

**Story begins-1**

Omar Grindgear looked out on the landscape of rocks and crystal as the transport gem crumbled in his palm. He brushed his hands; the metal scraping together. He smiled, gears whirling as his lips moved. This would be a great game.

He saw movement in the distance, between two crystalline outcroppings. A group of... he made the required gestures, added the one with his other hand to extend range, said the activation word, and a wave of energy flashed from him toward the group. Information appeared, his identification spell revealing those were Kravegidders, twelve of them, level fifty-eight to sixty-two.

He made a note not to head in that direction. Unless Bonesword had invited a hell of a lot more people, they wouldn't take on that level and number of monsters.

"Wow," someone said behind him, "have you looked at this view?"

Omar let out a steamy sigh and turned. "What are you doing here?" he said, his voice a mix of steam, hisses, and clanks.

"Admiring the view," the simian being composed of branches, leaves, moss, and hardly wearing anything answered. On the other side of the vegetation monkey, was the edge of the world, with the clouds of the gas giant underneath them. Small rocky islands floated at various heights and distance from the edge.

"I mean, how did you follow me?" Omar's eyes glowed in anger, and steam escaped from the joints in his face.

"Oh, I paid one of the game's admin to make me a duplicate of your travel gem."

"Of course you did. Why?"

The monkey shrugged. "I thought I'd play with you."

"No."

"Come on Tr—"

"It's Omar. When I'm in the game, it's always and only Omar." The Brastok threw his hands in the air. "That's why I don't play with you. You can't take this seriously! And I bet you're just here because you want to get my friends naked."

The monkey raised a leafy eyebrow. "Is this region set to adult?"

"No. Get out, Tuck. If you don't have a gem to get you back to the city, then just log out, otherwise, I am kicking you off the edge of the world."

"Not going to introduce me to your friend first?" the simian said, indicating behind Omar.

He looked. Someone on horseback was approaching. "Leave, now."

"Come on, Omar, be a sport, I haven't met any of your friends."

"And there's a reason for that. I remember the first time I introduced you to some of them, even if you don't."

The simian's grin told Omar he did remember.

"Get out of here, Tuck. Go fuck some of the passengers instead of bothering me."

"Fine, be that way." The simian stepped off the edge of the world with a salute.

Omar didn't watch. If he did Tucker would just keep falling into the gas giant until he reached the end of the playable area and the game despawned him.

He turned to greet the arriving horseman. “Longpine! It’s been a while. How was your trip?”

“Slow and uncomfortable.” Like the simian, Paul Longpine was made of branches and leaves, but his facial structure and mask of dark green leaves marked him as a raccoon. He got off the quad horse and patted its neck. He moved with ease despite the heavy armor he wore.

“Uncomfortable?” Omag asked, a metallic ear tilting with a whirl. “Since when have you started traveling in less than great comfort?”

The raccoon shrugged. “I don’t like traveling.” He motioned around them. “This is the only way I enjoy leaving Earth. It’s quick, it’s easy and I can leave whenever I want.”

“You don’t get this view from Earth,” Omar replied, motioning over the edge of the world. “Unless you’re looking at a projection.”

“Yeah, well, as nice as it…” Paul looked in the distance and canted his head. He turned to his steed and rummaged through the packs, pulling a scroll case, and then papers from it, leafing through them until he found what he was looking for. “Yes!”

“What?” Omar asked.

“There’s an achievement for reaching one of those islands.” He kept reading.

“I don’t think you can make it unless you got yourself something to fly since we last played.”

The leafy raccoon shook his head. “Wouldn’t help. The achievement is only valid if accomplished without the use of items, or outside help,” he added as Omar was about to offer to use his magic to help him.

“It’s a long drop, and an even longer ride back here from the closest city. I only have one portal spell ready and it’s for the others to join us.”

Paul took off a necklace with a green crystal hanging from it. “Spawn anchor,” he said, handing it to Omar. “Just hold it for me.” He climbed his quad and rode away.

Omar looked at the crystal. Getting one of those took dedication.

With a yell and shake of the reign, Paul got his steed running toward the edge. Omar had read up on the knight class and they could do a lot on horseback, but he didn’t see Paul having any buffs that would let him cross the distance.

The quad horse hit the edge and jumped. It was high, and majestic, Omar had to give Paul that. The raccoon stood on the saddle, stepping back until he was on the quad’s rump. As the quad reached its apogee, Paul ran, putting a foot on its head and launching himself in the air.

Omar fought the urge to cast a flight spell on his friend, it might save his life, but Paul hunted achievements in the game like Omar did spare parts. He’d rather die than have it invalidated with help. He held his breath as the raccoon fell. He wouldn’t make it, Omar was certain of it. There was no way.

Paul landed, rolled, and caught himself to stop his slide, coming to a final stop with his feet dangling off the other side of the tiny island. He jumped to his feet and fist pumped, taking out the scroll from the case, reading it and waving it around to show

Omar he'd done it; as if his presence on the island wasn't enough proof.

The raccoon put the parchment away. His fingers to his lips and let out a shrill whistle. His falling steed vanished and reappeared next to him. He mounted it, waved to Omar, and stepped off the edge.

Omar turned away. What was it with this place and people walking off the edge?

The crystal in his hand glowed, and Paul appeared next to him. He snatched the crystal with a grin. "That made the trip here worthwhile. I'm not one of ten people to have that achievement."

Omar rolled his eyes a full three-hundred-sixty degrees, but the notification the others were assembled at the agreed location kept him from replying. He stepped away from the raccoon and shook his hands to loosen them. It had been a while since he'd cast the portal spell and while he'd practiced the gestures in his lobby before logging in, as he'd told Longpine, he only had one of the spell set. If he screwed this up, he'd either have to shell out to reset it, or the dungeon crawl wouldn't happen.

He moved slowly, footwork matching hand motions, each word falling precisely with his steps. He'd mapped the spell to a dance as a way of memorizing it after watching Theo go at it, but he'd never have his brother's fluidity.

Still, thirty seconds of it and with a silent explosion a purple hole ripped the air open and three men stepped through while Omar caught his breath. This spell took a lot out of him. He should invest his next few levels into raising it.

"Greetings comrades," a bat said, covered in cloth, next to him stood Melor bareback, the Matrant bear, easy to identify with his bone carapace, and eagle, sitting on his shoulder. On his other side was Marc Bonesword, the skeletal bull.

Omar knew who the player behind the bat was, but he kept changing character and while he knew he'd played the tech bat before, the name wouldn't come to him and he didn't want to have to call up the character info.

"That's Taro, right?" Paul asked.

The bat smiled and bowed. "Taro Sato, humble alchemist at your service. I hadn't played him in a while and I figured I should make use of his work credits before the admins decided to change the rules and put a cap on it or something. It's good to see you all again. It's been what, two years since we've been in the same place at the same time?"

"And Titan, of all places," Melor said, "what are the odds."

"Ceril," Omar corrected.

"Right, Sorry," the bear apologized. "So, Bonesword, you picked the place, I figure your interminable research in this game told you there's something worthwhile to kill here."

The skeleton smiled. "Indeed." He pointed, and a reticule appeared in Omar's sight, highlighting a rocky mountain opposite the herd of monster. A window appeared.

You have been invited to join the quest  
The Dragon of the Rocky Depth  
Quest type: Dungeon Level 40 to 45

Yes/no?

Omar accepted it. That was why he was here after all.

“How do you know where all those quests are,” Taro asked. “I searched the boards when I got here and this one never came up.”

“The advantages of doing beta testing for the game,” Marc answered, “they had me run this area before they brought the game online.”

Omar eyed the skeleton. “Hasn’t Ceril been online for like seventy years now? Just how old are you?”

The bull smiled at him. “Old enough to know all the good quest. Shall we?”

“Definitely.”

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Paul Longpine dug his heels in Warstallion’s sides, two quick bursts, activating the trampling attack. Warstallion ran at the incoming monsters protecting the cave’s entrance. Paul drew his sword and slashed at the Rock Eaters who didn’t die under his steed’s hooves. They cut him and his health bar flashed visible each time he took damage. They had some sort of ability that let them bypass a lot of his armor, and his health was going down faster than he’d expected.

“Heal!” he yelled as he slashed and killed.

A bottle shattered next to him and the green vapors enveloped him. His health bar filling up. He steered Warstallion to the middle of the horde, counting on the potion to keep him alive while he killed most of them.

A lightning bolt fell close enough he felt the heat from it and a dozen of the Rock Eaters blew apart.

Melor swung his ax, cutting a swatch through the Eaters, saying the occasional word Paul didn’t make out to activate an effect or another. Occasionally the eagle swooped down to rake at the monsters.

Finally, the battle was over, Omar and Taro walking over, the only two without any visible damage since they’d provided support. Marc became visible, cleaning his knives.

“How much time do we want to spend on the loot here?” Paul asked. “I’m set to having to do an actual search of the bodies, remember?”

“Is any of us that desperate for level thirty-three loot?” Melor asked, looking at Taro.

“I can do a quick search of them, I’m tap and take.”

“Go for it,” Mark said. “I need to let my health fill up, these bastards were tougher than I remember.”

“They have armor bypass,” Paul said, taking feed out from his bag and Giving it to Warstallion, watching his steed’s health refill as it ate.

“Sorry, I should have mentioned that.”

“Are the five of us enough for this quest, Marc?” Omar asked. “This mob felt borderline too much.”

“Afraid of dying?” Melor asked, wiping the gore off himself with a washcloth.

“No, but unless someone has a group anchor they didn’t mention, any death takes them out of the quest. It’s going to be another hour before I can cast a portal spell again. And if I’m the one who’s dead...”

Marc went still. The player pulling out of the character for, Paul figured, some quick research through one of those secret file beta testers had access to. “Okay, they raised the area’s level three years ago as a response to all the newbies who kept running through it, but the dungeon itself hasn’t been touched since hardly no one has found it yet, and those who have, kept it quiet.”

“Players not talking about a dungeon?” Omar asked. “Just what is in there?” he looked at the skeleton.

“You want me to ruin the surprise, or you want to have fun?”

“You know me, Bonesword,” Omar said, groping his crotch. “I’m all about having fun.”

“Then, in we go.”

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Melor yelled “Toramok!” at the top of his long as he swung, activating his damage buff. His ax cut the golem in two. He removed another’s head and the legs out from a third before the buff expired. He yelled wordlessly as he cut through more of them. Keeping an eye on his health and his resistance buff. “Geronimo!” he yelled as the buff expired, a glow surrounding him as the new one applied. “Darickfort!” Swift Wing cawed in response and his health refilled. “Tomarok!” more of the golems went down. “Tomarok!”

And the fight was over. He dropped to his knees as his stamina vanished.

“You okay?” Paul asked.

“Just need to catch my breath. Went too hard on the damage buffs.”

“I’m thinking you went just right. You sure you’re not a tank in hiding? I’m always amazed with what you get this druid class to do.”

“Barbarian,” Melor said, hitting his chest with a fist. “I strong and hung barbarian. Not plant eater.” He snorted. “It all about how you use the class’s specialization.”

“And I thought druid was a simple class, like knight.”

Melor stood and patted the knight. “Hey, you can do some pretty amazing thing with that steed of yours. Omar said you jumped off the edge and reached one of those islands. That’s supposed to be impossible to do.”

“Not impossible, just really hard. And Warstallion doesn’t fit in here.”

“You’re still tough on your own.”

“You two done making out?” Omar asked.

“No!” Melor answered, “you jealous?”

“You left me with bone butt and spark cock, what do you think?”

“Hey,” Tora exclaimed. “My cock sparkler happens to be very liked.”

“You actually have that?” Omar asked.

“Be nicer and you might find out,” the bat answered.

“How much further?” Paul asked.

“Some way,” Marc answered. “I did tell you guys this wasn’t going to be a quick quest.”

“Then let’s keep going.”

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Marc sidestepped the stone elf’s swing and went still, letting the elf’s gaze move over and past him searching for what had almost registered, but the rest of the fight called to him and Marc was free to move again. His target was the taller elf at the back of the group, the leader, the one whose presence gave the force a buff to their attack and their defenses. If they had to fight through twenty or so enemies to get to him, the five of them would be too weak to have a chance.

It was why Marc loved being an assassin. Let everyone be distracted by the big fight while he made his way to the more valuable target. Technically, this could be considered kill steal, since as the sole person to kill the leader, he could keep the experience to himself, if he remembered his tables, it would be enough to get him up to level forty-eight, but he didn’t need it. He played for the enjoyment of it and to hang out with his friends, not to amass power, so he had himself set to share his experience evenly with the party.

He stood behind the stone elf leader, who was still unaware of him. The blind spot was on purpose, he knew, since it should be technically impossible for someone to make it through the fight unnoticed. But Marc knew the way the program ran. Not a cheat, he reminded himself, just a lot of studying. It wasn’t his fault if he had access to information the administrators didn’t have.

He buffed the knife’s power, added poison to the blade, covered the elf leader’s mouth with a hand, and planted the knife in his back with the other. The leader stiffened, and went limp in his arms. Marc let him fall and sat on the throne, waiting for the fight to be over.

Without the leader’s buffs, the rest of the elves fell quickly.

“Enjoying yourself?” Paul asked.

“Immensely,” Marc answered.

“I should hate you sneaky types,” the raccoon said, looking at the dead elf leader. “You make it look so damned easy.”

Marc smiled. “Ahh, but my young friend, it is easy, when you’re a sneaky type.”

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“Marc’s down!” Paul yelled, and Taro cursed. Marc had said this wouldn’t be that tough of a dungeon, so he hadn’t prepared as many ranged healing potions.

“Omar! What are you like to heal him?” Taro yelled. “I need a few seconds to make a potion!”

“Healing’s not really my thing, Taro!” the metal tiger replied.

“I’m keeping him safe!” Melor yelled. “You have those seconds.”

Taro mixed the ingredients, spend the work points to speed up the process. Looked up, located Melor and Marc and threw the bottle. Getting to work on more

immediately.

“Taro!” Melor yelled, and the bat looked up. Three of the Subterranean Horror were running in his direction.

With a curse, he grabbed three bottles and lobbed them at the Horror. “Omar, where my support?” the wizard was supposed to keep the enemies off him when he was crafting. A glance at the metal tiger fighting for his own life explained why he had to fend for himself.

The acid cloud had dealt with the three Horror and Taro finished the healing potion before lobbing it in Omar’s direction. Neither of them was close-quarter fighters, he’d need the healing.

He made more acid, it seemed especially effective against the Horror, added Colaro root to protect his allies from the effect and threw them in the fray, then went back to making healing. He was never taking on a quest without at least five dozen healing potions ever again.

“Getting a little full of yourself, hey Marc?” Paul said once the fight was over.

“It got in a lucky shot,” the skeletal bull replied.

“And that was all it took for you to go down. You owe Taro your life, by the way.”

“Good save, Taro,” Marc said.

“That’s my job, but I’d like better intel next time. This dungeon is not the cakewalk you said it would be.”

“Did I say it would be a cakewalk? I thought I’d said they hadn’t touched it since I’d run through it in its beta stage, over seventy years ago.”

“Then please tell me we’re almost done. I’m out of work credits so I need time to make more potions.”

“We almost are. There’s a couple of small rooms, then we’re at the dragon. Easy peasy.”

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Omar looked up, and up, and still up, the gears in his neck straining. “You have got to be kidding me.” The cavern had to be at least two hundred meters in height, and the dragon, sitting in the middle of it, head touching it, while slouching. “How is that thing only level forty-five?”

“It’s level sixty,” Marc corrected.

“This is a level forty to forty-five dungeon, what is a level sixty boss doing here?”

“Making us work for it.” The skeleton grinned.

“We have to try it,” Taro said, “we made it this far.”

“Is that what I think that is?” Melor pointed to a pillar before the dragon.

Marc’s grin broadened. “That is a caern, didn’t any of you thought it was odd this is an open-world dungeon instead of an instance. We defeat the dragon, and we get to claim this place as our own.”

“Until someone takes it from us,” Paul said, “as far as I know, none of us is staying on Titan station past our current business.”

“It does simplify our victory celebration,” Melor said, “we can have it here.”

“That’s if we win,” Omar said. “Does it have any weak points?”

“Cold and ice,” Marc answered.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” Omar said. “You brought us to fight a dragon’s who’s only weakness if that one element I don’t control yet? Taro, do you have anything cold related?”

The bat shook his head. “I don’t even have the kind of ingredients I’d need to cobble something like that together.”

Melor pulled his ax. “Then we do this the hard way.”

Paul looked around and put his fingers to his mouth. His steed appeared after the whistle. Omar looked at the dragon in worry, but they were outside its field of detection.

The raccoon climbs on his quad. “At least I have space to move about here.”

Omar sighed. “As Taro said. We made it this far, we might as well go for it, but Marc, if we win, your ass is mine.”

“If we win, you’re welcome to it,” the bull answered and Omar realized his previous confidence had been forced. Marc was no more confident in their victory than any of them were.

Omar shook his hands to loosen them “okay guys, let’s do this.” Stepped until the detection field as he finished the gesture to unleash the lightning strike.

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“I am done,” Melor said, on his back, covered in gore. “If I move, it’s going to cost me the little health I have left.”

“Someone crawl to the caern to claim it and activate the healing field,” Marc said, leaning against a severed dragon leg, missing one of his own legs.

Paul limped to the pillar. “How do I claim it?”

“Just put your hand on it. The interface will appear.”

“Never claimed one before?” Omar asked.

“No, I’ve mostly done instance dungeons or city quests with I’m not with you guys.” He placed his hand on it and his eyes lit up.

“Congratulation then,” Marc said. “You have now claimed this cavern system. You can adjust its settings, bring up a few vendors, set defenses, and even establish a communication system for us to leave and retrieve messages. In short, you’re the god of this place. Please abuse the power responsibly.”

Omar felt better and his health rose fast. “I think he found the healing options.”

“And the rating,” the raccoon said, grinning.

“Good,” Omar replied as the ‘adult’ rating flashed. “Because a certain skeleton owes me an ass.” He removed his robe, exposing a muscular metallic body of brass and silver with a polished brass cock jutting out of his crotch.

“I swear,” the bull said, standing and taking odd his scale armor. “That thing’s always hard.”

“Only in adult-rated areas,” Omar replied, stepping up to the skeletal bull. “You telling me yours has an off switch. Bonesword?”



“Off switch? What are those?” the bull replied, turning and offering his ass to the metal tiger.

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Taro rested on top of the raccoon, exhausted all the way to this real body. He loved these celebrations and was definitely happy he'd invested in a top of the line sensory suit. He rolled off Paul and was leaning against Melor, who ran a hand over the circuitry on top of Taro's head. Contented sighs sounded throughout the pile.

Taro chuckled. “I went up a level, guys. I'm officially forty-five.”

“Almost forty-six here.” Melor said, “I'd just crossed forty-five before this.”

“Forty-eight,” Marc said.

“Same,” Omar said.

“Forty-four,” Paul finished, “but I was forty-second at the start of the quest.”

“We should celebrate,” Taro said.

“Again?” Marc said. “I'm not sure if I can take much more of that metal cock.

“I mean, we should meet up and have dinner. You know. Meet officially. We've known each other for close to twenty-five years now and not one of us has met for real. We're all here, so why not?”

The silence stretched, finally, Omar sighed. “I can't. This was my last game here before my cruise departs. I'm heading back to Earth, vacation's over.”

“I might be able to do it later,” Marc said, “but once I log out I have to meet with a client.”

“I'm going to be in meetings all week,” Paul said. “Being a big entopic producer sucks at times.”

“I'm here for a few weeks,” Melor said, “but I have to set up an entire division of employees for my corporation. I am going to be drowning in managerial stuff.”

Taro nodded, holding back the disappointment. “I get it. There's always once we're all back on Earth.”

The agreement felt forced to him. Maybe it was something about having an implant that made them consider this as good as the real thing. “Since Paul owns the caern, it's safe to log out here, right?”

“Yeah,” Marc answered. “If someone claims it before you get back, you'll just respawn in the city.”

“Okay, I'm going to log out then.” Taro clapped his hands together before any could say goodbye and he found himself in the game lobby, facing the wall of characters, with Taro's space empty. It took off Taro, returning to being Nori, and put him back in his case, brushing imaginary dust off the bar's cloth, fixing the tears it received during the battle with a touch. When he closed the case, information appeared on the surface. When he'd last worn him, the number of work credits he had accumulated. Level, health, traits, and abilities. As well as his pretty much empty inventory. He'd have to go shopping for ingredients before he played Taro again. He had plenty of gold after this quest.