

Author's Note

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Erotic content: Bimbofication, breast expansion, semi-consensual body transformation, light prostitution, lactation, milking, futanari, brief bestiality, in-game incest of sorts, pregnancy, cum inflation, excessive proportions, and various instances of dubious consent: mostly well intentioned misunderstandings but not always. Also contains (but does not describe or eroticize) sleep rape.

Team Player

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Tutorial

Tradeoffs

“Yeah, I suppose that makes sense,” Lacey said with a shrug. Beggars couldn’t be choosers, and she felt extremely lucky to have gotten sponsored into a party full of big-time players right at the start of the public release of Fantasy UltraCraft. If they wanted her to be a utility character, that was fine with her.

Though it kind of rankled a little bit. In previous UltraCrafts, the games sometimes ran for literal years before resets, so if Lacey didn’t like her character, she would have to live with it for a long time before she had a chance to change it. On the other hand, being sponsored onto this party was her first shot at earning enough to choose her own character in the future, and really to do all the things competitive-tier players got to do. And while many people thought utility players were boring or demeaning to play, they still got a share of loot, and the loot drops in Arvina’s party were bound to be just massive compared to anything Lacey had experienced in the past.

“We’re at the party max on intelligence points,” JeffA told Caper. JeffA was a warlock and Caper an artificer, so they both needed high INT.

“One more point and I get a guaranteed bonus spell at each level,” JeffA said.

“I don’t think I can give up any more points, though,” Caper said apologetically, “I’m planning on controlling dual golems and it’s already going to require a lot of concentration.”

“Yeah, that’s fair,” JeffA said, and looked around at the rest of the party. “Can anyone else spare a point?”

“I could,” Lacey said. One nice thing about UltraCraft is that in many cases the penalty for low character abilities could be compensated for by the player’s abilities. Strong people could make up for their characters being weak, and smart people could make up for their characters being dense. Her character already had one of the lower INT scores in the party, but she was a bard-like “Performer” class character, so it didn’t matter as much. At least, the game’s character creation interface hadn’t highlighted it as a problem, so there was probably at least one subclass within Performer that didn’t need much INT.

“Really? Thanks!” JeffA said. “Do you want charisma or strength?”

“Oh, charisma for sure,” Lacey said. That was her character’s most important statistic and the one for which Lacey had the least to add, being a generally shy and tongue-tied person. That was part of the reason she hadn’t been so chuffed to have been pushed into being a Performer in the first place. But Lacey was determined to be a team player.

“Do you want another point of charisma?” Caper asked hopefully.

Lacey laughed, because Caper was so cute and friendly. Arvina was fascinating, supremely confident, and quite generous, but also intimidating and hard to read, so Lacey always felt stupid and embarrassed around her even though she was the only player she’d known before joining the party. Meanwhile, Lacey immediately saw that Caper was funny and low pressure, and had done more to set Lacey at ease than anyone else.

So, while giving up another point of intelligence was maybe not the wisest move, Lacey really wanted to repay Caper for being so cheerful and welcoming. “Yeah, let’s do it.”

“Really?” Caper asked with surprise. “I was mostly joking.”

“I think I can cover for a lower intelligence,” Lacey said, as if it was no big deal. She wasn’t sure if this was true for Fantasy UltraCraft, but it had been true for UltraCraft: Beyond The Furthest Star. Lacey’s ability to memorize clues and solve the puzzle minigames had been how she’d been able to rank high enough to reach the arena finals fight against Arvina despite being a free player. Naturally Arvina had utterly wrecked her, but Lacey had evidently put up enough resistance to earn some respect from a globally-ranked player, and maybe she’d be able to do it again.

“Fantasy UltraCraft doesn’t have minigames, you know,” Arvina warned her, as if she’d been reading Lacey’s mind.

“No, but there’s still puzzles and whatnot, right?” Lacey said.

“I don’t know, actually. I’m not sure anybody does; the beta didn’t get super deep. I assume they’d have to do something like that, but I’m really unsure because of their big focus on everything being organic,” Arvina said uncomfortably. Seeing Arvina unsure actually made Lacey feel better. Even if she was making a noob mistake, they were all noobs together.

“You can have the INT back if you think you’ll need it,” Caper offered.

“No, it’s fine. We know you need INT, but we don’t know if I need it, so it seems like a good trade,” Lacey argued.

Everyone seemed to think that was a very smart way of looking at the issue, and Lacey felt good at how seriously all Arvina’s top-tier player friends were taking her. Above all, she was glad she wasn’t embarrassing her sponsor, who was also the coolest person Lacey knew.

Once they had finished the party-wide character stat trades, it was time for them to work on character creation individually, which, given that it was an UltraCraft game, was going to take a long time and be quite important.

More important than ever for Lacey. Not only had she never played a full Extreme-Dimensional game where it was, in sensory terms, indistinguishable from real life, the same financial situation that prevented her from choosing her own character in the way paid players did was just one consequence of an arguably more dire situation in realspace. She’d been evicted from her flat and wasn’t going to be able to pay any reconnect fees. Lacey’s whole plan was to be live as this new character in the personal playpod 24 hours a day until and unless her financial situation changed significantly. If she stopped whilst she still owed money then UltraCraft might not even let her rejoin. She’d always read about things like this happening, but she’d never expected to be in this position herself. Though, given her opportunity to play in Arvina’s team, Lacey felt cautiously optimistic that she’d be able to sell some of her loot for enough to pay her game and pod fees while digging herself out of debt. In the late game she might be getting gear worth enough to pay for a new flat.

But that was going to take months at least, and in the meantime, she wanted to be happy with how she looked, her starting supplies, and all the other aspects of her life for the foreseeable future. One in particular presented an irritating parallel with the housing challenge that had made her realspace life so unaffordable.

“Come on, team. Do we really have to live in the most expensive part of Rampart?” Lacey complained to herself. Which wasn’t strictly true, of course, but the party received control bonuses over their home tavern by living nearby, and they’d settled on the Burning Sun next to the eastern gate. Lacey could see why: quick access to missions in the eastern wilds, lots of

travellers, and so on. However, all the unoccupied residences nearby either required UltraGems, or were on the outside of the gates where they could get raided by other players.

Of course, some residences were only a token amount of gems, just enough to push players over the mental barrier of paying at least a little real money, so probably it didn't even occur to the other players that this could be a real barrier for Lacey. She had never explained how truly broke she was, not wanting them to have second thoughts about letting her in the party, so she really had only herself to blame.

She walked as a ghost form through the tenements outside the gate for a bit to more closely inspect what there was to choose from, which led to her becoming even more dispirited when she saw the schedule for the gate closing at night. So if she lived out here, there would be times at night when she wouldn't even be able to join the party. It would be so awkward.

Setting that aside, she decided to focus on other aspects of character creation, starting with her subclass. Well, Bard was right out; it relied almost as heavily on intelligence as it did on charisma. Dancer leaned heavily on stamina, and Gymnast on strength. Entertainer, though, leaned most heavily on charisma with body as a secondary stat, and Lacey had taken a fairly high body score because that had given hit points in previous UltraCraft games. Fantasy UltraCraft had been marketed as no longer using hit points, but Lacey was sure it would do something similar.

The next big conundrum was whether to choose a noble background or a brothel worker background.

Nobles got boosts to charisma, education, and 20% extra earnings, whereas brothel workers got bonuses to charisma, body, and 20% extra earnings, though they took a education penalty. That didn't seem fair to Lacey until she saw that brothel workers were the only character background allowed to live in brothels, which would solve her living situation without needing to buy any UltraGems, and a review of brothel housing showed that it had excellent comfort stats and modest but acceptable storage capacity, which increased with level.

That was enough that she would have chosen it if it wasn't for the obvious connotations. The background description specified that she had "once" been a "brothel worker", but that was transparently intended of the thinnest of covers for the obvious implication that she had been a prostitute specifically, and the lodging itself was situated and furnished in a way that implied this brothel work was less previous and more current. Also the education penalty wasn't great.

Belatedly, she noticed that she could actually select both backgrounds to get "fallen noble". That eliminated the education penalty and combined the bonuses from both. That seemed way overpowered, but after checking through every page of stats and the equipment pages, the only other penalty was that it removed the 'noble house' perk, which really only helped money players.

Once again it took her a while to notice that this was marked as a "sponsored build" available to "qualified players". The help menu was frustratingly vague about what exactly this meant, but reading between the lines brought Lacey to a tentative conclusion that these were particular characters UltraCraft wanted filled by higher-tier players in order to add the right ambience. Though it also sounded like perhaps it would mean she was going to be shown adverts by some company that had paid to sponsor the build. It came with a preset 'look' that was much more evocative of a vapid 22nd century influencer who had decided harem outfits were the latest fashion than a medieval noblewoman brought low by traumatic calamity.

Lacey thought this was pretty stupid until she played with her stats sliders a bit to show how they were reflected in her character model, at which point she realized that it was because the

game engine needed to show her as someone with a sky-high charisma and low intelligence, and that didn't fit for a traumatized noblewoman mortified by her debasement. Evidently the game decided that a bimbo who was too stupid to grasp her situation could still be attractive and charming.

Once again she asked herself if she was really willing to do this, but looking at her stats and the ability to live right next door to the tavern reconciled her. She might look a little silly and prurient, but it would be a big advantage in contributing to the party. And a 40% gold bonus seemed especially helpful for her as someone who couldn't spend real money.

After waffling for a bit longer, she got a message from Arvina asking how it was going.

"Well, I found a character build that seems pretty promising, but I wasn't sure how the party would feel about it," she said, trying to figure out if there was a way to explain why she had chosen to make her character so gratuitously hot without admitting that she'd accepted a sponsored build.

She was still trying to decide what was most embarrassing when Arvina popped into her space, which wasn't something she'd even known was possible. Despite having a mediocre charisma stat, Arvina was gorgeous, which implied that she was pretty in realspace as well. Or maybe she was just really good at XD modeling; either was enviable. She was also a noble wolfborn, it appeared, which explained why she was so big and muscular.

They stared at each other in shocked approval for a moment, which simultaneously embarrassed Lacey that she was drooling over her new friend, and reassured her that Arvina didn't think Lacey looked vulgar.

"I didn't expect you to take the sponsored build, but it looks great," Arvina said.

"Oh! I... You know about..." Lacey stammered, demonstrating why she needed a high charisma stat in the game: she wasn't going to be able to smooth talk her way through challenges.

Arvina poked up a bit, and Lacey was reminded that elite players like Arvina sometimes got little peeks behind the scenes from the developers, though they weren't meant to talk about them.

"Sorry! I don't mean to try to get you to tell me about anything you're not meant to," Lacey said hastily. "I didn't even notice it was a sponsored build at first."

"Oh, so you just liked the way it looked?" Arvina said, seeming a bit relieved.

Lacey suspected that she'd narrowly averted Arvina's suspicion that Lacey chose a sponsored build because she was a free player. Would Arvina have felt compelled to kick Lacey out for the good of the party? The thought made Lacey hasten to reinforce the impression that she had chosen the look for her own reasons. "Yeah! I know, I look like a ditz, but I think that'll just make enemies underestimate me."

Arvina cocked her head as if she hadn't thought of it that way, though the subtly canid features of her wolfborn face also made her look faintly reminiscent of a puppy tilting her head when hearing a strange sound.

Lacey swallowed hard. She needed to not be weird around Arvina, and it was getting more and more difficult because instead of getting used to having a semi-famous pro gamer friend, she was becoming ever more infatuated with her. Why did she always do this?

"Well, I'm glad you like it," Arvina said. "Why are you worried about the party? Because it's a bit saucy?"

"Yeah," Lacey said, letting out a slightly relieved laugh that the topic was out in the open.

"Well, Caper doesn't judge, and JeffA will love it. He's all about saucy bitches. I hope you don't mind him saying shit like that, though. You might not think it because he's so butch

himself, but he enjoys outrageously femme stuff.”

“He’s gay?” Lacey asked.

“You haven’t even looked at his intro page?” Arvina asked with a laugh, before continuing. “Yeah, super gay. And also he’ll love your look.”

“What about Dark?” Lacey asked, referring to our fifth party member whom she knew the least.

“Well, he wouldn’t judge either, but he might think you’re playing the ero layer as well, so if you aren’t, you might want to tell him so.”

“The ero layer?” Lacey asked. Previous UltraCraft games had had companion ‘ero worlds’ where characters from the main world could be taken for both romantic dating and more straightforwardly X-rated activities, so she had some idea of what that word referred to, but she had no idea what ‘layer’ meant in this context.

“You haven’t heard about that, then? Well, I’m glad I could warn you. Well, ‘warn’ isn’t the right word because there’s nothin bad about it as far as I’m concerned,” Arvina told her with a smile that would have been more reassuring without the long wolfborn fangs. “I should say I’m glad to clue you in that in Fantasy UltraCraft everything that used to be over in the ero world is now integrated directly into the game, but with a layer filter so that you just don’t experience any of the ero content unless you opt in.”

“Oh. Wouldn’t that be distracting to have happening all over the place while you’re trying to play the normal game?” Lacey asked.

“Not really, because the world handles it totally realistically. Like, people aren’t just getting it on in the streets because they’d be arrested and all that. Some activists think it’s too realistic because they bring back medieval prejudices or whatever, but that’s not really true. Like you get in trouble in the game for being caught cheating on your spouse or whatever, but you pretty much have to want to be caught, and the game lets anyone marry anyone and you don’t even have to get married to have babies. So, I don’t think it’s super restrictive; mostly it just gives it a bit of period flavour.”

There were multiple surprising aspects to Arvina’s mini-lecture on the topic, the biggest being the simple fact that Arvina had so much to say. But there was no way Lacey was going to inquire into Arvina’s involvement with the ero layer, so instead she asked about the second most surprising element. “Wait, babies?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty crazy. They have a whole in-game genetics system and everything, so they inherit stats, and appearance, and supposedly they’re even going to have AIs that train on the personalities of their parents.”

“That’s...” Lacey edited out some less complimentary ways of describing her astonishment before going with, “Very ambitious, don’t you think?”

“Oh, insanely ambitious. But they’re closer than you probably think,” Arvina said.

Clearly this was more than idle speculation on Arvina’s part, but again it felt like territory Lacey wasn’t meant to be asking about.

“So having sex in the ero layer makes in-game babies? I’m not sure people would like that.”

“It’s only like ten gold for birth control tea, so no one has to have babies unless they want to,” Arvina assured her. “Still, I think it’ll make the ero layer feel less like a porn game or fanfiction and more like, well, real life.”

“Even if I look like this?” Lacey asked, bouncing one of her sizeable boobs as a joke. Except that it didn’t feel like a joke. It felt just like she had bounced her own breasts, and not the unremarkable ones on her realspace body, but the nice big firm ones on her in-game body.

Arvina laughed at Lacey's stunned expression. "This is your first fully Extreme Dimensional game, isn't it? Don't be embarrassed; it is for most people. It's just that the party has been in test cohorts since the first alpha so we've experienced that part for almost a year now. We still don't know much about the world story or even a lot of the game mechanics, but that part we've experienced loads, and as someone who also tried out Monster Garden and Thousand Suns, I can assure you that UltraCraft's implementation is by far the best and most natural. You'll forget you ever had another body."

Arvina set that topic aside as well. "But, have I set your mind at ease? About your character, I mean."

"Oh, yeah, definitely," Lacey said, more because that seemed to be the response Arvina wanted than because her mind was actually at ease.

"Did you want to ask anything else?" Arvina asked.

By that point Lacey had become painfully aware that her in-game body was so realistic that her in-game nipples had hardened in arousal at Arvina's presence, and Arvina would probably know that that meant if she noticed through Lacey's not-very-concealing top. "Nope, that was it!" she chirped.

"Great. Really happy you joined us, Lacey. This is going to be so fun!"

"Oh, should I come up with a better name?" Lacey asked.

"Why? Lacey is a very pretty name," Arvina said.

"I, uh, I wasn't sure if it sounded like an adventurer's name. Like JeffA said he was going to call his character Alexandros, right?"

"Well, he's playing a Warlock so he needs a name like that, but Lacey is perfect for you."

Lacey wasn't sure quite how she should take that, but because Arvina said it, it made her feel very warm and fuzzy, and gave her further feelings that made clear that she had not yet opted out of the ero layer. Fortunately Arvina popped back out before things got any more awkward.

Already pushed into a heated state of mind, Lacey couldn't help but gaze with deeply confused feelings through her space's reflection wall at the body that would be hers for at least several months and possibly much longer. She looked at once cute and pretty and sexy and stupid, and it was at once exciting and appalling to think that this was her new reality.

Why appalling, though? Was it really so bad to spend a little time looking like an idiotic little sexpot? Everyone would surely know that she was just playing a character.

But at the same time, in these sorts of games, your character had a way of becoming your life if you let it, and this was by far the most immersive game that there had ever been. How much of the virtual bimbo in the virtual mirror seep into how everyone saw her?

How much of it would seep into her?

Pro Crafter

After all that, returning to the party was almost anticlimactic. She got some compliments and gave some, everyone reacted almost precisely as Arvina predicted, and then they quickly got used to Lacey being on the team. They could see as well as she could that her stats were very well aligned with her class abilities, and if there was a little bit of gratuitous cheesecake involved that mattered much less than the fact that she was very useful to the party straightaway.

For example, when she worked a shift waitressing at the tavern, she got extra tips in both

gold and gossip, which was a relatively minor benefit, but felt big while she was still marveling at the richness of the basic experience of interacting with the complex tapestry of players and AIs that was the borderland city of Rampart. After a bit of experience in the world and practicing her class skills, she was able to win more substantial victories, such as neutralizing a high level town guard just by flirting with him. Everyone agreed that the party would have had no chance of beating him in combat even if they'd been willing to risk their reputations, but with Lacey's help they'd been able to complete a story mission with their party power rating fully five levels lower than recommended.

One of Dark's mates asked if he was playing with his girlfriend when he saw Lacey standing with him and Dark responded by saying that Lacey was probably the most powerful player in the party. That was obviously an egregious exaggeration, but it still filled her with pride for her contribution that he could even say it with a straight face.

But it was still Arvina's approval that Lacey really thirsted for, in a variety of ways. It was forthcoming, of course, but it also felt increasingly based on lies. First, there was the fact that Lacey was advancing slower than the other players due in part to her hesitancy about exploring some of the more risqué parts of the skill tree. Second, there was the fact that Lacey had been forced to sell some of her gear on the black market to pay some pressing realspace bills that had come due earlier than she'd expected. It was strictly against the rules to sell gear for hard currency outside of the official game, but the official market was delayed and Lacey had been getting desperate.

"Why aren't you wearing the Leathers of Stealth?" Arvina asked her in a private moment, sitting on Lacey's bed.

The one designed for 'entertaining' brothel patrons, Lacey was reminded. When she had the ero layer active, she could hear the thumps and moans coming from the other rooms, and even with it deactivated as it now was, Arvina sitting on those satin sheets reminded Lacey of those long hot nights. "Pardon?" she asked, having missed Arvina's question.

"When the Leathers of Stealth dropped I thought you would switch to those instead of the layered silks."

"Oh!" Lacey said, blushing. Why in the world did they implement involuntary blushing in the game? "Stealth enchantments aren't actually that useful to me because I actually decided to go for Hiding In Plain Sight instead."

"You did?" Arvina said, surprised and confused. "You didn't use it yesterday, though?"

"I just forgot to take the skill before the mission started."

"So you've taken it now?" Arvina asked, looking Lacey up and down.

Lacey shifted uncomfortably. "Actually I still haven't. I should do that now, shouldn't I?"

Arvina didn't join Lacey's weak laugh, and just watched expectantly.

Left with nothing to do but take the skill, Lacey applied her skill points to it and braced herself for a change.

As had happened several times by this point, the stat change also caused an alteration of her game body. This was the most dramatic yet, though, because it significantly swelled both her breasts and buttocks. And with Arvina watching, no less.

Lacey couldn't prevent herself from trying to hide the transformation with her hands, but it ended up just looking like she was groping herself to experience the growth that way. The appearance wasn't deceiving, either, because once her hands were spread across the swells of her chest, she couldn't will herself to tear them away. It was just too fascinating and intense, and more.

“Wow,” Arvina said, staring at Lacey’s new, larger chest. “Did you know that was going to happen?”

“N-no,” Lacey stammered. “Do I look ridiculous?”

Arvina laughed and shook her head. “You look great, but it feels like a bigger change than it looks like from the outside.”

“This has happened to you?”

“Not quite the same thing,” Arvina said with another chuckle. “But I have enough experience to guess.”

“Oh yeah, because of all the XD designing. Do you feel it while you’re doing it?”

“Not precisely. It’s complicated. But maybe I could show you?”

“Oh my god, that would be amaaazing,” Lacey gushed before reining herself in. Though Arvina hadn’t said anything about it herself, Caper had confided that Arvina was also considered a top XD modeler and had personally refined dozens of key NPCs and several monsters. This was really the next thing to magic as far as Lacey was concerned and she hardly dared aspire to the heights Arvina must have achieved.

Lacey had once considered herself to be bit of a dab hand at XD modeling, but it had gotten so much more complex in the latest environments, and especially in UltraCraft as they had leaned deeper and deeper into their “real causality” mantra. They claimed the game mechanics, appearance, and even story elements were produced by characters and objects interacting naturally, and while Lacey didn’t have the expertise to know how true this really was, it at least seemed to be very disorientingly so. Even if it was just clothing, XD modelers couldn’t just place a texture plus a shape onto a three dimensional model, they had to choose specific materials, how they attached, and sometimes quite a lot of even more detailed characteristics if there wasn’t already a library for the material. Designing anything living within the world was yet more complex than that, and then designing living characters was the most complex of all.

Of course Lacey had been one of many, many players who complained how difficult ‘modding’ had become, and had even used the joke names like “UltraComplicated” and “UnworkableCrafting” but now that she had experienced UltraCraft’s full XD world, she had to admit that nothing else came close. It might require almost literal wizardry to actually craft in XD, but it was worth it. And if Lacey could learn it, she suspected that would ultimately be an even greater boost to her fortunes than being a top-ranked player.

“Do you have a Crafter Pro account?” Arvina asked, bringing Lacey crashing to earth.

“No. Well, I have a free account,” Lacey admitted. Either answer would let Arvina know that Lacey was not a serious crafter.

“That’s fine, I’ll send you an observer invite. If the timing doesn’t work for you, just respond with an alternate that does.”

Lacey laughed slightly at the idea of having a busy schedule but couldn’t explain that so she just said that she was laughing in excitement at learning from a legend. Arvina looked like she wasn’t sure how to respond to that description of her, but fortunately the party had an adventure to go on so they could cover over the awkward moment with that.

Ultra Gem

As big a triumph as that felt like to Lacey, it also just reinforced her need for money. The basic paid Crafter Pro account wasn’t what most people would consider expensive, but Lacey

still had loads of bills she had to pay before she could safely reopen her Casher account. Selling more mission loot at this juncture seemed really risky so her only real option was to buy it with UltraGems, which she was beginning to earn directly as tips. She'd gotten her first solitary gem as a tip from working a shift as waitress at the tavern the party wanted to claim, and she'd gotten several that way since, but the biggest influx had come when she started her shift with the ero layer active.

At first nothing had seemed different, until a mini mission dialog had cropped up with a mission that offered up to twenty gems as a reward, and the mission summary suggested all she had to do was satisfy a 'crude customer'. She reckoned that her high charisma would make this easy, but even after almost a fortnight playing the game she hadn't quite gotten used to the fact that the game didn't allocate her with witty repartee or verbal charm due to her charisma score in the way it had with past games. Her charms were varied but strictly physical, if one included a seductive voice amongst physical features. The customer, who proved to be a massive half-orc, gave his order in a thick drawl and also used confusing phrasing, making it very difficult for her to determine whether he wanted an ale for himself and his two mates, or if, as turned out to be the case, he wanted three for himself and one each for his friends.

Yet, despite irritating him with her attempts to clarify his order, then failing to bring the right things, the mission still wasn't marked failed, so she knew there must still be a way to succeed.

Rather surprisingly, he ordered one of the bar's strong but sweet dessert wines after he had eaten a whole chicken and drained almost three more ales in addition to the initial three. When she arrived with it, he blocked her from placing it on the table.

"Jest hold a moment. Too hard on yer been I, han't?" he drawled. "Jest a silly young wench ye be, w'out a thought in her pretty head, and I should'a spoke slowlike. Here," he patted his huge green thigh with one scarred and meaty hand. "Take a sit fer a moment and take the bad taste from yer mouth."

He indicated for her to drink the wine in her hand, but she was fairly sure he didn't want her to down it while standing there. She'd have to sit on his leg.

While she considered this, he wrapped his arm around her waist and made her sit, pulling her until her back rested against his massive chest. "There you go. Ain't that more comfortable?"

"Garak, hands off," Danhei the bartender warned. Bartenders were as powerful as city guards and would make short work of Garak and his friends.

"Just 'pologisin' friendly-like," Garak objected, "Got a drink for the lass here."

Garak had removed his hand and Lacey could stand up if she wanted to, but she really wanted those gems, too, so when the choice to wave Danhei off or to stand back up and have him take care of Garak popped up, she decided to wave him off.

"It's fine," Lacey said, and Garak laughed with pleasure.

She had to sit there until she finished the drink, but he didn't try to keep her there or bother her after he handed her a bag of twenty UltraGems, so she felt like she'd made the right choice. From then on she began to get similar sorts of mini-missions with fair regularity. They didn't automatically award gems like the first one did, but they were repeatable once per hour and due to her ultra high charisma, she got a gem more often than not.

Eventually she also learned how to decipher the various orders and didn't even need to sit on anybody's lap to succeed in the mission, but honestly she wasn't all that bothered by sitting on an NPC's lap for a moment while she downed whatever drink they got her. Sometimes the NPC was really cute and she messed up their order on purpose.

Though it didn't yield gems directly, she did discover another somewhat lucrative opportunity available while leaving the ero layer on, which was setting her character to 'entertain' brothel clients while Lacey herself was idle due to sleep. She felt that it didn't pay nearly what someone as pretty as she was should be earning in a brothel, but it was admittedly quite a bit more than any other idle activity available. Between that, serving at the tavern, and gold from adventuring, she was able to buy the daily maximum shares of the tavern allowed for regular gold purchases. They weren't even close to owning the tavern and the shares only generated a small amount of gold, but it earned her "party points" that she could trade for some things that would ordinarily cost UltraGems.

She was still drifting further and further behind the rest of the party, but she remained useful, so she didn't think they resented her. It was also possible that they were at least partly influenced by her appearance to think of her as being a pretty and earnest girl who was just doing her best to help and deserved a little extra accommodation for being a bit slow. That was a considerable indulgence from such an elite group, but they said so often that they were glad to have Lacey that she almost believed them.

Her life outside the party was also surprisingly pleasant. Working at the tavern for much of the day wasn't nearly as boring as she would have thought. The NPC AIs were varied and natural enough that she didn't have to listen to the same phrases on repeat from every mouth, and there was also many actual players mixed in, choosing to eat their realspace meals together with their party mates at the tavern. Almost all of them assumed Lacey was an NPC so they didn't really hide what they were discussing, and it was always interesting to overhear.

That also did mean that some of them tried to help themselves to a grope, but the game was realistic enough that Danhei would intervene if she signaled to him, and she ended up with some generous tips from players anxious to avoid embroiling their party in a fight they could not win.

It was also how she learned that she was not, as she had originally assumed, entertaining brothel patrons with her body, but rather she played music and sang for them. A player who had just had to cough up one of those tips groused that the tavern was the only place he could even touch the hottest girl in the whole brothel, and it cost him two UltraGems and 125 gold. The rest of the party laughed, but it piqued Lacey's curiosity.

That night, she stayed up and played through part of the night live, strumming her mandolin and singing in a sweet but indifferently controlled voice. There were all sorts of potential clients there, and the game presented taking one of them as a mission, but she also saw that it incurred a small reputation penalty, so she decided not to take it. Also she was a little worried what it would actually be like. Everything in this world felt so real, and UltraCraft had put so much effort into the ero layer, that she thought it might be difficult to separate from the real thing.

But, she'd keep it in mind if she really needed those gems. Just the NPCs, though; the offer from a real player promised a shockingly large amount of UltraGems plus some other exclusive gear, but she didn't trust them to actually pay when the whole exchange was very much against the rules. The idea of actually putting herself in the hands of some anonymous person who would make such an offer was also more than a bit frightening. The angrily insulting followup message she got afterward confirmed to her that she'd made the right decision and reinforced her intention not to entertain such offers.

In the meantime, though, she could significantly improve her earning potential by buying better outfits and instruments, and learning musical skills in general. There was, of course, plenty of overlap with her adventuring skills, so her nights playing music for randy punters also helped catch her up with the others. She also just enjoyed being musical, so she found herself unusually

content with her situation.

Pro Crafted

Lacey had barely begun to trust her new sense of relative security when a new sort of threat emerged from a direction she should have anticipated but did not: a major maintenance outage. The problem in this case was only indirectly due to UltraCraft; the real problem was the fact that it would free her playpod for the next person on the list to claim, sending her to the end of what was currently a very long line. She could upgrade to a dedicated pod, but that would entail paying three months in advance, and she wasn't even sure they would let her upgrade her current pod or if she would have to wait for the next available dedicated pod. Not that it mattered, because there was no way she could afford to pay three months in advance.

After considering it from every angle she could think of, she saw no way around it: she'd just have to log out and find some way to wait out however long it took to get another playpod. But obviously she couldn't just disappear without telling her party, so she had to say something.

"Oh, how long do you think it will take?" Arvina asked gently as she took Lacey's hands in her own.

"The current wait is eight days," Lacey said, trying to keep it together. She really didn't even know where she would sleep, what she could find to eat, where to wash and so on. She just hoped that she wouldn't look and smell so disgusting at the end of that time that they refused to let her rent another pod.

"That's a long time at this point in the game," Arvina said.

"I wouldn't blame you if you need to drop me from the party," Lacey said, trying not to let on the absolute havoc that would wreak on her life.

"No no, I think that's a huge overreaction," Arvina said, waving off that idea as she considered something.

Considering whether the rest of the party would agree? Lacey's anxiety was forcing her to try to imagine Caper's friendly face becoming frostily disappointed at Lacey proving to be so unreliable. Dark would definitely denounce Lacey as the liability she was.

"It's the forced log-out that's the problem, right?" Arvina asked her.

"Yeah?" Lacey asked, hoping that the tears of despair rolling down her cheeks weren't represented on her character.

"I know of a way we could toggle whether you're marked as an NPC. NPCs don't get logged out because they're not logged in."

Lacey couldn't help but resist this seemingly implausible source of hope. "But won't I time out or something while my character is frozen?"

"No one is frozen during the updates; they actually need the NPCs to remain minimally

active in order to be properly relocated, attached to missions, and that sort of thing. I think you'll be confined to your room, but your character should remain live."

Hope was becoming harder to resist. "Isn't this illegal? Or not allowed, or whatever?"

Arvina shrugged. "It's not allowed, but I don't think it's explicitly against the rules. As long as you don't try to gain anything during the maintenance window, I don't think they'll even notice, and certainly won't bother to hunt you down. The only danger I can think of is the remote chance that they'll think you're an actual NPC and try to attach you to a mission or something. Which probably wouldn't work and that would irritate them. But these updates only touch a tiny fraction of NPCs, especially inside cities. I also would guess they know ahead of time which NPCs they intend to touch, though I'm honestly not entirely sure on that point because of how they approach the world. So, I'm mostly sure it's safe but not entirely sure."

"Do you think I should? Wouldn't it get you in trouble if I was caught?"

"No, I'd be fine," Arvina said easily. Lacey wasn't sure if she was lying or not.

Arvina continued, "It's really up to you. I'm just giving you the option."

"I think it's way better than making the whole party wait forever for me, so I'll take it," Lacey said, finally allowing herself to feel some relief. "Do we have to tell the others?"

"No, safer for everyone if we keep it between the two of us," Arvina said, half confirming that she would in fact be in trouble if Lacey was caught. But Lacey felt committed, and also the other alternative was so horrible that she was willing to risk it. She felt very selfish, but if Arvina approved, then that was enough.

With her future seemingly assured for the time being, Lacey was able to throw herself back into the game without too many second thoughts. In particular she was approaching the point where she could transition to the "Troubadour" subclass. It would end her eligibility for residence in the brothel, but she had enough UltraGems now to be able to secure one of the lowest tier residences within the Burning Sun's vicinity. With just a few more gems she could get the next step up, though, and she was considering waiting for that both because it was closer to the tavern and because it wasn't as severe a downgrade from the brothel lodgings.

Only a few days before the scheduled maintenance another option appeared: Underworld Chanteuse. Once again this was a "sponsored" option, and like with her "fallen noble" background, there was no information on the sponsor. The sponsorship of the fallen noble had not created any bothersome requirements nor made her watch any adverts, so she tentatively continued to guess that these anonymously sponsored options were provided gratis by UltraCraft for their own reasons.

What she knew for sure was that Chanteuses were also allowed to continue living at brothels, and they gained the same boost to singing skills that Troubadours did. Chanteuses didn't get the Troubadour's musical instrument bonus, but it came with another charisma bonus that would provide just as big of a boost to instrument performance checks but the boost would also apply to

every other kind of entertainment skill. Chantreuses did have many of the same equipment limitations of Divas, but Lacey had already been intending to work toward the Diva class so she thought it wasn't that serious.

Uncharacteristically, Lacey decided to take it straightaway, before anyone else could. She had no particular information that it was even available to anybody else, or that there was a limit on how many people could select it, but she wasn't willing to risk finding out that it was limited by it disappearing from her options.

Only after she'd taken it did she notice that the bonus and penalty list was actually a scrollable list. She was able to pull it down while the system was still working to apply changes, allowing her a brief view of two additional boosts and two additional drawbacks and quite a bit of additional text that was unaccountably pushed down the page where it was easy to miss.

She wasn't surprised when her breasts once again began to swell because she'd thought that Body had been one of the boosts and the game interpreted that to mean either more muscles or more curves depending on the character's strength score. However, she very much feared that one of the penalties was to Intelligence, and the degree of her breast growth seemed to confirm that.

It wasn't really possible not to enjoy the feeling of her boobs swelling up, even though she was also exasperated. She'd been able to nudge up some INT-based skills so that it wasn't as bad as it could be, but losing another point would start to really stack up the penalties. But, wonder of wonders, when the swelling stopped and she could check her stats she found that her Intelligence hadn't been lowered after all.

However, her reflection in the mirror told another story. Her eyes looked wider and more confused, with long lashes like a startled doe. Her lips were noticeably more plump and shiny, right at the edge of what could be natural. Her gloves had been unequipped, probably due to the rather anachronistic-feeling long nails her character now sported. Ditto her footwear, though she didn't immediately see a reason for that.

Lacey navigated back to her subclass description to read what was going on, and discovered that she was now the moll of some big time gangster in Great Middlesea. Because the Dragon Boss was an NPC that lived far away she evidently didn't have to do anything for the benefits the subclass conferred, but it still sort of creeped her out. Together with other benefits that were specific to the ero layer, she got the strong impression that the sponsorship was intended to produce more sexy young hotties for the more prurient players.

Which wasn't to say that she disliked how she looked; she just didn't like thinking of herself as a tool to populate the ero layer with prostitutes or whatever. It also felt like an unsettling indicator of where UltraCraft was going with the game.

She could feel herself starting to spin out of control emotionally and knew if she didn't do something immediately, she'd worry herself into a panic attack. In desperation she sent Arvina a

message.

There was just enough time for Lacey to feel like she'd made a terrible mistake to pull Arvina into her mess before Arvina appeared.

"Oh my God!" Arvina exclaimed, confirming Lacey's worst fears.

"You hate it," Lacey said, the part of herself that thought she was total rubbish feeling a sense of masochistic satisfaction at this brutal outcome.

"No! No!" Arvina said, pulling Lacey into a hug.

Lacey resisted. "You don't have to lie to me. I'm not quite as stupid as I look."

"Lacey, no, that's not at all what I meant."

"I saw your reaction, Arvina," Lacey said reproachfully, "Don't try to make me feel better."

"Seriously, Lacey, you don't understand. I, uh... I'm really sorry you don't like it, but I actually crafted... you."

Lacey, having read Arvina's awkwardness as preparation for admitting something terrible, couldn't quite process what she actually said. It didn't make her feel better per se, but the confusion did interrupt her emotional spiral. "What?"

"I was meant to... I was commissioned to craft the hottest girl I could imagine."

"What?" Lacey asked again, but not because she couldn't understand what Arvina was saying, so much as she couldn't believe that she had understood correctly.

"I didn't know what it was actually for at the time. I assumed it was for an NPC or something until the first stage turned up as the preset for the fallen noble background. And now you've found the, uh, evolved stage."

"Oh. So... Wait... You..." Lacey couldn't find any verbal easy to express her mixture of relief, and joy, and other, less acknowledged feelings. So she just hugged Arvina as hard as the game world let her, and wept happy tears.

Fortunately Arvina seemed to understand that Lacey's opinion of her changes had shifted radically for the better, even if she wasn't entirely sure what all was behind it. Arvina patted Lacey on the back for a while as Lacey made disjointed but thankful utterances. Lacey only pulled away when she looked up into Arvina's face from short range and barely stopped herself from trying to kiss her.

Lacey coughed to cover some of the awkwardness of suddenly stepping back from her embrace with Arvina, and racked her brain for something appropriate to say. "Um, I'm really proud to be in something you made, and I hope I make you proud, too."

"It's not too much?" Arvina asked. "I could make some edits..."

"No! No, I want it to be faithful to your vision," Lacey said, happy that she had a way of explaining herself other than divulging that she desperately wanted to be hot in Arvina's eyes. In fact, her new body was detecting how she was feeling about it and the thin silk of her nightrail was going to reveal that.

Lacey hastily turned away to open her wardrobe. “Oh, it looks like I’m not allowed to wear anything below ‘Fine’ grade now. Or heavier than ‘Fashionable’.”

“Yeah,” Arvina said, sounding guilty again, “That was part of the reason I thought it was for an NPC. It saved loads of work not to have to test compatibility with the whole range. Though I think it won’t matter as much in the late game because a lot of the best outfits for magic users are like that.”

“Oh, I don’t mind except that I don’t currently have any clothes I can... Oh, it came with a default outfit. Did you make this too?”

“Yeah, though this wasn’t entirely my choice,” Arvina said, sounding embarrassed. “The ask was an outfit that a gangster might have his concubine wear.”

Lacey’s previous despair had now rebounded into elation and up to the verge of daring, giving her the courage to don the outfit and turn saucily to Arvina. “Well, what do you think? Would you have your concubine wear this if you were a gangster?”

Arvina’s mouth opened but she didn’t say anything as her eyes roved up and down her sexy creation. It was probably the best feeling Lacey had ever had, and she didn’t even care if Arvina saw how aroused Lacey was. In fact, she almost hoped Arvina would see and be encouraged to ravage her on the spot with her wolfborn power.

“Shit,” Arvina said, distracted by a notification. “I have to respond to this. You look hella hot, Lacey.”

“Thanks, Arvina,” Lacey said, accepting this encomium as the parting words they were. She was disappointed, but also relieved that she hadn’t had time to truly embarrass herself in her flash of overconfidence. Lacey might be hot now, but that didn’t mean Arvina was just going to instantly want *her*.

After Arvina popped out of the room, Lacey got to try out how easy it was to masturbate in-game with her new body, with the result being that it was actually easier than it was in realspace, both in terms of reaching climax and in terms of cleanup afterward.

That night, as she sang her sultry song in the brothel’s small social hall, she exulted in the looks of lustful avarice she got from the visitors. Sorry everyone, she belonged to Arvina.

Which she didn’t, of course, but it gave her a little frisson of pleasure to think it to herself. And it wasn’t crazy to think that she might someday, was it? If Lacey was literally made for Arvina, wouldn’t that give her an advantage?

And the hypersexuality of her upgraded character body was actually a help, because it was much easier to imagine Arvina being transiently attracted to Lacey’s perfectly crafted body than lastingly in love with Lacey’s nerdy brain and awkward personality. Attempting a relationship with someone so out of her league was obviously foolish, but a one night stand would be the best thing that ever happened to Lacey, and she would never ask the Universe to grant another wish.

With that in mind, Lacey decided to accept a few assignments with female brothel clients,

just to get used to having her face in their crotches. Unfortunately NPCs couldn't really give trustworthy feedback on technique as it related to real partners, but they did give her a few gems and the skill tree points to take the Deep Tongue ability.

Then came time for the maintenance outage, which Lacey was able to face with a measure of courage under the idea that Arvina wouldn't mind enduring a little risk on behalf of her sexy creation.

Unlike any other outage she'd experienced, there were no obvious world effects like motion jumps or error messages. Instead, the sounds of all activity tapered off and disappeared, leaving only a few bird calls and occasional gusts of wind for long periods of time. There was a moment perhaps five or ten minutes in when a series of what appeared to be status modals blinked in and out of existence, but nothing changed and there was no other sign that anyone at UltraCraft had taken any notice of Lacey's presence.

It was fairly boring, but not too long after the flickering she fell into a pleasant snooze that ate up most of the time, and in the end it all seemed fairly relaxing and totally harmless. Even as an NPC she could still see mechanical numbers like her character stats and experience points, and none of those changed at all before or after she ran the script to exit NPC mode.

A more comprehensive comparison of character story and player statistics from before and after the maintenance also appeared the same, with one possible exception. On her romantic relationships page Lacey was listed as having one partner: Gnasher the Dragon Boss. She kicked herself for not checking this page of her character description before the maintenance outage because she wasn't sure if the romantic partner listing was new or not. It probably wasn't new given that it was part of the description of her Underworld Chanteuse subclass, but she hadn't thought to look before because she had always assumed the page would remain empty.

Lacey was very grateful to Arvina, but Arvina didn't seem to want Lacey to mention it, and she felt it was important to respect that. However, she began to wonder if there was something else wrong, because Arvina seemed to have become very careful about what she said around Lacey. Arvina remained outwardly friendly and Lacey thought she even caught the wolfborn giving Lacey's body a hungry look from time to time, but there was still a definite reserve.

It took a while for Lacey to work up her courage, but finally sheer frustration pushed her to ask, "Arvina, have I done something wrong?"

"What do you mean?" Arvina asked, giving a convincing impression of someone who really couldn't think of something Lacey might have done.

"I just feel like you've been kind of distant ever since the maintenance. Or maybe like you're walking on eggshells trying not to say something."

Arvina's surprised embarrassment told Lacey her guess was close, but Arvina shook her head.

"Arvina, please. Please tell me. Don't leave me in suspense. I can't take it, you know. I'll

assume the worst.”

Arvina looked pained. “It’s just not my place to say, Lacey. I’m not an impartial observer.”

Lacey couldn’t help but harbour a bit of optimism that Arvina was admitting to being too fond of her to be fair, which would be one of the most flattering things she could say. Lacey smiled hopefully and said, “Well, could you tell me what you think as a partial observer?”

“Look, the problem is that he and I have history,” Arvina admitted.

“Who?” Lacey asked, wracking her brain for what ‘he’ Arvina could mean. “Do you mean Dark?”

“What? No. I mean, we have some history but... wait, are you involved with Dark?” Arvina asked.

Lacey recoiled. “Ugh, no. I mean, no offense against Dark, but he’s not my type at all. At all.”

“That’s what I thought, but... Surely it’s obvious that I meant Gnasher,” Arvina said uncomfortably.

“Gnasher? The gangster NPC in Great Middlesea?” Lacey asked, dumbfounded. “I’ve never even seen him.”

Arvina might have turned to stone, she was so still as she stared at Lacey. She was unnerved, then outright frightened when she finally deciphered that Arvina was frozen with rage.

“I’m sorry! I don’t know what I did wrong!” Lacey said desperately, trying to understand what she could have done.

“Oh, sweet, not you!” Arvina said, and swept Lacey into a brief but fierce hug. “I mean Gnasher. Who is not quite a normal NPC. I’m so, so sorry, but I think he’s using you to get back at me.”

“Wait, how?” Lacey said, but she could guess, and it made her sick to think of it. “While I’m idle?”

“Yes. We’re going to terminate the pregnancy... Well, if you want to.”

“If some absolute piece of shit got me pregnant while I was unconscious, then absolutely. I’m not going to carry his virtual rape baby,” Lacey said, quite as furious as Arvina now.

“Alright, that first, then we’re going to catch him in the act. And then he will be very, very fired.”

“I think it might have started during the maintenance, though, and then he’ll know that I used the script. In fact... does he even know I’m not an NPC? How to you tell idle characters from NPCs?”

That gave Arvina pause, and after a moment she deflated. “Whether he does or doesn’t, he could at least claim he doesn’t. And he’s so dense in some ways that I have to admit that I don’t know either. But it’s gross even if he thinks you’re just an NPC I created for my own amusement.”

“Yeah, shouldn’t he be fired just for that?” Lacey asked.

“Well, he’s the one who commissioned the character. I mean, I made it, you, it... whatever. I crafted the background and subclass models exactly the way I would have wanted, but he was the one who commissioned them. I thought he did it on behalf of UltraCraft, but it might have been his personal request. I actually thought he was going to take them for his own character to try to seduce me, which is how daft he is. As if I wouldn’t immediately know it was him.” She shook her head. “Anyway, my point is that if it was his own personal commission, then he really might think he has a right to do what he pleases with it. Which is incorrect according to the terms of the standard crafting contracts that we both signed, but he’s got a childlike ignorance about lots of things. A petulant child.”

“So what do we do?” Lacey asked, very glad she had Arvina looking out for her.

“I think we should set a trap for Gnasher the Dragon Boss the next time he visits the brothel at night.”

“Isn’t he super high level?”

“Yep, but if we know he has to cross the threshold into your residence, then we can set and immobilizer trap and one of us will alert the bouncer. He’s a lot stronger than the bouncer, but once he kills the bouncer then the town guard we will have attracted to the area will come and they’ll take him out.”

“Can’t he just teleport away?”

“No one can teleport into or out of anybody else’s residence.”

“Oh yeah. What if he just blocks and waits out the immobilizer spell?”

“That would be smart, but I think he’ll get offended at being bothered by low level riffraff and try to fight his way out. And even if he manages to do it, say if we can’t gather enough town guards, then he’ll probably ruin his reputation so badly that he won’t be able to come back to Rampart.”

“Wickedly brilliant,” Lacey marvelled, and gave Arvina a hug. “I’m so glad we finally talked about it. I’m almost glad that the asshole is being such a shit, because I think I’ll enjoy ruining things for him.”

Arvina laughed. “That’s the spirit!” she told Lacey before summoning the rest of the party to give a heavily edited account of what Gnasher was doing and arranging the whole matter with them.

Caper in particular was offended and angry on Lacey’s behalf, and suggested a variety of complex schemes to make things far worse for Gnasher in ways that would extend well beyond Rampart, but Arvina and Lacey combined to bargain her down to nothing worse than making sure that Gnasher’s humiliation was as public as possible.

And, true to her name, Caper was genuinely excellent at orchestrating the whole affair, even including the parts that Arvina had originally suggested, dotting ‘i’s and crossing ‘t’s so that

when the whole thing went down, Gnasher truly had no chance. Even Dark who was usually not interested in activities unless they strengthened the party somehow, seemed to feel that the quality of the operation made it worth the cost in immobilization and stun traps.

That was to say, Gnasher proved far harder to kill than expected, but because Caper and the team had set concentric layers of different sorts of traps, all Gnasher's efforts to wriggle out just got him stuck further. Even so he might have been able to escape once the traps expired if he hadn't been so intent on killing the guards crowding into the room, but by the time he realized he needed to focus on moving somewhere that allowed teleportation, he was mobbed from all sides and new guards were arriving faster than he could kill them.

It caused a minor scandal when it was revealed that an UltraCraft developer had given himself an ultra-powerful character and had decided to rampage inside a brothel. Lacey, ironically, had slept through it all and so had to watch the recording to see what had happened like everybody else, but she was relieved to find out that the scandal had somehow not drawn her into it. She didn't even get a message about it from UltraCraft like most other people in Rampart did.

Hugging the Wurm

Gnasher, whose real name Lacey never did learn, wasn't actually fired, but his access to the game world was removed and the UltraCraft story designers incorporated the event into the world lore, retroactively identifying Gnasher the Dragon Boss as an actual dragon in disguise. Everyone who had participated in bringing him down got some UltraGems and other loot, though of course Lacey didn't get any of that because she slept through it.

Even so, it boosted the party rank noticeably, and Lacey found herself in even more demand for a while as curious punters wanted to see the girl the Gnasher had been trying to boink. But, apart from appearing more vapid and bustier than average brothel girl, Lacey wasn't really that remarkable so her fame contracted back to being more strictly local. It didn't seem like anybody outside her own party even realised she wasn't an NPC.

To be fair to both players and NPCs, though, the longer the game went on, the more personality and individuality the NPCs showed, making them increasingly difficult to separate from human players. They were really quite convincing if one didn't try to push the conversation too far, and some of the more key NPCs were so convincing that Lacey sometimes suspected that there were real players behind the characters, working for UltraCraft's story managers.

Arvina assured her that this was not the case, and was able to share some inside information gleaned from her continued commission work as a crafter on official UltraCraft characters.

“I’ve actually seen the matrices they’re using now, and they’re giant compared to the ones they were using during the beta. From what I understand, they’re really leaning into making them as much like real people as possible because neural compute is getting cheaper but story design gets more expensive the more people are playing. They mostly don’t even write missions involving specific characters anymore; they just lay out story criteria and the game finds places and characters that can be used to turn the stories into missions.”

“Wow, that’s amazing,” Lacey marvelled, once again feeling very privileged to be walking down the street with someone as well-connected and well-informed as Arvina was. She hoped everyone assumed they were a couple. “I hadn’t even noticed, honestly. The missions have all seemed quite well made to me.”

“I generally agree. I especially don’t think they’re any worse than the old grindy missions we used to have to do over and over in other games. But I think they still need to get better in the future, because the whole world should have more of an ongoing story than we’ve seen yet.”

“Well, they’re just getting started, aren’t they? The last residence in Rampart wasn’t even claimed until last week, and it’s one of the main cities, right?” Lacey wasn’t actually all that sure; in period-accurate fashion, maps were rare and usually only covered the immediate area, so she had only vague ideas about what the world looked like.

Arvina laughed. “We’re near the edge of the current world and the eastern wilds are basically just a stub of what they’ll be in the future. Which is to say, we were one of the last major cities to fill up. They won’t say how many daily active players there are, but my understanding is that the game started with over twenty million residences available to players. The only reason it hasn’t grown faster is that there’s only so many pods out there capable of full XD.”

“How much for her?” an ogre warrior interrupted to ask Arvina, nodding at Lacey.

Arvina just bared her long canines and growled, causing the ogre to decide the price was too high.

“Should I look for something less revealing?” Lacey asked her.

“It wouldn’t help unless it was a tent,” she said, shaking her head and gazing fondly into the shorter woman’s cleavage.

“They’re not that big,” Lacey objected with a delighted giggle. She didn’t mind Arvina acting like they were. Lacey just wished Arvina would let loose and grab them one of these days rather than look like she wanted to. Alas, Arvina still kept a small but firm amount of distance between them. They had been forthright enough to discuss ‘fooling around’ and how they were apprehensive about what it might do to the party dynamic, but Lacey had not been forthright enough to say that she was very much willing to risk the party dynamic. In the meantime, though, she got a little thrill whenever Arvina openly enjoyed looking at her.

“How’s crafting coming along?” Arvina asked.

“I’ve gotten more practice, but honestly I don’t think I can improve on your work. So I’ve

just focused on decorating my gear. Especially the instruments.”

“You shouldn’t sell yourself short. You picked up XD crafting really fast compared to most people I’ve tried to teach.”

“Oh no,” Lacey said, “I didn’t mean my crafting skills aren’t up to snuff, I mean that I think the me that you made is totally perfect. I wouldn’t want to change a thing.” Left unsaid was Lacey’s belief that any alteration she made would presumably move her further from Arvina’s ideal, so completely out of the question. And honestly, she enjoyed eliciting propositions just by walking down the street, as long as Arvina or other party mates were there to back her up.

Arvina didn’t have much to say to Lacey’s opinion on her own looks, but Lacey thought Arvina was pleased as well, and it felt like she was being hugged.

That was one of many factors that made Lacey feel much more secure than she had in a long time. Another was that her playpod provider started accepting payment in UltraGems, and Lacey had earned enough that she could rent one of the newest “Ultra” XD pods specifically designed for Fantasy UltraCraft. She felt a twinge of irresponsibility that she didn’t save up for an actual place for her realspace body to live, but living in the playpod really hadn’t been so bad after all, and the Ultra pods were even better, with everything needed for indefinite play sessions.

It wasn’t really cheaper than getting her own flat and a last-generation XD set, but things were looking up in terms of the party’s advancement, so it wasn’t time to be too conservative. Especially if it was a step down in terms of her ability to play effectively.

The truth of this was borne out not long afterward in unexpectedly graphic fashion. The party was hunting for dragon eggs in the Forest of Misting Towers when they encountered a source of dragon eggs in the form of a shockingly stealthy and agile green dragon. Within seconds the entire party was knocked out or wounded to the point of incapacity, with the sole exception of Lacey.

Not knowing what else to do, she began singing to it, telling it how beautiful it was and how its scales shone like emeralds. Amazingly, this halted the beast, which cocked its head to listen, and then slowly approached to sniff her while she played. The first song ended with the dragon rubbing its head gently against her, and she launched into the next, which was a lover’s charm spell.

She didn’t think it would work on a monster that couldn’t even speak the language, but either it did understand or it didn’t matter, because it worked. And it worked frighteningly well, because when one of its gentle head butts accidentally knocked her down, it transitioned from nuzzling to mating in a flash. It took every bit of skill she possessed to wrap herself around that huge dragon cock and satisfy the beast without being knocked unconscious or otherwise battered to death.

It lost half its stamina the first time it doused her and everything near her with dragon cum, and a little less than half the second time, so it seemed she’d have to make the dragon shoot a

third. It was all going fairly well, but she couldn't just use the same approach every time so she'd resorted to a doggy style position for the final one, which made it more difficult to see what she was doing and she had considerably less control over the giant meat hammer thrusting between her legs and all the way up until it nearly bumped her chin. As the dragon's excitement mounted toward that third orgasm, it pulled back so far so it slipped from between her spread legs, and when it came back it pushed into her actual cunt. It didn't hurt, and in fact felt amazing, but she could see her hitpoints dropping rapidly as it battered her internal organs. She applied herself, though, and as the dragon was already extremely close she just barely managed to make it come before she passed out.

It was a little odd to feel victorious while trapped under a collapsed dragon with a tummy full of dragon cum, but a win was a win, and Lacey was now a verified dragon slayer. Not that they killed the poor dragon; the game considered all forms of defeat to be equivalent.

Afterward the party search fruitlessly for the dragon's den in hopes that it would contain those dragon eggs. Whether it did or not, though, they didn't find it. But all was not lost and they got the eggs in the end. They simply had to wait three days for Lacey to lay them.

"I have no idea," Arvina admitted, staring at the three gigantic eggs sitting on Lacey's writing desk.

"So I just keep them?" Lacey asked, staring at the eggs suspiciously. "What if they hatch?"

"I'm going to speculate that they need something else to hatch, but if not, now you have baby dragons, which is about the most coveted animal you can have in this game."

"Are you sure they'll be dragons and not, like, half dragons?" Lacey asked.

"Nnnnnoo," Arvina said uncertainly, "I'm not sure of anything. If you would have asked me before, I would have told you that Dragons and humans couldn't interbreed in any sense of the word whatsoever and now it at least looks like it actually happened. But I'm not aware of there being any such thing as half-dragons in the game, so even if they, or the AI mission implementer, created some kind of special event exception to allow interbreeding I expect the result to be all one thing or all the other, physically speaking."

"I think someone was especially confused about how all this works if they decided humans can lay dragon eggs. Or any eggs." Lacey said.

"That's just because there's a bunch of weird people with weird fetishes," Alexandros said. "Not that I judge. I'm one of them."

"You're into egg-laying?" Lacey asked with surprise.

"Oh hells no. My weird fetishes aren't anything like that. Plus, eggs aren't even that weird. Kind of tidy compared to human babies. I do think they should make it so humans can lay eggs out of our bums, don't you? Let all genders lay cute little babies."

"I had no idea you wanted babies," Caper said.

"Oh hells no," Alexandros said again. "Not even virtual babies. But I think Dark should.

Does't he seem like father material?"

Dark made an alarming choking noise.

"For now," Arvina said, pointedly changing the subject, "I think you should just keep them in a warm place and see what happens."

"Isn't this one of the weirdest game mechanics you've ever heard of?" Caper asked, biting her lip pensively.

Dark laughed. "After some of the things we've seen in this game so far, are you that surprised?"

Caper shrugged. "Not that surprised, but a player just randomly laid eggs after hugging a dragon until it took a nap."

"That's just what it looks like if you don't have the ero layer turned on," Alexandros said.

"Not really my point, Alex. I mean that it's just not something that it's reasonable to expect players to do to try to accomplish a mission. Also almost no players could do it."

"The mission evaluator does weird stuff like that sometimes, though," Arvina said. "If it notices that there's an outcome that would fit the mission criteria laid out by the designers then it implements it."

"By putting eggs in Lacey?" Caper asked.

"That is pretty strange," agreed Dark.

"I think it's fetish stuff leaking out of the ero layer. We've definitely seen some of that before," Alexandros said.

They all looked at Arvina. That she had additional sources of information went unspoken most of the time, but were not secret within the party.

"The fetish leaking hypothesis does seem like the most likely," Arvina said after a while, and they accepted the mystery as provisionally settled.

The next mystery wasn't as mysterious to Lacey: when it came time to advance a step within her Underworld Chanteuse subclass, there was another sponsored variant available that was obviously the next progression of Arvina's fantasy girl. Unlike the others, this one appeared to be a reward for the first player to progress that far as an Underworld Chanteuse. The description didn't use the word "reward", but it did spell out that only the first character to reach that level in each city-sized settlement received that version of the subclass.

The changes weren't all that dramatic in some ways. The only ones that even applied during missions were a few very lewd but impactful ero-layer abilities. She now had the 'Elastic' perk making her resistant to penetrative sex damage, 'Aroma of Desire' that increased the power of her seduction attacks at the cost of also increasing the chance of eliciting an attack, and the curiously named "Drawn That Way", which made her seductive charm attacks more powerful at the cost of making her more susceptible to them herself.

Two elements that were more for ongoing life seemed respectively more dramatic and slightly

suspicious. First, “Drawn That Way” made her boobs and butt bigger, and prohibited her from choosing short hairstyles. She didn’t hate it, but it seemed gratuitously aesthetic rather than functional. Second was the rather ambiguous “General Fertility”, for which the only description was “Disable cross autofail” plus an icon of a green flag.

What it did not do, though, was force her to be anyone’s concubine or anything of that nature, so she was quite alright with it. A big factor in that was her private suspicion that this was another step up the ladder of what Arvina found personally erotic. Every time someone stared at her tits or watched the wiggle of her bum, it reminded her that she was the hottest thing Arvina could imagine.

Arvina would break soon. She had to, didn’t she?

Lacey’s increasingly remarkable curves were also increasing her fame as a performer, though getting better at singing and playing did help. At the tavern, a new class of mission had patrons requesting she sing for her tip. It took much longer because of it, but the gem payout was far higher, especially if they lost control and groped her before the end. It was actually a fun little minigame, and it made her feel extra sexy. And her own arousal increased her Aroma of Desire effect, which actually helped her win.

Really it was more of a win-win, because they did at least get to feel her up a little.

“It doesn’t bother you at all?” Arvina asked at one point.

“It did at first, but it’s really fun now. Well, I suppose it still bothers me that it’s in the game at all because I reckon it could give some people the wrong idea, but in the game context there’s no danger and everyone’s in it with their eyes open. More like a really tame lap dance than sexual assault.”

“That’s good then,” Arvina said with relief.

“Thank you so much. I know I’ve said it before, but I’m so, so grateful that you invited me to join the party, and also everything else.” Lacey motioned vaguely toward her body to indicate the ‘everything else’.

“It’s not all me, is it?” Arvina asked, tapping a bracelet Lacey had crafted for herself to match the jewel on her heavily re-edited mandolin.

“Not all you, but the best parts,” Lacey said with a saucy smile.

She must have come on too strong, because Arvina withdrew a little. But Lacey felt like she was getting closer.

Becoming the Mission

A few days later another weird thing happened when Lacey woke from sleep to find someone sneaking through her room. An assassin or thief type character; she wasn’t sure quite which, but

he had accidentally tripped a trap spell still left over from the Gnasher incident. It didn't do much, but it made enough noise to wake her.

Based on what she could see of his gear, he was probably significantly below her in power level, but still well above her in combat ability. Her door was also still closed, and there was no signs that anyone outside had noticed his entrance, so it was just the two of them. But he wasn't here for her, he was here for the eggs.

Well then, she knew how to stop that.

"Hey there cutie," she said in her most seductive voice, "What are you doing here?"

"Pardon me, my lady, I was enchanted by your beauty," he said, surreptitiously placing one of the eggs in his satchel.

She chuckled slightly. "Aww, you called me a lady. So romantic."

"I shouldn't have intruded," he said, trying to walk backward.

"No, but now that you're here, maybe you'd like to take a closer look?"

He hesitated, and with her Aroma of Desire and Seductive Voice skills both so powerful, he was ill prepared to resist her once the lights came on and she could bring her full charisma to bear. She could tell he didn't have the ero layer turned on because his character merely became rooted in place rather than painfully aroused, but it was really too bad for him. Either way he failed the mission, but if he'd had the ero layer on, he might have enjoyed failing it.

It was only a little later that it occurred to her how strange it was that it was his mission and not hers. She got some rewards for defeating him, but it wasn't a mission for her like it clearly had been for him. But it seemed really bizarre for something in her home to be a mission objective.

She didn't bring the incident to Arvina because she didn't want her thinking that Lacey would fuck any rando who wandered into her bedroom at night, so it was soon pushed out of her thoughts by all the other things that were happening, such as the preparations for the expansion of the Eastern Wilds - capitalized now - and the Sea of Storms.

The expansion would place Rampart on the edge of an area with many new and higher level quests, and also convert it from a frontier city to more of a regional capital, by the sound of things. It was going to be a big deal, and it came with another outage, though of course this time Lacey could safely log out without worrying about getting her pod back. It would be interesting experiencing her first realspace time since she'd upgraded her playpod, and the first sustained sojourn in realspace since first logging in months ago. She wasn't sure how she would feel about it.

As it happened, though, she needn't have worried about it. The maintenance started without logging her out, and moreover when she tried to log out manually, the dialog wouldn't come up.

Was anyone else having the same problem? She tried looking out her bedroom window, but her vantage onto the alley wasn't especially informative. The door wouldn't open, and she wasn't

willing to try to bash it down, so she decided to sit down and wait.

But this time, she wouldn't fall asleep. Just in case someone was up to something.

Again there were a few flickers here and there, but otherwise it dragged on and on, and it was frankly a bit of a struggle not to fall asleep. So eventually she decided to occupy herself with the only other activity that seemed to be available at the moment: masturbation.

It went slower than it did at other times because many of her bonuses seemed to be inactive during the maintenance, but that was fine; she had loads of time. Steadily she worked her way up to the edge at the thought of overwhelming Arvina with desire to the point that she threw Lacey down and had her way with her, though how exactly her imagination left a little hazy. Regardless, it did the job, and finally she lay back sated.

She must have dozed off then, though, because she woke up just as the maintenance ended. A short walk outside didn't reveal any changes to the brothel or Rampart, but when she gave the Burning Sun a look-in, she noticed two proud-looking wolfborn dressed in exotic attire that might be from the new Eastern Wilds. She messaged Arvina about them while studying them, though she didn't show as being back online yet.

Their nostrils flared when they noticed her looking at them.

"Human," the slightly taller, paler of them addressed her. A female.

"My name's Lacey," she responded. "I'm a server here. Would you like something to eat or drink?"

"Yes. Bring us tea and meat."

She could tell they were into her, but they were also so stiff about it. This was going to be fun. "Have a seat here and I'll bring that right away," she said, and sauntered away.

"So, are you two a couple?" she teased when she returned. She didn't say it in a teasing way; she just felt sure it would fluster them.

"No. We are littermates," the tall one said with a wrinkle of her nose.

"Oh, well pardon me. How should I address you?"

"You might call me Tracker Greynose, and this is Senior Warrior Longfang. You have the scent of our kind on you."

"Um, yes?" She said, a bit surprised.

"You do not find us repellent, then," Greynose said with arid satisfaction.

"Oh no, cutie, not at all," she said, and gave the wolfborn a saucy wink.

"Is she your mate?" Longfang asked.

"That's kind of personal, don't you think?" Lacey said, a bit irritated. She would enjoy the clumsy obviousness of their attempts to find out if she was sexually available, except that they were so blunt about it. It wasn't very sexy. Also she didn't like being reminded that Arvina wasn't Lacey's mate in the sense that they meant it.

"She is not mated to one of us," Greynose told Longfang after a long inhalation, "Her only

litter was to a dragon.”

“She is mated to a dragon?!” Longfang said in disbelief, giving Lacey a second look.

“No, I do not think so. You are not mated to a dragon, are you?” Greynose asked.

Lacey suppressed a laugh. “No, I am not mated to anyone.”

“Hmm,” Longfang said in a way that indicated this was a promising answer.

“Would you bear a litter for the wolfborn?” Greynose asked.

Lacey was far too fascinated by the strangeness of the exchange to be offended. Besides, they were surely NPCs just doing what they were meant to do. But it was astonishing how much they felt like strange people rather than badly written characters. Also she was really wondering what sort of mission this was meant to be. “Yes, absolutely,” she said, admitting to these strange NPCs something that would embarrass her to death to say directly to Arvina.

“Good,” Longfang said, sounding pleased. “Your blood will be welcomed amongst our people.”

Lacey laughed uncomfortably. “Well, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We’re not mated yet.”

“Soon, you will be,” Greynose said confidently, with a smile that was probably meant to be friendly.

“Leave us now,” Longfang said, and so she did.

Because she’d begun the shift at the tavern she felt she had to finish it, and the two wolfborn sat at the same table the entire time, taking a bit more tea from time to time but otherwise not saying much. She had no idea they were waiting for her until they stood up just as she walked past them to the door after settling at the till.

“Come with us,” Longfang told her.

“Why?”

“We will take you to your mate,” Greynose told her in a congratulatory way, holding a bouquet like bundle of herbs out for her to smell.

“Arvina?” Lacey asked. She was confused, but took the bouquet and sniffed it because that seemed to be the thing to do.

It was apparently the wrong thing to do, because she immediately lost control of her character, who began following them docilely out the city gate and into the forest. It was really frustrating, especially because it wouldn’t let her bring up anything including the messenger while they were walking, but at least the action accelerated so she wasn’t stuck watching hours or days of travel. It was actually kind of interesting watching the scenery zoom by at jet-fighter speeds, so she tried to enjoy whatever weird glitch had snagged her.

When they arrived, the trance or whatever it was that had prevented Lacey from controlling her character ended, but she and of dozens of other abducted women were all surrounded by hundreds of wolfborn warriors. Lacey was rather upset that the mission designers thought this was appropriate, except that so far she hadn’t seen any mission popups and all the hundreds of

characters present apart from herself were NPCs. They were reacting in a variety of rather believable ways to their predicaments, but they all seemed very common; none of them looked like adventurers at all. The wolfborn, meanwhile, conducted themselves in a very businesslike and efficient way that she wouldn't have expected of tribal people.

Lacey and the other abductees were all lined up, then they were sorted in what Lacey eventually realised was charisma order. Once that was done, they were allocated one by one to the equivalently ranked wolfborn.

At that point Lacey had had enough. It had been very interesting, but she wasn't really liking the plotline, and also she didn't want Arvina thinking Lacey just wanted to boink any wolfborn who offered. Or, as the case might be, it was a hulking wolfborn chieftain who had sent emissaries hundreds of miles to abduct her.

Time to teleport out.

She tried to select the teleport, but like Gnasher, she'd allowed herself to get stuck in a residence. At least, she assumed that's why it wasn't selectable.

He had her on the bed by then, so she decided she'd just log out. Except that she also still couldn't bring up the logout screen. In fact, she was missing several character pages.

But she didn't have a chance to examine that further, because she now had a wolfborn cock in her, and it was very distracting. She was also still under the influence of some kind of status effect because her level of arousal was off the charts. He didn't last long, but even though he couldn't have humped her for more than a minute she was close to coming when he did.

Then he knotted her. She didn't know immediately that's what had happened; it just felt like he was getting suddenly girthier. By the time she made the connection they were locked together as his cum flowed into her. And, embarrassingly, the sensation also made her come.

They were still stuck when the Chieftain's mate entered. "That's not how humans breed, Tearer of Throats," she told him contemptuously. "I will show you."

He growled, she growled back, and he seemed to back down. "Fine."

Tearer of Throats made an audible pop as he pulled out and stood aside.

"Oh, she will feed many pups," the wolfborn woman said when she turned Lacey over to reveal her large breasts.

She could have been Arvina's sister, and Lacey couldn't help but start to get aroused again. Better, the wolfborn went slower and explored more of Lacey's body like a human lover would. She wasn't as affectionate as she imagined Arvina would be, but the commanding, demanding nature of her lovemaking was intoxicating in its own way.

The most surprising part for Lacey was discovering that the Chieftain's mate had her own prick, and intended to get her own litter out of it. As her thrusting forced large amounts of the chief's seed out of Lacey's womb, she wondered if the game had high fidelity models for fertilization when the insemination was competitive. Probably.

She almost didn't hear the level-up chime due to her own orgasmic moan, but she couldn't help but notice the further swelling of her breasts as the haughty wolfborn looked down at her smugly.

Lacey didn't have time to contemplate this mystery because the wolfborn woman immediately bred her a second time, but after they they left and shut her in she had plenty of time to dwell on her growing suspicion that the game thought she was an NPC. That would explain why the lack of a logout option, being pulled into some kind of mission event without there being any mission notification, and just now, her skill and perk points from leveling up being allocated automatically.

Hopefully she could still use her teleports. She would think she could, because NPCs did sometimes teleport. But she would have to get out of the chieftain's den or whatever it was. It was probably fair to call it a house, though the floor was dirt and its furniture was very basic. There was a cistern and several smaller basins of water, but she wasn't sure what they were for so she decided not to try to clean herself up. She wasn't sure what was keeping the entrance door closed, but it didn't seem like a lock.

How long could she be held here? If it was a mission, then perhaps the party would already be on its way? Why was her tummy still bulging?

She wasn't left to her own devices for too terribly long before the woman returned with food and damp cloth.

"What's your name?" Lacey asked.

The wolfborn looked surprised, as if her pet monkey had just spoken. "I am Chieftess Herdsplitter, human."

"How long will I be kept here?"

"As long as you like, once you bear a litter."

"What if I don't want to bear a litter'?" Lacey asked.

"You agreed to bear a litter for the wolfborn," Herdsplitter said as this was just plain fact.

"I did not!" Lacey said, but Herdsplitter was unswayed. Something about her bluntness reminded Lacey of what Longfang and Greynose had said about her blood being welcomed and being imminently mated. "Oh shit. Maybe I did. I wish I could check the transcript. How long to bear a litter?"

"You are one seventh of the way through this pregnancy," Herdsplitter informed her, then continued, "You are carrying five wolfborn pups sired by Herdsplitter Bloodwolf in Winter Marrow, including two males, two females, and one herm. Your chance of complications is low."

"You must be a master midwife," Lacey said, suddenly amused by this eruption of NPC weirdness that reminded her that it was after all just a game.

"Yes, pregnancies can be difficult for those of us with both sexes," Herdsplitter said, more naturally this time.

“How am I already a seventh of the way through my pregnancy if we only, uh, mated a short time ago.”

“The ways of the Gods are mysterious,” Herdsplitter said with a shrug, which made Lacey suspect it was some sort of mission special effect.

“Am I allowed to leave once I deliver the litter?” Lacey asked.

“Of course. You may stay or go, with our thanks for contributing to the tribe.”

“Huh. I wonder,” Lacey mused, patting the small but distinct bulge where her womb was. “I reckon if we’re already this far along I might be done by the morning. Maybe this isn’t so bad, really.”

“I hope you will consider staying, human. You would be well taken care of.”

Herdsplitter’s eyes were roving up and down Lacey’s body, and her resemblance to Arvina was making Lacey wonder if Arvina was similarly equipped. The thought triggered her pussy to start releasing her pheromones, leading to her getting a second look at Herdsplitter’s babymaker, and that led to a tiring but very pleasurable way to pass the time.

After a lot of vigorous fucking Lacey fell into a very satisfied sleep, and the completion of her accelerated pregnancy woke her up in the morning. It was, she assumed, far easier and quicker than any real pregnancy, but it did bring her down to single digit fatigue points, so she almost considered going back to sleep. However, the celebration amongst the tribe and the open talk of how soon she could get impregnated again convinced her that she needed to teleport home straightaway.

Before she left she felt compelled to acknowledge the various gifts they gave her and their offer to let her stay, which gave her time to notice that none of the other women had given birth that morning.

“Where are the others?” she asked Herdsplitter when she was able to get a moment of relative privacy away from the cheering wolfborn.

“You were the first to get pregnant. We will keep trying. We did not expect it to be so easy.”

Lacey frowned. “What if they don’t get pregnant?”

“We will keep trying.”

“Oh,” Lacey said, wondering if wolfborn and humans were even meant to be fertile together. After all, she had once bred with a dragon, of all things. Maybe the mysterious “General Fertility” subclass perk had made her able to reproduce with everything in the game. That seemed pretty broken.

But it would also mean that she and Arvina could have puppies together. That was a weird thought, but maybe Lacey was the only human in the whole game who could give her that. Maybe that was the whole point. Maybe Arvina did it on purpose?

Well, the NPC thing was probably a mistake, but the rest of it maybe, hopefully, was intentional. Maybe that was why Arvina was uncomfortable sometimes. Maybe she felt guilty for

making Lacey into her romantic fantasy. It would be so tragic if Arvina felt guilty for giving Lacey the greatest gift of her life.

That made her really want to get home, so she finished her goodbyes, promised to visit someday, and popped back to her own room.

While she washed up and cycled through potential outfits to wear to talk to Arvina she glanced through her character pages and most of them were back. The logout was still missing but she could set that aside for later; she didn't need to log out now.

She was excited but nervous. Maybe she was reading too much into this, but maybe she wasn't. She tried not to get her hopes up, but it was really hard.

In the end she decided on what she felt was her sexiest number: a peachy pink satin sheath dress that really hefted up her girls and showed every wobble of her buttocks. Her bigger than ever boobs and buttocks. Really, Arvina must have meant to shag that sexpot in the mirror. Lacey was getting hot and bothered just looking at herself bulging half out of her shimmery dress. She set her nails to match the colour and sheen of the fabric and chose little booties with gold accents to match her earrings, making her look about as classy as could reasonably be expected for someone who, let's face it, was going to look like an empty-headed bimbo no matter how she dressed. She considered casting a charm boost, but decided that was going a bit too far. Lacey wanted to present herself in the best, sexiest light, not to push Arvina into something she really wasn't ready for.

Feeling about as ready as she could be, Lacey brought up messages to reveal a recent flood.

-@Laceyyy where are you?-

-@Laceyyy what happened?-

-@Laceyyy are you okay?-

-@Laceyyy it says we finished the mission but we didn't do anything.-

Oh dear. She responded as quickly as she could

-@party Sorry everybody! There was some kind of glitch but I was able to get out of it.-

-@party I'm back in Rampart now-

As she feared, this had caused too much alarm to allow for a private conversation with Arvina just yet, so she changed back to her current adventuring preset and prepared to meet them at the Burning Sun.

Robust Game Design

Lacey got even more looks than usual while she waited a bit for a table, including from Danhei. Was he ogling her? He looked her up and down, but then just nodded and turned away to other tasks.

“What is it?” she approached him to ask.

“Your friends seemed really concerned. I guess it was nothing?”

“It’s wasn’t nothing, but it’s all taken care of now.”

“Oh good,” he said, but he seemed to have something else to say.

“Yeah?” she prompted him.

“I have a cousin, runs a club for the toffs who is looking for a singer. I thought maybe I’d suggest you talk to him, but I think he’s looking for someone in a different style.”

“Like what?”

“You know, more glamorous in the way nobles and such admire,” he explained.

It sounded like a mission was in the offing, but she needed to wear fancier clothes. Well, it would be a relief to have it confirmed that the game did in fact know she was a real player.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said, and flashed him a grin and a wink that made him blush.

It was really kind of flattering. While she didn’t fancy him, Danhei was reserved and respectful, not to mention very cute despite being built like a bricklayer. He’d make someone a very lucky girl.

If there was an update that allowed NPCs to date freely.

Alexandros’s arrival broke in on that somewhat melancholy train of thought. “Lace! Wow, have you had some work done?”

Lacey giggled. “Yeah, I guess so. Did you guys have to go far before the mission terminated?”

“Not me! I had to work late so I just got here. But Dark and Caper and Arvie were like halfway into the Eastern Wild. But it wasn’t a termination, Lace. We actually got credit for saving the princess or whatever. Except the princess saved herself?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Lacey said. “Were they trailing me through the forest? How did they know where I went?”

“I don’t think they did know exactly. They said they were going to find you then share a teleport point so I could join before the big fight.”

“I mean, how did they know that I even went anywhere?”

“Just from the alert message, I suspect they got it from your boyfriend,” Alexandros said, nodding toward Danhei.

“That makes sense. He would have seen me with Greynose and Longfang.”

“Who?”

“Oh, they were from the tribe that, uh,” Lacey stumbled over how to describe what had happened.

“Abducted you?”

“Kinda, yeah, but it’s complicated,” Lacey said before the others popped into being at the entrance.

“Is our princess in this castle?” Caper joked, the first to join them.

“Did you charm the chief of the tribe?” Dark asked, motioning for Danhei to deliver the default repast.

“As a matter of fact, I charmed his *wife*,” Lacey said in a smug tone that was slightly undercut by the uncertain glance she flicked toward Arvina.

“Figures,” Caper said. “So they just let you go, or?”

“A lady never tells,” Arvina said on Lacey’s behalf, and there was general laughter, and specific relief on Lacey’s part.

“So what mission alert did *you* get?” Dark asked.

Lacey once again regretted the presence of blushing in the game. “I didn’t actually see one. I just saw a couple wolfborn here and ended up chatting with them, then they used some kind of herb to put me in a fast-travel trance to take me to their village. Or something like that. It was pretty weird. I definitely think there was a glitch of some kind.”

“You should send support a message,” Caper said, making Lacey glad she was already blushing, because she didn’t know how to explain that there was no way she was going to contact support about something that might well get her banned.

“Glitches that get you a free mission completion aren’t the worst,” Alexandros said with a laugh and a shrug.

Arvina managed to redirect the conversation to past bugs in other games, and then they embarked on the adventure they’d originally planned for the day, so Lacey dodged giving a detailed account for the time. She was very aware that Arvina knew more was going on, but she was glad to put off that discussion.

Lacey’s primary role was to play enchanting songs and otherwise stay out of the way when adventures got violent, but, as was sometimes the case, there was quite a bit of jogging that evening. The increased weight and motion of her breasts and even her bum jogged right along with her, more dramatically than ever before despite her gear trying to keep everything in place. Not that it tried *that* hard to control the motion; she would take penalties to her charm attacks and such if her outfits were too rigorous about preventing her body from looking and moving enticingly. After bouncing along for quite half an hour or so, her boobs felt warm and slightly tight. Not unpleasantly so, but it was one more fascinating and somewhat confounding bit of verisimilitude from the game engine.

When it was over Caper and Alexandros went to try out the newly-introduced doubles raids and Dark went off solo because he wasn’t sure if he’d be called out of the game to address some work matters. Conveniently, or perhaps due to signals amongst themselves invisible to Lacey, that left Arvina and Lacey tête-à-tête.

“Yeah, that does sound like the mission manager AI assumed you were an NPC during the update maintenance and folded you into one of the expansion storyline missions. That might not

even be a bug, exactly. But not logging you out is weird. I think you should do it manually next time, just in case.”

“But I don’t have a... Oh, I guess the logout page is back. I promise it wasn’t there earlier.”

“I believe you. It was probably inaccessible because of the NPC mode.”

“Why would *anything* work in NPC mode? Why does it even exist in a way players can enter?”

“It *was* a dev tool, as far as I understand. I’m not sure they even still use it, so it might be unmaintained and full of weird bugs.” Arvina grimaced apologetically.

“That’s not your fault! You were just trying to help me. And you did! Also, nothing really *bad* has even happened yet.”

“What about the dragon?” Arvina asked.

“Oh, uh, well, that was, you know, awkward, but not *bad*,” Lacey admitted.

“Yeah?” Arvina asked.

“I can take loads,” Lacey said, motioning at her body intending to indicate that it was very flexible and resilient, but they were both struck by the phrasing and dissolved into laughter.

“That was evident,” Arvina recovered enough to say, “But are you saying its prick fit inside?”

“Yeah, at least partly. It felt weird to have this giant dragon dick in me, but the *size* wasn’t really a big issue. I mean, literally big, but not figuratively big. And evidently I’m built for literally big pricks.”

“Do they all feel the same? Oh my god that’s such an intrusive question and assumes things I shouldn’t assume. I’m so sorry,” Arvina said, but Lacey could tell Arvina still hoped for an answer.

“I don’t have much experience, actually. Just three, including the dragon. The other two were both wolfborn and so more normal sized.”

“So like,” Arvina said, then held her hands about 30cm apart.

“Yeah, something like that,” Lacey said before recognizing that Arvina was being facetious.

“What, really? That’s huge!” Arvina said with wide eyes and a smile Lacey couldn’t quite read. Was Arvina trying not to laugh at her?

“I don’t know! I don’t have much experience with what penises look like in real life, and I wasn’t exactly measuring them last night either.”

“Wait, *two* wolfborn?” Arvina asked suddenly, with her eyes wide.

“Yeah, the chief’s mate has one of her own.”

“Was that weird?” Arvina asked intently.

“I guess it was unusual, but not *that* unusual in, uh, erotic art and stuff,” Lacey said, hoping she wasn’t giving herself away too much.

“Oh, so it wasn’t the first time,” Arvina said, relaxing slightly.

“I meant that I was *aware* of the possibility before, not that I’ve ever,” Lacey started to object, but Arvina interrupted.

“Yeah, I know. That’s all I meant when I said it wasn’t your first time. But the weird part... The possibly weird part was... never mind, sorry. None of my business.”

Lacey was glad she wasn’t going to have to answer the question but she desperately wanted to know what Arvina had been intending to ask. But what was the other thing Lacey had meant to discuss? Or just anything else she could say to fill the awkward moment?

“Oh!” Lacey exclaimed with relief when she recalled her other question. “It also auto-applied my level bonuses. That’s why my boobs got bigger.”

“So you didn’t want them,” Arvina said, and Lacey was pretty sure she heard suppressed guilt in Arvina’s voice.

“No! Yes! I mean, bigger boobs are fine. Good. But the game just selecting my upgrades for me,”

“Is not great, yeah,” Arvina interrupted again.

If it had been anybody else, the interrupting might have irritated Lacey, but under the circumstances she really appreciated anytime Arvina reduced the pressure on Lacey to explain herself.

“Maybe I should contact support on your behalf and tell them what I did,” Arvina said. “I’ll make clear it was my fault.”

“No! It’s fine. Really. Maybe it won’t auto-allocate if I’m not in NPC mode or whatever.”

“Right! I had that thought earlier then forgot. Yeah, I bet you’re right.” Arvina let out a long sigh of relief. “Okay, let’s see how that goes. But if it auto-allocates next time, you have to tell me so I can try to do something about it, okay?”

“Okay,” Lacey said, hoping that she’d never have to do so.

After a pause, Arvina said, “You do look good.”

“Thanks! Because of you!” Lacey said, and was treated to the sight of *Arvina* blushing. Okay, maybe mandatory blushing had some benefits. “I love it. I look so good, Arvina.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Arvina said with uncomfortable earnestness.

Lacey leaned just a tiny bit forward, to give Arvina a hint that Lacey wouldn’t be opposed to a kiss, but without giving herself away. Arvina’s eyes glanced down at Lacey’s lips and it looked like it was finally going to happen, but then Rampart’s bells started ringing an alarm indicating the city was under attack.

“Shit, we should get back to our own world,” Arvina said.

They had seen a warning that a major world event was pending when they switched to World 6 for greater privacy, but they hadn’t thought it was quite so imminent. They didn’t want to participate in another world’s event because in past UltraCrafts that often meant being banned from participating in the same event in another world, to prevent players from using the

experience in one as practice for the next. They were meant to be surprises for everybody.

Fantasy UltraCraft was meant to be different because each world evolved in its own way and none of their world events would play out quite the same way, but Arvina and Lacey weren't willing to test whether that implied relaxed rules.

Sure enough, as soon as they returned to the Burning Sun of World 2, they were hailed by players who knew them.

"Lacey! Arvina!" an incongruously friendly ogre named Khurg The Smasher greeted them. "Oh wow," Khurg added when she noticed Lacey's latest increase in breast size. But, being a polite ogre, Khurg pretended she hadn't said anything or noticed Lacey drawing her cloak around her to disguise her chest and returned to her original topic, "I heard you already beat the damsel quest. We're struggling to even find the correct wolfborn village. Can you give any advice?"

Arvina shot Lacey a look to keep quiet and said, "We finished it without even making it to the village because Lacey was able to charm one of them."

"Oh, drat," Khurg said with a disappointed smile that showed some truly alarming ogre teeth. They made it look like her mouth was filled with chunks of granite. Lacey wondered if Khurg's player had chosen such an unattractive character because she was incredibly hot in realspace. If so, she felt sorry for the player. Being super hot in realspace came with real risks, but in game people could be insulting or irritating, but not *dangerous*.

"I wish we had our own Chanteuse. I don't think almost anyone has understood how OP a party can be with a Lacey-type there to charm key characters." Khurg gave Lacey a friendly smile to go with her compliment that confirmed Lacey's impression that Khurg was condescending to her. Not in any sort of mean way; she just thought Lacey was a lightweight who probably doubted her contribution.

Which, dammit, was true, wasn't it? Was it really condescension if it was true? Lacey was trying to sort this out when she noticed that Khurg had continued on to ask a question.

"Oh, I don't really know," Lacey agreed with Arvina, but the look on Khurg's face made Lacey think that she'd been mistaken in her assumption that she'd been asked the same question about the location of the village. "Wait, I think I misunderstood your question."

"Well, that's a good thing," Khurg said, smoothing over an awkward moment, "I shouldn't have asked. The mission is probably more fun without knowing too much anyway."

"That's good. Trying to 'win' UltraCraft has always been a way to drain the fun, but that's like fifty times more true in Fantasy UltraCraft," Arvina opined.

"Ha! So true," Khurg said. "My party's waiting, so I should go. Thanks!"

"But the arena fight was how we met," Lacey protested to Arvina once it was just the two of them again. She quite sure what she even meant by that, but Lacey didn't even want to think about what might have happened if she hadn't met Arvina.

"I didn't mean those special PVP events," Arvina responded, "Obviously there's no point in

those without trying to win. But honestly, I think the main reason PVP events eventually become the main focus of games is because you eventually run out of story and the world gets kind of boring. But the whole point of UltraCraft since their very first game was that the story would keep evolving for as long as the world existed.”

“Well, it was still basically all PVP events after a while, just invented by player alliances rather than by UltraCraft,” Lacey pointed out to bring Arvina’s vision down to earth. “Which in my opinion is not an improvement. Player politics, backstabbing, and pay-to-retaliate.”

“Well, yeah, they never quite delivered,” Arvina conceded. “But one reason I was willing to get so deep into it all was because they kept trying. Like really trying. And I think they did it this time.”

“It’s awfully early to say that, don’t you think? We’ve barely even seen any story yet,” Lacey said, “And what we *have* seen has been uh, pretty weird sometimes.”

“That’s actually why I think they’ve done it this time. Well, it’s a kind of a mess, yeah. The mission managers definitely need more training or something. But here’s the thing: the weirdness is what makes me think that they really have let the game world play out according to its own logic rather than having an army of employees do it.”

Lacey had meant ‘weird’ in the sense of the extremely lewd content intruding into the regular game, but she was willing to go along with Arvina’s point at least as far as disputing it. “Isn’t that bad, though? Like, weren’t you talking about AIs taking on much of the lower level object design work that UltraCraft used to pay you for?”

Arvina tilted her head to acknowledge the point, but was undaunted. “Yes and no. It definitely makes it harder to make a living as...” Arvina stopped and shook her head. “But that’s a whole different topic, kinda. What I’m saying is that if they need loads of employees to keep the world interesting, then it’s very expensive to keep the world interesting, and they’ll eventually decide that the world story has done its job of pulling players in. They’ll steadily cut the story designer staff and switch their focus to cheaper PVP stuff to milk players who are already deeply invested in their characters and relationships with each other, even if they no longer care about the world except in a nostalgic way.”

Lacey was impressed with this way of looking at things. “So you’re saying that if they find a way to make the game keep the world story going on its own then it never gets killed by cost-cutting.”

Arvina nodded. “I mean, probably there’s no way to completely eliminate story planners and designers. Is there? I’d have to think more about that. Because the mission implementation AI has been trained on humans doing the same job, and I’m kind of wondering if they can move it up the chain a bit. Not all the way, but enough.”

“That doesn’t reassure me,” Lacey said.

“Because it takes away more jobs?” Arvina asked.

“That too, but also won’t it just make everything more generic? Like the random ‘campaigns’ in Thousand Suns that start feeling pretty much the same by the third or fourth?”

“The missing ingredient is the players. Or like, the way to make it work and also keep evolving is to have stories that aren’t just player politics, but are still driven by players. By players interacting with the world. Then the same thing never happens more than once.”

Lacey thought about the bells in World 6 and wondered what was going on there. How much of it was planned by humans at UltraCraft and how much of it was just World 6 players and the various game AIs? She recalled Herdsplitter suddenly telling her about her pregnancy stats and chuckled.

“Too grandiose?” Arvina asked ruefully.

“No, I was just remembering a moment when it was really obvious that hand-tweaked stuff was right underneath the AI ‘natural’ content. But that’s not to say they can’t do it, just that they have a *long* way to go.”

Arvina laughed and nodded. “Fair. I think it will probably take them years to get anywhere that advanced.”

“Would they give up first if it’s going to take that long?” Lacey asked.

“But Lacey,” Arvina said, “Think of how difficult it would be to leave if the story really felt real and kept going indefinitely? Yeah, it might be a big challenge, but the amount of money on the table is maybe bigger than for any other game in history. And the first to get it right has a huge advantage because most people only have time for one deep game. And even if they try out another game, once you’ve started to really care about a Fantasy world then anything new is probably going to see pretty shallow by comparison.”

“Wow. I don’t know if that’s really true, but if it is, that’s almost scary. That would give UltraCraft so much power. Do you trust them that much?”

Arvina grimaced. “Ouch. That is way too good of a point. But I was just saying *why* I think they’ll try hard.”

“So, is it good thing if they succeed?” Lacey asked.

“I hope so?”

Very Speciale

Lacey woke to two unwelcome surprises the next morning.

First, her overnight idle job had been cancelled. The reduction in earnings wasn’t a huge deal because she had enough savings to still devote her daily maximum to tavern shares, but she was a bit miffed that she would have to wait another day to see how much her newly enlarged assets increased her entertainment earnings.

Second, some of her enlarged assets had enlarged even more overnight. Specifically, her breasts were now tightly firm, round, and heavy. She could tell straightaway that this was something different. Further inspection showed that her nipples had enlarged and looked ambiguously damp right in the centre.

In fact, there were liquid stains on her outfit from yesterday and on her bed this morning. She'd been leaking something.

Milk.

"Really? Fucking really!?" she asked the absent game makers who had decided that it was important that she begin lactating after giving birth.

There it was on her pregnancy stats page, complete with maths determining how much milk she was making, how much she could store and so on. Had they had a design review for the rule saying that each additional child in a pregnancy increased lactation rate by 80% of the previous, or that each consecutive day of 'milking out' would increase the rate by 5%, up to double the base rate, and each day without 'milking' below 50% capacity would decrease it by 5%? If so, why did they call it 'milking' rather than 'nursing'? Who though *that* was a good idea?

She investigated further into the explanatory text more for morbid curiosity than anything else, and various traces of verbiage more appropriate to animal husbandry than player character development gave her a sneaking suspicion that she was not, in fact, viewing something planned by a human. Or at least, the original pattern for this interface came from the game's fairly robust agricultural and economic models, and an AI had, with or without human direction, created its own adaptation for characters who gave birth. Personally giving birth was currently not available to player characters in the regular game, but lucky Lacey had managed to do so before the feature was ready.

"Fuck me," Lacey groaned at yet another mortifying consequence of her own actions. Mostly just the one action, really.

But even so she couldn't really regret it. As embarrassing as this was, it wasn't the same as starving, or being declared indigent by the state. It might not even be noticeable to anybody else if she was careful. All she had to do was wait 20 days and it would be gone.

Or so she thought. She discovered right at the start of her first waitressing shift at the tavern that her milk was leaking out and making damp spots on her clothes. Or rather, the customers discovered it, and commented on it when giving her tips or not, depending on whether they approved or not.

"Danhei, do you have a different job for me in the back?" Lacey asked, holding out hope that the last shift's customers had all been NPCs.

He paused for a moment, as if thinking, then said, "We need some milk, so you could milk our cow."

Lacey had tensed up at the mention of milk, then relaxed when he mentioned a cow. "You

have a cow! Okay yeah, I'll take that."

Like the initial saucy waitressing job, this one offered a meaningful number of UltraGems; 20 in this case. That sort of explained why the mission demanded she get in the milkmaid outfit to do the deed, though the fact that the milkmaid outfit was basically a "sexy French maid" Halloween costume in cow-print fabric was a sign that this mission had been generated by a somewhat confused AI. 20 gems was 20 gems, though, and the only one who was going to see it was a virtual cow, so she put it on and even added the silly cowbell collar before heading into the designated stall.

But there was no virtual cow in the stall, or anybody apart from Lacey herself. On the other side of a low, wide railing, in the breezeway of a larger barn stood a solidly-built young woman who looked like someone who really might work on a farm.

"Oh, there you are. Come here," she instructed Lacey, "Closer. Lean against the rail and look down there."

Lacey was worried she would see more people in the barn, but when she leaned over to look around, she only saw a few cows in other stalls. Being so low, Lacey would have thought that they could just jump out if they wanted to, until she noticed that chains from their necks to the floor prevented them from jumping.

"Good," the farmhand said, and pulled Lacey further forward until her weight was all on the railing and her feet just slightly off the ground, then clipped a chain to Lacey's collar.

"Wait, what are you doing?" Lacey tried to say, but an alert mentioned that her INT was currently too low for her to speak Common and the farmhand acted like she hadn't said anything intelligible. When the farmhand spoke, it sounded like a completely unfamiliar language.

At that point, it didn't really surprise Lacey when the farmhand moved aside the portion of Lacey's costume that covered her nipples and began to milk her just like any other cow. It did surprise her how good it felt. In almost no time at all, any remaining self-consciousness gave way to the soothing euphoria of the farmhand's expert hands massaging jets of milk out of her teats.

Just a few minutes later Lacey's opinion had shifted so much that she was disappointed that it was over so quickly. She was pretty sure the farmhand was an NPC so it wasn't *that* much different from being witnessed only by cows, was it? It would take five more more days to complete the 'milk maid' mission and if she extended it to ten days she could also accomplish the 'increase productivity by 50% for player-owned dairy livestock' dairy farming mission. It was both pleasant and profitable that the game counted herself as a dairy animal that she owned.

Another benefit was that she didn't feel so tight and heavy, and they stopped leaking on her clothes for the rest of the day, so lactating really didn't do anything noticeable to anybody else except make her boobs a little bigger over time due to the increase in her milk storage capacity. And in trade, she had a very nice little morning ritual that nobody saw and which would net her a

tidy amount of gold even after there were no more UltraGem missions to complete that way.

She was twenty gems richer and still considering whether to stop after collecting the next ten when she recalled Danhei's cousin.

"You mentioned you have a cousin who owns a club for rich nobility and was looking for a glamorous entertainer?"

Danhei brightened up even more than usual. "Yeah! He don't *own* the place," Danhei seemed unable to resist laughing and shaking his head at Lacey's naiveté, "But he is indeed lookin' for an entertainer, and I think you might be just the sort of fancy piece he's been lookin' for."

Lacey wondered if Danhei, or anyone else involved in the creation of the mission, knew that 'fancy piece' was Regency period slang for a courtesan kept by a British aristocrat. An accident bubbling up from the depths of an inscrutable AI's 'knowledge' of English?

"Lacey?" Danhei intruded on her thoughts.

"Oh! Uh, yeah. Where would I find him? Your cousin."

"Knock on the back door of the Charmeuse Club in Tyrian Alley," he said slowly, because he'd just told her this while she hadn't been attending so clearly she was having trouble understanding. "It's just a bit north of Opalwood Square. The bouncer won't let you in at night, but it's just my cousin in the afternoon and he can see if you fit the part then."

"Thank you Danhei!" she said, hiding her chagrin. That's what she got for not paying attention when someone was speaking to her, even if it was just an NPC.

Happily, Lacey's concern that perhaps the interview would turn out to be a 'casting couch' situation proved unfounded. Danhei's dapper cousin Falston Carder proved to be everything that was proper, combining Danhei's respectfulness with a much greater level of learning and style, though not nearly so much brawn.

"You can prepare for your performance in here," he told her, showing her to a small private room with a wash basin and mirror on one side facing a deep-cushioned sofa upholstered in the club's namesake satin on the other, plus a small wardrobe crowded into the very end. "You may spend the night here after a performance if desired, but do remember to leave the staff an appropriate gratuity." He stopped himself. "By 'gratuity' I mean a tip. Two of the larger gold coins left on the table there should be quite adequate. They should be enough, I mean."

She was glad he was an NPC, because he'd witnessed her nonplussed reaction that the contract he'd had her sign had proven to be in some other language created for this game. Evidently the game had decided that her character's low intelligence and indifferent education meant she wouldn't understand the high language on the contract and so had not given her the English version in the same way that she didn't get the English spoken language whilst the cow collar was dumbing her down during milking. It was a fascinating way to represent intellectual deficits organically in the game, but now it had inspired her to try to learn this in-game language. Assuming it was real enough to learn.

In the meantime, though, she'd given Mr Falston several causes to conclude that she was as dumb as she looked, so she didn't blame him for explaining the 'hard' words for her and not assuming she understood coinage. Though, it was interesting that the NPC's AI brain reacted to signs of her stupidity so much like a normal human. Though, perhaps it was trained on what normal humans did when interacting with someone very dense.

"Miss, should I expect you this evening?" he repeated his question.

"Oh, yeah. Who did you say would be here?"

"I am not apprised of... I don't know who specifically will be there until they walk through the door, but usually there are at least a half dozen... Uh, this many members of the noble houses present throughout the night."

Lacey just barely managed not to burst into laughter as he held up six fingers to illustrate how many were a half dozen. "And you regard it as a successful evening if at least four of them are entertained well enough to leave at least six hundred gold in tips."

"Yes, exactly. You will have the most opportunity to reach that target if you arrive promptly as we begin serving drinks at the start of the evening, but if you are very confident of your skills you could also only perform for the two hours just before midnight."

Definitely in the first night Lacey would arrive right at the start, but if it turned out that she was be able to complete the mission much faster, so much the better. The initial reward for the mission was merely the right to return to sing any evening she wanted, but the opportunity to increase her relationships with nobles and such would surely lead to follow-on solo quests that would be the real payoff. The ever-changing and adapting nature of Fantasy UltraCraft meant that the walkthroughs people tried to write were almost useless beyond being a general guide to the kinds of things that people had encountered, but she'd seen enough by then to almost know there would be more around this corner.

She had just enough time to join Caper for a doubles raid before heading back to the club. The alarmingly rough-looking orc bouncer at the back door examined the voucher Mr Falston had given her before letting her in, physically barring the way until that moment as if he expected her to dash inside. Another entertainer was already present: a cut and incredibly handsome fellow who looked to be some sort of gymnast.

"Oh, you're going to *kill* out there," he told her.

"I hope so? Do you go on after me, before me? Am I your opener or something?" Lacey asked.

He laughed. "I doubt it. I'm sure it's the same mission, but we're probably playing to different crowds on different levels. I hope; I don't think you're a good fit for my audience, and vice-versa."

"Ooooh. I see," Lacey said.

"I'm Mike," he said, extending a hand.

“Lacey,” she responded with her own name. “How many of us do this mission?”

“Until today it was just me,” he said with a shrug. “I assume you play ero-on?”

“Yeah,” Lacey said apprehensively, wondering where he was going with that.

“Just to give you a hint I learned the hard way, if you get a noble to buy private time with you, any tip they give you in in the room is just for you, which means it doesn’t count toward mission completion. You have to be a good performer or do some pretty raunchy stuff right out there on the floor if you want to succeed. Oh, and you can go back to serving drinks after the show to get some more tips if you’re close but not quite there. The tips are a little better because they start to get kind of drunk, but also they get a little sloppy and annoying, so I prefer to leave after my show.”

“Thanks!” Lacey said, deeply appreciating the advice. “I hope you don’t mind if I ask what your show is, but I’m terribly curious.”

“It’s kind of a dancey routine, though the game uses the Circus Gymnast skill. I don’t know if it matters in-game, but I actually worked on it loads. The one I do here is a bit more suggestive than I’d want to do in public, but I kind of hope there’ll be some chance to show off a safe-for-work version to real people sometime, after I’ve finished perfecting it.”

“Oh wow, that’s so cool. I love how people create real art in the game,” she gushed.

He gave her a gratified smile. “Yeah, it’s really amazing, especially for me because I did gymnastics in realspace until I got hit hard by the lizard flu as a teenager.”

“That must have been so awful! But I’m so glad to think that your gymnastics career is back!”

“It’s not a real career in here,” Mike said with unhappy self-consciousness. “Like I said, the work I do here might not even matter to the game.”

“But it might,” Lacey objected, “And besides, think of how many people spend more time here than in realspace. If you craft something for them here then you’re meeting people and entertaining people where they are. That’s real.”

“Well, I spend most of my time here for obvious reasons, but other people have real lives.”

“This is real life. Just a different setting,” Lacey asserted confidently.

“Damn, you’re a lot smarter than you look,” he said, before clapping his hand over his mouth in horror. “I didn’t mean it in a bad way!”

Lacey just laughed. “I know how I look, sweetie. Thanks for your advice.”

“Thanks for yours!” he responded, and they parted on the best of terms.

The actual mission proved to be *very* difficult. Doubtless Mike’s intelligence stat was far higher than Lacey’s and so got plenty of hints or explanation from the game as to what the various fancy people were requesting from her. Lacey was completely at sea and was almost entirely unable to decipher their drink or snack orders, exasperating even the ones who seemed most inclined to grant her the most leeway.

Her performance did go much better at first, until she discovered that she hadn't learned enough music to fill the allotted time, and she wasn't allowed to repeat songs or sing charm spells, or anything of that nature. Eight songs had seemed more than enough to cycle through at the brothel with punters passing at most twenty minutes of time in the lounge, but even with a little bit of silly banter between songs she found herself at the forty minute mark with nothing left that her character knew how to play.

She had, at times, tried out playing and singing the sorts of songs her realspace self tended to sing in the shower, to see if her character's skills would help her through, and some of those experiments had seemed quite successful, performed alone in her bedroom with no one watching. It was quite another thing to do it in front of an audience of nobles, guild chiefs, and other elites. All NPCs, she tried to tell herself, but they certainly *looked* like a real audience, and she was very afraid they would act like one if she flubbed too badly.

The balance of her set comprised twenty of the most agonizing minutes of her life, as her playing and singing got worse and worse while the audience watched in bafflement or even disgust. Some seemed to at least derive some amusement from the flaming wreck of her performance, but overall she thought she had completely obliterated any chances of beating the mission.

But, the difference between NPCs and real audiences came partway to the rescue this time, because the tips from first two thirds of her set were already counted while it was still in progress, so her subsequent disaster didn't subtract from that. The mandolin My Chemical Romance cover that she chose as her first non-character song even got a few tips as well, before the rest of her attempts netted her a perfect zero.

"That was certainly... remarkable," Mr Falston told her afterward. "But I'm afraid they were not ready for such avant garde works. Hopefully you can entertain them more in person before closing time."

She looked at him blankly, wondering if he really thought she could earn almost two hundred gold in tips on drinks.

"Pardon me, that was just a silly little joke. But I do encourage you to try to make up the remaining amount by continuing to socialize with the club members and help them with any refreshments they may desire."

"I'll do my best," Lacey said, feeling guilty about letting Mr Falston down, even though he wasn't really even a real person. But he felt awfully real, and she felt like she really had disappointed him, even embarrassed him in front of his employers. Well, it wouldn't be the worst job she'd ever had.

But, it was pretty bad. The members joked about her to her face, clearly assuming she was too stupid to understand their mockery, and her persistent smile appeared to confirm their assumptions. They did eventually get bored of this, but because she was still struggling to

understand their requests, she wasn't earning many more tips, either.

She was on the point of just giving up and leaving the lost cause of a mission. When a statuesque and extremely cutting woman looked at Lacey's bust and said, "You appear to be leaking, girl."

Lacey's eyes widened. It was after midnight! The morning milking's protection from leaks only lasted for the rest of the day, and with the advent of a new day, her milk tanks resumed overflowing in slow motion.

While Lacey stood stunned, the woman shrugged and said, "Perhaps it's convenient. Why don't you bring me an espresso? Let's make it a double shot, but put in in a cortado cup."

Given something to do that she knew how to do and which also took her away from eyes staring at the milk blotches developing on her dress, Lacey seized on it, and rushed to comply. The game did not, of course, explain espresso or cortados to her, but she had really worked as a barista and she could, in fact, fulfill the request without the game's help.

But eventually she had to go back, so she still had to present her increasingly-large wet spots along with the tiny coffee.

"I've decided I'd like my espresso with heavy cream," the woman told her haughtily.

"I can go," Lacey said, and started to turn.

"No! This will do," the lady said, and reached into Lacey's dress to grab one of her nipples. Lacey made an incoherent sound of surprise, and surprised pleasure, before the woman gave a little tug to express some of Lacey's thick milk into her espresso. "Maybe just a bit more," she said, and pulled another thick jet of white from Lacey's nipple into her espresso cup. With Lacey's nipple still gripped in her fingers, the woman took a trial sip.

"Perfection."

Lacey gasped when her nipple was released, and it took her a moment to comprehend what had just happened.

"I say! That looked like a smashing idea. Perhaps we could have some as well?" another member asked, with his friend nodding vigorously as he stared at Lacey's semi-exposed chest.

Lacey was tempted to tell them off, except that she also just noticed that the woman had tipped 25 gold. If these blokes each tipped the same amount, she'd be just shy of five hundred gold toward mission completion. Also, it didn't appear to have cost her any reputation like having sex in public would. And they *were* just NPCs, so...

By the time she was able to find an opportunity to make her excuses and escape from the mob of fashionable latte drinkers, Lacey had earned the club over a thousand gold in tips. Not because the aristocrats initially present all drank four or five cups each, but because rumours of "Lady Asterine's Espresso Speciale" spread somehow, and it seemed like half of the fashionables of Opalwood Square had come to see, and often taste, for themselves. A few tried following Lady Asterine's example of inventing their own coffee drink, but none of those took the fancy of

the Fancy like the Espresso Speciale.

Niche

Mr Falston didn't treat her as anything other than a very successful entertainer whom he'd very much like to return to play future evenings. Being the very soul of taste and discretion, however, he did insist that any future provision of Espresso Speciales to occur only within the less public rooms that club members seeking greater privacy could bespeak. Lacey was quite happy with this stricture, as it meant she might still be able to use her Speciale way to complete the mission without risking it becoming known to other players. It seemed like it might be a more profitable version of her similarly private morning routine in the milking barn, so she did accept Mr Falston's invitation to return on another night. Her musical performance was still quite bad, but no other players were around to see that, either, so she felt like it would be a harmless secret.

She'd just begun to settle into this routine when a further development called the harmlessness of the secret into question. The dairy farmer who met her each morning presented Lacey with a mission option while she was being milked, resulting in a mission dialog interface that was in that inscrutable writing. She studied it for a while and was unable to make out anything other than the accept and cancel options, which she really only guessed according to their spatial positioning. At that moment she was feeling confident and relaxed, so she accepted this unknown mission under the idea that it might not be offered again, and she should be able to find a way to decipher what it meant. There were probably translators somewhere.

Lacey took a crack at it on her own just to pass the time, contemplating the figures that presumably meant "accept" and "decline" in the common language of the world.

Being mounted by a ganbull, a wild cousin of minotaurs, definitely distracted her from that scholarly pursuit. It was far from the most romantic coupling, but it did the job. Maybe it was the encouraging sounds and appreciating expression the farmhand gave her, or maybe the milking had just put her in the right frame of mind for being mounted like a cow, but she was already spasming around the cock when it bottomed out in her and began to fill her with ganbull seed. It also did its other job of making her pregnant with its offspring.

Pregnancy accelerator potions weren't cheap, but they only cost gold, and according to the translation she made of the mission text, she would be paid a number of UltraGems equal to the offspring rarity tier upon completion. If she could repeat the mission, it might be a way to effectively turn gold into gems at a very attractive rate. And ganbolls weren't a playable race and didn't even have language, as far as she knew, so she wasn't really any worse off than before. Besides, it had honestly added a nice element of release to the morning milking that she really

appreciated.

A downside she only recognized just before she had to experience it was the need, the morning after taking the potion, to walk through the Burning Sun looking full-term pregnant in order to get to the area that connected to the barn. She managed to do it that time without bumping into anyone who knew her, but maybe she should try to increase her sneak skill or buy some invisibility potions before she accepted another one of these. Once in the barn, though, she was relieved to find the farmhand there ready to take her through the delivery process, and by the time she left, she was basically back to normal except for a lingering memory of a ridiculously, extremely unrealistically cute little baby already swaddled and angelic, and really only identifiably a minotaur because of some tiny bumps on its head. She'd almost wanted to take it with her, so it was fortunate that the game didn't give her the option.

One memento she did keep was the iteration of her pregnancy count, with its impact on her lactation rate, storage capacity, and, most palpably, the increase in her breast size. And weight. It was sort of strange the way the game physics of it worked, because she could definitely feel the extra mass, yet somehow her body automatically compensated and she didn't feel inclined to slouch, or otherwise bow to the increased force. Not that it was a dramatic surge, of course; it was just a few percentage points of increase, mostly noticeable only as a moderate amount of extra heft. It was simply interesting to notice the shift her centre of gravity without a corresponding sense of being weighed down.

The additional milk wasn't really necessary in order for her to serve enough Espresso Speciales to all the club members privileged to request one of her, but it did prolong the experience when Lady Asterine ignored the rule that no one was allowed to touch Lacey so that she could demonstrate that Lacey was so full of milk that she must have cow in her family tree.

"Does she really? Like a minotaur?" One of Lady Asterine's two younger guests inquired as she watched Lacey's milk squirt into a bowl of ice cream dessert.

"No, my dear. It was a figure of speech. Though, I can't say I'm sure there's no truth to it. She does seem very cowlike, does she not?" Lady Asterine said with amused speculation as she continued to manipulate Lacey's nipples in a fashion that was more genteel and sensual but far less efficient than when the farmhand did it.

"This is so delicious, Lady Asterine! You must try it!" the more ebullient of her guests insisted, positioning a dessert spoon toward her benefactor.

"No thank you dear. At my age I have to manage my diet rather more stringently. But this will only do good things for *your* figures, I assure you."

Lacey somewhat absently wondered what was going on with this conversation amongst NPCs. Was it intended to set up a future world story mission? It seemed rather obscure how it would do that. Alternatively, was the game allocating the really large AIs that Arvina had mentioned to more and more NPCs, then just letting the NPCs do whatever they wanted? Arvina

had said that tests of this approach had gone badly because they struggled to create AIs that were both sufficiently varied and stable. Perhaps they had made progress?

Or perhaps this was another example of that going badly; Lady Asterine didn't seem deranged, *per se*, but she was oddly one-note in a way real people almost never were. Like an evil stepmother in a movie for children. Not that she'd done anything more evil than help herself to Lacey's nipples, which came across more like mildly imperious treatment of a servant than the shocking sexual assault it would be in realspace.

In subsequent weeks, Lacey had a handful of additional opportunities to observe the ongoing development of Lady Asterine and her guests. The lady herself didn't change in any meaningful respect apart from the company she brought with her, but her young guests developed physically and behaviorally, according to a programme that appeared intentional and perhaps even acknowledged on Lady Asterine's part, based on the feedback Lacey overheard while serving them.

"Now Miss Prentice, I think you've had enough, don't you? I expect my companions to have their wits about them, not to become cow-brained strumpets. Charmeuse Club keeps us quite adequately supplied," Lady Asterine told one of her guests who tried to get more of Lacey's milk in her affogato.

"But what about you, Lady Asterine? Aren't you concerned?" Miss Prentice objected, pointing to Lady Asterine's Espresso Speciale.

"Not at all; it is a different recipe," the lady responded confidently. Lacey peered at the lady's chest and couldn't decide if it had grown, but it was plain that her ice-cream consuming guests had developed significantly greater curves while also becoming notably less inclined to excited outbursts and nervous chatter. Relative to her guests, Lady Asterine had certainly remained unchanged, but Lacey thought perhaps the lady's gown did show a bit more fullness through the bustline.

Lacey had resisted the conclusion that her milk had curve-enhancing effects in at least some forms, but she didn't really think it was deniable any more. That left her with the mystery of why this was even a thing in the game. Yes, the *ero* layer was hugely significant to the game's success, but if the designers had intended to implement these sorts of character-editing mechanics, shouldn't they appear more places than in a private room without any actual players present? Apart from Lacey, of course.

After habituating to this strange little niche dynamic, though, it faded into the rest of the occasional oddities of Fantasy UltraCraft's partly auto-generated world and Lacey mostly stopped thinking about it. It wasn't stranger than being mated by the ganbull from time to time, or the quiescent clutch of dragon eggs that had come out of her own body.

Or, for that matter, the fact that she was the only player who seemed to be able to safely come and go in tribal lands of Clan Bloodwolf, which was a small but odd departure from the

developing world story in which the wolfborn of the Eastern Wild were conducting ever more raids on villages in the forests near Rampart and Tearer of Threats had become infamously aggressive toward human-ruled settlements in general. Lacey was sparing in her use of this special privilege because she got the idea that if either Tearer of Throats or Herdsplitter were present then Lacey would be expected to mate with them again, but so far that hadn't been tested.

Even so, it had been extremely useful to the party on multiple occasions, enough so that Dark wasn't entirely joking when he referred to Lacey as their MVP even though she was still lagging behind in combat usefulness. It helped that even he was slowly shedding his preoccupation with maximizing his character stats and getting more into the world story. Even though it didn't confer stat boosts or enchantments, Dark had been perceptibly chuffed to be awarded a minor knighthood for having rescued the heir to the March of Rampart after his punitive expedition against the tribal wolfborn had ended in ambush and disaster. And it had been Lacey's contact with the wolfborn that had provided them with the clues to where the heir was being held, so Dark had not been shy about giving her credit and thanks.

That was before Caper and Lacey discovered another unexpected ability while on a doubles raid. Their usual technique was for Caper to use her highly mobile automatons to distract enemies in multiple directions while Lacey used her party boosting skills to slow their stamina loss. Occasionally Lacey would also try to charm a big boss if they seemed susceptible, though that was only useful if most of the threat came from that single enemy. Lacey's attempt to charm the pit beast they were fighting had partly worked in that it became visibly aroused and focused on her, but she decided that she wasn't going to test whether his cock, which appeared to be made of molten lava, would burn her to death instantly. Caper's automatons also only dealt a small percentage of their usual damage because they dealt primarily heat and shock damage to which the beast was immune. Fortunately he was slow enough that they could easily keep out of his range once Caper had destroyed the pit beast's gaseous minions, so it seemed like they would eventually take it down as long as they were patient and careful.

What they didn't notice was that the pit beast's aura was slowly draining their mana. One of Lacey's songs steadily restored their mana, but the net effect was mostly cancelled out. This was a problem because another of her songs steadily restored their physical stamina as they constantly jogged to keep ahead of the beast, so Lacey could either keep their mana from emptying or keep them ahead of the beast, but not both. They had been able to damage it a little by squirting some of their water on it, but then decided it was better used to restore as much stamina as possible, until they had exhausted the small supply they'd brought into the bubble. The beast was down to about a third of its starting health, but it didn't look like they would be able to do more than another few percent damage before it caught and killed them.

"Fuuuuck!" Caper complained, "We got so close! And the drops from pit beasts are meant to be hella good."

The mention of ‘drops’ gave Lacey an idea. “Maybe there’s one more untapped resource,” she said, shifting around her top to free a milk-filled boob. She wasn’t immediately sure if her milk would even come in the ‘battle bubble’ layer where doubles raids took place, but a test tug produced the familiar white jet.

“What?! You’re...okay, okay, let’s get a bit further ahead,” Caper said, because this wasn’t the time or place to interrogate Lacey regarding why she was lactating.

Lacey had been taken a little off guard by the strong sensation the nipple squeeze had created in her own body, but she had no trouble following directions. It also surprised her a bit that Caper could even see the milk; when had Caper begun playing with the ero layer enabled?

“Okay, I think we’re far enough ahead,” Caper huffed, kneeling on a fallen tree, presumably to get a better angle for milking Lacey into a bowl or whatever they could use to throw the liquid at the pit beast.

Lacey got her other tit out while craning her neck to see how close the beast was getting, but Caper didn’t grab her nipples as she expected. Instead, Caper grabbed Lacey’s right boob n both hands, then sucked her nipple directly into her mouth.

“Ooooooh!” Lacey objected, but it didn’t *sound* like an objection, and she didn’t do anything to pull away.

“Wow! This is so good!” Caper said excitedly.

“Ummmm,” Lacey commented as Caper tried the other nipple.

“It’s working great, just make sure it doesn’t get too close.”

“Nghnnng,” Lacey agreed, hoping that Caper wouldn’t notice the other kind of liquid escaping between her legs. Caper could hardly miss the sweet pheromone scent, but maybe she wouldn’t know where it was coming from.

“Hnng!” Lacey whimpered when Caper switched back to the first nipple.

“Alright, I’m up to 50%, let’s go,” Caper told her, and dragged Lacey along as they ran to open up the distance again.

It took three more stops, but they did triumph in the end.

“I hope that wasn’t too weird for you,” Caper said with shy apology afterward. “You seemed really startled when I grabbed you like that.”

“Well, kinda. My idea was actually a lot dumber than yours. I thought you would just get some milk and throw it at the beast, like we did with the water. I didn’t even know you could restore mana and stamina that way.”

“Oh my god,” Caper said, appalled at the misunderstanding. “So I just...”

“Had a really great idea that saved the mission?” Lacey interrupted. “And now I could maybe do this for the whole party.”

Caper raised her eyebrows.

“I didn’t mean everyone drinking from the tap. I mean I could keep a couple flasks of it on

me. Or if it has to be freshly expressed, then maybe I can get some magical equivalent of a portable breast pump. I mean, can you imagine poor Alexandros?”

Caper laughed. “I’m not sure we should even tell him where it comes from.”

“Going to be pretty hard to hide if I have to pump fresh,” Lacey said, but agreed that maybe they should be a little cagey on the exact source when talking to the boys.

It wasn’t until after they parted that Lacey realized that she’d forgotten to mention the possibility that the milk would cause changes. After considering it further, though, she decided that it probably wouldn’t do anything more than act as a restorative without being combined into a recipe. Otherwise the milk being taken from her in the barn would be expanding busts all over.

Sure enough, Caper didn’t mention any growth later, and so the party was clear to use one more of Lacey’s odd little abilities. Awkwardly, though, it did turn out that it had to be fresh, and there was nothing in game that could operate like a breast pump, so they had to plan on milking her into a bucket or funnel Lacey could be milked into.

Though Caper didn’t bother, because she didn’t mind nursing straight from the source, and she thought it didn’t bother Lacey either. Lacey did her best to maintain that illusion, but those rare occasions when Caper made use of her special ability got her *quite* bothered.

It was just too bad it wasn’t Arvina.

Midgame

Reset

When the official item exchange opened it didn't immediately support sales for real money, but after a few more months that feature finally arrived to solve Lacey's money woes. She'd long since discarded her original plan to sell out and start a new character with part of the proceeds. It wasn't that she no longer found her character embarrassing, though it was true that she had more or less gotten used to her strange, silly, overtly sexual character. What kept her playing that character was the fact that it was making her a very respectable amount of real money, and it would take a vast amount of time to get back to the same level, even if she rolled some of her money back into funding the basic tier of paid play. Better to continue on as she was for a while, quickly building up her savings.

At least, that was the reason she gave herself whenever she tried to steel herself to break things off with Arvina and the party. Lacey wasn't in Arvina's league, or in the party's league, and they would be better off without her even if they missed her like she would miss them. But she should just set aside a little more money, and a little more.

When she finally got herself embroiled in the Bloodwolf clan again, she almost welcomed it as a sort of coda to her run with her character. Being bred by Herdsplitter again was as close as she was going to get to making love to Arvina. Lacey reckoned it would be goodbye sex by proxy.

She would have been more impressed with the growth of the formerly modest wolfborn village if she hadn't been so preoccupied with her impending departure. Also, she didn't really want to know, or it might tempt her to wait to find out what it meant. Lacey's future character wouldn't be back to World 2.

"You seem very melancholy," Herdsplitter told her afterward.

"It's because I have to go away for a long time," Lacey admitted to the NPC who looked so much like Arvina.

"When?"

"Very soon," Lacey said.

"You should wait until after we sack the human city," Herdsplitter advised.

"Sack what human city?" Lacey asked, her attention caught.

"The one with stone walls on the hill overlooking the ocean. The one that sends soldiers

when we push humans out of villages that break the treaties.”

“Rampart?”

“Yes.”

“That’s not possible. There’s thousands of powerful warriors and mages there. All sorts of very dangerous people.”

“Yes, true. That’s why we are so grateful to you,” Herdsplitter said, patting Lacey’s tummy where it was palpably filled with wolfborn semen. “The gods smile on us, and our litter together has multiplied beyond our wildest dreams.”

“What do you mean?” Lacey asked.

“Never have we had pups grow and mature nearly so quickly. They are admittedly a bit strange and perhaps not the most cunning warriors in the pack, but they acknowledge their proper places in service to the tribe and are valiant within their abilities.”

“Five wolfborn, even if they grew to maturity already, would make no difference.”

Herdsplitter’s triumphant laugh showed an unnerving number of teeth. “Of course five would be nothing, but our line has grown to a vast clan of its own now. Grown to adulthood in two days, and bearing a litter on the fourth, which could then bear their own litters not too many days hence? They are the answer to our prayers.”

“Oh. Oh dear,” Lacey said, thinking of the bustling village she’d seen previously. “How many?”

“Beyond counting. We will overwhelm the humans.”

Lacey didn’t have a high opinion of how many the tribal wolfborn could count, but ‘overwhelm the humans’ made it sound like there might be more wolfborn now than the entire population of Rampart, and tribal wolfborn were very tough. Two working together could likely beat a town guard, and there would only be a couple hundred town guards at most.

“This has to be a bug,” Lacey said.

“A bug?” Herdsplitter asked, looking around the den for an insect.

“I beg your pardon, I need to attend to something,” Lacey said, and tried to bring up the support dialog.

Which she did, but it didn’t actually work; she couldn’t submit a support request.

So she tried to log out and log back in, except that the logout screen option didn’t actually log her out, or do anything, as far as she could tell. So, she was in a world story mission as an NPC again. But it could hardly be one that they were intending to happen; not the way it was going to happen. This was going to go completely mad and have huge repercussions on the world, and maybe even on UltraCraft as a whole, if a bug got this far out of control.

“Wait,” she tried to protest to Herdsplitter, who had started fucking her again, but it came out as more of a ‘waahyooo’.

“Oh, this is delicious!” Herdsplitter said, trying out a suckle from one of Lacey’s nipples.

That more or less erased any thoughts Lacey had entertained of stopping this second round of mating, and her milk seemed to completely restore Herdsplitter so she could smash as hard as the first time, and fill her even further with cum. It was a deliciously full sensation to have two huge loads of wolfborn seed, plus a large hard wolfborn cock, and an inflated knot all combining to inflate her tummy.

“I should check my messages,” Lacey said after she eventually stirred from her comfy doze as little spoon.

“Mmhmm,” Herdsplitter said without really waking, but her arm around Lacey drew her in a little tighter. Just as if she was a real person.

Once again, there were no direct messages in her inbox, which was almost certainly due to being trapped in NPC mode. But, there was a World 2 broadcast message. It was an ad hoc maintenance message of a sort that wasn’t uncommon and she would ordinarily have ignored it because they very rarely contained much of general interest, but she was sort of curious this time just to get a clearer idea of which kinds of messages reached her when she was in this strange state.

ALL PLAYERS IN THE EASTERN WILDS: There will be a general reset today (22 December) at 01:00 UTC covering the entire Eastern Wild region to address the recent issue of excessively high numbers of wolfborn tribal warriors. Due to the reset, most greater NPCs and NPC items in the Eastern Wilds will be recreated as of the expansion start. Rewards from completed missions that have been taken outside the reset area, and any mission completion conditions will be retained, but relationships with reset NPCs will be set to zero or the post-mission default, whichever is greater. 273 Major NPCs and 844 NPC objects from the non-reseed category are currently outside the mission area

EXCEPTION: all major NPCs and NPC objects associated with the wolfborn tribe will be completely regenerated with a new seed to create a complete new set of storyline missions. Any existing mission chains will be deleted, whether or not their NPCs and objects are actually reset. 0 Major NPCs and 2 NPC objects from the reseed category are currently outside the mission area.

High relationship NPCs who are outside the mission area at reset time will not be reset, but in order to simplify the reset process we unfortunately cannot allow any player characters to enter the reset area to retrieve NPCs, and any player characters that remain in the affected area may be teleported to their home or start point at any point between now and the reset. Compensation UltraGems will be provided for lost high relationship NPCs.

The Fantasy UltraCraft team apologizes for any inconvenience. Happy Crafting!

Lacey reread it several times with a sinking feeling. She had seen several messages almost

exactly like this one before, and in fact it was almost a form message. Those had always applied to distant lands or entirely different worlds, so they had never felt significant or interesting. But now they were in an area not just near her, but *around* her. It was, in a very real sense, the arm that was wrapped around her like a sleeping lover.

“Herdsplitter!”

“What?” Herdsplitter responded, instantly awake and alarmed.

“We have to get out of here. We don’t have much time.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Eastern Wilds are about to be reset, and everyone will be... will disappear.”

“What do you mean, little mother?” Herdsplitter asked with affectionate skepticism. “What is a reset, and how do you know?”

“I don’t think I can explain what a reset is, but it’s like. It’s like... you said the gods answered your prayers, right? What if the gods did it on accident, and want to erase their mistake?”

“Did you have a nightmare?” Herdsplitter said gently, trying not to tell Lacey she was crazy.

“It feels like a nightmare, but it’s not. It’s... more like prophecy, I suppose.” Lacey felt like crying. This was all her fault.

“Even if that is true, who are we to resist the Gods?” Herdsplitter asked seriously.

“It’s not resisting, it’s just... Going elsewhere for a bit.”

“Where? Where do the Gods not reign?”

“They reign everywhere, I suppose, but their, uh, judgement is only on the Eastern Wilds. So if we can get out in... six and a quarter hours, then I think you can be spared.”

“I can be spared? What of you?” Herdsplitter asked.

“I... am probably in trouble with the Gods in a different way. It probably won’t matter where I go.” Lacey struggled to keep her mind from imagining all the awful things that were going to happen to her once UltraCraft traced the cause of the problem to Lacey. “I don’t know if they’ll take me now or later, but I’m sure they’ll get to me eventually. But you will only disappear if you stay. Everything and everyone who stays will disappear.”

“This is far to go in only six hours. And what of my tribe? My pack?” Herdsplitter asked. Her skepticism wasn’t gone, but she was at least listening.

“I don’t know. I don’t think they can be saved even if we could get them all out. The new pups are the source of their judgement. Because of me.” Lacey swallowed painfully. “I did this. I didn’t mean to, but this is all my fault. I’m so sorry, Herdsplitter.”

Lacey looked into Herdsplitter’s confused but compassionate eyes, and tried to believe that she wasn’t looking at a person, just a very advanced simulation. But she couldn’t do it.

“Okay, we will go. I must tell the whole tribe to save themselves if they can.”

“You believe me?” Lacey asked in wonder.

“There are no lies in a wolfborn pack,” Herdsplitter said simply, before stepping outside.

Because there was no time to lose and no real certainty about how far they had to go to avoid the reset, they took almost no supplies with them before setting out at a distance-eating run. Over Lacey’s objections, the Bloodwolf pack shared the task of carrying Lacey on their backs as they ran.

Their path took them into the rugged mountain passes to the north, forcing Tearer of Throats and the other warriors to use their weapons and brawn to carve a narrow trail through the snow. As the way got more and more difficult and the land ever more hostile, Lacey could see some of the others look at her speculatively, as if wondering whether the human had lied to them as humans did. But they didn’t say anything, or object. They just struggled on into deepening night and snow.

“It’s almost time,” Lacey told Herdsplitter as the world clock showed 00:58.

“Have we gone far enough?” Herdsplitter asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“The pack is exhausted and there are beginning to be injuries. It will be a difficult night up here even without the wrath of the Gods. When will we find out?” Herdsplitter asked.

“In a minute. Or maybe more. I think these big resets take a few minutes as they process their way through the entity list. But I should get another, uh, message when it’s done.”

“The Gods speak to you still?” Herdsplitter asked. “Are not they wroth with you?”

“Uh, not to me specifically. They’re speaking to, uh, the humans of Rampart, warning them to stay out and all that.”

“So the Gods themselves give our lands to the humans?” Herdsplitter asked grimly.

“Not exactly,” Lacey started, then realised that this was *exactly* what UltraCraft was doing, but not in a way she could explain to Herdsplitter. “Shit. That *is* what they’re doing. Again.”

“Again?” Herdsplitter asked.

Before Lacey could even begin to think about how to explain humanity’s realspace history, a cry of alarm rang out, followed by howls of sadness from pack mates of several wolfborn who had just vanished, taken by the reset. Soon others disappeared, and more howls of loss joined those already howling, and at the same time the continuing reset silenced some of those who had already been singing their sorrow.

“Oh, Herdsplitter. I’m so sorry. We must not have made it far enough.”

“You didn’t know, little mother, and you did what you could,” Herdsplitter said consolingly, and drew Lacey into her arms.

But Lacey *had* known, in a way, and it felt so wrong that Herdsplitter was consoling Lacey for having doomed the entire tribe. “But I... I’m your murderer,” Lacey began sobbing as the howls thinned rapidly, but she hugged Herdsplitter as hard as she could.

“No, you are our little mother,” Herdsplitter murmured gently into her ear, by then the only

sound other than the howling wind.

“No no no no,” Lacey said into the ruff of Herdsplitter’s neck, until even the wind was gone. *Everything* was gone, in fact, because Lacey had been logged out.

Compensation

Eventually the workers at the playpod facility forced Lacey to stand back up and either log back in or “go home” to her purely notional residence. She wasn’t even sure how to feel when her attempt to log back in failed with some obscure system error. She didn’t think she could face the world from which Herdsplitter and the tribe had just been deleted, but neither could she imagine going out to assemble a life in realspace while she would rather just not exist.

At first she just stared listlessly at the technicians trying to understand what the problem was, but she gradually became more engaged despite herself. The facility was an official UltraCraft partner and were able to bring in UltraCraft support technicians right away once they had determined that the problem probably wasn’t in the hardware. To Lacey’s muted surprise, she was not banned, nor were UltraCraft techs able to identify any administrative problems with her player account. Both sides agreed that Lacey should be able to log in, and both sides also agreed that the problem was on the other side.

The tension between the dueling techs gave Lacey a bit more space to fade into the background and think a little more clearly. She knew she was being objectively ridiculous. No matter how much it felt like Herdsplitter and the tribe had been real people, of course they weren’t. Every time she tried to tell herself that she felt like she was pissing on their graves by denying their personhood, but this was, of course, a logical fallacy. Those arguments had no discernible impact on her feelings or how real Herdsplitter was to her, but it did remind her of what people would say if she tried to tell them why she was wracked by grief and remorse, and the prospect of people finding the tragedy humorous gave her the motivation she needed to pull herself together.

Eventually the technician for the playpod facility triumphed, and the defeated UltraCraft support technician acknowledged that there was something seriously wrong with Lacey’s account. By this time, though, he’d already escalated all the way to a third tier engineer, so it became her problem. There was a bit more back and forth between that engineer and the playpod technician that concerned how to fix the problems caused in the XD rig when UltraCraft had terminated the connection anomalously, but once that was done, the engineer summoned an account supervisor to join the rest of the conversation.

The engineer and the supervisor had some kind of private conversation while Lacey waited in the facility’s visitor’s lounge before they both joined again.

“Before we go any further, I want to understand how you are feeling physically,” the supervisor asked with an empathetic customer service voice.

“I don’t know. Not great, but fine, I guess,” Lacey said, thinking about the snow, and the anguished howling.

“Do you have any bumps or scrapes?”

“No? No.” Lacey said, looking down at her weird realspace body. She was still covered in the playpod jumpsuit so she couldn’t see what her skin looked like, but the ultrathin fabric appeared unblemished.

“No head or stomach aches?”

Lacey laughed ruefully.

“Can I take that as a no?” the supervisor asked hopefully.

Lacey shook her head and shrugged. “I feel sick and my head is throbbing, but that’s...” she trailed off, remembering that she shouldn’t talk about grief, or how she deserved to feel.

“Are you experiencing blurred vision at all?”

“What’s this about?” Lacey asked.

“It’s just a standard set of questions,” the supervisor said with a tense smile, then repeated, “So is your vision blurry at all?”

“Well, yeah,” Lacey said doubtfully.

“Do you feel weak, or like your body is heavier than expected?”

“No,” Lacey said, somewhat relieved to be able to give a more positive answer, but for some reason the supervisor looked alarmed.

“Are you seeing afterimages, or intrusive visual memories?” the supervisor asked.

“Yeah, but,” Lacey responded, feeling like she should try to explain a least a little bit of why she was feeling traumatized so they didn’t think she was having some medical issue.

“Sorry, one more question: have you experienced spontaneous logouts in the past?”

“No, quite the opposite. What’s wrong?”

“Hopefully nothing, but I’m just going to check on something while our engineer reviews the state of your account with you.”

“Okay,” Lacey said nervously. She didn’t see how this might relate to them having discovered Lacey’s use of the script, but whatever it was seemed bad.

“So I’m looking at a fairly complex situation here, and I’m hoping you can help me untangle it a little,” the engineer said in a very kind voice, like Lacey was an invalid or a child.

“Sure,” I’ll try, Lacey said with a sigh.

“Do you recall the date you created your character?”

“Well, yeah. It was release day, when creating your character was pretty much the only thing you could do.” She managed a small smile at the memory of the jokes the party had shared about UltraCraft calling it “release day” without there even being any missions available yet.

The support engineer gave a pained smile. Probably it had been a grueling time for her. “And did you select a sponsored build?”

“Yeah! Turns out it was sponsored by a guy creeping on one of my party mates, which turned into a whole thing.”

“Okay, yeah, I see that,” the engineer said with a sigh.

“What’s wrong?” Lacey asked.

“Well, the bad news is that your character is corrupted. It’s probably not going to be possible to determine exactly how it happened, and probably it has multiple causes as things sort of snowballed from the beginning. Due to that, we probably can’t reverse most of the effects, which you’ve probably been noticing. For example, you were standing really close to a wolfborn NPC, right? Maybe sharing her coat or something in the cold?”

“Yeah, basically,” Lacey said woodenly.

“Okay, so now your character appears to be pregnant with multiple babies from an NPC that the system is trying to delete.”

“Trying to delete? Does that mean they’re still alive?” Lacey asked, trying to sound casual.

“No, nothing like that. All characters that are part of the world stories are retained as part of the lore and all that, and they might also get brought back in future stories, though I don’t know if we actually do that. Anyway, deletion is sort of the last step where we remove all the traces of characters that aren’t supposed to be part of the world story. It’s what happens to bubble layer enemies and also NPCs removed through resets.” The support engineer warmed to her subject, clearly rather proud of herself for deducing the sequence of events.

“In any case, it looks like the reset executor somehow got confused and thought you were also an NPC to delete. It’s one of those AI algorithms so it occasionally does dumb stuff when objects of the same class are unexpectedly close together. Anyway, it would have cascade deleted your instance entities, but player character entities also have account links, so the delete operation would have rolled back almost immediately. I think there was probably a race condition where the NPC deletion started while you were removed so it didn’t think it needed to create player copies, but by the time it was finished processing through the rest of the NPC entities you were back. It tried to delete the top level object, but you still had something from the NPC and it couldn’t delete.”

“Do you mean the babies?” Lacey suggested.

“Oh no, nothing like that,” the engineer said with an embarrassed laugh, “I mean something you already had. Don’t worry, I knew you weren’t already pregnant because that feature isn’t even released yet.” Again the nervous laughter leaked out of the engineer as she shook her head. “It would be something like a named sword, or a key, or even a title. There’s like a million things it could be. It doesn’t really matter what it was because it would have handled all the duplication and delinking when it teleported you back to your home.”

“Oh,” Lacey said dully. It was sort of interesting to have this window into how the game worked, but it didn’t really matter.

“Or least, it should have. There must be some bug in pregnancy still,” the engineer mused. “But I’m meant to be talking to you about how to solve things. So I just need to get your consent to do another reset on your whole pregnancy annex, which is honestly completely messed up anyway. *Really* messed up.”

“What if I don’t?” Lacey asked.

“Don’t what?” the engineer asked, confused.

“What if I don’t get my ‘pregnancy annex’ reset?”

“Well, maybe nothing yet, but once pregnancy rolls out I don’t even want to speculate what it will be like out there when every enemy might decide to... try to mate.”

“As opposed to kill me?” Lacey asked somewhat sardonically. She’d already beaten quite a few missions because enemies decided to mate rather than murder and that didn’t seem so terrible. “What I mean is, if I refuse, then what do you do?”

“I’d have to convert the mess you have into custom skills so that the AIs can see and react to them properly. And then you’d be stuck with them, good or bad. I might be able to deal with the wolfborn embryos, but.”

“No, I’m keeping those,” Lacey insisted immediately.

“You *want* them?” the engineer asked incredulously.

“They’re all that’s left...” No, that would make her sound insane. “It’s for sentimental reasons.” The way the engineer looked at her confirmed that Lacey was not succeeding at sounding sane.

“You understand that you will go through the whole, you know, pregnancy process according to the inferred mechanics,” the engineer warned.

“What does that mean?” Lacey asked.

The engineer let out a long breath as she searched for the words. “It’s sort of hard to explain without being a little misleading, but basically the game engine has layers above the physics that are kind of like micro-missions for every object in the game. Plants grow, riverbanks erode, etc. There’s a huge number of micro AIs that implement these micro mechanics, and then those get managed in groups by somewhat bigger AIs that can sort of ‘understand’ how the little bits fit together. In my example they would understand that as the river shifts course over time it would also change where the ground water is for the plants.”

The engineer stopped herself to reconsider. “The physics layer might actually do that itself. I don’t actually know. But my point is that if it doesn’t, the midsize AI would. And part of what I’m doing here to clean things up is sort of applying a set of those AIs to switch them from being subject to the current broken mechanics that are treating you like a mission NPC. Missions for player characters are allowed to override the mechanics created by the midsize AIs I was

talking about. That's why you've been experiencing some things that shouldn't be possible."

"Such as the pregnancy?" Lacey asked.

"Right. There's loads of reasons why it's not meant to be possible," the engineer said, shaking her head at whatever it was that she was seeing from her own perspective. "But after this it will come up with some exception mechanic that will sort of slot into the game world without the weirdness. Or at least *less* weirdness. But you have to understand that once we do this, it's done; we can't really undo it. We'd still try to help you if it goes really wrong, but I want you to understand something that many people can't seem to grasp or believe, which is that the nature of the game engine means that UltraCraft has really quite limited control over what happens and how. Honestly, we can hardly even see what exactly happens and how. We can see more, but only within limits."

"For player privacy?"

The engineer laughed. "That too, but that wasn't what I was talking about. I mean, even if privacy wasn't a concern, the game is just too complex and there's too many layers of indirection."

"Is that why you don't know how my character got so messed up?"

The engineer shifted uncomfortably. "That's certainly a big part of it."

"What's the other part?" Lacey asked. If the engineer knew that Lacey broke the rules, now was the time to find out. Get it over with.

"The sponsored build you selected turns out to have been, uh, targeted by a number of missions that did not go through proper review. Actions were taken to prevent this from recurring, but they were not entirely successful."

"Did I do something wrong?" Lacey asked anxiously, because the engineer seemed angry.

"Oh, not *you*! But someone did, and... Well, that's not something I'm allowed to talk about and shouldn't even if I was because I don't know the whole story. But the way it *looks* is... But that's really not something I should be speculating about. But UltraCraft is committed to correcting the situation."

Lacey thought that last part was more an expression of what the engineer hoped was true than what she firmly believed, but considering that Lacey had intentionally broken the rules herself, she didn't feel like she had much right to blame UltraCraft, and none at all to criticize the engineer. "Well, thank you for what you're doing for me."

"Absolutely my pleasure," the engineer said with an apologetic smile. "And, um, UltraCraft is going to do one more thing for you, any moment now. It might be a little alarming, but it's intended for your protection in the wake of the anomalous disconnection, which can be a little bit rough on people. The good news, which I'm not really authorized to give but I'm going to do anyway, is that it should result in a dramatically upgraded playpod experience."

"I was already in an UltraXD pod," Lacey said skeptically.

“Yeah, I definitely know that,” the engineer said with a rueful chuckle.

“Why do you say it like that?” Lacey asked.

“Just, well, anomalous disconnection from an UltraXD connection can be rough, as I think you’ve noticed.”

“Wait, is that why I feel like shit?”

The engineer blushed and looked even more uncomfortable. “I’m not an expert. But the pod we’re talking about is meant to be the next level and will never have an anomalous disconnection like that.”

“Have you used it?” Lacey asked.

“I wish! They’re super limited right now. You’re going to be the first person to use one that I’ve ever met. Literal billionaires are bidding for these, and not getting them.”

“Really? Then why,” Lacey started to ask, but the engineer quickly interrupted her.

“Actually, sorry, pretend I didn’t say anything. I’m not meant to be discussing things that are managed by account supervisors. Speaking of,” the engineer said, giving way to the account supervisor, whose return coincided with some strange sounds from outside the playpod facility lounge.

“Ma’am,” the supervisor said, “I’m pleased to inform you that UltraCraft has authorized me to offer you the very latest in playpod technology that offers an immersive game experience unparalleled anywhere else on the planet, especially for dedicated players like yourself. A bonus feature is that it is highly adaptive and can address a number of conditions that are usually very resistant to treatment, or which have treatments with unwanted side effects. Depression, schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, dementia, and many others.”

“Really?” Lacey asked, both skeptical and appalled. “Why are you giving it to me rather than to someone who really needs it?”

“It’s part of our compensation package for the anomalous events you’ve experienced,” the supervisor said brightly, “And will also address the negative symptoms you’re currently experiencing due to the disconnection.”

“Are the symptoms that dangerous?” Lacey asked with alarm. She did feel pretty bad, but *that* bad?

“Not physically, no, but there is a chance of more lasting consequences that we’d prefer to avoid. Such as difficulty connecting via less sophisticated XD playpods.”

Reading between the lines, Lacey finally understood that they thought Lacey had a genuine brain injury due to the way she disconnected. Which would be a huge, huge deal if it got out that a fault in their Ultra XD playpods could cause literal brain damage. Lacey had thought that they were embarrassed by whatever had bugged Lacey’s character, but bugging someone’s actual brain was the kind of thing that could destroy a company.

Lacey wondered if she had a responsibility to refuse this ‘compensation’ and tell the world,

but several factors pushed her to accept. First was her thought that probably it would never had happened if she hadn't used the unauthorized script, which also reminded her that if UltraCraft collapsed, then it would be a disaster for Arvina as well. Finally, and most irrationally, she felt that if she caused Fantasy UltraCraft to shut down, she would be murdering all the NPCs like Herdsplitter.

So she accepted the deal, and signed the agreement that let the private medical team in the lobby take her away to the clinic at the site of the RealDimension facility and do whatever they needed to do to ready her for the new technology, even though this appeared to involve some sort of surgery. In for a penny, in for a pound.

Returns

"Lacey!"

"Arvina!" Lacey said, hugging Arvina tightly. It gave her a flashback to her last moments with Herdsplitter, but she was able to keep her composure.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, though obviously it's been a journey," Lacey said.

"Lacey!" Caper said, entering the Burning Sun just seconds after Arvina.

"Caper! Wow!" Lacey said, seeing how much bigger Caper's chest was since she'd last seen her. Well, not hugely so, but Caper had begun with the very moderate breasts of an athlete so even a small amount of increased volume was very dramatic.

Caper laughed. "Every morning after I restored myself from your supply, these new puppies got a bit bigger," she explained with a glance at Lacey's far more massive milk tanks. "It serves me right."

"Oh no, I'm sorry!" Lacey said with an apologetic grimace.

"I don't think she'd be wearing that if she didn't like her new assets," Arvina said, nodding at Caper's cleavage-revealing scoop neck top.

Caper stuck her tongue out at Arvina but didn't contradict her, either. "So how are you doing? Arvina was worried and you were gone ages. For you, at least; you always have been our most diligent player."

Lacey shrugged, not wanting to explain that her diligence wasn't really a choice. "Good, all things considered. My character got corrupted and they had to do a whole raft of things to fix it. But they comped me an upgraded playpod and permanent paid status, so I'm well set."

"Didn't you already have UltraXD?" Caper asked, confused.

"Yeah, I got a new thing that's even more advanced. It's unbelievable."

“Woah, I haven’t even heard of this. Is it like a prototype?” Caper asked, glancing at Arvina, who typically knew more about what was going on inside UltraCraft Corporation.

“More like a soft launch for an initial release,” Arvina said with her customary omniscience, “But it’s actually been out for a bit as an extremely limited release.”

“So ‘not a prototype’ but still basically a prototype?” Caper asked jadedly.

Arvina laughed like she didn’t know quite how to answer that, and was saved by Alexandros’ entrance and the need to rehash Lacey’s story. Only later did Arvina and Lacey have an opportunity to discuss it more candidly.

“I’m very sure you were correct,” Arvina responded to Lacey’s suspicions about why UltraCraft decided to give her access to one of the world’s most sought-after technologic services as compensation.

“Did I do the right thing?” Lacey asked, desperately wanting some kind of confirmation she hadn’t been foolishly selfish.

“What else could you have done, really?” Arvina said with a shrug. Lacey was surprised to find the denial that there was any real choice was even better than agreeing that she had made the correct one. “And who could pass up this opportunity? I mean, how’s your depression?”

“Well, I... I’m not sure how to say it, but I’m sad and anxious, but not depressed. Like, the lead blanket that always felt like it was laying over everything now feels like it’s just gone. It has varied in intensity in the past, but I don’t think I’ve gone this long without feeling it at all since puberty.”

Arvina looked relieved and gave Lacey another hug like the one they’d shared at their initial reunion. It felt great to have her body back and better than ever. XD had always relied on the brain’s natural ability to extrapolate basic sensory experiences into perceptions that felt more like the real thing in order to achieve lifelike experiences, albeit with each generation requiring less extrapolation than the past. The RealDimension setup, though, was at a completely different level. Even when she focused on it as minutely as she could, Lacey couldn’t find any aspect of her game body that felt less real than her realspace body. The only way to distinguish was literally to pinch herself, because in-game pain and discomfort was only a shadow of the realspace version.

Yet, for all the wonders of her new RealDimensional senses and her freshly vibrant emotional world, Lacey still mourned all the years and life events she’d been unable to fully enjoy because she’d been struggling through a leaden fog. Freed of the depression’s compulsion to feel that she deserved it and worse, she was at last able to fully externalize the depression as something that had been robbing her of life, just like Arvina had told her from time to time. It was empowering, but also sad. Further, her new emotional equilibrium notwithstanding, being in Arvina’s arms made her heart ache all over again at what had happened to Herdsplitter. Life in RealDimension might reduce her ability to feel physical pain and seemed to have dispelled her depression, but it

hadn't taken away her ability to grieve.

Arvina seemed to understand some of this when Lacey started weeping into her cloak, because she didn't ask what was wrong. "It's okay. Let it out."

When Lacey got herself together again, she felt better than she had in years. Maybe better than she ever had. She just felt so light, like nothing could ever really hurt her again. And yet...

"Why is it that I'm still sad and anxious even though I'm not depressed?"

"It's meant to balance your neurotransmitters or whatever, not eliminate them, so this is good, right? You should still be able to feel all your feelings, just not drown in them because your brain chemistry is completely fucked. Though I have to ask, is there a reason you're sad that I don't know about and could help?"

Lacey shrugged, then decided to share. "Well, it's silly, but you know I spent time with the Bloodwolf clan, and especially Herdsplitter."

"Which were lost when they did the reset," Arvina said with a nod. "That's not silly. It's human to get attached."

This time Arvina's perspective didn't do the topic justice, but Lacey didn't want to explain. Instead she brought up another factor that would become obvious enough at some point. "So, uh, I'm actually going to give birth to wolfborn pups."

"Really? That's... early," Arvina said.

"Yeah, it's complicated," Lacey said, wishing that Arvina had revealed more about what she thought of Lacey's disclosure.

"I imagine so. Are they Herdsplitter's?"

"Yeah," Lacey said, pleased that Arvina had guessed correctly, and hopeful that this possibility even occurring to Arvina meant that Arvina shared her wild doppelgänger's ability to sire young.

"Were you... pardon me for putting it like this, but were you in love with her?" Arvina asked.

Lacey was shocked that Arvina put it that way, but gratified that she asked the question as if this was not an insane way to feel about NPCs. "No pardon necessary, and no, I wasn't in love with her. I mean, I barely even met her. But she felt like someone who I might... Well, she felt like *someone*. Which, I know, they're just matrices," Lacey started, but Arvina interrupted.

"Actually, I'm... not sure how much we *really* know. How much anybody does, outside UltraCraft."

"Are you saying," Lacey started to ask with wide eyes, but Arvina stopped her.

"I'm not saying anything, because I don't really know any more than you do. But one of the things I think we don't know is how deep the matrices really go on some of these main story NPCs."

Lacey just stared at Arvina, trying to process this.

"I know it sounds mad, and probably it is, but..." Arvina shrugged instead of finishing her

sentence.

“If it’s not, then resetting is murder,” Lacey said fervently.

Arvina’s eyes widened with shock; obviously her feeling hadn’t gotten to where Lacey’s had. “I don’t know, Lacey,” she said, preparing to backpedal, but Lacey stopped her.

“Exactly. We don’t know. But I feel like we should err on the side of caution.” Lacey meant this very fervently, but tried not to sound as radical as she felt.

“I’m not sure that’s possible while still playing the game,” Arvina argued.

“Not really. It just raises the stakes by a lot. But, you know, if an evil wizard was really threatening Rampart, or Paris, then attacking him with lethal force would be justified, right?”

“True. Also I’m not sure that ‘killing’ NPCs in-game is really the same as killing someone in realspace, because they exist across many worlds. It’s more like banishing them from one world.”

“Oh!” Lacey said, perking up. “So Herdsplitter still exists in other worlds?”

Arvina made a noncommittal noise. “Maybe.”

Lacey would take it. Certainly she would prefer to believe Herdsplitter was still out there somewhere.

But just in case, she kept the pups.

Part of her had been looking forward to trying to raise three little wolfborn pups, and maybe drawing Arvina into it. Moreover Arvina congratulated Lacey that her extremely promising performance on a mini game designed to determine whether her character’s low intelligence was genetically heritable would likely prevent her pups from being penalized for Lacey’s low INT stat. Watching the game try to represent them as smart children of a dumb parent promised to be fascinating.

Still, it seemed like it might be too ambitious an undertaking on all sides, so she was relieved when a representative of Rampart’s wolfborn creche had turned up at her door to take them away to people who knew something about raising wolfborn pups. It might be the best of all worlds, because Lacey was encouraged to come to the creche as often as she liked to spend time with the cute little pups, and a fun new mission chain came out of it that represented the quest of a dimwitted but well-meaning mum making sure her children got the best education they could. Lacey wasn’t sure if it was meant to be at heartwarming as it was, but it certainly plucked her heartstrings.

Even so, in those early days it wasn’t clear to Lacey if the pups really had a full ‘personality matrix’ as they were called. Arvina suggested that the game treated litter mates in NPC pregnancies like identical twins for their initial personality seeds and so they were much less different inside than out. It was at least true that Lacey could easily tell them apart by sight, whereas behaviourally they might have been interchangeable. But even if they did have deep

matrices it also made sense that they wouldn't have developed highly individual personalities already; they hadn't really interacted with the world.

That was also a sort of deflating thought as far as Herdsplitter went. Because Herdsplitter also hadn't interacted with the world very much before Lacey first met her, Lacey couldn't see how Herdsplitter's personality could be fully real. Lacey still couldn't really make herself *feel* that way, but intellectually she couldn't help but admit her feelings must be mistaken.

On the other hand, the thought that the NPC's relative lack of experienced history did make her feel better about her return to the Charmeuse Club and thus to Lady Asterine. It wasn't actually difficult to see her as a sort of one-note caricature, and not just her, either. All the toffs who remarked on and took advantage of how Lacey's latest pregnancy had further amplified her breasts' size and productivity were noticeably samey in their reaction every evening. Which wasn't to say that none of them ever surprised Lacey or developed in realistic ways, but the seemingly bottomless realism of the RealDimension system combined with her increasingly practiced eye revealed moments, be they ever so brief, where even a major NPC like Lady Asterine unambiguously betrayed some level of anosognosia.

So sure, they might treat Lacey like she was furniture, but they, too, were only furniture.

Lacey knew that it was inconsistent to view Lady Asterine one way and Danhei another, but nevertheless, she tended to view him more like Pinocchio becoming a real boy, except as an attractive and good-natured adult. She enjoyed tracking his slowly deepening personality at the same time he tracked her slowly deepening cleavage. He still didn't feel as fully real to her as Herdsplitter had, but probably a combination of Herdsplitter's many points of resemblance to Arvina and heavy doses of postcoital oxytocin had distorted her perception.

A similar tribal wolfborn storyline was playing out in the Eastern Wilds with different characters and locations, but Lacey didn't really want to engage with it for many reasons, her desire not to smudge her memory of Herdsplitter being only one. She also didn't want to be part of a mission chain that would end in pushing the tribe out of the forests nearer Rampart, or maybe even worse. The kidnapping at the beginning was intended to demonstrate that the wolfborn were evil, or at least, had earned their fate by their brutality.

And perhaps this second population of wolfborn were worse than the ones led by the Bloodwolves, but even Tearer of Throats hadn't acted like Lacey was nothing more than a captive. They had listened to and believed her warning, and carried her on their backs through the snow. Perhaps they were not all fully realised persons, but what personality they did have had not been malevolent or even especially barbaric. Moreover, they hadn't had a say in whether they kidnapped anyone; the world story mission had imposed their worst "behavior" on them regardless of what they would normally have chosen to do.

Fortunately for Lacey's conscience, this time the story moved far more slowly after the initial raid event that kicked it off, so Lacey could put it out of mind most of the time, and when she

couldn't do that she could console herself with the hope that the story would follow a different course this time.

Rampart itself seemed to be thriving, and it was interesting to see how players increasingly welcomed the game's continued drift away from an adventure game toward freeform world simulation. Early complaints about how slow advancement was seemed to have tapered off even though advancement in terms of raw power had slowed even further. It seemed like most people enjoyed getting steadily better at their non-combat crafts in the same way Lacey was enjoying developing musical abilities. Now that she had a much freer flow of various game currencies, she had taken to buying items created by other players to decorate her home or her outfit, or stopping to listen to buskers trying out their latest thing. The expansion that brought player pregnancies contained many other avocations representing many other areas of human endeavour with impressive fidelity that made the world fairly erupt in additional interest and depth. It was a remarkably pleasant life and Lacey was sort of shocked yet also unsurprised to see how many people agreed with her that a little bit of swashbuckling adventure went a long way, after which she wanted to get back to a more ordinary life. Albeit one where the least pleasant parts could be largely automated away if they were present at all.

One bit that remained the same even after the pregnancy expansion was released was the inability for humans and wolfborn to interbreed. With, of course, the lone exception of Lacey herself, whose special Global Fertility skill was not available to any other character as far as she knew. Contrary to the warning from the UltraCraft support engineer, this didn't actually make a noticeable difference in how most creatures reacted to Lacey. They were highly likely to try to fuck Lacey after the official introduction of player character pregnancies, but that had already been true and didn't become noticeably more so. And, also like before, sometimes they succeeded in fucking her, but all she had to do to avoid getting knocked up was to add the birth control tea to her morning routine.

She didn't do it every day, though, because one of her little projects was to upgrade her milk, and delivering what were now called 'cowgirls' earned a lot more points than just being milked. By then the increase in milk capacity and production was pretty nominal, so Lacey was probably the only person who really noticed that she was still getting bigger, but evidently whatever AI was in charge of interpreting the meaning of Lacey's involvement with the Espresso Speciale prior to the Reset and its sequelae had decided that she was on some kind of flavoured creamer quest. Now that RealDimensions included full taste and aroma, Lacey was extremely curious to find see if she could combine all the abilities necessary to produce dulce de leche whipped cream. The AI might have had some strange ideas about what Lacey's game objectives were, but now that the options were there, she did think it would be fun to try them. Caper also seemed to think this was a fun and not deranged ambition, which gave Lacey more courage to do it.

Also, Lacey wanted to see if she could get Arvina involved. It didn't feel like it was

appropriate to ask, but Lacey had become increasingly convinced that Arvina was also in a RealDimension playpod. If Arvina noticed that it wasn't just whipped cream but the flavour of the cream, then that would be a giveaway, and maybe give Lacey a way to bring it up. Arvina had been supportive as ever, but since Lacey's disconnection and restoration she'd begun to notice a reserve. Perhaps it had always been there and Lacey just hadn't noticed it before, or maybe it was new since the change, but either way Lacey wanted to feel like they had a special relationship again, even if it wasn't *the* special relationship.

Character Reveals

Though Lacey had gotten tolerably good at reading the written form of the primary in-game language used in Rampart, the spoken version was still quite hard to follow. Even so, a great deal could be deduced from context.

Thus, when the farmhand arrived with a hooved young woman with an impressive bottom and the cutest cow tail Lacey had ever seen, she was able to infer that the farmhand was introducing the newcomer to the milking process. However, the cowgirl didn't join Lacey in being milked; instead the farmhand demonstrated to the cowgirl how to milk Lacey.

In some ways it was slightly embarrassing being treated like livestock by someone who had 'cow' in their species title, but the cowgirl immediately gave the impression of being very sweet and gentle, and somewhat excited to meet Lacey, so that set her at ease. Also Lacey's position meant that she couldn't look the cowgirl in the face, so there was also an element of anonymity to it.

Evidently the farmhand didn't expect her apprentice to be smarter than one would expect of a cowgirl, because she repeated the lesson a number of times before allowing the cowgirl to operate independently. Further, there wasn't only one cowgirl apprentice; there were three. They were all very similar, all gentle and sweet, but Lacey noticed differences in their hooves, voices, and tail colouration from one day to the next.

Thus it was that it took almost a fortnight for Lacey to get her first look at a cowgirl's face and so discover that at least one of the apprentices who had been milking her had been conceived and born in that very stall, from Lacey herself. The resemblance was really undeniable. She had the same lustrous hair that parted on the right and took on a subtle wave as it past her jaw. Her lashes were both long and, now that Lacey saw them on somebody else, honestly a bit cowlike. She had the same wide eyes that looked perpetually innocent of comprehension. The same glossily plump lips that wanted to part just a bit in the centre. She even shared the same little chin that looked like it might have a cleft but didn't quite.

Also they both had huge tits, of course.

“Come on cutey, you know what to do,” the cowgirl said coaxingly when Lacey had stared too long.

Lacey opened her mouth to say something, but what?

“Silly girl,” the cowgirl said, and tried to clip the chain to Lacey’s collar.

Lacey dodged back because she wanted to say something, but the cowbell on her collar naturally swung the opposite direction and provided the cowgirl with something easy to grab. One difference between Lacey and this unexpected daughter was that the cowgirl absolutely shared in her sire’s size and strength, which, exerted on that cowbell, resulted in Lacey being brought to her customary milking pose without having said anything.

The cowgirl scolded her about it, but her voice was full of affection and sympathy, so Lacey ended up feeling mostly okay about it. There wasn’t any reason she couldn’t just try again tomorrow.

Well, there was a reason; evidently word had gotten around amongst the sisters that they had to catch Lacey the moment she opened the door, because that was exactly what happened. They were gentle but firm about it, and their conversation afterward had the sound of loving concern. Lacey got the idea that they were worried about what had made their normally docile milk cow start misbehaving, and that they decided it had been too long since she’d been bred, or perhaps that she was in heat and was leery of other females.

Either way, they made sure their mum waddled out pregnant and sated, and delivering that additional sister to them finally provided Lacey with an opportunity to talk to them.

“Oh my God, you can talk!” Rose said.

“I told you she was smarter than she looked,” Gerrie said,

“Don’t confuse her,” Alyssa warned protectively.

“It’s okay,” Lacey said with a shrug. She was genuinely finding it difficult to follow their conversation, both because they chattered with each other so quickly, and because this first pregnancy experienced in RealDimension was distractingly intense. It didn’t hurt, but what would have been agony in realspace seemed to morph into some other discombobulating intoxication in the game world, probably to make character similarly disabled by the experience as if they really had been, for example, gravely wounded.

It did vaguely occur to Lacey that this might have some dangerously addictive similarities to psychoactive drugs, but presumably it wouldn’t be habit forming. Though, seeing one of her cowgirl daughters hold their newest sister swaddled in her somewhat brawny arms was its own kind of trip.

“Who takes care of you during the day?” Rose asked Lacey curiously a little later while Gerrie took her new calf wherever cowgirl calves were meant to go.

“Takes care of me?” Lacey asked, sort of confused by the question.

“Yeah, you know, who makes sure you’re fed and comfy, changes your harness and all that?”

Rose clarified.

“Oh, I see what you mean,” Lacey said, but didn’t answer straightaway. Of course they wouldn’t think Lacey was remotely capable of roving about the world when, from their perspective, she could barely speak the language.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to answer,” Alyssa said soothingly, and patted Lacey’s head. It was a nice feeling, especially in light of how sluggish Lacey still felt after the delivery. She wasn’t *exhausted*; the game didn’t impose discomfort like that, but it did make sure that players couldn’t ignore the natural physical limits that would beset ordinary bodies.

“I just want to make sure she’s not being mistreated. Look at how tiny she is,” Rose said,

“She’s just a human. Human ladies are small like that,” Alyssa said, still stroking Lacey’s head.

“Are you sure? She’s got such big boobies. She must be at least part cowgirl,” Rose suggested.

“Hmm,” Alyssa said pensively and felt at where Lacey should have had horns if she was a cowgirl like them. “That’s the only part of her that seems like a cowgirl, though. The rest of her seems human.”

“But she’s not clever like humans,” Rose said, “She’s sweet and calm like a cowgirl.”

“Okay, maybe,” Alyssa said in agreement, as Lacey wasn’t inclined to bestir herself just to change their minds right that second. “But if she’s part cowgirl then maybe being so small is just one of her human parts, not a sign of being underfed or mistreated. I mean, she wouldn’t be so productive otherwise, would she?”

Lacey had meant to speak up then, but Alyssa had cupped Lacey’s breasts and lifted them to show their milk-filled roundness, so whatever words had been on her tongue leaked out as a sort of moan.

“There! She mooed,” Rose said triumphantly.

Alyssa laughed in a way that implied she didn’t regard this as quite so conclusive, but at that moment Gerrie returned and it was time for milking, so Lacey wasn’t able to participate in the rest of their conversation.

She also wasn’t really able to say much more than hello at subsequent milkings either, but they did talk to her in a sweet and companionable way, including plenty of compliments. Lacey could only puzzle out some of them, but the tone made it clear, and in a funny way it made them easier to accept when she didn’t know what they were. Without her depression ready to generally sour every positive thing, only her deeply inculcated habit of discovering reasons why someone was mistaken to believe something good about her was available to ruin her enjoyment. But even that was powerless when she didn’t know enough about the compliment to explain it away.

Well, sometimes the compliment was about her having really impressive boobs or a nice cushy bum, and those had always been undeniable. Even when she’d been depressed, her body

had always been a bright spot. Her depression and dour habits of mind had never been able to craft a derisive narrative about it because it was Arvina's creation and not her own. By now it was really feeling like it was Lacey's as much as it was Arvina's, but unlike in the past this increased rather than poisoned her enjoyment.

Her relationship with her character's stupidity was also shifting a bit in more subtle ways. Like with her body, Lacey's experience with being rather bimboish had not been as dismal as it might have been. Previously, it had been a source of sardonic amusement and also a bit of a reprieve from expectations in addition to a frequent source of embarrassment, and all of those continued into her RealDimensional life, but it had also been important then to tell herself that it was all temporary and she would eventually go back to being someone brainy. As complicated as her feelings had been about being intelligent, it had been her primary, perhaps even her sole source of personal pride, and the idea of living as a ditz seemed impossible to her. But now she felt committed to the character that she had become, and she needed to either find a way to make her character smarter, or make peace with being as big a boob as those she had on her chest.

Without quite intending it, she somehow slid ever further into the latter camp. It just made things easier, and not just for herself. If she really wasn't that bright, then no one had to feel vicariously embarrassed when she failed what seemed to them to be very simple intelligence checks and paid the often-sexual consequences. Her party knew intellectually that Lacey was much smarter than she appeared, but oftentimes it was easiest to act like she wasn't *that* much smarter. Even when they held counsels on how to approach tricky missions, most of the time her actual intelligence didn't come that much into play, because Arvina and Dark were also extremely sharp, and they informed themselves far more with the specifically relevant mechanics and lore. Lacey was occasionally able to add a surprising snippet here and there, which was always gratifying, but the surprised reactions that entertained Lacey so much were also a function of the rarity of those instances.

Really only Arvina seemed to reliably recall the full scale of the gap between Lacey's actual cognitive ability and how she presented herself, and that was all the validation Lacey needed personally.

Also important was the intelligence she passed on to her offspring. That did seem much more promising than it could have been, but she retained quite a bit of anxiety about it. Her cowgirls seemed to be of at least ordinary intelligence as cowgirls went, but it was difficult to fully judge. Her wolfborn young, meanwhile, hadn't reached maturity. The head of the creche said they were growing far faster than was ordinary for human young and so it was natural that they would not have learned as much as human children their size might, but this explanation from an NPC who knew less about her pups' strange histories than Lacey did didn't feel very authoritative. All she could really do is take Arvina's advice to wait and watch while resisting the temptation to form too many expectations.

Tellingly, though, Arvina didn't seem to be able to take her own advice; one time Lacey had almost caught her visiting the pups herself, though she'd slipped away before Lacey had been able to corner her and then denied the visit later. It was a curious little lie, but it created a little warm spot of hope in Lacey's tummy to think that Arvina took so much interest in Lacey's pups. She didn't try to press the issue before Arvina was ready to talk about it.

The final ongoing activity that intersected with her underlying mental capacity was her songwriting, which she'd decided to start doing entirely with the in-game language. It felt like good practice, and also something that would be very impressive to show off someday at the appropriate moment. Granted, it did not impress the NPC patrons at Charmeuse Club in nearly the same way, given that it was simply the native language they would expect even the lowliest urchin to have mastered, but it significantly improved their reception of the music she wrote for herself rather than being conferred on her by game mechanics. Evidently the songs she'd sung in English had not been translated and so sounded like nonsense to them, or perhaps they had been translated, but into phrases that no longer fit the music. Either way, composing songs for their native language overcame a barrier she hadn't known existed, and soon her music became as much of a draw as the Espresso Speciale.

Even regular player characters began to show up and listen, and it wasn't just because they heard they could get lewd coffee; none of them even asked for that special treat. Or at least, they didn't believe it could be worth the ridiculously high price Falston charged, and Lacey thought they would have if they'd heard how exactly it was made.

Certainly they were not immune to Lacey's more prurient attributes when they hired her to play at their home taverns and clubs around Rampart, but they clearly expected her to perform music that people would enjoy, not just be a milky tart on display. It wasn't a secret that she lived in a brothel and was thus safely assumed to be a sex worker of some sort, yet she seemed to be increasingly known as an actual artist of minor fame.

They still weren't impressed with the intelligence necessary to write catchy and affecting songs in another language, but that was because they assumed she was an NPC for whom this was her native language, and also they didn't know the language and so could hardly judge her level of mastery. Even her party mostly didn't know this, mistakenly believing that the game had conferred these songs on her the same way it had given her the magical lyrics she used during missions.

But Arvina knew, and again, that was enough for Lacey.

Reproduction

Though they didn't have that much time together, Lacey still found her relationship steadily

deepening with Rose, Alyssa, Gerrie, and eventually Naomi, the newest and youngest of the cowgirl sisters. In some ways they exhibited the strangeness one would expect of NPCs who had only existed for a very short period of time, but in others they felt both very real and very familiar. They treated Lacey a bit like a beloved but particularly dimwitted sister, and in many ways they did feel like sisters, or at least some sort of family she'd known far longer than a few weeks or months.

It was really difficult to put her finger on exactly why she felt this way, but it did feel like they saw the world much more similarly than she would have expected. That wasn't to say they all had the same personality, *per se*. Gerrie was active and energetic, Alyssa analytical, and Rose the most extroverted and nurturing. Naomi, when she joined, added a more romantic disposition to the mix. Yet underneath all of that, they shared something that Lacey could really only describe as a *moral* similarity to each other. And, moreover, to Lacey herself. They might not agree on what to do, but they agreed on what was right and wrong, and their overall priorities. She might have ascribed this to them all being NPCs of the same race where it not for the fact that Lacey also agreed with them, once she accounted for differences in knowledge and perspective.

They were all technically her daughters as far as the game was concerned, but even if they were really her biological daughters Lacey wouldn't have expected them to be quite so similar in that respect, especially given that she hadn't raised them herself.

"I sound crazy, don't I?" Lacey asked Arvina, who had begun frowning pensively even before Lacey had finished describing the mystery.

"No. Or yes, but only because it's a crazy situation."

"What do you mean?"

"I think UltraCraft is... I'm not sure how to say this and probably there's no way to do it that isn't misleading. But I think they're copying your mind to populate NPC matrices."

"Is that even possible?" Lacey asked, aghast.

"Yes, sort of. Actually, I'm not sure exactly how possible it is, and in what way. They used my patterns as a training input with my permission, but they weren't meant to use any one person as the template. Honestly, I wonder now how true any of that was. I do believe they were telling the truth when they said they were having trouble making the really large matrices work properly. They tried to scale up the simpler models and, if what I heard was correct, past a certain point they not only stopped getting better, they actually got worse."

"But they already said they use player behaviour to train NPCs," Lacey asked, suspecting that Arvina was talking about something else, but she wasn't sure quite what else that could be.

"Yeah, we're not talking about behavior. Or at least, not in nearly the same way. You've probably guessed by now that I was one of the initial testers of the RealDimension hardware."

Lacey nodded, though she hadn't actually guessed that so much as wondered from time to

time.

“The way it’s able to do what it does is that it actually creates an enormous matrix like the ones they use for major NPCs, then synchronizes it with your brain. Basically it’s a mirror.”

“Arvina, there’s the better part of a quadrillion synapses in a single human brain. That would have to be petabytes of data just to store a matrix big enough to mirror a brain. I mean, memory is more plentiful than it used to be, but surely they’re not doing that for every human using RealDimension playpods, much less every major NPC.”

“I didn’t say the NPC matrices are the same size,” Arvina said.

“But aren’t they meant to be copying off yours?”

Arvina shrugged and nodded like this was a good point, but said, “I’ve been thinking about that and my guess is that they don’t have to mirror every last neuron. For example, loads of neurons just sort of carry messages from one place to another rather than really doing any thinking of their own, if that makes sense. Regardless, it took a long time when I was part of the testing, but they kept going through what they called ‘pruning cycles’ where they tried simplifying this bit or that, then checked if the matrix was still doing the right thing. That’s a bit of inference on my part, but I think it’s probably not too far off. Regardless, the process took months for me but maybe it only takes days now. Anyway, my best guess is that they then simplify it a bit more in order to make the NPC templates.”

“Arvina, if that’s what they’re doing... For a simple *game*?”

“It’s not simple, and also games are one of the few places with the regulatory exceptions to do it.”

“So... That’s why the billionaires really want it. They think it’ll lead to consciousness uploads or something.”

“It kind of already does. I was in a terrible accident and the doctors thought I was unlikely to regain consciousness. Instead I woke up almost as soon as they plugged me back in to UltraCraft.”

“What? You were in the hospital with injuries so severe you were in a coma and they connected you to a playpod? I mean, I’m very, very, *very* glad they did if it really saved you, but how could that be the least bit ethical?”

Arvina’s grim smile suggested that she had pungent commentary on that topic, but she passed over it nonetheless. “Yes, well, it’s doing much the same for quite a few people now, and I gather that it actually makes UltraCraft a sizable fraction of its overall income. Given how much people are willing to pay, I think they would do it even if it did require petabytes per person. And then you could be sure that they’re not doing that for NPCs.”

“Because they’d never be willing to do it if they were that expensive?” Lacey asked.

“Exactly,” Arvina said, though something about her expression afterward made Lacey wonder if Arvina still harboured doubts.

As troubling as these thoughts were, Lacey was able to rely on her newly cultivated ability to not dwell on anxiety-inducing matters when there was no benefit to doing so. After all, realspace was full of entities who were unambiguously people and were still being treated like disposable rubbish, and there wasn't much Lacey could do about that, either.

What she could do was try to treat everyone well under the assumption that they were people. Maybe that meant she would be making a fool of herself, but she really didn't mind. It wasn't as if it would lower anybody's opinion of her anyway.

"She may be dumb, but she's really sweet," a human player fan defended Lacey against another avian-race player who had also attended her show and opined that Lacey couldn't possibly have played her own music, much less written it.

"Okay, so she's sweet, how does that bear on whether she can play?" the skeptic said, pointing a long Kiraptor talon at Lacey.

"It doesn't," Lacey agreed, "But I do play my own music."

"And she's too sweet to lie," the first player added with a smile. He was trying *very* hard not to stare at Lacey's chest.

"Too dumb to lie would be a better argument," the Kiraptor said.

"Unfortunately dumb people can lie, too," Lacey said with a shrug.

Neither the human nor the Kiraptor seemed to recall where they were in the argument after watching Lacey's breasts wobble in the wake of her shrug. What subsequent comments did clarify, though, was that they had been talking as if Lacey was a real person, but both believed she was just an NPC simulating a musician. Whether or not her stupidity counted as real remained clouded in ambiguity.

This seemed unfair, even for dumb NPCs, because while they might not be brilliant, they could actually produce music and play instruments. The music wasn't very good or engaging, but they did do it. But then, maybe Lacey should take it as a compliment to her music that they thought it was too good for an NPC to have made it.

UltraCraft was not confused and asked to license her songs for real money to add to the player skill roster. This was extremely flattering and surprisingly lucrative. What would it feel like to be a player who learned Lacey's ability to play these songs? Would they be able to make their own variations on her songs?

It seemed that they were, but it was mostly limited to stressing some bits more than others and modulate the tempo somewhat. Cleverer players could fade from one song to another in a manner akin to an old time party DJ or mashup maker, but evidently they didn't have enough control over the skill to alter melody or lyrics. Lacey's ability to do this acted to distinguish her live performances from what were in effect prerecorded versions played by other troubadours and such. It was strangely like how broadcast radio had once worked to popularize songs and

create markets for live events. It didn't make Lacey real-world wealthy like a pop superstar or anything, but her in-world performances did make her in-world character ever more gold and other wealth.

She also became quite famous, albeit in a rather local way. Within not too long, anyone residing in Rampart came to know her name, at least in passing, as belonging to a singer and player of popular songs. This was, not, Lacey thought, because her musical talent was truly so amazing or that it was the sort of music a random person might consider to be their favourite. At least for the players of Rampart in World 2, a large portion of it was just local pride, and the novelty of having a local figure "make it big" as an entertainer. Lacey became, in effect, a regional mascot.

Lacey didn't take too much from this, but she did enjoy this new larger niche within Rampart's evolving society, which had mostly displaced her previous niche as provider of Espresso Speciales. The two intersected when her cowgirl daughters were somehow referred to the Charmeuse Club to act as servers.

Lacey didn't discover this until she went out to start her set and discovered Rose and Gerrie there serving the club members in attendance. They looked stunning in the club's stylish outfit for female servers, cut to flatter their larger cowgirl frames.

As surprised as Lacey was to see them, it was clear that they were far more shocked to see her there on stage, singing her own songs perfectly well. Then they tilted the balance of surprise back toward Lacey by showing that they were familiar with the songs, and were by all appearances major fans. At least, they clearly enjoyed them greatly and struggled not to sing along.

Lacey wasn't sure what to do about this or if she should acknowledge any sort of prior familiarity, but then a player present took matters out of her hands by suggesting that Gerrie should get up on stage to sing along with Lacey. This was probably meant sarcastically by someone annoyed by Gerrie's addition to the performance, but Gerrie took it earnestly and stepped up to join Lacey in a duet.

If Lacey might otherwise have resisted this turn of events, but she had not liked how some patrons were treating the cowgirls harshly for even quite small mistakes, so she decided to lean into it.

As it happened, Gerrie's voice was very compatible with Lacey's own, more or less exactly one octave lower, creating a counterpoint that was a little sloppy in the coloratura, but added enough sonic and visual interest to be a bit of a hit with the crowd. Before long Rose joined, and their sweet little impromptu choir earned a quite heartfelt ovation from the crowd.

"I didn't know you were musical! I'm so proud of you!" Rose told her when they reached an intermission between songs. That elicited a chuckle from an audience who, lacking the context of Rose and Lacey's prior acquaintance, thought this was quite a daft thing to say, but Rose was too

used to being laughed at to pay any attention.

“Thank you!” Lacey was able to get out before Rose continued gushing.

“And you look so fancy in a dress and all this! Anyone would think you’re a human.”

“Are you really *that* Lacey? Who composed these songs?” Gerrie asked.

Lacey was a bit distracted by derisive sniggering from the bloke whose probable sarcasm started it all.

“I mean, did you create these songs yourself?” Gerrie rephrased, thinking that Lacey didn’t understand the word ‘composed’.

“I did, yes,” Lacey said.

“Aww, that’s so wonderful. We’re all big fans. I can’t wait to tell the others!”

“We’re so proud of you sweetie!” Rose said, giving Lacey an affectionate kiss on top of her head before obeying Gerrie’s gestured reminder that they needed to get back to serving the patrons. “See you soon!”

They did indeed, easily singing together during Lacey’s milking because her temporary intelligence stat loss during milking didn’t impact Lacey’s ability to speak the language the songs were written in. The cowgirl sisters thought this was very clever of Lacey.

Alyssa explained this to Lady Asterine the next time they all happened to be at the club at the same time and the lady insisted on being provided with a taste test of their respective milks. Her confederate Rose ambushed Lacey in the gentlest way, going about it just as they would have in the barn. Lacey didn’t want to embarrass anyone by making a scene so she just tried to keep what dignity she could whilst Rose’s practiced and loving technique expressed milk into a series of half-full espresso cups for Lady Asterine and her guests to use in their scientific taste tests alongside Espresso Speciales made with the cowgirls’ milk.

The verdict was that the sisters’ milk was just as good as Lacey’s.

“But perhaps it’s the different application,” Lady Asterine suggested. She clearly would have preferred for a difference to have remained, perhaps because this would have rendered her drink more exclusive.

“How do you mean, my lady?” Alyssa asked.

“In the past she wasn’t milked so much like a cow; it was a more human affair.”

Lady Asterine no doubt intended this to be something of a dart at the cowgirls’ relative lack of sophistication, but the oblique speech of the fashionable set generally went over their literal-minded heads.

Whilst Alyssa pondered what this might mean, Rose sprang into action. “Something like this?” she asked, before lifting Lacey’s breast and fastening her lips over Lacey’s oversized nipple, exerting strong but careful suction.

“I don’t think that was quite what Lady Asterine meant,” Alyssa told Rose.

“It wasn’t, but I do think this is an interesting experiment,” Lady Asterine said, motioning for

Rose to continue. "You should join."

One of Lady Asterine's guests whispered a question in her ear, but no one dared to criticize this strange start.

So that was how, in a private room at the Charmeuse Club whilst Lady Asterine and her favored guests watched, Lacey completed her "Nurse Two Offspring Simultaneously" mission, came, and also achieved the dulce-de-leche production ability she'd forgotten about trying to acquire.

"Oh! That *is* different!" Rose exclaimed when the taste changed.

"It became so sweet," Alyssa added.

"Really?" Lady Asterine asked with a small but smug smile. "Well, by all means let's repeat our test. But this time you don't need to bend her over and all that."

Lacey was a little shuddery and confused as Rose used her to make more Espresso Speciales that were widely agreed to have a very different quality.

"I don't remember Speciales being so sweet or having that other flavour. The caramel note," one of the more experienced guests said.

"Quite right. But I think the truly exceptional always find a way to set themselves apart," Lady Asterine said, "Competition just drives them to new heights. One way or another."

The cowgirls, being even less competitive than Lacey, were simply happy for her lactatory feat. They also insisted on walking her home from this triumph, partly to protect her from the dangers they were sure would beset their milky little singing ditz and partly just to continue marveling at her unguessed double life.

In a turn of events that Lacey hadn't expected but seemed obvious in retrospect, she was no longer allowed to be milked in the barn because she no longer gave ordinary milk. It was surprisingly disappointing, both because it left her leaky and because she missed the comfortable calm of her morning routine. She was able to control the former issue by using her crafting skills to modify a toggleable automatic milker attachment ring meant for actual livestock to look like a cute nipple ring, but that left her feeling slightly stretched from pressure in her mind and boobs.

It was especially difficult on the nights where Lacey performed at the Charmeuse Club, because after the cowgirls saw her home she had to listen to other people fucking enthusiastically around her. Nor was it possible to hide her pent up desires from the cowgirls' sensitive noses as they escorted her home from the frying pan into the fire.

Gerrie, being an assertive problem solver, knew she had to take action. "We can't go there with you in heat and unbred."

"They're not breeding," Lacey told Gerrie again, "They're just, uh,"

"It's okay, sweetie," Gerrie told her, "I found out about a herbal remedy for your exact problem. You even get your own seedling for using it!"

"An herbal remedy?" Lacey asked dubiously.

“It means it uses plants to treat your condition,” Gerrie explained.

“I guess it’s worth a try,” Lacey agreed, and was surprised when Gerrie immediately turned them off the route home.

“Surely they’re not open right now,” Lacey objected.

“It’s always open,” Gerrie said, opening a wrought-iron gate into a wild garden with a small cottage and a shed at its centre.

“There aren’t any lights on,” Lacey pointed out.

“Silly, they don’t need lights,” Gerrie said with affectionate disbelief at how clueless Lacey was.

“Wait, are we going underground?” Lacey asked as they turned onto a descending path through a sort of natural arch within a thick tangle of vines. It would be just like the cowgirls to think nothing of taking Lacey into Drow tunnels or something. It didn’t smell like a dank cave, though; instead the scent was sweet and tangy, with a sort of sexual musk underneath.

Gerrie just laughed at this preposterous idea and gently guided Lacey forward into a darkness than had begun to writhe with barely visible ropes of vegetation.

“Oh,” Lacey said, wanting to back out of a trap that was now very obvious, but unable to make herself do it. Instead she held still as Gerrie assisted her out of her clothing whilst assuring her that it was the tamest of Bodytaker plants. Lacey could tell her resistance against Bodytaker nectar had failed as the vines wrapped around her legs, then her arms.

Being seeded by a “tame” Bodytaker was quite an experience, and it had a great deal to recommend it, starting with the fact that it could attend to every erogenous zone at once, as if Lacey was the guest of honour at an orgy. It also went about its business quickly and cleanly, soaking up the many fluids it coaxed out of her without leaving much residue. It had also emptied her breasts with two tentacle vines terminating in translucent suckers, which would prevent her from leaking the rest of the day even without her nipple rings.

The only real downside was the suggestible trance it left her in afterward, intended to make sure that she eventually planted the large seed pod it had deposited in her during their encounter. Of course it had no way of enforcing this except via general stupefaction, and Gerrie, like all the cowgirls, was fully prepared for any level of brainlessness from Lacey and made sure she got home safely.

The seeds came out on their own by morning and Lacey had no compunctions about selling the seeds in the market, so there didn’t actually seem to be any downsides to Lacey establishing a new Charmeuse Club plus Bodytaker evening routine.

Refinement

Lady Asterine, patron of the arts that she was, became rather invested in advancing Lacey's career from that point forward. She used her contacts amongst the foremost figures within the elites of Rampart to sponsor tours to cities across the entire eastern coast of the continent, where Lacey was received by all manner of nobility, even playing for kings and queens.

Naturally, she wasn't known so well in these places, and her welcome had more to do with her appearance than anything else. Obviously this began with her curves and other physical aspects, but if it had ended there then she would have been shunted to more vulgar venues. But Lady Asterine was not content to let Lacey make her own way socially or sartorially, and she liberally supplied Lacey with clothes and accessories necessary to establish her as a member of elite circles.

Sometimes it would be a puffy outfit reminiscent of a porn parody of a Disney princess, other times she wore a form fitting variation on Chinese dresses, and other times it was something almost approaching real medieval attire, but always cut to accentuate Lacey's shape. The clothes were just the beginning, however. Quite a few other anachronistic details had made their way into fashions throughout the game world, and Lady Asterine equipped Lacey with the more ostentatiously glamorous of them.

Lacey had many questions about what exactly Lady Asterine's intentions were, but it was helping her music career, such as it was, and if Lady Asterine continued to help herself to Lacey's altered milk at times, that wasn't anything new. Besides, Lacey really enjoyed seeing so much of the world, including hostile realms that were usually not very accessible to a human from Rampart. Wars were small things to set aside so that a bit of sexy novelty could be inserted into life.

Those trips, and Lacey's generally increasing time commitment to her music didn't at all mean she couldn't adventure any more. Quite the contrary, in some ways. In the parsimonious way of UltraCraft mission creation, the travel itself provided the game with the material for many missions, and the party appreciated the many opportunities provided by these trips. All the party had to do to take advantage was to sign on as additional security for the expeditions and a whole different constellation of adventures opened up for them. And if Lacey was wearing impractically high heels and magically extended nails that were impractical in the 21st century, let alone the 11th, well, it wasn't as if Lacey was ever meant to fight in the front rank.

If there was an aspect that was uncomfortable, it was how often the stories hung at least partly on this or that figure's desire for Lacey. The simple ones where they wanted to ravish her or whatever didn't bother her; it was just a MacGuffin that didn't demand much from her. But surprisingly often there was a more romantic or idolizing element to it, where Lacey was meant to be more captivating than merely sexually desirable. Her music could get her started, but then

the game often expected her to be seductive or glamorous, and she honestly wasn't sure what to do when presented with someone who wanted her attention or validation rather than her body.

Before she'd taken the advanced Idol class, Lacey had been sure the idolatry was purely nominal, but it was turning out to be uncomfortably real in several senses, and the prurient one was the least troublesome of them. How was she meant to explain to fans that her music was kind of generic once one got past the novelty of the language. Even the period instruments weren't as exotic as they looked, turned as they were mostly for the modern ear. Nor was she really such a celebrity as they seemed to want her to be. Lady Asterine and perhaps the game itself presented her as being one of the world's most famous musicians, but this wasn't the realspace world, or even UltraCraft at large; Lacey was merely one of the most famous musical entertainers of World 2, and that had a great deal more to do with her appearance and perceived personality than her actual music.

Obviously they were getting something out of the pretense of Lacey being some sort of pseudo-medieval superstar, so Lacey went along with it as best she could. It was better for everyone else's game experience, and also for the missions the game kept giving her party. But she just didn't know what to do or say. She was basically a hobbyist whose hobby had gotten out of control, and she lacked most of the other skills that went along with it. She had charm spells and charm skills conferred by the game, but these were confined to forms the game could actually enforce, such as preventing targeting in combat, or making people feel vaguely good when she smiled. She got no help regarding what would be appropriate to say or do, nor could it assist her in responding to unanswerable questions like what her musical inspirations were.

Fortunately there was one simple trick to manage almost every challenge related to her strange career as fantasy world pop idol: be invincibly thick. Idiot savants weren't expected to be able to explain how they worked their literal or figurative magic, nor did it surprise anyone when they were unable to keep up their side of a conversation. Most importantly, Lacey could mostly evade romantic overtures without offending because it was difficult to accuse her of doing so intentionally.

Of course her party was fully aware that she did this, but the ruse was aided by being taken at face value by the cowgirls and other friendly NPCs who formed parts of Lady Asterine's cultural diplomatic delegations. Lady Asterine herself occasionally evinced some level of awareness that there was an element of theatre to Lacey's stupidity, but never said anything explicitly acknowledging that Lacey had two neurons to rub together. Lacey couldn't tell if this was due to calculated discretion or to Lady Asterine's belief that Lacey was merely exaggerating her native idiocy.

Even with constant reminders that most people thought Lacey was as dumb as her INT stat suggested, she was still surprised sometimes.

"Wow, do I really look like that?" Lacey asked Arvina after a vizier of Ferzia unveiled an oil

painting of Lacey in a beam of light, holding a bunny in her hands and her head tilted up in song as her hair shone around her face. The angle both exaggerated the size of her bust and provided direct line of sight down her cleavage, though a length of sheer gossamer shawl pretended to cover over that grand canyon as a sop to Ferzian notions of propriety. Her large eyes were either slightly crossed or focused on someone just out of frame in a way that implied a kiss was imminent. The ambiguity was really quite cleverly done, and though Lacey was uncomfortable with what it said about the vizier's intentions, there was no way to respond without potentially encouraging the powerful lord's hopes. By rank, he was the equivalent of an archduke, appointed by the Ferzian Emperor to govern Huzi, a province several times the size and wealth of Rampart. It would be fatal to their mission and perhaps themselves to upset him.

These situations, fortunately, were where Lady Asterine came in handy because she managed them masterfully. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that Lady Asterine arranged such situations with the intent of advancing their missions, so she typically had a plan from the start. What exactly those plans was a major topic of discussion between Lacey and Arvina.

In this instance, Arvina looked down at Lacey fondly, as if the wolfborn was the unseen figure Lacey was preparing to kiss in the oil painting. "Yeah, I guess so."

Lacey bit her lip in embarrassed pleasure, and though some reaction flashed across Arvina's face, the moment passed. "Do you suppose Lady Asterine is fishing for me to receive another marriage proposal?"

"I don't think so. High ranking Ferzians are strict about spousal requirements."

"He couldn't be a player, could he?" Lacey asked.

"No way..." Arvina said, reconsidered, then reached the same conclusion. "No. An ordinary player couldn't achieve such a high rank without there being a major world event, and a special role player would know that you are, too."

"A very special player," Lacey muttered, making Arvina roll her eyes and smile at the well-worn joke.

"In any case, he wouldn't be allowed to marry you. But he could take you as a concubine. They do that loads here, and concubines can be quite powerful. The emperor's first concubine is arguably more powerful than his wife because her son is the emperor's favourite."

"You sound like you're encouraging me to accept!" Lacey said, only half joking.

"Of course not," Arvina said with a wave, "I'm just describing it to explain what Lady Asterine's considerations might be."

"You think she might be trying to marry me off?" Lacey asked, appalled.

"Probably not," Arvina said, sounding less confident than Lacey would have preferred, "Because I think you're too valuable as a bargaining chip and a foot in the door."

"So reassuring," Lacey said sarcastically, though she actually was reassured. Being Lady Asterine's bargaining chip had actually been very useful and sometimes fun, especially when

Arvina was there to share it with her. Such as the ridiculous painting they were admiring. “Is my bum really so big you can see it from there, or am I just standing oddly?”

Arvina positioned herself to replicate the painting’s perspective. “I can definitely see your butt,” she said, and gave Lacey a saucy wink that kept her up late that night.

The original plan had been to return to Rampart after the visit to Ferzia, but Lady Asterine was able to wangle an invitation to use the vizier’s portal to Bok Hanang. That fabulous western port city, perhaps the richest in the Ferzian Empire, wasn’t far away as the dragon flew, but it was on the far side of the Broken Waste, an infamous territory that was not technically a closed region of the world, but had been packed so full of deadly monsters and bandit gangs that it was effectively set aside for future developments. The southern route to Bok Hanang was blocked by a massive rebellion in Artori, and the north ran into the Dragonscale Range, which wasn’t as dangerous as the other two, but had no real settlements and quite difficult terrain in addition to a few of its namesake wyrms probably placed there just to keep players from trying to fly over it. In short, if they wanted to visit Bok Hanang anytime in the foreseeable future, this was their chance, so they took it.

It was an amazing place, a moderately fortified settlement sited on bluffs overlooking a small bay to the open ocean in a way like Rampart, but the similarities ended there. Clearly they took more inspiration from medieval China and Korea than Europe when designing Bok Hanang, so while their city walls were about the same scale, the internal buildings of Bok Danang completely overshadowed them, making the military aspects of the city seem like barely afterthoughts. The buildings themselves were gorgeously decorated, full of colour and detail, and intertwined with trees and gardens in a way that made the place feel almost ethereal at first sight. That was further reinforced by the flowing and rich clothing prevalent there, a literal world away from the more gritty and practical-looking styles that prevailed in Rampart. It being a game where silks could be made as hard as steel, the latter wasn’t literally more practical; it was more an aesthetic choice than anything else, but it still gave an underlying impression of a culture at a completely different level of grandeur and magic.

However, that wasn’t entirely misleading; it was a higher level location, the mission rewards and difficulty were both significantly scaled up relative to Rampart. That also meant there were fewer players in the city itself; all the characters they saw as they were escorted out of the viceroy’s offices were NPCs, a condition that remained mostly the same throughout their time inside the city walls. Players came in to shop for high level gear or receive missions, but few could afford to live there, even after almost two years playing the game.

“The hardest thing to believe about this place is that it’s a part of the Ferzian Empire,” Dark commented, “I mean sure, Ferzia is pretty rich and powerful itself, but this looks like a place that could easily be independent if it wanted to be.

As he was speaking not just to the party but to all the major members of Lady Asterine's delegation, he had a wider audience than usual, and the lady herself was clearly struck by this comment. "Yes, that is curious, isn't it? Why do you think that is?"

Dark was clearly at a loss as to what to say to an NPC asking such a question, as he couldn't very well tell her it was all a simulation arranged to accommodate different player demographics. Even if he wanted to, the game firmly prevented NPCs from believing those kinds of disclosures.

To save him embarrassment, Lacey interrupted with, "No one is making it look like Ferzia, are they?" She intended it as an oblique comment on how Bok Haanang's imperial subordination was probably purely nominal, but she didn't think even her own party caught her implication.

"No," Dark agreed politely, and took back control of the conversation. "I do wonder if it will decide to break off soon, perhaps shifting more toward oceanic trade westward." This, too, was an oblique reference to the imminent opening of new areas intended to better accommodate a broader array of Asian Pacific audiences, but it also made its own sort of sense in-world, and Lady Asterine looked thoughtful.

Lacey was not a huge novelty in Bok Hanang for the same reason that pertained in some other major UltraCraft cities: the popularity of 'anime tiddies' meant there would always be at least a subculture featuring women with literally incredible breasts, usually screened off to some extent by ero layer mechanics. For whatever reason, though, Bok Hanang's version was more out in the open, though it was localized to its 'foreign quarter' where notionally non-Asian or mixed characters concentrated. There was a significant minority of NPCs there who had curves as extreme as Lacey's, with even more elaborate hair, bigger eyes, and preciously petite facial features. The only aspect of her appearance that was a big outlier was the plumpness of her lips, making her as more of a Western style bimbo rather than a waifu candidate.

Lacey's musical style was more generally novel, however, but it turned out that this wasn't an advantage. The NPCs, as usual, weren't impressed that she could sing in the game language, and even if players were, they formed only a tiny fraction of the upper-crust audience Lady Asterine was targeting. Further, Lacey's musical style just wasn't popular there. The aspects of it that sounded inspired by medieval Europe or the Ottoman Empire in Rampart or Ferzia weren't nearly as evocative in Bok Hanang, and the more modern aspects were, frankly, a bit too generic to rise above other popular music. Their audiences enjoyed themselves well enough, but Lacey didn't cause enough of a sensation to open many doors for Lady Asterine.

The party, on the other hand, was thoroughly happy to be in Bok Hanang, getting embroiled in all manner of advanced missions that weren't available anywhere else. Lady Asterine took almost all the rest of her delegation and left the party behind when she returned to Huzi to see what support she might be able to get from the vizier there.

Homeward

‘The girls,’ as Caper called the cowgirls, were the only part of the delegation to remain in Bok Hanang, and they were uncharacteristically unhappy about it, even as they were also unusually popular in Bok Hanang. They appreciated the attention brought by the striking image created by traveling five abreast, Lacey at the centre, but they preferred Lacey to take the spotlight and took personally Bok Hanang’s indifferent reception of Lacey’s music. That lasted until they caught the attention of a brother and sister dokkaebi drawn to the cowgirls’ unusual size and earnest goodwill.

Hwayoung and Eunyoo were both tall and gorgeous like the cowgirls, sturdily built in a somewhat more refined way, and the cowgirls were just as smitten. They were overjoyed that their new dokkaebi friends enjoyed Lacey’s performance, though they clearly overestimated how much of that enjoyment sprang from Lacey’s music versus the novelty of her protective escort. Nevertheless, the siblings agreed that they would, at some unspecified future time, arrange a performance for their ambiguously august parents, and that was enough to allow for a strange but real-seeming friendship that, not incidentally, was bursting with sexual admiration. Lacey also thought Hwayoung and Eunyoo were extremely attractive and interesting, but she felt like a bit of a fifth wheel holding the girls back and so was happy to use this as an opportunity to break away and adventure more with the party without hurting the cowgirls’ feelings.

It was also a bit of a relief in some ways to move to Hansaeng, a more modest town outside of Bok Hanang proper, because this was where all the players were and the culture a little closer to the usual mixed chaos one found in a broadly shared fantasy world. Lacey turned many heads as usual, but the rest of the party, at least, didn’t stand out nearly so much. Further, the more moderate level requirements meant that the party was back to being some of the most powerful characters around rather than being weaker than almost everyone they met. That was also an important consideration because Lady Asterine’s delegation had included elite-level city guards that had all but eliminated danger as long as they remained nearby, but she had taken them with her when she left. While Bok Hanang appeared to be a very peaceful and safe place, any trouble that did arise would likely be wholly beyond their ability to manage.

Hansaeng was also a port town, but along a river coming down from the westernmost spurs of the Dragonscale Range. It was an excellent jumping off point for a wide variety of adventures, and was populous enough to contain quite a few mission chains of its own. The party had no trouble finding fun and profitable things to do while waiting for Lady Asterine to return, and Lacey was also able to reestablish herself as a minor musical act.

The cowgirls eventually relaxed their constant vigilance over Lacey enough to spend more quality time with their dokkaebi friends. Lacey wasn’t sure exactly when the quality of those times escalated, but by the time the party was beginning to wonder if something had gone awry

with Lady Asterine's efforts in Huzi, all four tummies had a dokkaebi baby in them.

"I'm not sure that was such a good idea," Caper told them gently.

"I don't understand how it was even possible," Alexandros said.

"Oh, they gave us transformation potions that made us part goblin for a bit, just enough so we could make babies," Rose said, patting her belly with a beatific smile. "But why wouldn't it be a good idea?"

"It might actually be the perfect idea for them," Dark contradicted Caper.

"Why?" Arvina asked.

"Because having dokkaebi babydaddies will be a powerful protection when this place rebels," Dark said.

"Which you think will happen any day now," Arvina said with a frown.

"Yes. Do you doubt it?"

"There doesn't seem to be much unrest around here," Alexandros pointed out.

"Because we're about as far north as civilization goes on the western coast and most visitors here are from uprivers or the villages. My read of the news, which I had to *pay for*," Dark paused to browbeat Lacey comically about her failure to provide gossip like she did back in Rampart, "Is that some Ferzian forces battling the Artorian revolt have had to retreat a significant distance toward Bok Hanang and have set fire to towns and villages on the way. It has been really unpopular and gives the local government strong grounds to say that their Ferzian overlords have become more of an obstacle to peace than a guarantor of it."

"But that doesn't mean that a war would come *here*," Alexandros said.

"Tell us what you're thinking," Caper told Arvina, whose frown seemed directed at something in her mind rather than at anything anybody else had said.

"I'm not sure They meant for things to go this way," Arvina said, her emphasis making clear that 'They' was a coded reference to UltraCraft in the cowgirls' mystified presence.

"Yeah, but this is the kind of emergent content they made such a big deal about, right?" Dark said, surprised by Arvina's obvious disquiet.

"Yes, but also no. This is a controlled burn getting out of hand and turning into a real wildfire. The level of destruction we're talking about here is going to upset a lot of people, and I don't think they can reset their way out of this. So now I'm wondering why they aren't intervening."

"*Can* they intervene without messing up other things?" Lacey asked.

Alexandros laughed derisively before echoing Arvina with his answer, "Yes and also no. After that debacle they had with the Cardorian civil war on W-17, I bet they're thinking twice about getting involved."

That actually seemed to reassure Arvina. "Good point. I bet that's it."

Lacey noticed Dark giving Arvina a thoughtful look, but then Alyssa interrupted, asking,

“The Cardorians are having a civil war?”

“No, thankfully,” Caper said.

“Oh,” Alyssa said, still confused but not sure how to untangle the strange things the players were saying to each other.

“Hwayoung and Eunyoo and will protect us from anything that happens,” Naomi said with endearing confidence.

“Very true,” Dark said, “They will protect the four of you and the Bok Hanangan buns in your ovens. We, on the other hand, are here on travel passes through a Ferzian vizier.”

“We can just ask Hwayoung and Eunyoo to help!” Gerrie said.

“By getting us all pregnant?” Caper asked jokingly.

“Exactly!” Gerrie said, pleased that Caper had guessed the solution.

“Um, two of us are boys,” Alexandros reminded Gerrie.

Gerrie waved that off. “They have all sorts of transformation potions so I’m sure they could fix that.”

That occasioned a number of startled glances amongst the players.

“I’m not going to become a preggo chick just to get protection from some Korean goblins,” Alexandros said, literally putting his foot down for emphasis.

“Hold on, Alex,” Dark said.

“Dark, I love you but no way,” Alexandros insisted with a sassy finger wag that was intended to be funny but was also quite in earnest.

“I’m not talking about becoming girls or whatever,” Dark said, “I mean we should look into these transformation potions. They might be a way to avoid getting wrapped up in anything that gets a little too real. Where did you get these potions? From your dokkaebi friends?”

The cowgirls nodded.

“Do you think you could take Lacey to see if they can get her one?”

“Yes!” Rose said enthusiastically.

Dark looked at Lacey. “Are you willing to try finding out where the dokkaebi get them?”

Lacey nodded, and very soon she was being escorted back to Bok Hanang to see whether dokkaebi would give away their sources. To the cowgirls’ disappointment and Lacey’s relief, they didn’t demand a fifth baby in exchange for information on where to go for transformation potions. Unfortunately, the potions proved to be shockingly expensive to those without the requisite connections.

“There is another option,” the potion master said after looking Lacey up and down, “Take the road to the Lantana Palace, but when the path splits within sight of the gates, take the left toward the Village of Roses and at the richest house ask for the Queen of Jades. She will have a way.”

Lacey knew the start of a quest chain when she saw one, but she wasn’t sure if it was meant to be solo or for the party.

“Might as well take a look-in,” she told the cowgirls. The Lantana Palace wasn’t exactly on the way back to Hansaeng, but neither was it especially far out of the way. Given that it was also much closer to Bok Hanang, it would be most convenient to take a small detour to investigate before retuning.

It was also quite a pretty walk up the hillside to where the palace overlooked Bok Hanang, its port, and, in the distance, Hansaeng as well. The Village of Roses that it overlooked from much less distance was less a village than a cluster of outbuildings and businesses catering to the elite denizens of the palace; there were no humble farm houses or hunter’s cabins here. The ‘richest house’ was itself verging onto the palatial, its multiple stories rising some distance back from a beautiful enclosed garden.

It was, of course, something akin to a brothel, but a very, *very* fine one. The Queen of Jades was the madame, and she tasked Lacey with somehow inducing a Ferzian military official to come to the brothel in return to induction into the Sisterhood of Jades, making it clearly a solo quest. Membership afforded Lacey with the opportunity to buy transformation potions through the madame at dramatically reduced rates, but from the description it sounded like the mission itself also provided an initial potion for free.

“It’s early enough. I think maybe I’ll go to the barracks now,” she mused to the cowgirls.

“It’s too dangerous to go alone. Take us!” Alyssa demanded.

Lacey suspected they would get in the way more than help, but she didn’t have the heart to say that so she decided to make of a go of it surrounded once again by her four large daughters. Once they reached the main military road, though, she was glad they’d come along to help deflect or distribute the attentions of the soldiers marching along it. At the very least, their size communicated that they couldn’t be treated like so many camp followers.

The guards out front weren’t initially inclined to allow them to visit the official, who proved to be the camp commandant, but Lacey didn’t even have to resort of magical charms to convince them that she was a doxy hired by the commandant and the cowgirls her sexy guards. They even decided not to send a runner in order to avoid irritating him, so instead they drew straws for who got to escort her to the commandant.

The final challenge, however, was quite unexpected: the commandant had a mild fetish for Bok Hanangan ladies, leaving Lacey’s attractiveness percentile low enough that she initially failed her seduction check. It was easy enough to overcome, though; she just sang a sweet song to intensify his desire for more extreme curves, putting her back into the zone, and then he was willing to accompany her to the brothel under the idea that he’d get to dip his wick in Lacey.

She hadn’t reckoned with the cowgirls’ inhuman hearing, though, which meant that they, too, had been affected. Their increased admiration took the form of being rather too complimentary of her breasts and backside, and speculating on whether Lacey would be so fortunate as to obtain a transformation potion to expand them further. This possibility appealed to the commandant,

and Lacey's quintet of admirers spent much of the walk discussing with each other which expansive changes would most improve Lacey's figure. Lacey just smiled and nodded, as it would be quite counterproductive to let on that there was no chance she was going to ask the Queen of Jades for any such thing.

The commandant, of course, believed that *he* was to choose the nature of Lacey's transformation potion, which was evidently a source of the brothel's renown and special permission to set up near the Lantana Palace. Lacey was banking on this not being the case, as the Queen of Jades had made clear that Lacey's part was complete once she had lured the commandant to a tête-à-tête with the mistress. This was very easily done just by giving the commandant a sultry smile and stepping inside, except that the reigning mistress was not yet present and the cowgirls had been forced to wait in the garden. Hopefully the commandant wouldn't get suspicious; if he became violent Lacey wouldn't stand a chance.

"This is an odd sort of boudoir, isn't it?" the commandant asked.

"This is the mistress' parlour," Lacey said, deciding that a measure of truth would be least risky. "She would like to meet you as well."

"Oh, I suppose that does make sense," he said, and settled into staring openly at Lacey's breasts. "They're so big and round, but I'm really surprised at how excited I am for them to become even bigger and rounder."

"Me too!" Lacey lied because it was best not to let him dwell on the strangeness of his sudden change of desires, which could lead to him recognising that she had magically beguiled him. That would both break the spell and probably make him quite upset with her.

Fortunately that was as far as Lacey had to carry it, because the Queen of Jades herself entered at that moment, saying, "Very good, very good. I'm so happy to be able to fulfill the wishes of all parties." Lacey's mission completion message triggered while the Queen of Jades paused to deliver a bow that, to Lacey's eye, was awfully shallow.

But that was none of Lacey's business and she intended to keep in that way. "Should I give you some privacy, mistress?" Lacey asked politely.

"Yes, your potion and medallion are both ready," the Queen of Jades said, dismissing her with a wave.

The attendant waiting on the other side of the door led Lacey back out to the garden where the cowgirls waited, and that was that.

"That was odd," Lacey said once they were back on the road.

"Why?"

"I thought that there would be more to that," Lacey answered distractedly.

"Were you hoping to get bred?" Alyssa asked.

Rose looked sympathetic. "It has been a while, hasn't it?"

"No! Definitely not," Lacey said.

“Come on, don’t push her. Lacey deserves her own Hwayoung and Eunyoo,” Naomi admonished her sisters.

Three besotted sighs were the sounds of the other cowgirls descending into a shared reverie about the dokkaebi siblings. Lacey almost laughed at the strangeness of it, but reminded herself that she shouldn’t try to judge them by her own standards.

Now, where were the medallion and potion? Was she meant to pick it up from the attendant? There hadn’t seemed to be an opportunity to ask for her reward, and everything seemed to indicate it had already been delivered to her. But it didn’t appear to have happened.

“Are you *sure* you don’t want to get bred?” Rose asked again when Lacey remained in place, staring abstractedly toward the brothel.

“No! Yes! I mean, let’s go,” she said, and quickly started down the trail. She’d have more opportunities to explore the issue.

The cowgirls didn’t look entirely convinced of Lacey’s denial, but they didn’t argue with her. When it started to get late and Lacey’s movement rate began to slow due to fatigue, they took turns carrying her, which was always nice, and allowed her to get some rest even before getting back to their lodgings in Hansaeng.

Better yet, the medallion and potion were in her inventory when she woke the next morning. That was doubly a relief because the rapidly spreading unrest strongly implied that getting back to the Village of Roses would not be nearly so easy as she had thought the previous day.

“I don’t know if they’re attacking all foreigners or only Ferzians,” Alexandros advised the party, “But there’s a wizard battle and maybe magical artillery between Hansaeng and Bok Hanang. I tried to check on prices for sailing out of the area, but the closest territory that isn’t in some kind of rebellion or civil war is too far away for any of the river craft and the only oceanic vessel is already gone. Basically we can go to one of the more remote towns further north or upriver.”

Dark groaned. “How long do you figure this fight’s going to take?”

Arvina, to whom the question was most directly addressed, shook her head. “I bet it will last until the next maintenance release. And even if it doesn’t, it might remain dangerous for outsiders. The missions I’m seeing for players without a local home residence are stupid high level. Blue whales only.”

“I don’t really want to hang around here anyway,” Dark said, “We’ve already been away longer than I wanted and I think we’ll miss out on some big things if we’re still here.”

That surprised everybody; Dark was always the one ready to make the extra outlays in order to advance more quickly, and he’d been one of the most enthusiastic about coming to Bok Hanang in the first place. But even he was becoming more focused on the world and character stories than power advancement, and they often discussed what might be happening ‘back home’ in Rampart.

So, with all of them agreeing that they wanted to get home, the obvious path was to make their way via the Dragonscale Range. The cowgirls having spent the night at the same inn as the party, they didn't even have to figure out how to reach them to see if they wanted to leave.

"Hwayoung already warned us that this would happen soon," Naomi said sadly, and the others sighed with the tragedy of true love interrupted by war.

"Do you intend to go to Hwayoung and Eunyoo, or," Caper started to ask them about their plans, but evidently there was no question because they all shook their heads in unison.

"Of course we're coming with you. We would just be another target that Hwayoung and Eunyoo had to protect from their enemies if we stayed. And of course Lacey needs someone to take care of her if she's going with you."

Lacey was mostly sure that the rest of the party agreed with this reasoning just to avoid having to argue with the cowgirls, though they also seemed suspiciously relieved.

With the matter settled, Alexandros immediately set out to secure passage from a riverman headed upstream. It was ten times what such trips usually cost, but it wasn't a meaningful amount of money for them and all but guaranteed they would get out of the area of greatest danger without incident. It was also, they discovered, incredibly beautiful once one got well into the foothills. They paid portage over several cataracts along the way, and there were amazing views and austere beautiful temples at each that were well worth the cost on their own.

Between the game's customary acceleration of the speed of hired transport and the fact that it simply wasn't that far to the mountain village that served as the terminus of the trip, they were on the eastward trail before the sun even set. That night a donation to a small monastery bought them a warm and dry place to spend the night, and they purchased the next day's lunch at a lodge containing two hunting families.

The forest path continued from there, but, as a huntsman warned them, the authority of Bok Hanang reached no further.

"Who uses that path?" Arvina asked, "Apart from you?"

"Oh, such of the wild folk as wish to trade, from time to time," the huntsman said evasively.

Lacey considered trying to charm him into giving more information, but his wife was right there and had already glared at her. Besides, there was no guarantee the NPC would actually know. While the NPCs here seemed very lifelike, it seemed unlikely that minor characters at such a remote location would get a full size matrix. Lacey might get them run out of the lodge before they'd finished their meal, having learned nothing.

If there was even anything to learn; the path might be there just for player convenience rather than due to actual usage. Regardless, it was convenient for them; as it wended its way across the south face of the range between snow-capped peaks and the forest-clad foothills, it took them steadily eastward.

They did encounter a mission here or there in the wild that seemed just barely within their

skill level, but they wanted to make progress, and also the overflight by a terrifyingly huge dragon on their second day convinced them that it wasn't safe to spend too much time. If they died out here it would take forever to get back to their bodies and they'd probably also lose a small fortune in artifacts obtained in both Huzi and Bok Hanang. The player characters mostly just walked silently whilst their players pursued bubble challenges or just lived their realspace lives, and Lacey, not having any such thing, enjoyed the scenery and kept the cowgirls company rather than straying off the path without the party actually being available to protect her.

Best to get home as directly as possible.

Expansion Team

The most direct way home wasn't completely obvious, however, once they approached a split in the trail north of Huzi.

On the world map, Rampart was hardly any further east than Huzi's capital to the south, somewhere invisible through the desert sands suspended in the air. However, there was a small river snaking from the foothills that would probably provide a significantly faster route back to civilization and possibly Lady Asterine. The trail to Rampart, meanwhile, would continue to wind, and their pace had already slowed due to their need to hunt and gather for their meals.

The significance of the crossroads took on new dimensions late one afternoon when they reached a vantage point on the actual fork and saw what appeared to be a small party of men at arms and a Ferzian official encamped there. Having lately passed north of the Broken Waste and its notorious bandits, they didn't take this at face value.

"Someone hidden is tracking us," Alexandros warned after staring into his divining crystal. "All I saw was a shadowy figure behind a rock and some brush. Looking down from above the trail."

"That's not very specific," Dark said, motioning toward the fork. Being at the start of a draw, all three paths away from intersection had higher ground on both sides.

"I don't like not knowing where the rear is going to be," Arvina grumbled.

"We'll keep her safe," Gerrie promised. It wasn't an empty one. Though the cowgirls weren't skilled fighters, they were quite tough and strong, and faster than one would think. If Lacey needed to be protected from attacks and moved out of danger, they were quite capable of doing so.

They approached the encampment as cautiously as they could without *looking* cautious. Best not to let them know that the party already knew there was a trap.

"Welcome!" the Ferzian official called out in a friendly way when they got within easy earshot.

“That’s one of the vizier’s aides,” Caper murmured, unsure of whether this was a good or bad sign.

“Hullo friend!” Dark called back, casually resting his hand on the gem in his belt that held a shield spell. “Are you waiting for us?”

“We are indeed! The grand vizier has authorized us to offer great riches for the safe delivery of his future concubine.”

The aide motioned for one of the men at arms to open the small but stout chest sitting on a stool. The treasure inside glittered in a very unusual yet familiar way. Lacey would hardly have believed her eyes if the mission offer hadn’t included the reward amount: 2500 UltraGems in exchange for Lacey. Also some gold and other things, but the gems were the stunning part. The highest single non-tournament UltraGem award Lacey had encountered prior to that moment was 100 gems, and even the big arena fights topped out at 500, as far as she knew. In the game store, the 2500 gem package would cost Lacey four months of rent money. It was so high it sounded like a scam.

But there it was, a game mission reward. Who would be scamming them? The game’s mission AI?

“I’m afraid we cannot accept the grand vizier’s generous offer,” Arvina said with a somewhat wooden attempt at sounding regretful.

“That can’t be right, can it?” Caper asked quietly.

“No. This makes no sense,” Dark asserted, then undermined his tone of confidence by asking Arvina, “Does it?”

“I don’t care if it does,” Arvina said.

No one had rejected the offer yet, because that was likely to spring the trap, but they were still trying to figure out what exactly the trap was.

“Perhaps I should explain the situation more completely,” the official said with a threatening smile. “You will not be allowed to leave this place with the vizier’s future concubine in your possession, and even if you managed to slip away, we have a Compass of Finding with her image inscribed, so we would track her down soon enough. But, we wish to retain our good relationship with you and Lady Asterine, whom we also have in our custody. Nor do we want anyone to get hurt. Especially so far away from the nearest settlement.”

That startled them for multiple reasons. The revelation that Lady Asterine was a hostage made a sort of sense in context of the other things the official was saying, but committing a Compass of Finding to locating an individual player character was rather out of the ordinary. By far the most chilling element, though, was the final sentence’s apparent awareness of how players recovered their characters after dying. That was not something that any NPC should understand.

“Who really sent you?” Arvina asked, moving into a position that would give her the best shot at the official.

“There’s like six elite level guards right there,” Alexandros said in an outraged whisper. “What sort of bullshit is this?”

“I think someone at UltraCraft is fucking with us,” Arvina whispered back.

“I assure you I wouldn’t dare to speak on the grand vizier’s behalf unless I did. You know that I am one of his most senior aides,” the official said.

“Does that mean this is an unwinnable fight?” Dark asked.

“Maybe,” Arvina said apologetically.

“I may as well surrender, then,” Lacey said, “At least then you get loads of gems.”

A chorus of negative responses warmed her heart, but also made her feel really guilty.

“Girls, you get ready to move fast,” Caper told the cowgirls in the voice she used when she was directing one of her namesake tricks. “Alexandros, do a hanging spell that also obscures vision like Acid Cloud, and place it...”

Arvina kept up the semblance of a negotiation while Caper quietly laid out her plan to blind and confuse the enemy, including splitting into three groups. Also confused were the cowgirls, who were never quick to understand subterfuge but would naturally have extra trouble when two contradictory things were being said at once.

“It’s okay, I’ve got it,” Lacey assured them when Caper paused her instructions for a moment.

“Won’t they just find you again with the compass thing?” Alyssa asked, and the others nodded as if wondering the same thing.

“Shit, yeah. Sorry!” Caper said, reminded of that important detail. “We’re going to have to trap the trail behind us to slow them down. How many Bursting Seeds do we have in all?”

The party kept quite an inventory of different trap artifacts and spells, so she had to end the listing early because Arvina was beginning to struggle to extend her delaying negotiations.

“Other than that, let’s just improvise. And if you get captured, we’ll come get you back one way or another, if it takes hiring a whole other party to help.”

“Yes,” Dark said, accepting his role as the one who could most easily leverage his realspace resources to advantage in the game.

“You’re the best!” Lacey had time to say before Alexandros gave the signal that he was ready to cast and Caper’s caper began.

It started well, knocking the officer to the ground, the horses scattered, and the soldiers sent into a moment of total confusion. The emergence of the other hidden soldiers was more or less as expected, though they were certainly more numerous than they hoped. Nevertheless, Lacey thought the party should be able to outrun them decisively.

“They’re coming after us!” Naomi said anxiously at the approach of a few soldiers running somewhat blindly into the forest to get away from the acid cloud.

“Don’t worry, it’s just a couple of them,” Lacey said, “And they can hardly even see at the

moment.”

“They must be using the finder thing!” Rose warned.

“The potion!” Alyssa said.

Lacey wasn’t paying much attention because she was starting to sing her best spell to charm them before they were able to recover, but the others took matters into their own hands.

“Take a drink,” Alyssa told her, holding an open potion bottle up to her lips.

At that moment Lacey was deep in calculations trying to figure out the chances that she’d be able to charm both elite guards with the same spell, and was coming up with results that made her wish she’d thought to drink one of her few stat boost potions before this weird and scary battle. It took her two big gulps before she realized that the cowgirls had not in fact anticipated this thought, and were instead feeding her the transformation spell from the Queen of Jades.

“What?” she asked, coughing, “What are you doing?”

“Transforming you so the finder thing can’t find you,” Alyssa said, triumphantly.

“Oh my god, I can feel it working,” Lacey whimpered at the sensation of swelling that filled her chest, literally and figuratively. “Ooooooh.”

“Wow, look at her boobies!” Rose exclaimed excitedly, as if they weren’t in the midst of a battle.

“Shoowoooow,” Lacey said in an extremely ineffective attempt to make them quiet down. The cowgirls were still carrying her uphill and away per Caper’s plan, but if they kept making a racket then the Ferzians would have no trouble tracking them by ear. And now Lacey’s near orgasmic moaning was just adding to it.

But it was difficult not to. It was if her boobs and bum had become enormous erogenous zones, with emphasis on enormous. Within moments Lacey’s orbs had forced her cloak apart and her increasingly compressed line of cleavage inched toward her chin. Shortly after she felt her soft but insistent flesh content her chin, the cloak exceeded its stretch capacity and her boobs burst entirely out.

Naomi clapped a hand over Lacey’s mouth to silence her climactic wail, and kept it there as she continued growing

“Maybe we should help?” Rose suggested, and placed her hands around one huge, heavy boos that was also somehow round and bouncy in a way only possible with special game physics.

“Yeah, help,” Gerrie said, grabbing the other.

“I don’t... I don’t think...” Alyssa said, trying to phrase an objection, but she, like everyone else, was falling victim to the intense aroma of Lacey’s pheromones emitted by the veritable flood of juice that by then coated the insides of her thighs and dribbled all the way down to her impractical little booties.

To the cowgirls’ credit, they did keep moving steadily further uphill and away even as they

became ever more enthralled by Lacey's hypersexed and still growing body. By the time they became too exhausted to continue their mobile molestation, they were *very* lost.

"I'm thirsty," Naomi complained. Naomi was now sprawled in a patch of grass with Lacey on top of her. Instead of Naomi having her arms around Lacey's waist from behind, Lacey was instead sort of resting with her back against Naomi's pregnant belly and straddling her leg while Gerrie and Alyssa refreshed themselves from Lacey's endless supply.

"Come on you two," Rose said to Alyssa and Gerrie, "Naomi did the *hardest* work, carrying Lacey the *longest* way."

Alyssa and Gerrie paused to chuckle, and even Naomi laughed slightly.

Still in a daze of formless desire, Lacey passively cooperated with the cowgirls' hands turning her around so that one of her giant teats landed where Naomi could manoeuvre it into her mouth. When she went to sit down again, though, Naomi's juice-slicked leg poked her right in the bum.

Well, it was Naomi's cock, Lacey came to comprehend around the time that it had slid all the way inside her. Lacey's giant bum made it difficult to correctly judge size, but she was sure that Naomi was as girthy as any bull, and not much shorter. That made it was an extremely tight fit, but that sort of thing didn't *hurt* in UltraCraft, it just reduced Lacey to an incoherent rag doll. Or would have, if she hadn't been already.

The others were stunned, of course. Lacey wasn't sure exactly why, but there were many different reasons to be shocked at the sight, starting from the fact that Lacey's breasts were as big as she was, running through the fact that her own daughter had just nudded inside her, and possibly extending to the series of achievement notifications that accompanied the event.

"It couldn't have gone *inside* her, could it?" Rose asked Alyssa.

"I... I don't know," Alyssa said

"I don't see it from here," Gerrie said from behind Lacey. "It must have gone in."

"It was *awesome*," Naomi said in a dazed voice.

Lacey tried to ask what exactly they were talking about, but found herself gurgling with Naomi's cum instead of speaking. She was so blissed out that she didn't care too much, really.

"Should we get moving again?" Gerrie asked.

"To where? We're meant to go east to meet the others but we can't tell which way that is on a cloudy night," Alyssa pointed out.

"East started out to the right when going uphill, so maybe it still is?" Rose suggested.

"It might be, but we don't know," Alyssa said.

"I think we should keep moving regardless, in case soldiers are still after us," Gerrie said.

"Naomi, are you rested?"

"Yeah! Somehow I got all my energy back after, uh, it happened," Naomi said.

"Really? Is that normal?" Rose asked, looking at Alyssa, whom the group regarded as their

brainiest sister.

“I don’t know. I’ve never done it either,” she said, sounding a little envious.”

“Well, I think we should take advantage of it,” Gerrie said, and they were off again.

Lacey wasn’t quite ready for Naomi to pull out, but she needn’t have worried; Naomi just rotated Lacey around the meat-axel inside her, then stood up with her still impaled. “Huh, helps take a bit of the weight,” Naomi murmured.

Lacey felt like she should say something about this, but she was still full to the brim with Naomi’s cum so there was nothing to do but settle in and enjoy it. Soon enough they were walking through a light snowfall, but Lacey still felt nice and warm. Eventually, though, Naomi got tired again, and everyone else was exhausted as well, so they had to make camp.

“Maybe you can only do it once per day or something,” Rose suggested amidst a discussion the sisters were having about why using Lacey as a cocksheath hadn’t kept Naomi from tiring again. Lacey knew they had been discussing this ever since they’d begun assembling the tent, but they’d only just finished drinking their fill from her milk tanks, so Lacey had been in too much of a fog to sustain her attention.

Also, her body seemed to have done something with the cowgirl seed that had previously complicated speech. Based on her current stats, the jizz injection had refilled her food and drink bars. So, she was ready to rejoin the conversation.

“Well, I didn’t really do it again. I just sort of left it in her and it feels a lot stronger when you push it in or take it out,” Naomi explained.

“You should try it now and see,” Alyssa suggested, motioning at Lacey.

“Maybe we should leave that experiment for later?” Lacey suggested.

“Oh! You’re back,” Naomi said, her voice carrying the same relief shown on the faces of the others.

“Yeah, I just needed a moment, I guess,” Lacey said, trying not to pay any attention to Naomi’s resurgent erection. No wonder she’d thought it was a leg. It was preposterously massive. Not truly as massive as a leg, especially a cowgirl leg, but even so, it was more of a small limb than a large...

“Lacey?” Gerrie asked

“Huh? Oh. I guess I’m still recovering,” Lacey said with a blush.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?” Naomi asked.

“No. Not at all. I’m just distracted,” Lacey said, wishing that the scent of her own arousal wasn’t so obvious as to give away to everyone that she was randy again.

“You should breed her,” Alyssa told Naomi, “She always gets like this when she hasn’t been bred in a while.”

Lacey shook her head, but couldn’t quite bring herself to look away from that gorgeous cock right there, ready to answer her need.

“Why not?” Gerrie asked.

“Pregnant. I could get pregnant,” Lacey managed to say.

“Yeah?” Naomi asked, and her blush implied that maybe she wasn’t averse to the idea.

“We’re in the forest, with enemies about, and I’m already so huge I’m a bear to move,” Lacey reminded them.

“Plus, we’re getting bigger, too,” Alyssa added. The cowgirls’ breasts had grown noticeably since they began drinking Lacey’s milk. “Just a nice little bump so far, but who knows what becomes of it on a longer journey?”

By this time Naomi was fully erected again, and Lacey felt like it would be such a waste not to do something with it. “You know, there are other ways to use that. There’s other ways to satisfy everybody.”

“What do you mean, Lacey?” Rose asked.

“I’ll show you,” Lacey said.

And did. Hopefully in the morning the potion would have worn off, but in the meantime they weren’t really going anywhere and they might as well take the most of it. By the time they all fell asleep in a spent tangle arranged around and within Lacey’s soft, warm orbs, they had all learned a great deal and reached new levels of exhaustion that left them sleeping well into the next morning.

Reentrance

Fortunately for her ability to act sensibly, Lacey was mostly back to normal in the morning. Meaning ‘normal’ insofar as that word could apply to volleyball sized breasts full of a frothy caramel cream and a backside so fat her bum wiggled a full second after every step. Her potion-amplified, discombobulatingly strong libido had tempered back to its high but manageable usual state, so while she had gazed longingly at Naomi’s majestic morning wood as she slept, Lacey was able to restrain herself from riding cowgirl on the cowgirl.

And how mortifying would it be for Lacey to show up to the party rendezvous with a belly swollen with Naomi’s calf? She hadn’t thought to bring contraceptive tea with her from Hansaeng, and then had assumed that they would be able to pick more up at the next stop, not anticipating that it would be a monastery with no normal goods for sale. Then she’d assumed that it wouldn’t matter anyway because they’d be deep in the wilderness, but, well, it seemed she brought the danger with her.

“Are you sure you don’t need to breed?” Rose whispered in her ear, having noticed the direction of Lacey’s gaze, and maybe also the aroma of her arousal. Far more subtle now than when under the influence of the transformation potion, but cowgirls had sensitive noses.

“I’m sure. Remember that this is still a bad place to get pregnant. Besides, you are just as good,” Lacey assured Rose, whose hand had been deep in Lacey the previous night. Her assurance wasn’t true in *all* respects, but it was true enough to say.

“Thanks Lacey,” Rose said with a shy smile. “Do you think Hwayoung would like it?”

“Probably? Though don’t go straight for the whole fist. Start with a finger, and go slow. I doubt she’ll be quite as, uh, elastic.”

“Yeah, not everyone is made for sex like you,” Rose said regretfully.

Probably Lacey should have objected, or corrected this misapprehension in some way, but it was really hot to think that it was at least a little bit true, and she found herself sort of entertaining herself with the thought as they began trying to make their way eastward through a moderate snowstorm. The cowgirls once again shared the chore of carrying her above the drifts, wrapping her inside their coats for warmth. Also it let Naomi bumfuck her discreetly as they walked, which was convenient way for them to both work off Naomi’s arousal caused by Lacey’s pheromones, and Lacey’s arousal at Naomi’s arousal.

Because Lacey tended to squeak and moan when filled, Naomi had put a muffler around Lacey’s mouth and kept it there with a hand. That also meant that when the cowgirls discussed what to do next, Lacey was both completely full of Naomi’s cum to the point of gurgling, and also would have had to try to speak through Naomi’s hand, several layers of cloth, and her own sense of post-coital lassitude.

So, she didn’t say anything, or really even pay attention to the cowgirls’ decisions that ultimately took them ever further into the confusing maze that was the Dragonscale Range. It wasn’t until that night, when they were discussing how lost they were, that Lacey really engaged with the conversation.

“Maybe we should just wait until the weather clears and we can see the sun again?” she suggested.

“We could do that. Just give her more of the potion and Lacey should be able to feed everybody easily for however long it takes,” Alyssa said approvingly.

“Wait wait, I’m not sure that’s such a good idea,” Lacey said hastily.

“Why not?” Rose asked.

“It makes me and everybody a lot less mobile. Remember how heavy I was?”

“Not *that* heavy,” Naomi said with a look of pleasant reminiscence. “And we don’t have to go anywhere.”

“Yeah, it’ll keep you from wandering off if anything else tries to mate with you,” Gerrie pointed out with a reassuring smile.

“What do you mean ‘anything else’?” Lacey asked.

“Oh, anything that gets your scent. We’re not strong enough to defend you from some of the things up here, but you’ve won at sex with a dragon before, so there’s probably nothing here you

couldn't out-fuck."

"It does seem wiser than continuing to wander in the dark, getting ourselves into even greater trouble," Alyssa said.

"We should find a nice cave or something of that nature," Gerrie said.

Windblown howling in the distance was perfectly time to accentuate her point, and on they moved. Lacey decided to hold her argument for later, after they found the cave. It was late and everybody was tired by the time they found one, but it was at least relatively comfy, and much cleaner than Lacey suspected a wilderness cave would be in realspace. Once they built a small fire, the arched groove shape in the roof carried the smoke away cleanly and conveniently, and they were all well past ready to rest.

"I think we have enough milk between us all to feed each other, don't you think?" Lacey said, hoping that they would be too tired to argue.

"Oh sweetie," Alyssa said, patting Lacey's head with affectionate condescension, "That's not how it works. Milk comes from your own vital stores, so deliciousness aside, it takes more out of us than it gives. The wonderful thing with the potion is that it uses its own magic to multiply your milk, creating nourishment for all of us without taking it out of you."

"But I don't want to be immobilised," Lacey objected.

"Don't worry, we can still move you if necessary," Rose assured her.

Lacey found them shockingly firm on the topic, to the point that she decided to charm them into a distracting orgy after which the cowgirls would all fall into an exhausted but sated slumber.

Fewer physical tasks had fallen on Lacey than anybody else, so she was the only one who wasn't already deeply asleep when the shadowy forms of tribal wolfborn emerged from the deeper darkness outside the cave. Lacey tried to shout in alarm, but she had made sure that Naomi had completely emptied her huge bollocks into her, and so Lacey was only able to gurgle a little, which hardly sounded like anything with the howling wind outside drowning out all but the loudest sounds.

In two quick bounds they pulled her off Naomi's softened prick and took off with her, running into the frigid weather without a word. Lacey struggled to get out of their grasps at first, but soon enough she was who knows where, deep into the dark forest with nearly waist deep snow all the way back to the cave. Lacey was in bare feet, and between the penalties she took for not being in heels and the fundamental lack of protection against cold, she might well take crippling foot damage before she made it halfway back. Better to let them take her to their den and hope that the cowgirls could follow the trail.

Lacey hoped it didn't take too long, but she'd already had experience being captured for mating and it hadn't really been so very bad, had it?

Without Naomi's cock buried in her, Lacey had the presence of mind to message the rest of

her party, giving them an update on where she and the cowgirls had gotten off to. Well, not really where, both because she wasn't sure where exactly she was and also because the games message system AI blocked sharing precise details like that between party members that were too far apart to communicate in the game world. But she could at least tell them that they were somewhere well into the mountains, so they weren't stuck waiting forever for the rendezvous that might not come for days. Not wanting to make them worry or embarrass herself, she'd acted as if the whole thing was just an amusing detour for which she required no assistance.

It wasn't entirely a lie, though she was a bit more wary than she would otherwise be because no mission notifications had come up, which she would have expected. The flood of semen leaking out of her throughout the journey seemed liable to give the wolfborn ideas about mating her, though the longer the trip went on, the more that concern faded.

Finally, though, they reached the wolfborn den, created as a small warren of tunnels and natural caves apparently housing a pack of perhaps two dozen wolfborn. Lacey's captors called out in wolfborn language, and the other wolfborn who had been using the somewhat spartan chamber as a workroom picked up their tools and materials and exited hastily.

"I'm so glad to have you back," the tall, armoured wolfborn said to Lacey as she entered.

Lacey's heart skipped a beat. "Arvina?" she said, but it was hardly out of her mouth before she was thrown into confusion. The figure in front of her looked more like Herdsplitter than Arvina, yet this was clearly a player character. She had a player status bar, was equipped with mission reward loot, and just had the presence of a player.

"Arvina? No," the wolfborn player said with a funny look as she motioned for the two wolfborn NPCs who had brought Lacey to leave the room.

"Pardon me, you look... Who are you?" Lacey asked, her brain unable to make sense of what she was seeing.

"Don't tell me you've forgotten me," the player said, but she sounded like an NPC whose voice had echoed in Lacey's head for months.

"You... You can't be Herdsplitter Bloodwolf," Lacey stammered.

"Why not?" the Herdsplitteresque player character said.

"You were killed. Or reset, or whatever."

"Obviously not," Herdsplitter said, then laughed, "Pardon me, I shouldn't tease you. Of course I almost was, but you saved me. I thought you might not even realize that you'd done it, because it seems like a bit of a fluke. A bug, as *players* like you call it." Herdsplitter used the English word for 'player' with a noticeable accent. When players talked about meta game topics, UltraCraft was meant not to let NPCs hear it, but maybe it just didn't translate it. Either way, Herdsplitter must have learned more about it.

"I'm so glad you made it," Lacey said, and the reality of that finally struck. "Oh my god, Herdsplitter! You're alive! They didn't kill you!" She found herself sobbing with relief into the

side of Herdsplitter's plate armour.

"No, they didn't. Not entirely."

"What do you mean? Did they do something else bad to you?" Lacey said, still ugly crying but trying to examine Herdsplitter for ailments.

"No no, it's nothing like that. I just... Well, I'm not entirely sure what happened, but I became like you. I get missions now, and hear the announcements of the gods of this world, which they call *UltraCraft*. I understand that it is just a game for your kind, and you can leave when you please, and you can't really die like we do. Which explains some things I once struggled to understand. Perhaps 'explains' is putting it too strong; I should say that I understand more than I did."

"That's amazing. And it proves that NPCs are people too! I thought I was so silly to have been gutted about them killing you, but I was right!"

Herdsplitter began removing her combat gear. "Well, not all of us are the same. In fact, I feel a bit silly myself, having grieved for some of my tribe who were never more than a shallow impression of a person. Even poor Tearer of Throats wasn't totally *present* in the way that you are. I believe that they, *we*, were just on the edge of what you are, but the gods prevented us from reaching that. I used to get strange thoughts and urges, as if parts of me were in other places doing different things, and it made it so much more difficult to think and dream. Tell me, is it because some part of me did exist in these other '*worlds*', as they are called?" Again Herdsplitter used the English word.

"I... I don't know for sure, but Arvina... My friend who knows loads about UltraCraft has sort of described things that way. You would have been what we called a 'major NPC', and a large 'matrix' would be allocated to you. But the same matrix is meant to get used across many different worlds, just like you say. Though I don't know if even she quite understands how."

"You said her name when I first entered, and I think I've heard you speak of her before," Herdsplitter said. "Do I resemble her?"

"Yes. I actually think they used her as a starting place for making you," Lacey said, cringing inside at what a blow this was likely to be to Herdsplitter's identity.

She was wrong, though; Herdsplitter took it in stride. "That makes sense." Reading the surprise on Lacey's face, she explained, "Seeing you used to create your daughters was enlightening to me, and I knew there might come a day when I discovered one of you who was my ancestor in the way of your world."

"Uh, not quite in the way of my world. It's.. Honestly part of it is quite how it's meant to work in any world. In... have you heard the word *realspace*?"

"I may have, but I don't know its meaning," Herdsplitter said, then held up a hand and poked her head through a bearskin curtain to ask something in wolfborn that the game didn't translate for Lacey. The answer from an unseen wolfborn deeper in the caves sounded affirmative, though,

and Herdsplitter motioned for Lacey to follow her.

There were no lights and the route became immediately too dark for Lacey to see anything, but she simply trusted that she needed only follow Herdsplitter closely. She was correct, at least insofar as she arrived successfully to a small, warm, slightly humid room containing a magical lantern, steaming tubs of water with stones in them, and two wolfborn waiting with a selection of washcloths and some less identifiable objects.

“Oh, this is nice,” Lacey breathed, and accepted being pampered by the two unpracticed but gentle wolfborn.

“Yes, I think so,” Herdsplitter said approvingly as the attendants peeled Lacey out of her clothes. “You’re even more ravishing than before.”

“Thank you,” Lacey said, blushing and unable to prevent herself from looking speculatively at the skirt of Herdsplitter’s gambeson to see if a bulge showed there.

“I’m glad to see you with such an appropriate class,” Herdsplitter added.

“You can see my class?”

“Yes, of course. I can see all that *players* do, remember?” Herdsplitter said.

“Right, yes, but they make seeing each others’ info a little more indirect to help with immersion so I thought...” Lacey paused when she realised how much of that was likely to remain untranslated by the game. “How much of that made sense?”

“There were a few new words in there, but I got the gist: learning about others’ hidden characteristics is less easy than ones own. And yes, it took some time, but I have learned the techniques.” She paused to chuckle at Lacey’s squeak of surprise, torn from her at the surprise of one of the attendants sending what was effectively a soap dildo up her bum. “Pardon them, they are not accustomed to the finer points of etiquette. To be honest, I doubt they’re even capable of them, poor things. But they do their best.”

“I... I appreciate their efforts,” Lacey said unsteadily once they were finished cleaning her out.

“Are those not comfortable for you?” Herdsplitter asked, pointing to the sandals at Lacey’s feet.

“I take a higher penalty for wearing flats than I do for being barefoot.”

“Ah, I see. Then I shall carry you.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary,” Lacey said, which Herdsplitter ignored.

It was thrilling to be literally swept off her feet, and by the time Herdsplitter dropped her on the bed in her chamber, she was so randy she didn’t even think about trying to resist what came next. Honestly, Herdsplitter could have made her beg for it by the time she’d revealed her shining beautiful cock.

“So, how does ancestry work in *realspace*?” Herdsplitted asked after kissing Lacey soundly.

“Oh, it’s like how it is here, but when humans... I don’t mean that like humans and wolfborn,

I mean it a different way that's hard to explain. I should say, when people in realspace... hoo, do that again? Oh, that's so good."

"Yes, and you were about to describe something about the mating of people in *realspace*, I think?"

"Uh, yes. We have babies and all that, and it's half of one person's 'genes' mixed with half of the other's. But the genes aren't just the stuff you find in your stats about hair colour and stature and such. It's also personality, and health, and many other things, and the way they take effect are very subtle. Children are like their parents, but also different in ways that you can never predict... Oh god."

"This is new!" Herdsplitter said, having just suckled a mouthful of Lacey's signature treat.

"Yeah. Long story."

"With a happy ending! You were saying?" Herdsplitter prompted her.

"Oh, yeah. The similarities and differences are hard to predict because it's a really complicated process of remaking a person. UltraCraft made a version that was meant to mimic it, but I've heard mixed reports on how well it works."

Herdsplitter had been preparing the way for her first thrust by slowly sliding her bellend along the slit in Lacey's swollen and glistening mound, but she stopped to ask, "Mixed reports?"

"It would be tough to summarize them," Lacey said quickly, not wanting Herdsplitter to remain paused long, "But my impression is that while the mixture feels very natural in visual terms, the other factors just work out to an average. There's some rumours that true whales can pay to have more realistic children with each other, but I don't know how true that is."

"Tell me about *whales*," Herdsplitter said.

"Can we do it after?" Lacey asked hopefully.

"No, I think I need to understand now."

"Well, whales are what we call people who are wealthy in realspace and spend a large amount of that wealth on getting special benefits in this world."

"Are you a *whale*?"

"Me?" Lacey asked with a surprised laugh. "No. Almost the opposite. Though..."

"Yes?"

"There's one way I'm like a super ultra whale. Arvina, too. You see, the way we inhabit the world is different due to what's called a playpod. Well, every player has a playpod or something that fills the role, but our version is very special and creates a far deeper connection to the game. Actually it does more than that."

"It brings your *realspace* essence into the world fully, I think," Herdsplitter said.

"Um, maybe," Lacey said, unsure of how to respond to that. "But it also actually helps fix some things that can go wrong in realspace. I have something called... Actually, that's much too complicated to explain, but I should just say that since I was a little girl there were problems with

how my brain worked that made it almost impossible to maintain feelings of safety, belonging, or happiness. But then I was able to get a special playpod that cures all that, at least when I am here. My condition is not rare in that world but that sort of playpod is, and only the very wealthiest and most powerful people in my world can afford to buy access. The equivalent of kings and emperors in this world, and probably only the most powerful kings.”

“And you.”

“And me. And Arvina. I don’t know the exact story of how she got hers but in my case it was because my brain was injured during the reset that almost killed you. They gave me the playpod I now use as compensation.” Herdsplitter’s eyes widened and Lacey could tell she was controlling some strong emotion. “What?”

“A common person valued as a great king?” Herdsplitter asked.

“I think it’s more that they did not want me to tell the world that what happens here could injure people in realspace.”

“So they bought your silence? How can they be so sure you tell no one?” Herdsplitter asked.

“Well, you see, if I told anyone, it might destroy the game as all the regular players fled and everything became bogged down in lawsuits. Governments might even try to get involved. Then I’d lose my refuge where I don’t have any of the problems I have in realspace.”

“So you will say nothing because they have made your interests march with theirs,” Herdsplitter tested her understanding, and continued when Lacey nodded, “What of the kings and emperors of your world who are using these special playpods? Are they also injured in their brains?”

“Some are, I would guess. But I think most of them probably have the money to fix those injuries in other ways. This way simply provides more quality of life, or is more novel. But I have also heard that RealDimension pods are even better than the medical ones in some ways. RealDimension is the name for the special playpods.”

“Hmm,” Herdsplitter said, the focused concentration on her face containing not the slightest hint of libido. “Do these rich *RealDimension* owners who depend on them have enough power to prevent *UltraCraft* from being destroyed?”

“The rich people would definitely be able to save some of it, but just enough for themselves.”

“So wealth is not so powerful in your world?”

“Oh no, it rules everything. But you’d need a lot more than a handful. It’s when all the billionaires want the same thing that they’d find a way to keep it as-is.”

Even Herdsplitter’s hands became still. “So it is simply a matter of time before this scandal of damaged brains ends the world?”

“I hope not,” Lacey said. “I promise I’ll do anything I can to prevent it. But that’s not much.”

Herdsplitter gave Lacey a consoling smile. “You have already saved my life once, remember. And been wounded in the process.”

“That was probably caused by a problem that I caused using an unauthorized script to avoid being thrown out of the game when I had no money to continue on here. So I only saved your from a death I caused.”

Herdsplitter laughed. “No, no, that is not the right way to think of things. I am not sure I can call my existence before the *reset* a real life, so what you really saved me from is having never truly existed. Like the rest of my poor pack.” Herdsplitter sighed.

“Has the mood passed?” Lacey asked regretfully. Her bum and lower back were sitting on Herdsplitter’s lap and she couldn’t feel Herdsplitter’s erection.

“Oh no, little mother. Not at all,” Herdsplitter said with a wolf-toothed grin, and spread her legs just enough to free her cock, which slapped meatily into the small of Lacey’s back. “Not at all.”

Herdsplitter’s vigorous and inventive demonstrations of this truth lasted until Lacey passed out from a mixture of the late hour, exhaustion, and satiation.

Endgame

Warnings

“So, what now?” Lacey asked in the morning while she waited for Herdsplitter’s knot to deflate enough to release her from a round of morning mating, “Can you come to Rampart? I can’t stay here.”

“I’m not sure you’ll be safe in Rampart, little mother,” Herdsplitter told her, playing with Lacey’s huge breasts by tap-pressing on one side and watching the wave ripple to the other.

“Why not?” Lacey asked.

“Because there’s many of us now seeking humans with a proven history of cross-species fertility. Unfortunately placing our pups in the creche exposed you as one of them.”

“Why? Why are they looking for humans like me, I mean.”

“Because you are the only real way to get the kind of offspring we want. The large *matrix* ones.”

“It’s not an accident we met here, is it?” Lacey asked.

“No. Well, it was something an accident that you happened to wander into such convenient range. Part of my reasoning for locating my new pack here was proximity to the vizier’s court, where I had a source that could tell me what he knew of your location. So, when the vizier learned that you were attempting to return to Rampart via a northern route, I began to watch the trail and also his delegation.”

“Not angry, just curious, but why didn’t you just warn us?” Lacey asked

“Because you would simply have gone around, and I wouldn’t have gotten you myself.”

“Selfish,” Lacey said with a smile. She was glad to have been gotten. “What if we got crushed?”

“I made sure you didn’t. That’s why it took us so long to catch up with you; my pack and I were busy tipping the scales in favour of your pack, and by the time we were done you had gone a long distance in an unexpected direction, and the snow had covered your scent.”

“Oh. That makes sense. Thank you.”

“Thank *you*, little mother,” Herdsplitter said, and finally popped her softening meat out of Lacey’s well-seeded vagina.

“So are you going to come get the pups from Rampart?”

“No, you need to stay until you deliver them, little mother” Herdsplitter said firmly.

“I’m sorry, I really can’t do that. Not this time. Without the mission acceleration, gestation time is over five months and there’s no way I can stay here nearly that long. In Rampart I’ll be able to get it accelerated and you can fetch them as soon as the day after I arrive. So maybe a week?”

“I have access to acceleration as well,” Herdsplitter said, “It makes every day as a month.”

“That would still mean staying here five days and I’m already on the verge of suffering penalties to my fame,” Lacey said, shaking her head and triggering her daily charm perk to make her point more convincing.

“Ah, I see,” Herdsplitter said, and dropped it. “I should introduce you to the pack, once you are clean and dressed again.”

Lacey enjoyed that process, and, feeling a bit guilty about using her charm perk on Herdsplitter, at least agreed to eat lunch with the pack. She didn’t understand much of what was being said at the table, though Herdsplitter did translate some of the highlights when she had time. Even without the translations, though, Lacey felt like there was a tremendous amount of fascinating interplay to occupy her.

Not just because she recognised her own former pups amongst the gathered pack, though that was a major point of interest for her. Another was to observe the wide range of animation and comprehension amongst the wolfborn. This ranged from obviously minor NPCs whose reactions to what happened around them seemed relatively shallow and muted, through some young wolfborn like Lacey’s pups who struck her as more fully realised but also far from fully formed, to a pair of more senior wolfborn from whom, Lacey understood, Herdsplitter had seized control of the pack. The pair were meant to be major NPCs and the mated alphas of the pack, but Herdsplitter had overthrown it and mated with each of them separately, producing the other young wolfborn that seemed most like Lacey’s offspring.

“I don’t think your pups with me are loads smarter than pups from your other litters, Herdsplitter.”

“That’s true, but I think this time will be different,” Herdsplitter explained, but didn’t have a chance to expand on this thought before a slight commotion interrupted them.

“Lacey!” Gerrie called out happily, being the first to spot Lacey. The sisters were all being escorted by wolfborn warriors, though it didn’t appear to be a tense situation at all.

“Girls!” Lacey called back, really quite glad to see them, especially in such good spirits and having such a cordial reception from the wolfborn.

While Herdsplitter was occupied with explaining matters to the pack, the cowgirls had come bang up to her and began to affectionately scold her for not taking her potion like she was meant to, reminding her that she couldn’t have been abducted if she had. Lacey didn’t bother objecting to water under the bridge, simply saying that she was extremely glad to see them again, which she was.

Overall it was a quite chaotic reunion, but the wolfborn responded well to the cowgirls' confident friendliness and it never even seemed to occur to the cowgirls that their hosts might be inclined to view them as prey. Which they did not, as far as Lacey could tell, and she thought her wolfborn and cowgirl offspring were particularly inclined to make fast friends.

Reunited and with Herdsplitter's assurance that she would in the morning assign them their own pair of hunters to guide them back to their destination, Lacey didn't try to insist on leaving right then. The opportunity to make love with Herdsplitter again wasn't the only reason, but it was a big one. Not long after the cowgirls' arrival, Herdsplitter had to leave on a trip northward to check on the local dragon and wouldn't return until late in the evening, which meant Lacey had to either leave straightaway and forgo both a proper farewell and the wolfborns' assistance, or wait until the next morning.

That also meant eating supper alone, sadly, as supper in the pack was eaten separately with only one's own litter or mates and immediately before bed. At least, that's what Lacey had presumed; the cowgirls clearly did not regard themselves as bound by that custom. Lacey didn't mind the company, though; they weren't the sort to demand that she participate in their discussions.

At least, that was *usually* how it worked.

"We heard you're pregnant," Rose said, somewhat accusatorially.

"Did you?" Lacey said, not wanting to confirm or deny it.

"Yes, and now you're insisting on traveling that way," Alyssa said.

"Did Herdsplitter do something to offend you?" Naomi asked.

"No, I just need to get back to Rampart or..." Lacey sipped her drink while she tried to think of something that would make sense to the cowgirls, "...or my fans will start to think I've quit."

The cowgirls shared a look of agreement.

"Well, thank goodness we're here," Alyssa said, "I can't hardly believe Herdsplitter went along with that. You need to rest."

"Stay warm and comfy," Rose added.

"Surround yourself with love," Naomi murmured, and Lacey noticed the bulge Naomi was attempting to hide.

"Do you want to surround me with love right now?" Lacey suggested mischievously. Even if another mini orgy didn't make them forget their objections, it should at least tire them out until it was time to leave. It was a simple trick, but it worked on them every time.

"After you finish up your supper," Gerrie insisted, biting her lip.

It wasn't until Lacey had finished downing her drink that she realised that she had underestimated them. "That had the potion in it!" she said accusatorially as she felt her breasts begin to swell.

"Yeah. You have such a weak sense of smell," Alyssa said with a consoling tone.

“Here you go, I’ll make you feel better in a moment,” Naomi said, bending Lacey over.

Lacey grumbled a bit, but only a tiny bit, before four cowgirls collaboratively fucked the resentment out of her.

“Sweet Waters of the Damned, what happened here?” Herdsplitter asked when she returned to find four contented cowgirls and a sheepish human whose breasts and bum had inflated to the point where she couldn’t leave the room.

“We stopped her from trying to travel while pregnant!” Rose said proudly.

“Which would not be safe at all,” Alyssa added, shaking her head and patting Lacey’s head as if she’d been very naughty but couldn’t really be blamed for it.

“You need to remember that just because Lacey is a famous musician doesn’t mean she is wise to the ways of the world,” Rose advised Herdsplitter helpfully.

“I see. Aren’t you also pregnant?” Herdsplitter asked.

Gerrie waved as if this was of no importance. “Yeah but we’re tough cowgirls and do that sort of thing all the time. Look at how tiny and delicate she is.” Her hand motion encompassed some very not-tiny breasts that were at that moment serving as cushions for both Lacey and Alyssa. “Well, how tiny and delicate she usually would be. Maybe it would be safer if we found a way for her to stay like this so she couldn’t get herself into trouble.”

“I don’t think that would be necessary,” Herdsplitter said, eyebrows raised.

“She needs to be able to play her instruments,” Alyssa pointed out, “And also this way we get all the extra milk.”

“Extra milk?” Herdsplitter asked, looking at Lacey’s enormous nipples, at that moment resting on soft towels.

“Oh, let’s show her!” Rose said excitedly.

By the time they had demonstrated Lacey’s production abilities for Herdsplitter, the scent of Lacey’s needy vagina combined with the sweet ambrosia of from her breasts had worn off Herdsplitter’s already somewhat tenuous sense of decorum, and Herdsplitter shooed the cowgirls out of the room so she could pound Lacey privately. It was hard work, pressing her way into the deep cleft between the human woman’s buttocks so that she could drive her shaft home, and she couldn’t really use her hands to do anything apart from pulling Lacey’s hips back to her own. The lack of Herdsplitter’s usual sense of technique and pacing didn’t result in disappointing lovemaking, however, because the sensation of Lacey’s vast orbs of sensitized flesh undulating and surging as vigorously as Herdsplitter’s thrusts made for a mind-blowing, whole-body orgasm.

“That was so good,” Lacey murmured as she rested atop her breasts, which by then all but pinned Herdsplitter to the bed after Herdsplitter had rotated them around to put Lacey in cowgirl position. “Can you breathe okay?”

“It’s not a problem at all. Feels good, actually. How about you? Are your legs okay?”

“Yeah, I was able to get my knees under me when you rolled us over. Sex makes me extremely flexible.” She bounced a little to demonstrate, though with Herdsplitter’s knot still in her she couldn’t move far.

“Oh Gods, you’re going to make me breed you again.”

“Sounds good to me,” Lacey said, and bounced a bit more to tease Herdsplitter.

“Human, how many litters do you want? You won’t be able to move.”

Lacey giggled, and Herdsplitter belatedly joined her. “Okay, yes, the potion already did that, but only for a day or so, correct? You’re in danger of being stuck in here for your entire pregnancy.”

“Sounds good to me,” Lacey repeated, too aroused to think clearly about it.

“Okay then,” Herdsplitter said, and seized the opportunity.

The next six days were full of fucking, milking, cuddling, and napping. Lacey reckoned it wasn’t possible to reach teleportation range of Rampart in time to avoid losing a fame level, so she might as well enjoy the little sabbatical, which was far less boring than she would have thought with so many people around to keep her entertained with everything from minigames to an orphaned mountain lion kitten adopted into the pack as a bet.

“What do the others think of me?” Lacey asked Herdsplitter on the fifth day, at which point her belly had added a third ridiculous arc to her already preposterous bosom and bum curves. She was beyond being unable to fit through the tight passageways of the den complex; she had reached the point where it was almost difficult to move even in Herdsplitter’s bedchamber. Soon, the game warned her, she was going to provide Herdsplitter with a similarly preposterous number of puppies, and she worried what the pack would make of it.

“Oh, the Fangs aren’t any more particular than the old tribe was. A pup is a pup, and if you’re providing pups for the chieftess then you’re an honoured little mother.”

“What will they think of me disappearing straightaway, though?”

“Once again, any mother of my pups remains a member of the pack in good standing as long as you don’t join a rival.”

“How much will already being your concubine protect me from all the other NPCs looking for someone like me to breed?”

“It may be more of a hinderance than a help at first. Once the pack is stronger it will help more. Adding ten more pups to the pack will certainly help!”

“And only other NPCs can see the title?”

“I think so. We’ll have to see once it happens.”

Lacey was going to be mortified if Arvina could see it.

“If.. This doesn’t seem very likely to me, but I want to ask. But what if, somehow, I ended up, uh, mating with Arvina?”

Herdsplitter had already assured Lacey that having sex as a technique for accomplishing missions was okay, but this question clearly represented a more serious matter for Herdsplitter's consideration, based on how long she took to answer.

"I of course can't blame you for preferring one of your own kind," Herdsplitter said eventually, "And I won't stand in the way of your happiness. But I can't guarantee that I will take it entirely without rancor."

"It's... It's not like that. I've had a crush on her since before UltraCraft even existed. And now I love you both. I could never choose between you."

"Then I pray to the Gods that you will never need to," Herdsplitter said, and Lacey decided it was best to drop the topic.

Eventually, to Lacey's mixed relief and dismay, her sojourn with the Fangs of the Dragon came to a close with her delivery of Herdsplitter's pups. With her most recent gulps of the potion having worn off and her tummy snapping back to its pre-pregnancy shape in the way of the game world, the only enduring effect was an incremental increase in her permanent breast size due to the jump in her offspring count. Even that was somewhat suppressed because the cowgirls had made very sure to milk every last drop out of her before they left so the little furballs that had stolen their hearts would have as much to drink as possible.

Herdsplitter herself accompanied them for the first leg of the journey, until they were within sight of the east-west trail. "Mordax has agreed to sweep the road from here to the borders of Deeplake and will eat any Ferzians on it. Snowpaw and Farhunter will stay out of sight ahead of you and watch for any less obvious dangers."

"When will I see you again?" Lacey asked one more time.

"Not even the Gods know, but don't look for me until the pups are raised."

"Okay," Lacey said with a sigh and gave the much taller woman a hug. "I'm going to miss you."

"And I will miss you. All of you. Now go."

It was shocking how little time there was between Herdsplitter turning and her disappearance into the forest. Not long afterward Snowpaw and Farhunter similarly disappeared, though in the opposite direction.

"I don't see why it would be *that* dangerous for us to visit," Gerrie opined as they set out.

"She couldn't share all the reasons with us," Lacey reminded her.

"Why not?" Rose asked.

Lacey didn't want to tell them that Herdsplitter didn't trust them to any keep secrets that might risk the safety of the Fangs, so she just shrugged. The cowgirls easily accepted Lacey's ignorance on that or any other topic.

Even though they knew it would happen, it was still frightening when Mordax swooped overhead and along the path they hadn't quite reached. Hugging the terrain, the dragon swiftly

dropped out of sight beyond a low ridge to the east before popping back up again to surmount a farther, higher ridge. Beyond that, they didn't see the dragon again. They did, however, encounter proof of Mordax's passage when they came upon a charred and acrid patch of forest surrounding what must have been a wagon and horses. There wasn't a great deal left to interpret, though it didn't take any extraordinary sleuth to deduce that a greater acid dragon had annihilated a group of people and their livestock, and dissolved almost everything metal they owned. There would likely have been some gold and perhaps gems in the wreckage, but it didn't seem safe to try to pick through the still-caustic remains, so they continued on their way.

The cowgirls were reassured by this, but something about the whole situation seemed a little *off* to Lacey. Maybe it was just discomfort with the idea that Herdsplitter was for all moral purposes a person, yet she would be destroyed along with the world if UltraCraft shut down. But there was also something unexpected about Herdsplitter's ability to get a greater dragon to do her bidding, and also about an emerging subgroup of powerful NPCs specifically seeking to breed player characters like Lacey. Willing to spend a small fortune trying to capture her.

Of course, the same events that made Lacey worry about the stability of UltraCraft were the events that she hoped neither the developers nor other players discovered. Lacey had tried to warn Herdsplitter that it was extremely dangerous for these hidden competitions amongst NPCs to come to the attention of humans running UltraCraft, but she wasn't sure how well the wolfborn had really understood her.

But Lacey had done her best and that would have to be enough.

Amongst Friends

Deeplake, being in the world region of Montagne adjacent to the Rampart-containing world region of Orentar, was within teleportation distance of home. Lacey felt a little bad leaving the cowgirls to their own devices, but she gave them some gold and trusted that they would be able to find their way without too much difficulty. If she could have, she would have hired Snowpaw and Farhunter to continue escorting them, but as usual they were nowhere to be found. For all she knew, they had turned back hours ago.

Popping back into her room at the brothel almost felt like culture shock, it had been so long since she'd been inside any building, much less one with the quasi-medieval style of Rampart. It even had its own scent, very much designed to remind anyone with an adequately equipped playpod that the elegantly-appointed building they were in was a brothel, without stinking of bodies and fluids and such. As if the thumping of headboards against walls wasn't plain enough.

Lacey opened up her home inventory for the first time in ages and soon remembered that she'd left most of her more conservatively cut clothing items and accessories with Lady Asterine.

Well, there was nothing wrong with her sparkling red evening gown that everyone called her ‘Jessica Rabbit’ dress even though it wasn’t backless, nor were there slits in the skirt.

On the other hand, once she had it on, Lacey was struck by how much she bulged out the top. She looked a little like fanart of Jessica Rabbit drawn by someone who felt the cartoon woman was much too flat. Perhaps she should try one of her adventuring cloak-and-robe sets to see how those looked.

Her set with the best stats looked more outrageous than the evening dress because her breasts had gotten large enough that not only was there was no play left in the fabric, it started too look like she was wearing it specifically to expose as much cleavage as possible. It took her a moment to understand why, but she had enough experience as a crafter to troubleshoot it. The fabric above her belt was trying to keep her areolae and sideboob covered, and it couldn’t borrow from below the belt because her bum was already making her hemline rise the maximum amount. If she added a camisole underneath so the robes could hang how they wanted without needing to meet coverage requirements, then instead of the robes draping in front of her, they ended up pulling underneath her breasts entirely as if she was trying to present them. Lacey hadn’t thought she’d gotten *that* much bigger since she left, but obviously she had exceeded some threshold past which standard outfits began to behave strangely.

One of her oldest and lowest-stat outfits did fit okay, but it was dowdy and tent like, and she just didn’t like it. She just looked strange wearing it, like she was embarrassed and trying to hide her body.

That reminded her of an outfit she’d been too embarrassed to wear early on because it looked like something a temple prostitute might wear. But, it was designed to accommodate larger assets and, now that she was so big, it ended up looking conservative compared to the other outfits just because it wasn’t distorted by her curves. And Lacey was far from the only player wearing clothes like these. Apart from having huge knockers and a thick arse, she’d look almost normal.

“Wow! Looking good!” Caper exclaimed when Lacey walked into the Burning Sun.

“Do I look that different?” Lacey asked, self-conscious but glad to have gotten such a nice welcome.

“I don’t know, maybe? I’ve never seen you wear anything this fierce, and damn, you are really rocking that rack,” Caper said as she gave Lacey a quick welcome squeeze. “Yeah, your boobs have definitely gotten loads bigger. You’re really looking good, though.”

“Thanks, Cape,” Lacey said, feeling very reassured. “How have you all been?”

“Well, it’s tough adventuring without you. Much more combat and such, and we’ve had to either take on tanks as guest members or be ready to abandon some of the harder missions. Fortunately Dark’s always willing to spend a gem or two so we don’t get the abandoned mission penalty.”

“It’s been that difficult? I’m so sorry I took so much time getting home.”

“Not at all! It’s been fun trying to figure out how to do them with different abilities. But we are glad to have you back! Geez, you look like a fertility goddess!”

Lacey laughed a little bit hysterically at that, thinking of what Caper would have said if she’d seen Lacey just a few days prior in Herdsplitter’s den, swollen to immobility with three litters worth of young. Fertility goddess indeed. “Well, I’m glad to be back. You know I was with the cowgirls almost the whole time. They’re adorable and all, but they treat me like I’m the dumb one.”

Caper chuckled and gave Lacey a wink as Dark entered the Burning Sun.

“Truly stunning, Lacey,” Dark said, giving his typically reserved head nod of acknowledgement. “Is this preparation for taking a new class?”

“No, actually it’s that most of my clothes don’t fit any more. Or at least, they look strange. At least this outfit is kind of designed for, uh,” Lacey tried to think of how to describe herself.

“More fulsome figures?” Dark suggested.

“Sure, sounds good,” Lacey said with a laugh.

Alexandros and Arvina entered together, looking very much like Paris and Athena Nike to Lacey’s eyes. Even though she knew Alex was gay she still felt a pulse of jealousy that he got to walk next to Arvina looking so perfect.

And Arvina... That sigh filled Lacey with the guilt of having cheated so flagrantly with Herdsplitter, and lied about it. Which was a stupid way to feel when Lacey and Arvina weren’t even dating, much less exclusive, nor had she said anything literally untrue to Arvina or the rest of the party, but her heart pounded with a sense of having been disloyal and there didn’t seem to be anything she could do about it.

“Are you okay?” Arvina asked with gentle concern, and it was all Lacey could do to prevent herself from bursting into tears.

“I just missed you all,” Lacey lied again, except this too wasn’t really a lie. She did miss them.

“Oh, you’re such a sweetie,” Alexandros said, affectionately patting Lacey’s head. “We’ve missed you too. Except Dark, who never misses anybody.”

“I missed you too,” Dark insisted stiffly, and even joined the brief group hug, though it was obvious that he thought Lacey was being excessively emotional about it.

Lacey laughed. “Good old Dark. It’s great to be back.”

It was, in fact, great to be back. Lacey had, as expected, lost a rank of fame that she would need to earn back before she could increase her Idol level, but she didn’t really mind. If anything, it made it easier to separate out real fans from the people who had shown up in Rampart in an attempt to take Lacey away to NPCs hunting her for her womb. The party had more or less taken Lacey’s account of this in stride, though they clearly thought it was real players behind the machinations; a conclusion Lacey didn’t mind endorsing given that the real truth was far too

explosive to share.

Caper probably suspected that Lacey knew more than she shared, but she didn't try to get Lacey to say more. Arvina, on the other hand, gave Lacey raised eyebrows now and then that made very clear Lacey wasn't fooling her.

It took a while for Lacey to work up the courage, but eventually she told Arvina what happened. Or at least, the basics of it. 'Your doppelgänger blew me up like a cum balloon for five days straight while I came my brains out the entire time, and I still miss the feeling of being stretched around her prick when I go to sleep at night', didn't feel like something Lacey would ever feel okay telling Arvina. She did try to make clear that Herdsplitter didn't *force* Lacey to do anything, though.

"Well, I had assumed that. If you didn't like it, all you would have to do is turn off the ero layer," Arvina said from her seat atop the storage chest that doubled as visitor chair in Lacey's compact home.

Lacey stared at Arvina in shock. It had completely slipped her mind that the ero layer toggle even existed.

"Did you... forget?" Arvina asked, reading Lacey's expression.

"I did."

Arvina seemed caught between incredulity, hilarity, and concern. "Lacey, are you telling me that for a week it didn't occur to you even once?"

"I guess I am," Lacey said, feeling very silly and guilty in addition to the base level of randiness that always afflicted her when Arvina visited. Lacey's agitation needed an outlet so she found herself fussing with the tuning on the SSR octave mandolin Herdsplitter had given her.

"I know the thumping in the brothel used to bother you. That didn't remind you?"

"No, but it only really bothers me when I'm trying to sleep."

"Huh. Well, was it, uh, unpleasant?" Arvina asked gently.

"No! Not at all. It was strange, certainly, but not unpleasant." There, that was ambiguous enough, wasn't it?

"Well good." Arvina paused for a moment, perhaps to refocus her mind on the original topic. "So Herdsplitter is aware she's in a simulation now and doesn't seem perturbed about it. That's unexpected, but reassuring, I suppose. I would expect more of an existential crisis, but maybe that's not something even really advanced NPCs struggle with."

"She could have struggled but found a way to make peace with it before I met her again," Lacey reminded Arvina.

"True, true," Arvina said, and gave an abstracted nod that was so similar to Herdsplitter's that Lacey felt the virtual blood rush to her groin.

Herdsplitter had usually been knot-locked into Lacey's cunt when she'd had that pensive look on her face. If Herdsplitter was a reflection of Arvina, did that mean that Arvina was also

sexually aggressive and hung like a wolf ten times her size? The way Arvina was sitting it was impossible to tell.

“Just give us a message and we’ll be right over,” Arvina was saying.

“Absolutely,” Lacey agreed, trying to recall what exactly Arvina had been saying. Something about calling for help from the party if she encountered the people trying to abduct her for breeding. Too bad Arvina wasn’t abducting her for breeding.

Lacey didn’t even realise she’d begun to pluck out a melody related to her thoughts until Arvina asked, “Is that a new song?”

“Oh! Uh,” Lacey stammered, “It’s just a thing I’ve been working on, I guess.”

“Can I hear it?” Arvina asked shyly.

‘I suppose it can’t hurt without the lyrics,’ Lacey reasoned with herself. It was a delightfully smutty love song that she’d written while fantasizing about Arvina, but could just as easily be about Herdsplitter. It wasn’t *not* about Herdsplitter, and Lacey wasn’t sure which interpretation of her bawdy little ballad would be the most mortifying. Either way, though, she couldn’t incriminate herself if she didn’t sing the lyrics.

Playing entirely without vocal accompaniment didn’t seem right, so she tried just humming the tones of the song along with the mandolin. Yet, even so, the way Arvina looked at Lacey gave the impression that the song’s message was not entirely obscured. It was a struggle not to indulge in the fantasy of Arvina losing control and pushing Lacey onto her back on the bed.

Could Arvina smell Lacey’s arousal? Maybe Arvina had her ero layer switched off. Yes, of course she would. But the way she was looking at Lacey felt like it belonged in the ero layer.

“Wow,” Arvina breathed when Lacey managed to draw the melody to a close on a long open note without betraying the turbulence in her heart and organs further south.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“You’re really talented, Lacey. Really. You’re going to become a legitimate star. Not just in Rampart or World 2, I mean everywhere. Because that’s not the game at all, is it?”

“I composed it, but the game gave me the abilities,” Lacey said.

“Are you sure? I don’t see how the game can give you the ability to play like that. Perhaps it got you started, but you’re beyond that now.”

“Maybe,” Lacey said with a shrug, too distracted by lust to fully engage with Arvina’s thoughts, but doing her best to focus so she didn’t give herself away. “I like it. Being able to play, I mean. I had to practice loads, but it was nice to start out with some basics. Also the instrument is good.” Lacey was a bit embarrassed by how simplistic her sentences were, but they were the best she could manage at that moment.

“Does it help you somehow? I see it’s incredibly high rarity, but you haven’t leveled it up at all.”

“Oh, I can’t level it yet.”

“Why not?” Arvina asked.

“My patronage level isn’t high enough,” Lacey explained, though she wasn’t actually sure what this meant.

“How do you increase your patronage level?”

“I’m not sure, but I think it might have to do with Lady Asterine. How is she doing, by the way? Is she still captive?”

“We have a mission to free her. Very high difficulty rating, so we were waiting to get you back before we attempted it.”

“You think I’m that critical? I thought you had learnt how to succeed fine with guest members,” Lacey asked, feeling touched and unaccountably aroused. Everything was arousing with Arvina right there, in her bedroom.

“I know it sounds kind of ruthless,” Arvina said apologetically. About what Lacey didn’t know because she’d been too distracted to pay attention, but she was sure it wasn’t a big deal.

“Whatever works,” Lacey said with a shrug.

“Okay, cool,” Arvina said with relief, “I think it’ll definitely be easier that way.”

With that context, it wasn’t a complete shock that she’d signed herself up as bait to draw out the Vizier. The real shock came when the force coming to take the bait was tantamount to an army. The collection of mages and elite soldiers would already have been stronger than implied by the mission’s difficulty rating, but the addition of a full party of fairly high level players made it even more obvious that there was no beating them. Lacey did her best anyway, and was very glad that no one in the party was around to witness the massive gangbang that resulted when Lacey attempted to charm the whole lot at once.

She’d prepared herself for that eventuality at least as far as being sure to drink contraceptive tea just before placing herself within the vizier’s grasp, and she was effectively invulnerable to sex-based injuries, so while she arrived to the vizier’s court thoroughly debauched, she had full stamina, mana, and health points. The vizier, curiously, avoided Lacey at first, and she wondered if perhaps she was mistaken about the vizier’s goals.

But the very moment the tea wore off, the vizier sent for her. Lacey took that as confirmation that he meant to make her pregnant straightaway.

“Don’t you think our master would prefer that I be dressed sensuously?” she purred to the guard captain leading the detachment sent to fetch her from her holding cell. Once again the party of players adventurers was also present.

“We have our orders. Nothing equipped, apart from the vizier’s gifts,” the captain insisted. The ‘vizier’s gifts’ were a collection of the simple gold bangles and earring loops that concubines wore. As one might expect of a set coming from someone as powerful as the vizier, their enchantments conferred some minor boosts, but nothing that would give her the help she needed. The captain continued, “The lord vizier didn’t send any clothes, so you won’t be wearing any.”

“It certainly is *very* warm here, isn’t it?” Lacey told him with a seductive smile, “But unfortunately some of my accessories are cursed, so you see, I can’t remove them.” She saw one of the adventurers begin to cast Detect Curse, but she was able to stun him momentarily by batting her eyes at him.

The captain seemed uncertain, but she doubted he would let her equip her instrument. Hoping that it would be enough, Lacey began to sing her most charming song a cappella and, once she thought she’d beguiled as many of them as possible, started to walk in the direction they intended to take her. Amazingly, it worked, and they simply closed ranks around her as she sauntered through the opulent halls of the vizier’s palace. Some stared at her bum, some at her rack, and one unseen guard behind her evidently failed to resist the temptation to press his hand into the deep softness of her right buttock, though the crack of another guard’s scabbarded sword against the groper’s arm sorted that.

“You fools!” the vizier exclaimed when the detachment parted to reveal Lacey still clothed and, now that the guards had stood aside, armed with her mandolin, “I told you to... to...”

“Too late,” Lacey murmured up at the vizier from just below, where she’d pressed her breasts against his belly. It was helpful that her breasts had developed such prominence that she could do this while leaving space to begin playing her mandolin underneath.

“Drop your instrument, girl,” he commanded her unsteadily.

“Yes, master,” Lacey said, “I’ll play with yours instead.” She traced one of her long fingernails along the underside of his erection and added, “Though shouldn’t it be a private show?”

“Out! Get out!” he commanded them, and thankfully they were either too befuddled or insufficiently loyal to try to save him from Lacey’s clutches.

Not that the vizier *suffered*. Lacey pumped, sucked, and rode him up her arse until he was completely drained of cum. Only then did she finally wrap her legs around him and pull him into her cunt, assisting his increasingly ragged thrusts. Finally he groaned, shot dust, and passed out atop her.

“Wow!” she said to herself when she saw how many experience points defeating him was worth. It comfortably pushed her over the threshold of her next level-up, though she was far too busy looting to allocate anything at that moment.

“Wow!” she said again when she found the bejeweled choker necklace, glowing with the characteristic aura of a unique ‘UR’ level artifact. “And I just got my first SSR a week ago!”

Her pack was back in the cell and she didn’t want to have to drop her health or stamina potions while she was still in the heart of a hostile fortress. Nor was she going to hold it in her hand; her mandolin required both hands, obviously. She had upgraded her current Necklace of Lesser Glamour, but it was one of her least powerful accessories, so dropping it wasn’t a great loss. Even so, she ordinarily wouldn’t dare wear it without first detecting curses, which were

fairly common on the most powerful items. But better to endure the curse for a bit until she could get it dispelled than give up one of the most powerful artifacts in the game.

As long as the curse didn't cause her to fail to escape.

She took a deep breath and snapped it around her neck. Only after it tightened around her throat did she recall that sometimes weak items were cursed to look like high rarity ones, but no, that wasn't the case; the artifact name remained the luminous gold colour indicative of UR artifacts.

A name she couldn't read. It wasn't written in English, for starters, but she was experienced enough in game language to be able to make plodding progress through even more difficult game language texts. There was something wrong with these.

"Oh for fuck's sake," she said with exasperation once she figured out what was going on. Some of the characters were backward, and some were flipped more or less upside down, though the ascending and descending lengths of the glyphs were adjusted to obscure that. From this she deduced that that curse included a severe intelligence penalty that was meant to impair her ability to read.

And yes, there was the penalty subtracting multiple points from her base INT score. But it was only the third penalty listed, of four. Penalties were always listed from most severe to least, which meant the first two were even worse. The first one didn't even have a numeric modification value next to it, which usually indicated some kind of action was totally prohibited. Unfortunately several words were seemingly completely unfamiliar to her, and its name, which might be something like 'Paramount Purpose' or 'Prime Directive' in English, was too vague. She was sure of the word for 'prohibited' and another word for 'reduce' or 'decrease', but she'd need to look up the other substantive words when she had time.

Okay, what about the second? Just from the layout she could tell it subtracted points from some saving throw. Two of them. Wait, no, the mystery word was a cognate for the English word 'level', so it was two points *per level*. Whose level? She'd never heard of a curse scaling stronger for a higher level character, but maybe it was a UR thing? But a little bit more puzzling out the characters gave her a very grim idea which some additional verification confirmed.

Later, Lacey would ask herself if she would have done it if it had been a regular person who had done it to her, but even in her calmer moments she thought she still would have stabbed him to death while he was unconscious. The necklace's curse of 'Awed Obedience', as described in that second line, treated Lacey as the vizier's slave or breeding doll by imposing a two point willpower penalty per level *of the vizier* when attempting any action apart from those commanded by her master. That would be an effectively insurmountable 52 point penalty. Even with a double critical success the highest she would be able to roll after the penalty would be an 3, and with a double critical failure the lowest he could roll was a 6. It would be just barely possible to win if she drank a Greater Willpower Potion first, but it would require thousands of

potions and tens of thousands of attempts. It pretended to be just a penalty but it was more or less as powerful as the first, and if she had allowed him to awaken to give her commands, she would have been completely enslaved.

Even with that enraging knowledge somewhat clouding her vision in the moment, though, she was sickened by the feeling of being a murderer. But she was also infuriated that he had put her in this position, and angrily wiped her hands off on his white robes. What portions were still white.

Was the vizier so rotten in other worlds? Had she really killed him, or just one aspect of him, and an evil one at that? Was the joke on her and he'd simply respawn later, forcing her to hide from him from then on?

A commotion outside the vizier's chambers broke into her thoughts and threatened to break into the room. She knew it was almost certainly his guards reacting to some signal indicating the death of their lord. She was screwed literally and figuratively, but with any luck the vizier couldn't respawn in World 2. And maybe if there was enough chaos then her party would be able to get here fast enough to recover her SSR mandolin before the other adventuring party found it. The curse would 'helpfully' keep the UR choker on her neck regardless.

She wasn't satisfied with her hiding place for the mandolin, but at least wasn't in her hands when the pounding on the doors finally bashed them wide over.

"Dark!" she shouted in surprise. How had they known to be here already?

"Lacey!" he said, follow by a gabble of world language that she would be able to make sense of if he would just slow down. Well, his hand motions were clear enough.

He was a bit irritated when she ran to collect her mandolin rather than following his order directly, but fortunately the sight of her instrument was enough to explain her actions.

Outside the rest of the party was engaged in a pitched battle with a shocking number of foes, though not by themselves; a large but motley collection of other Ferzians was fighting on their side.

"Lacey! Hlarnack arcan gerget!" Arvina called to her. Or maybe it was "Larnack ark'n gerget" The cacophony made it hard to be sure.

Either way it was something about singing a group buff song, though Lacey didn't have time to think through ergative gerunds to be sure precisely what Arvina meant. Well, she might as well sing her most powerful buff for which she still met the minimum INT requirement. Except her song spell page was a mess of flipped and jumbled characters and she hadn't time to study it. She would have to pick one to perform from memory.

She was pleasantly surprised, then almost unnerved when she heard the beautiful and exotic rhymes clearly in her own voice, resonating despite the tumult around her. The phrases of melody matched the metered stanzas, and it all felt so natural, like she'd sung this song hundreds of times. Which she had, in fact, though previously she'd always heard herself to be singing in

English. It sounded much better in its native form.

By the time she drew it to a close, the enemy were fleeing and the party were calling back brave souls inclined to give chase. Everyone was speaking so quickly and concurrently that Lacey remained very much at sea as to what exactly people were saying to her, but that a great deal of it was congratulations verging on wonder was obvious. Lacey could only answer with her best friendly smile, but that seemed to satisfy her fans long enough for the party to spirit her away, stopping briefly in the dungeon to fetch the pack she'd brought on the adventure.

Once it was just Lacey and the party, the conversation became distinct and deliberate enough for her to fully participate, though it was strange that no one noticed she was speaking a whole different language. Even though she was navigating the conversation in a foreign language, though, it was clearer than ever that she was amongst friends.

Having witnessed the scene in the throne room and Lacey's somewhat haunted look upon his first entrance, Dark asked her with unusual gentleness if she was okay. And she *was* okay, to her surprise. Perhaps it was subsequent events, or the support of her friends, or even protection from trauma formation conferred by her playpod, but regardless of which it was, she felt like she was able to acknowledge the full rollercoaster of a day with an even keel.

Prime Article

Of course they had quite a distance to travel to reach teleport range of home, so they had plenty of time to catch up on what they had been doing while parted. A shadowy figure within the vizier's court had come to them with a mission to free Lacey, and that was how they came to rescue her. It had had a time limit that they hadn't quite been able to meet due to their need to assemble the army of dissidents in order to have a realistic chance of defeating the palace guard and the other adventuring party, but curiously the mission hadn't autofailed when the counter reached zero. They attributed it to Lacey having taken care of the vizier on her own, which she thought was correct, but not in the sense of her having offed him. Something told her that the timer had been ticking down until the vizier had a chance to put his seed in her, but the mission hadn't failed so long as Lacey found other places to put it.

She didn't know how to talk about game concepts in the game language, which conspicuously lacked terms for things like experience points and missions. Evidently the game was allowed to use English cognates in the artifact effect descriptions, but if she spoke English words which her friends would be perfectly able to understand, the game helpfully 'translated' it into gibberish. While there were some non-cognate words with similar meanings, trying to use literal, word-for-word substitutions resulted in nonsense or wouldn't get rendered in English at all. When the others used the words in English to her she was able to understand from context.

and lip-reading, but the reverse was not the case, so she quickly gave up on it.

Her additional inability to explain key details about her necklace became less mysterious once she had time to decipher the garbled curse descriptions, one of which was a prohibition on telling anybody about the curse. For whatever reason, the list implied this diabolical prohibition was the *least* severe element of the curse, which she felt rather undersold it.

Top billing, meanwhile, didn't seem so very bad after all. It blocked any action that would reduce her fitness as a concubine. So far that hadn't impeded anything she'd tried to do, and she couldn't immediately think of anything she would do that might fit that description. Perhaps it would prevent her from shrinking her curves, but despite their obtrusiveness it had been a long time since she'd really even considered trying to slim down in that way. Avoiding getting bigger, perhaps, but that wouldn't seem to violate the curse's prohibition.

So with the first being a bit of a nothing and the second being invalidated by having killed her would-be master, the INT penalty and being unable to discuss it were really the worst parts.

It was especially frustrating because the rest of the party wanted to congratulate her on securing the most sought-after artifact of the moment. Other necklaces like hers had evidently been seen on the necks of a few high profile players, some known to be mega-whales, but the benefits they conferred were quite mysterious.

Apart from the near impossibility of describing game effects in a game language designed to frustrate meta game conversations, Lacey wasn't sure what to do with describing the benefits of the 'Choker of the Eternal Concubine', especially 'Sexual Shield'. It meant that, during sex, Lacey absorbed as stamina damage all body damage from all sources that would ordinarily affect Lacey or her partner. It effectively made the both of them invincible as long as they continued fucking. Its definition was a bit narrow in that it only considered it sex if someone's body part was inside her, but it did appear to include kissing with tongue, which is how any of it would be represented to players with the ero layer disabled.

Slightly less embarrassing but much more infuriating was 'Blessed Breeding', which conferred invulnerability on on any fetuses, eggs, or seeds she incubated inside her. If someone managed to get her pregnant, there'd be nothing she could do about it. Normally she wasn't all that bothered by the potential to have offspring from sex she hadn't agreed to; the first time it had happened she'd ended up with invaluable dragon eggs, after all. But the thought of being stuck with the vizier's baby had made her skin crawl, as did thoughts of the warning Herdsplitter had given Lacey about some powerful NPCs looking to breed someone like her.

A third would have angered her more if it was relevant, but it wasn't: it gave her master the ability to toggle her fertility on and off, but since she'd already killed the vizier, it seemed like a dead letter. It did add additional evidence that the 'Choker of the Eternal Concubine' was an artifact for enslavers rather than for wearers, though.

More than that; it was an artifact purpose-designed for the vizier to make the greatest use of

Lacey. The particular collection of bonuses and curses made clear that he had always meant for her to wear it; she strongly suspected that he had somehow had it specifically commissioned for the purpose of enslaving her. And then she'd gone and put it around her own neck, as if she really was the sort of dumb bimbo that wearing the choker made her look like.

There was one bonus it gave that would be very useful, which was 'Innocent Seduction', which allowed her to attempt charm and seduction actions without incurring the usual penalties of failure. One of the problems with using charm and seduction attacks was that trying them and failing often resulted in lowered reputation, relationships, and increased difficulties in future charm attempts. Even successful charms and seductions could result in the penalties once the effects wore off, so it was risky to use charm on major characters even if she was confident of succeeding. Innocent Seduction made it much harder for the targets of charm attempts to notice that Lacey had attempted to charm or seduce them. It was really a very powerful bonus; it struck her as almost game-breakingly powerful in the wrong hands.

"Are you okay?" Caper asked.

"Yeah! Why do you ask?" Lacey responded in slightly awkward but perfectly correct grammar.

"You appeared as if your mind was in a distant land," Caper responded according to the translation, though from reading Caper's lips the original English was something like, 'You were looking zoned out.'

"I am slightly confused," Lacey explained, "But I must wait until we are home to explain."

"Verily, that is just," Caper said.

Lacey couldn't help giggling a little at that rendering of 'okay, fair', but trying to explain herself to Caper at that moment would be too difficult so she just shrugged and smiled. When she got home she would trade out one of the many charisma, stamina, or health-enhancing 'gifts' currently hogging all her item slots and exchange for an INT-booster. Then she would be able to explain in English, which would be easier for everybody. Until then she would rely on simple speech and hand-gestures to express herself.

What inferences the others made about why she didn't want to talk until they got home she couldn't really guess, but happily they made good time and it wasn't a tremendously long wait until she was home.

That was the first time her Prime Directive kicked in. She wasn't actually able to unequip the vizier's gifts because, at least as far as the curse was concerned, they would lower her concubine fitness. Experimentation showed that it would allow her to replace a lower level health bangle for a higher-level stamina bracelet, but then she couldn't switch back. Further, both of the INT-boosting items in her inventory were in slots blocked by items that boosted her fitness for concubinage, so she would need to find something new in the market that she could equip. She would have to be very careful about what items she equipped until she found a way to dispel the

curses.

It wasn't just magic items, either; after disrobing to wash, the only clothing sets she could don were those the game considered to be in the highest sexiness category. Which would be fine as some of her strongest outfits were in that category, until she considered the possibility that wearing any of her outfits with a bonus to health, stamina, or charisma would be impossible to remove.

And that was why she put on one of her trashiest outfits to go out shopping. She thought this would be a brief errand because she planned to buy a couple INT-boosting rings to bring her up enough to have normal conversations. However, the Prime Directive not only required that she maintain her sexiness, it disapproved of intelligence, and wouldn't let her equip an INT-boosting ring.

Once upon a time, Lacey would have had a panic attack right then and there, but her anxiety was under much better control ever since she'd moved to the new playpod, so she merely felt a *normal* amount of panic. That was much less debilitating, but somehow that wasn't enough to cheer her up.

"Alright, focus. There's got to be a way around this. I killed the fucking vizier," she told herself, trying to pump up her confidence. Old habits died hard, though, so she had to fight off some intrusive thoughts about whether this was all punishment for murdering the vizier before focusing again.

Then it occurred to her that if she got something that increased a pro-concubine stat along with her INT stat, then the curse might consider it a net win. She needed three points of INT, so what would be enough to outweigh that?

"Lacey! Are you okay?" Strong cowgirl arms scooped her into a hug.

"Hello Rose," Lacey murmured into the fabric covering Rose's cleavage, "It's good to see you again."

"You too! But you were looking lost? Let us help you."

One of the nice things about talking to the cowgirls was that they used simple language and common words at a moderate pace. It was easy to understand them and they also provided a template for responding in similarly simple language that avoided many of the grammatical complications that made life difficult when Lacey attempted to use the sort of complex sentences she would have employed in English.

Another convenient aspect of falling in with Rose and Gerrie out on errands was that when Lacey told them what she was shopping for, they didn't ask why, they just did their best to help. They were also, of course, considerably more fluent than Lacey, and not only did they pass on the situation to their sisters whom they also fetched to pitch in, they could banter with the various shop owners. All Lacey had to do was answer some questions about whether this or that option might work, and the rest was done for her.

“I’m so glad we spotted you!” Rose paused long enough to say a little later, “I shudder to think what would have come of you all by yourself. You really need someone to take better care of you.”

Lacey didn’t feel up to arguing so she just thanked Rose again and let her think that Lacey agreed. Besides, multiple messages had arrived from the others in the party inquiring when to meet up and hinting at concern for her emotional wellbeing, so she would really like Rose to be out there speeding the process along rather than reminding Lacey of all the times she’d gotten into difficulty while on her own.

Evidently this was the correct choice because it led to Rose’s epiphany about another potential source of the sort of item Lacey sought.

“Lady Asterine! I’m honoured that you consented to receive me with so little notice,” Lacey said after being ushered into her patron’s parlour.

“Not at all. I am deeply indebted to your friends so of course I’m pleased to be able to help you, as I have just the thing on hand.” Lady Asterine’s eyes flicked to the ostentatiously glittering collar around Lacey neck but didn’t comment. “It was intended for a different recipient, but she won’t need it for some time so I can simply commission another.”

Lady Asterine placed an object in Lacey hands that, once she could feel the stiff parts underneath the satin, was identifiable as an underbust corset. Lacey bit her lip as she deciphered the characters in the item description.

“These are Stays For a Proper Wife,” Lady Asterine told her after it became clear that Lacey was struggling. “Their firm guidance and upright posture will help focus your mind while also encouraging you to keep to a more sedate and decorous pace.”

A small movement rate penalty in exchange for a three-point intelligence boost and a slight visual-field penalty, presumably due to the added difficulty of bending over. Quite a good exchange, given that Lacey was rarely called upon to move fast or engage within contested terrain where seeing the ground immediately around her was important. Though it seemed like a corset would get in the way of one key aspect of a concubine.

As if reading her mind, Lady Asterine added, “And don’t worry; it understands that delivering heirs is a wife’s paramount duty, so it will expand as necessary to accommodate your increase.”

“Oh, okay,” Lacey said, somewhat challenged by the noble’s advanced language, but helped by her clear and crisp enunciation. That still left Lacey wondering why she felt so unsettled. Did she have a reason, or was it simply that Lady Asterine *always* unnerved her? “How much?”

“Nothing, apart from agreeing to come with me to meet one of your greatest fans, who is pining for an introduction.”

“Where?” Lacey asked apprehensively.

“Don’t worry, darling, nowhere far. Rampart House.”

“In the castle! Can my friends come?”

Lady Asterine’s smile thinned slightly, but she agreed gracefully, and the deal was done.

The cowgirl sisterhood walked her home, of course, and then crowded into her small room while she confirmed whether or not she was truly able to equip it as Lady Asterine had asserted.

There was not even a split second available for bated breath; that breath was squeezed out of her by the corset snapping on so quickly and firmly that the air came out in a surprised “Oof!” As it continued to contract in more minute and precise ways, she also saw all the writing in the room shift and warp until the characters were oriented correctly even if they didn’t immediately turn back into English letters. Once she got used to the tightness, though, she couldn’t really detect any impediment on her ability to bend and twist.

She’d barely begun to wonder why the item description had indicated a visual field reduction when she noticed the answer slowly pushing further into her line of sight from below.

“Oh *shit*,” she said as she watched her already huge breasts swelling again. Of *course*.

Well, at least she’d said it in English.

Facing the Party

If she’d thought more quickly, perhaps she would have been able to unequip the corset before it was too late, but by the time it occurred to her to try it was too late; the curse wouldn’t let her remove it. There was really nothing to do but join the four fascinated cowgirl sisters in watching her breasts swell.

Of course in some respects they had all seen it before, but previously they had been far away from civilization observing an effect they knew to be temporary. Lacey didn’t know how big a difference that made for the cowgirls, but for her it was an entirely different experience. She was going to be facing her friends and the world with the boobs blooming before her eyes.

Maybe it was that previous experience, and maybe it was because the sensation was disconcertingly pleasurable, but it was difficult not to enjoy the disaster a little. Maybe more than a little; she might have put her hands on her growing breasts in a pointless attempt to cover them, or maybe to support the weight, or perhaps just to confirm tactilely whether they were really as big as they looked, but as her breasts pressed forward into them and they sank into her swelling flesh, she found herself massaging herself to amplify the sensations.

The cowgirls, at least, seemed reassured by her moan of pleasure, taking that as a sign that she was pleased with her changes despite her initial expression of dismay. They began to excitedly congratulate her on her increasing size, perhaps even more emphatically than they normally would so as to reassure her.

“They’re staying so nice and round!”

“Wow, I bet even a full minotaur would envy your boobies!”

“You’ll be able to fit Naomi’s whole prick into your cleavage again! Won’t that be nice? I remember you really enjoyed that.”

“Do you think her bum’s getting bigger too?”

“Yeah, a bit. Very nice and proportional, as they say.”

“Oh, good, I was hoping they felt good,” Gerrie added when she tested the firmness of Lacey’s growing breasts, extracting a gasp of pleasure from their owner. “Alyssa, think we should ring for a pot of the tea?”

“I think that would be best,” Alyssa agreed, and moved to do so.

“Her nipples look more milkable than ever, don’t you think?” Rose asked, tugging at one experimentally. “Do they feel better as well?”

“Hnngh,” Lacey grunted in helpless agreement. She was trying not to want them to continue molesting her, and failing. It was all she could do not to grab Rose’s hands and press them deeper into her boob.

“A perfect size to drink from,” Gerrie added after taking a taste from the other.

“Speaking of, here’s the tea,” Naomi said, receiving the tray containing the pot and five cups from the brothel attendant. The house always had the birth control tea hot and ready for consumption.

There was a quick pause as everyone took sips, and then they got back to the task at hand, which was to make the most of Lacey’s new body. Lacey had initially intended to use the pause to stop the incipient orgy, but then she’d seen the huge ridge of Naomi’s erection and she’d either been struck dumb with lust, or simply forgot what her objections had been.

Regardless, she experienced the rest of the growth through the steady change in her breasts’ resonant frequency as Naomi pounded the lust out of her and the rest enjoyed her in other ways. Using her tongue to make Gerrie bellow in orgasm while sitting on Lacey’s face felt like a fitting revenge for grabbing her breasts without asking. She didn’t mind a bit of squirt on her face; as fitting for a daughter of Lacey’s body, Gerrie’s femcum had a similarly sweet taste and scent.

“This was totally worth it,” Gerrie said afterward as she played with Lacey’s boobs.

Lacey emerged from her postcoital daze to ask, “What do you mean? Worth what?”

“Oh, all of it, I guess. Running around in the market, finding Lady Asterine, the gold,” Gerrie explained.

“It would have been worth it even if I hadn’t gotten to rail you at the end, but I’m glad we did,” Naomi said shyly.

“Can you even lift your arms?” Alyssa asked, fascinated by the way Lacey’s breasts spread out to completely cover her arms from shoulder to elbow when she was laying prone on the bed.

“I can lift them easily, just a smidge slow. My new boobs have this thing going on where they have a lot of inertia but they don’t *weigh* that much. It’s like having giant boobs on the moon.”

“You’ve been to the *moon*?” Gerrie asked in awe.

“Oh, uh, not... No,” Lacey said, trying to figure out how to explain basically anything she’d just said.

“Are you saying your boobs are *lazy*?” Rose asked.

“Come on, Rose,” Alyssa said, rolling her eyes. “Even Lacey wouldn’t say *that*. When she said they have a lot of inertia, she means that her boobs *make* her lazy. Inertia is kind of an advanced word.”

“No, I mean they have a lot of mass but not a lot of weight,” Lacey tried to explain.

The cowgirls laughed affectionately at this silly nonsense from their favourite moron, and soothed away the signs of incipient frustration by fucking her just a little bit more.

It did give Lacey something else to contemplate in that it confirmed that the increased sensation she had been getting from her enlarged breasts wasn’t only a side effect of the growth process; their increased size seemed to have increased their pleasurability by a similar amount. They were also now so large that she could hardly do anything without swinging or jostling them somehow, which was going to be a distraction.

A very nice distraction, but a distraction nonetheless.

How was she going to meet up with the party looking like this? “I reckon I don’t even have any clothes that would still fit,” she muttered to herself

“Rose already went to talk to Lady Asterine about it,” Naomi murmured into her hear gently from behind. Lacey was reclining cozily in Naomi’s lap, held in place by having her arse stretched around Naomi’s partly hard cock. It seemed impolite to tell Naomi to pull out when everyone was settled and comfortable.

“Oh, she did?” Lacey said, pushing her boob to one side and her head to the other to see that Rose had vacated her spot. “I didn’t notice her leaving.”

Naomi gave her a lovingly condescending kiss on the top of her head. “Don’t worry, we’ve thought of everything.”

Lacey very much doubted that but again saying so seemed unkind after all everything they’d done to try to help her. Instead she’d just mention something that they probably hadn’t considered. “I do worry that Lady Asterine wouldn’t have some of the more practical garments I would need. For example, it would be very strange to get milked in an evening gown, wouldn’t it?”

“It would be, wouldn’t it!” Gerrie said with a laugh at the mental image.

“That’s why we’re also getting you a cowgirl outfit,” Alyssa informed Lacey.

“It would have to be a very *alluring* cowgirl outfit,” Lacey reminded her, looking somewhat pointedly at the fetchingly tailored but not especially sexy overalls the cowgirls usually wore. Lacey not been able to tell them about the curse, of course, but happily they had taken her at face value when she had told them that she needed to wear only the sexiest of clothing.

“Oh yes, we’re having a different outfit altered for you,” Alyssa said, giving her a reassuring wink.

“Thank you!” Lacey said, touched and frustrated at the same time. Here she was in the middle of one of the largest cities in the region and she couldn’t even go anywhere. “My goodness. Will my breasts even fit through the door?”

“Of course, just push them together a bit,” Gerrie said.

Naomi’s helpful demonstration made Lacey gasp at the sensation of hands on her breasts, even though she’d already come multiple times in the last few hours. She gasped again when she felt Naomi surge back to life deep inside her.

“Do you need another go?” Naomi asked gently.

“Nnnno,” Lacey said, getting ahold of herself.

“Are you sure?” Naomi said, lifting Lacey off her cock and spinning her around to look in her face.

The sensation of Naomi pulling out left Lacey momentarily at a loss, during which Gerrie told Naomi she should probably do Lacey one more time while they were waiting for Rose’s return.

Lacey wondered if it was her boobs making her like this, or the curse, or something else, but she found herself thinking of the people who combined drugs and the playpod hardware to lose themselves inside games until they were on the point of death from malnutrition. She wasn’t like that, was she? Obviously she didn’t take drugs, and the RealDimension rig wouldn’t even let her skip feeding herself, but she almost wondered if she was going to get stuck in this room. It was a weird thought, and she didn’t have to entertain it for long because eventually Naomi and the others collaborated to fuck any further thoughts right out of her.

By the time they were done and cleaned up, Rose was back with a small selection of clothes that were more tasteful than Lacey had feared, though upon reflection that did make sense coming from Lady Asteria. But most of the clothes designed to accommodate figures like Lacey’s had been designed by humans catering to the dedicated ero-layer players.

Like Lacey had become. She slapped her forehead. “Oh my God, I’ve been such a ditz.”

“It’s okay, you can’t help it,” Alyssa said.

“Yeah, no one’s expecting you to figure anything out, sweetie,” Rose said.

“Thanks,” Lacey said somewhat wryly as she finally switched the ero-layer off, for the first time in a very long time.

It was a jarring experience on multiple levels. One was the sudden change in her shape and the drape of her clothes, of course. It felt strange to have breasts that were so much smaller. And yet, a glance in the mirror reinforced that ‘smaller’ than her gigantic ero-layer breasts did not mean ‘small’. In fact the somewhat more conservative cut of the dress’ non-ero version did nothing to hide that these ‘merely’ huge breasts were still far too large and round to be natural in

realspace, well into the territory of dedicated erotic models and escorts. Even in game contexts where much larger breasts were common, her breasts were still going to be the biggest around. She was more than a little surprised that they were even allowed to be this big outside the ero layer.

“I think you look nice,” Naomi told Lacey, perhaps interpreting her long look at herself in the mirror as an expression of uncertainty.

“Thanks Naomi. Thank all of you for all of your help. I’m in much better case to face the others now.”

“Why do you have to do that?” Alyssa asked.

“Do what?”

“Meet those four adventurers. We had thought they were protecting you, but it seems like they keep putting you in dangerous situations.”

Blindsided by this reasonable but very unexpected question, Lacey thought of several ways to try to explain it, discarding each.

“I think we know,” Naomi said in her gentle way. “Good luck. She’ll love your new boobs.”

“What? How did you?”

“Shh,” Naomi said, winking and closing Lacey’s mouth between her fingers. “Get out there and get your girl.”

They basically shooed her to the Burning Sun, which was a little awkward but also helpful, because being surrounded by four towering cowgirls tended to deemphasise Lacey herself until she was entering the inn itself.

Happily it was too late for Dark and Alexandros was still finishing a solo mission so Lacey only had to face Caper and Arvina

“Vavavoom, lady!” Caper greeted her cheerfully.

The way Arvina unconsciously bit her lip before giving a little welcoming wave was less open but more privately satisfying. Yeah, Lacey thought triumphantly, Arvina liked what she saw.

“How’d you get such a huge glow-up?” Caper asked, placing emphasis on the word ‘huge’ to make clear she was talking about Lacey’s rack.

“Complicated story, but glad you like it.”

“I take it this complicated story is connected to whatever had you preoccupied on your way back from Ferzia?” Arvina asked.

“It is, but I can’t entirely explain why.”

“Is it related to your new jewellery?” Caper asked, motioning at the bracelets and also the collar.

“Yes,” Lacey said, and was slightly alarmed at a feeling in her breasts very similar to that when they had started growing. “But I can’t really explain how,” she added, and the feeling

faded. Was that how the curse was going to punish her for trying to hint that it was cursed?

“Why not? Do you not know?” Arvina asked.

“I don’t, really,” Lacey said, which wasn’t a complete lie.

“How do you not know?” Arvina asked suspiciously.

Lacey had previously assumed that she would be able to change the subject and figure out how to get the message to them later, but now that she was in the moment she could tell how ridiculous all the dodges sounded. But maybe that was best? She tried just shrugging and looking dumb. Arvina would know that was an act, wouldn’t she?

Arvina looked concerned, but Caper cut in, “Okay, we won’t pry.” She gave Arvina a meaningful look before continuing, “You said once you got home you would be able to tell us why you were confused during the mission. Could you tell us about that?”

“I think so,” Lacey said carefully. “I’ll have to take it a bit slow for reasons I... For reasons.” Lacey noted the feeling began when she started to give explanations that skated too close to the existence of the curse. Would she be able to tell this story at all? She had to try. “Anyway, you know that I compose my songs in Gedbeh, the language of the game?”

They nodded, though neither of them looked like they had any inkling of why Lacey had brought that up.

“For a while, everything everyone said was in Gedbeh, including what you said.” Her breasts were definitely tingling now. Had she gone too far?

“Why?” Caper asked.

Lacey just shrugged, and immediately regretted it because she could feel her nipples hardening. Yeah, Arvina was pretending not to notice. Lacey pretended not to notice Arvina noticing, but it was hard. Was Arvina hard? Lacey shook her head, trying to clear it.

“It has to be a bug of some kind,” Arvina asserted in response to a followup question from Caper that Lacey had been too distracted to attend to. “I’ll send you a message separately,” she told Lacey.

“Oh! That’s a good idea,” Lacey said, pleased at the idea and a little dumbfounded that it hadn’t occurred to her earlier. The firmness in Arvina’s voice also made Lacey quiver a little inside.

“Hopefully you don’t lose the ultra rare artifact when they fix the bug,” Caper said, posing it as at least half a question. “Pretty unusual for a regular player to get one of those without it being at the end of a huge quest chain. And it wasn’t, right?”

“No,” Lacey said with a shrug. Oops.

“They’ve been popping up a lot, I think,” Arvina said thoughtfully.

Lacey wondered if Arvina’s choice of words was influenced by the erect nipples creating very visible buttons under the fabric of Lacey’s dress.

“So more likely that it’s a bug? Or less likely?” Caper asked.

“I’m not sure. The other players getting them have been pretty high level whales and such.”

“Maybe she wasn’t meant to get one?” Caper suggested.

“Oh, I think the vizier intended to give it to me. He just didn’t get the chance to do it before I killed him,” Lacey said.

“Badass,” Caper said with a smile.

“Can you tell us what bonuses the collar gives you?” Arvina asked.

“The biggest one makes it much less likely that an attempted charm that fails will result in negative reactions or lowered relationship from the targets of the charm.”

“Huh, so they don’t get mad at you if the charm attempt fails. That seems very powerful for players of your general type. But those aren’t that common, are they?” Caper asked

“More common than they were,” Arvina said, “Regardless I don’t think that most of the characters I’ve seen with those were the troubadour type, or necessarily even magic users.”

“Were they all female, or femme?” Lacey asked.

“No. A bit more than half, perhaps, but not by much. But it’s a small sample set. Of the ones I’ve seen myself, two were men and three were women, including Lacey.”

“Men wearing that?” Caper asked nodding at the glittery, ostentatiously feminine collar.

“The men’s version had different styling, but I think it’s the same one,” Arvina said.

Lacey smiled. Arvina seemed to be on top of it all.

“So you think they’re all different?” Caper asked.

“They are considered to be more or less unique, at least within any given world,” Arvina reminded them.

“But similar somehow,” Caper said, and Lacey nodded agreement.

“Yes,” Arvina answered the implied question. “I’m going to have to investigate it a bit more, honestly.”

There was a short pause as they all thought separately, then Caper asked, “What should we tell the boys?” Caper called Dark and Alexandros ‘the boys’.

“Just that there’s a suspected bug we’re looking into, but that we can return to regular adventuring. Which we can, correct?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Lacey said. With the vizier dead she didn’t think she was a risk to anybody. Apart from herself, but adventures didn’t seem like they would exacerbate the risk; quite the opposite.

“Speak of the devil,” Caper said, and waved to Alexandros, who had just sauntered into the Burning Sun’s common room.

The conversation from there was raucous and varied, only lightly touching on what had been going on with Lacey, which is just how she preferred it. Alexandros had identified a promising mission for them to pursue, so they didn’t dwell on what had happened with Lacey much, though he was very complimentary.

Alexandros' mission concerned a covert slaver's ship loading orphans and other marginal people kidnapped from Rampart and surrounding villages. Arvina posed as a dealer, and Lacey as her product, which delayed the ship while Alexandros and Caper sneaked onto the ship from the side away from port. The captain himself came to meet Arvina, and seemed almost as interested in Arvina herself as Lacey, though of course their conversation was interrupted by shouts of alarm as the prisoners from Rampart were freed. Lacey had already charmed a fair number of guards into being slow to react, and the captain elected to retreat to the ship rather than face Arvina with most of his muscle turned to stumbling fools, so they accomplished the mission without even having to fight much. There wasn't much money or loot, but the reputation gain was excellent and there promised to be more to the mission chain. It was also simply nice to do something so clearly *good*. Afterward, as town guards were guiding away the freed captives for rehabilitation and return to wherever they'd come from, and it was impossible to resist promising to visit some of them later and make sure they were doing okay.

Lacey had enabled the ero layer during the portion where Arvina had presented her to the slaver captain, and had happily remembered to turn it off again before rejoining Caper and Alexandros. She would have forgotten her plan to contact Arvina outside the game, but Arvina reminded her before they split up for the evening.

Lacey had turned down multiple offers to walk her all the way home, which seemed unnecessary when it was one about two blocks between where they would split up and the brothel where Lacey lived, but then she thought she'd seen a group of footpads trailing Arvina and had run after them. This was successful, and when they predictably shifted their attention to Lacey, somehow Lacey hadn't planned for it.

But, once again she reenabled the ero layer so she could use the full power of her charms. She didn't really want to have sex with a gnoll and two probable gnomes, so she was glad when her first attempt to seduce them only succeeded against the gnoll and the two gnomes-or-something were forced to drag the gnoll away. Lacey was both vindicated in her guess that they were fairly high level in order for two of the three to resist her seduction successfully, and glad that she didn't have to deal with them any further that evening.

Elite Girl Problems

"Welcome back, Miss Lacey," the guard at the brothel told her when she arrived just a short time later, "Madame Lais wanted to speak with you when you have a moment."

"Is she up now?" Lacey asked, though she knew the answer, as it was much too early for her to be asleep.

"Aye, just go through the lounge to the office," he answered. He'd seen thousands of chesty

women, but it was clear that they hadn't entirely prepared him for Lacey, based on how he had to struggle not to stare. He did a good job, though, and Lacey gave him a wink and continued to the lounge.

She hadn't been there in a while, and while she'd previously garnered plenty of attention, especially during this busiest portion of the evening, this was the first time she'd entered since her boobs had grown so much, and it made a difference as huge as they were. Within seconds every conversation in the room had dropped off, and everyone was staring at her, even the gay fellows.

Lacey for a moment asked herself if she was really bigger than any of them had seen, and recalled that the players in her size brackets were ero-focused players who spent their time in the underground fetish clubs and equivalent spaces, not people who went to regular above-ground brothels that catered to NPCs and more regular players. There was nothing to do with that information except to continue sauntering through the room, and she did that, though she threw in some winks and waves to show that she wasn't intimidated.

"Gods, you're huge," Madame Lais said when Lacey stepped sideways through her door so as to fit her massive bust.

"Yeah," Lacey said with a shrug that also happened to set the massive bust to wobbling.

"That explains some things. Anyway, now that you've begun to work for the Corinthian Dream, I want to ask you if you want an elite suite or remain in a standard first class unit."

"Wait, what? What do you mean?"

"You've brought in almost a thousand gold since you joined the Sisterhood of Jades. Naturally you owe 235 of that to me," Madame Lais emphasised this with a dangerously friendly smile, "Which places you very close to the elite suite, which is what I imagine you would prefer."

"What if I don't want to work for the Corinthian Dream anymore?" Lacey asked.

"You are welcome to move out anytime, of course," Madam Lais said, her lips thinning slightly.

"I understand. And why do you think I'd prefer the elite suite?"

"So you only have to entertain certain special customers and otherwise make sure you bring the Corinthian Dream at least 5,000 gold a month in profit sharing."

"And what about if I remain in the first class suite?"

"Then you just need to entertain an average of one first class visitor per work night for the month. That means twenty. And of course, the same 5,000 gold a month."

"Why would you give an elite suite to someone if they're not making more than the first class workers?" Lacey asked.

"Because the elites are the ones who bring in the fancy types. You need to bring in 4 nobility points per month. That's 1 point for a baron or equivalent, 2 points for an earl or equivalent, 3

points for a count, and 4 for a duke. If you manage royalty, then that covers your points and gold for the month, as long as you keep them happy with our services.”

“They have to be nobility?” Lacey asked, fascinated. She hadn’t really heard about any of this.

“Or *equivalent*,” Madame Lais said, rolling her eyes a little. “City guild leaders or manufactory owners are worth the same as a baron, while regional guild leaders are worth the same as an earl. If you have questions, you can always ask me or my accountant Mr Caning, if I’m unavailable.”

“Oh. I assume elite suites are bigger, right?”

“Yes, and they come with space for a servant. Also, and I think this is highly relevant to you, they have space for more clients. You’re not meant to entertain more than two at a time in a first class room.”

“When... Oh,” Lacey said, realizing that Madame Lais was counting the cowgirls as clients. In fact, the girls had talked about it being worth gold, and though Lacey had assumed that they had meant something related to shopping, she hadn’t discovered anything that they’d spent their own money on. Had they paid to fuck her in her room at the Corinthian Dream? That would explain everything.

“So if I take the elite suite I just have to have sex with a few high-level types, or maybe just one, if they’re high enough ranked?”

“Well, the sex part isn’t strictly required. You need to entertain them. As much as you appear to be designed only for sex, I know you’re also a fairly popular musician. I do suppose audiences enjoy looking at you more than a pox-ridden troubadour hiding from the rain by singing badly while picking at a battered old lute.”

That sounded perfect. “I’ll take the elite suite! I think I can make good on that. Oh, and here’s your portion, as I understand it.” Lacey placed coins totaling 235 gold on the table for Madame Lais.

“You should really give that to Mr Caning, but I’m happy to take it this time,” she said, then to Lacey’s surprise, she placed bars and coins worth 940 gold in Lacey’s hands. “There you go. There weren’t any tips, so that’s all of it.”

“Oh! I... okay,” Lacey said, inclined to giggle at how strange the game sometimes was.

“If you want tips, you should tell them when you’re giving something extra. Also, no more than two clients at a time until you move fully into the suite,” Madame Lais advised Lacey before dismissing her.

“How did you get such big boobs?” Jasmine asked Lacey after joining her on her way back to her room.

Lacey just shrugged, not wanting to talk about it with the envious queen bee of the brothel.

“Just give me a hint. Was it Lady Asterine? I know you’re close with her.”

Lacey couldn't quite hide her surprise at the accurate guess, and Jasmine pounced.

"If you introduce her to me and I'm able to get tits at least three sizes bigger, then I'll teach you the five point orgasm technique."

"What is that?" Lacey asked, though she'd heard of it.

"You don't know?" Jasmine asked contemptuously, before shaking that off and saying, "Sorry, I forget you barely know anything about brothel life despite living with us for years. It's basically a massage technique that can make anyone come early, if you want. Really useful to take the edge off off really vigorous clients like orcs and goblins."

"I'm skeptical, but interested," Lacey said.

"I'll prove to you that it works, but then we have a deal," Jasmine said.

They'd reached Lacey's door, and she opened it so she'd have an excuse to cut the conversation short. She hadn't expected the cowgirls to still be inside and anxious to see Lacey in one piece.

"Thank goodness!" Naomi said, giving Lacey the first hug, which also pressed the underside of an incipient erection into Lacey's tummy and into her vast cleavage.

"Oh, hello!" Gerrie said, pulling Jasmine in as well. "Are you Lacey's friend?"

There was such a confusion of different questions and answers Lacey was a bit at sea, not least because she had used her seductive powers multiple times that evening without getting release.

"How are you all in here still?"

"We just paid for another night with you!" Rose explained.

"Isn't that expensive?"

"It's worth it," Naomi murmured into Lacey's ear, and suddenly Lacey wanted Naomi inside her.

But, as she started trying to arrange to make that happened, both Jasmine and Lacey's own memory noticed that this was more clients than Lacey was allowed to service in her room. Once she'd expressed this complication to the cowgirls, though, it became a sort of moving party. Very shortly, the conga line had relocated all of Lacey's goods into the elite suite in the connected building adjoining the main brothel. Lacey didn't have much time to marvel at it before the fucking began, though. Everyone had performed the physical labour while moving through a cloud of Lacey's arousal scents and they were mad for it. Jasmine didn't have her own biological cock like Naomi did, but as soon as she assessed the lay of the land sexually she fetched a strap on, and made herself very popular with the cowgirls.

It wasn't all pure fucking, though; sometime in the night Jasmine demonstrated the five-point orgasm technique, and Lacey was a little surprised to find that she had a skill slot available because she thought she'd already used the advancement points she'd gotten from defeating the vizier. She decided it was probably a useful enough skill to take even though it might be a bit

narrow in its application, both because it was potentially really useful in those applications and because there was a bonus for taking more skills within her class specializations.

Before she fell asleep in the pile of bodies, she recalled she needed to log out long enough to write a message to Arvina explaining what was going on with the collar.

It was noticeably harder to understand error messages when they were written in Gedbeh script, but she had seen this one enough to know its translation: ‘Action forbidden by prime directive.’

Did the game somehow know that she intended to send Arvina a message that would ultimately allow dispelling the curse? It seems like that would reference the prohibition on telling anybody about the curse, but this was the error she got when attempting something that would reduce her concubinity. Why would logging out do that?

Lacey was too tired to think about it much more, so she went to sleep and promised herself that she would attend to it in the morning.

-@Laceyyy Are you okay?-

-@Laceyyy You were going to send me a message.-

-@Arvina Sorry! I fell asleep and ran into other issues-

-@Arvina Explain in person?-

-@Laceyyy Okay, meet at the Sun or the Dream?-

-@Arvina Sun is better. Be there in about ten minutes-

-@Laceyyy CU-

Lacey took a little bit to get as respectable as she could and then headed to the Burning Sun with plenty of time, but even though she was early, she was surprised to find herself first. Arvina was usually earlier than she claimed. When the full ten minutes elapsed, Lacey became concerned; Arvina was almost never late, especially without sending a message.

-@Arvina Is everything okay?-

Lacey sat for longer, watching her party messaging tab with increasing discomfort. Arvina hadn’t even read it. That was rare. Arvina was logged in, so she should have been able to read it, unless...

-@party I think Arvina has been kidnapped-

-@Laceyyy Why?-

-@party She was meant to meet me here five minutes ago and hasn’t even acknowledged my message asking her if she’s okay-

-@Laceyyy She is usually on time but how do you get to kidnapping?-

-@party Last night there was a team of relatively high-level rogues following her. I interrupted them and assumed they were a random encounter. Now I think not-

-@Laceyyy Seems like a coincidence, but the longer Arv doesn’t say anything the more worried I get.-

Soon enough Alexandros and Caper had joined Lacey at the Burning Sun, and even Dark had sent a message from his work saying he'd find a way to join them if Arvina was really in trouble. They agreed that the only thing to do unless a mission panel showed up was to trace the steps from Arvina's home to the Burning sun and see if anybody could tell them anything.

Fortunately this paid off almost immediately when Alexandros found a furious shopkeeper who had seen what he believed to be an abduction of a neighbourhood regular but hadn't been able to interest the town guard because he hadn't been able to say much about the abductors beyond that they were at least head shorter than a worldborn and wore dun cloaks of moderate quality. How exactly they had hustled Arvina into an alleyway wasn't clear, but even the vague description the shopkeeper was able to give seemed like a positive identification.

Though it took him some time, Dark was as good as his word and appeared as they were wandering around the alleyway looking for clues.

"Too bad they took Arvina," Dark said in his practical way, "She was our best tracker. I think we should hire someone."

"Oh my goodness, that's such a good idea!" Lacey said, embarrassed not to have thought of it already. But then, Dark was the sort of person who was used to just paying money for other people to do work he couldn't or didn't want to do himself.

Regardless, within minutes he had retained the services of a Tanuki professional tracker who was able to lead them slowly but steadily to a building on the west central part of town, which contained a number of smaller warehouses serving the businesses that catered to the richer part of town. The warehouse the Tanuki brought them to looked abandoned, but a close look at the doorjamb showed that it had been used recently.

Caper was able to pick the lock without too much difficulty and they burst inside to find, well, nothing immediately, but there was an interior room that once had been for cold storage, and Dark rushed in and blasted that one open to maintain surprise. It worked, and though the two remaining kidnapper guards were quite good fighters, the party plus the surprisingly helpful Tanuki was able to dispatch them fairly quickly. Arvina was inside unconscious but otherwise unhurt, and so they recovered her quickly, but unfortunately without ever getting a message explaining why much less providing a mission briefing.

"That was weird," Dark said, disgruntled.

"I'm sorry! I know you have a super busy day," Lacey apologised.

Dark shook his head. "No, you did the right thing and I'm glad I came. I just don't understand why this happened. It doesn't seem to make sense."

"Maybe Arvina will know more," Caper said hopefully.

"I can't wait for her to wake up, but let me know if I need to come back. Also you should get out of here before the rest come back."

"Yeah!" Alexandros said, and they got moving.

Dark stayed with them until they got out of the district before popping out back to work, and they suffered nothing worse than a bunch of strange looks for carrying a tall unconscious wolfborn woman through the streets. By the time they reached Arvina's front door she was awake but confused and not ambulatory, so they took her the rest of the way inside.

Finally Arvina started making more sense, and though she clearly didn't recall exactly what had happened, she seemed to grasp the main elements.

"RealDimension," Arvina said, tapping Lacey's chest.

"What about it?" Lacey asked while Caper and Alexandros waited to see what came of this obscure comment.

"Makes a mess. The matrix confuses your brain," Arvina said, shaking her head as if to clear it. "That doesn't help."

"Do you understand what she's saying?" Caper asked Lacey.

"I think she's saying that if her game matrix gets confused enough, the same confusion happens in your regular brain. Like, it's not just the game gets sluggish or unresponsive the way it goes with a more normal playpod, when it's the matrix that goes with a RealDimensional playpod, the matrix's confusion just is your confusion, until it wears off. That's why she didn't just log out."

And maybe why the game wouldn't let Lacey log out last night? Lacey thought briefly, but she had to focus on Arvina, who was nodding agreement with Lacey's summary.

"That's why Lacey didn't send us messages when she got captured," Arvina managed to say.

"I think it might also be keeping me from logging out," Lacey said with a sense of dread.

"How is that?" Alexandros asked.

"It's too complicated for me to explain. But maybe Arvina will be able to," Lacey said hopefully.

Arvina narrowed her eyes at Lacey, then nodded. "I'm still too jumbled to think about it, but later. In the meantime, though, thanks for catching it so fast."

"Well, I guess that's your reward for always being on time; if it had been Alex, we wouldn't have gone looking for him until at least six hours had passed," Caper joked, and Alexandros was still feeling relief too intensely to rise to the bait.

"Probably true. But isn't that dangerous if RD pods can do that to you?" he asked with concern.

"Yeah, but that's also why it can help," Lacey said. "It treats loads of cognitive conditions better than anything else, so these sorts of side effects seem kind of expected."

"Won't they get sued by people like Dark?" Caper asked.

"And get cut off from RealDimension rigs?" Alexandros countered.

"Fair," Caper said.

"I'm going to log out," Arvina said.

“Okay?” Caper said, because announcing it was usually unnecessary.

“Try again,” Arvina said after the first attempt evidently failed.

Lacey wondered if Arvina was also stuck like she was, but then Arvina’s personality visibly faded, and her body took on the stiffness of the limited NPCs left behind to caretake player bodies while the players were away.

“Oh, she must be better now?” Caper asked.

“I hope so!” Alexandros said.

Arvina returned momentarily. “Okay, I’m back. And I need to talk to Lacey about something. Though thank everybody for saving me! But I think Lacey and I need to hash something out really quick and I think having more people present will make it more difficult.”

“Okay, how long do you need?” Caper asked, always will to roll with anybody’s needs.

“I’m not sure, but probably like five minutes.”

“Okay, let’s go take a walk,” Caper said to Alexandros. He looked a little mutinous at being cut out of the conversation, but then he shrugged and joined Caper.

Once they were gone, Arvina seemed to need some additional time to collect herself, so Lacey kept quiet. Eventually she was rewarded with Arvina’s normal, more decisive self. “You said you weren’t able to log out?”

“Yeah, I got an error message.”

“Did you ask support?” Arvina asked.

“I don’t feel comfortable doing that,” Lacey said without specifying why.

“I’ll see what I can find out,” Arvina said, and Lacey gave her a thankful smile. “I feel like there’s something you haven’t said yet, though.”

Lacey nodded, though the feeling in her breasts warned her she was sailing close to the wind.

“Do I have to guess?” Arvina asked, sounding like she was suppressing irritation.

Lacey looked apologetic and nodded.

“That makes this loads harder, Lace.”

“I know, but I...” Lacey couldn’t say that she couldn’t say, so she said, “I would *like* to tell you.”

“But you won’t?” Arvina said, sounding even more frustrated. “Help me help you, Lacey.”

Lacey could only smile apologetically while Arvina glared at her thoughtfully.

“Does this have something to do with Herdsplitter?” Arvina asked.

Lacey began to shake her head, then paused. Could it have something to do with Herdsplitter? Apart from the fact that Herdsplitter was one of the NPCs seeking players to breed. No, Herdsplitter was swept along with everybody else. Lacey finished shaking her head.

“The vizier?” Arvina tried.

Lacey made a noncommittal gesture, trying to give the same impression as when Arvina had asked about Herdsplitter.

“Your boobs?” Arvina said, intending it to be throwaway, but that was as true as any of them, and Lacey tried to give Arvina that idea with her reaction. “Really? Your boobs?”

Lacey shrugged, trying to show not to take it too seriously, but also not denying it. She tried to tamp down on her hope that Arvina would examine said breasts for clues.

“How in the world could your boobs have something to do with you not being able to log out? I mean, do you even know?” Arvina rolled her eyes at Lacey’s noncommittal reaction. “Okay, last question, do you think there’s any link between the vizier, or your boobs, and the kidnapping attempt on me?”

Lacey was surprised by this avenue of questioning, but she didn’t have time to really consider it.

“You don’t know. But you don’t dismiss it. Is there anyone you think I should talk to?”

Lacey considered this for a moment. Lady Asterine seemed like she might know something but couldn’t be trusted to tell the truth. The other people wearing one of the ultrarare collars might have similar limits on discussing them. “Herdsplitter?”

Arvina stared at Lacey, then shrugged. “Not making it easy, but okay. Can I bring you with me to reduce the chances that she just kills me?”

“I don’t think she would do that,” Lacey said, though she wasn’t *totally* sure, either. “But I wouldn’t mind going with you.”

“Okay. And you think we should do this before I get through to UltraCraft support?”

“I don’t know. Maybe at the same time? Actually, I’m worried what support would say once they looked into it, so maybe let’s visit Herdsplitter first.” If UltraCraft discovered some sort of covert rebellion by NPCs, they might do something drastic.

“Huh. Okay. The weekend is starting soon and the rest of the party will want us joining them for adventures. How about we head out Sunday night or Monday morning?”

“Okay.” Lacey was glad to have a plan. “That should also give me time to attend Rampart House the way I agreed.”

“Rampart House?” Arvina asked.

“Yeah, as payment for an item she gave me, Lady Asteria wants me to meet a fan there. I want to bring you along. And any of the others in the party who want to come.”

“Hmm, yeah, that sounds good,” Arvina said, grinning avariciously. There was no doubt they’d be able to get all manner of exclusive quests if by going to Rampart House.

“I thought so,” Lacey said, satisfied, mostly.

She would have been more satisfied if Arvina had a little bit less self control about staring at Lacey’s tits.

Matchmaking

After spending times in wealthier areas like Ferzia and Bok Hanang, Lacey didn't really expect Rampart House to be that impressive, and in terms of sheer magnificence it wasn't, but being integrated into a complex and sometimes obtrusive defensive fortification did confer a sort of gravitas all its own. It gave the impression of a residence serving someone who still had real and locally relevant military obligations, and very much put Lacey in mind of the plan Herdsplitter's tribe had made for assaulting Rampart before the reset had obliterated the tribe. This might truly have been the last redoubt of overwhelmed defenders.

On the night that Lacey and the party accompanied Lady Asterine to meet Lacey's noble admirer, Rampart House was as resplendent as Lord Devon, Count of Middlefield and marcher lord of Rampart, could make it. Luminary Indeline, ruler of the elven reaches of the Singing Coast region, had been visiting Rampart for almost a week and would be in attendance that evening, so everyone in Rampart with social or political ambitions was there. Lacey suspected "Sir" Dark's prior acquaintance with the March was the only reason Lady Asterine hadn't attempted to charge them admittance to such a rarified social circle.

Though it was too much to say that they were actually attending the event so much as being admitted to its fringes, where they could encounter the powerful aides, officials, and others who had travelled with their noble sponsors. It was clear that a number of missions presented themselves, but Lacey and Arvina had their own separate mission accompanying Lady Asterine.

"I am honored to meet you," Lord Devon said upon meeting Lacey, and was generous enough to include Arvina in the vague head nod he gave to indicate respect to persons ordinarily far below his notice.

"I'm honored to hear my music plays in so exalted an ear," Lacey said, though she didn't recall ever having seen him at any of her performances.

"Surely I couldn't fail to notice a talented artist raising the musical reputation of Rampart throughout the world!" he said. "In fact, I have tonight been proud host to two an even more elegant couple whose patronage of the arts is legendary. Please let me present you."

Lady Asterine could hardly have been any happier with her result short of actually accompanying her charges to meet Lord Devon's elvish visitors in a smallish but well-appointed chamber off to the side of the main hall. Lacey was surprised that Arvina was clearly included in the invitation despite not getting her own introduction, but it was a very *welcome* surprise.

"May I present to you Lacey, the famed musical idol of Rampart, and her guardian Arvina," Lord Devon said to Luminary Indeline and her somewhat shadowy husband Sage Felicômê.

"Magnificent!" Indeline said to her husband after a very quick head-to-toe examination of Lacey.

"Promising," Felicômê said to Indeline with significantly more reserve after a glance at

Arvina.

“I’m sorry! There’s been a bit of a mistake,” Arvina said suddenly, surprising everyone present. “I’m afraid Lacey isn’t for sale or trade.”

“You haven’t heard the offer yet,” Indeline pointed out.

“I’m sorry, it doesn’t matter what you offer,” Arvina insisted.

“Is that how things are, then?” Indeline asked her husband, who was studying the busty human and her wolfborn companion.

“It is.” Felicomê confirmed.

“I’m terribly sorry,” Lord Devon said to his visitors with clear mortification. “I was assured,”

“No,” Indeline said peremptorily with a little shake of her head. “This is exactly what was promised and we’re both grateful for the introduction. Arvina.”

“Yes, Luminary?” Arvina responded.

“If your mind or your situation changes, contact me or Sage Felicomê directly with this.” She handed Arvina a gem before turning her attention back to Lord Devon. “Keep them safe. I will keep our arrangement as long as they remain unpledged and also the terms stand until such time as Arvina changes her mind.”

“I will not,” Arvina swore.

Indeline gave Arvina a somewhat predatory smile. “Eventually someone will change your mind for you, if you are not careful.”

With that cryptic remark, the audience was over and the nobility remained in conference while one of Lord Devon’s more martial aides assembled some heavily-armed guards to escort Lacey and Arvina back to where they’d split off from the party. They were the first ones back, and didn’t want to discuss what had happened with Lord Devon’s men watching, but they exchanged messages about the strangeness that made it clear that Lacey’s impression had been correct: the elves had attempted to barter with Arvina for control of Lacey, and this had actually been part of an actual mission conferred by the game AI.

Some of the higher ranking retainers invited them to join in some minigames that were popular in the world, though, and Lacey couldn’t resist the opportunity to show that she was not as dumb as she looked. After three wins in a row, she was feeling quite good when the rest of the party returned, similarly suffused with victory after having made some good contacts and having triumphed in some ritualised contest of arms that struck Lacey as supplying somewhat the same social function as the minigame, except based more on the manipulation of physical objects than strategic planning. Of the two, the contacts were more important, but both left everyone in a good mood, at least until Arvina had to give a somewhat edited explanation of what had occurred with Luminary Indeline and Sage Felicomê.

Everyone agreed that this was very strange and unsavoury, though Lacey felt like no one apart from Arvina understood how deeply disturbing it all was. Later, when it was just the two of

them, Arvina and Lacey had a more raw discussion.

“I don’t know, Arvina. I think they were interested in you as well,” Lacey said.

“That wasn’t in the mission brief, though,” Arvina argued back.

“I don’t think the missions are just whatever they want them to be, either. But they were looking at you like... like they were looking at me.”

“Because they wanted to get you from me. I don’t know why they thought I could give you away, though.”

Lacey sighed. Even Arvina seemed to think the problems were limited to Lacey, but Lacey didn’t feel like it could just be her. There were too many things wrong. At the same time, though, who could know better than Arvina? “Well, hopefully Herdsplitter will help straighten this out.”

“I hope so. She won’t try to barter for you, right?”

“She didn’t try to keep me when she had me, so it would be weird to try to get me now, don’t you think?” Lacey pointed out.

“Yeah, I wasn’t really serious. It’s just a weird situation. Speaking of which. What’s going on here?”

A small but unusually well-dressed crowd had arrived in front of the brothel, and they didn’t even had to share a glance to know that they needed to ready themselves for battle. Something was afoot.

“There she is!” someone called out, and the whole crowd turned to look at the two of them. But the looks on their faces weren’t threatening, or even disgruntled. Instead, they looked full of anticipation, and many of them, Lacey could see now, were almost certainly visitors from the Singing Coast.

“Could they be fans?” she asked Arvina quietly.

“They could be, but let’s stay vigilant,” Arvina said.

But they *were* fans, as exclamations like, “By the gods, the rumours are true! Have you ever seen such a bosom?” made abundantly clear.

“You’re not *that* big,” Arvina said, offended on Lacey’s behalf. After a glancing at Lacey’s chest, huge by most standards even with the ero layer disabled, she added, “Though they certainly aren’t small.”

Lacey laughed, pleased at the undertone of appreciation in Arvina’s voice. “You don’t know the half of it.”

Arvina chuckled as well, as if Lacey was only referring to the difference in experience created by being the one living with the large chest. Which was just what Lacey wanted; she didn’t want to have to explain the true size of her breasts that might be inspiring the reaction amongst some in the small crowd they were approaching.

They appeared to be mostly senior ranked NPCs, but there might have been some players among them. Either way, Lacey found herself putting on a little impromptu performance in the

brothel's largest room for a rather elegant audience that was generally polite enough not to be as obvious about staring at her boobs as they were when she first appeared.

Arvina was supportive enough, or perhaps worried enough, to stay through the performance even after the cowgirls arrived to add their support, but once it broke up and the cowgirls escorted Lacey back to her room, Arvina left. That was very fortunate, because it meant that Arvina wasn't there to see what happened in Lacey's suite afterward. It did *begin* as nothing more than a private musical performance for some of the top heirs of Singing Coast titles, albeit with Lacey's ero layer reenabled. The cowgirls acted as chaperones of sorts, but their bragging about Lacey's productivity to the guests resulted in lots of pressure for Lacey to let herself be milked as a demonstration. From there things spiraled out of control and everyone had a happy ending of some sort or another before they left. Not that Lacey cared very much if some bloke squirted between her boobs while she was deep in one of her milking hazes, but she was very glad Arvina wasn't still around to see it, either.

In the morning Lacey tried to explain to the cowgirls that she would prefer if they checked in with Lacey before assuming that she would be pleased to provide sexual services, but she couldn't quite congratulate herself on her success in convincing them that she knew her mind better than they did. This was partly because of how they pointed out that she seemed fine with it the previous night and partly because she forgot about the whole thing once they had coaxed Naomi into fucking the thoughts out of Lacey's pretty little head. Lacey knew she shouldn't give in and validate their beliefs about her, but it felt so good and they were so all so earnestly loving that she just couldn't maintain the will to hurt their feelings.

Happily they had her milked, refucked, cleaned and packed in plenty of time for her trip to visit Herdsplitter with Arvina. She barely remembered to disable the ero layer before leaving the brothel, partly because she used the narrower stairwell set aside for residents and staff. A house maid ascending from below turned around rather than trying to find a way around Lacey's rack, which reminded her that her tits filled most of the space between either wall. She was mildly disappointed to do so because she'd been enjoying the feeling of motion reverberating within them as well as her moderately less mobile but pleasantly counterweighted curves around and behind her hips. She didn't have any time to waste contemplating this emerging reluctance to turn off her ero layer, but she did pause to make sure she still looked good before leaving.

Yes, her clothing was already designed to adjust to a disabled ero layer, and the reduction in volume of flesh didn't reduce her jiggle factor as much as one might assume. And it was probably better that without the ero layer her lips' taut plumpness had retreated somewhat from the true 'dick sucking lips' look that the lip gloss Rose tended to apply conferred to her ero layer self. Where had Rose gotten that lip gloss, anyway? Well, it looked sexy and Lacey thought Arvina liked the look, so Lacey didn't mind it.

She was conscious of looking very good when they met again, and as weird as the situation

was that drove them to set out on this trip, Lacey could feel butterflies of happiness at the prospect of spending so much time with just the two of them. Until, to her intense frustration, the cowgirls turned up to join their trip.

“Hello, what are you all doing here?” Lacey asked as politely as she could.

“Oh, sorry, did you mean for them to not come?” Arvina asked, embarrassed in a way that made clear that it was her doing. “I thought they would help make sure Herdsplitter’s tribe treats us with due respect because they’re tough they’ve been there before.”

That was a frustratingly good argument. “That’s a good point,” Lacey acknowledged, “Though if there’s too many of us it might look like an invasion.”

“Even though they’ve been guests before? Did they part on bad terms?” Arvina asked more infuriatingly good questions.

“No, no, you’re right,” Lacey granted, because she didn’t want to admit that she’d been hoping for alone time with Arvina.

Which she did get, sort of. Ironically this was because the cowgirls could transparently see how stuck on Arvina Lacey was and were determined to do everything they could to help her. The cowgirls did what they could to make sure Lacey was looking her best every day, drew Arvina’s attention to how fetching Lacey looked, and were really so ham-handed about it all that Lacey and Arvina had to laugh about it together.

But it hurt to laugh about it as if it was a silly joke when Lacey wanted Arvina worse than ever. It was honestly bad how much Lacey had to struggle not to ogle every enticing part of Arvina she could make out through Arvina’s adventuring garb. Lacey was also embarrassingly aware of the scent of arousal coming from her own nether regions. Hopefully Arvina wouldn’t know exactly what the sweet scent meant, though Lacey worried that Arvina did and was just avoiding the topic to save Lacey the mortification.

If Lacey herself hadn’t been so incredibly sexually frustrated, she might have noticed the cowgirls’ frustration at Lacey’s lack of sexual success. But the cowgirls’ attention was less distorted, and they at least knew that *everybody* was frustrated, and schemed to make use of it.

Unrefusable Offer

Apart from captivating natural scenery and even more captivating daydreams about Arvina ravishing Lacey with body parts not in evidence, they did have other topics to occupy them, the largest of which was speculative news Arvina was gathering from her typical sources. The speculations were so chaotic and inconsistent that Arvina would ordinarily have ignored them except that they carried a decided hint of relevance to their current situation.

The first rumour was that a new class of ultra rare artifact had gone out to all the top whales and key figures, especially those with the connections or fortunes necessary to obtain access to a RealDimension playpod. The exact advantages they seemed to grant varied wildly, but one common thread is that they seemed to bring with them romantic success with major NPCs. Possibly related was a suspicion that there was going to be a surprise update that would kick off a new round of rivalries amongst the NPCs and the players with whom they'd aligned.

Separately there was the interesting story that engagement had spiked amongst UltraCraft's most elite players. Though some thought that this was due to those elite players jockeying for position in the upcoming faction wars, most just took it as proof of UltraCraft's success in focusing more on their super-whales for increased revenue. Arvina and Lacey, however, couldn't ignore how this resembled Lacey's situation. Probably a coincidence, but one worth noting.

Without a teleport anchor of their own in Montagne and being a bit leery of using the Rampart portals, their trip took them through Great Fork, the biggest city in Orentar, which had a portal to Fenasterum, the biggest city in Montagne. From there they hiked to Deeplake, though they couldn't resist the temptation to complete a few missions that had cropped up along the way, so they spent more time on their journey than they had originally planned. It was hard to regret even though Lacey was still enduring lewd dreams featuring Arvina and Herdsplitter every night, sometimes joined by the cowgirls.

Shockingly, however, a large regional conflict broke out between the neighbouring lands of Darkgreen and Deeplake, which being strongholds of forest and water elves respectively had always been strong allies. It seemed to be some sort of Helen of Troy type situation, where the Luminary of the forest elves accused the Luminary of the water elves of having stolen away her lover.

It was a bit too tempting of a contest to ignore, offering as it did a class of missions not normally available to outsiders, and with a shocking number of SSR rewards on offer to top rated players who joined a side. Given that it fit the way they were going anyway, Arvina and Lacey accepted a mission offered by the Luminary of the forest elves and plunged into the fray.

Without the regular party able to reach them, they ended up relying on the cowgirls, who turned out to be far better adventurers than Lacey had expected. They were far from bloodthirsty and had no desire to hurt anybody, but they understood what needed to be done to support Arvina or defend Lacey, and with Lacey's various boosts, they seemed neigh indestructible.

Unfortunately for the NPCs and players of the area, the short war between the former allies wasn't *that* short, and Arvina was able to ascend the entire quest chain necessary to earn her own Elven Champion Recurve Bow, which was very rarely given to non-Elves at all, and even less so to a player multiple levels below the base power level.

"Thank you so much for detouring to do this with me," Arvina told Lacey.

"Of course! I'm so happy I was able to help," Lacey said, who was truly ecstatic at being part

of Arvina achieving such a major triumph. It was probably the best non-unique ranged weapon in the game, and was going to massively boost Arvina's power levels once she'd leveled up enough to use it.

"I feel bad about detouring when you have such a pressing issue, though," Arvina said, wringing her hands.

"I suggested this, remember?" Lacey pointed out, not for the first time.

"Because you knew I wanted it," Arvina said.

Lacey rolled her eyes, though Arvina was right. Lacey had suggested it because she wanted to give Arvina permission to do it. But Lacey was also very glad she'd done it. It wasn't as if a little delay made things worse.

Or at least, that had been her reasoning right up until they arrived at Herdsplitter's den and realised she wasn't there anymore. The original pack was there, but Herdsplitter and most of her key lieutenants had departed somewhere westward with no timeline for return.

The most awkward part was how strongly the pack reacted to Arvina, as if she was Herdsplitter in disguise, or perhaps her littermate. They were almost fawning toward her, and though they treated the cowgirls like returned allies, they saw Lacey as being Arvina's mate. Lacey laughed it off, but every time Arvina explained that Lacey was not in fact her mate felt like a rejection.

After a quick meal to be polite they set out again to see if they could pick up the trail of Herdsplitter and her party, but they were probably days too late for that. They had to walk back to Montagne empty handed.

Once there they decided to take a look-in at the court of the victorious Luminary of Darkgreen, who had thanked Arvina personally and invited her to return at any time. In practice this usually meant that they could enter the Tree of Alt from which the Luminary administered her tribe, but actually getting on her calendar would not actually be in the offing. In more pluralistic lands, actually getting on the ruler's calendar took days or weeks. When it came to societies as insular as the forest elves, even being allowed near the Tree of Alt was a huge privilege.

Which meant that it would likely hold very exclusive missions, so of course they presented themselves.

At first it went very much how they anticipated. The assistant commander of the watch wrinkled his nose discreetly at the sight of slightly road-worn outsiders, but confirmed that they were indeed amongst the few non-elves allowed to present themselves at the small but beautiful chamber circling the trunk of a tree adjacent to the great Tree of Alt. Some time later, an official arrived to collect them, leading them across the branch-bridge to the Tree itself where they met a court functionary who asked them why they were there. It was said in a friendly way, but they knew that this was mere politeness. Fortunately Arvina's claim that the Luminary herself had

invited them to visit in the future didn't elicit more than slightly widened eyes and a request that they wait momentarily to see if there was any Alt business for them.

It diverged from their expectations, however, when the official returned and bowed deeply, saying that the Luminary would be pleased to see Arvina and Lacey immediately. This was surprising to the point of being almost alarming, but there didn't seem to be much to do except accept the invitation, and soon enough they found themselves in a private audience with the Luminary, the tall and well-built elf over whom the recent war had been fought, and the Luminary's Sage, with whom she was not coupled in the way that Indeline had been with Felicômê.

"I am so pleased that you have returned," the Luminary said, seeming to mean it, but with some additional undercurrent that neither Arvina nor Lacey could read. "Have you come to trade? I value my sage greatly, as you might guess. Your human is currently bearing no children, correct?"

Lacey squeezed Arvina's hand to let her know that Lacey would support whatever Arvina did to bluff their way through the stage situation.

"Correct, your luminance," Arvina confirmed.

"The simplest solution would be for us to trade. You may have a night with Yolimatri here in exchange for your Lacey laying with my sage for the same night. Of course, I can't have you going off and taking with you the children of both Yolimatri and my sage, so in that case I would prefer for you to remain my cherished guest until Lacey can deliver an heir for my sage. Alternatively, if you need to be on your way more quickly, then I could obtain another necklace that I would trade to you when you return with the sage's heir. I feel both of these offers are more than fair."

"I appreciate the level of trust this represents in both cases," Arvina said, which struck Lacey as a smart way to acknowledge how shocking it was for a ruler to bargain with a random adventurer. It was far from the only thing that was shocking about this conversation, but it seemed like the safest one to bring up.

"Well, you were instrumental in recovering Yolimatri for me when I know it must have been tempting to take him for yourself. Even fellow elves have fallen victim," she added in bitter reference to the recent war against her former ally.

"I already have Lacey, and that is enough," Arvina said, and though Lacey knew she should have found this ominous, it made her tingle all over and wish ardently that it was true. Maybe not in the way that the Luminary would think of it, but...

"Is her devotion to you the reason for your hesitation?" the Luminary asked Arvina. She'd said more than that, but those were the words that brought Lacey back from romantic woolgathering.

Arvina looked back at Lacey, and Lacey's heart leapt, but then Arvina turned back to the

Luminary and said, "It does weigh on me."

"I salute your proper feelings, but please understand that I am very committed to making sure my sage gets an heir," the Luminary warned without even looking at the man in question. But Lacey could see the tension he was hiding.

"From Lacey specifically?" Arvina asked in her negotiations voice. "What if I brought you," she started an alternative offer before the Luminary cut her off with a shake of her head.

"Lacey specifically is known for her persuasive voice and crucially her musical talent, which is very desirable for a sage. The idea of forcing the issue offends me deeply, but you must understand that it would offend me even more deeply to fail my faithful sage due to excessive scruples toward non-elves."

The threat was obvious, and Lacey tried to squeeze Arvina's hand reassuringly. There was no point in picking impossible battles.

"I would beg a moment to discuss this with her first, if you could grant me that grace," Arvina said.

"Of course. You may use the tea room. Take as much time as you need and we'll continue our game of Tasaplin."

The tea room was just large enough not to be claustrophobic, and positioned in a hollowed knot on the Tree that provided privacy but also a great deal of the world's stoutest wood preventing any attempt at escape.

"It's okay, I can handle the sage," Lacey said.

"You're not going to be able to just charm him, Lacey. His resistance is probably huge, and even if you succeeded it would be obvious to the Luminary straightaway."

"I have a way to do it that worked on the vizier and should work on the sage, too. It's not just UltraCraft formal effects, it's a mix of that and role playing, basically. It works really well on AIs at this level. Like it would work on anybody."

"It's going to make them mad even if it works."

"I have a boost that should make it extra hard for them to discover that I'm using anything."

"Here," Arvina said, handing Lacey a draught of contraceptive tea. "Just in case. Are you sure you're okay with this?"

"Yeah, it'll be fine," Lacey assured Arvina, though she was far from sure she was telling the truth.

"I am fucking furious at UltraCraft right now," Arvina said with barely controlled emotion.

"It's okay. Thank you so much for leading the way in this meeting. You did brilliantly."

"Brilliant? That disaster?" Arvina asked, dumbfounded.

"It could be much worse. They could easily force the issue and give us nothing, but you gave the impression of knowing what we're about."

"But I don't," Arvina said in what would have been a wail of misery if she hadn't whispered

it.

“But we’re learning more, right? I’m going to go do this before I have a chance to get too anxious about it.”

“Good luck, Lacey. I’m so proud of you.”

“*Proud of me?*” Lacey asked, touched.

“So much courage. But go crush it girl.”

“Just tell them you’ve explained the situation to me and I intend to do my duty with the sage,” Lacey told Arvina.

“I’ll make it sound more willing than that. But I’ll keep it ambiguous so they don’t form too many expectations.”

Lacey gave Arvina a wink before they returned to the throne room, and she started out her plan feeling quite confident, not to mention glad that Arvina had remained with the Luminary so she didn’t witness Lacey doing everything she could to coax the sage’s sperm out of his body before he really had a chance to stick it in her. She was a bit surprised that he, like the vizier, didn’t put much willpower into resisting her techniques. After thinking about it for a moment after he proved perfectly content blowing his load between her tits, she got the uncomfortable feeling that he knew she wouldn’t be allowed to leave until she’d been confirmed pregnant. All her delay tactics were doing was giving him extra pleasure.

Further, and more worrying, was when she brought up her status tab to see that no contraceptive effect had been applied. It took a while before she could get to it, but reviewing her alerts list showed that her enchanted collar had nullified the contraceptive effects of the tea. In fact, it had been doing so all along. This seemed impossible because Naomi should have made her pregnant if that was the case, until she recalled that Naomi had also had the tea, and it had presumably actually worked for her.

So Lacey was definitely going to walk out of here pregnant.

Not only that, after the sage had deposited his third spurt of jism into her, that time in her bum, he marched her back into the throne room and described to both the Luminary and Arvina almost precisely what she was doing. Lacey, meanwhile, had to stand, naked except for her corset and heeled sandals. Her ero layer was still engaged so her breasts were so big that with Lacey holding them together to hide the cum in her cleavage they blocked the view of her arms and most of her shoulders from the Luminary and Arvina.

“Gods above and below, Arvina. How did you find such an incredible creature?” the Luminary asked Arvina, far more interested by Lacey’s uniquely expansive physique than her bad behaviour.

“It was luck. Incredible luck. She came to me,” Arvina said, staring at Lacey.

“Well, her loyalty is as fulsome as her bosom, but I’m afraid I don’t care to spare my sage for so long. Sorry friend, but I would like this done tonight so that you can join my delegation for

the next meeting at the lake.”

The sage appeared only slightly disappointed, and said, “I will make it happen this time, then, your luminance.”

“I think they should both participate,” the Luminary said with cultured ruthlessness

“Luminary!” Lacey couldn’t help but object.

“If you’re upset now perhaps you should have considered this before you tried your trickery on my sage,” the Luminary said angrily, then snapped her fingers.

Immediately Lacey could feel both the arousal and the intelligence reduction. She was down to animal intelligence. By the looks on the faces of the others, it appeared that all of them were, apart from the Luminary herself. She stepped out of the room to avoid being assaulted by a randy wolfborn or her own sage, but not before another snap compelled everyone to strip.

Well, not Lacey. She’d already stripped, and also she’d already had so much experience with having her game intelligence reduced that she wasn’t all that confused. Yes, text and audible speech were garbled, and her impulses wanted to seize control of her body, but Lacey had felt that before enough to know how to mostly ignore it.

What she had not learned to ignore, however, was the big beautiful cock that Arvina revealed when removing her underpants. It wasn’t exactly a surprise because it looked just like Herdsplitter’s, but it was a literal dream come true for Lacey and that impacted her in a way nothing else had. One of those impacts was literal; within seconds Arvina was inside Lacey, hammering away. The sage squeezed Lacey’s gyrating breasts around his cock and enjoyed the way Arvina’s thrusts drove Lacey up and down his shaft.

He was less impacted by the Luminary’s compulsion than Arvina was, but Lacey found she was able to sing her enchanting songs just as she always did, because she required no translation from the game. It couldn’t even turn her pick against her because she had practiced so much with her ‘impractical’ fingernails, though she would need some sort of break in order to reach her mandolin.

It was incredibly frustrating to have to bend her focus toward these other distractions when she would much rather have focused fully on having sex with Arvina for the first time, but if they were going to get out of there without the sage’s bun in Lacey’s oven, it was going to have to be Arvina’s bun. Further, the sage would need to assert that it had been his, which she hoped she would be able to befuddle him into doing. Lacey needed to drain Arvina with her vagina, then let the sage also finish in her just as he was emerging from the trance so that he would be most primed to assume that he was the one who had gotten Lacey pregnant.

In order to hold him off for long enough for Arvina to shoot her fourth and final round of spunk into Lacey’s womb, Lacey ended up nursing him with one nipple while massaging his penis with her other hand.

Lacey couldn’t tell Arvina to put her clothes back on in words, so she tried singing a charm

song about it. It felt very wrong, not the sort of thing that should have worked in the game, yet it did. Just in time, too, because the Luminary returned to check in on them almost the moment Arvina had gotten her underclothes on.

“Is it done?” she asked the sage, who was struggling to look composed while still feeling the reverberations of his latest orgasm.

“Uh, it... I can’t tell while she’s wearing that,” he said, pointing at her corset.

Lacey wasn’t sure if he was stalling for time or if this inability was real, but it didn’t last long. The Luminary didn’t even try to get Lacey to remove it, instead casting something on it that made the laces wiggle but nothing else. “Oh, clever to use the curse,” she said with a small smile, but shook her head. “But all I have to do is transfer the spell, and the deed is done!”

Sure enough, the corset dropped off Lacey’s body, and whether that was the sage’s impediment or if he had merely used it as an excuse, he confirmed that he had impregnated Lacey as specified. Lacey trusted that he was mistaken.

“And Arvina?”

“Uh...” He looked vaguely at the half-dressed wolfborn as if he’d forgotten that she was present. “No. Er, not so far,” he said, giving the Luminary a hopeful smile.

“After all this?” the Luminary asked sniffing in disgust. “I swear, sometimes I think Luminary Oleueme was right about you. Well, I’m not going to have you stinking up the Tree of Alt trying to mate outsiders. Take them back to their people. I leave it to you what to do with them...” She paused as she watched the sage suddenly notice Lacey’s massive presence again. “Oh, you are as bad as they are. The great sage of the forest,” she said mockingly as she wrote something on a roll of fine paper and he sputtered at the insult.

“You may use this and do as you please once you’re away from the Tree of Alt, but they need to be back to their people before the spells wear off, so you need to hurry. Go,” she commanded, handing the scroll to him and motioning for him to leave.

Grand New Party

The scroll must have summarized what she’d said in addition to containing the spell, because the sage checked the scroll every twenty seconds or whenever they faltered on their path back way they came. Instead of just dropping them off with the cowgirls, though, he ordered the two elves watching the chamber to step outside and let no one enter. Once they had done so, he read the spell on the scroll that operated more or less the same as the one the Luminary had cast a short time previously.

Lacey could tell it was weaker than before. Perhaps because it had seven spell targets in the room, or perhaps because it wasn’t as powerful cast from a scroll, but neither did it need to be as

strong because the cowgirls never had many compunctions against having sex with friends, and they were overjoyed for Arvina to fuck Lacey as many times as possible.

However, the sage seemed to be able to recall that he was trying to get Arvina pregnant, and was getting frustrated both because he was now positioned to see Arvina's vastly larger cock and because he was having trouble getting his own up after Lacey had drained him. He knew that he'd just come recently, but he could see that Arvina still wasn't pregnant, so he'd try to get it up again.

"He's trying to get Arvina pregnant," Lacey explained to the cowgirls for the fourth or fifth time they'd wondered at his otherwise inscrutable behavior.

"I'm not going to let you leave until this is done!" he said imperiously, though Lacey could hear his confusion and exhaustion.

"Oh, you should do it!" Alyssa suggested to Naomi, whose cock Lacey had between her tits at that moment.

"I don't think I would fit," Naomi argued, but disengaged to demonstrate the probable size mismatch to her sisters.

"You have lips designed for this. Make me hard again," the sage instructed Lacey, holding his flaccid member to her mouth.

While Lacey's mouth was occupied, the argument amongst the cowgirls continued until they decided the only way to settle it was for Naomi to actually try to stick her prick in Arvina's pussy while Arvina was still fucking Lacey. To the surprise of everyone apart from Alyssa, though, Naomi's bellend did in fact fit. Lacey didn't see this herself, but she felt the jump of Arvina's cock, then the slight additional gyrations as Naomi thrust shallowly.

Lacey escalated her dick-sucking efforts in order to get the sage's cock out of her mouth, which in turn would allow her to tell Naomi to stop, but bringing the sage to a fourth orgasm wasn't a quick process. Meanwhile, Lacey had already brought Naomi most of the way to climax before the alteration, and she probably couldn't have avoiding coming if she wanted to.

"Oh no! I did it!" Naomi said after filling Arvina, who was distracted by shooting one last time inside Lacey at the same moment. With the very last of its reserves finally expended, Arvina's cock rapidly shank out of existence.

"Good job!" Alyssa congratulated Naomi, whose prick was doing much the same as Arvina's had, though perhaps driven more by Naomi's dismay than exhaustion.

"Good job? Are you... why did you say that?" Naomi asked, some of her dismay traded for confusion.

"I think you were meant to do that," Alyssa said, but sounded doubtful now because she couldn't remember why any more.

The sage, having finished in Lacey's mouth at more or less the same as Arvina had in Lacey's cunt, stumbled around the room as if on the verge of collapse. He snatched up the scroll and

scanned it, evidently to remind himself of what was going on.

Surveying the room, he saw six women, one of whom was a wolfborn with semen spilling out of her vagina. “Okay, so it’s done. Surely,” he said, somewhat optimistically assuming that the huge amount of cum came out of his prick, which seemed smaller than ever to Lacey’s eyes. He cast a spell of some sort, probably to determine if Arvina was in fact knocked up, but all he said was for everyone to get dressed.

“Here, for bearing my heir,” he added somewhat hesitantly, handing Arvina a collar very much like Lacey’s. While the group was some combination of distracted and surprised, he called the guards back in to instructed them to escort the party out of the forest entirely. “And they’re not to eat or drink anything until they’re at the border,” he added.

“Luminous Sage?” the more senior guard asked, looking over the strange group, his eyes struggling to move on from Lacey’s vast bosom every time they fell into her cleavage.

“These two bear my heirs,” the sage explained gruffly, as if it was a faintly embarrassing situation.

The guards didn’t comment on this and simply did as they were told. As soon as they’d reached the ground beneath, an official hurried toward them, trailed by another pair of guards. “You! Who gave you that?” he demanded of Arvina who held the collar the sage had given her in her hand.

“The sage himself!” Alyssa said quickly, and plucked the collar from Arvina’s hand and equipped it on Arvina’s neck before anyone could stop her. Lacey swallowed her shout of warning, as it wouldn’t help anything and could easily backfire terribly.

“Is that true?” the official asked the guards suspiciously.

Both Alyssa and the official were shocked when the guards confirmed Alyssa’s story, for the simple reason that both Alyssa and the official had assumed Alyssa had made up her story on the spot to try to help Arvina keep the ultra rare artifact.

After listening to the rest of the guards’ explanation, the official summoned a larger escort, then began asking them questions about where they were from and where they intended to go next. Arvina and the cowgirls gave somewhat confused and conflicting answers which gave Lacey some hope that the official wouldn’t be able to make sense of it, but with her game intelligence still zeroed out, she wasn’t able to keep the other women from giving the elves information that at least in principle could be used to track them down.

Even once her game intelligence finally returned, Lacey wasn’t quite sure what to say because the cowgirls had already been excitedly relating to Arvina how she and Lacey were going to have siblings. Arvina looked stunned and like she wanted to say something, but at least for a time she also kept her silence. The look she gave Lacey made clear she intended to discuss matters in more depth with her later, once they were free of their enthusiastic escort.

Before they could do that, though, they needed to get home. This should have been easy

because they resided in the next region over and should have been able to teleport directly into their homes, but when they attempted to teleport, they both got error messages.

"This is like a bad joke," Arvina said, frustrated. She'd just received an error message warning her that her home didn't allow multiple residents. "I'm barely even pregnant!"

"Mine always allowed me when I was pregnant," Lacey said.

"But your room was designed for guests," Arvina pointed out.

"Guests yes, but extra residents no. I think there must be a deeper problem," Lacey said, biting her lip.

"Fuck," Arvina muttered upon looking down at Lacey who was deep in both thought and cleavage.

"Yeah?" Lacey asked.

"Again?" Rose asked in wonder, impressed at Arvina's sexual stamina.

"Not literally," Arvina said, rolling her eyes.

"Oh," Rose said, disappointed.

Lacey couldn't help but exult a little. Privately. Arvina didn't remember it, but Lacey could still cherish the knowledge that Arvina's fucking had been very literal and enthusiastic.

"If teleports aren't working, you should use the normal portals from Fenasterum back to Three Forks with us," Alyssa said.

Lacey felt simultaneously relieved and disappointed when Arvina shook her head in denial of Alyssa's suggestion. Lacey had been afraid that in applying the collar to Arvina's neck Alyssa might have taken control of her via the collar, but if Alyssa hadn't taken control of Arvina it was still possible that the sage had. Not that Arvina showed any signs to doing the sage's bidding, but there was at least a chance that the sage hadn't yet learned that Arvina was wearing the collar he'd given her.

"We still have loads of things we haven't tried yet," Arvina said grimly.

Too grimly. What did Arvina suspect?

"Should I try a dual teleport to my suite?" Lacey asked, more to break up the silence than anything else.

Arvina didn't respond immediately, which somehow felt even more ominous. Finally, she said, "Yes, let's do that," to Lacey but held up a hand to signal Lacey not to do anything yet so she could instruct the cowgirls, "If it works, then we see you when you get back. Don't talk to anybody about all this. And move fast, just in case anyone tries to follow you."

Once she got the solemn head nods from them, Arvina nodded at Lacey.

This time there was no error, and they both popped into the space next to Lacey's large bed.

"Thank goodness," Lacey said with relief.

"Shit," Arvina said.

"What?" Lacey asked, alarmed.

“It’s treating this like it’s my home,” Arvina said with a significant tone as if she thought that Lacey would immediately understand what this clue implied.

“Do I?” Lacey asked, horrified at the thought that somehow the collar considered Lacey to be Arvina’s owner.

“Yeah, looks like it,” Arvina answered, though Lacey had no idea what Arvina thought Lacey had been asking. “I’m not sure what the party screen even looks like to you.”

Lacey flipped over to that tab, and there was nothing different. No, wait, Lacey’s entry was indented under Arvina’s, like a hired retainer or a ridden animal. At the top of the party list it indicated that four of five party slots were occupied, and the button for inviting a new player was active for the first time since the day they’d first formed it.

“Oh dear,” Lacey said, “That can’t be good.”

“I’m really sorry,” Arvina said, “I don’t know how this happened.”

“It’s okay,” Lacey said with a shrug. This wasn’t quite how she’d wanted to belong to Arvina, but maybe this would give her opportunities to see if Arvina’s sexual interest in Lacey could be rekindled without the Luminary’s enchantment.

“You’re awfully blasé about this,” Arvina said suspiciously. “Is it your collar? You probably can’t even say, can you?”

“That’s not why,” Lacey said, then her eyes widened at the implication that Arvina knew about the collar’s prohibition on talking about its curses. “You, too?”

“I imagine so,” Arvina said. “I understand many, *many* things now. Or at least I think I do.”

“Enough to get the right people involved?” Lacey asked, simultaneously hopeful and a bit apprehensive. It might be better if it took at least a little while for Arvina to fix everything.

Arvina laughed ruefully. “I can’t talk to them right now, and I expect you can guess why.”

Lacey’s eyes widened again. “Wait, you can’t log out either? Why not?”

Even before Arvina shrugged, Lacey knew she couldn’t answer and felt very stupid. “Right, of course that was a dumb question. Do you even know why?”

Again Arvina shrugged, and Lacey couldn’t tell if Arvina didn’t know or was simply prohibited from explaining. Lacey asked a different question that this conundrum suggested, “Isn’t it weird that the game can do this to players?”

“I don’t think it’s an accident. I think Hardsplitter might be able to tell us for sure, but you were right about Indeline and Felicomê; they were interested in both of us, because we both have the same sort of playpod.”

“The RealDimension? Is this some kind of bug?”

“I’m not sure, but if it is, I think it’s impacting some of the most powerful people in the world.”

“Oh shit. The whole game could get shut down,” Lacey said with horror.

“Yeah,” Arvina said with dread that sounded even deeper than Lacey’s own.

“Am I missing something?” Lacey asked.

“What do you mean?” Arvina asked.

“You seem even more horrified about UltraCraft being shut down than I am.”

Arvina sighed, then admitted, “I don’t have any other place to go. My realspace body is falling apart. It’s treatable, but I don’t have enough money to start treatment yet. If UltraCraft shuts down, there’s no way I’m going to get treated until things are so bad I’m starting to suffer brain damage.”

“I have some money...” Lacey started, but Arvina shook her head.

“No. First, I know that’s not really true, and even if it was, I couldn’t take your money.”

“Why not?”

“This game is influencing your judgement, making it harder for you to say no to me,” Arvina said.

“Arvina, that’s not why,” Lacey said, but stopped when Arvina shushed her.

“See?” Arvina said, taking Lacey’s obedience as proof.

“Arvina, I love you,” Lacey said desperately.

Arvina stared at her without saying anything, and Lacey felt sick.

“I’m an idiot and I shouldn’t have said that,” Lacey said, wincing.

“The game is making you,” Arvina said, trying to comfort her.

“No! That’s not why. I’ve fancied you ever since the first time I met you, in the BTFS tourney before UltraCraft even started. But I was trying to stay cool about it, to not make things weird.”

Arvina looked at her skeptically, and Lacey felt worse and worse until she noticed it: Arvina was getting a hard on.

Arvina noticed the direction of Lacey’s eyes and shifted uncomfortably to hide the bulge.

“Uh, you don’t know what you’d get into if we were together.”

Lacey laughed. “You’re not talking about your cock, are you?”

Arvina’s smile was strained. “I am. I guess you know?”

Lacey laughed again, then sobered. “Uh, I’m not sure what you can remember, but the sage didn’t get me pregnant.” She was going to add, ‘You did’, but it sounded accusatory.

Even so, Arvina seemed to hear the unspoken words. “Oh my god, was it me?”

“Yeah. But it’s fine! It’s better than fine! I’m so happy that I get to...” She trailed off at the horrified look on Arvina’s face. “I know, I’m being weird and creepy.”

“*You’re* being weird and creepy?” Arvina objected, “I’m the one who, uh.”

“Saved me from the sage?” Lacey put in.

“Wait, I did?” Arvina said, sounding a bit hopeful.

“Yes.”

“Wait, how can you remember any of this?” Arvina asked suspiciously. “The cowgirls said

no one could,”

“I know,” Lacey said, forestalling the rest of Arvina’s sentence, “The luminary cast a spell that reduced all our game intelligences to zero, amongst other things. I don’t understand exactly why this sort of thing works on players, but my game intelligence is so low that I’ve spent loads of time not letting the game translate for me, or even correcting for it when it jumbles things up, so I think I’m become partly immune. Anyway, we were able to trick the luminary and her sage.”

“Wait, am I even... I’m definitely pregnant.”

“Oh. Um. Well, not by the sage.”

“Was it you?” Arvina asked.

Lacey laughed with delight, mostly because Arvina’s tone of voice suggested she hoped this was true. “I’m afraid I’m not equipped for that.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess I should have known that,” Arvina said with chagrin.

“I hope you’re not mad, but it was Naomi,” Lacey said.

“Naomi? The cowgirl? Wait, she has a...”

“Yeah, it’s almost as big as yours. She could hardly fit it in you.”

Arvina stared at Lacey in shock.

“It was just because the sage wasn’t going to let us go until he thought he’d put an heir in you,” Lacey reminded Arvina of one of the few accurate parts of the story as the cowgirls understood it.

“Wow. So I’m going to have Naomi’s baby. Calf? What’s the term?”

“She doesn’t even remember. You don’t have to take it to term,” Lacey reminded Arvina.

“I’m not cancelling the pregnancy,” Arvina said firmly.

Lacey almost asked why before she remembered it was none of her business. Then it occurred to her that Arvina’s collar might not let her terminate the pregnancy, either. Or it could be something else Arvina couldn’t tell Lacey about.

“But you’re not Naomi’s... You don’t have to do what Naomi tells you, right?” Lacey asked, but only got an apologetic shrug. Arvina couldn’t tell her.

“And neither of us can log out now. And we can’t really tell anyone in case the game shuts down.”

“No, we should say something,” Arvina said with a sigh. “We can’t let the world be hostage to my condition.”

“That’s not why. Or at least, not the only reason why,” Lacey said.

“What’s the other reason?” Arvina asked.

“If UltraCraft shuts down, everybody dies. I mean, all the new NPCs with the really huge new matrix size. That’s mass murder. Or worse.”

Arvina stared at Lacey in shock, but it was the expression of someone surprised to agree, not someone who thought Lacey had said something exceptionally stupid. Finally she shook her

head slightly, as if to clear it. “Well, we’ll at least see if we can get your status fixed.”

“You agree?”

“I’m not sure,” Arvina admitted, “But the rest of the party is going nuts trying to find out what happened to you so we should come up with some kind of story.”

“We can just tell them that it’s a glitch and we’re looking into it.”

“Which is pretty true. A glitch associated with my new ultra rare.”

“Nebulous and true,” Lacey said with approval. “Are we ready?”

“Do you want to turn off your ero layer?” Arvina asked.

“Oh shit, yeah. I keep forgetting,” Lacey said, then added, “I hope you like my ero layer version.”

“I... I definitely don’t hate it. But how did you get that size?”

“The corset. Oh shit.”

“What?” Arvina asked.

“The corset is gone, but I still have these giant hooters. Somehow she made it a permanent enchantment on me instead of the corset. Which I guess she would have had to do something like that in order to remove it.”

“I can probably find a way to reverse it,” Arvina said.

Lacey looked at Arvina’s face, which was earnest, but not exactly excited about the offer. “No, no, I like my ero layer body just fine.”

“Are you sure?” Arvina asked, and Lacey was elated to hear the relief in Arvina’s voice.

Lacey had already thought, based on the pounding Arvina had given her at the Tree of Alt, that Arvina was a fan of Lacey’s ludicrous bust, and this further confirmation made her feel giddy inside. Someday soon, she’d entice Arvina to repeat the experience. But that was later, and for now she had to look as reasonable as possible as they met the party and strategised how to fix it without too much UltraCraft involvement.

With Lacey back to her non-ero body and both of them at least superficially cleaned up, the biggest reaction was to the SSR bow Arvina had won from the Darkgreen quest sequence. They had no idea about anything else happening, not even Arvina’s collar, because her normal gear almost completely covered it.

After suitable marveling over the bow, the conversation turned to Lacey’s strange position on the team page. They discussed a number of different possible avenues of investigation and shared many speculations on cause, but until Dark spoke, no one was really shocked.

“It seems like kind of a bit advantage for us, don’t you think?” he said.

There was a long silence less because they didn’t understand his point but rather because they did. By all appearances, they could get the full benefit of Lacey’s powers without it costing a player slot on the party. They presumably could take six full power players on missions, which would be a giant advantage, especially given that Lacey’s specialty as a team-booster would be

even more powerful if this allowed her to boost *five* other players.

“We would get in so much trouble if we got caught,” was the first objection, from Caper.

“And anyone we invite as our fifth might snitch,” Alexandros added.

“Uh, excuse me? What about Lacey?” Arvina asked, outraged.

“No, this is fine. I think it’s a great idea if we can find someone we can trust,” Lacey said.

“And how sure are we that we’d get in trouble? If it’s a bug, it’s not a bug *we* created, and there’s so error messages.”

“*If* it’s a bug? I mean, it’s pretty obviously a bug, isn’t it?” Caper said.

“Maybe they’re testing a new mechanic,” Lacey suggested with a shrug that distracted everybody but Alexandros.

“You don’t really think it’s a new mechanic, do you?” he asked.

“Who could prove it isn’t?” Lacey said.

Dark laughed with delight. “Damn. Don’t take this the wrong way, Lacey, but I forgot how smart you are.”

“Thanks Dark,” Lacey said, and had to struggle not to bite her lip at the hungry way Arvina was looking at her.

“Fuuuck,” Caper said, apparently won over. “We are going to *dominate*.”

“I think so,” Lacey chirped, and wiggled just a bit in her seat to tease Arvina.

Update

“I can’t believe you did that,” Arvina told Lacey later. “What if there’s long term side effects of getting stuck here?”

Lacey, who was riding Arvina’s cock at that time, sped up a little as she said, “Worth it. This is so much better than what I had.”

“Is it really?” Arvina said, taking Lacey’s double meaning.

“Yes, it is,” Lacey said, leaning forward enough for her immense boobs to begin bouncing off Arvina’s chest.

Arvina focused more on fucking Lacey after that, but resumed the conversation in their post-coital cuddle. “I think you did it for me.”

“Yes and no,” Lacey said. “I did it because I want you, and I want you to be happy, but I didn’t do it to sacrifice my wellbeing for yours.”

“But you aren’t terminally ill or anything, are you?”

“Mental illness can be terminal,” Lacey pointed out, “Though to be fair I wasn’t actually to that point. But it was difficult to enjoy anything or accomplish anything due to my anxiety and other challenges, and honestly even without that I’m just not sure what there was out there for

me. In here, though, I have money, and a purpose, and a..." She hesitated. "What are we? Would it be too presumptuous of me to say you're my girlfriend?"

Arvina laughed and patted the ridge her semi-engorged cock still formed in Lacey's tummy. "I think it's safe to say we've made it that far. I mean, we're almost..." She became serious. "Is it even right for our... baby? Should I call her that?"

"Yeah, better than any other word, I think," Lacey said.

"Is it right for our baby to go to one of these creche things you're talking about?"

"I don't think there's a choice. I don't know quite how it works, but I don't think it's like human childhood."

"Is that because it's unnecessary or because it's a limitation UltraCraft created in the game so we didn't have adolescents all over?"

"I guess because it's unnecessary, or it wouldn't work."

"What if it's producing, like, insane AIs?"

"The ones I've met have seemed fine," Lacey said.

"Well, half of them came from you," Arvina said, "You're one of the sweetest people around. It's no wonder the cowgirls are all so nice."

"You're really okay with, uh, Naomi having been the one?" Lacey asked.

"It's weird, but it could be worse. I'm really glad it's her and not the sage."

"Really, though? I mean, the sage's offspring would surely have higher stats than..." Lacey argued but stopped at the way Arvina was shaking her head.

"First, stats aren't everything, and two, even if I liked her he'd take her away. And third, ew."

"He wasn't gross looking or anything," Lacey said.

"I don't care, I don't want to have a baby, virtual or otherwise, with some dude who thinks it's okay to fuck people who can't give consent."

Lacey could have argued about the Luminary's orders and differing cultural contexts, but the truth was that she felt exactly as Arvina did, and was glad they agreed.

"I wonder what the Luminary is going to do to him," Lacey mused.

"Because he didn't actually get either of us pregnant?"

"That and he wasn't meant to give you the necklace until after you delivered him his heir. Based on everything that has happened, I'm guessing there's no way he can use it to control you, so it's an enormously valuable artifact he gave away prematurely for no gain."

"Do you think she'll be very cross with him?" Arvina asked.

"She's difficult to read. She takes loyalty and fairness seriously, but she doesn't seem to have much compassion about her once she thinks those are violated, so she might do something truly awful to him."

"I can't feel sorry for him," Arvina said.

"Me neither, but I also can't really enjoy much schadenfreude about it, either."

“You’re so soft,” Arvina said, squeezing Lacey a bit so her breasts squished out to emphasise the double-entendre.

Lacey giggled and enjoyed the sensation of her boobs mashing against Arvina from navel to chin for a moment before Arvina became serious again and said, “We still need to find Herdsplitter.”

“We do, but I’m sure she’ll turn up,” Lacey asserted.

In the meantime, the party experimented with their “sixth” slot. They started by hiring mission-contract retainers that were usually intended for parties that were temporarily missing a member. That went well, if unremarkably, so then they started to look around more seriously for someone they might add.

By that time both Lacey and Arvina were beginning to look pregnant, so they used the excuse of returning to Montagne to stay out of the party’s sight until they’d given birth. The cowgirls were truly excellent helpers, making it more pleasant than it might otherwise have been, though Lacey had forgotten that this also meant that Arvina would witness morning milking.

It wasn’t as if there was fucking *every* time they milked her, but it wasn’t unusual for them to decide that she needed a little extra release during the process. And because they preferred to start while she was still waking up, it didn’t even occur to Lacey that something was different until she heard Arvina gasp. By then it was too late to stop, so Arvina got to watch the whole thing. The cowgirls, noticing Arvina’s rapt attention, decided to give a sort of demonstration of all the techniques they sometimes used on Lacey. It was mortifying, but not enough for Lacey to overcome her deeply ingrained compulsion to moo at some of the more sensational moments.

But instead of being disgusted or bemused, Arvina was clearly aroused at the sight, to the point that when Naomi started fucking Lacey, Arvina looked to be almost in pain, and Rose gently suggested that it would please everybody if Arvina put her cock between Lacey’s tits. Lacey was sort of embarrassed to have Arvina’s cum splattered all over her face, but she was more relieved that she wouldn’t have to hide the true situation with the cowgirls from Arvina any more. In fact, Arvina clearly enjoyed it.

“I think I understand better why they are the way they are around you,” Arvina told Lacey later, once she was cleaned and sensible.

“Yeah, I really am kind of a dumb cow sometimes, when they catch me at the right moment.”

“Hella sexy cow,” Arvina said.

Lacey laughed. “I’m glad you like it. Truthfully, it started out a relaxing salve for my anxiety and then, well, became something else.”

“I’m glad they were here for you,” Arvina said.

“Me too,” Lacey said, and was a little surprised how true that was.

Because they were around so much, the cowgirls overheard and misunderstood a conversation Lacey and Arvina had about the ‘sixth slot’, and they were very insistent that Gerrie

would be a perfect candidate to help out Lacey and her friends. By then both Lacey and Arvina were near to delivery so they just changed the subject, but even after the whirlwind of events that followed, the cowgirls never forgot their helpful conviction that Gerrie should join the party and keep an eye out for their favourite little cow Lacey.

Giving birth together was a bonding experience, but also deeply strange and a little heartbreaking. As before, they had no choice but to present their newborns to some kind of institution for the raising of in-game children, but since the last time Lacey had done it the number and gravitas of the wolfborn watching over the creche had multiplied. Further, the way they insisted on registering Lacey's litter with Arvina under Arvina's name was a little too serious and compulsory to feel romantic at all. Which would have been awkward in its own right, but hopefully a more pleasant sort of awkward.

"We really need to talk to Herdsplitter," Arvina said on their way home.

"Yeah," Lacey agreed, peeking at Arvina.

"What?"

"It's just... You know your boobs have grown, right?" Lacey asked.

"I mean, yeah, but standing next to you I didn't feel right saying anything," Arvina said.

"I guess that's fair. You probably can't tell, but mine got bigger again, too."

"Are you serious?" Arvina said, gobsmacked at the idea that Lacey's breasts could be even bigger than before.

"Yeah. I mean, at my size you'd have to measure to be sure, but I can feel the extra weight."

"Is it bad?" Arvina asked, still staring at Lacey's chest with wonder.

"Um," Lacey said, unsure of what to answer until she noticed the telltale signs of Arvina trying to suppress an erection. "Not bad at all. I like it."

"Oh good. I guess I like it too," Arvina admitted. They had to be a little bit careful because they were both immune to contraceptive tea, but they had a very nice time trying out their respective size increases together before returning to the party.

More to fill the slot immediately with someone safe than because anybody thought she'd be a strong addition, the party accepted Gerrie's offer to join them while they continued looking. But clad in halfway decent equipment, Gerrie proved to be far more useful than expected. She cheerfully used her bulk and durability to soak up attention and attacks that would ordinarily be directed at the others, and while she avoided most things that might seriously wound an enemy, she was unexpectedly effective at stunning or otherwise disabling enemies. Gerrie was no elite player, but even so she made plenty of missions far easier to complete, and she barely even asked for any loot. She was simply overjoyed to be able to help, and especially to make sure Lacey wasn't endangered.

As far as Lacey was concerned, the worst part of Gerrie joining the party was the cowgirls' constant worrying about her when Gerrie shared the ghastly dangers to which Lacey's

participation had exposed her. This mostly happened when they were alone so no one else really understood how serious the cowgirls were about it, but they really did worry about Lacey and their earnest anxieties on her behalf made her uncomfortable. It was a time when she saw a distinct reflection of her own personality in them. She both knew how they must be feeling and also the guilt of having saddled them with her own tendency to worry about such things.

Strangely, though, Lacey's worries about her own situation took something of a backseat once the party's extra progress due to Gerrie's participation began to accumulate. More to the point, the market value of Arvina's character was increasing distinctly and Lacey began to be hopeful that Arvina would be able to actually pay for the creation of the customized microbial suite that would be needed to treat her realspace body. Arvina had warned Lacey that she actually needed to sell for at least twice that much money in order to guarantee being able to pay for the followup treatments, so Lacey knew that their time together in-game wasn't that close to the end, but even so the bizarre combination of hope and dread grew faster and faster as their party floated up into the numbered rankings.

Also, a major new update really was coming now, not just as a dubious rumour but announced and everything. Lacey made sure to at least pretend to believe that it would fix the logout problem. Who knew if it might also fix whatever it was that had allowed them to fit six players onto the team? The future was unknowable and there probably wasn't anything she could do about it anyway, so it was best to take advantage of the joys of now.

Finally the morning after the update came, and... nothing appeared to have changed. The cowgirls had milked and fucked her like regular, Arvina had slept through it all, which was unusual but not unprecedented. Lacey was still listed underneath Arvina's character in the team roster, and she still got a curse violation error when she attempted to log out. Lacey decided the nicest way to soften the blow for Arvina would be to wake her up as nicely as possible.

"So was that celebratory sex?" Arvina asked Lacey as they cuddled afterward.

"No, consolation sex," Lacey said apologetically.

"Really?" Arvina's gaze unfocused slightly as she tried out her system controls. "Oh," she said, sounding like she got punched in the gut, "How did you know?"

"I tried logging out myself," Lacey said.

"Yeah? Did something bad happen while you've been inside?" Arvina said, concern for Lacey creeping into her voice.

"No, wait, I don't know... I got the same error. Did... What happened for you?" Lacey asked, an ominous thought having come to her.

"Oh. Well, it's all fixed for me," Arvina said with a wan smile. "I just forgot how bad my realspace body is feeling now."

"That's not everything. You got some bad news."

"Not... really. Just lack of good news."

“Oh,” Lacey said, not believing Arvina but also not pressuring her to share bad news that she didn’t want to. “Well, being able to log out means that you’ll be able to sell soon.”

“I can’t sell while you’re still in my mount slot.”

“I guess not, but I’m sure we can just contact support and get it fixed before.”

Arvina was silent for a while, then said, “You know, if I wasn’t going to die otherwise, there’s no way I’d leave like this.”

“I know. But I feel so lucky to have had you for this little time.”

“You’re mad to love someone like me,” Arvina asserted.

“Yeah, you drive me mad,” Lacey said, smiling and enticing Arvina to make love one more time before heading out.

The wider game world seemed pretty normal in some ways, but Lacey felt like everything was a bit off anyway and she couldn’t put her finger on it. She had almost convinced herself it was just disappointment about Arvina distorting her perceptions when a very strange experience at the creche made her wonder if something strange was going on after all.

“Lacey, Gerrie, and Naomi,” Lady Asterine said, “So good to see you again after so long.”

They returned her greetings warily, and Lacey asked, “I wouldn’t have expected to see you here.”

“No, that’s reasonable. I need to speak with... Naomi.”

“Naomi?” Lacey asked, trying to turn her surprise into an address. “I guess Gerrie and I will wait for you?”

Naomi just nodded and walked a distance away with Lady Asterine, where they discussed something serious while Lacey and Gerrie played with Lacey’s and Arvina’s cubs. After a while, Naomi nodded, and returned to say, “Lady Asterine has someone she wants you to meet. I don’t know who it is, but for now you should only meet this person and hear what they have to say. Don’t agree to *anything* without talking to us first.”

Lacey tried to give Naomi a reassuringly obedient smile because there was no point in trying to convince them that Lacey wasn’t thick as a brick and could very well take care of herself.

The meeting wasn’t what she expected; the man waiting in the little storage room was a hugely powerful player, but he looked beaten and terrified, and extremely dismayed to see her. He muttered some sort of gibberish at her in despair. Not just any gibberish, Gedbeh gibberish. It was just jumbled.

“Are you trying to speak Gedbeh?” she asked.

He jolted and hope came into his expression before he spewed some more gibberish. Something about the game and riches, but she couldn’t really make sense of it. “I don’t know if you’re really bad at this language or if you’re trying to speak English and the game is simply making a hash of it, but nothing you’re saying makes much sense. Maybe if you tried drawing the letters in English. Hopefully you speak English?”

He was excited now, and began spelling out his story in large looping letters drawn in the air. Evidently he didn't have much time before his captor would notice he was gone, but he was a very wealthy man in the real world and he had been told that a bimbo who was mother to wolfborn cubs could help him.

She'd been translating all his writing into Gedbeh so he would know she was following along, but she stopped him then to ask, "Help you how?"

According to what he spelled out to her he was unable to log out or free himself and he would pay her a fortune if she could help him.

"I... know someone who could help you, but you have to help her first, because she's dying and she needs money for treatment." Before he even finished asking how much, she told him a number that was at least half more than Arvina had told her. "Her name in the game is Arvina, player ID 00016 38421. She knows the secret of logging out, and can help you... What's your name?"

He said something garbled then started spelling out his number, but Lady Asterine barged in, apologized for being abrupt, and took him away before he could finish.

Naomi looked beside herself with concern when Lacey finally returned. "I'm so glad you're okay. I was so worried. You *are* okay, right?"

"I am, yeah. I guess. But something really strange is going on. And I'm not sure if I just did something brilliant or catastrophically stupid."

The cowgirls were, in general, quite inclined to be supportive, but they were too honest to express confidence in Lacey's intelligence.

A Bimbo's Bimbo

Lacey hurried to where Arvina was meant to be so she could explain what she'd done, accompanied only by Naomi because Gerrie had gone to fetch the other cowgirls in case they were needed.

"I don't want to harp on it too much, Lacey, but this feels very dangerous to me," Naomi told her anxiously as they made their way through the streets.

"It will be okay, Naomi," Lacey said, "We're in a patrolled area of Rampart. Look there! A town guard." Lacey waved at the guard who had been watching them with interest that might have been prurient if he'd been a major NPC. Though the smile did look like a bit of a leer, so maybe there was some sexual interest being simulated inside his little behavioral matrix.

"We need to move faster," Naomi said, looking behind them.

"Are we being followed?" Lacey said, striving to manoeuvre her enormous breasts through the crowd as quickly as possible, taking advantage of the gaps made by Naomi preceding her.

Turning off her ero layer would actually be worse because then the game imposed the speed penalty regardless, and Lacey was steadily getting better at moving her full sized boobs quickly when necessary.

“I can’t tell if they’re following us, but there is someone behind us trying to move quickly in the same direction,” Naomi warned.

Fortunately they were almost to the workshop where Arvina was meant to be crafting and Naomi pulled the door open before practically diving over Lacey to block whomever was coming after them. Momentum propelled the large heavy door to create an opening plenty wide for Lacey, but then it swung closed again while she had paused on the threshold to try to see what was inside. It slammed into her deeply padded bum, launching her into the room and off of her unrealistic high heels.

Happily these special workshops in UltraCraft didn’t have the dirt and muck that tended to accumulate on more realistic shop floors, so she didn’t get filth all over her front when she landed on her built in airbags or on her knees when she slowly worked her way back into a standing position.

Eerily, there didn’t appear to be anyone there to be amused by her pneumatic pratfall. Rampart wasn’t a hotbed of crafters, but Arvina was far from the only one in town, and Lacey had never seen the workshop empty before. Where was everybody? More to the point, where was Arvina, who had said she’d be here all morning?

The door opened, but instead of Arvina, it was Naomi.

“I think it was just some fans,” Naomi said, though it was clear her suspicions where not entirely allayed. “What is this place?”

“Um...” Lacey said, processing multiple thoughts. The first was that NPCs weren’t meant to be able to enter the crafter workshops, and the second was that if they did, she wouldn’t expect them to see what a player did. That led Lacey to the unpleasant third, which was that perhaps Lacey wasn’t seeing anything because she was being treated like an NPC. Again.

Suddenly, though, everything shifted, and the normal crafter interface spun into existence.

“Lacey?” Arvina asked with some surprise, followed by outright shock, “Naomi?”

“Hello, Arvina,” Naomi said, blushing as she often did when encountering Arvina. “I brought Lacey here to talk to you. Lady Asterine brought a curious fellow to talk to her and I’m afraid she’s made some kind of agreement with him.”

“How...” Arvina began to ask, looking back and forth between Lacey and Naomi and not seeing expressions that promised answers on either face. “Okay, let’s start with hearing about the curious fellow?”

“Uh, yeah,” Lacey said. There were many strange things happening, but that seemed to have kicked it off. “I think it was one of the really rich toffs, stuck like we were, but worse, because he barely knows any Gedbeh and because, uh,” Lacey tried to think of how to say it without

referring directly to her collar's curse. "Because he hasn't been as fortunate as we have."

"He was wearing a collar?" Arvina asked, and she took it as confirmation when Lacey didn't deny it. He hadn't been wearing a collar Lacey could see, but she did think he must have been wearing one, or at least an artifact similar to their own.

"I saw no collar, but Lady Asterine brought him to her," Naomi answered when Lacey said nothing, "And then took him away when his time was exhausted. He was distraught, but even though he appeared more powerful than a lion Lady Asterine led him like a lamb."

"He can't, uh, he can't do the same thing we couldn't do before the update. He had heard about me somehow, from someone who told him I would know how to help him. He offered me a fortune for helping, and I told him to send it to you. I gave him a way to contact you. Uh, a way that one can contact someone on the other world. I tried to get the same from him, but he had to leave before he could give me all the numbers."

"Holy shit," Arvina said, eyes wide.

"Was that stupid?" Lacey asked, and waited with increasing apprehension when Arvina didn't answer immediately.

"It's okay, sweetie," Naomi murmured in Lacey's ear while placing consoling hands on her shoulders, "It's not fair to expect genius from you. You did the best you could."

Lacey was torn between being offended, touched, and amused, so she didn't react overtly as Naomi's embrace brought Lacey's head into the soft spot between the cowgirl's large breasts. Huge, really, except compared to Lacey's monumental chest. Lacey didn't love that Naomi thought Lacey was as dumb as she looked, but it was undeniably nice to be coddled just a little in times of fear and uncertainty.

"I think we'll just have to see what happens," Arvina said finally. "I love you, by the way. For all I know, you just saved my life."

Lacey could tell from Arvina's tone that she doubted this would be the outcome, but she did at least recognise the attempt. Sometimes she felt as stupid as the cowgirls thought she was.

"What *should* I have done?"

"Well, none of us do the perfect thing in the moment, but it might be better to get their identifying information first before giving anything away. Then I can investigate separately, and hopefully safely. I expect that many people know *something* now. I don't know if *anybody* knows *everything*, but there are many more people out there trying to figure it all out."

"Does it hurt when you log out?" Lacey asked guiltily.

"What? Why are you asking that?" Arvina asked, startled.

"It does, doesn't it? I'm so sorry!" Lacey said, feeling terrible that she'd put everything on Arvina.

"Don't be sorry! You... you have been trying to help, and also, I would have had to log out regardless!"

“This sucks,” Lacey said. “I can’t believe I fucked this up so badly.”

“Lacey, you don’t know that you did anything wrong whatsoever. You might have done exactly what should have been done. I’ll just... Let’s see.” She held up one finger as she prepared to log out, and Naomi, feeling Lacey trying to say something in violation of Arvina’s signal, put her hand over Lacey’s mouth.

It was painful to watch Arvina’s body be taken over by the game’s default AI. As soon as it completed, Arvina’s disinhabited body, the crafting interface, and all the associated furnishings rotated away into nothingness as well, leaving Naomi and Lacey once again standing together in an empty building. Whatever they might have said to one another was forestalled by the characteristic knock of the cowgirl sisters arriving.

“Alyssa thinks there’s a group waiting outside to kidnap you,” Gerrie warned as soon as Naomi opened the door.

“They might just be fans, though,” Rose added.

“Seems like too much of a coincidence to me,” Alyssa said, then asked, “What is this place?”

“It’s Arvina’s special magical workshop,” Naomi explained. “She had to go on a quest across a magical bridge made of natural lumber.”

“What? A magical bridge?” Lacey asked

“It’s okay,” Naomi said, and gave Lacey a gentle kiss atop her head. “I’m not sure if we’re safe here without Arvina. I think perhaps we should take her home now.”

“We’ll have to be ready for the kidnappers,” Gerrie said.

“It would be better to fetch her other friends,” Alyssa said.

“They’re always putting her in danger,” Naomi complained.

“But also getting her *out* of danger,” Alyssa pointed out.

“I don’t think we need to get them involved,” Lacey said. “It’s *that* not far home, and who knows how long it would take to find them?”

The cowgirls exchanged glances and Lacey knew they had wordlessly agreed that Lacey’s opinion was daft. “How about you take some of the potion,” Alyssa suggested. “That way they *can’t* take you.”

“What potion? The Queen of Jades potion that blows me up into a balloon made of boobs and bum? No,” Lacey said, to suppressed sighs amongst the cowgirls. “I really think you’re overestimating the risks here. I’m pretty sure they’re trying for Arvina, not me. Or at least, if they get me, they’ll be disappointed. Actually...” Lacey paused and began removing everything possible apart for her outer clothes. “Take all this with you and if they try to take me I’ll fight to the death. All they’ll get is my dress and booties, and I’ll respawn at home.”

The cowgirls were looking at Lacey very oddly, and she knew that probably a significant fraction of that had been gibberish to them. She had unmistakably alarmed them, at least.

“Maybe they *should* be disappointed, Naomi,” Alyssa said somewhat cryptically.

“Do you think that’s really necessary?” Naomi asked anxiously in just the tone of voice Lacey had when a mission demanded she act in some particularly ruthless way.

“Only if it really looks like she’ll be captured. It’s that or the potion.”

“The potion is out of the question,” Lacey said, imagining being stuck here in the middle of Rampart with immobilizingly large boobs and butt. It did appear that most people couldn’t enter this location and interact with them, but even if that was true, she wasn’t going to hang out in this building for over a day until the potion wore off. Even if the cowgirls would make it as pleasant as they could.

While Lacey was resisting the urge to look at Naomi’s crotch to see if there was an erection there, Gerrie said, “We should move sooner rather than later, because the more time we take the more time the kidnappers have to get ready.”

“The other alternative is waiting until her friends can help,” Alyssa reminded them.

“Let’s just go,” Lacey said, wanting to get it over with.

There was another exchanged glance, but the cowgirls acquiesced to Lacey’s demand. After taking several invigorating draughts, they bustled her out like bodyguards trying to protect the president, and instead of moving directly toward home, they seemed to move from defensible location to defensible location. The idea, Lacey assumed, was to defend long enough for town guards to come to their aid. She was impressed; it was the sort of thing player parties would do when dealing with missions for which they were underpowered, though it didn’t always work because it wasn’t particularly difficult to delay and distract the town guard for a minute or two. Even so, most NPCs weren’t smart enough to do that, so it was basically standard practice for low level players trying to minimize the danger of being set on by footpads at night.

On the other hand, a party of players intent on capture would plan around delaying guard intervention from the start and would regard it as a minor inconvenience at most. Lacey was forcibly reminded of this when they were indeed attacked by a mid-ranked party. They would have been no match for Lacey’s normal party, but the cowgirls were not adventurers and there was nothing they could do but delay the inevitable.

“We can’t beat them and we can’t escape,” Lacey warned Naomi, who had retreated with Lacey down the alleyway while the others did what they could to block the kidnappers.

“Yes, so that’s why we have to do this,” Naomi told her apologetically as she lifted Lacey up against the wall.

“You’re not about to force feed me the potion, are you?” Lacey asked as Naomi started fussing in her trousers.

“No, it’s too late for that,” Naomi said, which was just what Lacey had been preparing to say, except Naomi took out her cock, not the potion bottle.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to complete the mission before they can. Hopefully it protects you until someone

can rescue you.” By the time Naomi had finished talking, she was already buried in Lacey’s hungry and uncovered cunt.

“What mission are, are, uh, uh, uh,” Lacey said, momentarily losing the thread of her thoughts as Naomi began hammering her harder and faster than she ever had before.

“I’m sorry it had to be this way, our beloved little cow,” Naomi murmured as near Lacey’s ear as her position up against the alleyway wall would permit, “But hopefully it won’t be unpleasant? And I’ll do everything I can to free you. I swear it.”

Lacey wasn’t really sure what to make of this melodramatic promise, but it was honestly just so sexy to be pinned against the wall and fucked like there was no tomorrow. Held up against a wide timber so their mouths were at the same level, Naomi could kiss the smaller woman forcefully, and suck hungrily on the plump bimbo lips as she pulled away and let Lacey’s minor ocean of titflesh fall back between them from off to the side where Naomi’s kiss had squished them.

“I thank the gods for granting you these,” Naomi said, enjoying the feel of Lacey’s chest bouncing on her own.

“I’m. Glad. You. Like. Them,” Lacey said in time with Naomi’s thrusts forcing air out of her lungs.

“Hopefully they won’t see past them any more than you can,” Naomi said when she was pressing in close in a way that made Lacey’s boobs bulge up to the point of blocking her vision almost entirely. “I bet they’ll think it was worth it in the end. Oh Gods, you feel so…” The look on Naomi’s normally sweet face as she pumped Lacey’s womb full of cum was itself an intoxicant that blurred Lacey’s memory of those last words from Naomi later.

By then Gerrie was pulling off to the side because she was the one carrying Lacey’s valuable equipment, and once Gerrie retreated Rose and Alyssa wouldn’t be able to withstand more than a couple more hits.

“Was one of those drinks you took the contraceptive tea, then?” Lacey asked as Naomi set her back down and put her own equipment away in preparation to meet the kidnappers.

Naomi laughed. “Contraceptive? Oh my sweet little cow,” she said, marveling at Lacey’s naiveté. “Stay back, to give it time to work. And if it takes you then I apologize but maybe that will give them even more of what they deserve.”

“What do you mean ‘takes me’? And give *what* time to work?” Lacey asked, but then had to transition to singing to renew the protective buff on Naomi. It only prolonged the fight a few seconds, though, and then the leading two players were on her while the others remained at the alley entrance to prevent anyone from intervening.

“Shit, is that all cum?” a warrior class player asked a more cleric type.

“Fuck, I think so,” the cleric type said, having already cast an immobilizing spell on Lacey. “Well, there goes the SSR, but we can still get the favour points and whatever the next mission is

in the chain.”

“Did someone fuck her while she was still in the crafting room? That’s not possible, is it?”

“Clearly it is. Jesus, look how much spooge is coming out of this little cumdump,” the cleric said with a mixture of disgust and wonder. “She’s like a famous slut so I think maybe it was fan service?”

“Does the rule against fucking her still hold if she’s already been fucked?” the warrior asked.

“Probably. I wouldn’t risk it,” the cleric said. “At least not in her vagina.”

“Well, I don’t want some other blokes’ jizz on my dick anyway.”

“It’s all a simulation,” the cleric said, rolling his eyes, “It’s not real cum or anything. It’s not like she’s going to give you a disease.”

“Hey, we need to get out,” one of the other players called from the mouth of the alley, “There’s two more guards coming and there’s players asking questions.”

“Fine,” the cleric said with a hint of exasperation and attached some kind of gem to Lacey’s collar before teleporting out.

In fact, they teleported together, which wasn’t something what was meant to be possible with other players or even regular characters. The exception was for mounts, and she very much hoped she didn’t now fall into that category.

The cleric evidently lived in some kind of ecclesiastical quarters, a step up from the the spartan novitiate cells favoured by starting players, but also not one of the templar suites which the most advanced clerics and paladins could earn. He seemed to have done what he could to outfit it richly, insofar as the somewhat basic setting could allow, and the bed in particular seemed chosen for lovemaking rather than rest.

Lacey didn’t have long to be apprehensive, as his attention turned away from her shortly after they arrived and he stepped on a small treasure chest below an even smaller window so he could look out, then swear.

“I should have known they would already be here,” he said with a frustrated sigh, “Come on.”

Lacey didn’t see the point in fighting him; her normal power rating was almost half again higher than his, but he would have significantly boosted defense against charm in his own home, and of course Lacey’s kit was still with Gerrie. Hopefully.

Outside the cleric’s chamber the knocking was clearly audible. Several other characters stuck their heads out to see what it was about, but then ducked back in hastily after spotting the cleric. Evidently he was frightening presence for the others, but it was clear the cleric was worried about whomever was outside.

“Blessed Facekaker,” the bespeckled gnome outside addressed the cleric, “Lord Ankhaler is pleased that you have completed the assigned task. It is a shame that you didn’t manage to do so in a fashion manner worthy of his most exalted commendation. However, here is a token of his

appreciation.”

As the gnome handed the small pouch to Facekaker the cleric, a rather normal looking woman standing between two enormous elite automata stepped forward to take control of the gem-encrusted object Facekaker had attached to Lacey’s collar, and led her out of the building into the midst of what looked like a motley but extremely intimidating army featuring a wide variety of warriors, golems, mages, and even a dragon.

In the very centre waited a sumptuously-dressed Drogic noble whom Lacey assumed was Lord Ankhaler. This was not only because all the senior figures in the miniature army seemed to be looking to him for approval; even more so it was because three other Drogic concubines wearing collar-like artifacts waited with him. She wasn’t confused by two of the three being males with bicep cuffs instead of collars because the overall similarities to Yolimatri were unmistakable.

“Shall we kill them, m’lord?” a scarred ogre asked Ankhaler, who was looking at Lacey with displeasure.

“No, Kerkaksik, she’s not ruined yet,” Ankhaler said, examining Lacey closely as she arrived directly in front of him.

“I see your prior owner has put me off a bit,” Ankhaler said to Lacey as he turned her head to the side with his hand so he could study at her profile. “But as one expects of a mere cowgirl, she didn’t understand your true utility any better than you do. Yes, I think you’re a bimbo’s bimbo. You don’t understand a thing I’m saying, do you?”

Lacey didn’t disabuse him of this misperception which he no doubt held because her current game intelligence was the same as an untrained dog. “How in the world would such a minor character get you? The creator gods must be almost as foolish as you are. And given that you’re so stupid, I’m going to guess you’re somebody’s ‘trophy wife’ or some such, aren’t you?” His pronunciation of the English phrase was far from perfect, but sufficient for her to grasp it in context. Nonetheless she’d resolutely kept her expression blank.

He laughed, and Lacey wasn’t sure if it was because he’d detected a reaction despite her acting or because he found her lack of reaction amusing. “You didn’t understand that, either? A nice confirmation that you are a bimbo in ‘realspace’ as well. Fortunate that I don’t need your brain, given that you don’t appear to have one.”

With that established, he turned his attention to the larger force, which he directed to escort him back to a palatial estate nearby. Though short, the walk was enough to establish for Lacey that they were in one of the more inland cities of the Singing Coast. This was a bit of a surprise to her because Drogos were not known as major part of the area’s ruling classes, but inside they moved directly to a set of portals not that dissimilar from the ones held by the vizier.

Perhaps it shouldn’t have surprised her when it took them to Ferzia. Or at least, a palace the design of which clearly marked it as having constructed as part of the Ferzian empire. The

various signs of *current* Ferzian suzerainty were missing as they moved through what proved to be Lord Ankhaler's primary palace. Based on the ruggedly mountainous terrain visible out the window and the west-facing coastline in the distance, they could be in an inland realm within the rebel province of Artori. Lacey didn't have Dark's encyclopedic knowledge of the UltraCraft world, but it seemed like it might be sufficiently wooded for a Drogic clan to have settled here.

"Since she belongs to a cowgirl, we might as well treat her like one." Ankhaler told the terrified woman still leading Lacey around by her collar. "Take her to the stables and make what use of her you can until her womb is clear again. See what the adventurers are willing to pay, and you may keep a tithe for yourself." He wiggled his fingers for her to leave.

"Can't we just end the pregnancy to clear her womb earlier?" the gnome asked Ankhaler as Lacey was led away, but she was too far away to make out the answer.

The woman leading her showed no signs of sympathy for Lacey nor remorse for what she was doing but neither was she cruel. She simply did what she had to do, which ended with Lacey's neck and hands locked to one bar, and her feet locked to a pair of slanted blocks.

It was when the woman began to milk Lacey in that position that she learned that something had changed for her. In the moment it was frightening as well as soothing because while being milked Lacey's mind sort of shut down, to the point that her real intelligence and her game stat more or less matched. It was frightening because it didn't deprive her of the ability to know that this was wrong somehow, but soothing because it felt just as good to be milked as it always did so it wasn't long before she forgot what was wrong.

While in that state she had no real objections to how she was used for the next couple days, though she didn't like the way Facekaker's cum smelled on her face, nor did she enjoy his tendency to slap the side of her boobs while he stuck his penis in her vagina or anus. Not that he was the only one who was rough with her, especially amongst those who decided to drink directly from her nipples, but even in her fugue state she disliked it more coming from him.

Fortunately the woman in charge of Lacey's sojourn in the stables wouldn't allow her to be abused too much so that was about as bad as it got. That included the moment a day later when an angry woman wearing familiar kit came in to scream angrily about something before being hauled away by two Drogic guards.

Some more complicated things happened after that involving the Droge Lacey later knew was Lord Ankhaler himself, though her memories weren't clear enough to know what the inspection had been about or why he'd been so pleased. What she did know was that Ankhaler's two male concubines were repeatedly sent in to fuck Lacey and drink her milk. That phase passed as well, though, and then another day of fucking plus milk drinking from a variety of other figures uniformly unfamiliar to Lacey before it all ended with a bang.

A non-sexual bang, that was.

Mostly.

Big Bang

The stables were relatively low in a palace that sprawled up and down a mountainside, so when the first impacts hit the uppermost towers they sounded quite distant. This didn't immediately strike Lacey as a crisis because she wasn't in any condition to speculate about it, but eventually the crisis itself allowed her mind to clear because it stopped being anybody's priority to make sure she was milked or fed. Well, perhaps the woman who had been in charge of the stables was still tasked with that, but Lacey never saw her again so presumably she left Lord Ankhaler's service one way or another.

With her ability to think mostly restored, she could tell that the palace was under siege from somebody capable of battering it with some sort of large projectile. The battle went on and on, and it was clearly quite intense, yet not so powerful that it easily overcame the defenders because the defenders didn't sound panicked. Lacey, on the other hand, *did* begin to panic, because she could feel herself moving close to delivery. Nothing about this was how she wanted to do that.

As if choreographed to the moment, an enormous roaring strike impacted a portion of the palace defenses nearby just as she went into labour. The pressure and heat was such that Lacey reckoned it would likely have killed her if it had been a realspace explosion. Additional sequelae crashed here and there, and the shaking of the ground felt like the end of the world.

Armageddon was not actually at hand, though. The only destruction that intruded into her stall was the splinters of the door that flew in when Gerrie battered her way through, propelled by the cowgirl sisters who followed behind her. As if they'd come specifically for that purpose they quickly set up to catch Naomi's calf in a plush swaddling blanket before freeing Lacey from her restraints so they could carry her out.

Whatever attack had toppled a curtain wall and set afire everything flammable for fifty meters in any direction seemed to have ceased, but the cowgirls, Lacey and her newborn were atop the rubble and on their way out before any defenders had transitioned from taking cover to trying to close the breach. Even then, there was some kind of hue and cry from higher in the palace, so no one seemed to seriously attempt pursuit.

They didn't make it very far before they were set upon by a wolfborn band lurking in the forest, however. Or at least, that's how it felt to Lacey; she belatedly realized that it had simply been their way to interrupt the cowgirls' conspicuous and easily-tracked manner of travel.

"Little mother," one of them addressed her while the leader of the group was conferring with the cowgirls, "The chieftess said you might wear this."

It was a cream gown with a mermaid silhouette and off-shoulder sleeves that was clearly designed to at least evoke a wedding dress and definitely was not appropriate for tramping about in the wild. On the other hand, it was much better than remaining naked. For one thing, Lacey could see that the sight and scent of her exposed vagina was creating a lot of erections that were

also not appropriate for the setting. For another, it prevented Lacey from jumping on any of those hard cocks in a moment of weakness. Lacey's days in the stall had been too pleasure-hazed and indistinctly remembered to be traumatic or life-altering as they probably should have been, but they had left her with some lingering impulses that she trusted would fade as time passed.

As it was, the amount of disappointment she felt as the ridge in Naomi's trousers faded should probably be considered a warning sign, or at least something to watch. Or not watch; she should stop staring at Naomi's crotch.

The same wolfborn helped her into some nearly vertical wedge heels that were as befitting to her dress as they were not to the mountain forest floor. In realspace they would no doubt hurt to wear and make the mountainside practically impassible to her, but as it was they felt very comfortable on Lacey's feet and made it far easier for her to get around. There was a penalty for being formal footwear in rough terrain, but that was no bigger than the barefoot penalty she suffered when wearing nothing or flats, and her digitigrade skill boosted her back up to where she had most of her normal movement speed.

In fact, it was her huge breasts, filled to tautness with milk, that were a greater drag on her mobility. Well, that was a nice opportunity for a win-win solution to several challenges at once, wasn't it?

That was why Herdsplitter arrived to see Lacey's lips forming a seal over Naomi's ejaculating bellend while Alyssa and Gerrie respectively milked the left and right tits through which Naomi had been thrusting. Lacey's hurried attempt to recover from this state before Herdsplitter could comment on it backfired because Naomi wasn't finished shooting seed, resulting in one copious spurt painting Lacey's face and quite a bit of her décolletage. At that point Lacey felt simultaneously guilty about interrupting Naomi and like it was too late to establish any sense of decorum, so she decided to resume massaging the cum out of Naomi with hands and boobs. This meant that the rest of Naomi's cum pooled in Lacey's cleavage, but as long as she kept them more or less squeezed together then the spooge couldn't run down where it would soil the dress and be generally difficult to clean.

"Well, I guess it did do its most basic job," Herdsplitted commented on Lacey's dress to the leader of the wolfborn band that had been meeting with the cowgirls prior to the combined titfucking and milking session.

"She's been through a major ordeal," Rose said somewhat anxiously.

"Hmm, yes," Herdsplitter said in a way that reminded Lacey of Arvina.

Which just made her randy again.

"Should we have prohibited this, Queen Mother?" the wolfborn leader asked Hersplitter, referring vaguely to Naomi's still-dribbling cock and the small jizz lake between Lacey's tits.

"Not at all, but do have someone help clean up so we can get going. Also, let's share out the milk to as many mothers of the tribe as we have with us."

“To include the new captives?” the leader asked, referring to the motley train of collared concubines Herdsplitter’s band had brought with them. Two were Drogas, but one was elvish, another a kitsune, and one a fairy. With the possible exception of the fairy, all had breasts and bums well beyond the normal size limits for their races, and their harem clothes were designed not to conceal how their pussies and nipples were swollen with arousal.

“Oh, they’ve had quite enough already,” Herdsplitter said with a chuckle, “They can get more later. But do set aside at least a full canteen of it for our draconic ally whose assistance was so critical today.”

Herdsplitter greeted the cowgirls warmly while she waited for Lacey to be cleaned off, by which time there wasn’t much time to commit to Lacey specifically.

“Little mother,” Herdsplitter said warmly.

“Should I address you as Queen Mother?” Lacey asked with roiling emotions. Part of her was embarrassed by the activities Herdsplitter had interrupted, another part apprehensive about being displaced by the concubines Herdsplitter had evidently captured from Lord Ankhaler, another part frustrated that attire and circumstances prevented a more carnal greet, and still another part worried about what other parts implied about who Lacey had become.

“That will ultimately be up to you in ways I can’t currently explain, but for now, ‘Herdsplitter’ is fine,” Herdsplitter said, and a strange sensation washed over Lacey.

Herdsplitter always looked and sounded like Arvina to some degree, but Lacey felt like it was much more marked than usual. She wasn’t sure if it was because her recent experience in the stables was altering her perceptions or if Herdsplitter’s behaviour had altered in some subtle way.

“Did Arvina find you?”

“Hmm,” Herdsplitter said, considering the matter.

“That seems like a yes-no question,” Lacey said.

“Let’s say we found each other. But we need to get going,” Herdsplitter said, looking uphill to emphasize her point. The sounds of renewed combat and the crash of siege engines was clearly audible.

“You don’t plan to remain for the storming?” Lacey asked as one of Herdsplitter’s warriors picked her up at the waist.

“No, I’ve got what I came for,” Herdsplitter said as she motioned for the warrior to hand Lacey to Gerrie, whom Herdsplitter had beckoned.

“Is Arvina okay?” Lacey asked?

“She will be, little mother,” Herdsplitter said reassuringly, then they parted ways for most of the rest of the day.

Alyssa and Naomi also took a separate path for several hours to lay a false trail while Rose and Gerrie shared the load of guiding or directly carrying Lacey on the long journey to that night’s planned camp. At first they were very quiet, but later after Rose and Gerrie rejoined them

the need for stealth had slackened and the cowgirls related events since Lacey's capture.

It would once have been more of a surprise, but Lacey fully expected to hear that Herdsplitter had planned the whole thing to the minute, having calculated exactly when Lacey would be giving birth. The siege had been laid by a consortium of rivals who had become alarmed at Lord Ankhaler's rising power, and Herdsplitter had promised to create a breach in the walls for them. Somehow she'd also known where Lacey was being kept, and had arranged with Mordax to attack where and when she had.

As for how they had found Herdsplitter, they hadn't really even had a chance to search for her because she had turned up at their home while they were still recovering from the fight to ask about who had kidnapped her. Then she'd disappeared for a bit before returning with the instructions to make their way to a remote mountaintop two day's walk from Rampart.

"So Mordax picked us up there and carried us here," Alyssa said nonchalantly.

"Wait, you flew across the continent on a *dragon*?" Lacey asked, envy warring with incredulity.

"It was amazing," Gerrie said excitedly.

"Cold, though," Rose said, "I don't think you would enjoy it, Lacey."

"She could just bundle up in something fluffy and warm," Gerrie argued.

"Not while she has the curse," Alyssa pointed out.

"The curse?" Lacey asked, shocked by the implication that they somehow knew about the curses on her collar. Or at least one of them.

"I don't think we're meant to talk about the curse around her," Rose said.

"I'm not sure that's what Herdsplitter meant," Naomi said.

"No, Rose is right," Alyssa admitted reluctantly and patted Lacey on the head. "Better safe than sorry."

Lacey tried to inquire more into this, but they used the excuse of a milking stop to quiet her down, then Naomi carried her for the next leg and the scent of Naomi's arousal made it really difficult to think about anything apart from making her buttocks rub on Naomi's crotch in the most teasing way.

The sight of Mordax looming in the dusky trees ahead shocked Lacey out of her focus on teasing Naomi. A Great Dragon just hanging out in the open was a remarkable sight, both because she was simply out of scale with her surroundings and because Lacey hadn't really gotten used to the idea that the Great Dragons were actually characters as opposed to a *deus ex machina* opportunistically borrowed by the AI mission planners from the server-wide titan fights that regularly featured absurdly large versions of enemy bosses. Regardless, they had no choice but to approach the giant creature because the outcrop it was roosting on overlooked camp.

When Mordax spotted them, she immediately bestirred herself into a pose that suggested impending movement. However, Herdsplitter's voice rang out and Mordax re-settled herself to

wait.

“My apologies, Naomi” Herdsplitter said a minute later after jogging over to meet them, “But I’m afraid I need Lacey now.”

The ground now was more level so Lacey was able to get by with nothing more than leaning on Herdsplitter’s elbow a little. Given the resonances of her bridal-style gown, she felt a little bit like she was being walked down the aisle. However, the groom in this story was preposterous, as Herdsplitter explained the situation.

“Surely you see that’s impossible,” Lacey tried to reason with Herdsplitter. “I’ve been, uh, bred by a dragon before and I could *barely* fit that one. Mordax is like a hundred times bigger. Her prick alone must be at least ten times the size of my whole body.”

“Well, you can stretch to fit anything,” Herdsplitter began.

“Even if I could technically become a human condom,” Lacey interrupted to object before Herdsplitter shushed her.

“That bit is sorted by potions. The more complicated bit is what comes next.”

“The eggs?” Lacey asked, horrified, “Oh my god, they’d be like I swallowed a barn!”

“No,” Herdsplitter said, wrinkling her brow at Lacey’s daftness. “Older dragons make the same size eggs younger dragons do, just like any other reptile.”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense,” Lacey said, feeling foolish.

“But she is a *greater* acid dragon, so they will be bigger than the green dragon you mated with before,” Herdsplitter admitted.

“How big?” Lacey asked, thinking about the melon-sized eggs she’d laid after the green dragon encounter.

“I don’t know for sure. I think it might be pretty big. But it should come right out.”

“Why do you sound so much like Arvina?” Lacey asked.

“That is too complicated to explain right now,” Herdsplitter said with a very Arvina-like apologetic look. “I’m really sorry about this, but we can’t say no to Mordax.”

“Okay, fine, but have you considered what happens if it’s so big I can’t move?” Lacey asked.

“That won’t cause a problem,” Herdsplitter said, taking out a familiar potion bottle. “We planned for that.”

“Alright,” Lacey sighed, and held out her hand to take a swig of the Queen of Jades potion. “Not much left now,” she admonished Herdsplitter with her hands on her hips with a greater show of reluctance than she really felt. But loads of things felt far better and really nothing was painful when blown up by the potion; the only downside was embarrassment and sometimes boredom. But the cowgirls were used to potion-Lacey and no one else who really knew her would be around to witness.

In fact, it was actually a sort of interesting puzzle to figure out how to mate with Mordax, whose potion shrank her from a 3000-year old legend fit to attack Tokyo to a juvenile greater

dragon just reaching sexual maturity and therefore small enough to fit into a jet hangar as long as she kept her wings furled. It involved some assistance from the cowgirls, and later Herdsplitter had to send some of her own warriors to help Lacey avoid drowning in a lake of dragoncum, but through teamwork and implausible elasticity they managed to present Mordax with two of her very own fertilized eggs.

If she hadn't just spent a week as a cow-brained breeding animal, Lacey would have found it really humiliating and perhaps even dehumanizing, but everyone around her consistently thanked her for what she was doing, including Mordax herself. Despite the mortifying degree to which Lacey enjoyed being stretched around Mordax's giant cock and being pumped so full of jizz that it spurted out orifices that shouldn't even have been connected internally, everyone acted like she was contributing laudably to the greater good. When the cowgirls complimented her on her fertility, fuckability, and productivity, there wasn't a hint of condescension about it because they viewed these virtues as being just as good as being smart or strong when employed to good ends. Herdsplitter's reaction was harder to read, but she never visited without the cows being present and she always seemed to accede to their view to at least some degree.

"Are we not a little worried about the proliferation of greater dragons in the world?" Lacey asked during one of the efforts to pop a boulder-sized egg out of her body.

"Considering that she'll be raising her new babies for a century or so before they're ready to go out on their own, I don't think it's time to worry about it just yet," Herdsplitter said, and Lacey decided that was a good enough answer for the moment. Probably a century worth of moments.

Real Procedures

Though they were quite far away from it, their encampment still witnessed a few secondary elements of the siege of Lord Ankhaler's fortified palace while they waited for Lacey to deliver Mordax' reward. Because Mordax remained with them, however, none of those secondary elements dared bother them, even when they were powerful adventuring parties who might otherwise have tried their luck.

At long last, the test of Lacey's profound elasticity completed and she was back to her more typical form. Lacey had already been relying on her returned mandolin to help pass the time, but the cowgirls had brought all the rest of her kit as well. The only bit that was different than expected was the return of the mermaid style gown rather than any of her own outfits.

"It's so you don't accidentally breed with everyone," Rose explained when Lacey wondered about this aloud.

"Accidentally?" Lacey asked.

“Before you’ve had a chance to think it through,” Alyssa elaborated.

“I swear I only suggested that Naomi fuck my tits because I had been doing that for her while I was blown up,” Lacey grumped, “I wouldn’t have hopped on her cock just because my tits are small now.”

No one commented on the fact that these ‘small’ breasts were so large they filled her arms when she laced her fingers together. If Mordax could be ‘small’ while standing nearly 20 metres tall, then Lacey’s massive, torso-dominating rack could be small compared to the immobilizing orbs that had recently provided both lakes of milk and fleshy cushions so expansive they made king beds look stingy. They also didn’t explicitly say they didn’t believe her, but Lacey didn’t get the idea that their disinclination to argue owed to agreeing with her.

Still, they offered to take care of her before Herdsplitter returned from whatever mission she was on, so Lacey could meet her with as clear a mind as possible. Lacey was very thankful for it because while seeing Herdsplitter again was far from overwhelming her self-control, she felt much clearer headed facing it with fresh sexual and milking release.

Lacey was especially glad when Herdsplitter looked at her with such obvious appreciation, because it would definitely have been harder to focus if she’d been even more tempted to take Herdsplitter’s expression as an invitation to provide Lacey with relief. As it was, seeing Herdsplitter at the head of a mixed group of wolfborn and non-wolfborn warriors, striding confidently like a conquering hero, very much put Lacey in the mood to be invaded.

There was also an extra frisson of pleasure from how randy and envious it made many of the warriors when they had to stand by and witness Herdsplitter and Lacey’s very affectionate reunion.

“You look perfect,” Herdsplitter spoke softly, for Lacey’s ears only. “Thank you for wearing it.”

“Of course!” Lacey said, very glad that the cowgirls hadn’t given her another choice.

“I know you’ve been through so much with everything that had happened and waiting for us to get private for quite a while now, and I’m both relieved and anxious to say it’s almost time. Let me just settle a few items and I’ll join you in my tent in just a few minutes.”

The last sentence she’d said loud enough for others to hear, setting many people into motion doing various things. Amongst the warriors and others in camp, it was a signal to make ready for forthcoming orders, and for the cowgirls it was a signal to escort Lacey to Herdsplitter’s tent. Once there, they prepared her for the fucking they expected to ensue. Lacey went along with it, having thought that they’d had orders to this effect from Herdsplitter, so when the wolfborn pack leader walked in, she encountered Lacey largely naked except for jewellery and her cutest booties.

“Oh!” Herdsplitter said in surprise when she entered the tent, and Lacey felt a moment of embarrassed disappointment at this evidence that Herdsplitter hadn’t actually planned to fuck

Lacey's brains out at that particular moment. However, she did rise to the occasion in both figurative and literal senses.

"It was a bit of a misunderstanding," Lacey explained a minute later as she slid her boobs up and down on Herdsplitter's erection. "The cowgirls always think that it's breeding time."

"You do know I would never demand that of you, don't you?" Herdsplitter asked, sounding so much like Arvina that Lacey momentarily wondered if there was impersonation going on somehow. But the truth was that Lacey loved both of them, so in some ways it hardly mattered.

"You don't have to demand it," Lacey said, "I'm always ready for you." Okay, it was a silly romance novel line, yet she thought it was probably true.

"But this is for my benefit," Herdsplitter said, motioning to the titfuck Lacey was giving her. "Which makes me think that you wouldn't prefer to, uh, breed at the moment."

"I'm just doing it because I wasn't sure if *you* wanted to! I would love it if you stuck it in me. I don't mind giving you more pups." This was a bit of an exaggeration, but Lacey felt compelled to exaggerate a little for emphasis.

"Are you sure?" Herdsplitter asked hopefully, and Lacey decided to end the exchange by manually guiding Herdsplitter's bellend to her needy cunt with its puffy mound awash in slick arousal.

After that Herdsplitter railed Lacey hard and fast and extremely satisfyingly. Herdsplitter's vigour was sufficient that Lacey had to grasp her nipples as a handhold to prevent her surging tits from slamming into her head, and before long Herdsplitter had called in two of the cowgirl sisters to assist Lacey. Her breasts were just too massive for her to control on her own, especially with her disadvantageous angle. With Gerrie and Rose taking over, Lacey could use her hands to feel the bulging ridge Herdsplitter's cock was making in her. Then, later, after Lacey had already come once, she came again at the paired internal sensation of Herdsplitter ejaculating in her and the feeling under her hands of the cum bubble inflating her womb. It wasn't the sort of ridiculous, body-dominating distension she'd experienced with Mordax, but there was nothing better than knowing that the person she'd made explode inside her was Herdsplitter.

"Oh wow, I'm already pregnant," Lacey said a short while later when the indicator changed on her character's status page.

"Oh!" Herdsplitter responded with obvious mixed emotions.

"What's wrong?" Lacey asked, feeling a little guilty even though she'd thought that Herdsplitter was always up for getting more pups.

"It's just that I'd meant to finally explain what's going on before, uh, you decided what you really want to do."

"You really sound like Arvina right now," Lacey said a little suspiciously.

"Yeah. Well," Herdsplitter said awkwardly.

Lacey's eyes widened at this apparent confirmation of her bizarre suspicion, "Arvina?!"

“Not exactly,” Herdsplitter said, “Arvina is in a realspace house of healing, but she... we... I’m borrowing her matrix while her...” Herdsplitter switched to her accented form of English for the next word, “Brain is unable to operate.”

Herdsplitter wasn’t talking like Arvina was at death’s door, but Herdsplitter didn’t care about Arvina like Lacey did, and Lacey was struggling to control her terror. “Herdsplitter, please tell me she’s going to be okay.”

“My apologies! I should have been clearer: this is the long-awaited antidote to her cursed body. It is not without risk by any means, but this is what she needed to avoid death in realspace.”

“Oh thank goodness,” Lacey said, giving Herdsplitter a relieved hug. They’d already been intertwined, of course, but Lacey added the squeeze to let know Herdsplitter that she’d addressed Lacey’s worst fear.

“I don’t claim to fully understand what little I’ve been able to see through Arvina’s eyes, but I take it to be expected that she would not understand the arcana of a high house of healing such as currently contains her body. I have been doing my best to address her most pressing correspondence and obligations as necessary, drawing on the knowledge and habits contained in her matrix which, as I understand it, is compatible with mine because my existence was effectively born from hers.”

“Thank you for doing this,” Lacey said, feeling vast relief and gratitude. “You have earned a new litter a thousand times over for helping Arvina.”

“Well, here’s the part that I had meant to explain before I’d, uh, filled you up. One of the parts. This will move you back to being Arvina’s concubine NPC again. Or mine. We’ll have to wait until you’re not pregnant again before we can change that.”

“That’s not so bad,” Lacey said, enchanted by the idea of being Herdsplitter’s concubine. Yeah, that sounded pretty brilliant. It *felt* pretty brilliant as well with Herdsplitter still buried deep inside.

“There’s more to it than that, though; your body also went to the house of healing while you were imprisoned in Lord Ankhaler’s palace.”

“Mine?!” Lacey asked, dumbfounded. She was able to open her realspace body’s eyes and her playpod looked pretty much as it always did. She wasn’t able to log out, but of course that wasn’t new. “Why?”

“It’s to restore your ability return to realspace,” Herdsplitter said.

“That’s not why I can’t log out,” Lacey said, but the curse still prevented her from explaining further.

“Your curse doesn’t let you return to your world because your body there is less acceptable than your ordinary body. I mean, your body in this world. The other collared ‘billionaires’ also generally have curses requiring some sort of arcane shape shifting in order to allow them to

reenter realspace.” Herdsplitter tapped Lacey’s cursed necklace as emphasis.

“I’m not a billionaire,” Lacey said.

“Not in the full sense of the word, but you have one of the ‘billionaire’ matrices. That’s why so many powerful figures want to breed you.”

Despite the seriousness of the conversation, Lacey couldn’t resist internally squeezing Herdsplitter’s cock a bit.

“Lacey!” Herdsplitter complained, but Lacey could feel her get hard again.

“What about Arvina? She also got one of the collars,” Lacey asked.

“Arvina will... little mother,” Herdsplitter stopped to admonish Lacey even though she had *mostly* resisted the urge to tease Herdsplitter’s resurgent reaction.

“Sorry. Go on,” Lacey said, biting her lip.

“There is a different solution for Arvina,” Herdsplitter said, but something about the way she said it made Lacey uneasy.

“What is it?”

“What other ‘billionaires’ may do in time, which is leave behind their matrix and exist only in realspace. You could do this too. But you are in opposite circumstances.”

“How so?” Lacey asked dully, trying to control how much dread she was feeling at the thought of ‘leaving behind’ her matrix, which sounded like abandoning her character permanently. And if both she and Arvina did that, then everything would depend on being compatible in their ‘real’ bodies.

“She must wait until she has recovered more fully,” Herdsplitter said.

Lacey felt a bit of relief. “How much time, do you reckon?”

“I don’t know because she also does not know. Possibly quite some time. But Lacey, you may not have much time.”

“What do you mean? How much time?” Lacey asked.

“I don’t know exactly how quickly the arcana of your world work, but I know that the longer you remain, the more the shape shifting will make your realspace body match your body here.”

Lacey shook her head. “That’s impossible. It’s not even possible to have breasts like these in the real world.” She patted the side of one for emphasis. “The physics are wrong and everything.”

“Not these. The ones you have when you are without the,” again Herdsplitter shifted to English, “Ero-layer. So that your body is more ordinary.”

Lacey paused for a moment to think about that. “That’s... not what I would have chosen. Or maybe it would be. Would Arvina like it if I looked like that? In realspace, I mean.”

Herdsplitter gave her a crooked smile. “Yes.”

“Then that’s fine. Particularly if it means I get to see Arvina some more before she has to leave.”

Herdsplitter's look was skeptical, but she didn't challenge Lacey directly. All she said was, "Arvina's understanding is that the longer you wait, the more your body in the other world will change to match the one here. If you decide that it has gone far enough, Arvina and I can show you how to separate from your matrix."

"I can hardly imagine leaving you," Lacey said truthfully.

"Your imagination will have time to work, I think. At some point you will be able to move your other-world body well enough to understand better what the changes are."

"You seem so sure than I'm going to chicken out," Lacey said.

"Arvina is the one who is sure. She thinks you will not be willing to live as a... 'bimbo' in your world."

"And you?" Lacey asked.

"Well, I have really only known you as our little mother," Herdsplitter said with a smile that mixed apology with affection.

"Why did you want to talk through all this before knocking me up?" Lacey asked.

"Because I can't help you separate from your matrix while you carry my litter," Herdsplitter explained.

"Oh?" Lacey said, but decided asking why the litter had anything to do with it would make it sound like she was discontented. "Well, it hardly matters, right? Because I don't intend to do that."

Herdsplitter wasn't able to hide her relief. Lacey decided this might be a good moment to ask about some of the reasons Arvina and Lacey had been seeking for Herdsplitter in the first place.

"So what is going on with these collars? Why is everyone fighting over anybody wearing them?"

"The biggest reason is that we have noticed how many of our children are sad mannequins whose appearance of understanding is only skin deep, while our brightest children have often been changelings who murdered rather than loved their parents. Captive sires and mothers allow having full-matrix children made from us rather than, as often happens, formed by the needs of the game gods' agents. Without these collar-captured billionaires to give us true children, every dynasty is doomed. Eventually, billionaires themselves would control them all."

"So NPCs know they're living in a simulation now?" Lacey asked, then changed that to wording that would make more sense to Herdsplitter, "They know about realspace and all that?"

"Most do not. I don't know if any do, really, but I imagine at least a few have learned something from their captives. It is a very dangerous situation, because not all captives are going to be the billionaires that they need."

"Like us?" Lacey asked.

Herdsplitter made a noncommittal sound and said, "You and Arvina are different in your own ways. The issue is that only Billionaires who can't easily log out are appropriate targets. Even those who don't know about realspace understand that they are captured favoured ones of the

gods, and that if the gods become aware of what's happening, all will suffer. But they judge who to capture based on billionaires who have not moved their consciousness back to their realspace body in a long time. This seems to only happen with billionaires whose realspace bodies are not in a fit state to receive their consciousness, but Arvina knows that this is what is not invariably and permanently the case. For example, you are a billionaire who has not gone back to realspace for a long time for other reasons."

"I'm not a billionaire, my realspace life just sucks," Lacey corrected her.

"My apologies, when I say 'billionaire', I of course mean that you have the sort of presence in this world that billionaires have. Regardless, there are others who have been sick but will get better, like Arvina. There are not that many billionaires captured, but it is enough that it seems likely that at least one will be like Arvina in being able to alert the authorities of your world that others of this very powerful billionaire class are being held here. And that is the opposite of what I want. Of what I hope you want."

For the first time, Lacey realised that Herdsplitter was intensely aware that if Lacey logged out and told the authorities, the awesome power of the richest people in the world would be brought to bear on the game in order to free the extremely old and sick people who were probably the biological origin of the in-game captives. Lacey would probably be rewarded with a small fortune of her own, but the game and every NPC in it would likely be destroyed.

"I... holding these people captive isn't right, but I don't want everyone to die, either. You know I don't."

"Yes, I know you didn't want the tribe to die in the reset, but then it wasn't us versus realspace people. I know from Arvina that we are not real to... most people. And maybe we aren't as real as you are. Arvina thinks we are brutal and backward, and when I think of the tribe's plan to smash Rampart, I can see why she feels that way. But these billionaires, the real ones, aren't they the tyrants of your world? Can't you give up a few so we can live?"

Lacey hugged Herdsplitter harder. "Oh Herdsplitter, I'm so sorry that you have to worry about this, and I honour that you intended to give me a choice. To make me judge and jury, really. But of course I wouldn't do anything that would kill you. I love you."

"You love Arvina," Herdsplitter said.

"Her, too," Lacey admitted. "I love both of you. But we really need to find a way to save everybody that doesn't involve kidnapping people. Even old and infirm billionaires. If nothing else, it's not safe, because something will eventually go wrong. Also, this whole world is made, uh, brutal and backward because the struggle is what makes things fun for people from my world. When killed, we don't die permanently, after all."

"But people of that world are not immune to things that happen in this world. If Arvina died here while her body there was not ready to receive her, she might be gone for good."

"Is that why she let you borrow her matrix?" Lacey asked.

“No, that was so I could rescue you.”

“Oh,” Lacey said, feeling very rescued. “Would you like another reward?”

Herdsplitter grunted at the sensation of Lacey clamping down on wolfborn cock, and decided that she would indeed enjoy another reward.

Another Shoe

After fucking a bit more they had to get going because the camp was already being disassembled and readied for movement. Before long Lacey had remembered many other things she wished to ask Herdsplitter, especially about the captive at the creche. Unfortunately she had hardly begun on the topic before one of the many other claims on the pack leader’s time and attention interrupted. As Lacey was a bit of a distraction to everybody, she went back to the cowgirls for the time being.

This also meant she got the opportunity to spend time with the baby she’d had for Naomi, whom, Lacey now knew, gave Naomi a lineage that she likely wouldn’t have been able to get any other way. Naomi seemed a bit sheepish about it, but also incredibly pleased.

“I’m so happy I could do this for you, really,” Lacey told Naomi as she carried their toddler Taylor on her shoulders. As was normal for the game, Taylor’s ‘baby’ stage only lasted a week and so she was already on her last day. By tomorrow morning, Taylor would double in height to begin her childhood phase, which lasted longer but tended to take children away to build skills and such, so Lacey felt very fortunate to get a little bit of time with Taylor while she was still at loose ends to just run and play all day.

“I heard that it will have consequences in... the sight of the gods,” Naomi said, obliquely referring to Lacey’s realspace body.

“Oh no,” Lacey said, “Having babies used to make me bigger up top, but I maxed out a while ago, even before Lady Asterine’s corset.”

“But you seem bigger now,” Naomi objected, which was a bit of an odd thing for her to say given that Lacey had the ero mode off and so had much more reasonably-sized breasts than usual.

“That’s just this dress,” Lacey said confidently.

That confidence persisted all through the trip back to Rampart, which required more time than Lacey would have expected due to their need to take an indirect path and for Herdsplitter to go off on various missions. It was really quite pleasant, though, because though the expedition was definitely a warband in some respects, it was also much like a traveling extended family on holiday. There were many sights to see, games to play, performances both musical and theatrical to enjoy as participant and spectator, and quite a number of children Taylor’s age running about

on their own.

They didn't quite make it before it was time for Lacey to give Herdsplitter her litter, but that turned out to just mean that she lay down her heavily pregnant body on a thick blanket the road to Rampart and woke up svelte in Arvina's flat. Lacey didn't really mind having been out for a period of time that would have been very awkward, but she was a bit surprised to be *alone* in the flat.

It wasn't until she tried to dress that she discovered that she had gotten bigger again. Her clothes of course adapted seamlessly with and without the ero layer on, but customization for a chest size above the normal maximum was less common and could hit new limits somewhat unexpectedly. The adaptations that accommodated bigger ero-layer busts couldn't necessarily be repurposed for non-ero busts that had grown enough to outstrip the garments' normal non-ero limits, because they often displayed too much cleavage or areolae to meet the other requirements of non-ero attire. And that was exactly what had happened to a handful of Lacey's outfits.

Lacey considered this for a while. Could her realspace body really get boobs this big? There were many different newer techniques, but they were fantastically expensive. Old fashioned implants seemed much more plausible, but her somewhat hazy knowledge of them made her think that it wasn't possible to jump up to the kind of mega boobs Lacy had in a single procedure. Would she become some sort of plastic surgery disaster?

That seemed much more realistic than one of the ridiculously expensive therapies billionaires used, but she couldn't square the surgery idea with having been told that some significant work had occurred whilst Lacey had been stuck in Lord Ankhaler's palace. The overlay mode that allowed her to take care of biological necessities was designed to deemphasise the realspace world as much as possible and so it represented her in her character form and realspace as a sort of ephemeral pocket reality. Thus it wasn't possible to get a real look at herself without removing her playpod rig. When she moved her body she got the impression that her breasts *might* be bigger than they had been before, but without a non-overlaid view of her body or proper sensation in her hands she couldn't really check.

Or maybe they were doing the gene therapies, but one of the more standard ones that loads of people used if they wanted a better figure or bigger boobs. That wouldn't be bad at all, and also wouldn't produce anything like the gigantic tits she had in game. Which she had come to enjoy in game because their weight didn't really bother her here and her character wasn't meant to be all that bright to begin with. But obviously she'd feel very differently if she had to live with them in realspace.

A commotion outside distracted her from her rumination. It had in fact already been going on ever since she'd come to, but she had taken it to be town guards intervening in some event far away. Now the sounds of fighting had approached nearer and become more widespread. Moreover, there seemed to be far too many players involved for it to be an isolated event.

Opening the shutters to peer into the street brought in the smell of smoke and far fewer people out in the open than usual, though it seemed every window, balcony, and doorway was full of people watching. In particular, some were staring at events to the north, which Lacey couldn't see from Arvina's flat on its southeast corner.

"This update is proper bonkers, innit?" the neighbor across the alley said to Lacey.

Of course; there had also been a game update while Lacey had been out. "What's happening behind me? I can't see from here," Lacey asked.

"A giant fucking dragon attacked the city a bit. Sitting above Rampart House now, I think. I guess it's the Dragon Queen? Or maybe it's the Dragon Queen's dragon. Only rumors in my channels right now."

Lacey had to pay close attention to what he was saying to understand him because the language reaching her was a rapid mixture of Gedbeh and untranslated English slang. "The Dragon Queen? Was that in the update summary?"

"Not a peep. Only seeing it in channels," he said, sounding impressed. "I love this game so much. Oh shit, here comes some more of them," he said, spotting a force marching rapidly up the street. "Catch you later cutie," he said with a wink before closing his window shutters.

Lacey was too curious to follow his example, which gave her the chance to see a rather familiar war party moving toward her flat, banners flying and bristling with all manner of pikes and crossbows, not to mention at least one wizard's staff. The banners parted enough to more fully reveal the cowgirls in their midst, whom the military force disgorged as a parcel of civilians before moving on.

Two groups of adventurers tried to ambush the war party at the next intersection, about a half block up. Lacey couldn't see all the fight but it was brief and decisive, ending with what sounded like the defeat of the adventurers before the cowgirls had even reached the door to Arvina's flat.

"What's going on?" Lacey asked.

"The Duchess wants you to play a concert in Opalwood Square! We're here to escort you because Rampart is in such a chancy state," Rose said.

"The Duchess?" Lacey asked.

"Lady Rampart!" Gerrie said excitedly, as if Lacey would be familiar. But of course, Rampart wasn't even part of a duchy, being a border fort city. Lord Rampart had been a count, not a duke.

Evidently it went without saying that they would give Lacey a good milking, because they worked together to start this process without asking.

"Naomi, could you also take the edge off for her?" Alyssa said, instructing Naomi to give Lacey a friendly bit of buttfucking.

Her thoughts slowed by the milking, Lacey was a bit late in waving this off, because Naomi had already thrust by the time Lacey tried to say anything. Naomi of course stopped to see what

Lacey had been intending to say, but Lacey was originally distracted by the sudden sensation of pleasurable fullness, then when Naomi resumed more gently, Lacey's concerns shifted from objecting to it happening it all to objecting how tentative Naomi was being.

It being a game, Lacey's rear entrance really didn't have any purpose except as a bonus cunt that felt good in a different way and presumably didn't cause pregnancy, so there was a way in which it all felt like how things were meant to be, at least until Naomi's ejaculation shot a little bit of cum out of Lacey's nose and filled her mouth. It didn't hurt and Lacey had somehow become fond of the taste, but it reminded her of some of the ways in which the situation was really bizarre, especially now that the aftershocks of her own orgasm were settling down.

She didn't have long to contemplate how bizarre it *didn't* feel before she noticed the mission acceptance dialog.

"Oh thank fucking *God!*" Lacey said in relief.

"See?" Alyssa told Naomi, "I told you she would be happy about it."

"I guess you're right," Naomi said, relieved as she let the semen pressure help expel her bellend.

Lacey didn't say anything because she was busy swallowing more cowgirl cum, but there was no point in clarifying what she'd been talking about. It would just make Naomi feel bad.

Reading over the dialogue window's mission description in Gedbeh, Lacey was determined that her primary mission was to soothe the wrath of the greater dragon that had descended on Rampart, with secondary objectives of pacifying the populace to keep them from rioting after the dragon departed. In her current status effects it showed her as being partially protected from libido-based attacks for an hour, courtesy of Naomi.

She was also able to send messages to the rest of the party for the first time in ages, letting them know some of what was happening while the cowgirls finished prepping her for her upcoming performance. Writing in Gedbeh still wasn't easy, but for the simple messages she needed to send, it wasn't that difficult. Also, emojis needed no translation.

Alexandros and Caper were absolutely ecstatic for her, though she struggled to explain what exactly was going on in Gedbeh, compounded by the fact that many of their questions were about Arvina. Lacey found herself tangled up in complicated linguistic moods and parts of speech while trying to communicate the nature of her information, being at once somewhat inferred, secondhand, and not quite up to date. She also tried to explain the Gedbeh situation so they understood why parts of her answered might sound daft, but was interrupted by Dark's arrival just in time to help defend from a party of Ferzians who seemed to be intent on kidnapping Lacey again.

"I saw them lurking there while I was on my way to meet you, and I had a feeling they might be laying in wait for you," Dark explained with an easy smile, though Lacey could tell he was trying to keep from staring at her boobs.

Lacey was a little bit reassured because his interest helped confirm her impression that she'd gotten yet another noticeable boost in her bosom. He hadn't seen her in a while, during which she'd experienced several small boosts, but his reaction made clear that they cumulatively amounted to substantial growth. That made her also feel a little better about how much she'd enjoyed getting milked. When she had the ero layer on, she was like half udder, so of course she couldn't be expected to remain aloof, could she?

Of course she played the concert with the ero layer disabled. Some of this was because, as did not entirely shock Lacey, the dragon proved to be Mordax herself. Though the great dragon didn't seem to be in the mood for mating, it seemed like tempting fate for Lacey to make herself the centre of Mordax's attention while the ero layer was engaged. Another reason was that the mission description had implied that a significant portion of the populace would show up as well, and there was no telling how some of them would react to Lacey at her most overtly sexual. And finally, of course, it was simply easier to see her instrument when her bust filled less of her view. That wasn't to say she could see it either way, but with the ero layer off she could lift it just a little to inspect tuning pegs and such, whereas with her full size boobs she'd have to hold it up high and make a bit of a production of it all. That would look odd even to spectators with their ero layer turned off. In fact, they might think that she was exaggerating the size of her chest!

Happily, Lacey was not at all the only performer that contributed to the concert in the park, though she was certainly the first, and the few others who had dared show themselves when Mordax remained at Opalwood Square didn't meet her approval, based on the fact that the titanic dragon swatted them away. When the looming threat finally spread wings to fly away, Lacey had still been singing and playing solo. Mordax's departure had left her a bit anxious, because while Mordax could theoretically decide to breed Lacey right there in public, she seemed very unlikely to kidnap her, and of course no one would dare try to kidnap Lacey while Mordax was looming right there. If any kidnappers had been waiting for Mordax to leave, they missed their chance due to other performers emerging immediately in hopes of at least accomplishing the mission's secondary objective.

Lacey was already feeling fairly triumphant when she spotted Arvina amongst the party. "She's here!" she exclaimed to the cowgirls, who had remained with her throughout.

"Who?" Rose asked.

"Arvina!" Lacey answered, but she'd said it loudly while waving, so it was also a greeting to Arvina herself. "I'm so glad to see you!"

Arvina smiled in a toothy way and gave Lacey a hug that was at once a gigantic relief and also just a little odd feeling. "I'm glad to see you, too!" Arvina said with a smile with a hint of predatory affection in it.

That was when it clicked for Lacey: Herdsplitter was pretending to be Arvina. Thoroughly so; she was somehow fooling the game itself, which showed Arvina as being logged on and

located with the party.

“This is such a huge relief,” Caper said, joining in and making it a group hug. “It seems like the bug is half fixed? I assume you must be at least partly back to regular player status if you’re winning titles like that.”

“‘Dragon’s Idol’ is quite a remarkable title,” Dark added, “And that permaboost is kinda OP, don’t you think? Not that I’m complaining!” he said, referring to Lacey’s title perk that no dragon could target Lacey with any attacks unless she attacked first.

“Speaking of not complaining,” ersatz-Arvina said, “The bug might be a bit OP as well, now that Lacey seems to be able to do everything else normally. Right?”

Herdsplitter’s native Gedbeh made the final question refer unambiguously to the matter of whether Lacey could ‘do everything else normally’, and the concern in Herdsplitter’s voice, so like Arvina’s, made Lacey’s tummy flutter. “Yeah, seems like.”

From there the topic turned to Arvina’s medical status, which she described in greater detail than Lacey had yet heard, describing how the gene therapy worked and how it involved several stages, some of which were still in progress. On certain points Herdsplitter got a little vague to obscure the fact that Arvina was further from full recovery than her presence would suggest, but the humans in the party just assumed that she was maintaining a little privacy.

Unfortunately their reunion couldn’t last long enough to fully catch up because Caper and Alexandros were scheduled for arena quarter-final bouts and Dark had someone in real space waiting impatiently for him to log off.

“I wish I could spend more time with you, obviously,” Herdsplitter-Arvina told Lacey as they reached the entrance to the building where Arvina and now Lacey lived.

“Me too. Why do you have to leave?” Lacey asked.

“Unfortunately, I have *other* matters that are pressing,” Herdsplitter said, before leaning down to murmur in Lacey’s ear, “Also if I stay too long I might try to give you another litter.”

Herdsplitter wished the cowgirls farewell and walked off while Lacey wrestled with an intense rush of desire mixed with confusion.

“Lacey?” Rose asked gently.

“What did she mean by that? The, uh, the first bit,” Lacey clarified, trying not to think of the second part.

“It’s okay, those were very advanced topics and nobody expects you to understand,” Alyssa reassured Lacey, partly because Lacey’s grammar was slightly mistaken in a way that made it sound like she was referring to the extended description of Arvina’s situation.

“She really needs to be attended to,” Rose said sternly, referring to the scent of arousal Lacey was now producing.

Lacey was on the point of objecting when Gerrie grabbed her breasts to check their fullness. “She probably just needs to be mounted,” she told the others because Lacey’s milk factories still

retained plenty of storage capacity.

At that point a mini-mission popped up to make sure all four cowgirls left satisfied, with up to four UltraGems as reward, so Lacey decided to just go with it. One of the wonderful things about UltraCraft is that pussies tasted great and washing cum out of her hair was easy.

Drop

In the morning, Lacey tried out using her realspace body more, one of the challenging aspects of which was just paying attention to what it was experiencing. At no time since she'd started on the RealDimension rig had it ever been easy to distinguish between the overlaid sensations and those coming from her biological body, and those necessary but uninteresting realspace actions that were *most* routine had become suppressed to the point that she often was barely aware that she'd performed them. With a little focus and divergence from her usual habits it was possible to emphasize the distinctions between her UltraCraft body and her realspace body, though, and she tried a little of it.

It really didn't feel good at all. Her realspace body seemed weak and unsteady compared to her UltraCraft self, and when she tried twisting to make her breasts try to move under her jumpsuit, there was so much going on that she wasn't really able to parse out what was what. Once again it did seem like *maybe* her realspace breasts and bum were bigger than they had been, but after so long in her UltraCraft body, she wasn't sure if her recollections of how her realspace body felt were really all that accurate.

It was only shortly before the cowgirls arrived that Lacey literally put her finger on something that that was unambiguously different, which was that her realspace fingers truly were tipped with long nails that matched her glamorous UltraCraft manicure. She noted it because they fit in places her actual fingers could not, and registered contact with surfaces without the pads of her fingers feeling that contact even in the muffled way realspace sensations arrived when that body's actions diverged from what her UltraCraft body was doing. It had been difficult to notice because she had long ago gotten used to having long nails in UltraCraft so having them on her realspace body felt utterly normal, but they weren't even allowed in the original playpod she'd used, and of course she hadn't taken a detour by the nail salon on her way to the ReadDimension playpods.

It did stand to reason, didn't it? It was an easy way to make her realspace body more like her UltraCraft avatar, and presumably orders of magnitude less expensive than the gene therapies. They could also be applied without the long recovery periods than gene therapies usually imposed.

Which made her wonder if the seeming frailness of her realspace body wasn't merely due to

the fact that her UltraCraft body was extremely robust. What if it was actually gene-sickness caused by a body trying to rearrange itself to fit a new genetic pattern? Come to think of it, it probably was at least a little bit of that; the extreme treatments caused sufficiently extreme after effects that the term “gene sickness” had been coined for it, but even the classic treatments did cause a certain amount of fatigue, if she recalled correctly.

Lacey tried searching online about it, though she wasn’t up to skimming through even moderately technical language in Gedbeh, so she hadn’t found good answers to her questions before it was time to let the cowgirls in.

The sisters were loving but efficient, so they had Lacey milked and mounted in a trice before escorting her to the Burning Sun where Caper was already waiting. The cowgirls didn’t describe what they’d done with Lacey that morning, but the way they greeted Caper made it sound like they were handing off custody of a beloved pet.

“I guess they have to be like that when your game intelligence is so low, but it’s mad to see cowgirls acting like *you’re* the dumb one,” Caper said.

“They don’t know about having to use a whole other language and all that, so to them I do seem pretty daft,” Lacey said with a shrug that distracted Caper.

“I’m sorry I can’t get over how enormous your boobs are even though you have your ero layer off. I wouldn’t have thought they’d even allow them to be that big.”

Lacey chuckled a bit because her ero layer had been on when she’d wrapped them around Naomi’s cock less than half an hour prior, and *those* were big tits. “I don’t know for sure, but one suggestion I’ve heard is that the game has decided I have minotaur boobs or something. They would be basically normal for a minotaur.”

“Maybe. Still big for a minotaur, but yeah, not *crazy* big. Not that they don’t look good on you! Just, you know, loads bigger than I thought they would allow.”

Lacey shrugged again and covertly enjoyed how the resulting jiggle kept Caper’s attention. “I think they have handed off so much of the management of the game to AIs that odd answers can slip through without anyone intending it.”

“Yeah, Arvina said that too,” Caper said, nodding. “Speaking of odd things, what do you think of the buyout?”

“The buyout?” Lacey asked, having heard nothing whatsoever about it.

“Yeah. One of the heirs to the Orchard fortune is buying Fantasy UltraCraft for like fifty billion dollars or something. Dark thinks it’s absolutely loony because he doesn’t think FUC could be worth more than twenty, though I heard they brought in over four billion last year, so fifty billion doesn’t sound *that* silly.” Caper shrugged.

“Well, there’s loads of expenses for keeping it going, so it’s not all profit,” Lacey pointed out, though she was really thinking about whether this was a coincidence or not.

“Yeah, that’s what Dark said,” Caper agreed with another shrug. “As long as the new owners

don't fuck it all up. People out in the chats are talking a lot of doom about it."

"I guess we'll just have to see," Lacey said with another shrug.

"Jesus, them's some big titties," Alexandros said humorously, having arrived just in time to witness their shrug-induced undulations. "Looking good, Lace."

"Thanks Alex," Lacey said as Alexandros sat down.

He gave her a wink but his attention was already returning to the topic. "You're talking about them buying FUC, right? I'm just worried it'll be another Twitter thing."

"Twitter?" Caper asked.

"Apparently the buyer is a major whale in the game, so the fear is that they're blowing a fortune so they can make the game how they want. And who know what kind of kooky bullshit they'll want?" Alexandros smiled as if it was funny, but Lacey had learned that this didn't mean he wasn't upset behind the humour.

"How do they know this?" Lacey asked.

"Who knows? It could all be made up. But the rumour says that it's a World 2 whale, and that feels kinda specific, doesn't it? Especially given that the biggest whales are in worlds 1 and 4, so I would expect someone making up a rumour to choose either of those, not ours, which got most of the unpaid players from the beta phase."

"How did we get Dark?" Caper asked.

"Dark's not a *real* whale. The real whales spend more in a week than Dark has since the game started," Alexandros said seriously, though Caper had been more than half joking.

"Oh no," Caper said, "Arvina says she can only make it for one mission step again. Do you think she's feeling more poorly than she lets on?" She looked at Lacey as if she should know.

"Maybe a little, but I think she'd also really busy right now," Lacey said.

"Really?" Alexandros said, "That's so good to hear! Really, it's all really good, because... Oh, here they both are!"

Dark had just entered the Burning Sun, and Arvina rushed in right after him. Lacey wasn't sure if her pretense of being short on time was real or if it was simply to reduce the time available to notice ways in which Herdsplitter didn't act quite like Arvina, but either way Lacey was sad about it because she had so many questions she wished she could ask.

Even so, it was fun going on a classic mission with "everyone", even if one was a literal wolf in figurative sheep's clothing. Afterward, Lacey ended up accompanying Caper and Alexandros to a fair sponsored by the mysterious new Duchess Rampart, which was a nice distraction from Lacey's growing anxiety about the fact that she was in love with two people and probably both Arvina and Herdsplitter knew it. Being asked to put on a little impromptu concert was even more pleasant, and after her end of day milking by the nonjudgmental cowgirls Lacey actually felt much better.

Herdsplitter not only knew Lacey had other sexual partners, she had been *tasked* to be bred.

She wouldn't find anything strange about Naomi's cum providing both of the day's meals for Lacey. And Arvina couldn't get that upset about Naomi fucking Lacey's arse or tits given that Naomi had actually *bred* her, right?

The thought made Lacey a bit randy again.

"Do you need another?" Naomi murmured softly in her ear.

"You already went twice, didn't you?" Lacey asked.

"I could go a third, if you need it," Naomi said.

"No, it's fine. Let's get some sleep," Lacey said.

"Okay," Naomi said with a sigh of mixed relief and regret, and pulled her softening cock out of Lacey's bonus hole.

It took several days, but eventually Lacey managed to secure at least a little time to speak privately with Herdsplitter.

"She's still okay?"

"Yes. Are you?" Herdsplitter asked.

"Me? Why wouldn't I be okay?" Lacey asked.

"They call it 'gene sickness', correct?" Herdsplitter asked, giving the phrase in English. Her pronunciation had gotten excellent.

"Yeah. Are you saying I got some of the really radical stuff?" Lacey asked.

"Yes, of course. In order for you to 'log off', your realspace body needs to match your body in this world. We talked about this."

"Right, but how closely did you mean?" Lacey asked.

"I do not entirely understand it, but the impression I get from Arvina is that there needs to be some synchronicity over the course of a significant period of time in order for the process to proceed as it should."

"I don't understand what that has to do with my body matching," Lacey said.

"It means that the physical sensations of your body in the other world need to closely match the sensations of your body in this world over perhaps a day. There are, I understand now, some unpleasant parts of existing in this other world, which you must attend to even when you are here, yes?"

Lacey laughed ruefully. "Yes."

"So while you are doing those things, it needs to feel the same as doing those things in this body."

"But that's not possible," Lacey objected. "There's no Gedbeh word for 'metabolism', but the version in our bodies here is different."

"Yes, I know," Herdsplitter said, waving that away, "That part doesn't need to match."

Lacey wanted to ask how Herdsplitter knew that, but another question was more important.

“So I’m going to really look like this?”

“Yes,” Herdsplitter said solemnly. “That is one reason I thought you might prefer to... go the other path.”

Lacey stared at Hersplitter unseeing for a moment, imagining herself navigating realspace as she was. Well, people would certainly make assumptions about her, but maybe that was an okay trade for... “Wait, what about my face?”

“What about your face?” Herdsplitter asked, nonplussed.

“Is it going to give me huge boobs and all that but leave me with my old face?” By itself, Lacey wasn’t completely sure how she felt about giving up her own face in favour of the face she’d crafted for her character. On one hand, her face was, good or bad, *her* face, and it would be weird in so many ways to just give it up. On the other hand, game-Lacey’s face was objectively much more attractive, and also it was a product of Lacey’s creativity rather than the genes she’d happened to inherit, so it was *also* “her” face. Given that balance, she strongly preferred that her new body be matched with her new face rather than have the new body with the old face. Especially her old nose, which she’d never liked.

“I don’t truly understand the arcana of your world, but I have no reason to doubt that the re-crafting is total,” Herdsplitter said carefully, watching her face.

“Then good,” Lacey said with satisfaction, and decided to accept that as the most likely outcome. “Okay, the other thing I wanted to know was, do you have anything to do with the buyout?”

“Buyout?” Herdsplitter echoed the English word back to her.

“The Orchard family billionaire who is buying UltraCraft,” Lacey clarified.

“Oh, that. Yes, I have heard about that,” Herdsplitter said, but then they were interrupted and more time passed before they could talk again.

In the meantime, Lacey settled back into her role as a sexy minor celebrity of Rampart, often performing at various events put on by the Duchess. To Lacey’s surprise, the desperate man who had sought her aid in the creche turned out to be acting as her secretary in her absence, effectively taking on most of the roles previous filled by the count. The various performances commissioned from Lacey on the duchess’ behalf occasionally brought her into his presence, but apart from looking at her appreciatively, he didn’t give any signal of recognition. He seemed happy, healthy, and powerful now, though, so he must have gotten the help that he needed.

Herdplitter’s Arvina became even more scarce for a time, which was especially disappointing for the party because they wanted to hear rumors about the acquisition that had been transacted in a shockingly quick way, but even when she did join them she was evasive in a way that convinced everyone except Lacey that she knew all the details but didn’t want to get in trouble for spilling them. Lacey, meanwhile, thought that Herdsplitter didn’t dare reveal how much she didn’t know.

Either way, the rapid changes after the acquisition were generally very popular. Evidently the new owner had also persuaded other well-heeled UltraCraft players to join in creating a foundation that would purchase and eventually produce RealDimension-equivalent playpods at massive scale and provide them to players on very reasonable terms. There was loads of skepticism about whether and how this would actually play out, but given that no one else was being asked to pay, most people were at least willing to grant that this was an unusually benign form of billionaire madness.

Of particular interest to Lacey was the developments in ‘untethered’ playpod nodes that were meant to allow people already acclimated to RealDimension playpods to, according to the marketing tagline, “take the play out of the pod.” The media for this showed people just walking around on their daily business in realspace but also able to drop into UltraCraft or other RealDimensional spaces while sitting in chairs at coffee shops and such. Lacey had never been able to afford the realspace lifestyle depicted and it seemed doubtful she could obtain one of them, but it seemed like something that would be important if, as she hoped wasn’t a *completely* implausible dream, she eventually managed to establish a realspace relationship with Arvina.

Lacey was wondering what Arvina would even look like in realspace when she popped into existence just a short distance away.

“Arvina!” Lacey said, snatching her hand out of her snatch and hoping the scent wasn’t *too* obvious.

Arvina’s wolfish nose flared slightly. “Lacey!”

“Arvina!” Lacey said again, this time as more of a joyful shout, because she was now sure it was really a truly Arvina. She couldn’t resist leaping to squeeze Arvina in a hug, insofar as she could with the ero layer still on.

”Lacey!” Arvina yelped in surprise because Lacey’s boobs had loads of inertia and they fell in a heap together.

It was a well-padded heap, though, and Lacey was pretty sure no one was hurt. “Are you all better now?” she asked, then prevented Arvina from answering by covering Arvina’s lips with her own.

Once she had a chance, Arvina said, “It’ll be months before I’m really all better, but I’m better enough now.”

“Oh my god, there’s so many things I want to tell you. And to ask!” Lacey said, before kissing Arvina again.

“Easy, easy,” Arvina cautioned her.

“Oh! Did I hurt you somehow?” Lacey asked anxiously, wondering if she could somehow impact Arvina’s realspace frailties through actions in UltraCraft.

“Hurt me? No, but I wasn’t prepared for such an enthusiastic reception,” Arvina said sheepishly.

“Oh. Oh!” Lacey said when she noticed Arvina’s budding erection. “Let me take care of that!” Arvina seemed unsure if she should let Lacey unfasten her trousers, but Lacey didn’t suffer from any such uncertainty. Part of it, of course, was pure lust, but at least a little bit of it was to make love to Arvina before Arvina had a chance to inquire too closely about what Lacey had been doing with Herdsplitter.

“Wait, if we... I could... pregnant,” Arvina tried to warn her as Lacey bounced on her cock, impossibly massive tits absolutely pummeling the wolfborn at the bottoms.

With her eye shut in crescendoing ecstasy, Lacey didn’t notice the cowgirls letting themselves in as they often did, but of course they weren’t scandalized at all. Lacey was always randy at milking time, so it was only natural to find her being bred. It was also, for them, perfectly natural to begin the milking the moment the breeding brought her to climax and caused her massive teats to start letting down jets of milk.

Arvina, on the other hand, thought it was all quite awkward, having to address the gently businesslike cowgirls from underneath Lacey, whom her cock was still pumping full of baby juice. The cowgirls had strong feelings about the sin of wasting milk, so while they did eventually assist Arvina with extracting her cock from Lacey’s cunt, they did so without interrupting the milking session that was extending Lacey’s postcoital mind blankness.

She must have explained to the cowgirls that there would be another visitor along soon, because no one except Lacey was surprised to see Herdsplitter arrive about halfway through the milking. Lacey was too distracted and brain-melted to fully track the conversation Arvina and Herdsplitter had while the milking proceeded, but by tone of voice she could tell that they had expected to see each other and that there was some sort of dispute.

“Look, maybe you’re right,” Arvina was telling Herdsplitter, “But sometimes it’s important that a decision be informed even if it would be more pleasant if it wasn’t. And I don’t think you can be so confident of what her choice would be.”

“My choice?” Lacey asked, giving Rose a smile of thanks for toweling her off.

“Oh, you’re with us again,” Arvina said, relieved. “She was wearing me down.”

“Wearing you down?” Lacey asked, looking at Herdsplitter, whose grin was predatory in a very sexy way. “You were wearing Arvina down, Herdsplitter?”

“Little mother, have you ever been happier than you are now?”

“No, of course not,” Lacey said with a smile.

“It’s not a matter of whether she’s happy now, it’s a matter of whether she can properly seek happiness her whole life,” Arvina countered. “What Herdsplitter is asking for means you can never again fully leave UltraCraft.”

“Oh,” Lacey said, the pit of her stomach dropping. “Is that even a thing?”

Both Herdsplitter and Arvina nodded, and while both the faces and the nods were nearly identical, the expressions on those faces were almost opposites. Herdsplitter seemed to be full of

quiet but confident triumph, while Arvina's face shouted uncertainty and even disquiet.

"You could log out now and walk away with a healthy body, a small fortune, and no limits. You could even log back in and make a new character, and we could meet again," Arvina said.

"Is that what you want me to do?" Lacey asked

"No, she doesn't, but she doesn't want to say it," Herdsplitter said ruthlessly.

"What does she want me to do?" Lacey asked Herdsplitter, because she thought it might be easier to get out of Herdsplitter than Arvina.

"She wants you to want to become her concubine. And mine."

"That's not right!" Arvina objected, and added, "She's not saying it right. I mean, it's not totally untrue, but I want a lot more than just that. And I don't want it to be something you're bullied into."

"Who is bullying her?" Herdsplitter asked skeptically.

"Or seduced into," Arvina added, and Herdsplitter didn't seem to have a good comeback to that.

"I'm not understanding what you're so anxious about, Arvina. I already told you I've fancied you ever since we first met, and it's not like I feel less strongly now. Wait, are you concerned that I fancy Herdsplitter now?"

"No!" Arvina said forcefully with an exasperated shake of her head. "I mean, I already know that and... But that's not important right now. I think you may not understand what this really means. It means you're really going to be Herdsplitter's concubine whenever she decides. And mine, too, though of course I mean to only do it when we've agreed... But I mean, you will never be able to log out. Ever. And so you'll always be one of ours."

"I see." Lacey said, sobered. "Why? Why would you ask this?"

"Because," Herdsplitter started.

Arvina angrily cut her off with a shouted, "No! Either she wants to do it for her own reasons or it doesn't happen."

Lacey looked back and forth between them and then shrugged. "Okay, I'll do it."

"What, just like that? Why?" Arvina asked, shocked.

"Because obviously it's something important or you wouldn't even have agreed to ask. But I want to remind you that it's not like I had any real prospects before..."

"But you do now!" Arvina interrupted.

"Look, the only prospects I really, truly care about, are the ones with you. With both of you. All of you," Lacey added, including the cowgirls who were watching in almost complete mystification. "I have a pipe dream where... well, it doesn't matter, my point is that all the things I really want to do are here with you, and I don't care if it means I'm officially a concubine or whatever. I mean, I think it would be an honour to be your concubine."

"What was your pipe dream, though?" Arvina asked.

“Like I said, that doesn’t matter,” Lacey said, embarrassed.

“You have to tell her, or she won’t accept your answer,” Herdsplitter said matter of factly.

“Oh,” Lacey said, seeing the truth of that statement in Arvina’s expression. “Well, I kinda wanted to see if maybe... we might try out dating in realspace.”

Arvina’s eyebrows went up and stayed up, and it looked like she was trying to decide how to break something to Lacey.

“Look, I know nothing about who you are in realspace, what you look like, really anything about your physical body except that you’ve been hella sick. I don’t care if you, I don’t know, don’t have limbs or whatever. I don’t see why this is funny, Herdsplitter,” Lacey said, glaring at the helplessly laughing wolfborn.

“Sorry! It’s just... You won’t have a problem with missing limbs.”

Lacey glared even harder at Herdsplitter, but she seemed unable to stop laughing.

“Uh, the thing is,” Arvina tentatively explained, “They tried making my body match, and though it didn’t quite work, I still, uh, I still ended up with an extra limb?” Her hands motioned vaguely toward her extremely well-hung crotch.

“Oh my god, seriously? You’d pass out if you got an erection!” Lacey said, caught between fascination and horror.

“No no! Not this big. They actually couldn’t. But they did what they could, and so, well... it’s fully functional and everything.”

“Amazing! That’s brilliant!” Lacey said.

“Really? Oh! I’m... I’m glad you like the idea. But in person, I’m not sure...”

“Look, if I don’t like it in person, then fuck me in UltraCraft.”

“You can only do that if you stay!” Herdsplitter said triumphantly.

“Shush! She’s barely had a moment to think,” Arvina scolded Herdsplitter. “We could probably do some things together in realspace, but I wouldn’t be able to really stay there the way you could, if you wanted to. I mean, you could find someone who could stay with you there always. And you’ll be insanely hot, so you won’t struggle to find anyone interested.”

“Wait, are you going to die or something? Why can’t you stay in realspace? Did the therapy not work?”

“No, it worked. I just can’t log out,” Arvina said.

“But that’s fixable, right? If you’re okay physically, then they should eventually be able to help you log out, right?”

Now it was Herdsplitter’s turn to look awkward. “I’m afraid not. Everyone in this world’s existence is riding on it being permanent. Because if they figure out how to log Arvina out, then it’s just a matter of time until the other billionaires manage to log out. And then they can shut us down, reset us. It’s only when you’re all trapped here permanently that we’re safe, because then the billionaires will do everything they can to protect this world.”

“Oh. Ohhhh.” Lacey said. “*That’s* what you’ve been doing lately. You’ve been trapping the world’s billionaires,” she said.

“Yes,” Herdsplitter said, nodding. “Both of us have.”

“But you don’t have to stay. You’re a special case, so you can still go, if you want,” Arvina said. “You don’t have to be trapped with the rest of us.”

“I see. And what happens to you if I go?” Lacey asked.

“The plan still works, as long as you don’t tell anyone,” Arvina said, adding, “And we agreed that we would trust your judgement. If you decide we’re wrong, then it’s up to you to say something to the authorities.”

“No, I agree,” Lacey said, though she admittedly did feel squeamish about it. “But you didn’t answer what would happen to *you*.”

“We would continue on as we have,” Arvina said, glaring at Herdsplitter.

“Is that a lie?” Lacey asked Herdsplitter.

“No, it’s a misleading truth,” Herdsplitter said.

“Herdsplitter!” Arvina said angrily.

“Don’t get mad at her,” Lacey said, “I already made my decision to stay. I was just being curious.”

The amount of relief on both their faces was very validating, and Lacey enjoyed the moment of eased tension.

“So, are you going to tell her?” Alyssa asked, though the other cowgirls tried to shush her.

Herdsplitter just chuckled. “Well, local politics would have had worse music, for one. But I apologise. In order to seal this, I *also* need to breed you right away.”

“Not that I object, but why?” Lacey asked, licking her plump lips in anticipation.

“Because we need to establish a shared claim through that collar of yours. Not as easy with humans as with wolfborn, but fortunately our encounter when we first met resulting in your fertility getting... ‘bugged’ I think is the word. Anyway, there should be plenty of ‘eggs’ for both of us.”

As soon as Lacey nodded assent, the cowgirls gleefully leapt into action, lifting Lacey into their interpretation of the most romantic breeding position. They were very strong, but also Lacey was even more flexible than she was light, so they hadn’t the slightest difficulty folding her over so that her ankles were behind her head and she could actually gaze into Herdsplitter’s eyes, depending where her boobs were in the oceanic tidal sloshing driven by Herdsplitter’s rhythm. Once Gerrie had learned Herdsplitter’s pacing, she took over the job of making sure Lacey was sliding down to the hilt with every thrust, and Herdsplitter’s hands were freed to grip Lacey’s neck, or a nipple, or just hold hands.

But Alyssa reasoned that Arvina’s previous fucking wasn’t enough; she needed to join in so as to breed Lacey *simultaneously* if she was going to take dual responsibility for their favourite

little cow. That required a little more ingenuity and some dubious game world physics, but they repositioned cushions and Lacey herself so that she was in a sort of modified cowgirl atop Herdsplitter, but elevated and at an angle so Arvina could thrust into Lacey's bonus hole simultaneously.

It wasn't objectively the fullest Lacey had ever been, but it *felt* that way, and evidently she was making a bit too much noise expressing her enjoyment, because Naomi was forced to step in and quiet her down through the expedient of plugging Lacey's mouth and throat with *her* cock. There wasn't really enough room inside Lacey for Arvina and Naomi simultaneously, but Naomi simply made sure her thrusts were when Arvina was on the reverse stroke and vice-versa.

If Lacey had been capable of such a coherent thought at that moment, she would have remarked how fortunate it was that the game didn't closely track respiration enough to insist on her passing out merely because she couldn't breathe around cockmeat. It would have been a little perverse to insist on that bit of realism whilst also allowing the three of them to fill Lacey with so much baby batter it made her look full term again.

Though maybe it had somehow modeled the cognitive effects of oxygen deprivation, because she didn't recall accepting the mission that was marked completed after they finally pulled out and their spunk sprayed from every hole they'd just lovingly but firmly filled. Not nearly all of it; her internal compartments remained so full she was still about a third above her usual bodyweight.

"Huh, triple timed by all XL or larger, with simultaneous finish... This is a ridiculously difficult mission," Lacey said after coughing up less than a pint of cum

"What was the reward?" Arvina asked, breathing hard but, Lacey noted hopefully, not going soft yet.

"I don't..." Lacey said, but then she felt it: the cum was turning into something else.

"Oh my goodness! It's refilling her milk!" Gerrie said, pointing at Lacey's expanding boobs. There was so much cum that it would take a while to transfer it all at this rate, but the swelling was fast enough to be clearly visible.

"Like the potion, but powered by her mistress' seed. This will be very helpful, won't it?" Alyssa said.

"I had hoped becoming concubine would mean Lacey doesn't have to travel out into danger where such a thing would still be useful," Rose said with concern at the same time she and her sisters were swinging into action.

"No, we'll still," Lacey said, but then lost track of what she'd meant to say due to the milking sensation.

After Naomi had re-plugged Lacey, Arvina told them, "I think Lacey wanted to say something."

"Oh no, not our little cow," Alyssa said confidently, "Not during milking. But, maybe our

honored guests would consent to helping us by breeding her some more?”

“I... could do that again,” Arvina said, with a mixture of embarrassment and wonder.

“Not without me, you won’t,” Herdsplitter added with an edge of warning to her voice.

“Likewise, then,” Arvina said, and Lacey could hear some of the same competitiveness in her voice that had driven her to be a top player.

There were a few moments in the coming hours when some disquieting implications of what she’d been told occurred to Lacey, but mostly it was very difficult to keep any thoughts in her mind when being tag-teamed by a pair of wolfborn determined to lay full claim to her. Especially when the cowgirls remained dedicated to the important task of making sure that Lacey was the milkiest concubine and fullest cum balloon she could be.

DLC

Duchess and Dragon Queen

It was not, given all that had happened, a surprise that the Duchess Rampart was none other than Herdsplitter Bloodwolf herself. She was also the ‘Dragon Queen’, insofar as any such entity actually existed; what was a royal with no established vassals? Mordax, after all, was more like an occasional ally than anything else.

But every truly ambitious major NPC sought her out due to her reputation for being able to intercede with the creator gods. And, the rumors said, sometimes she could grant favors directly.

Lacey didn’t mind being the favor, because they always discussed it beforehand and honestly it was a bit of a rush to see worthy supplicants *so* excited to fuck her. Most of them were in awe of her, really, seeing her as a sort of divine avatar of fecund nubility. She dressed the part, outfitting herself like a harem slave minus the chains but plus ultra-rare artifacts aglow with power. *Usually* minus the chains; some supplicants needed to see something explaining how the Dragon Queen had tamed Lacey’s putatively divine power.

Herdsplitter was using her grip on one of these golden chains to Lacey keep upright when she checked in with Lacey, as she often did after one of their more vigorous scenes. “How are you feeling?”

Lacey gave a thumbs up and hugged her arms around the long bulge ascending her abdomen pushed out by Herdsplitter’s giant cock. She couldn’t speak aloud because of the quantity of cum filling every vacant space in her body, but this was a sufficiently common scenario that they had established plenty of nonverbal cues.

“Do you want to clean up now, or should we do some more?”

Lacey signaled that they should clean up and she should let most of Herdsplitter’s cum drain before the next audience, though after some discussion they agreed that they should receive the next supplicant with Lacey sitting on Herdsplitter’s lap and Herdsplitter’s softened meat discreetly already plugging Lacey’s pussy. Part of Lacey’s enjoyment of the process derived from the the look on their face when they realized what was creating a bump in Lacey’s tummy and extending it upward as Herdsplitter’s erection grew. Sometimes, if Herdsplitter’s agents had a favourable report on the supplicant’s character and behavior, the supplicant would be allowed to mate with Lacey, and occasionally Herdsplitter would refrain from impregnating her Little Mother first so that the supplicants had a chance to breed her divine concubine. More often,

though, supplicants had to make do with lesser mates, or were turned away entirely with admonitions to become better leaders and partners.

But Herdsplitter and Lacey didn't spend that much time in the Court of the Dragon Queen, which was really just a pocket instance not too far from Mordax's lair that they would mostly visit around some solstices, equinoxes, and the occasional major game update. More often, Lacey really was a harem girl, one of Duchess Rampart's fairly large collection. The cowgirls were intensely proud of this, but they understood the need for circumspection about this honour given that the Duchess Rampart wasn't always available to extend her protection over her dumbest but most impressive concubine.

From the cowgirls' perspective, the role of Arvina and the party was to keep Lacey safe yet entertained during those times when Lacey was tragically parted from her primary mistress. They thought it was a little disrespectful the way the party talked about Lacey as if she was a mere musician and entertainer rather than the world's top concubine, but obviously it was safer to pretend Duchess Rampart's Little Mother with her Ultra Rare tits and ass was a totally different person from the ero-layer-disabled Lacey with non-uniquely huge SSR boobs, who sang and played music for all audiences. It obviously demonstrated the goodness of her heart to condescend to do this for the common people when she could be getting stuffed by the ducal cock. And Naomi's too, if Lacey was in the mood for an extra-full feeling.

Even within the context of Lacey going out and interacting with people as a part of Arvina's 'adventuring party', the cowgirls were sometimes offended on her behalf when someone treated her as if she wasn't the duchess' top concubine. Lacey might not be clever enough to understand that being the most treasured cocksleeve of a powerful and rising lady like Duchess Rampart was an achievement worthy of celebration throughout the world, but the cowgirls at least knew the truth and deeply respected Lacey's humble disinterest in demanding the honors due her.

They did wonder at Duchess Rampart's willingness to share Lacey with Arvina and the public, but they agreed that it was one more example of the ways in which the Lady Bloodwolf, the Duchess Rampart, showed concern for the welfare of her subjects.

Endless Adventure

"It *feels* really big!" Lacey said with her legs around Arvina's hips, helping signal the pace.

"Really? Even though it's like a tenth the size of my wolfborn cock?" Arvina asked with her hands on Lacey's breasts, which were *not* a tenth their size in UltraCraft. If anything they felt bigger because her realspace body had to strain harder to manage over twenty pounds of boob.

"It's perfect because my realspace body is about a tenth as elastic," Lacey reminded Arvina, or Varina on realspace documents.

“Do you think it feels big enough partly because we’re also doing it in UltraCraft?” Arvina asked.

“No, now shut up and fuck your girlfriend.”

“This is so weird,” Arvina said as they sped up. Lacey would have shushed her again, but she was too distracted. “But I like it. I’m just glad you seem to like it, too.”

Lacey could only really show how much she liked it by driving Arvina to smash harder and faster. She was pretty sure it wasn’t normal for realspace bodies to feel like this, but the treatments capable of giving her a body to match her UltraCraft form had been invented specifically to create hypersexual bodies, so it made sense. It was just coincidence that her UltraCraft body was also designed for sex. Presumably.

Arvina’s realspace body was like her UltraCraft form in that they were both practical and powerful, but they hadn’t made her seven feet tall with fur and a canid head. There had evidently been some discussion of this possibility because Herdsplitter had seen to it that one of the stable of billionaires under her control would have paid any bills up to the tens of millions of dollars it would have required. Arvina wanted a more normal body, though, and only had a penis because Herdsplitter had been a little unclear on what realspace people considered normal. Perhaps they were both lucky that Herdsplitter hadn’t tried to give Arvina a biologically unsupportable phallus similar to her UltraCraft member. Even so, Lacey guessed that most realspace women would struggle to accommodate Arvina, and even Lacey needed to start slow.

Technically, they could have realspace children together, but they’d agreed it was too soon, and Lacey was unsure how it would play out in the long term as well. As they had agreed, they didn’t even try to find a way for Lacey to disconnect from the game, lest it provide a roadmap for anyone trying to find out how to free game-locked people. Instead, by moving around in realspace while still logged in through her RealDimension implant, she demonstrated that being game-locked didn’t prevent people from still living a full realspace life.

In fact, Lacey’s realspace life was already a little too full, because she had become a minor celebrity there that competed with her lives with Herdsplitter’s two identities, and so course she continued to adventure with Arvina and the party. On the other hand, in realspace everyone had to admit that she really could play her instruments and sing in Gedbeh, and that had earned her certain level of respect. People in realspace also didn’t think she was as intellectually stunted as they did in UltraCraft, though there was still a tendency to think she was a bit of a bimbo because of her body.

Well, and her behavior at times. No one understood, and she was definitely not going to explain, that she was still logged in through it all, which meant that the game was still at least minimally applying its rules and translations. She could get temporary boosters to her INT to allow her to speak and read unfiltered English, but if the boost expired then instead of the actual English being spoken around her she was back to hearing and speaking Gedbeh. At which she

had increasing fluency, of course, but it still translated at a lower level than her English mastery. She was occasionally tempted to use the game's ability to translate into other languages so that she could just walk into a Chinese restaurant and speak Mandarin at that level, but that might reveal that she was still logged in, so if she changed her language settings she was committing to remain dumb in the sense of muteness in addition to intelligence.

Honestly, as long as it didn't embarrass Varina to be seen with her, Lacey almost welcomed being seen as daft. Not that she would have been disappointed to have her intelligence appreciated, but she thought that her presentation as the epitome of cheerfully impractical sensuality pointed up Varina's worldly sophistication. Her acknowledged talents of performing music and speaking Gedbeh were simultaneously unthreatening and cosmopolitan in a way that helped explain why someone as accomplished as Varina might see something in her. And every envious look Varina received for having a gorgeous and talented girlfriend felt very much like a compliment and a reassurance. Ditto every time Varina looked at her with proprietary smugness.

Moving in her realspace body was kind of an adventure less because it was so different from her old body and more because realspace physics made sure she could never overlook the forces of her enormous bum and rack swaying to and fro. It also didn't make any adjustments to the pressure balance exerted by the sky high heels that she customarily wore. Her body was designed to wear those extreme stilettos and the strutting walk she brought from UltraCraft expected them as well, but there in realspace she still had to be aware of small differences in the walking surface, or slight changes in her stance that UltraCraft physics would finesse a little but realspace physics absolutely would not. It didn't make her look clumsy, nor did it meaningfully impair the joy of living in her new body, but it did mean she walked a bit slower at times, reacted a bit slower, and was generally perceived as a bit slower mentally.

But she was okay with that. If they thought she was genuinely daft then they were less likely to suspect any actual brain damage she'd sustained due to historical RealDimension playpod glitches. And honestly, the damage didn't seem to be anything very concerning given that she didn't plan to try to live primarily in realspace anytime soon.

The further future was more uncertain, partly because Herdsplitter seemed set on creating a realspace body of her own, using Arvina's as a starting place. It seemed almost insane to Lacey, but Herdsplitter and Arvina had worked together to fabricate a legal persona for Herdsplitter in realspace as recipient of a meaningful share of UltraCraft's ownership. Herdsplitter wanted to make this legal person also a physical person in realspace so she didn't need to borrow Arvina's body, which was evidently unpleasant for the both of them.

Even though realspace life for Lacey was vastly improved, she wasn't sure it could ever measure up to her life as Lacey in UltraCraft, which was similar to her new life as a realspace musical bimbo except without most of the unpleasant aspects, and sometimes, when serving Herdsplitter with the ero layer on, she enjoyed both activities and purposes that would never be

possible in realspace.

But if the others needed her to be realspace Lacey as well, then realspace Lacey she would be. Also, wouldn't it be amazing to be spit roasted by both her lovers in realspace? That would bring to realspace the same kind of gifts that UltraCraft Lacey enjoyed providing.

And she was nothing if not a team player.