

Chapter 1: The Adventure Begins... I Think

They were going to lose this fight. Ixix, Corrupted God of the Harvest, roared their fury at the group with their tangle of vined hair flying around their writhing face, and despite how much the people around the god had been wailing on them, they looked none the worse for it, which made sense. Their group was a mere irritant against their near invincibility.

Two of them were down, although Rowan wasn't sure if they'd fully succumbed to death yet, and their druid, who'd done a—frankly—*incredible* job of keeping them alive until now, was almost out of spells. Rowan could tell by their panting and how much their shoulders were drooping.

As for her? She couldn't keep their enemy's attention on her. Rowan was the strongest of them, wearing the best armor, which meant Ixix needed to be swinging their building-sized fists at *her*, but her taunts weren't working. Ixix kept turning toward the last member of their group: a lithe female with her flashing sword.

Growling, Rowan shoved her own blade into Ixix's toe, and ponderously, they turned toward her. Good. Now, if she could keep the god's focus on her and if their druid downed a few potions to replenish their spells...

"Fuck this. I'm out!"

Finishing a last string of swings into Ixix's ankle, the girl with the swords spun—

"No! Run, wait!"

—and sprinted into the darkness around them.

With a shout, Rowan stabbed Ixix, cursing as she withdrew her blade, and after taking stock of the situation, she gritted her teeth.

As she dodged a bunch of knuckles, slamming into the earth, she shouted, "Toad, get out of here! I'll draw Ixix away."

The druid froze halfway through drawing runes in the air.

"But—" they started.

"*Toad! Go!*"

Slowly, Rowan backed off, parrying and dodging the strikes that she could, but still, some glanced off of her armor, cracking her bones and jarring internal organs. When the druid transformed into a snow leopard and sped away, Rowan breathed a thankful prayer to the gods, those who remained

uncorrupted at least.

Ixix didn't take kindly to that, punching at her with a bellow to shake the heavens. Rowan saw mossy, curled fingers rushing her way and...

'You Have Died' flashed onto her screen with the option to resurrect below it, and she slammed her palms onto her desk, rattling her keyboard and mouse.

"*Avan* damn it all!"

Rowan took a moment to calm down, slowly breathing in and out, before tuning back into the game. Of course, her party was bickering, so she cut in with a shouted 'Quiet!' They shut up quickly enough, even if she could feel their resentment burning down the connection.

"Toad, did you make it out of the dungeon?" she asked.

"Almost," Potatoad said. "Give me two minutes, and I can revive everyone outside."

"Anyone want to explain *what the fuck* happened in there?" Brassassin, their rogue, asked.

For once, the group could throw plenty of blame around for their party wipe. The overall reason that everyone had died was that they hadn't stood against Ixix *together*, but individuals in their party had made mistakes as well.

GothicFlash, their sorceress, had once again been too enthusiastic when entering the fight, pulling Ixix to her instead of letting Rowan do it. Potatoad couldn't output enough healing to keep them alive, and once two of their damage dealers had dropped, they'd been screwed.

None of that had truly been their fault, though, considering they'd had a shitty party composition when going into the dungeon. Druids like Potatoad and warriors, Rowan's class, were supposed to be secondary healers and tanks, at best, but Brassassin had insisted that they should go in anyway. And to top it off, Rerunner, or Run the samurai... had run.

They could all take some of the blame for this, but if Rowan let them, GothicFlash, Rerunner, and Brassassin would sit here, arguing about it, for the rest of the night, and while Rowan was about done with playing for the night—with her guild at least—she didn't want to leave Potatoad with this mess. They were far too empathetic and easily swayed to mediate a disagreement like this.

"It's on me, guys," she said. "I couldn't hold threat. Sorry."

"No, Fable! Don't do that," Potatoad said. "You always take the blame for the guild's screwups, even when it's not your fault."

At their words, the rest fell silent, and before Rowan could protest that, as the guild's leader, it was her place to fall on her sword, her screen flashed white, leaving her revived character standing outside of the dungeon with her guildmates.

There was an awkward pause until GothicFlash cleared her throat.

"Toad's right," she said. "You can't be our scapegoat for forever."

Rowan very well could be, but hell if she'd say that right now.

“Yeah! You’re not even supposed to tank for us.” Brassassin said. “If Gramps were here or... now that I think of it, Willow too, Ixix would have gone down easy. No offense, Toad. Priests beat druids in healing, hands down.”

“None taken,” Potatoad said.

As usual, they’d stayed in leopard form. Potatoad had always said that the best part of playing as a druid was that they didn’t have to look humanoid and therefore, pick a gender.

“Don’t try to pin this on Mia and Thomas. They’re attending a board meeting at their father’s insistence tonight,” Rowan said, “although it *is* running a little long.”

As one, her guildmates’ characters turned toward her, and she winced.

“Willow and Gramps,” she said. “Sorry.”

In their guild, using real names was anathema when walking through the world of Nedrya. Here, they were everyone and no one. Here, they could talk without extraneous details getting in the way.

Brassassin—a gremlin with his legendary daggers at his side—wasn’t Quillan Vaessa, a man only spoken of in whispers. Potatoad—a human typically masquerading as a snow leopard—wasn’t Avery Kirst, someone whose name wasn’t often heard outside of their city. Rerunner—a gorgeously tall human, dressed like a ninja—wasn’t Dottie Clostar, soon to be married off for convivence’s sake. GothicFlash—a Dullahan forever draped in black—wasn’t Nomi Zan, rumored to have a harem numbering in the hundreds.

And Rowan was simply FatalisticFable—a succubus stubbornly dressed in the most modest of armor—not the youngest daughter of House Kolb.

Here, these characters were all they were, nothing more or less, and to break that immersion was one of Nedrya’s gravest sins, in their guild at least. Thank *avan* the others had decided to ignore her mistake.

“I almost feel bad for those two, even with the consequences to us,” Rerunner said. “Atharian businesses and the families that run them are-”

She made a noise like she was shuddering.

“Gramps and Willow aren’t like that, though,” Potatoad quietly added.

“No. They’re all right,” Rerunner agreed. “So, are we running this dungeon again, or should we wait another day for our vaunted healer and tank?”

“I think it would be best to wait, don’t you?” Rowan said. “Plus, it’s getting late here. Four-hour time difference, remember?”

“Yes,” Brassassin drawled. “You Atharians are like the elderly in that: going to bed at the earliest of hours.”

Snorting, Rowan shook her head. Brassassin had always been the most difficult of her guildmates to get along with.

"I'd like to see how 'late' you'd stay up if you lived here," Rowan said, "but *anyway*. Wait a day to run Ixix again. All in favor?"

A chorus of ayes, both enthusiastic and surly, rang from her headphones.

"All right. Until then," Rowan said. "Thanks for the run, everyone. I had fun, regardless of how hard we wiped."

After a mix of farewells, she logged out, only to sign right back in on her alternate account. She wasn't ready for bed, no matter what she'd told her guildmates.

For a while, she ran around Nedrya's Icefields, killing mobs and doing quests for faction experience, and yes, these activities could be mind-numbingly boring sometimes, but she needed something to dull her mind right now.

An hour or so into this, 'AutumnWillow has come online' popped into the corner of Rowan's screen, and she stopped what she'd been doing to request a private connection. When it was accepted, tension drained from her.

"Why are you still awake?" Mia asked.

"Couldn't sleep," Rowan said, "and don't lecture me. I don't want to hear it tonight."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Mia said. "Am I joining you in the Icefields?"

"Yes, please."

A few seconds later, Mia's white-clad, blonde-hair priest flashed into being beside Rowan, rotating to observe the swath of disappearing gnoll bodies around them.

"You've been busy," she said.

"What else was I supposed to do while waiting for you? I didn't want to get ahead on quests," Rowan said. "How's Thomas, by the way? Will he be joining us?"

"No," Mia said with a long sigh. "You know how he is when it comes to the family business. He went straight to bed after the meeting. He sends his love, though."

At her answer, Rowan closed one eye, hissing in a breath. Thomas loved playing *Durya's Breaking*, or Break. He was the only one in their guild to have a vaunted reputation with all of Nedrya's various factions as well as the best gear a player could get for a paladin. If he'd gone to bed before logging in, at least for a minute, the board meeting must have gone *swimmingly*.

"Should I ask?" Rowan said.

"Best not. It was bad enough that *I* didn't want to be there," Mia said. "Let's just go, ok? Thomas won't mind missing out on a few quests. He's done them often enough."

As they mounted up, Rowan wondered what could have bothered Mia so badly that she'd wanted to leave the meeting. She had a bit of an obsession when it came to economics and marketing, going off about things like product placement all the time. Usually, this meant she enjoyed any part of handling the company that her father let her get away with.

Rowan worried at this puzzle for a while, happy to have something besides monotonous quests to keep her mind off of her own problems. As they retrieved lost baubles or kill crazed bears for quest givers, Mia rambled on about... something. Rowan gave her what little attention she could, but it was difficult to do with her head so muddled.

Eventually, she blinked at her screen and noticed that Mia's priest had fallen far behind her, getting swarmed by a mob. Cursing, Rowan returned to her, diving in to save her life.

"What was that?" she asked once they were safe. "You almost left me behind!"

"Sorry."

Sighing, Rowan rubbed her sandpaper eyes.

"Tomorrow's got me..."

She trailed off, knowing she didn't have to finish that thought.

"Ah. Tony, then?" Mia said.

Pushing back into her chair, Rowan let her hands fall off her keyboard and mouse.

"No, it's not him. I'm happy for him, wish him all the best," she said, "but the wedding itself..."

While Mia made sympathetic noises, Rowan bit her lip. She knew tomorrow would be hell, even if she couldn't put a finger on why that was. She enjoyed social events, which her brother's wedding would *most definitely* be. She liked being in a crowd, *loved* the energy found in one that was celebrating, but for some reason, the idea of tomorrow's ceremony only raised her hackles.

Maybe it was because it would involve her family instead of a friend or a classmate.

"It's too bad I won't be there," Mia said. "I'd love to distract you."

Narrowing her eyes, Rowan said, "Distract me how?"

Mia laughed, low and breathy.

"However you like, Rowan Kolb," she said.

Smiling, Rowan sucked on her lower lip, humming to herself.

"Then, yes. It's too bad you won't be there," she said, "but come on, Mia. You know a noble House like mine wouldn't lower itself to inviting an untitled, especially not one associated with Shalen Corp, to their eldest son's wedding."

Mia snorted at Rowan's sarcasm before dissolving into a giggling fit. Closing her eyes, Rowan blissfully listened to every jarring bit of it, frowning when it tapered off.

"Seriously, though," she said. "All of my family, including Tony and my parents, wanted to invite you and Thomas but fucking Jessica Sono..."

"That stuck-up bitch," Mia said.

“Truly. I don’t know what my brother sees in her.”

“A powerful alliance?” Mia suggested. “Sono’s an influential House in Roswines, right?”

Rowan shook her head.

“It’s not just that,” she said. “You haven’t seen the way he looks at her. It’s sickening enough that even *I*’ve noticed it.”

“And that’s saying something,” Mia said with a laugh.

Rowan stuck her tongue out at Mia, even knowing the other woman couldn’t see it.

“I’m sorry you can’t come,” she said.

“Who says I wanted to?” Mia said in a teasing tone. “I bet tomorrow’s ceremony and after-party will be as passion-filled as an accountant’s might be. None of you nobles know how to have proper fun.”

“Hey! I’m fun.”

“Mmhmm. You keep telling yourself that, sweetie.”

Mumbling vitriolic comments under her breath, Rowan reached for her keyboard and mouse, starting her snoozing succubus off toward the closest town.

“Why do I put up with you again?” she said.

“Because I make you laugh. Also, Thomas and I are the only people who can get you out of that ivory tower of a manse that you call home,” Mia said. “And I’m the only one who knows how to make you *scream* with-”

“Shut it! Shut up. Shut your hole,” Rowan shouted, high-pitched and a little panicked. “You’re not the only one who can do... that.”

“Sure about that, sweetheart?”

Rowan glared at Mia’s priest, sedately riding alongside her, for a while.

“I hate you,” she eventually said.

“No, you don’t,” Mia said with amusement in her voice. “So, is that it? The wedding’s why you’re online instead of asleep?”

“I mean, yeah,” Rowan said. “I’m not sure why I’m so worked up about it, though.”

“You don’t like being lonely,” Mia said under her breath.

But Rowan still heard it. A jerking finger almost had her warrior careening off of a cliff.

“What was that?” she asked.

Sighing, Mia said, “Nothing, Rowan. I’m sure tomorrow will be fine, and after it’s over, you’ve got this year’s Summit to look forward to, right?”

Wiggling in her seat, Rowan happily hummed. Every year, Lutov’s noble families traveled to Novadracht, the neutral zone at the center of this big, incredible landmass that they called home. There, the Houses traded news, threw grand parties, and did everything in their power to outperform each other. It was the one time of the year when Lutov’s four nations—or their nobles, at least—truly co-mingled, and it all took place in the single most magnificent city in the world.

“Icrodon,” Rowan breathed. “Have you ever been?”

Scoffing, Mia said, “When would I go? During the Summit when only nobles are allowed over Novadracht’s border? Or the rest of the year when that neutral zone’s abandoned?”

“Right,” Rowan muttered.

Sometimes, she forgot about the luxuries she enjoyed that Mia would never have, not that the other woman would ever complain about them. As the daughter of Shalen Corp’s founder, Mia had a separate string of benefits to enjoy, ones Rowan would never touch, but Novadracht? The Summit? Those were sore subjects for the many corp families flung across Lutov.

“I don’t get why the nobles still meet in Icrodon. It’s been centuries since the royal family’s assassination. The Houses no longer come together to pledge their yearly fealty to their emperor but to preen instead. Holding the Summit in the old empire’s capital serves no purpose,” Mia said, “but don’t let me bring you down, Rowan. You should enjoy it. You deserve to go. Finally.”

“No, you’re right. A lot of things about the Summit are messed up, and its location is one of the worst problems,” Rowan said. “People say we meet in Novadracht because it’s neutral ground, but I say that’s bullshit. If our world is to have a chance at gaining greater understanding between the nations, we need to spend time in the ones that *aren’t our own*, and what better time to do that than during the Summit?”

“Sure, changing how we run the event would be rocky at first. We’d have to reach a majority consensus on how we’d choose a location, and the chances of sabotage and espionage would jump for the first few years. If we kept with it, though, a change like this could benefit everyone, consolidating the Houses into one, functioning unit instead of so many squabbling parties.

“Maybe after we’ve done that, we can focus on Lutov’s bigger problems but... Oh, shit. I’ve gone off on a tirade again, haven’t I?”

The world snapped back into focus, leaving Rowan sitting in front of her storecase in her darkened room instead of *once more* getting lost in her head. At some point, Mia’s priest and her warrior had returned to the closest quest hub, and they were both sitting in place there.

“Mm. I don’t mind. Listening to you talk politics is kinda sexy,” Mia practically purred, “but if you’re done, we should turn in our quests, and *you should go to bed.*”

“But I’m not tired-”

“Rowan Kolb, you do as I say, or I swear to *avan*, I will call your parents and tell them you’re still awake,” Mia said. “Do they know you’re playing Break right now?”

“No,” Rowan sulkily said.

“Then, log the fuck off,” Mia said. “You’ll thank me tomorrow when you don’t fall asleep in your brother’s wedding cake.”

“...Bossy bitch,” Rowan said. “Thanks, Mia.”

“Anytime, you hopeless dumbass.”

Rowan didn’t turn any quests in, leaving that as a nice surprise for the next time she logged on. Instead, she scurried her succubus to the closest inn before closing *Durya’s Breaking* and stretching her arms overhead.

After turning her storecase off, she used her wristcom’s flashlight to fumble around her room, and once she’d removed her clothing, she paused to run a finger along the softly crisp fabric of tomorrow’s dress. It had been hanging over her closet door all night, a potent reminder of what was coming in the morning.

Closing her eyes, Rowan imagined that she was touching her college graduation gown from a few months ago. A tiny, selfish part of her hoped that the same small number of people who’d attended her significant life event would show up for Anthony’s, but the second that petty desire rose, she smacked it down.

Slowly breathing out, Rowan drew her lips into a thin line and dropped her arm. With her eyes still closed, she crossed her room and collapsed into bed.

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