Chapter 43

I never slept on my wedding night. My mind was too busy. After Jaesmin and I played out our sexual needs she fell asleep entwined with me. My thoughts were on what needed to be done in town and how the Matriarch AI was helping me. The AI that governed this game was in fact a god to me. But should I worship, fear or ignore its existence? I decided I had too much to do right now to have an existential crisis.

So what did I need to set as my priorities? I needed to draft the logging camp and build it. The wood was vital for supplying our town's construction and our future furniture industry. I was holding back from looking at the NPC auction. No use in getting frustrated. With my pathetic town funds, I didn’t have much of a chance of snatching a valuable high-level NPC right now.

I needed to get to level 25 to select my class. My cheat for leveling was still intact with casting my stone rain spell from horseback. I just couldn’t get a horde to follow me, just two or three at a time now. I definitely needed to start making time to level. Once the game launched I would be stuck in a level freeze.

I needed to travel to other cities so I could activate their portal stones to my personal network. That definitely should be done before the game launch. I decided, once my garrison showed up I planned to leave on this Odyssey. Titan needed a workout anyway. Should I risk bringing Jaesmin? That would be quite the honeymoon. A panicked thought occurred to me. Could I bid on NPCs for Malcum if I wasn’t in Malcum? I didn’t see any restriction but that was the type of update the admins would do just to make my life more difficult. I made a mental note to keep an eye on it.

Finally, I needed to make lots of coins in the game and money on the outside. Surprisingly I no longer felt overwhelmed. I moved to my drafting table and quickly drafted the logging camp with its buildings.

*Uncommon Logging Camp, Health 50,000, Requires Woodcraft Carpentry 23 (Bonus 50% to Stamina Recovery, +1% chance for unique resource per tree harvested)*

That was something interesting. What was a unique resource? It took twenty minutes of searching and an inquiry to the admins. A unique resource was basically a minor treasure that was found in a tree or buried in the ground around the roots. It could be an old copper ring that the trunk grew around or it could be a bag of gems secreted away under the earth centuries ago. I doubted the random probability of the game would give me anything game-breaking. My best estimate was our new lumberjack, the elf Darai, could harvest about 30 trees a day and get them to the lumber mill. So I might see something every third day or so…if she found the unique resource. I would guess she would have to search at every tree so maybe I shouldn’t count on it.

I had a little bit of time before I needed to join everyone in building the logging camp so I started drafting again. When Jaesmin came downstairs we kissed and I continued while I ate breakfast and handed her the plans to bring to the logging camp. Two hours later I finished the new plans.

*Very Rare Paper Mill, Health 50,000, Requires Masonry Structures 43 (Bonus +15% bonus production, 5% to create runic quality paper)*

I had been a little inspired and shocked that the building was very rare. I had only invested about 3 hours of my time in creating the blueprints. The runic quality paper was good enough to be used to make one-use scrolls or even actual spellbooks for players to learn new spells! It had its own tier quality as well. So you couldn’t inscribe a tier 4 spell on tier 1 runic paper. After a little back-and-forth messaging with Mad Dog and I found out that runic paper mills were a thing and extremely rare. So my regular mill that could produce runic paper should be a massive boon! More trade goods!

I needed a papermaker to run the mill. Since I didn’t have anyone I shelved this construction project. I would check the NPC auction and hopefully find someone. I decided I was done drafting and went to check on the progress of the logging camp.

I headed outside. I found Grinder sitting there. “Morning Tallis!” Been waiting for a bit. We have a wedding gift for you.” He handed me a sack. “It is the materials you need to build your player auction house.”

“Thanks, this an amazing bit of help. We will start work on it today!” I said enthused about the gift. With the auction house, I could lock up my enchanter long-term to Malcum. Grinder lingered for a bit before speaking.

“Just know we are here for your Tallis. The game hype is real out there. This is considered the new frontier. We will help you free yourself and make a godly fortune for everyone,” Grinder said.

When he didn’t leave I asked, “Is there something else?”

“Yeah, I wanted to get your permission to pursue the affections of your new huntress, the demonkin Mira,” Grinder stated shyly.

I had no objections but gave it some thought. Grinder was a demonkin himself so maybe he had a fetish for the race. I asked him a pertinent question, “When the testing period ends won't you lose all your efforts to woo her?” Grinder suddenly looked constipated. He hadn’t thought that far ahead.

“Yeah, maybe you are right.” He sighed deeply then gave me a grin, “Have you seen her move? The sway of her hips and muscled legs? Amazing! I guess I can wait to make a move on her.”

“Don’t despair Grinder. Use your time to get to know her now. Bank information that will help you when you return to the game.” He brightened at my words.

“Got a good head on your shoulders Tallis. Thanks for the green light.” He left me with a skip in his step, probably off to find the demoness, Mira.

When I reached the logging campsite the work was almost done. It wasn’t too complicated and my bear beastkin NPC Varrine had the required skill in carpentry to utilize the plans. We finished just after lunch and we all returned to the inn to enjoy Fareth’s cooking.

At lunch, I learned Varrine’s backstory. Is wife, two daughters, one son and his father-in-law were in the coastal city of Barenth during the incursion event. The outlying farms and villages were overrun with the insectoids during the event. The city held but the devastation and death in the surrounding lands were immense. Figures the game testing could do so much damage to the NPCs without care.

I put the plans on the table after the meal for the player auction house. This was going to be our focus until it was completed. I was actually anxious to see the building completed because I wanted to use it as well. The player auction was not open to NPCs so I thought I might be able to find some bargains before the player population exploded.

As we were discussing the build something happened. Varrine who had been next to me started to give off an odor that was a bit…offensive. I associated it with a men’s locker room that hadn’t been cleaned in a while. Other odors began to hit me as well. The smell of Fareth’s cooking from the kitchen. The stink of the waitress's clothes. Muffled perfumes in the air. Fresh-cut wood from the recently built inn. On and on the smell came and went. What was this? I checked my updates and found it…of shit! Literally.

The day had finally arrived that would require NPCs to poop and piss. I didn’t know why this aspect of realism needed to be added to this game. We were doing just fine without it. At least my sewers were already in place. The NPCs seemed unaware of the new assault on the olfactory senses. I could set the degree to which I smelled things in my interface but decided it would be prudent to start with it turned all the way up.

We traveled as a group the short distance to the auction house site. The foundation had been completed and Sanso had his golems bring in the rest of the stone that was required. With everything in hand I went and found Breda who was talking to Mad Dog. Mad Dog was haggling over which plot of land he wanted for his guild house.

“Mad Dog how goes the struggle to convince our city planner to have the guild house in the center of the park!” I joked as I approached.

Breda turned and gave me a not-so-friendly look, “Might as well be in the center of the gardens,” she grumbled. “This wolfkin wants to build his guild house outside the area I zoned for guild house construction!”

Mad Dog looked amused as I was filled in. Mad Dog wanted a plot of land between the inn and the portal stone. Wow, that was premiere real estate. Breda had a wide street planned there and the zone was designated as the entertainment district. She had six buildings planned on each side of this street. The buildings were restaurants, playhouses, a brothel, and a small fighting ring. Ambitious little dwarf. The brothel did intrigue me slightly but I needed to mediate.

I looked at the map a few times and suggested a compromise. My house wasn’t too far from the inn. I had the old lumber mill just sitting there. It could be torn down and the guild house could be erected there, right on the river. Prime real estate in its own right. Breda was still fuming but agreed since I was lord and the land was mine it would be acceptable. Mad Dog just seemed amused.

I asked Breda if the sewers were up and functioning and she affirmed it before storming off. I looked at Mad Dog who shrugged and said, “Got a quest from Neral, your fire giantkin, who is supervising the guilds and administration. He gave me a 20% discount on his services if I could make Breda angry. Apparently, those two have been going at it in the town hall. Some discord on how things should be done.” Mad Dog was still smiling knowing that my head was probably going to explode at any minute.

“Fucking devs,” I swore. Mad Dog patted me on the back.

“Tallis if everything was unicorns and rainbows mate life wouldn’t be interesting.” He chuckled. “I was doing you a little bit of a favor, directing Breda’s wrath at me instead of Neral. It was kind of fun. And I got a premier location for our new guild house!” I rolled my eyes at him.

“How is the questing going outside of Malcum?” I changed the subject.

“Pretty good. We are doing a lot of fetch quests for you craftsmen in town. Mostly for town rep and a few coins here and there. When we are away we get as many quests done as we can before returning. We have been doing all solo city questing. Your portal stone has been seeing a lot of work, mate!” Mad Dog finished as we walked.

“What do you think about the new update?” I asked curiously about his opinion.

“We don’t have an immersion pod to transmit smells. Wasn’t required for testers. I do think it was necessary to add that realistic layer to the game. You are all set though? The sewers are flowing from what I saw?” Mad Dog asked.

“Yeah, we are good. I actually wanted to let you know the auction house should be completed tomorrow. It is my next priority. So if one of you can get the fetch quests from our enchanter, Persephone that would be great,” I grinned at him.

“I am about to log off. Tallis, mate. Want to get some Jungle Brew with me before I do so?” He asked. Jungle brew was the exotic name for the beer we were brewing in Malcum’s new brewery.

“Yeah sure, I have a few things to talk about,” I responded and we headed over to the inn.

I mostly wanted advice on leveling and Mad Dog just confirmed I should use my cheat. Anytime you could safely kill monsters higher level than you it was paramount to take advantage of the bonus experience and quicker skill growth from the battles.

Mad Dog was deeply disappointed that I was avoiding the NPC auction. Even if I didn’t want to bid I should at least be making plans and tagging those NPCs I planned to try to get. I told him I would check the NPC auction after two more days. I planned to spend the next two days trying to gain a level or two.

My notifications pinged and I checked it…a wandering monster was coming from the plains for the village. My map identified it as an ***Apex Cleardusk Lion King, Level 10***. I told Mad Dog about it and he asked me to share the location so I did and he planned to meet Grinder and go take care of it. Black Beauty was offline.

Fareth had a waitress bring me some of her excellent stew. I downed it and got 100% regeneration bonus to all my pools. I decided I should make use of it so I went to demolish my old mill and figure out my estate. I had just knocked down the outbuildings when Grinder came running past and halted to talk with me.

“Hey, Tallis. I kinda got killed by your wandering monster. But don’t worry Mad Dog finished it off.” I was shocked.

“Wasn’t it just a level 10?” I asked ready to laugh.

Grinder looked abashed, “Yeah but it was more like a mini raid boss than an elite monster like we thought.” God damn fucking devs! A problem that I thought was just going to be a nuisance was now a major headache! What if it had come from the Shiverwood and was a level 50 mini raid boss? Grinder noticed my worry and added, “We got some fantastic loot Tallis. At least a 100 gold in parts and meat and this…” Grinder taped away at his hidden screens and sent me an item description.

*Mane of the Lion King (Cloak), Gives +10 to Charisma, once per day can inspire all allies in 100 yards for 20 minutes, inspiration adds +25% to damage and give a temporary health pool of 10%*

“Now Tallis you can not tell me that is not badass!” Grinder laughed.

“Do you think he would sell it to me?” I asked Grinder.

“Sell it! Hell no! I think he plans to give it to you for the guild house to maintain the ‘fair trade’ appearance. He is coming now.” Grinder finished pointing down the road.

Mad Dog, the wolfkin, did in fact show himself walking toward us. When he approached he was a little upset that Grinder had already revealed the information about the cloak as he handed it to me. The cloak did look marvelous and felt super soft as well. “Thank you guys this is amazing. I hope you don’t mind but I think either Galana or Tanguin would be better able to make use of its abilities.” Mad Dog looked hurt for a second and then nodded. I hated to give it up but would help our defense more. I told Mad Dog he could do the honors and chose Galana. She had been with me the longest and she was responsible for defense within the walls of Malcum.

I left to find Jaesmin, Sanso, Varrine, and Iona at the auction house site. Persephone was also present adding the required essences to the building as well. She was the most excited of the group. I joined in the building process and late into the evening the building was eventually completed. I sent them all off to get some food at the inn and decided to try the auction house myself.

The interior of the building had separate doors for each player to enter. Inside each room, a player had their own access to the auction terminal. I choose one at random and entered. A comfortable seat and a large forward display were in the room. A holo keyboard appeared with a scrolling wheel when I sat. The range of my auction house was shown as 1400 miles. This meant the quality of the construction had increased the functionality of the building by 40% since the plans had just been for a range of 1,000 miles.

I was able to sort by the connected auction houses, with just 17 in my range. Both my auction house and the other auction house needed to have their ranges overlap in order to show the goods offered. For instance, if my auction house had a range of 5000 miles I couldn’t look at goods with an auction house 5000 miles away if their auction house only had a range of 4999 miles. I wasn’t sure if I liked this mechanic. The world they had created was massive so restricting the auction houses to regions meant I would have some limitations on what was available to me to purchase and the population of my audience would be limited when I decided to sell.

I looked at everything offered and it was mainly crafting materials. In order to post anything on the auction house you paid a fee based on how long it was posted. The fee was a percentage of the sale. 5% for every 24 hours the object was posted to the auction site, up to a max of 25%, but always with a minimum of 5%. Since that was in-game hours if you wanted to post an object for one real-world day you would have to leave it up there for 20% fee. The minimum fee was 5% for any item posted, if an item did not sell you would be refunded the item at the auction house you posted the item.

They giveth and they taketh. Damn admins skimming funds at the auction house. You could also post a ‘buyout’ price for an item. If someone bought it earlier in the auction the time posted would take precedence. So if you posted something for 4 days and it sold in one you only lost 5%. It was a gamble by the seller to find the correct buyout price I guessed. Maybe I could design an auction house to reduce this cost?

I had found with some trial and error that I was not able to draft any building that required an enchanter to help build. This was a major hole in my drafting and building ambitions. I sent off a ticket to the admins but the reply was short. I would need to pick up the relevant enchanting skills in order to draft the buildings. They did not indicate which enchanting skills those were and didn’t answer any further inquiries. Maybe they were deciding if creating drafting plans of this caliber would be game-breaking?

I didn’t have the luxury of disposable income currently so I just paged through the offerings gaining some familiarity. Definitely, I could upgrade my equipment if I wanted to. I decided to stockpile all my drafting plans for when there was a bigger player population to bid on my items. Thankfully all sellers and bidders were anonymous at the auction so I should be safe. I was sure my new guild would make good use of the auction house and it also meant my enchanter, Persephone, was a lock to stay. I checked the quest and it just required the first month of materials to be delivered from the auction house to her to complete the quest. I sent a note to Mad Dog to finish the quest as my funds were terribly low.

After spending way too much time perusing the auction site I finally went home and found Jaesmin already asleep. It was late and I felt I needed some sleep as well. I kept trying to commit to getting a few hours every night but I always had too much to do. I climbed into bed and snuggled next to Jaesmin.

In the morning I summoned my builders to my house. We were going to start on the guild house today. Unfortunately, Breda came by and snagged Sanso for her own purposes. It was to get help moving a few buildings. I spent the morning getting everything set up for the construction of the guild house. Since it was going to be next to my house and my gardens I wanted to add some aesthetic beauty to the guild house. When Sanso stopped by at lunch, escaping Breda for a short time, he suggested coating the exterior in white marble with blue metallic veins. We had a quarry of such stone so he could handle it. The floors on the interior would receive the same stone. Sanso spent his lunch complaining about Breda. It seemed the little dwarf was not making friends anywhere in town. I also had to resolve the issue between Breda and our Master of Guilds. Maybe after I returned from my leveling trip.

Titan was excited to see me and the elvish teens had him ready to go. I had told everyone I planned to be gone for two whole days. I was going to spend my first day leveling and then exploring the south. Not only did I want to level but I also was looking to increase my combat skills and magic. I had been way too focused on Malcum and couldn’t let my own development slip too far before the game launch.

I stopped by the potion shop and Savannah, the young elf, came rushinig up to me. “Lord Tallis what can I help you with today?” Her energy was infectious and I smiled.

“I am heading out to do some monster slaying and need to stock up on some potions,” I said and her face fell into a frown.

“My healing and stamina potions still need work before they can be sold according to Tonna,” she said dejectedly. The young elf had been hoping to peddle some more of her brews to her lord.

“Well, why don’t you show me what new potions you have prepared that I may be interested in,” I played to the elf girl while Yonna smiled at me from across the shop and I could see she was preparing some healing potions for me so this little diversion was fine by me. I ended up buying a sunblock potion that gave 50% reduction in damage from harmful UV and light spells. It also gave the user a natural-looking tan and the more you applied the darker the tan. Savannah was happy to take her lord's coin.

I left on Titan and raced through the Cleardusk plains. I stopped and harvested some of the porcupines for their quills. This was for Galana because I had heard Mira thought these arrows worked exceptionally well with her archer abilities. Not great experience but I did get enough quills for 100 arrows. Since it was getting dark I moved southwest toward the Azul desert. The moon was extremely bright in the chilly night air.

Well into the night we moved through the Azul desert pulling and hunting scorpions under the moon. When the sun was cresting the sand dunes I had decent progress toward level 22. Instead of returning to Malcum I had Titan push south and start to avoid encounters. I had it in my head that I could perhaps reach the city of Stillwater which was 240 miles south of Malcum. Then I could just portal home after locating their portal stone. It would give me a head start at creating my portal network.

The dessert returned to plains and creatures I was familiar with. Lions, porcupines, and the large buffalo. The Cleardusk plains must be a massive area. I came upon a massive stone monolith in the plains. It was visible for about two miles distant. I cautiously approached it.

The monolith had a lot of script on it that I couldn’t read and there was no monster guarding it. I was very curious about its function but didn’t have time to puzzle it out currently. I marked it on my map and sent Mad Dog and company the coordinates as well. I guessed it was part of a quest of marked a dungeon or entrance to something. I couldn’t spare the time right now so continued south.

Eventually, the land converted from plains to rolling hills dotted with lots of shrubs. I entered a new region and was rewarded with a notification.

*You have entered the Broken Hills (Level 20-25)*

The monsters here were dog-sized groundhogs, pit vipers, and hyenas. It was not a fun environment for me and Titan. The hyenas traveled in packs and were just as fast as Titan. The groundhogs popped out of nowhere and bit Titan’s legs and the pit vipers had a camouflage that was very difficult to see through. I was obviously under-leveled for the region. I had been fortunate to find the creatures in the Azul desert, while higher level than me, were much slower when I was mounted on Titan.

I decided to head straight east. I knew the road that ran along the river would be there and it should be safe from monsters. I had used up almost all the healing potions that Tonna had given me for my little leveling excursion and I really didn’t want to die and lose all my progress. Titan was also sick of getting ambushed by groundhogs and nipped at by the hyenas. Fortunately, the pit vipers had gotten a lot easier to spot and we avoided them easily enough now.

When the road and river came into view I think Titan was just as relieved as I was. We were able to travel faster and without the worry of attack. We came to a new settlement called Willow’s Bend. It was located on a large bend of the river. The town had tall wooden walls dotted with stone towers. It encompassed maybe a half-mile square. That was about a quarter the area that Malcum’s walls held. Of course, Willow’s Bend had a little over 3,000 inhabitants so it put us to shame in that respect.

Willow’s Bend looked to be about halfway to the large city of Stillwater. About 120 miles south of Malcum. I think it was time to see how these human-populated cities farther to the south of me actually felt about Malcum. I entered the small city and headed toward an inn.