

The [Soul Flame] in the hearth beside Arwin danced merrily as it waited hungrily for more metal to heat. He was pretty sure that metal was just about the last material that a long bow should have been made out of.

Even if he was using Brightsteel, it was still magnitudes less flexible than wood, and he'd seriously underestimated one little problem. Arwin needed a piece of metal that actually wanted to be a bow.

Finding something that wanted to be a sword wasn't hard. Armor, weapons, all of the normal things that metal was meant to be – that was easy. But a bow... not so much. It was like trying to find a child whose ideal future career was a pickler.

They probably existed somewhere, but chances were they'd need a little bit of motivation to get to that point. And that was exactly what Arwin did. He found the piece of Brightsteel that seemed most indifferent about its eventual form and spent about an hour going on about how fascinating bows were.

It was – quite literally – akin to talking to a brick wall. He had no clue if the metal could actually hear him. His reflection, warped in the face of the Brightsteel, spoke back to him as if mocking his words. Arwin pressed on. If something was stupid and worked, then it wasn't stupid.

“Don't tell the other pieces of metal,” Arwin informed his chosen piece, “but close-range fighting is actually a little boring. The real excitement is in blasting someone's head off from a hundred meters away. Doesn't that sound fascinating?”

The metal didn't respond.

“Imagine how flexible you could be. Nice and bendy. That's much better than being stuck as a stiff old sword. Who wants to be stiff? Nobody, that's who. You could be raining thunder down on our enemies from two – no, three hundred meters away. Imagine that. What can a sword do in comparison?”

*A whole lot of stuff, but that's not the point. I am not going to start arguing with myself.*

The metal rippled in the firelight. Arwin ran his hands over its smooth surface. A small smile pulled across his lips. Something had changed. The metal wasn't as resistant as it had been before. Where there had been opposition there was simply nothing beyond a faint, dim sense of curiosity.

[Stonesinger] wouldn't quite let Arwin speak to Brightsteel since it wasn't a magical material. Fortunately, he was pretty sure he didn't need it. He'd gotten his unspoken invitation. The metal was willing to play.

“Let's see what we can do with you, shall we?” Arwin asked, bringing the Brightsteel over to the hearth and placing it within the flames. He picked up the piece of Maristeel he'd cleaned the previous day while he waited.

Its beautiful blue surface shimmered to his touch. Arwin was fairly certain it wasn't magical. [Stonesinger] didn't connect with it any more than it did with the Brightsteel. But, at the same time, the Maristeel was clearly more.

He'd fully expected it to be harder to convince this metal to do what he wanted than it had been to convince the Brightsteel, but he couldn't have been more wrong. The instant Arwin's attention brushed over it, he felt a sense of anticipation and approval coming from the metal.

It knew all the effort he'd gone through to clean and prepare it. Even though it seemed to have no desire to be a bow in particular, it hungered to be *something*. Arwin had taken it from scrap and returned it to glory. Now it was ready to return the favor.

*I think I like this metal more than I like most people.*

"Thank you. I'll honor your gift," Arwin promised the Maristeel. He placed it into the hearth and crossed his arms as he waited for everything to heat. His attention drifted to the Heart of the Devouring Prism while he waited.

It was dead – but there was no doubt that it was magical. Arwin had yet to try to communicate with it. He wasn't so sure that he wanted to. The murals in the skeleton's grave had painted a very vivid picture. It wasn't a folly he longed to repeat.

"It's not like I'll be able to bring out your full potential if I don't at least try to speak with you," Arwin said to the crystal. "I guess that means I have no choice. I'm not settling for mediocrity. I need power. You want power. I think we can work together – but only as long as you let me lead."

The crystal rippled in his hands. Arwin's eyes narrowed. The ripple hadn't come from the dancing flames. It had come from within the crystal.

*Dead my ass.*

“If you want to speak, then speak,” Arwin said. “Just know that I’ll toss you aside if you try to betray me or hurt my allies. I want to work with you, but I don’t *need* to work with you. I won’t put them at risk.”

He sat down beside the hearth and focused his senses on the crystal. His eyes drifted closed as he waited to hear its response. If it didn’t give him one, the weapon would be impossible to make. He wasn’t going to take the risk.

*I’ll have to smash the crystal apart and see what I can take from it. There’s no way I’m sticking the whole thing into a weapon until I know exactly what it wants.*

A tendril of energy brushed across Arwin’s mind. It deepened and pulled at his mind. The temptation to resist was strong. He forced himself to relax. The only way he’d get anywhere would be if he spoke to the crystal.

Arwin opened his mind, and a vision flooded into it.

A sea of glittering green washed out before him. It was full of a deep, all-consuming hunger. A desperate hunger, one that could never be sated by any meal. It permeated every part of the crystal and sank deep into the earth.

There was no way to stem the hunger. The more the crystal ate, the more it hungered. An endless cycle that had no end or beginning.

Pain. Hunger. Pain. Hunger. Pain. It swirled and intermixed like a viscous soup of agony. The crystal wanted more than anything to escape it, but all it could do was make it more intense. It couldn't even remember the last time it had felt relief.

And, in the rippling green, Arwin saw himself. He saw his future, should he fail to succeed on the Challenge that the Mesh gave him. There would come a time where he couldn't forge enough equipment to sustain himself.

If he couldn't change his fate, he would become like the crystal, seeking out magic like a rabid dog and devouring it – just to find that the hunger had grown deeper still in the time it had taken him to swallow.

Visions of his future appeared hidden within the verdant ocean. Rabid and mindless, his teeth turned to jagged spikes and his hair overgrown. Eyes, sightless and starved, darted about like bees trapped within a cage.

The back of Arwin's spine prickled at the intensity of the crystal's anger. At its hunger – and at its fear. He set his jaw as the vision bore down on his mind and tried to crush his will.

“No,” Arwin said. He slammed the visions away with the force of his own will. “That's not what's going to happen to me. I will conquer the Challenge.”

The crystal shimmered around him. It was laughing. Arwin's annoyance grew. [Stonesinger] let him communicate with magical materials. It hadn't said anything about fighting back against them – but he wasn't about to let that stop him.

He threw the vision back, but he didn't let the crystal free. He envisioned a different future and imposed it onto the glistening stones.

A future where he stood atop a cliff, clad in glistening armor that most could only dream of seeing. The roaring might of Verdant Blaze in one hand and a massive bow in the other. The Hungering Maw coiled within him, a snake that had been tamed and laid in wait for his beck and call.

Behind him was his guild, all clad in armor that he had made. Some of them had faces – Lillia, Rodrick, Reya, Anna. The others were faceless. They were the ones he hadn't found yet, but they would come. He would not lose himself. There was too much at stake.

Arwin slammed his reality into the crystal like a hammer blow. It was the only reality he would accept, and a magical rock wasn't about to make him change that. The Heart of the Devouring Prism shuddered in his grip.

It tried to push back. Perhaps it did – Arwin wasn't actually sure. This was not a contest of power but a contest of will. And, no matter how strong the crystal had once been, Arwin would not be outdone.

“Yield,” Arwin snarled. “You will do as I say. I will forge you just like I will forge my future. Your only options are to bend or to break.”

The crystal struggled against him. It pushed fear and doubt. It knew that Arwin would fail. It –

“I will not fail!” Arwin roared. “Yield!”

The crystal's vision shattered. It crumbled around him like planes of breaking glass and swirled into a green hurricane. A sea of black stretched out around Arwin as the crystal gathered. Across from him floated the Heart of the Devouring Prism.

Color bloomed from the darkness. Silver and deep blue metal gathered into the form of a bow; the Heart of the Devouring Prism carved into the bow's grip. The vision faded. Arwin's eyes opened.

He still sat on the ground in his rickety temporary smithy. The crystal rested in his hands, just as it had when he'd closed his eyes – and yet, even though all appeared identical to how it had been just a short while ago, it was everything but.

The Heart of the Devouring Prism had given to his demands. It would be the heart of his bow. A smile split Arwin's lips and he rose to his feet. The metal in his hearth was glowing a warm orange, ready to be forged.

There was nothing left in his way. Every part of his bow awaited to be forged. All that remained was to put it together.

“I won't let you down,” Arwin promised the Heart as he took the Brightsteel from the hearth and set it onto the anvil. “Even if you never found a cure for our condition, I will. I'll find it for both of us, and you'll be at my side. Turn that hunger into drive. Channel it into determination to succeed. Determination to take down everything in our path. And, with your help, I will claim everything that you could not.”

*Let your hunger add to mine, for no matter how much you starved, it is nothing in comparison to my desires. My own hunger eclipses any primal instinct that you could ever contain. I hunger for more than just food and power and survival.*

*I hunger for victory.*

## Chapter 108

Verdant Blaze sang. Arwin had – as usual – lost track of time entirely. All that remained was the strike of crystal on metal and the beat of his own heart. Hours had gone by. Of that much, he was certain.

The time hadn't passed in vain. He'd formed the sleek arms of his new bow, twisting strands of Maristeel through the Brightsteel in a swirling pattern. He'd kept the ratio heavily in favor of the Brightsteel so the bow wouldn't be so difficult to draw back that even [Scourge] would struggle.

Mixing the two steels would give it what Arwin hoped to be the best of both worlds. Flexibility from the Brightsteel and immense resilience from the Maristeel. The closer to the ends of the bow limbs the metal got, the more of it became the glistening blue metal. Its tips were pure blue, hardened from repeated forging and quenched in oil.

The grip of the bow was still unfinished. Arwin had left it wide open, leaving space for the Heart of the Devouring Prism. It was to be the last piece he added. The time for that was rapidly approaching.



Arwin checked over his work, making sure there weren't any glaring flaws. The bow was coming together spectacularly. The Mesh seemed just as excited about making it as he was. It had guided his strikes, but he hadn't followed it entirely.

Some of the designs at the bows ends and the spot to hold the crystal were entirely his own work. Finding a balance between relying on the Mesh's guidance and using his own ideals was the way to make the best equipment. Everything that he'd learned over the last few weeks had gone into the weapon on the anvil before him.

*One last step.*

Arwin picked up the Heart of the Devouring Prism. It felt lighter than he remembered. He'd never actually managed to damage or cut up the crystals before, but he'd have to find a way to do it if he wanted to make it fit.

"You're going to have to work with me here," Arwin informed the Heart. "You want to join me, then help me make you into the best weapon that I can. There's only one shot at this."

The crystal didn't respond. It had finished speaking. All Arwin could do now was hope that he'd gotten through to it and do his best to ensure the final weapon was the best it could possibly be.

He set the crystal into the slot he'd carved. It fit perfectly, but that was the easy part. The next one was figuring out how to carve away nearly half of it. He chewed his lower lip, then grabbed Verdant Blaze again.

*I've never been one for subtlety. I'll just –*

A tiny click split the air. It was so faint that it was almost lost into the crackle of the [Soul Flame], but Arwin managed to just barely pick it up. His eyes focused on a tiny node at the top of the crystal. It had cracked – entirely of its own volition.

Arwin grinned.

The Heart was helping him.

He swung Verdant Blaze. It struck the crystal with a loud clang, splitting off a small portion of it. The piece shattered into dust that rained across the grip of the bow. And, in the process, a new crack formed.

Arwin struck that one too. Every blow broke away another portion of the crystal and scattered faint green dust across his anvil and the bow's surface. Verdant Blaze rose and fell faster with every strike. Coils of [Soul Flame] rose off its head and infused into the weapon.

Excitement built in his chest as he worked. The crystal grew smaller and started to resemble the picture he'd had in his mind. Even though every strike he made only took away a tiny portion of the crystal, it was still progress.

Hours passed. The crystal smoothed and shrank further. Its dust fused with the metal around the grip, welded into place by Verdant Blaze's [Soul Flame] until it resembled a green starry sky surrounding a moon at the bow's center.

Tingles of the Mesh danced within the bow and prickled at his fingertips. Power built with every hammer strike. The last pieces of the puzzle slotted into place. The Mesh no longer

recognized the Heart of the Devouring Prism as its own being. It was part of the bow now, for better or for worse.

Arwin lowered Verdant Blaze and brushed the weapon off. He brought it to his hearth and plunged it into the flame once more, letting it heat for just a short while before taking it over to the oil barrel and dunking its tips in.

He didn't want to overwork or harden the center of the bow – that part needed to be flexible. The ends, on the other hand, were best off being resilient. Oil hissed and flamed as fire danced across its surface.

Arwin waited until it had died down before taking the bow out and working at removing the crud that had formed on the portions of the bow that had been quenched. He polished it off with [Scourge] empowered fingers, rubbing it smooth.

And, finally, he was done. What remained before him was a metal bow. It was devoid of a string, but the power within the weapon was evident. Glistening silver and blue intertwined, speckled with stars of green surrounding a matching grip carved from pure gemstone. The whole bow was almost as tall as he was and thicker than his arm. It was laughably large – or it would be up until he actually shot something with it. Arwin doubted anyone would be laughing then.

“You're beautiful,” he breathed.

The Mesh appeared to agree. Golden letters burst forth in the air as power hummed through both him and Verdant Blaze. The hammer shuddered and a feeling of deep satisfaction

invaded Arwin's mind. It was getting more powerful with every new piece that Arwin made. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

He didn't have time to consider it. The Mesh's writing had completed, and his attention was fully upon it.

**[Prism's Reach: Unique Quality] has been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.**

**Achievement: [Armed and Dangerous] has been earned.**

**[Armed and Dangerous] – *Awarded for forging a weapon whose rarity was overwritten by its own desires.* Effects: You may select an item to join this weapon's Set, regardless of its quality. *This achievement will be consumed upon selecting an item.***

Arwin swallowed. He couldn't muster thoughts, much less words. The Mesh had given him the ability to make a Set from nothing. He'd still yet to unlock any of the hidden properties from the one set he'd completed for Lillia, but he knew all too well just how powerful Set synergies could be. Being able to force two items together into a single set was an incredible boon so long as he chose the right item.

*The string – or an arrow, I'd assume. It depends on if the Mesh counts the string as part of the bow or as an entirely separate item. There's only one way to find out.*

Barely even willing to breath, Arwin turned his gaze to his bow to see its status. It had turned out Unique, which could be either a blessing or a curse. The Mesh had said that its desires had overwritten its rarity. That was mildly concerning. The bow wasn't fully his own to control.

**Prism's Reach: Unique Quality**

**[Awoken]: This item has taken on life of its own. With every death it causes, it will grow slightly more powerful. Upon reaching [Unknown] threshold, it will be able to bond with its wielder.**

**[Power for Power]: Prism's Reach can only be drawn when infused with magical energy from its Wielder. A portion of the spent energy will be transferred into its shots.**

**[Corrupted Shot]: Arrows fired by Prism's Reach will infest their target with crystal upon impact, consuming any uncontested magic whenever possible.**

**[Immense Hunger]: Prism's Reach can absorb magical energy from its wielder in exchange for empowering its next shot. The amount of magical energy it draws will increase exponentially with the amount of time it spends drawn. Overfeeding Prism's Reach may modify its attributes temporarily.**

**[Incomplete]: This item and its abilities cannot be used until it is finished with an appropriate string.**

**[Unique]: This item has formed a treaty with Arwin Tyrr. It has not yet acknowledged him as owner, but it will obey his commands until deciding if he is worthy of its service. Information about this item may be hidden from others.**

**[The Left Arm]: This is a set item of [2] pieces. When the entire set is used, a concealed property will be unlocked.**

It was, without a doubt, the longest description for an item that Arwin had ever seen. He read over it several times. Most of it was good. Most, but not all. The bow was definitely powerful. It seemed he'd convinced the Heart to give him a trial period.

*I'm a bit worried about what it means by temporarily modifying some attributes by overfeeding it, but that's something for me to worry about later. I'm going to need to find a string strong enough to actually withstand the draw weight this thing is going to need. I'll also need something to shoot from it.*

Arwin hadn't managed to reach the next tier from making the bow, but he was relieved for it. He hadn't gotten all that many Achievements at his current one. While advancing would definitely be useful and would have given him another spot to bind to a weapon with, getting an extra Achievement or two would go a long way.

Still, he wasn't sure he wanted to walk around with the bow just sitting loose at his side. Arwin took a moment to hide its status from any prying eyes. It was already eye-catching enough as it was. After a moment of thought, he unbound his leg armor.

The rest of his armor appeared on his body as [Arsenal]'s power vanished for the rest of the day. Arwin didn't mind that. He didn't have any more plans, and he wanted to bond to the bow as soon as possible.

His greaves were powerful, but they were probably his weakest item right now. They were the only pieces he had that weren't part of or didn't have the potential to eventually be reforged into a Set piece.

*I should be able to reforge the Ivory Executioner Chestpiece so it fits the set with the helm, and I figure my greaves will probably be expected to be part of that set too. Maybe gauntlets and boots as well. Either way, the pants will be the next piece I replace for myself when the time comes.*

Arwin slung the massive bow over his shoulder with a grunt. It really was heavy. The sooner he could bond to it, the better. He headed over to the door and poked his head outside. To his surprise, night had already fallen.

“Could have sworn it hadn’t been that long,” Arwin muttered to himself. The world didn’t seem to mind its offense to him. The moon rested in the sky above, uncaring. Arwin shook his head and drew the fire from his hearth before walking over to the tavern.

First things first, he needed to take a bath. A small grin pulled back across his face. After he finished cleaning up, he could show Lillia his new bow. Even if it wasn’t done yet, he couldn’t wait to see what she – and the others – would think of it.

And, after that, he greatly looked forward to completing the weapon and putting it into action.

## Chapter 109

When Arwin got to the tavern, he found that he wasn’t the first one there. A tall man stood in the dim orange light cast by the lantern. Lillia leaned against the doorframe across from him, her expression unreadable in the dark and posture guarded.

As he stepped inside, the man turned to face him. He had pointed features like those of a hawk that were softened by a bushy unibrow that connected the expanse of one side of his temple to the other. It vaguely resembled an escaped caterpillar that had frozen in place, hoping to not be seen by its pursuers.

“You must be Ifrit,” the man said. He adjusted the well-worn suit he wore and fixed his tie. “Is now a good time?”

“That depends on what you want,” Arwin said, grateful that [Arsenal] had deactivated and he was fully clad in his armor. There wasn’t all that much reason to be distraught either way. His mask was really more of a marketing tool than an actual disguise. Even if he’d been caught without it, it didn’t matter much.

“I’m Jake.” The man extended a hand and looked down the bridge of his nose at Arwin. “With the Merchant’s Guild.”

*They can’t be here to try to take the land for the smithy from me, can they? Nobody else is using the damn thing. The city can screw off.*

Arwin took his hand, a chill running down his spine. “And you’ve come here…”

“To discuss some work you’ve been doing in the market.” Jake’s grip was firm, just barely. He released Arwin’s hand and adjusted his coat once more. He seemed rather uncomfortable in it. “I believe you set up a stall, yes?”

“I did,” Arwin allowed suspiciously. “Why?”

“Did you register that with the guild?”

“No,” Arwin said. “I’ll be honest, I didn’t even know you existed. How would I have registered with you if there’s no information on you?”

“There most certainly is information. It’s in our handbook.”



“Which is...”

“In our guild office.”

“Right,” Arwin said. “And how was I supposed to know your guild office existed in the first place?”

“Well, you just do.” Jake’s brow furrowed in confusion as if Arwin were speaking to him in a different language. “Everyone knows about the Merchant’s Guild.”

“I don’t.”

“Ah. Well, now you do.”

“Lovely.”

“So, now that you know, you’ll have to abide by our rules,” Jake said with a self-satisfied nod.

“Why?”

Jake’s confusion returned. “What do you mean, why? It’s how things work. The Merchant’s Guild regulates all trade in the city. We make sure all the merchants in it are selling what they promise to sell, and we ensure their promises hold true. It’s how shoppers can rest assured that they won’t get scammed.”

Arwin went to leave a snarky comment – then paused. That sounded surprisingly reasonable. Having a body that made sure nobody was going around and scamming everyone they sold to was actually a pretty decent idea. That didn't make him like it any more.

“I'm not particularly keen on sharing my profits with anyone,” Arwin said. “I understand your perspective, but I don't even have a permanent stall. Just a wagon that rolls through every once and a while. I can't afford exuberant fees to be part of a guild.”

Jake gave Arwin an understanding nod. “I know where you're coming from. It's only logical to want to protect your interests. However, I can assure you that our fees are far from exuberant. We do our best to scale to everyone's size. If you're only renting a small wagon like that and dealing in specialty goods such as custom-made armor and weapons, the only thing you'd need would be a minor vendor's license.”

*And I'm sure I'll be thrilled to find that said license only costs a mere 100,000 gold plus taxes and other hidden fees. I've seen how Milten is run. This city is a shithole.*

“And how much would that be?” Arwin asked.

“One gold a year.”

Arwin blinked. “What?”

“One gold,” Jake repeated. “So long as you're operating on your own and not employing anyone else. If you set up a full storefront, the price will increase. We'll have to do a safety check on your building and make sure there aren't any forms of magic that influence people's

decisions to purchase items anywhere inside. Those licenses can range from five to five thousand gold, depending on the size of your operation and the number of employees you have.”

Arwin squinted at Jake. Now he was certain that the man was lying. “Just one gold? For an entire year? No other fees? What about fines?”

“So long as you’re selling what you promise to, then there are no other fees. If it’s found that you’re lying about your goods, the guild may force you to take back an item or weapon and fully refund whoever purchased it.”

*Oddly reasonable. Again. There’s no way these people have anything to do with the ones running Milten.*

“That’s it?” Arwin repeated. “There’s nothing else?”

“Nothing,” Jake confirmed. He rubbed the back of his neck and let out a sheepish laugh. “To be honest, the fee is a pittance. It’s only there to ensure that all merchants are willing to comply. We rarely have any trouble.”

“He seems legitimate,” Lillia said. “I took a look at his badge. It’s magical, at the very least.”

“Are you sure you’re in the right city?” Arwin asked, not even bothering to hide his suspicion. “Milten is horrid. The way you talk makes it seem like everything should be sunshine and roses, but you’ll probably get gutted if you walk down the wrong street.”

“Probably,” Jake agreed with a cheerful smile. “Please understand – we don’t take any responsibility for the actions of anyone within Milten. Our responsibility is the safety of customers alone. This city is... less than ideal. It certainly has its flaws. The Merchant’s Guild understands that. We aren’t responsible for those flaws. The only thing we care about is that our own duties are executed properly. If you have issue with Milten, I suggest you bring it up with the local governance.”

That was a really roundabout way for Jake to say that he didn’t give a shit about the problems that plagued Milten. A fair take, all things considered. It seemed respectable that the Merchant’s Guild was even bothering with trying to manage anything this far out into the kingdom.

“I see,” Arwin said slowly. He went to get a gold. His fingers met nothing but leather. He’d spent every single gold he had. Lillia spotted the look on his face and pulled out a gold of her own.

“Here,” she said, handing it to Jake. “I already paid for the tavern.”

“Have you come up with a name for it yet?” Jake asked.

“No. It’s been about five minutes since we last spoke.”

“I was just checking,” Jake said as he tucked the coin into a pocket. “Names are of utmost importance, you know. It’s very difficult to properly register anything without a name. Fortunately for you, Milten does not have any ‘monster themed inn and or taverns’ within it.

We'll make sure to give you another visit once you've put up a sign so we can get everything properly set up."

"I'll keep that in mind," Lillia said.

"Best of luck to both of you," Jake said. He stepped away from the lantern and headed toward the moonlit streets, pausing as he reached the door to look back at them. "If you get that smithy of yours set up and start selling from it, please remember to register with us. We will fine you if you fail to do so now that you know about our existence."

"So you wouldn't have if we didn't know?"

Jake flashed Arwin a grin. "No. But it's too late for that now, isn't it?"

He strode off and disappeared into the night. Arwin blinked. Part of him expected Jake to pop back up, but the man seemed to have left. He looked back to Lillia.

"That was... odd," Arwin said.

"Tell me about it," Lillia said. "I fully expected him to be grubbing for more money. It seems weird for any sort of authority group to actually not be a terrible piece of shit. Maybe he's unique?"

"I suppose it's too much to hope that one guild isn't completely horrible?"

Lillia snorted. "Optimistic. I'll believe it when I see it. Maybe they're fine right now, but who knows what will happen in the future. They tracked us down pretty easily. I wonder how that happened?"

“I haven’t exactly been quiet about my location. It could have been anyone,” Arwin said. “I don’t suppose we’ll find out unless we ask. It doesn’t seem like anything to worry about at the moment.”

“We’re in agreement there. For the amount of gold they’re asking, it’s not a huge concern. We’ll just have to keep an eye on things to make sure they don’t surprise us with something,” Lillia said. She shook her head and let out a huff. “Whatever. How’d your work go? Did you manage to finish? I see you’re holding a bow.”

Arwin’s face split apart in a grin and he hefted the weapon in question. He went to unveil its stats, then froze an instant before he could and lowered the bow again. Lillia frowned.

“What’s wrong?”

“I have to take a bath first. Your rules, not mine.”

“Wait, that’s not fair. I want to see what the bow does.”

Arwin just chuckled and headed into the bathroom, much to Lillia’s avail. She couldn’t do anything other than stand in the common room and glare at his back. That said, he was just as eager to show her the weapon as she was to see it, so his bath didn’t take long.

He headed back out to find Lillia pacing back and forth in front of the counter.

“Finally,” she muttered. “Show me!”

There was no reason to make her wait any longer. He'd already built up all the anticipation he wanted. Arwin removed the concealment and let the Mesh identify the bow for Lillia.

Her eyebrows steadily crept up on her forehead and her mouth formed into a small *o*. She read over it several times, then finally tore her gaze away from the Mesh to look up at Arwin.

“Godspit,” Lillia said with a disbelieving laugh. “A Unique Set item. We haven’t even figured out what my Set does yet and you went and started another one? This thing is terrifying, Arwin. I’m not sure I love the part where it hasn’t accepted you as a master.”

“Me neither,” Arwin said. “But I’ll be honest, the only thing I really want to do is shoot something nasty with it.”

“Like a Wyrm?”

Arwin grinned. “Like a Wyrm. I’ll need a string and a big ass arrow, though. I don’t suppose your hair...”

“Is just normal hair.” Lillia rolled her eyes. “What, do you think my body is made out of precious metals?”

“I don’t know,” Arwin said defensively. “It’s not like I’m an expert on it. I figured it couldn’t hurt to ask.”

“You’re an idiot,” Lillia said through a laugh. She flicked her hand at him. “Hide the stats on that before someone sees it and gets a heart attack.”

Arwin did as she suggested. “So... dinner?”

“You made that thing and are worried about dinner? I thought you didn’t need to eat normal food.” Lillia’s tone made it clear that she was paying him back for making her wait to see the bow.

*Suppose I deserved that. I still don’t regret it.*

“I don’t, but that doesn’t stop it from tasting good.”

Lillia shook her head and laughed. “Fine. Come on. I’ve got more sandwiches.”

## Chapter 110

When the next morning came, Arwin found that he’d mustered enough self-control to keep himself from showing anyone else the abilities of his bow. [Arsenal]’s powers returned and he dismissed the weapon. Letting Lillia see it had given him all the dopamine he needed for the time being.

Instead of showing the others a half-finished weapon, he decided to get his hands on a string and an arrow. Then he’d be able to show it off as an entire piece rather than taking away from the final reveal.

Arwin headed out into the common room, clad in his armor. It wasn’t like he had a choice. It was wear it or carry it around until he reached the next rank – which, all things considered, he suspected likely wouldn’t be too far away.



Reya and Rodrick were both eating breakfast when he stepped out. They were dressed for the road and their faces told the stories of a pair that were preparing to set out.

“What’s going on?” Arwin asked.

“I was thinking it would be a good idea to check up on the forest,” Rodrick said. “We don’t know how long it’ll be until that Wyrms horde pops up, assuming it actually will. Looking into it a bit more would do a world of good.”

“And also be incredibly dangerous,” Arwin said with a worried frown. “What if the Wyrms sees you? Or if the horde is already there and just waiting?”

“It would be a bit too fast for the horde to already have matured,” Lillia said as she walked out from the kitchen behind Arwin. “But I agree that it might be dangerous. Why go alone?”

“We’re going together,” Reya said. “That’s the point.”

“We aren’t actually going into the forest,” Rodrick added. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a small metal tube. It rested in his palm, roughly the size of a cylindrical apple. “I’ve got this.”

“To throw at monsters?” Arwin asked.

A laugh slipped out of the warrior’s mouth. He thumbed the front of the tube and gave it a small flick. The tube expanded out with a series of clicks until it was about a foot long. “It’s a looking glass. Lets you see stuff from far away. Close one eye and stick the other one up to this.”

Rodrick held it up so Arwin could peer into it, and he did as the other man suggested. He was rewarded with a very, very zoomed in view of Rodrick's nose. Arwin pulled back.

“So you're just going to walk up near the forest and then squint into it with that thing in hopes of seeing something?”

“Pretty much,” Rodrick said. “But a lot of our research is actually going to be talking to people. News travels. It's not like nobody has been to the forest since us, and I'm sure most people didn't run into the Wym.”

“The ones that did probably didn't make it back to report,” Lillia said.

“Probably,” Rodrick agreed. “But a lack of information is still information. If we poke around a bit in town and then take a quick look from a safe distance, we should be able to put together some information. It certainly can't hurt.”

That was a good point. Information was always useful. Even if it wasn't much, anything that Rodrick and Reya could gather would go a long way.

“Bring one of my imps with you,” Lillia said. “They're not exactly the most dangerous fighters, but people are scared of demons. If anything goes wrong, it'll buy you some time. They can ride around in your shadow so nobody picks up on them.”

“We'll do that,” Rodrick said with an appreciative nod. He finished the rest of the food on his plate and pushed back from his chair to drop to his feet. “Thanks.”

Lillia nodded and flicked a hand. The inn was so dark that Arwin could barely even make out the streak of shadow that passed from her hand and flew over to his feet. Rodrick glanced at the ground, then back to her.

“That’s pretty neat.”

“Can I have one too?” Reya asked.

Lillia shrugged and flicked her hand again, sending a second shadow over to Reya. “I suppose it can’t hurt. Extra backup is always good. Just make sure nobody overzealous sees your shadows. They’re bigger than they should be, and anyone that’s fought monsters with dark elements is going to notice something might be wrong. They won’t immediately know what’s hiding in there, but nobody with an abnormally large shadow is up to anything savory.”

“Appreciate the warning. Let’s get to it, Reya. We won’t be gone long – expect us back by the end of the day,” Rodrick said. “Should we look into trying to do another dungeon soon? I’d like to try to push to the next level in my Tier before the horde, and I think Reya would benefit a lot from that as well.”

“We all would,” Arwin said. “The dungeon we’ve been going to isn’t going to be ready yet, though. It hasn’t been long enough to recover from a full wipe. We could take out some of the newest monsters that moved in, but I doubt there were a lot just sitting around and waiting. There’s another dungeon somewhere nearby according to Olive. Maybe we can convince her to show us where it is.”

“If she’s going to it, it’ll be an open one,” Rodrick said. “Be prepared to pay for entry – and to deal with others.”

“That’s fine,” Arwin said. He did some mental math in his head, then pressed his lips together. There just weren’t enough hours in the day. He wanted to make money crafting items to sell at the market. He needed to upgrade his equipment and that of his guild. He needed to figure out how his Sets worked and get his hands on a bowstring and an arrow for his bow. He also needed to work on his own advancement, though he could do that and crafting at the same time. “Damn. I feel like the tasks keep piling up. These Wyrms can stuff it. They have horrible timing.”

“Tell me about it,” Rodrick said with a grin. “My dad used to always say separate the urgent from the important. Not sure how much that’ll help, but giving advice always makes me feel smart.”

“Thanks. Be careful. Don’t take any risks. I don’t want to lose anyone else.”

“Don’t worry.” Rodrick’s smile fell away and his features turned dead serious. “I know how to get around without drawing the wrong kind of attention, and Reya is one slippery little brat.”

“I take offense to that,” Reya said.

“Good,” Rodrick said. “It doesn’t change anything, though. Let’s get to it.”

He and Reya waved and headed out the doorway. Arwin watched them leave, a twist of trepidation knotting his stomach, but it fell away. Rodrick and Reya could both handle themselves.

“Back to working on the bow?” Lillia asked.

“No,” Arwin said reluctantly. “I want to, but I don’t know where I’ll get the string. Buying one might end up being my best option. We need money either way, so I’m going to make some armor to sell instead. I’d like to learn how to make boots and gauntlets, but I don’t know if I’ll have time to figure it out before the horde. I might get a helm made for Rodrick and you, though.”

“Just Rodrick,” Lillia said with a shake of her head. “The armor you got me is already more than enough. I’m not going to be on the front line like he will be. Might as well get him a good set of armor that actually manages to survive one of his fights.”

“Given his current track record, that doesn’t seem likely,” Arwin said with a chuckle. Making Rodrick more greaves was definitely at the top of his priority list. The previous set had perished beneath the Crystalline Bonehemoth’s fist. “I’ll be in my little smithy. I assume you’ll just be upgrading the inn?”

Lillia nodded. “I should have some people coming today with pieces I had Reya buy yesterday. I need to get more boons from the Mesh, and the only way I can do that is upgrading the inn or cooking food to advance my tier.”

“Do you get more magical energy for making meals from more exotic ingredients?”

Arwin asked, a thought suddenly striking him.

“Yeah,” Lillia said. “Why wouldn’t I? There’s a reason I haven’t been just trying to get stuff from inside the city every time. It’s no different than any other crafting class. Weirder ingredients, more challenge. More challenge, more reward.”

“I suppose I should have been able to tell that on my own.”

Lillia shrugged in response. “Sometimes the obvious answers are the ones we look right over. See you tonight?”

“Tonight,” Arwin agreed with a nod.

He headed out of the tavern. Ridley was already hard at work outside, standing beside the plot of the smithy. The mason had made good time and was well along in his construction. It looked like Arwin was going to need the money sooner rather than later, but he wasn’t concerned about not being able to make gear fast enough. Basic breastplates weren’t all that difficult to craft anymore.

The hearth waited expectantly for Arwin when he stepped into the building. He greeted it with a ball of [Soul Flame] before taking inventory of what he had left to work with. There was still some of the Brightsteel – enough to make a breastplate and a helmet if he was judging it correctly.

*I think I start with a basic set of stuff to sell, then use that money to get more metal and make Rodrick some greaves.*

That was as good a strategy as any. He could then build up excess money and pay off Ridley. When Olive got back, he'd ask her to show them the dungeon she was running and he could look for materials or money to make the rest of his bow there.

It was the plan that relied on the least amount of 'if' statements that Arwin could come up with. He would have preferred to finish the bow today, but that wasn't how life worked. Arwin shrugged to himself as he set about putting metal into the hearth to heat.

Something shifted behind him. Arwin suppressed a sigh. He hadn't seen who it was yet. There was no need to. There was only one person he'd met in recent time that had a penchant for showing up out of nowhere without making a single noise.

"Do you ever announce your arrivals like a normal person?" Arwin asked as he turned.

The drunkard leaned against the wall and took a sip from his mug. "No."

"Have I done something to make you feel like I enjoy company while I'm trying to work?"

"Not particularly, no."

"Then why are you here?"

"There really isn't much else to do on this street. You're a decent source of entertainment. It's better than sitting around and waiting for something to happen."

"Is that what you normally do?" Arwin asked. "You could just... find a different street."

“I don’t particularly want to. This one is nice,” the drunkard replied with a shrug that somehow didn’t spill his drink everywhere. “And it’s nice to find someone to feel superior to.”

Arwin arched an eyebrow but didn’t even bother gracing that with a response. He couldn’t see a single thing that the drunkard could hold superior to him. Even if there was, it didn’t matter. There was no need to waste words when he had work to do.

“You really think that’s going to be enough?” the drunkard asked as Arwin took the heated metal from the hearth over to the anvil.

“Enough?” Arwin glanced up. “What do you mean?”

There was no response. The door swung askew and the drunkard was gone. He heaved a sigh and shook his head, summoning Verdant Blaze getting back to work. The day was young, but time was a scarce resource that couldn’t be wasted on men that liked the sound of their voice a little too much.