



SHATTERED

REALMS

BOOK ONE

DL PAWSON

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by DL Pawson

FREE SAMPLER

Prologue + Chapters 1-10

This sampler contains the prologue and first ten chapters of Shattered Realms: Book One.

If you want to keep reading (and you will), the full book is available on Amazon Kindle.

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THE LAST SUNSET

The sunset spilled through the window, painting John's little cabin in shades of gold and amber. He settled at his desk, watching Nicholas chase fireflies in the garden with the nanny. The boy stumbled, laughed, tried again. Almost five years old and already showing his mother's determination.

The scent of spiced Chickenraptor drifted from the kitchen. Fire-pepper crackled, the comforting aroma of cooking herbs thickened the air. Vivienne was making his favorite. Meat was a rarity reserved only for their boy, while they scraped by on broth and roots. But there was no need to hold back anymore.

Soon they would begin their great journey with the Twenty-Three. Vivienne had wept when John's stone came up obsidian instead of crimson. She had wanted to be the one to enter the Vessel of Giving. They all did. What parent wouldn't want to grant their child the ascension? Yet the stones had spoken, silent but absolute.

Above, the twin suns hung close together in the dimming sky. The second sun pulsed with its wet heat, the Vessels of Passage descending from it like tendrils of some vast, celestial organ. Six hundred years, the Witness said, since the Weaver showed mercy upon the First Realm. Six hundred years of families gathering at the sacred grounds, of children rising while their parents completed the Great Offering.

The nanny trailed Nicholas through the garden, always just a step behind. "Careful," she called gently, as the boy brushed past a splintered board jutting from the fence. He slowed. Obeyed.

John had spent a fortune on hiring this nanny. It was an indulgent, unorthodox for someone like him, and Vivienne had argued against it from the start. But he could not shake the feeling that Nicholas deserved more than they could give. A kiss on the forehead when he woke from nightmares. A pat on the back when he did something brave. Arms that never pulled away when he reached out. John wanted the boy to know what it felt like to be loved in the simple, worldly way, even if just for a few weeks.

John glanced toward the kitchen. From the clatter of pots, he gathered he still had time. He pulled out a sheep leather, the vellum felt smooth under his fingers. He dipped his quill in ink. There was so much he wanted to say, so much Nicholas wouldn't understand until the "enlightenment" took hold.

He wrote:

My little firefly catcher,

Remember when you asked me why some stars move, and others don't? You'll understand soon. You'll understand everything.

People will tell you I left. In a sense, I did. But I'm also closer than you think, I'm part of something larger now, woven into the very mechanism that lifted you up.

The Witnesses of the Weaver taught me that love isn't keeping someone safe in a dying realm. Love is opening the door to let them soar, even if you must become the key.

You'll feel things after the transformation. See patterns where others see chaos. Hear whispers in the space between heartbeats. Your heart will grow quiet, and your mind will expand.

The other children who rise with you - Samuel's girl, the Chen twins, they'll be your companions on this journey. Trust them. The Twenty-Three will be your family in your next realm.

Shattered Realms

Find the ways, my son. The Witnesses say each realm has its own doors, its own prices. Be brave enough to pay them. Be determined to keep ascending.

When you doubt (and you will doubt), remember I stood in that Vessel smiling, thinking of you.

All my love travels with you. May you be met by the Weaver.

-Your Beloved

Father

He folded the leather carefully, sealed it with the special wax the Witnesses had provided, the kind that wouldn't open until touched by "Enlightened" hands.

Outside, Nicholas caught a firefly at last, cupping it gently in his small hands. The light pulsed between his fingers. He ran to show the nanny, laughing with pure joy.

John watched his son and felt only peace. Tomorrow they would set out on the journey from which no one returned, the path they had prepared for so many seasons. But tonight, he had spiced Chickenraptor, fireflies and a boy who still believed the world was full of wonders.

The twin suns sank toward the horizon. In the distance, the Vessels swayed in the evening breeze, patient as prayer, silent as judgment.

CHAPTER 01

Anna jolted awake, her heart pounding.

She was still in her red pajamas, the ones with the cartoon cat proudly flipping the middle finger and the words “I do what I want” stitched across the chest.

Yet, she was not in her bed. She wasn't even indoors.

She was on her feet. Outdoors. Amidst a sunlit field.

No bed. No walls. No room. Just endless green hills rolling in every direction, lush and alive, nature untouched by humanity.

Above her, the sky stretched wide, a clear blue expanse scattered with soft white clouds that drifted lazily across it.

And the sun...no, two suns! They remained just above the horizon. One glowed with a soft golden warmth, its light spilling across the hills. The other sun hung higher and dimmer, tinted with an ancient red, as if it had been there since beginning time.

“What the hell is that?” she whispered, staring at the twin suns. She blinked. Once. Twice. They still hung high in the sky.

Anna turned again, slower this time. There were no buildings in sight, no smog clouding the air, and no people anywhere. Only the open sky and the endless green hills stretched out before her.

But something seemed off. The air felt too clean, the colors looked too vivid, and the silence was too... expectant. Like the world itself was

holding its breath, waiting to see how she'd react.

Her last memory was mundane: lying in bed, her cat Mimi curled at her feet, cinnamon chai cooling on the nightstand, reading a book on stock trading - one of the fun ones, the kind with charts and psychological analysis. For Anna, that's the kind of reading that thrilled her the way crime novels thrilled other people.

"Mimi?" she called out, louder. "Mimi!"

No answering "meow", no pitter-patter of tiny steps.

She cupped her hands and called out, "Hello? Anyone?"

Nothing. Not even an echo. Only soft wind brushing through the grass.

Anna exhaled, trying to anchor herself. She was a notorious light sleeper. She would wake from anything sound, whether it's a creak of a floorboard upstairs or a sneeze two apartments away. There was no way someone could've moved her, let alone dropped her into a landscape with two suns, without waking her up.

It must be a dream, she thought. Fine. Dreams are simply information. Test the variables.

She looked down at her pajama top and ran her fingers over the pattern. The thread was rough under her thumb. The faded "I" in "I do what I want" was exactly how she remembered it. Familiar and real.

A soft chime rang out, delicate and flourishing. A gray, transparent rectangle blinked into view, hovering squarely in front of her eyes. Anna yelped and instinctively turned to run, only to find the box still there, fixed in her vision no matter where she looked or moved. She spun the other way. It stayed centered, unwavering, locked in her line

of sight.

“What the hell?” she muttered, slowly backing up. Don’t panic, she told herself, drawing in another slow breath. It was only information. Process it. Stay rational.

She squeezed her eyes shut. The rectangle stayed, hovering in the dark behind her eyelids.

Okay. Fine. Classic dream test.

She opened her eyes and pinched her arm hard. It hurt. A lot.

But nothing changed.

She was still standing in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by alien hills, with the twin suns warming her back, and this floating rectangle refusing to be ignored.

Anna took a steadying breath and examined the floating rectangle more closely. There was text on it now.

WELCOME, TRAVELER! ACTIVATE SQUIRE MODE?

[YES] [NO]

“Squire mode?” Anna muttered. “What is that supposed to mean?”

She scanned the interface, but there was no ‘X’ to close it, no way to swipe it away, and no back button in sight. Fine. Maybe clicking “No” would at least shut it up and let her think in peace.

She reached out and tapped the word “NO.” Her finger passed through air, but a subtle vibration pulsed at her fingertip, similar to a game controller’s haptic feedback. The box blinked.

WARNING

**Without squire mode, the traveler will be completely alone
and will receive no assistance.**

[CONFIRM] [BACK]

Anna stared at it, trying to process. It seemed to be a system of some kind. A menu, possibly some form of guidance. She didn't know where she was, how she got here, or what resources she had. Accepting help, even from a strange, floating tutorial box, still increased her odds of survival.

She tapped "BACK", next selected "YES."

The box flashed again.

Squire Mode Engaged. Simple functions added.

The menu vanished with a cheerful descending arpeggio.

"Wait. That's it?!" Anna shouted, throwing her hands in the air.

Before she could launch into a proper rant, a few additional elements appeared in her vision. Three slim horizontal bars appeared on the bottom left of her vision: one red, one blue, one purple.

"Okay... health, mana, and... vibes?" she muttered.

In the bottom right corner, a translucent circular compass hovered, etched with a faint grid overlay. Curious, Anna spun in place. The compass rotated with her movements. She wasn't a seasoned backpacker, but the layout made sense. North was north, south was south, verified by cross-referencing the sun's position.

“Alright. Not terrible.” she admitted.

With another chime, a new box blinked into existence directly in front of her face.

NEW QUEST: FIND YOUR HERO.

You are but a humble squire without a hero to follow. The threads of fate were cut, and the path ahead is uncertain. seek the one whose strength, spirit, or sheer stubbornness calls to your own. follow the pull. Travel north. without your hero, your journey cannot begin.

“What hero? And I don’t sense any pull!” Anna threw up her hands and shouted at the open air.

There was no response. Anna’s anxiety crept back in.

The box blinked out of existence, vanishing from her view like it had better things to do.

She glanced upward at the sky. The brighter sun hung low in the western sky, while the ancient red one loomed higher and slightly to the east.

She focused on the tiny compass icon in the bottom-right corner of her vision. The moment she reached for it in her mind, the icon swelled, glowing brighter as it expanded into a full translucent compass. It hovered before her like an augmented reality projection.

She turned with it, aligning herself to its directional points. With the compass and the unmoving locations of the suns, she guessed the time. Assuming this world mirrored home in any way, the angle of the

brighter sun suggested it was around 3 PM.

That's when she noticed something strange about the red sun.

Two thin, faint lines extended from it all the way down to the horizon. They didn't look mechanical, not like wires or cables. From this distance, she couldn't tell what the lines were made of. Perhaps something more... biological?

"Nope," she said, narrowing her eyes. "We're putting a pin in that."

She took a deep breath, steadying herself. All she knew was that she wanted to go home. If finding this so-called "Hero" helped get her there, great. If not, she'd figure something out. She always did.

Following her gut, she oriented herself with the compass and headed north. The grass was soft and damp under her feet, the muddy earth cool between her toes, which reminded her of one important logistical oversight.

"Really?!" she shouted toward the sky. "You couldn't spring for shoes?"

CHAPTER 02

Anna walked for what felt like hours, trudging up and over one identical green hill after another. The landscape never changed, but her thoughts wouldn't stay still. They kept drifting back home. The pit in her stomach was growing by the minute.

If she didn't make it back... who was going to feed Mimi?

No one would even know Anna was gone. She lived alone. No roommates. No daily check-ins. No neighbors paid attention. No one would come by the apartment for days. Maybe longer. Mimi would be left waiting. And then starve.

Anna blinked hard, jaw tightening. That couldn't happen. She wouldn't let it.

She dug in her heels and pressed forward, legs aching, bare feet muddied with each step. If there was even a chance this "Hero" led to a way home, she'd find them, or die trying.

Finally, as she crested yet another hill, something new broke the monotony: a sprawling ruin in the distance.

A fractured village encircled a castle, or what was left of one, stretching toward the horizon, its crumbling remains. Even from where she stood, Anna could see the scars of battle and time. Jagged, burned-out towers leaned like broken teeth. Houses lay collapsed or hollowed, their charred wooden frames tangled with thick moss and curling vines. The outer stone wall snaked east and west, barely holding its shape. A narrow dirt road led toward the gate.

Anna stopped and stared.

This place had seen better days. And judging by the look of it, those days had packed up and left a long, long time ago.

She turned, glancing back over the endless hills she'd crossed. The purple bar in her HUD had drained to a quarter. Her feet ached. Her legs throbbed. And yet the suns, both of them, hung in the same spot they had hours ago, just above the horizon. Watching. Like they were mocking her.

Time here didn't behave the same as back home.

She forced herself to look forward again, steadying her breath. Shelter was the priority now. At least that's what every survival show she'd ever binged had drilled into her head. Any standing structures inside those walls were preferable to the outside.

Anna trudged onward, breath shallow, steps slowing as she neared the edge of the ruined town.

That's when she saw them.

Dozens of skeletons littered the grassy fields like discarded dolls. Their bones bleached white, some still tangled in scraps of rotted clothing. Flesh was long gone. Torn ligaments clung in places, dried and blackened. And then there were the spikes.

Along the dirt road, jagged wooden stakes jutted from the ground at irregular intervals, each one crowned with something: a severed hand, a skull, the occasional twisted, half-recognizable limb.

Overhead, the sudden beat of wings made Anna flinch. Crows scattered from the rooftops with low, guttural caws, circling before

diving again, excited by her presence.

They'd already eaten. They were just waiting for the next course.

Anna's stomach turned. The realization crept in like rot: not a single body strewn across the field wore armor. There were no weapons, no shields, no signs of defense. Some skeletons were horrifyingly small. These were civilians, families, even children.

This was no battlefield. This was a slaughter.

The air itself felt wrong. Thick and damp, it clung to her skin and dragged at her shoulders. Even her breath felt heavier, like whatever evil had happened here hadn't left.

Her instincts screamed at her to turn back. To run. Find shelter somewhere else. Anywhere else.

Just beneath the silence, it surfaced.

A whisper.

Soft as breath at the edge of her thoughts. Not words, a low melody that moved slowly, settling behind her eyes. It bloomed from inside her head, beckoning.

A small gust of wind curled through the archway and into the dead town, carrying with it a sharp, metallic tang.

Yet, Anna stepped forward.

She didn't know why.

Only that something wanted her to.

As Anna passed beneath the gate, the smell hit her like a physical blow.

Not just rot, but a stench brewed from death left too long in the sun, layered with the reek of sewage, sour meat, and something sharp and unnatural. It filled her mouth, her lungs, her skin. Her stomach turned over.

Her eyes watered. Vision smeared. The world around her broke into ghostly shapes and shivering shadows. It felt like walking into a dream turned rancid, familiar laws of reality bending at the edges.

She staggered forward. Her body was screaming to stop, to turn around, to run for her life, but her legs carried forward, anyway.

With each unsteady step, the wind picked up, cold and sharp. The whisper that had curled in the back of her mind now rode on the air. It shrieked between the buildings like a storm clawing its way loose. High and layered, it screamed in her ears, as though something was enraged.

She blinked through tears, unable to focus, but one thing remained crystal clear.

Her HUD.

The three bars were steady, but new words now pulsed in red above them:

SONIC AFFLICTION X3

OLFACTORY AFFLICTION X3

“What is -” she tried, but the words didn’t even make it out before her foot caught on loose rubble. Her knees slammed into the road. Her palms scraped raw against the cold brick.

The stench hit even deeper, forcing its way down her throat. She doubled over, coughing so hard she gagged. Vision spun. The edge of

the world pulsed and went soft.

Something massive passed across her blurred vision, a shifting shadow, wide and fluid. It wasn't human. It moved like it didn't belong to this world... and yet it belonged here more than she did.

Anna froze, breath caught in her chest. She wasn't alone. Her heart thundered in her ears. She just knelt there, trembling, eyes wide and stinging, lungs burning, trying not to make a sound.

The whisper in her head changed. It no longer howled like a storm. It hissed. Low, primal and ancient. The unmistakable sound of a snake... only impossibly deep, and far too loud.

Anna screamed as the shadow stopped in front of her, blotting out what little light remained. A wave of cold washed over her.

The flick of a tongue, heavy and wet, brushed the air just inches from her face. The ground shifted beneath her as coils thicker than tree trunks encircled her from all sides. Scales rasped across the stone with a dry, sandpaper scrape. The creature moved with the slow, confident certainty of a predator that had already won.

Anna couldn't breathe. The stench and the mass pressed down on the air itself.

Then it squeezed.

Its first crush robbed the breath from her lungs. Her ribs groaned at the second crush. Rough scales dug into her skin as the pressure built, inch by inch. Cold muscle wrapped tighter, unrelenting.

She was being crushed. Unable to speak, unable to move, barely able to see. Anna felt her body go limp. Hope slipped from her grasp like the last breath in her lungs. In the corner of her vision, her health bar

was dropping fast.

As her world narrowed into pain and shadow, Anna's mind reached. Her life flickered behind her eyes in fractured memories: the warmth of sunlit mornings, the weight of lost loves, quiet moments with her parents. And above all else - Mimi.

Her stubborn, ridiculous, perfect in her own way fluff-ball.

Anna prayed Mimi would be safe. That she wouldn't wait by the door too long. That someone would find her. Feed her. Give her a home.

The snake's tongue retracted. The hissing deepened, shifting into a guttural bellow. Anna could only assume it was winding up... getting ready to strike, to feast.

This was it.

Suddenly, something faint broke through the noise.

A small... meow? At the same instant, warmth flooded Anna's body.

At first, she thought it was blood rushing from crushed organs, maybe the start of internal bleeding. However, the heat intensified, becoming invigorating. She felt it in her chest, her limbs, her fingertips.

Her vision returned in bursts: colors sharpening, shadows pulling back. The roar of the wind dulled. The choking stench peeled away like smoke in the wind.

In her HUD, the two statues flickered once, then vanished.

Anna jolted back to full awareness and immediately wished she hadn't.

With her vision now restored, the creature before her was no longer a

vague shadow.

It was an enormous snake. Far bigger than she'd imagined.

The snake's head alone was the size of a car. Its gleaming fangs were at least a foot long. Blood clung to its mouth in smeared, dark streaks, and its eyes a deep, furious red. They looked intelligent and hungry.

The pressure on Anna hadn't eased. The snake was still squeezing. She glanced around in panic and realized she was over twenty feet off the ground, suspended in midair, coiled within a living mountain of white-scaled muscle. But even with all that horror in front of her, something even more surreal caught her eye: floating just above the snake's head in her HUD.

RARE GREAT SIREN SNAKE LVL:???

[MONSTER]

A long red health bar floated beneath the name.

The snake no longer seemed focused on Anna. Its massive head swayed from side to side, scanning the village ruins as if searching for something. Each movement was tense and agitated.

It looked skyward and released a thundering roar, deeper than before, vibrating its coiled mass. The sound tore through the air like a shockwave. Anna felt her eardrums rupture, pain lancing through her skull. She cried out and squeezed her eyes shut, every nerve in her head screaming.

The monstrous bellow cut off so abruptly that Anna thought she'd gone deaf for a moment.

She opened her eyes to a thin red line across the snake's scales, angled

just below the base of its head. The snake's neck remained stretched toward the sky, unmoving.

Blood began to leak. It started as a slow drip but quickly swelled to a bubbling stream. Within seconds, it poured from the wound in a torrent, like water from a broken dam. The creature let out a rattling, gurgling croak as it choked on its own blood.

Above its head, the red health bar plummeted.

The snake's neck wavered left and right, unsteady, fighting to remain upright. With a final lurch, the massive head dropped, smashing through the roof of a nearby cottage in a deafening crash. Wood splintered. Stone crumbled. Under the weight, the building collapsed.

Its health bar vanished. The creature's name flickered once:

~~**RARE GREAT SIREN SNAKE LVL:???**~~

~~**[MONSTER]**~~

Now crossed out with a single, clean line.

Its coils slackened and slid away as its body went limp. Air rushed back into Anna's lungs, and blood prickled through her limbs. A dizzy wave of relief followed.

But in that moment of confused victory, she forgot one crucial detail: she was still twenty feet off the ground, suspended in the coils of a now-dead creature.

She plunged, screaming, slipping through the loosened coils toward the ground racing up to meet her.

She slammed into the earth, shoulders first, and everything went black.

CHAPTER 03

Time passed, or maybe it didn't. There was no sense to it. Just darkness.

Then pain slowly crept in. Anna stirred awake. Her body ached like she'd been hit by a truck, then backed over for good measure. Her head throbbed with a deep, rhythmic pounding. She was lying on something cold and hard. A road, maybe. Her limbs stretched out, useless and heavy.

Somewhere in the far distance, she heard a faint sound, a wet squelch, wet and repetitive.

Her eyes fluttered open and immediately slammed shut again as light pierced her skull like a blade. She winced, groaning, and smacked her lips in reflex.

Cherry?

A thick, syrupy taste clung to her tongue. Sharp, medicinal... but weirdly tasty.

She smacked her lips again. *Yeah, tastes like cherry.*

She glanced in the corner of her vision. Her health bar sat at half, which was shockingly generous, considering she'd just been body-slammed by gravity.

Then she noticed it. The red bar was expanding steadily, inching toward full.

She was regenerating.

Anna groaned as she sat up, every movement sending a fresh wave of nausea rolling through her. She looked down instinctively, checking for damage. Her pajamas had several tears, with ripped fabric and frayed seams, but her skin was almost untouched.

This made little sense. After being crushed by a creature of coiled muscle and razor-edged scales, she expected at least some injuries. Instead, she found only a few shallow scrapes. No broken bones, no bruises, not even a fresh cut.

Scanning the world around her, the village was eerily still, dust hung in the air, glowing faintly in the sunlight. The massive corpse of the snake lay sprawled across the road beside her, unmoving. Its pale, scaled body warped, like the aftermath of a storm frozen in time.

Anna rose slowly. Her legs trembled beneath her, knees threatening to buckle. The ache in her muscles ran deep, dulled only by the lingering haze of adrenaline and confusion.

She turned toward the squishy sound she'd heard earlier. It hadn't stopped. It sliced through the quiet with a steady rhythm, like a knife working through raw meat.

She did not know where she was, what she was supposed to do next, or how to even comprehend what had happened.

Something was still alive. And she needed to see it.

She limped toward the corpse, each step sending a fresh jolt through her sore limbs. The snake's thick, round body stood nearly to her full height, a grotesque wall of pale, scaly flesh.

Carefully, she traced the curve of its enormous coils winding through

the village street.

At last, she reached the place where the snake's head had crashed through the cottage. The building itself was half-collapsed around it, shattered beams and stone now tangled with the beast's lifeless bulk.

But the sound wasn't coming from the wreckage. It came from inside the snake's head.

Softly. Speedy. Talking to itself?

And the slicing sound grew louder.

Deliberate. Focused.

Someone was in there.

And they hadn't finished cutting.

The snake's head twitched as Anna approached, jerking in small, sudden spasms. Something thin and furry was sticking out of its mouth.

Anna stopped in her tracks, ready to flee at the next sign of danger.

A muffled voice echoed from inside the skull.

“Almost there, I can do this, I can do - OW!”

A sickening tear of muscle followed, and something small tumbled out of the snake's jaw, drenched in blood and clutching a massive snake fang like a trophy.

Anna screamed and stumbled back, heart lurching as the thing hit the ground, skidded, then sprang upright on four limbs. It spun in place, giddy and wild with uncontainable glee.

“YOU’RE AWAKE??” it shrieked.

The creature - small and drenched in gore bolted toward her, flinging blood and gunk with every overjoyed step.

“MOM MOM MOM MOM MOM!” it cried, voice shrill with excitement.

Before Anna could move, it hurled itself into her lap like a carnage-slicked plush toy launched from a cannon. It immediately began purring, loud and uneven, like a tiny blender.

Tiny paws went to work, kneading Anna’s stomach in a steady rhythm. Its head nuzzled under her chin, and it smeared her already-ruined pajamas in what could only be described as... reptile jam.

“Mi... Mimi?” Anna whispered.

“I KNEW YOU’D BE HERE SOMEDAY!!” the cat crowed, still purring and kneading.

Anna just stared, too shocked to function, blinking at the writhing mess in her lap.

Text flickered to life above the creature’s head:

GREAT BEAST HERO MIMI LI LVL: 8

[HERO]

The same font as the snake. Except Mimi’s health bar was comically short. Like, house-cat short.

Still stunned, Anna blinked hard and looked closer.

This creature on her lap was the same size as Mimi. Same round, fluffy

belly. Same stormy grey fur, thinning around the temples from years of wall-rubs against every corner in her apartment. Same grey-brown toe beans, twitching happily as they kneaded her enthusiastically.

And... there was the armor.

Because of course this creature claiming to be Mimi, purring in her lap, covered in snake blood, shouting “Mom” like a broken alarm clock, was wearing a full set of black tactical plate armor.

Strapped to her tiny feline frame was a breastplate polished to a mirror sheen, etched with faint glowing patterns that pulsed softly in the light. The craftsmanship looked... expensive. Like ancient-and-enchanted expensive. Like someone poured a royal budget into armoring a dangerous house pet.

The sword, or rather, the dagger - a standard human-sized dagger, now sheathed across her tiny back like a full-blown longsword. The hilt alone was half her height, angled perfectly for a dramatic over-the-shoulder draw.

The rest of the armor matched: segmented gauntlets, reinforced knee guards, and shoulder plates marked with a single paw print.

The entire ensemble radiated something ancient and absurdly overpowered, as if this armor hadn't been forged, but rather unlocked after a lifetime of side quests, boss battles, and cosmic roll checks.

“Mimi?” Anna whispered. She gently cupped the cat's face in both hands, tilting its head upward. Wide green eyes stared back, one of them flecked with tiny brown spots. Melanosis. Just like Mimi's.

The cat let out a soft, trembling meow.

“Mimi...” Anna breathed, her voice catching.

Relief swelled inside her, rising too fast to contain. She pulled the tiny cat into her arms and held her close. Tears spilled down her cheeks before she even realized she was crying. Confusion, fear, adrenaline, all of it drowned under the rush of joy. Familiar weight. Familiar warmth. For one impossibly perfect moment, nothing else mattered.

She was here. Mimi was here. And that was enough.

The little cat leaned into the hug, purring so deeply it seemed to vibrate through her armor and into Anna’s ribs.

“I thought I’d never see you again!” Anna cried, voice cracking with laughter and tears. Anna squeezed tighter. And tighter. Mimi squirmed.

“Mom, that’s enough. I can’t breathe.” Mimi wheezed, voice muffled somewhere in the folds of Anna’s arms.

With a grunt, the cat wriggled free, flopping onto the ground with an exaggerated huff and a little armored metallic clink. Her tail flicked behind her in sharp, irritated beats, ears pinned back in familiar feline protest.

Back home, Mimi had never been a fan of being smothered. Hugging her too long usually earned Anna a gentle but assertive paw to the face. Sometimes a scratch. Always the attitude.

“Well, you’re definitely my Mimi,” Anna said with a breathless laugh, brushing a streak of snake blood from her cheek.

Before Mimi could reply, a soft ascending chime rang in Anna’s ears.

A pop-up blinked into view.

QUEST COMPLETE: FIND YOUR HERO

You May Now Party With Your Hero

Anna squinted. "... Party?"

The message flickered and shifted:

REWARD UNLOCKED: UNIQUE LOOT BOX

Before Anna could react, the menu vanished with a polite pop.

"I got a loot box! For finding you!" Mimi shouted, eyes wide with surprise.

"I just got one too," Anna said, then froze mid-celebration. "Wait... HOW ARE YOU ABLE TO TALK?!?!?"

Mimi looked up at her as if Anna's rudeness was the real shock.

"First, I've always been able to talk. You just couldn't understand me. Second, I think the system's translating everything I say into... human?"

Anna blinked. "The system? You mean the pop-ups and quests?"

"Yeah, you've got one too, riiiiight?" Mimi said, drawing out the word with a little wiggle of her ears.

"Hold on," Anna held up a hand. "You've always been able to talk?"

"Of course. Every time I meowed at you, I was saying something," Mimi said matter-of-factly. "Sometimes you got it. But most of the time, you just stared at me like an idiot. I thought you were dumb, if I'm being honest."

“Hey, that’s not nice!” Anna said, standing up. She tried to wipe the blood off her arms but only ground it deeper into her pajamas.

“Hang on, I’ve got something for that,” Mimi said. She held up her right paw, and a small swirl of white light blinked into existence, floating gently in mid-air. Mimi stepped forward, pushed her paw straight into the glow, disappearing past the wrist like she was reaching through a portal. Her tongue poked out in concentration as she rummaged through thin air. Then, with a triumphant little grunt, she yanked her paw back... now holding two small bottles filled with shimmering purple liquid.

Anna just stared. “I have so many questions right now.” She muttered.

“Shoot,” Mimi said, offering Anna a bottle like this was perfectly normal.

“Okay, okay, um...” Anna’s brain spun for a starting point. “How are you holding those bottles?”

Mimi blinked slowly. “That’s your question? Not how I pulled them out of thin air? Not why I’m wearing armor? Not how I one-shot a Rare Great Siren Snake? Or where the hell we even are?”

Anna hesitated, then insisted. “...Yes?”

Mimi sighed. “Unbelievable.”

She lifted a paw. “Well, it’s actually pretty cool. I have - drumroll - magic thumbs.” Anna leaned in. A soft shimmer flared around Mimi’s dewclaw as something extended. It’s not a human thumb, but a feline version of one. It curved slightly outward, like an extra-articulated claw wrapped in light, glowing faintly as it flexed. The rest of her toe beans adjusted effortlessly, wrapping neatly around the bottle.

“I can grip, pinch, and even snap. It’s a game changer,” Mimi said proudly. “No wonder humans are so smug about their opposable thumbs. Ten out of ten. Would recommend.”

Without hesitation, Mimi uncorked the bottle and poured the purple liquid straight over her head.

Anna yelped. “What are you -”

Mimi stood perfectly still as the glowing potion rolled down her fur and armor like silk. It coated her from ears to tail in a fizzy layer of violet shimmer, gurgling softly like a freshly poured soda.

Anna stared, wide-eyed.

The liquid slid off Mimi’s paws and pooled on the ground in a bubbling swirl. Her face emerged from the shimmer, and she was completely clean.

Her fur looked freshly fluffed, soft and immaculate. Not a speck of blood remained. Even her armor gleamed, the obsidian-toned metal polished to a mirror shine.

Mimi, with a grin, blinked up at Anna. “Refreshing,” she said. Then, with a proud little flick of her tail, added, “These potions clean you up nicely on the fly. You should try it. You smell... well. Yeah.”

Anna wondered if this was all a fever dream. Or maybe brain damage. Or the world’s most elaborate prank sponsored by bath products. And honestly, if bath products were willing to go this far, who was she to say no?

With a sigh, she uncorked the bottle.

The potion poured out thick as conditioner, coating her in a slick violet

sheen. Then it sank in, bubbling and fizzing, slipping into every pore. The sensation was somewhere between a warm facial and a full-body massage at a spa so exclusive it probably required a generational trust fund. When the liquid peeled away, it felt like it took more than just snake guts with it. The grime, the tension, the bone-deep fatigue lodged between her shoulders from pretending she was fine - all of it sloughed off and disappeared.

“Oh... my... god,” Anna whispered.

“It’s good, RIIIGHT??” Mimi beamed.

“That was amazing.” Anna sniffed herself. “I smell like... actual flowers.”

Mimi sighed. “Yeah, well, don’t get used to it. Those things cost a fortune. I only had two.”

“Great,” Anna muttered. “Blew my luxury spa pass on day one.”

Her head still buzzed. So much had happened in the last few hours. A new world. A giant siren snake. Mimi... talking. Not just talking but fighting. Wearing armor. Wielding a sword. Anna wobbled slightly, the weight of it all finally crashing down.

“Whoa, easy there, Mom.” Mimi padded closer, her voice soft with concern. “I know it’s a lot to take in.”

Before Anna could answer, a deep roar rolled across the hills and through the ruins. Not the hissy shriek of the siren snake, this one was something else. Lower and heavier. The ground rumbled beneath it.

Mimi froze. Her ears rotated, then flattened. She stared into the distance, scanning. “That’s... new.”

Anna's heart skipped. "You don't know what it is?"

"Nope." Mimi's tone sharpened, clipped and alert. "But whatever it is, it's big. And it's headed this way."

"You can kill it, right?"

Mimi thought for a second. "Hmm, probably? But let's not risk it with you being here." She scooped up the massive fang she'd pried from the snake and flicked it into her inventory with a swirl of light. Then she trotted back to Anna, nudging her shin with a firm head-butt. "Let's go."

Anna didn't argue. She turned and followed Mimi, weaving through the shattered buildings and out the broken gate, back into the wide, grassy hills.

CHAPTER 04

“Are we... safe now?” Anna panted, glancing nervously over her shoulder.

“Safe-ish,” Mimi called back without slowing.

Anna grunted and kept running, because apparently safe-ish still meant keep moving or die.

The rhythm of their movement settled in: paws thudding, bare feet dragging through the grass, and Anna’s breathing growing heavier, more uneven.

“My vibe bar is empty,” Anna gasped.

Mimi skidded to a stop and turned, squinting at her. “Your what?”

Anna pointed weakly at the purple bar hovering on her HUD. “This purple thing. It’s been shrinking since we started running. I figured it was morale. Emotional wellness. You know... vibes.”

“That’s your stamina,” Mimi said flatly.

“What? No, stamina is green. Sometimes yellow. Who makes stamina purple?” Anna was flabbergasted.

“I don’t know. I didn’t design the interface,” Mimi deadpanned.

Anna groaned and dropped onto the grass like a sack of potatoes. “I hate it here.”

Mimi trotted over, tail flicking. “Keep moving. You collapsing in an

open field doesn't exactly scream 'safe-ish.'"

With a wheeze, Anna dragged herself upright. "Fine. But no more running, like ever!"

They continued at a slower pace, Anna trudged beside her armored cat.

"So," she managed between breaths, "it seems like you've been here for a while now?"

"About a month," Mimi said with a nod. "I had a feeling you'd show up eventually. Then today - boom! I got a quest out of nowhere." Her eyes lit up. "It told me to find my squire and dropped a little dot on my compass. I followed it. And it led me to you."

"But you were just with me last night..." Anna said slowly, trying to piece together the timeline.

"I don't know how it works," Mimi shrugged. "I went to sleep. I woke up here. Like a month ago."

"But why am I the squire and you're the hero?" Anna asked, squinting at her cat.

"I think you mean Great. Beast. Hero. Please say it right. Thank you, thank you," Mimi replied, tail swishing with pride. "I don't know why you're a squire. I mean, yes, you were technically my assistant back home -"

"I was not." Anna rolled her eyes.

"So it sort of tracks. Still, I feel a tiny bit bad that you came all this way just to be my sidekick." She tilted her head. "What build did you pick?"

"YOU GOT TO PICK A BUILD??" Anna shouted, outrage bursting

out of her like steam from a cracked kettle.

“...Yeah? You didn’t?” Mimi blinked, ears twitching. “When I first woke up in a field, I got a HUD. Then a tutorial thingy popped up -”

“You got a tutorial??”

“Yeah, but I rushed through it. I wanted to fight like an assassin, but I made a mistake -”

“You made a mistake??”

Mimi narrowed her eyes. “Are you going to do that every time I talk?”

Anna threw up her hands. “Sorry. It’s just the injustice in the system!”

“Anyway,” Mimi said with a sniff. “I mis clicked or whatever and ended up picking a barbarian-warrior build. Totally not what I wanted.” She paused, waiting for another Anna’s outburst. But Anna just sighed and waved for her to continue.

“So yeah,” Mimi said, perking up again. “Then, this armor just spawned on me. Pretty cool, right?”

She shook her armor proudly, metal clinking. “You see this chest plate?” Mimi puffed out her chest. “It gives me eighty Constitution and sixty Strength.”

She lifted a front paw, showing off her gauntlets. “These? Fifteen Strength, each.”

Then she kicked up a back leg, flashing her knee guards. “And these babies give me another thirty strength combined.”

“And it came with a helmet that gives me twenty extra Constitution,” Mimi said, puffing her chest. “But it squashes my ears, so... I don’t

wear it.”

Anna blinked. “Constitution, strength, like... RPG?”

“Yep! I’ve never played one, but I did watch you sink 170 hours into Baldur’s Gate 3, so I kind of knew what I was doing. Though heads up, there is way less spicy romance here. So maybe don’t hold your breath for a brooding Victorian vampire with a tragic backstory.”

“I only did those romance quests for the XP,” Anna said, cheeks turning pink.

Mimi snorted. “Mom, you watched lore videos. Plural. You were emotionally invested.”

“I would’ve skipped all those side romances if I knew one day I’d be judged by my cat,” Anna muttered to herself, flustered. She tried to change the subject and pointed at the dagger strapped to Mimi’s back. “What about that? Looks lethal.”

“Oh! That’s The Claw,” Mimi said, beaming. “It came with the armor, along with a giant sword. But I sold that one. Way too big for me.”

She held up the dagger proudly. “This one’s the perfect size. I just use this as my sword now.”

“You sold the -” Anna caught herself before repeating more. She sighed. “Go on.”

“So, The Claw? If I stab something and land a critical hit, I can one-shot it,” Mimi said proudly, puffing out her tiny, armored chest like a smug little war general.

“That’s how you killed the snake!” Anna gasped.

“Exactly!” Mimi puffed up with pride, her tail high like a little furry antenna. “I climbed up onto the roof when it was focused on you, jumped down, and slashed it with all my might right across its neck. Full anime moment.”

“Well done, Mimi. If you think about it, you kinda killed it like an assassin.” Anna crouched down and gave her a stroke.

Mimi leaned into it. “Exactly,” she started purring, “a really strong assassin.”

Anna smiled, but the mention of stats, gear, and abilities sparked a sudden curiosity. Wait... what are my stats?

As if triggered by thought, a window blinked into her vision. A shorter, less enthusiastic chime accompanied it.

**ATTRIBUTE POINT FEATURE CURRENTLY
NOT AVAILABLE FOR SQUIRES**

“Why can’t I see my own stats?” Anna asked.

“You can’t?” Mimi tilted her head. “Weird. I can see mine anytime. Just think about it, and a window pops up. Easy.”

Anna tried again, focusing on the system. The same window blinked into view:

**ATTRIBUTE POINT FEATURE CURRENTLY
NOT AVAILABLE FOR SQUIRES**

“It says it’s not available...” she sighed.

“Maybe your system’s defective.” Mimi offered casually.

Of course, it was broken. Just her luck.

Anna had never been lucky. She was a successful trader not because of luck, but because she was disciplined - waking up at 4 a.m. to prep for the market open, still logging every trade, never risking more than 2% of her portfolio.

Now she was whisked from her warm bed to become her cat’s squire, and her system didn’t even work.

Sounded about right, for someone whose luck always came with conditions.

She rolled her eyes and waved the window away with a pop.

Fine. If she couldn’t see her own stats, maybe she could at least see what kind of ridiculous stats her armored cat was rocking.

With the interface open, she shifted her gaze toward Mimi, and...she focused. The display shimmered and then updated.

GREAT BEAST HERO MIMI LI LVL: 08

[HERO]

The same title appeared just beneath that, barely visible. A fine-print message appeared like a smug footnote:

PLEASE UNLOCK PERCEPTION TO INSPECT.

“Really? I’m not even allowed to see my own cat’s stats?” Anna muttered.

The message lingered in the center of her vision like a quiet insult. She

waved it away with a sigh, and turned to Mimi. “Perception?”

“Perception is a skill,” Mimi said. “You gain experience by using it, and it ranks up by proficiency. I had to do a lot of just... staring at things to get mine from Novice to Apprentice.”

“Well, you are good at that,” Anna replied. “Always creeping around the apartment, silently watching me from random corners.”

“Someone had to keep an eye on you,” Mimi sniffed. “At Novice rank, you can only see ten levels above you. What’s your perception proficiency now?”

“How do I even find out?” Anna asked, already annoyed.

“In your skills tab,” Mimi said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Anna opened her interface with a thought and dug around. Nothing. She sighed. “I don’t have a skills tab.”

“Maybe you haven’t unlocked it yet. You probably have to, like, successfully do something first,” Mimi said, waving a paw vaguely. “Y’know. Contribute.”

“Hang on, I can read your attributes for you.” She grinned and pointed at herself with exaggerated pride, then paused, squinting into the air like she was reading something only she could see.

“Anna Li, Level 1,” she announced dramatically. “Strength: 1. Intelligence: 5. Constitution: 2. Dexterity: 1. Charisma: 1.”

“That seems... bad.” Anna mumbled.

“It’s quite pathetic.” Mimi said matter-of-factly.

“Mimi! That’s not helping!” Anna protested.

“But hey, it’s just level 1. I started with only 10 attribute points too.” Mimi brightened, trying to soften the blow. “We can get you leveled up, get you some cool armor or weapons. Could balance things out.”

Anna grumbled under her breath, a quiet soup of jealousy and resignation. But she was too tired to keep bantering. Too tired to ask more questions.

Mimi’s ears flicked. She glanced up at Anna, reading her like a very tired book. “Let’s keep moving. We’ll get you sorted out, okay, Mom?”

“Yeah... sure,” Anna said it softly, defeated.

Mimi gave a satisfied little nod, then with a shake of her fur, she trotted ahead. Her tail swayed with purpose, flicking like a small banner as she led the way forward once more.

The duo continued walking in silence. Mimi hummed cheerfully to herself, a jaunty little tune that sounded vaguely familiar to Anna, though she couldn’t quite place it. She stared out at the horizon, her thoughts as empty as the rolling hills ahead. The suns, yes, plural, still glared down on them, seemingly frozen in the sky.

Anna frowned. Hadn’t they been walking for ages?

“Mimi,” she said, her voice dry, “why hasn’t the sun moved?”

Mimi looked up, then shrugged. “Oh. Yeah. The days here are super long. Way longer than back home. Like... I think nights are only six hours or so, if that.”

“That doesn’t seem... natural.”

“Riiight? And the days have been getting longer.” Mimi sulked, “It

should be at least dusk by now. But lately, it just kind of... keeps going.”

Anna shielded her eyes, peering up at the two blazing spheres above. “Do we even know what they are?”

Mimi’s tail twitched. “Well, one’s definitely a sun. The other... maybe not. I’ve asked around, but nobody really wants to talk about it. Like, seriously uncomfortable. One guy acted like he didn’t hear me and walked straight into a fence.”

Anna blinked. “That’s not suspicious at all.”

“Riiight? And I have absurdly high Charisma. If even I can’t get answers, something’s off.”

Anna nodded slowly, eyes still on the sky. She didn’t like the sound of that.

And with that, they kept walking, two small figures under an endless sky that refused to dim.

CHAPTER 05

They had been walking for what felt like hours. The suns were finally on the verge of setting, the strange pink and orange sky deepening into shades of violet and dusty brown. For all its chaos and danger, this world did offer some truly spectacular sunsets.

One of the suns - the bright golden one - sank behind the hills at last, casting a final splash of warmth across the land. The ancient red sun still lingered high above, dimmed and ghostlike, barely visible now in the darkening sky.

Then night fell. The temperature dropped sharply, the shadows vanished, and the moon rose, fast and full, climbing into the sky beside the dimmed red sun, which still hung there, but no longer casting light of its own, just glowing faintly under the silver wash of the real moon. Now it looked as if there were two moons in the sky, one alive, one an echo.

Anna's legs ached, her feet were sore, and every part of her felt heavy with exhaustion. She was barely keeping up with her cat.

"We're almost there!" Mimi suddenly shouted, startling Anna out of her haze.

Nestled in a shallow valley between the hills, glowing softly against the dark, was a town. A tall log barricade encircled it, its top lined with torches that flickered steadily. Watchtowers stood at intervals along the wall, each crowned with a golden flame casting long shadows.

From where Anna stood, the town looked small. It was contained,

cautious, but alive. Lanterns shimmered inside clustered cottages. If she listened closely, she could hear laughter and music carried on the breeze. And she could swear she smelled it too: something warm and savory drifting from the chimneys, permeating the night air.

“What is this place?” Anna asked, her voice quiet with a mix of hope and hesitation.

“Hearthmere!” Mimi chirped. “That’s where I’ve been staying for the past month. Everyone’s super nice! Food’s a bit boring, though. I’ve been trying to get Rebecca to recreate Fancy Feast, but she keeps using herbs.”

Anna raised a brow. “Oh, not the herbs!” She knew all too well how deep Mimi’s Fancy Feast obsession ran.

“Riiight?” Mimi said, dead serious. “Anyway, whatever you do, do not trade with Leroy. Sure, he gave me a decent deal on that great sword I sold, but he’s been a complete headache ever since.”

Anna was about to ask more questions, but a soft chime rang out first. A new pop-up appeared in front of her:

NEW LOCATION DISCOVERED: HEARTHMERE

She dismissed it with a blink.

“And... we’re safe there?” she asked, the thought of seeing other people in this strange world making her stomach flutter.

“Super safe,” Mimi said with full confidence. “I know everyone. Not a safer spot down here, promise.”

Anna nodded slowly, putting all her trust in her talking cat. “Okay.

Let's do it."

The two travelers approached the walled town by way of a narrow dirt path. Anna slowed her pace as they passed a group of creatures that looked vaguely bovine. They were massive, easily twice the size of a bull, with dark reddish-brown fur and two broad humps at their backs like a camel. Each one had a pair of tight spiral horns that curved inward.

One of them turned to Anna, narrowed its eyes, and let out a deep, guttural "MOOOO."

Anna flinched. "Should we be worried about those?"

"What? The Boscula?" Mimi waved a paw dismissively. "Nah, they're sweethearts."

The Boscula in question had not stopped staring. It scraped a hoof against the ground.

"Uh-huh," Anna muttered, keeping a healthy distance.

As they drew closer to the wall, Anna spotted deep claw marks scored into the wooden barricade, huge gouges, like someone had raked it with tree-sized talons. The sight made her stomach twist. Whatever made those marks wasn't sweet. Or a heart.

Mimi padded right up to the gate and knocked four times with her tiny paw. The sound echoed like a war drum, unnaturally loud for something so small.

Anna blinked. *How strong is this cat?*

A rectangular hatch creaked open at Anna's eye level. Behind it, a pair of tired, bloodshot eyes stared out.

“What do you want?” the old man asked, voice like sandpaper.

Anna opened her mouth to answer.

“Down here, Barry,” Mimi called.

She snapped her magic thumbs with a sharp crack.

“Oh. Mimi. Why didn’t you say so?”

The upper hatch slammed shut. A second, much smaller one opened lower down, right at Mimi-height.

“Who’s the girl?” Barry’s voice came out in a whisper, like he was trying to keep Anna from hearing, with Anna standing right there.

“She’s cool, Barry. Don’t worry,” Mimi whispered back, in the same fake-hushed tone.

“You know we don’t like outsiders,” Barry muttered. “Nor uninvited guests. Especially ones in... such weird attire.”

“Barry Barry Barry,” Mimi said, sounding like a used car salesman.

“She looks weird, Mimi.” Barry gave Anna a quick once-over, as if justifying his disgust.

Anna raised an eyebrow. Was she seriously being judged by a gatekeeper who was talking to a cat?

“I don’t care if she looks weird. We’re letting her in.” Mimi slapped a paw against the wooden gate for dramatic effect.

“I’m telling Ivan about this,” Barry grumbled.

“Oh, please. First of all, Ivan adores me. Second, if you tell him, I’ll be

sure to tell him about your little adventures with Brianna the other - ”

“FINE. Fine. Just don’t mention that. I’ll let you both in.”

The hatch slammed shut.

Behind the wall, Barry’s voice could be heard bellowing something unintelligible.

“See?” Mimi said brightly. “All good!”

She lifted a paw and pointed toward the tiny window at her height. “By the way, they made this just for me,” she added with a proud little wiggle. “Custom cat window.”

“OPEN THE GATE!” a young man shouted from one of the watchtowers, his voice carrying cleanly through the night air. A moment later, another figure raised a large Boscua horn and blew. The sound was deep and resonant, low enough that Anna felt it in her chest like a drumbeat.

Anna watched as the log wall before her split down the middle and slowly swung open. Hidden behind the thick timber, she could hear the groan of gears and the hiss of unseen mechanisms at work.

“Come on, let’s go. They don’t like leaving the gate open for long,” Mimi said, giving her a nudge.

They stepped through the open gate and into the town. Another horn blew behind them, deeper this time, and the gate rumbled shut with a final thud that echoed down the narrow street.

“Thanks, Barryyyyyy,” Mimi chirped as they passed the old man now standing beside the gate. He gave her a warm nod and a smile, then turned to Anna with a look that could curdle milk.

Mimi didn't seem to notice. "Stick close, Mom!" she called over her shoulder.

A long, packed-dirt road stretched out ahead, flanked by rows of squat houses and clustered shops built from wattle and daub, their rough white walls cradled by thick wooden beams, and topped with sagging thatched roofs. The town's architecture was humble, practical over pretty, with none of the ornate flourishes Anna had seen in the ruined city.

The air hit her next. Damp earth, wood-smoke, and the unmistakable sting of manure clung to everything. It smelled of work. Like people lived here not for leisure, but for survival.

The street bustled with life. Dozens of people, ranging from toddlers wobbling after their parents to elders hunched with age, moved through their end-of-day routines. Lanterns were being lit. Shopkeepers packed up stalls. Someone called for a child to come inside.

To Anna's surprise, everyone looked human. She had half expected to see elves, dwarves, hobbits, or something equally mythological wandering about. But there were no pointed ears, no beards to the knees, no furry-footed folk. Maybe those kinds of beings existed somewhere else in this world, but not here. Not in this muddy little town tucked into a valley.

Everyone looked as if they'd walked straight out of a medieval reenactment village. The women wore long sleeveless tunics with hooded scarves; the men wore plain linen shirts and loose trousers. Everything was brown, gray, or some variation of "mud." Anna, barefoot, in bright red pajamas, might as well have been wearing a neon sign that said, "Not From Here."

A young boy came barreling straight toward Anna, barefoot and grinning, a wooden sword clutched in one hand. His tunic was too big for him, sleeves rolled up haphazardly, flapping as he ran. Anna sidestepped just in time.

As he dashed past her, a small icon blinked into view beside him - a magnifying glass. Instinctively, she focused on it.

SAM OAKHEART LVL: 1

[???

Strength: 1

Intelligence: 2

Constitution: 2

Dexterity: 3

Charm: 2

Appeared in a glowing text bubble above the boy, with a small red health bar underneath.

With a chime, a new pop-up flashed across her vision:

NEW SKILL UNLOCKED: PERCEPTION

OPEN SKILLS TAB TO VIEW.

Anna gasped, eyes wide. Her first successful Perception check! She was absolutely giddy. Not only did it work, but she finally unlocked her Skills tab as well. The possibilities!

She dismissed the pop-up and, with a thought, opened her interface. A new menu greeted her:

SKILLS:

COMBAT SKILLS: 0

CRAFTING SKILLS: 0

SUPPORT SKILLS: 0

SOCIAL SKILLS: 1

One skill. She has one singular skill.

That was it.

What about all the skills she actually had back home? She could sew. She could cook. She was great at trading stocks. She even took watercolor classes for six months! None of that showed up?

Seriously? Was she expected to start from scratch?

Frustration bubbled up as she tapped the Social Skills tab.

There, sitting alone like an awkward kid at lunch, was:

PERCEPTION: NOVICE

“Keep up, Mom!” Mimi called out, already a dozen feet ahead.

Anna closed the menu and caught up with Mimi. Still... it was comforting to know she'd unlocked her first skill - even if it was just for identifying a Level 1.

Mimi led Anna through the crowds, onlookers turning, gazes locked onto the duo. Low murmurs trailed in their path as the townsfolk muttered among themselves.

“Mimi, everyone is staring.” Anna whispered through a clenched smile. “Are you sure we're even supposed to be here?”

“Oh yeah. Same thing happened to me when I first showed up. Some thought I was a monster. And my talking didn’t help much. I had to dump a few points into charisma before anyone stopped throwing things at me.” Mimi shrugged, like it was the most normal thing in the world.

The image of villagers pelting Mimi with cabbages was both horrifying and weirdly easy to picture. A few townsfolk still gave them odd glances as they passed, but no one looked ready to launch vegetables today.

Mimi veered off the main street, weaving through the crowd toward a sturdy, three-story building that looked like it had stories of its own. A wooden sign swung overhead, creaking faintly with each breeze.

“The Broken Mug” written in bold, chipped paint. Except... it wasn’t written in any language Anna recognized. And yet, she knew what it said. Was the system translating for her?

From inside came the sounds of clinking mugs, off-key singing, chairs scraping, then a crash, followed by laughter. Chaos of the lively kind.

Mimi stopped at the door and turned to Anna. “All right, this is where I’ve been staying the past month,” Mimi said, gesturing toward the tavern. “The owner lets me crash upstairs in exchange for a little monster hunting. Pretty sweet deal. Just... be cool, okay?”

Anna narrowed her eyes. “What does be cool mean?”

“You know, just... be cool,” Mimi shrugged. “I know crowds aren’t your thing, and it can get a little loud in there. Just brace yourself. You’ll be fine.”

How her cat knew she didn’t vibe with crowds was beyond Anna. She wasn’t antisocial, just more of an introvert who preferred spreadsheets

and books over strangers and loud noises.

“Okay...,” Anna said, steeling herself.

“Wait - I almost forgot,” Mimi held out her paw. “Shake my paw.”

Anna blinked. “What for?”

“Just do it.”

Hesitantly, Anna gave her a shake.

“You, Anna Li, are now officially in my paaaaarty!” Mimi announced, tail flicking with excitement.

As if on cue, a chime rang and a glowing window popped up:

Anna Li has joined the party “The Li Girls.”

“I dig the party name, but what does it do?” Anna said.

“It’s cute, riiight?” Mimi beamed. “We can share buffs, experience, and no friendly fire between party members.”

Anna opened her mouth to ask more, but Mimi had already turned to the door. With a graceful leap, she caught the knob between both paws, twisted, and landed neatly as the door swung open with a soft thud.

CHAPTER 06

Inside, the tavern stretched wide and open. Five long picnic-style tables were scattered across the room. A bar lined one wall, and a massive stone fireplace crackled at the far end, radiating warmth. It was packed. Every table buzzed with noise and motion, the air thick with the scent of roast meat, spilled ale, and the slightly off-key twang of a lute player strumming near the fireplace with desperate enthusiasm.

As Mimi trotted in, an older woman with long white hair and a deep green dress caught sight of her. The woman stopped mid-step, her gaze locking on them with a look of suspicion. One by one, heads turned. Conversations trailed off. The room hushed. And just like that, the entire tavern was staring.

Anna shifted uncomfortably, suddenly hyperaware of her bare feet and loud pajamas. She glanced at Mimi, hoping for guidance or maybe an exit strategy. Instead, she found her cat grinning - full teeth, zero shame, absolutely radiating.

A bold strum of the lute broke the silence, followed by the bard belting out a triumphant note that filled the room. He launched into a fast-paced rhythm, and to Anna's shock, the entire tavern burst into song.

"It's the eye of the tiger, it's the shadow with claws,

Leaping high through the storm to defend her own cause,

She's the last gleaming whisper in the stillness of night,

And she's watching them all with the eye of the tiger,"

Mimi bobbed her head in time with the beat, her tail flicking, the grin on her face somehow even smugger than before. She looked utterly in her element, basking in the attention like a celebrity at a fan convention.

"Mimi, what is happening right now?" Anna whispered, crouching down to the cat's level.

"Oh, it's just a little song they wrote about me," Mimi said, eyes locked on the musician. "Well. Technically, I gave some notes. So really, we co-wrote it."

The melody tugged at Anna's memory; something about it was weirdly familiar. Then it hit her. This was the same tune Mimi had been humming on the walk over. And the lyrics? Her jaw dropped.

It was "Eye of the Tiger." Remixed. In medieval fantasy tavern style. About her cat.

Before Anna could press further, the song soared into a dramatic crescendo. The entire tavern erupted into cheers and applause, tankards raised, feet stomping. Then, just as quickly as it began, the moment passed. People turned back to their drinks and conversations as if nothing unusual had happened.

Anna blinked. "Why 'eye of a tiger'?"

"Because I told them that's what I am," Mimi replied breezily, finally glancing back at her with a smug flick of her whiskers.

"But you're not. You're clearly a house cat," Anna said, incredulous.

"They don't know that! These people have never seen a tiger before.

Or a house cat, for that matter, cats don't exist in this world." Mimi replied. "I've always felt like I was meant to be a big hunter cat, and now... being here, this is my shot." There was a flicker of sadness in her voice.

Anna softened; she smiled and scratched behind Mimi's ear. "You got it... tiger."

Mimi's ears twitched with delight. She lifted her chin proudly and sauntered off toward the bar like she owned the place.

"But seriously, can you tell me what's up with the song?" Anna urged.

"Oh, that," Mimi said casually. "I've been doing a lot of odd jobs for these folks over the past month. Killing monsters, running errands between villages, fetching ingredients for potions and crafting, you know, side-quest stuff. So yeah, they like me." She gave a casual shrug. "Then one day the bard asked the crowd for song ideas, so I hummed the melody to 'Eye of the Tiger' as a joke... and he kind of ran with it."

"So... you're like their hero-tiger?" Anna asked, teasing.

"YES, THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT I AM!" Mimi declared. With a dramatic leap, Mimi landed on the bar, startling the patrons nearby. An older man spilled his drink and shot her a sharp look, only for it to soften almost immediately into something like adoration. A few people even chuckled, shaking their heads fondly.

Anna watched in quiet amazement. This wasn't just Mimi being dramatic. The townsfolk really did love her. It was strange seeing her like this: confident, adored, practically glowing with pride. A far cry from the skittish little cat who used to bolt under the bed at the sound of the doorbell.

"REBECCAAAAAAA," Mimi called out, drawing the word out with

dramatic flair, her voice playful and affectionate.

A large woman rounded the corner and stepped behind the bar, effortlessly hefting a wooden barrel nearly as long as Anna was tall. Anna mentally clicked on the tiny magnifying glass icon hovering near this large woman's head.

REBECCA BARLEY LVL: 6

[BARTENDER]

Strength: 5

Intelligence: 2

Constitution: 4

Dexterity: 1

Charisma: 3

Strength five? Yeah, no kidding. Anna thought to herself.

Rebecca looked like she'd grown up somewhere you either learned to throw a punch or took one daily. Her long brown hair, streaked with gray, was tied back in a thick braid. Even through her worn tunic, Anna could see the kind of muscle that came from real work.

"There she is, our little tiger!" Rebecca beamed, her voice rising several cheerful octaves, wrapped in that cozy Cockney lilt. "Come on then, love, what've you got for me today, eh? Somethin' special, I hope!"

Anna barely suppressed an eye-roll at the "tiger" comment while Mimi, entirely unfazed, lifted a paw and summoned her inventory. White swirls coiled around her wrist, the same visual flourish Anna had seen back in the fields. With a dramatic little shimmy, Mimi reached in and yanked out a full monster carcass, slamming it onto the bar with a

wet thud. Cups rattled. Ale splashed. Conversations paused.

The same old man who had previously side-eyed Mimi recoiled, lips twitching in disapproval, only to soften again into something weirdly affectionate, like she'd punched someone for the first time and he approved of the form. Then his eyes shifted to Anna. And that fondness evaporated instantly. His face twisted into a sour grimace before he turned away, as if she were the real problem in the room.

Anna ignored the look from the man, too busy being stunned by the sheer absurdity of fitting something that huge into what was essentially a cat's magical storage. She stepped closer to the bar; eyes fixed on the monster sprawled out before her.

The creature had the body of a wolf, blanketed in shaggy white fur, but its front legs were all wrong: scaled and taloned like a bird, each claw curved and gleaming like a kitchen knife. Two thick, spiraling horns jutted from its head, and a row of jagged fangs framed a gaping maw that looked dangerous even in death.

Anna inspected the creature. Translucent text blinked into view above the carcass:

VELKRYN

“Oh, so this perception thing also works on dead things,” Anna muttered to herself, making a mental note to ask Mimi later.

Rebecca leaned in, arms crossed and unimpressed. “That’s it? What about the Chickenraptors?”

“First of all, do you know how annoying it is to kill one of these things? Especially when they travel in packs!” Mimi huffed, licking her paw in a half-hearted attempt to disguise the creeping guilt in her voice. “And second... I may have forgotten about the Chickenraptors. It’s been a

busy day.” Then she perked up, and jabbed a paw toward Anna. “But I found my mother! And I heroically rescued her!”

Anna was taken aback. Mother? Sure, she’d always considered herself a cat mama jokingly, but being introduced as someone’s actual mother? That was new. She wasn’t sure if she was flattered, concerned, or just...overwhelmed. “Mother...” she echoed under her breath, half-smiling.

Rebecca let out a sigh and wiped her hands on her apron. “Right then, but you bring me them raptors tomorrow, yeah?” she said, giving Mimi a pointed look.

Then she turned to Anna, giving her a slow, skeptical once-over.

“And you’re tellin’ me she’s your mum?” Rebecca asked, raising an eyebrow

“Because... I’m not a, um, tiger?” Anna offered, not entirely sure herself.

“No. Because you’re scrawny!” Rebecca barked a laugh.

I’m the scrawny one? Anna thought, glancing at her two-foot-long house cat standing on the bar top. She swallowed whatever comeback was forming.

“She IS my mom,” Mimi declared, stepping closer to Anna with her tail held high. “She fed me, brushed me, tucked me in every night. So yeah, you better believe it.”

Rebecca shook her head, then chuckled. “Well, whatever you are, any friend of Mimi’s is a friend of mine. Name’s Rebecca. I run this charming mess of a place.”

“Hi... I’m Anna...” she said, extending a hand toward Rebecca.

Rebecca just stared at it, like Anna had offered her a used tissue instead of a handshake.

A beat passed. Then another.

Anna stood there, arm hovering mid-air. Eventually, she got the hint and gave a quick nod. She lowered her hand and casually wiped it on her pajama pants as if that had been the plan all along. “Lovely to meet you,” she added, voice meek.

“Alright, Mom, let’s go get you cleaned up.” Mimi announced brightly, hopping off the bar. “Rebecca, I’ll have those Chickenraptors tomorrow!”

Anna gave Rebecca a quick smile and hurried after Mimi, who was already heading up the spiral staircase next to the bar.

CHAPTER 07

“So, I saw this bracket beneath Rebecca’s name. It says ‘Bartender.’ Is that like a job title?” Anna asked as she caught up with Mimi.

“I guess you can call those professions.” Mimi said, glancing back.

“Is that the same as your class?” Anna asked, curious.

“Yeah, but it’s not quite like the classes in the games you play,” Mimi said. “Professions here are just what people do. Like, if you’re really good at bartending, your profession is bartender.”

Anna frowned, curious. “What if they change jobs? Like if Rebecca suddenly wants to be a hunter?”

“If she gives up bartending and gets really good at hunting, then she’ll become a hunter,” Mimi answered. She flicked her tail and went on. “Like John, my friend who lives on the outskirts, he told me he used to be a miner. But when I inspected him, his bracket said Carpenter. Turns out he stopped mining years ago and has been building stuff ever since. So I guess his profession just changed.”

Anna tilted her head. “But what if she still bartends and hunts?”

“Duh. Then she’ll have two professions, bartender and hunter.” Mimi gave her a look that screamed obviously.

Anna squinted at her. “Wait... why is your profession listed as ‘Hero’?”

“I guess you can say I do a lot of heroic things,” Mimi said proudly,

puffing out her chest.

Anna chuckled. “Okay, so... what’s mine?”

Mimi stopped mid-step, peered at the space above Anna’s head, and squinted. “It says ‘Squire’ in the bracket thingy under your name.”

Anna frowned. Even for her, that was a lame profession.

“But I don’t think it’s that literal,” Mimi said quickly. “I think the system’s just translating things for us, trying its best to categorize things in a way you and I can understand.”

Maybe, Anna thought. There were so many questions she still wanted to ask about the system, but she was too tired to think. Just focus on getting home, she reminded herself.

They stepped onto the third floor and made their way to the last door at the end of the hall. Up here, the tavern’s chaos had thinned into a soft, distant hum.

“This is my - err, our room!” Mimi corrected herself, shooting Anna a quick glance.

From her inventory, Mimi pulled a large, tarnished brass key. The thing was nearly the length of her forearm. With magic thumbs engaged, she leapt into the air and jammed it into the keyhole with a hollow wooden clunk. With another jump, she twisted the key with a grunt of effort.

“You know I could help with that, right?” Anna offered, watching.

“I got it!” Mimi huffed, already making a third leap. She caught the door handle, swung from it like a furry little pendulum, and the door creaked open, revealing a shockingly spacious room.

A king-size bed dominated the far wall, piled high with fluffy white pillows and crisp sheets that practically whispered Anna's name. On either side of the bed, wooden chandeliers hung low, their candlelight flickering gently. A sturdy dresser stood to the right of the doorway, and on the left, a small archway led to what Anna guessed was a restroom - if they had those here.

Right in the center of the room stood a massive cat tree: easily five feet tall, with three platforms stacked at varying heights and connected by sloping ramps. Dangling from the undersides of the platforms were strings with soft, round toys attached, bobbing gently like they were waiting for their next swat. This thing had it all.

"Wow, Mimi, this room is huge." Anna said, taking it all in.

"Riiight?" Mimi leapt up to the middle platform of the cat tree. "It's the king suite."

To Anna's surprise, the cat tree didn't even wobble under Mimi's weight, not like the cheap one she had back home, which threatened to collapse if Mimi so much as sneezed on it.

"Um, that is... nice," Anna said, pointing at the cat tree, feeling weirdly insecure. "I thought you said they didn't have cats here, so how did they even have this?"

"Oh, I had it custom-built," Mimi replied, batting one of the dangling toys like she was showing off. "The one back home was basically a death trap. Figured I deserved better. Hence the suite. Hence the tree."

"You didn't like the cat tree I bought you?" Anna's brow furrowed, sounding defensive.

Mimi turned to her. "Did you ever see me use it?"

Anna bristled. “It was a hundred and twenty bucks.”

Mimi gave her a flat look. “I told you it sucked, like a dozen times. You didn’t listen.”

“I don’t speak cat!” Anna snapped. “You meowed at me every day, how was I supposed to know which meows meant you hated your furniture?”

“You could’ve tried!” Mimi turned away from her, tail lashing once.

Anna fell silent. Her arms folded tightly across her chest. For a moment, the room was filled with nothing but the sound of a tiny bell as Mimi swatted at her toy, deliberately ignoring Anna.

Did we just have our first fight since she learned to talk? Anna wondered. She exhaled. “Fine,” she muttered. “When we get back, I’ll get you a better one.”

Mimi didn’t respond.

Anna bit her lip. Her voice softened. “I mean... if I can afford it.”

Still no response. Just more jingling.

Anna sighed. This passive-aggressive cat. She was about to give up when she caught it - Mimi’s tail flicked once, slow and deliberate. An acknowledgment. A silent maybe.

Anna sat on the bed and sank into the cottony sheets. Despite the long, chaotic, and frankly terrifying day, she wasn’t exhausted. Sore? Definitely. But not drained.

She glanced at the purple stamina bar hovering at the bottom of her vision, which was still holding at around half full. For once, something here was working in her favor. Back home, fifteen minutes at the gym

left her gasping for air.

A loud stomach growl interrupted her thoughts.

Her HUD blinked:

HUNGER X1

The short line of text hovered just above the three status bars in the bottom-left corner of her vision. Instantly, her purple bar began ticking down steadily, dropping a sliver every five seconds.

“Mimi, the system says I’m ‘HUNGER X1.’ What does that even mean?” Anna asked, sitting up. “I mean, obviously I’m hungry, but what’s with the multiplier?”

Mimi finally turned to face her. “The part above your bars shows your current statuses. Good or bad. ‘HUNGER X1’ just means you’re a little hungry. If it goes up to like ‘HUNGER X2’ or ‘X3’, you’ll feel it more. Your stamina drains faster, and you might feel weaker. Hit ‘X5’ and you could pass out and take health penalties.”

“So it stacks?” Anna frowned.

“Yeah. Same with the good stuff. If you eat something enchanted, you might get ‘STRENGTH X11’ for a while. Drink the right potion will get you ‘FUNNY X2.’ The higher the number, the stronger, or worse, the effect.” Mimi explained patiently.

Anna nodded, then frowned. “Wait. What about ‘Sonic Affliction’ and ‘Olfactory Affliction’? I saw those earlier with the snake.”

“Oh, those?” Mimi said. “Classic siren snake stuff. Their whole thing is sensory overload. The horrible smell? That’s from their poop. It messes with your head, makes you dizzy. And the luring whisper sound you

heard? That's from their tongues, yeah, they have two tongues, gross right?"

Anna grimaced. "That is not how I imagined a siren monster."

"Yep. Instead of a pretty mermaid singing you to death, it's a giant snake whispering and pooping all over the battlefield," Mimi said as she leapt down from her cat tree and landed on the bed, curling up beside Anna.

"That is... disgusting. So those statuses at times three is pretty bad, right?" Anna asked.

"Wow, that was baaaad," Mimi blurted, eyes wide. "The highest status stack I've ever seen was five. I'm honestly surprised you lasted as long as you did."

"Well, I guess I was lucky you showed up," Anna said, reaching over to scratch under Mimi's chin.

"Riiight?" Mimi purred, arching into that scratch. "I'm your hero. I'll always come to your rescue."

Then she stood up and gave her fur a shake. "Alright, time to get ready. I bet that hunger status is already eating into your stamina. If you let it run out and don't deal with it, it'll start draining your health next."

Anna stood up with a groan. "That's a little dramatic for being hungry."

Mimi protested. "Hunger cannot be overlooked!"

"Well, YOU would say that, of course," Anna teased. Mimi had always been a hopeless foodie back home. She'd sit in front of her food

cupboard like a tiny, judgmental statue... sometimes three hours before dinner, just in case Anna forgot how time worked.

Mimi hopped off the bed. Instantly her armor, gauntlets, kneepads, and sword blinked out of existence. What was left was a very “naked” cat that Anna was used to. Her fur flattened and mussed from where the gear had been pressing.

“That’s way better,” Mimi said, stretching luxuriously.

Anna blinked. “Did you just dump all your stuff into your inventory?”

“Yup! I set up a hotkey in my interface to change armor sets. Suuuuper convenient.” Mimi bragged.

Anna suddenly remembered; the system had given her some kind of loot box after finding Mimi. Curious, she wondered how to open her inventory.

The answer, apparently, was just to think about it. With barely a thought, a menu blinked into view.

It looked familiar: a transparent gray screen suspended in the air, filled with a neat grid of empty square slots. As Anna scrolled, more rows loaded seamlessly, giving the impression that the inventory could expand without limit. In the top corner, a small button read “Create New Category” - untouched for now. In the very first slot sat a single item - a small white box wrapped with a black sparkly bow, waiting.

As Anna focused on it, a smaller window popped open automatically.

UNIQUE LOOT BOX

“Mimi, I have a prize box. Should I open it now?” Anna asked.

“No no no no no. Quest boxes and loot drops are only opened at the end of the day.”

“What? Why?”

“It’s my routine,” Mimi said matter-of-factly. “Like a nice little surprise before bed. We’ll open it after dinner. Now go get ready! I’m gonna clean up too.”

She nudged Anna’s shins toward the bathroom, bossy as ever.

“Okay, okay!” Anna said, catching sight of Mimi already flopped down on her haunches, one back leg stuck straight up like a rotisserie chicken, as she licked her belly without a care in the world.

Anna stepped into the bathroom and was surprised to find it shockingly clean. Against one wall sat a toilet made of smooth stone and brick, sturdy and practical. Beside it, a large wooden crate filled with sand, Mimi’s litter box, apparently. On the other side, a massive wooden tub rested on clawed feet, its rim polished to a soft shine. A slightly warped mirror hung above a sink, complete with an actual faucet. She turned the handle, and warm water gushed out.

“At least there’s that.” Anna muttered, smiling in relief. Everything a bathroom back home had, this one did too.

She sat on the toilet, the cold stone sending a small jolt up her spine. With a sigh, she propped her elbows on her knees and dropped her head into her hands.

Then came the soft sound of paw-steps on wood.

Anna cracked one eye open to find Mimi lying sprawled on the floor just a few feet away, her green-yellow eyes locked directly on Anna like

she was waiting for a TED Talk.

Anna tensed, squeezing her knees together. "...Um, Mimi, what are you doing?"

"What do you mean?" Mimi blinked.

"You're watching me pee," Anna said, visibly uncomfortable.

"So? I always come with you when you pee. You literally called us 'pee buddies' once." Mimi replied with a lazy yawn.

Anna groaned into her palms. "Yeah, that was before you could talk."

"I always could talk -"

"Get out!" Anna shouted, pointing at the bathroom door.

She dropped her head into her hands as Mimi padded off, tail swaying, deliberately taking her time before nudging the bathroom door closed behind her. From the other side, a muffled voice muttered something unintelligible... except for one very clear word: "Rude."

Anna had been turning it over in her head all day. Sure, Mimi insisted that nothing about her had changed. But Anna doubted that the same cat who used to flee at the sound of a vacuum or try to catch the red dot from a laser pointer had always been this smart. Either Mimi's intelligence had been cranked up after arriving here... or Anna had just never noticed.

Stepping out of the bathroom, Anna found Mimi sitting on the bed, looking insufferably pleased with herself, one paw resting on a neatly laid out set of clothes. Plain brown pants and a soft white cotton shirt. It's not much, but it's a massive improvement over the bright red pajamas she was currently wearing.

“Where did you find these?” Anna asked, already reaching for them.

“I got them when I first arrived. Said it was for my squire,” Mimi said with a grin. “I didn’t sell it because... I thought maybe one day I could give it to you.”

Anna smiled, unexpectedly touched. That was... actually kind of sweet. She changed quickly, grateful to blend in for once. Still no shoes though. She eyed the wooden floor with suspicion. The idea of surviving a near-death experience only to get taken out by an infected splinter in her pinky toe felt both absurd and entirely plausible.

Mimi hopped off the bed with a flick of her tail, clearly satisfied with her wardrobe selection. Anna followed, and together they slipped out of the room, with the soft creak of the door closing behind them.

They were halfway down the stairs when Anna felt it - a dull ache in her stomach, a slight heaviness in her limbs. Her stamina bar had dipped and now sat at around thirty percent. The status flashed.

HUNGER X2

The tavern noise swelled as they descended, laughter, clinking mugs and boots stomping against wood. As they reached the bottom, a few heads turned. “Tiger’s back!” someone called out, and a cheer rippled through the crowd. Mimi raised a paw in greeting. “One drink, everyone! On me!”

The cheer exploded into full celebration. Tankards were raised, and the barkeep was already scrambling to fill mugs. Anna watched, a little stunned, as Mimi took it all in stride, like this happened every time she walked into a room.

From the surrounding gossip, Anna picked up bits and pieces:

“She’s incredible.”

“How could such a powerful beast be so kind?”

“I’m telling you, she’s the star of this village.”

“Why does such a kind tiger keep such unruly company?”

That last one hurt. This was almost comical. Just how charming was this cat? And more importantly, where was she getting all this money from?

Mimi settled into a corner of one of the long tables. Anna followed, sliding into the seat next to her.

“So, Mimi,” Anna said, tone serious, “I think it’s time we had a proper conversation.”

“About what?” Mimi replied, barely paying attention, her eyes scanning the room, looking for a server.

“For starters, going home.” Anna said it flatly.

There was a pause. Then Mimi slowly turned to face Anna and blinked. Once, twice. Her eyes were absurdly round, glossy. “Why would we want to do that?” she asked, voice soft and innocent. “This place is great.” Apparently, the wide-eyed Puss in Boots look was a universal skill every cat possessed, passed down through generations, along with dramatic flair and selective hearing.

Anna stared at her, caught off guard. Maybe a little hurt, too. After everything they’d been through today... this was where Mimi landed? Full-on vacation mode?

A young, wiry server zipped past their table. Mimi lifted a paw to flag

him down.

“Oh! Bart! Two raptor thighs for us, please! Thank you!” She tossed him a gold coin from her inventory and dropped a small pile more onto the table. Bart snatched the coin mid-air, eyes lighting up as he dashed off, practically vibrating with excitement.

Anna glanced at the coins. They were small, just a bit larger than a quarter, and clearly handmade. Uneven circles, rough edges, full of dents and bends like they’d been hammered out in a hurry.

“Mimi, I’m serious,” Anna said, her voice low. “We need to figure out how to get home. This isn’t our world. This isn’t our life. I can tell you like it here, but... we don’t belong.”

Mimi stared at Anna. Her eyes began to swell, lower lip trembling. Anna could almost see her tiny cat heart breaking right in front of her.

“Let’s start off from the beginning. How did you get here?” Anna said gently.

Before Mimi could speak, Bart returned with two heaping plates of food. He dropped Anna’s onto the table with a loud clatter, the ceramic rattling against the wood. She let out a quiet sigh, trying not to take it personally. Still, it was hard to ignore how differently he treated her compared to her cat.

Without a word, Bart levitated Mimi’s plate. It hovered six inches above his palm, spinning gently as it drifted in a graceful arc around the table. A soft breeze brushed past Anna as the plate circled once, then settled in front of Mimi with barely a sound.

“THANKS BART!” the cat chirped.

The boy walked off smiling, pleased with his performance.

Mimi wasted no time. She sank her fangs into the food and tore off a hefty chunk. Juice ran down her cheeks as she chewed with delight. Her little ears twitched, and a low, satisfied purr vibrated in her throat.

“What was that?” Anna asked.

“Chickenraptor,” Mimi replied casually. “One of the more common monsters down here, they are delicious. Try it!”

“No, I mean the boy. He floated your plate. In the air. What was THAT?”

How can Mimi be so casual about something so... extraordinary? Anna thought.

“Oh. Some kind of magic,” Mimi said through another bite. “I think most people here can do stuff like that. Just look around.”

Anna glanced around the tavern. A man lit his pipe with a snap of his fingers. A woman cooled her mug of ale with a touch. Bart, meanwhile, floated a tray of drinks from one table to the next with a flick of his wrist.

“Alright then... Magical world it is,” she said under her breath as she tried to wrap her head around the concept.

“Aren’t you hungry?” Mimi mumbled, still chewing.

Anna glanced at her food, which looked... interesting. The meat resembled a chicken drumstick, if a chicken drumstick had been super-sized fifteen times over. It was nearly twice the size of Mimi herself, barely fitting on the plate. And instead of the familiar crispy brown skin of a roasted drumstick, it was coated in deep-fried scales that crackled

when touched.

“It’s huge...” Anna murmured, her mind racing with images of what kind of beast could grow a leg this size. The claws. The teeth. It had to be a walking nightmare.

Anna glanced around for utensils. Nothing. She tried lifting the leg with both hands, but it was too heavy to manage. With a resigned sigh, she followed Mimi’s lead and leaned in, taking a bite straight off the plate.

Overcooked, dry, and utterly flavorless. The leg on Anna’s plate was easily one of the worst things she’d ever eaten. She glanced over at Mimi’s plate and immediately noticed the difference: her portion looked juicier, crispier, better in every way.

She leaned over. “Mimi, can I try yours?”

Mimi, mid-chew, narrowed her eyes but grudgingly jumped onto the table and stepped aside. Anna wasted no time. She reached down and took a bite from Mimi’s plate.

And it was glorious.

Perfectly seasoned, fall-off-the-bone tender. The juice exploded with rich, savory flavor. There was a faint char that gave it depth. Anna’s eyes widened. For a moment, the world blurred into nothing but taste.

Smack. A paw landed squarely on her forehead.

“That’s enough,” Mimi scolded. “You have your own plate!”

“But mine is -” Anna began but was promptly silenced as Mimi shoved her aside with a firm butt-bump, sat back down, and resumed eating with enthusiasm.

Anna sighed and glanced at her HUD. The word HUNGER X2 still glared back at her, unchanged.

She returned to her own plate with a heavy heart of someone betrayed by the culinary gods.

One bite at a time, she told herself. Just keep going.

CHAPTER 08

An hour later, Anna finally managed to choke down enough of the awful meal to clear the HUNGER X2 status. Her stamina bar was now, thankfully, rising at a steady pace.

Mimi, on the other hand, had demolished her plate. Not even a single crumb remained. She sat back with a happy grin and a noticeably round belly, staring at Anna like they'd just shared a gourmet experience.

“That was good, riiight??” she asked, eyes gleaming with excitement.

“Um,” Anna muttered, choosing not to comment.

Anna spent the entire meal trying to think of a way to convince Mimi to go home. But between the noisy tavern, the terrible food, and the borderline feral sounds Mimi made while devouring her meal, it was hard to focus, let alone form a solid plan.

“Mimi, about what I was saying earlier. I -” Anna began, deciding to just dive in.

“DID THE FOOD CHANGE YOUR MIND?” Mimi interrupted, placing her front paws on the table, tail shooting straight up like an exclamation point.

“No, Mimi,” Anna said with a sigh. “It’s time you told me exactly what happened here.”

Mimi let out a long, theatrical sigh and slowly lowered her paws back

to the bench.

“When I got here, I was in the field just like you,” Mimi began, sounding like a teenager reluctantly recounting a night out to nosy parents. “After I picked my build and had the armor equipped, I just started walking. Found the town. I had no money to bribe my way in but my Charisma was at 2, just barely enough to talk my way past the gate.”

She shrugged. “So I did odd jobs for Rebecca and a few others. Leveled up a bit, put points into Charisma... and, well, everyone kind of fell in love with me. It’s been fantastic ever since.”

“That’s why they love you so much?” Anna said, narrowing her eyes. “I knew something didn’t add up. So what’s your Charisma now?”

“Nine!!” Mimi announced proudly.

“How many points do you get each time you level up?”

“Just one.” Mimi said, still proud.

Anna did the math in her head. Her eyes widened. “Wait... you dumped all your points into Charisma?!”

“Yeah! It’s not like I need anything else. I’ve got my armor and a badass dagger. I can beat everything here.” Mimi said. “But you still need -” Anna started, throwing her hands up in exasperation.

“I just really want people to like me.” Mimi’s voice cracked just a little, her ears drooping as she stared down at her paws.

The shift in tone caught Anna off guard. Her frustration deflated like a balloon.

“Okay...” Anna said more gently. “Your stats, your choice.” She took

a breath, grounding herself. “So, when you first arrived... there were no clues on where to go? No signs or directions?”

“Nada.” Mimi shook her head. “So I guess the only thing to do is build a life here and become super successful adventurers.”

Anna stared at the cat, willing herself not to react to the sheer audacity of it all. She took a long, slow breath, steadying herself.

Then something clicked in her mind.

“Mimi... I really need you to think,” Anna said, voice soft but urgent. “Is there anything that might have guided you somewhere? Like a quest or a person? Anything?”

The cat paused, then slowly looked up, suddenly studying the ceiling with great interest. She even started humming. Anything to avoid Anna’s gaze.

“Aha!” Anna pointed. “So there is something!”

“Well, I meaaaaan...” Mimi stretched the word out guiltily. “Yeah, there’s this quest in my HUD called YOUR JOURNEY BEGINS... but I can’t open it anymore. It says, ‘Conditions Not Met.’”

“But you were able to open it before?” Anna pressed,

“Yeah, it wasn’t greyed out back then.”

A flicker of a thought crossed Anna’s mind.

“When we were walking into town,” Anna said slowly, “you mentioned you sold a sword. Was it part of this armor? Is it... a full set?”

“Yeah! The set’s called the Celestial Dawnbreaker Set. Cool name, riiiiight?” Mimi grinned. “But the sword was way too big, so I just sold it

to Leroy.”

“Ce... Celestial?!” Anna’s eyes widened. “You sold a sword from a Celestial armor set?” Her voice shot up, drawing a few glances from nearby tables. She immediately lowered it. “Mimi, that’s like the highest equipment tier in every game that’s ever been made!”

Mimi’s ears drooped, her eyes going round and glossy again. “But I had no use for it, and I was starving. I needed the money for food...” she said meekly, “...and the cat tree.”

Anna clenched her jaw. It took every ounce of willpower not to explode. Deep breaths. No strangling the cat. At least not in public.

The quest has to be tied to equipping or at least owning the full set, Anna was sure of it. She’d seen it a hundred times in games. Complete the armor set, trigger the quest. And the higher the gear tier, the more epic the reward. If they could get that sword back and complete the Celestial set, it might lead to something big, maybe even a clue about why they were here... or how to get out.

“Mimi, we need to get that sword back!” Anna exclaimed.

Mimi laughed. “Yeah, good luck with that. Leroy is... well, kind of an ass. He has a strict ‘no take-backsies’ policy. And he listed the sword for five times what I sold it to him for. So, total scam.”

Anna groaned.

“I think we should pay Leroy another visit,” Anna said. “I’ll explain the situation to him, and I’m sure he’ll understand. I mean, who wouldn’t understand their cat selling a magical sword that’s possibly the only way home after being yanked into a fantasy world mid-sleep?”

The moment the words left her mouth, Anna paused. Wow. That

sounded absolutely insane.

“Whatever you say, Mom.” Mimi rolled her eyes. “Just so you know, he’s even impervious to my high charm. Plus, we can’t go tomorrow; his shop’s closed on Wednesdays and Thursdays.”

Anna let out an exasperated sigh. “Well, we need to buy it back before someone else does. How much do we need?”

“I sold it to him for 10,000 coins,” Mimi said, frowning as she tried to do the math. “So five times that would be...” She lifted a paw and started counting on her beans.

“Fifty thousand!” Anna snapped.

“Yeah, that.” Mimi nodded quickly. “Okay, well... I currently have around 3,000. But we’ve got expenses, like room, food, cat tree, cat toys, clothing, potions... all the essentials.”

“Cat tree? Didn’t you already have one?” Anna cut in.

“That one’s on a payment plan.”

Seeing Anna about to explode, Mimi quickly added, “I’m paying it off though - 100 gold a month!”

Again, no strangling the cat, Anna repeated her mantra silently. Then she took a long, slow breath. “How long does it take to make that money back?”

Mimi’s eyes darted back and forth as she calculated. “Umm... five years? If we cut back some expenses.”

Five years?! That might as well be a lifetime. What would her life even look like by then? She’d be fired. Evicted. Maybe even legally declared dead. Her thoughts spiraled, each worst-case scenario toppling into the

next like a line of falling dominoes.

“Okay... tomorrow, we find a way to make money. Fast. And we need to take a hard look at our expenses, budget, cutbacks, anything we can save.” Anna was determined to take control of the situation.

“What? No! you can’t just expect me to downgrade on a whim,” Mimi protested, scandalized.

“Mimi, I can’t wait five years to go home,” Anna said, her voice low but firm.

“But I’ve grown accustomed to a certain standard of living over the past month...” Mimi muttered, staring down at her paws, ears drooping just a little.

Anna’s pulse spiked. Her frustration bubbled, close to spilling over. She couldn’t for the life of her understand what Mimi saw in this place.

Anna was about to respond when she noticed a young girl standing directly behind Mimi, staring. She couldn’t have been older than ten years old. She was fair-skinned, with light brown hair and a red cloak draped around her shoulders, hood down. Her eyes were locked on Mimi, wide with a mix of awe and confusion.

While the girl looked like any ordinary child, something about the intensity of her gaze made Anna uneasy. Still, Anna had never been good with children. She chalked it up to that and pushed the feeling aside.

“Hello, uh... little girl in red?” Anna said awkwardly. She immediately cringed. That was the best she could come up with?

Mimi whipped around, crouching low on the bench like she was bracing for an ambush. But the tension melted from her body the

moment she saw the child. “Oh, hi!” Mimi said excitedly.

“Kitty-cat! So cute,” the young girl chirped, not even blinking.

Mimi took a quick step back. “Excuse me, I’m a tiger, thank you very much! Everyone knows that.” She said it without an ounce of shame, like lying to a child was just part of her daily routine. Anna rolled her eyes.

“No,” the girl said with perfect confidence. “You’re a kitty-cat. Tigers are waaaaay bigger, and they have stripes.”

Anna couldn’t help but chuckle at the girl’s boldness.

“Well! I have never heard such rudeness from someone so young!” Mimi huffed, clearly appalled. “I am clearly a tiger!”

The girl giggled and reached for Mimi again, tiny hands grabbing at fur and whiskers. Mimi meowed loudly in protest.

As Anna chuckled at the chaos unfolding, a familiar magnifying-glass icon appeared next to the girl’s name. She mentally clicked it open.

ISABELLA ASHTHORN LVL:11

[???

Strength: 4

Intelligence: 3

Constitution: 7

Dexterity: 2

Charm: 4

Anna studied the numbers. Constitution 7? She thought back to her

own pitiful 2. If we got trapped in a cave, this kid would outlast me three times over. How was this ten-year-old already level 11? And how was that even fair? She was just about to close the window in defeat when something in the bottom-left status section caught her eye:

ENLIGHTEND X1

ENLIGHTEND X1? How could a ten-year-old be enlightened? Could the girl be some kind of monk build? Anna squinted at the status, trying to make sense of it.

“I thought I told you to stay put!” a man’s voice boomed above the crowd, snapping Anna back to attention.

An older gentleman approached Isabella. His long, greying hair streaked with faded brown hung to his shoulders. His skin was deeply tanned and weathered, the kind of leathery texture that only came from a lifetime spent under the sun. Despite his age, the man was in excellent shape: broad-shouldered, muscular, and trim. He wore the same red cloak, almost identical to Isabella’s.

“Sorry, Grandpa...” the girl mumbled.

“Oh! Hi Gerald!!” Mimi greeted him, though Anna noted the forced cheer in her voice. She was clearly trying to sound enthusiastic, but her body betrayed her. Her tail was flapping with sharp, irritated flicks, the universal cat sign for annoyed but pretending not to be.

“I told you not to leave my side!” Gerald said, his voice low and stern. He gripped the little girl’s shoulder with a firmness that bordered on harsh. As Gerald’s sleeve shifted up, Anna caught sight of something inked onto his forearm: a black tattoo. It was an unsettling symbol that looked vaguely like an eye enclosed in a broken circle, with two faint lines trailing from each side. There was something about it, something

disturbingly familiar.

Anna glanced at Mimi, who returned the look with a flicker of concern. The girl who'd been so bright and vibrant just moments ago was now completely subdued, tucked into herself like a flower closing its petals.

“So... Gerald, I didn't realize you had a granddaughter!” Mimi said lightly, trying to draw the man's attention away from the child.

Gerald didn't even acknowledge her. He just grumbled to himself. His grip tightened on Isabella's shoulder. She winced; tears swelled in her eyes.

Anna had never been one to stand up to people. Back home, she'd been a borderline people-pleaser: always smoothing things over, rationalizing bad behavior, searching for the middle ground even when there shouldn't have been one, anything to avoid conflict.

She was already halfway through convincing herself to stay out of it when Mimi leapt onto the table.

“Gerald.” the cat growled, “You're hurting her.”

The man looked up, locking eyes with the small grey cat. His expression turned icy, calculating, like a predator sizing up his next kill. But Mimi didn't flinch. She stood firm, fur bristling, unrelenting.

Anna stared in disbelief. Mimi, who used to dive into the closet at the sound of the mailman's footsteps... now glared down at a man ten times her size without so much as a twitch. It was surreal. Tense. And brave.

A soft white pulse shimmered around the cat's paw as she dipped it into her inventory, ready to quick-swap into armor or summon her

dagger.

“Take your hand off her. Now.” Mimi’s voice was low and clear. She lowered her stance, muscles coiled, eyes locked. Whatever she had planned, she wasn’t bluffing.

Anna, heart thudding, pulled up her HUD and tried to inspect the man. Anything to help.

GERALD MARROW LVL: ???

INSPECTION FAILED

Perception skill is too low to inspect highlighted object.

Her stomach sank. Mimi had told her what that meant - he was at least ten levels higher. Maybe more. He was dangerous.

She should stop Mimi. She wanted to stop Mimi. But watching her cat, her skittish, anxious, clingy little fluffball, stand up for someone else with such unshakable resolve made Anna’s breath catch. She was touched. And also terrified.

After what felt like an eternity, the old man finally grunted, breaking the silence.

“Mind your business...” he growled, his voice thick with venom, each word dripping with contempt.

He reached for the girl’s wrist again. To Anna’s surprise, his grip was much lighter this time, and without another word, he turned toward the tavern door.

“Byeeee, kitty-cat!” the girl chirped, stretching her arm out toward Mimi as she was tugged along.

The door slammed shut behind them. The tavern came back to life in an instant. Conversations resumed, chairs scraped against the floors, and it was as if nothing had happened.

Mimi closed out her inventory and hopped down onto the bench beside Anna.

“What was that guy’s problem?” Anna asked, her voice still shaky as the adrenaline wore off.

“I’ve never liked that guy!” Mimi snapped, tail lashing. “He’s always been a major asshole. That poor girl! I’m asking Rebecca about him tomorrow. Honestly, we shouldn’t have let him leave.”

“He’s pretty high level though...” Anna muttered.

“Yeah. Even I couldn’t inspect him,” Mimi huffed. “And I’m at apprentice level! My perception can see twenty levels above me. Twenty!”

“So he’s at least Level 28.” Anna said, thinking aloud.

“Wow, that’s super cool,” Mimi said, her voice briefly filled with admiration, then she quickly caught herself. “I mean, terrifying. Very dangerous. I haven’t seen anyone around here at that level. The highest I’ve seen is the village head, Ivan. He’s like, Level 14.”

Anna nodded slowly. The whole encounter had felt off. Gerald wasn’t just hostile; he was... out of place. An outlier in a town that, up until now, had seemed relatively harmless.

But something else gnawed at her. “Didn’t you say people here don’t know about cats?” she asked, brow furrowing.

“Of course not,” Mimi said. “I asked around when I first got here.

Nobody had a clue what I was. Even Rebecca, and she knows about everything.”

“Then why did the little girl call you a kitty-cat?” Anna asked.

Mimi froze, ears flicking as if buffering the question. Her eyes widened slightly. “Huh. That’s... actually a good question.”

She shrugged, casual as ever. “I dunno. But I’m pretty sure no one knows I’m a cat.” Her whiskers twitched with a smug little smile. “I mean, come on, Mom. How else do you think I got people to write a song about me being a tiger?”

Anna raised an eyebrow. For a split second, she wondered if the whole town was in on some elaborate prank, but no. Mimi had been here a whole month. There was no way a joke like that could hold together without someone slipping.

No, this was something deeper. She could feel it in her gut, like trying to solve a puzzle with half the pieces still missing.

CHAPTER 09

Back in their room, Anna sank onto the big bed, the door clicking shut behind her. The walls were quiet, but her mind wasn't, still replaying every second of the confrontation, frame by frame.

Her gaze drifted to Mimi, who was on the floor meticulously grooming her fur as if nothing had happened. Curious, Anna mentally tapped the magnifying glass icon hovering above the cat's tiny head.

MIMI LI LVL: 8

[GREAT BEAST HERO]

Strength: 2

Intelligence: 1

Constitution: 2

Dexterity: 3

Charisma: 9

“What? You're only level eight?” Anna laughed. For all of Mimi's bravado, the cat wasn't that much higher level than she was. “What have you been doing this whole time?”

Mimi paused mid-lick to glare at her. “Did you just inspect me without my permission? Rude. And for your information, I have been busy enjoying life, thank you thank you. Grinding is for people without hobbies.”

Anna sighed. Mimi wasn't wrong. This wasn't a game, and why would

Mimi care about rushing levels? For Anna, grinding wasn't the priority anyway. Finding a way back home was.

Finished grooming, Mimi leapt up to bed and slid neatly into the crook of Anna's arm, like a heat-seeking missile with fur.

"Soooo..." she purred. "I can tell you're sulky... but. What if I tell you I have something fun planned for us?"

That piqued Anna's interest; she looked at Mimi, waiting.

"You want to open our loot boxes?" Mimi asked.

Now that Anna could get behind. Who didn't like opening presents, especially after a day like this?

"Yes, let's do that. Maybe I'll get something good," Anna said, already sitting up straighter.

"See? I told you saving it for the end of the day is always a good idea."

Anna chuckled as she opened her inventory with a thought. Sitting in the first slot was the loot box she'd received earlier for finding her "Hero."

"Unique Loot Box?" she read aloud, unable to believe her luck.

She reached out, a soft swirl of white light coiled around her wrist. The air around her hand shifted, cool and crisp, brushing against her skin like a breeze slipping through a crack in the world, a refreshing contrast to the heavy warmth of the room.

"This feels weird," Anna said.

"I kind of like it," Mimi replied.

“How does it work exactly?” Anna’s arm hovered midair, too hesitant to touch anything.

“So, you’ve got your inventory open? Just reach for the item and grab it. It’ll appear in your hand. If you know exactly what you want, you don’t even need to open the menu. Just think about it and stick your hand out. Same effect.” Mimi lifted a paw to demonstrate. A potion bottle blinked into her grip, then vanished just as quickly.

“Okay, here I go,” Anna said, grabbing the loot box.

She pulled her arm back, revealing a sleek white box resting in her palm. It was perfectly cube-shaped, wrapped in a black sparkly ribbon that shimmered faintly in the light. At the center sat an immaculate bow. The box was wrapped with such precision it looked like it belonged in a luxury boutique display.

“It’s Unique? I’ve never seen one of those!” Mimi yelled, clearly excited.

“I just open it like I’d open a regular box?” Anna asked.

“Yup! Then a pop-up will explain what’s inside,” Mimi said.

Anna took a deep breath, set the box on the bed, and reached to tear off the wrapping -

“Wait!” Mimi shouted.

Anna paused, confused.

“You can’t just rip it apart! What if we need the wrapping someday?” Mimi reached over and carefully peeled it off.

“What? It’s not like you’re going to reuse it for gifts,” Anna said.

“You never know what might come in handy. And with my unlimited inventory, where’s the harm?” Mimi replied, holding the wrapping in her paw as it shimmered and disappeared into her inventory.

Is my cat a hoarder? Anna found it both cute and mildly infuriating. She rolled her eyes and finally lifted the lid off the box.

A soft white glow lit up from inside with a familiar chime. A pop-up window appeared in Anna’s view.

UNIQUE SQUIRE BOX

No Hero Walks Alone.

In rare moments, when a true bond is forged, the Weaver takes notice. Upon accepting the sacred role of Squire, one is granted a relic once thought lost to time.

Within it lie three foundational tools, fragments of ancient knowledge, awakened only in the hands of one chosen to walk beside a hero.

Though modest in appearance, each item holds quiet power. They offer different ways to support, protect, or uplift the one you serve.

Choose with care. The path of a Squire may not be glorious, but it is never without meaning.

Anna groaned; she’d been hoping for something more... personal. A weapon, armor, a map at least, anything that helped her make it out of this place alive. Mimi had already survived a whole month here just fine. Why did she need more support?

She tapped through to the next menu. Three glowing items appeared

on screen:

ITEM 1: POTION COOKBOOK

Unlocks the ability to prepare potions. Includes a potion-making kit. — Potions given to your Hero are 10% more effective. — Potions given to non-Hero allies are 5% more effective. — New potion recipes can be discovered and added to the cookbook as you journey.

ITEM 2: BLACKSMITH MANUSCRIPT

Unlocks the ability to craft and repair weapons and armor. Includes a full set of blacksmith tools. — Weapons and armor crafted for your Hero gain +10% to all base stats. — New blueprints for gear can be found and added to the manuscript as you journey.

ITEM 3: SPELLBOOK

Unlocks the ability to chant magic spells. Spells fall into three categories: Support, Defensive, and Offensive. — Spells cast within 30 feet of your Hero are 10% more effective. — Additional spells can be unlocked and added to the spellbook as you journey.

Anna read the three options out loud to Mimi. The two stared at each other, thinking it over in silence.

“Well, I think it’s pretty obvious which one you need to pick,” Mimi

said confidently.

“Potions,” Mimi declared.

“Spellbook,” Anna said at the exact same time.

“What? Why do you need spells?” Mimi asked, baffled.

“I need to be able to defend myself. Plus, I always play a spellcaster in games, intelligence is my best stat, remember?”

“Mom. Mom. Mom. Trust me. The potion kit is the best choice. I can defend you. I literally have the best gear in the world right now. You don’t have to do anything but sit back and watch me mop the floor with monsters.” Mimi swung an imaginary sword, then raised an invisible shield for emphasis. “But even I can take damage, run out of stamina, or need mana. And who knows what other potions you’ll unlock later?”

“But what if we get separated? What if something happens to you? I need to be able to rely on myself. I’m choosing the spellbook, Mimi,” Anna insisted.

Mimi looked offended. “First of all, your Hero would never let anything happen to you. Second, have you even thought about how much money we could make with potions?”

Anna paused. Her eyes widened. “...Money?”

“MONEY,” Mimi confirmed, rubbing her toe bean and magic thumb together in a cash gesture. “I don’t think there are many potion makers in town. The townspeople are always desperate for potions. Supply and
-

“Demand.” Anna nodded slowly.

She thought it over. As tempting as it was to learn how to hurl lightning or summon fire with a thought, Mimi did make a solid point. If they could actually earn good money from selling potions, maybe they could buy back the sword Mimi sold, and finally complete her Celestial Dawnbreaker set. With any luck, that might lead to a clue about why they were here... and how to get home.

Besides, she hadn't even unlocked the ability to level up or assign attribute points yet. Who knew whether her magic would even scale later, especially when stronger enemies started showing up?

Potions, on the other hand, didn't rely on her mana. And with hers and Mimi's infinite inventory, ingredient storage wouldn't be a problem. All things considered, potions might just be the most useful and safest choice for now.

Anna sighed. "Okay, you're right, Mimi. This is the right move."

Mimi let out a delighted little trill, her whiskers twitching as a big, goofy grin bloomed across her face.

Anna selected the Potion Cookbook and skimmed the description one last time, just to be sure. A pop-up appeared.

SELECT POTION COOKBOOK?

[YES] [NO]

She tapped Yes. The other two options dissolved away, and the text updated:

**POTION COOKBOOK AND POTION MAKING KIT HAVE
BEEN ADDED TO YOUR INVENTORY.**

She closed the prompt with a thought and opened her inventory. The

once-empty grid was now filled to the brim. At the top sat the cookbook, neatly slotted beside the potion-making kit. Below them, rows of items stretched across the screen: bottles of strange liquids, bundles of dried plants, softly glowing herbs, each tagged with a tiny number indicating how many she had.

“Oh, that’s cool. They even gave us some starter ingredients,” Anna said, surprised the “system” was actually helping her for once.

“Really? That’s awesome! We can start right away!” Mimi’s eyes lit up.

Anna shot her a look. Mimi’s ears drooped. “I guess you must be tired,” she said meekly, then offered: “Should we open mine now?”

With practiced swiftness, Mimi reached into her inventory and pulled out her loot box. This one was a white box with black ribbons.

“I didn’t realize mine was Unique too!” Mimi squealed, practically salivating over the gift. With the precision of someone defusing a bomb, she delicately untied the ribbon. Once freed, she folded it with great care and held it up. It shimmered briefly before vanishing into her inventory.

The same soft glow spilled out as she slowly lifted the lid. Her eyes began to dart back and forth, locked onto her HUD, scanning the description like she was reading sacred scripture.

“Oh. My. God,” Mimi said, her mouth hanging open.

“What? Did you get something cool?” Anna excitedly asked. She was starting to understand what Mimi meant about loot boxes being the perfect end-of-day activity.

“YES. I mean, it’s not for me, but it’s super cool,” Mimi chirped, glancing back at Anna with a suspiciously gleeful look. Then she

quickly turned back to the box, reached in and pulled out the contents, setting them neatly on the bed with a flourish.

There they were.

Two ultra-neon pink running shoes, trimmed in blinding white and electric green. The kinds of colors that screamed for attention. The candlelight hit them and bounced off like a disco ball. Anna actually had to squint. There was neon... and then there were these shoes.

“Do you like them?” Mimi asked expectantly, pulling Anna’s gaze away from the neon monstrosities. “These are really, really, really badass. I mean, yes, I chose the color for you. I’ve always thought your wardrobe needed something more eye-catching. You wear way too many cat shirts. And cat socks. You need something that POPS.” Mimi continued to pitch the shoes like she was their brand representative.

Anna took a breath, trying to collect herself. Never in a million years did she expect to be fashion-shamed by a talking cat, no matter how admittedly limited and cat-centric her wardrobe actually was.

“How are these badass?” Anna asked. These shoes reminded her of an ‘80s roller rink disaster.

“Okay, so, not only do they give a big boost to your speed,” Mimi began, practically buzzing, “but they also have four gem slots. Each. For context, none of my gear has slots. We can upgrade them later.”

“What are gemstones?” Anna said.

“I don’t know, I’ve never seen one.” Mimi shrugged.

“Then why are you so excited?!” Anna threw up her hands and half-yelled, half-laughed, eyes wide with disbelief.

“It’s the possibilities, Mom! Having gemstone slots is a huge deal. I even asked Ivan to open a gem slot for my chest plate, and he said he couldn’t. Like nobody can,” Mimi said.

Anna glanced down at the hideous shoes and opened the inspection tab.

RUNNING SHOES OF THE SQUIRE

UNIQUE ITEM

The official shoes of newly appointed squire Anna Li.

Hideous as they may be, these running shoes are perfect for errand running, battlefield dashing, and making a bold, if questionable, fashion statement in neon pink and green.

You’ll turn heads whether you want to or not.

Effect: Grants the wearer the skill: The Squire’s Speed.

Anna chuckled. The system, whatever it truly was, clearly had a sense of humor. With a thought, she opened the skill description.

Skill: The Squire’s Speed

A gift once granted to messengers of the old kingdoms, this burst of unmatched swiftness was said to turn tides and save lives. Though fleeting, it honors the squire’s role not in power, but in presence.

Effect: Temporarily boosts base speed by 10x when activated.

“Mimi, I got a new skill!” Anna called out, excited, as she slid the shoes over her bare feet.

They were surprisingly comfortable.

Actually, extremely comfortable.

Anna had never worn shoes that felt like this. It was as if her feet were nestled in small, supportive pillows. They were unbelievably light too, almost unnaturally so. She took a few tentative steps around the room and felt herself gliding more than walking. Her feet barely made a sound. She could hardly feel them touch the floor.

She turned to face Mimi just in time to see a pillow flying at her head.

She ducked on instinct.

Nothing hit.

Confused, Anna looked up.

The pillow was still in the air, drifting slowly toward her as if it were underwater. Not quite Matrix slow, but slow. She blinked. Everything around her seemed normal, except for the pillow.

She stood up, reached out, and casually caught it midair.

Only then did it hit her, she wasn't seeing the pillow move slower. She was moving faster.

She sat back down on the bed, clutching the pillow.

“WOOOW, THAT WAS SO FAST!” Mimi shouted, still staring at the spot where Anna had just been.

“Really? It didn't feel any different,” Anna said, genuinely puzzled.

Mimi jumped, startled to find Anna suddenly sitting right next to her.

“WHAT! How did you get here? That was insanely fast, like teleporting!” Mimi’s eyes sparkled with excitement.

Anna glanced at her status panel. Her blue mana bar had dipped slightly. *So, it drains mana when I use it*, she thought.

“Weird. I didn’t feel like I was moving that fast,” Anna said.

“Well, let me tell you, you were moving!” Mimi practically bounced. “You won’t even need a weapon, nothing’s going to be able to touch you!”

“Yeah... until I run out of mana,” Anna chuckled and scratched Mimi behind the ears. This did seem badass. Who wouldn’t want superpowers? Still, she’d need to calculate how many speed boosts she could pull off before her mana ran dry.

“Well, we can give these a proper test tomorrow,” Anna said. “Totally! I can’t wait for you to see more of the town, and come with me on the raptor hunt!” Mimi grinned, raising her paw in a tiny, confident fist. Anna mirrored the gesture and gave it a gentle bump. Mimi held her gaze, eyes glowing softly in the dim light, and blinked - slow and deliberate. The universal cat sign for I love you.

Anna returned the blink. “All right, wanna get to bed?”

“Let’s do it!” Mimi chirped. She darted to the head of the bed and curled into a small, fluffy ball, seemingly asleep before her body even settled.

Anna opened her inventory and selected the red pajamas, figuring this was finally an appropriate time to wear them. She quickly set up two quick-change armor sets: one for sleepwear, one for the casual clothes Mimi had given her.

To her relief, navigating the interface already felt easier. Maybe she could get the hang of all this fast enough to help them survive.

She equipped the pajamas and closed the menu.

Standing up, Anna yanked the bed covers, and Mimi let out a quiet groan as she was unceremoniously dragged along with the covers.

Anna blew out the candles and climbed into bed. The soft white cotton sheets were incredibly pleasant, instantly soothing her body and mind.

A quiet moment passed.

In the stillness of the room, Anna replayed the day's events. She combed through every detail, searching for a missed clue. Then came the familiar chime, and a menu blinked into view.

CHRONICLES OF THE SQUIRE

The title hovered in large glowing text, with a blank page below.

“Perfect, a journal.” Anna murmured to herself.

She glanced at Mimi, wanting to ask if she knew about this feature, but the cat let out a loud, vibrating snore.

Anna chuckled quietly. *Of course.*

She turned back to the menu and began mentally typing down her first entry:

Anna's Entry:

“Today sucked, but found Mimi.”

Shattered Realms

CHAPTER 10

Anna jolted awake at the sound of the bedroom door creaking open. For a split second, she thought she was back home, with her soft sheets, her cluttered nightstand, and the faint hum of city traffic beyond the window. She sat up, her heart hammering. Then the pieces fell back into place. The snake. The village. Mimi.

And there, standing in the doorway with a smirk, was the cat herself. “Well, well, look who finally decided to wake up,” Mimi said, her tone light and teasing.

“What? How late is it? How long did I sleep?” Anna asked, still caught between panic and groggy confusion.

“About ten hours, I think. Kinda hard to tell without clocks around, to be honest.”

Anna paused, realizing she hadn’t seen a single clock, or any kind of timekeeping device, since she got here.

“Huh... interesting. What were you doing outside?”

“Oh, just grabbing breakfast for us,” Mimi said casually, hopping onto the dresser.

With a flick of her paw, she opened her inventory and pulled out two plates. Each held a heaping mound of green-tinged scrambled eggs, paired with a few crispy slices of toasted bread.

Anna narrowed her eyes. “Chickenraptor eggs, I’m guessing?”

“HOW DID YOU KNOW?!” Mimi exclaimed, tail puffing slightly in surprise.

“Lucky guess?” Anna shrugged, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. She gave a quick stretch and padded over to the dresser, where Mimi was already face-deep in her portion, devouring it like she hadn’t inhaled a chunk of meat twice her size just hours ago.

Anna grabbed her plate and sat cross-legged on the floor. She opened up her inventory.

“Whatcha... doing?” Mimi asked through a mouthful of eggs.

“I want to take a quick look at that potion cookbook before we do anything,” Anna said. Reaching in, she felt the cool, weightless air of the storage space brush against her fingers. With a focused thought, she grabbed the cookbook and pulled her hand back.

The book was deep emerald green, bound in thick, heavy-duty leather. It looked ancient, the cover worn and chipped, the pages yellowed with age. It gave off a distinct smell, like a blend of dried herbs and incense, reminiscent of a holistic medicine shop you might wander into while vacationing in some artsy mountain hippy town.

Anna opened to a random page. The text was written in an unfamiliar, ancient-looking script that vaguely resembled Middle Eastern hieroglyphics, with fluid curves and spiked edges. The letters shimmered faintly, like heat rising off pavement, just enough to strain her eyes. She could not make out a single word. Occasionally, the pages were broken up by diagrams, sketches of plants, animal parts, and other strange materials. Ingredients, probably. She sighed and flipped through a few more pages, the sound of Mimi chewing loudly in the background making it even harder to focus. Finally, Anna turned

back to the first page, hoping to find a translation key, an index, or anything at all that might help her make sense of it.

Then it clicked. She could read the first page. She didn't know how, but the words translated themselves effortlessly in her mind, just like the tavern sign had. It was a strange sensation, as if the knowledge had been dropped into her brain fully formed, not learned but implanted, foreign yet accessible.

CRUDE HEALTH POTION

A rudimentary healing tonic, bright red and deceptively sweet. Often the first potion a novice brews, it restores a modest amount of vitality with a distinct cherry flavor.

INGREDIENTS:

1 Purple Dandelion

1 Ripe Lumpsick Berry

2 cups of water

INSTRUCTIONS:

- 1. In a small cauldron or pot, combine the Purple Dandelion, Lumpsick Berry, and water.**
- 2. Bring the mixture to a boil over medium heat.**
- 3. Once boiling, reduce to a gentle simmer and stir continuously for 15 minutes.**
- 4. Remove from heat and allow to cool slightly before bottling or consuming.**

Anna reread the page several times. It seemed... too easy. But judging by the name Crude Health Potion, it was probably a very low-level

recipe, so the simplicity made sense.

She flipped ahead, hopeful that the rest of the book had been unlocked too. But the other pages remained the same, unreadable, shimmering cryptic symbols.

Maybe she had to level up to access stronger potions. The item description did say new recipes could be added, so that had to be it.

Determined, Anna decided to try making the health potion.

She opened her inventory and pulled out the Potion Maker's Kit along with the three ingredients listed in the recipe.

The kit came in a large wooden crate. For the first time, she had to use both hands to retrieve something. She set the crate down with a solid thud. Inside, the contents rattled like dinner plates being jostled around.

"Oooo, what's that?" Mimi asked, hopping down from the dresser.

"The potion kit," Anna replied as she opened the crate.

Inside was a surprisingly comprehensive set of tools. A small black cauldron sat neatly to one side, next to a flint stone, a granite mortar, and a wooden cutting board. There were pots and pans of various sizes, a set of sturdy wooden stirring rods, and a bundle of cloth pouches filled with dried herbs and powders. Nestled in the corner was a tidy rack of empty glass bottles, likely intended to hold whatever potions she managed to brew.

Anna set the tools aside and turned her attention to the ingredients she had pulled from her inventory.

The Purple Dandelion was exactly what she expected - literally just a

dandelion, but purple. It was slightly larger than the ones back home, nearly the size of her palm.

The Lumpsick Berry, on the other hand, looked like something out of an alien jungle. It was vibrant cherry red with a rough, gravelly texture, covered in tiny sharp spikes that jutted out from every angle. It was nearly twice the size of Anna's fist and surprisingly dense. When she gave it a light squeeze, it yielded slightly, about the firmness of an avocado. Soft enough to press, but not so fragile that it would burst.

"Interesting..." Anna murmured.

Behind her, she could hear Mimi munching again, presumably on Anna's portion this time.

She turned her attention back to the crate, her eyes scanning the tools. Instinctively, she knew what to do. That strange sensation returned, that feeling of knowledge buried deep in her mind surfacing without warning. It was like invisible puppet strings gently tugged her into motion. Unsettling, but not threatening. There was no malice in it. Just... guidance.

Anna pulled out the cauldron along with several long wooden sticks, each about three feet in length. She arranged the sticks in a tripod, securing them together and hanging the cauldron from the center so it hovered above the ground. Then she reached for the kindling and flintstone, ready to start a fire.

"Whoah, woah, woah," Mimi said, finally looking up from her food. "You're gonna start a fire? In a hotel room? Do I need to remind you about your track record with open flames?"

She was, of course, referring to the time Anna had set her apartment kitchen on fire by leaving soup on high and running out for a quick errand. She returned to fire trucks outside, the apartment filled with

smoke, and Mimi covered in soot from head to tail.

Anna paused. *Fair point.*

Setting a fire in a wooden, medieval hotel room probably wasn't her brightest idea.

With a sigh, she stood and began repacking the crate.

"Let's head outside then," Anna said, quickly swapping into her everyday clothes and slipping on the squire shoes.

The town, now bathed in full daylight, looked rougher than Anna had realized. Cracks lined the buildings, shingles were missing, and sunbeams only served to highlight the grime. The air was warm but carried a sour edge, made sharper by the stillness between the buildings. The duo settled on a back alley behind The Broken Mug, cluttered with crates, broken furniture, and the occasional unidentifiable pile of junk.

"Mimi, you sure no one's gonna see us back here?" Anna asked, glancing over her shoulder.

"Totally," Mimi said with confidence, waving a paw like it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Nobody ever comes back here. Even the Rocyons have standards."

Anna straightened, instantly on alert. "What are those?"

"They're like raccoons," Mimi said, "but cuter. They've got these little pouches to carry their babies. You'll see. Adorable."

Despite Mimi's breezy tone, Anna remained uneasy. Maybe Mimi could charm her way out of trouble with a wink and a head tilt, but Anna wasn't so sure the townsfolk would be as forgiving if they caught

her brewing potions in some random alley.

Still, it would have to do now.

“Alright then,” Anna said, setting down the potion kit and beginning to unpack.

Anna set up the tripod once more and began preparing to start a fire. She crouched down, brushing some dry leaves aside, then looked up at Mimi.

“Mimi, give me your dagger,” she said, holding out a hand.

Mimi narrowed her eyes. “Why?” she asked suspiciously, taking a small step back and clutching her dagger like Anna might swipe it off her at any moment.

“I just need it for a second.” Anna said, giving Mimi a pointed look.

Mimi hesitated, then cautiously handed the blade over. It felt oddly heavy in Anna’s hand, far more than a dagger of that size should weigh. She tried to inspect it, but the system blocked her perception — not high enough level. Probably had a strength or dexterity requirement as well.

Turning back to the flint, Anna struck the blade against it with a sharp clink. Sparks flew, catching the kindling immediately.

She turned to Mimi, only to find the cat in what Anna privately called “Attack Mode”. Ears pinned back, brow furrowed, pupils blown wide until her eyes were nearly all black. Her tail fluffed up like a bottlebrush, every inch of her broadcasting ready to strike.

“Mimi?” Anna said gently, carefully holding out the dagger.

Mimi snatched it from her hands and stuffed it into her inventory.

“This is a CELESTIAL WEAPON! Not some fire-starting stick!” she snapped.

“I only used it for a second...” Anna replied, shrinking slightly under Mimi’s intense glare.

“I HAVE DOZENS OF CRUDE WEAPONS IN MY INVENTORY. ANY OF THOSE WOULD DO!”

“Well then give me one of those. I need a weapon anyway,” Anna said, trying not to sound defensive.

“FINE.” Mimi huffed.

While Mimi muttered to herself and rummaged through her inventory, deciding which weapon to part with, Anna turned her attention back to the potion.

She dropped the three ingredients into the cauldron, which now hung properly above the fire from the makeshift tripod. The recipe hadn’t mentioned any prep or cutting, so she tossed everything in whole and hoped for the best. There was no timer, so she would have to estimate the fifteen minutes, which made her a bit uneasy. Hopefully, the ingredients were not toxic even if they were undercooked.

The system-planted knowledge guiding her actions was starting to feel less intrusive. Still, it tickled at the edge of her awareness.

“Okay, here,” Mimi said, tossing something onto the ground behind her.

Anna turned to find a sword, if it could still be called that. It looked like it had been fished out of a dumpster. The blade was rusted from hilt to

tip, deep chips lining both edges. The handle was wrapped in faded leather, stained dark from what had to be years of sweat. The whole thing looked like it would crumble if she so much as breathed on it.

Anna opened the inspection icon.

RUSTED SWORD

CRUDE

Attack: 1

Strength Required: 1

She picked it up. Despite its size, the weapon felt surprisingly light in her hands.

“Do you have anything that doesn’t... suck?” she asked.

“That’s rude, this is a gift!” Mimi gasped. “I thought long and hard about that.”

“Mimi, seriously.” Anna stared at her, deadpan.

“Fine,” Mimi huffed. “You may have a common one. But you have to give it back when you finish with it.”

Mimi pulled out another sword. This one looked significantly more elaborate than the last. It glistened in the sunlight, the blade clean and sharp, with intricate gold details lacing the handle. Her eyes widened the moment she saw it, and she shoved it back into her inventory as quickly as possible, clearly hoping Anna hadn’t noticed.

“Hey, hey, hey. What was that?” Anna asked.

“Nothing but another crude sword.” Mimi lied very unconvincingly.

“Mimi!” Anna said in a warning tone. It was the same tone she used whenever Mimi was about to knock something off a counter back in the apartment.

“Fine,” Mimi grumbled. “That was an Epic sword I didn’t want you to see. It’s not as nice as my Celestial stuff, but it’s still pretty powerful.”

“Can I have it?” Anna held her hand out expectantly.

“No. I don’t think you could even wield it with your stats, anyway. Plus, I’m holding onto it for emergencies. Or maybe we can sell it later.”

“You’re such a hoarder.” Anna was exasperated.

“Here. You can have this one instead,” Mimi muttered, clearly trying to change the subject.

She pulled another sword from her inventory and handed it to Anna - by the blade.

Anna grabbed it by the handle and gave it a look. It was simple, but at least it looked new. Same size and build as the crude one, same leather-wrapped grip, but this one wasn’t falling apart.

BASIC SWORD

COMMON

Attack: 4

Strength Required: 1

“That will have to do, I suppose. Thanks, Mimi,” Anna said.

“Hrmph. You could be a bit more grateful,” Mimi grunted.

“Thank you, Mimi Li, Great Beast Hero,” Anna said, delivering an exaggerated, overly theatrical curtsy.

“That’s better,” Mimi replied, her tail finally relaxing.

Then Anna felt it. A strange vibration deep in her skull.

BRZZZZ. BRRRZZZ.

It was exactly like the sound of a phone vibrating against a wooden table, only it was happening inside her head.

“What the hell?” Anna muttered, pressing her fingers to her temples.

“Mom, you okay?” Mimi asked, reaching out a paw.

Anna felt dizzy. She looked around, trying to spot the source of the strange sensation. Then, a faint scent of cherry drifted through the air.

It clicked.

She knelt beside the cauldron and saw that it now contained a vibrant, glowing red liquid. The transplanted knowledge floating in her mind whispered that the buzzing had been a timer. As soon as she realized this, the vibration stopped. Convenient, yes, but Anna made a mental note to see if she could adjust the intensity later, like turning down the haptics on a game controller.

She lifted the cauldron off the fire and set it gently on the ground. It let out a soft sizzle as it touched the dirt.

“Mom, what was that?” Mimi asked, eyes wide with concern.

“A timer,” Anna said. “The system told me the potion was done by sending AN OVER-THE-TOP ELECTRICAL SIGNAL INTO MY BRAIN.” She raised her voice to the sky, unsure who she was

complaining to, but it made her feel better.

“Ooooo, that’s super cool!” Mimi said, clearly more excited by the feature than concerned with Anna’s suffering.

“Yeah... anyway, the potion’s done. How do we test it?” Anna asked.

“What do you mean? It’s a health potion, right?”

“Yeah, but we’re both at full health. We should test it before we actually nec - OW!”

Anna recoiled, clutching her arm. Mimi had reached out and raked a single claw across her forearm.

“What was that for?” Anna shouted, wincing. She had dealt with her fair share of cat scratches before, like most cat owners had, but this one hurt way more than expected.

“You said you wanted to test the health potion,” Mimi said matter-of-factly. “So test it.”

Blood began to seep from the cut. It wasn’t deep or life-threatening, but it stung like hell.

Anna glanced at her health bar. She had lost roughly ten percent of her health. She wasn’t sure what was worse: the surprise attack from her own cat or the fact that such a small wound had drained her health bar that much.

She turned to the cauldron, which had cooled slightly. The liquid inside had settled to a quiet simmer.

Reaching into the kit, she pulled out a ladle and filled one of the provided glass bottles. The thick red liquid poured in smoothly, looking exactly like the kind of stereotypical health potion found in every RPG

she had ever played.

A new pop-up blinked into view.

NEW SKILL UNLOCKED: POTION MAKING
OPEN SKILLS TAB TO VIEW.

“Go on! Try it!” Mimi said eagerly, practically vibrating with anticipation.

Anna grumbled under her breath and dismissed the pop-up. She lifted the bottle to her lips and tilted her head back while Mimi stared as if she were watching a season finale.

The cherry-flavored potion hit her tongue. It wasn’t awful, but the thick, sticky, cough-syrup texture made it hard to swallow. She forced down half the bottle, grimaced, and glanced at her arm. Nothing. The cut still bled.

“Damn, did it not work?”

“Nah, you gotta drink the whole thing,” Mimi said.

“Seriously?”

“Yup. But give it here, I’ll show you a trick.”

Anna, wary but curious, handed the bottle over. Mimi studied it with faux seriousness.

“Uh-huh. Yup, that’ll do it.”

“What?” Anna asked.

Without warning, Mimi hurled the bottle straight at Anna.

It nailed Anna in the chest before she had a chance to activate her “Squire’s Shoes”. She stood there stunned, expecting glass, blood, maybe a death screen.

Instead, the bottle bounced shattered and evaporated mid-air, the red liquid splashing across her chest before sizzling away into nothing. A high-pitched metallic chime rang in her ears, rising in tone as the potion disappeared.

She looked down. Her health bar had jumped to full. The cut on her arm was already healing, leaving behind a faint tickle and that familiar itch of a scab ready to peel.

A classic D&D move, throw a potion at a hurt ally and it would auto-apply. She never thought it would actually work like that.

“You’re welcome,” Mimi said, smug.

“How did you know to do that?” Anna asked, still stunned by Mimi’s cleverness.

“Do you know how hard it is to get someone who’s incapacitated to drink something?” Mimi said. “When I saved you from the great siren snake, I could barely hold your mouth open long enough to get a few drops in. I got frustrated, smashed the bottle over you, and bam, it healed you.”

“Huh. Good to know,” Anna said. She briefly considered how badly that could have gone if the potion hadn’t worked like that. Mimi might have accidentally made things worse. But she pushed the thought aside. It had worked. That was enough.

“Best part is, the empty bottle goes right back into your inventory,” Mimi said with a sweet smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “So we don’t even have to spend money on replacements... unless you want to

stock up. You know, for your big quest to go home and leave me behind or whatever.”

Anna was too ecstatic to take the bait. Her first potion had worked. Actually worked. The guilt trip barely registered.

“Mimi, you’re a genius,” she said, deciding to feed the cat’s ever-growing ego.

“Hehe. I know,” Mimi purred, tail flicking smugly.

Anna sat back down on the ground, grinning, and eagerly dove into the potion book again, excited to see what other secrets it held.

By midday, Anna had brewed a total of seven potions: four health, including the one Mimi had smashed against her, and three mana.

She had hoped for a wider variety, but the book only offered three recipes she could access. The health and mana potion ingredients had all come with the starter kit, which she had fully burned through to make the six.

The third recipe was different. It brewed a potion that granted the drinker a permanent +3 boost to Charisma, but only toward one designated target. The catch? It required a rare, specialized ingredient Anna didn’t have.

But Mimi did.

One of the main components was a Great Siren Snake Fang. Anna clearly remembered Mimi yanking one out yesterday. With a fang that size, she could probably brew a charm potion easily. The real challenge? Coaxing it out of her hoarder cat. At this point, that felt about as doable as robbing a dragon.

Mimi, for her part, had been bored out of her mind all morning. At one point, she even pulled a mobile cat tree out of her inventory. Not as ridiculous as the one in their room, but still wildly unnecessary, considering they were in a filthy back alley surrounded by trash.

“Are you done?” Mimi asked with a dramatic sigh, sprawled out on the top platform of her cat tree like a queen bored with court.

“Actually, yes,” Anna replied.

She had already started packing up the kit, dousing the fire, disassembling the tripod, rinsing the cauldron with some of the provided water, and neatly placing everything back into the crate.

Anna had been wondering when leveling up would come into play. Maybe then she could unlock stronger potions or learn entirely new types. The thought excited her. She had always loved the crafting systems in games, so it made sense this would appeal to her too.

Then she remembered something Mimi had said the day before.

“How come I didn’t get to choose a build?” Anna asked suddenly.

“I don’t know.” Mimi said, her little furry head tilted a bit. “Maybe you need to level up first or something?”

Anna groaned. Every RPG she had ever played started with choosing a class or a build. The fact that she’d somehow skipped it made her feel completely ripped off.

With a sigh, Anna tucked the crate back into her inventory. The only thing she could really do was keep moving forward and hope she’d get to choose a build, eventually.

“Okay. Let’s go hunt some Chickenraptors, I want to level up.” Anna

said, feeling emboldened by her first weapon, her potions and her boots.

“FINALLY!” Mimi yelled, launching herself into the air. In one fluid motion, she recalled her cat tree into her inventory and swapped into her armor mid-jump. She landed in full battle gear, looking smug and ready for war.

Anna had to admit, it was a cool move. Straight out of an action movie.

The duo made their way out of the alley. Mimi led confidently, knowing the path toward the gate. Anna followed close behind, distracted by her growing curiosity about leveling up and her missing build. She opened her interface as she walked, determined to find something.

She tried every command she could think of. “Game Start.” “Class Selection.” “Character Start Menu.” “Open Sesame.” “Let Me Choose My Friggin’ Build Please.”

Nothing. No new menu. No class. No build. No magical pop-up. Just... silence.

With a sigh, she gave up and opened the skills menu instead.

SKILLS:

COMBAT SKILLS: 1

CRAFTING SKILLS: 1

SUPPORT SKILLS: 0

SOCIAL SKILLS: 1

Anna paused mid-step. Wait, I have a combat skill? I have a combat

skill!

Excited, she mentally clicked into it.

The Squire's Speed – Expert

Anna groaned. How does running really fast count as a combat skill? At least it is expert rank though.

She moved on to the crafting tab.

Potion Making – Novice

She wondered how many potions she would need to make to rank up, and what kinds of potions could come next. Strength boosts? Transformation? Invisibility?

The possibilities were endless.

Then she caught herself.

No. Stay focused.

As thrilling as it was to live inside what felt like a fantasy RPG, Anna knew the danger was real. This wasn't a game. There were no checkpoints or respawns. If she made the wrong move, she could end up dead, for real.

“This is life and death,” she reminded herself. “Act like it.”

She took a steadying breath. Okay. Priority one: earn money, get the sword, and hopefully find a quest that leads home.

She hated that word. Hopefully.

Whenever someone back home told her, “Hopefully it works out,” she

had to fight the urge to roll her eyes.

Anna had always been logical. Methodical. Every part of her life had been carefully planned, calculated like a market position. Relying on hope, especially in a situation that could kill her, made her uneasy.

“Hope isn’t a strategy.” She’d heard that phrase a hundred times from her old boss. Sure, it was about stock trading, but the sentiment applied just as well here. Still, whether she liked it or not, hope was all she had right now.

Anna snapped back to the present as a deep horn blast echoed through the air, vibrating in her chest like thunder.

The gate horn.

Mimi called over her shoulder. “Can you keep up, please?”

Alright, time for her first monster hunt.