

Up a Tree
by
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Gemina Stex appeared in the main room of the Guildhall. Around her, humans, dwarves, elves, and sprites milled around. Over their heads, nametags and health bars showed who was who and how they were doing. Normally, she didn't mind all the floating monikers, but in a crowd this dense? Visual overload!

The Adventurer's Guildhall was decorated with a lot of dark wood and paintings of the game designers and playtesters. Morgrim Thanyu, one of Gemina's teammates, was in a few different pics, some as his current character, and some as his alternate persona, a much higher-level dwarf tinkerer.

Once she'd oriented herself, Gemina wove her way through the crowd. For a brief moment, she looked up and considered taking to her wings, but the low ceilings and tall elves meant she'd still have cramped traveling.

After a few million rounds of "excuse me," she made it into the corridor and blew out a long breath. From there, she had a quick jog to the room Morgrim reserved for them to gather before they set out on the evening adventure, unless Leif had spotted another problem and took off without them like last time.

When Gemina walked into their room and found the rest of the gang gathered, she glanced to the left of her vision to check the system clock. No, she wasn't late. Barely. She smiled and perched on the "sprite chair," a glorified stool with no back so it wouldn't interfere with her wings. Unlike the hunting cabin-styled main room, this meeting space was done in

wrought iron furniture and simple chairs with puffy steel gray cushions. On the walls, silly paintings showed the company's employees posing with their characters. In the painting, Morgrim posed as his real self – a middle-aged gent in western wear and a cowboy hat – with both of his characters beside him.

“Well, hello, all you fine folks.” She nodded toward the main room and then leaned closer to them. “It’s crazy out there.”

Morgrim snorted. “It’s that time. Everyone’s off work and dinner’s et by now.”

His plate armor sported fewer dents. Even the scratches from yesterday’s toxic turtle adventure were gone.

“Whoo, Angie! You gain a level?” Gemina turned toward their human tinkerer.

Angie Neer nodded. “When you used my grenade on that turtle, that pushed me over the limit. I put my points into armory so I can take care of our stuff.”

Gemina high-fived her. “Suh-weet!” She turned to Leif, who usually got there early to make elixirs and do a bit of recon with his elf eyesight advantage. “How’s Tocksiturdle looking today?”

“Back to normal, as normal as a swamp with car-sized turtles can get.” Leif smirked.

Gemina thought back through last night’s adventure when the hacker had bugged the AI so badly that it had turned comedian on them. “No dancing frogs, no wisps mocking us with their emojis, no turtle conga lines?”

“No synchronized swimming frogs. The reboot reestablished situation normal.”

“Took some doing with the cleanup today, but it’s all good.” Morgrim stood. “Well, before everything hit the fan yesterday, we were on our way to rescue a damsel in distress.”

Angie popped up. “No time like the present.”

As usual, Morgrim led the way, and Leif and Angie followed behind. They'd make a cute couple except that Angie was played by a middle-aged housewife with three kids under ten years old, and Leif was actually a teenage girl. That left poor Morgrim as the only real guy in the group. He didn't seem to mind.

As soon as they were outside, Gemina kicked off from the ground and flew over their heads. Walking actually drained her stamina. Sprites were meant to fly.

Now that she had space to move, Gemina pulled a few aerial loops to stretch out. She came to the end of the last one and looked down at the empty street. Where did everyone go?

When she looked back the way she'd come, the others were gathered in front of a fencepost while Morgrim carried on a conversation with it. The scowl on his usual frowny face meant trouble. The sort of thing that guaranteed to ruin their evening.

Gemina slumped and blew out a sigh as she flew back to the others.

"And there's no one else who can take this?" Morgrim asked the fencepost.

"I'm sorry. I know your group got to field yesterday's mess. I tried everyone else. They're all in other sectors or off-line." The voice coming from the fence post was a woman. "Maybe it'll be a quick fix."

"Yeah, and maybe it'll take us all evening." Morgrim growled and looked at each of them. "What do you say?"

"Let's check it out," Angie said.

Leif nodded. "It's not what we had planned, but it still gives us XP and loot."

Morgrim looked up. "How about you, sprite?"

She wanted to give him a resounding, "No!" since they'd just spent last night sorting out Tocksiturdle's AI glitch and all the paperwork that went with that, but they'd all known that

signing up on a game developer's team meant they might have to help with admin duties. That balanced out the perks: no respawn penalties, sneak peeks at new features and areas, and occasional gifts of gold or equipment.

Gemina shrugged. "I'm with you guys."

Morgrim turned back to the fence post. "All right, Ellie. We're on it."

"Thanks, Morgrim. I've told the warden to admit only you and your group. I'll be keeping my eye on you from here. Just say the word if you need an access node."

"Right." He turned away from the fence post.

"So, what's the hubbub, bub?" Gemina asked.

"Customer service complaint. Some idjit is sniping people on the path through Trierluk Forest." Morgrim looked up to the Guildhall tower. "Let's see if you can spot them, Leif. Maybe we can get the drop on the ambush."

"See you up there!" Gemina waved and flew for the balcony on the tower. The wind through her hair and along her wings was the whipped cream on her coffee.

She intentionally overshot the top of the tower, practiced a few aerial maneuvers then landed on the balcony rail in a perfect handstand before starting on one of her balance beam routines. These were so much easier as a sprite than as a wingless human, but things she learned in the real world she could do here, after she adjusted for being half the mass of her real-life human self.

As she finished the routine, Leif reached the balcony with Angie not far behind. Morgrim? He'd be a while, unless he'd opted to wait for them downstairs. Climbing all the way up here was taxing for dwarves in plate armor.

Gemina executed a perfect dismount and landed in the air before settling on the tower

next to Angie.

“Morgrim will wait for us downstairs,” Angie said.

“Figured.” Gemina nodded. “By the time he gets all the way up here, Leif will be finished with snooping.”

Leif tapped next to his eye to engage his ability, whispering, “Farsight.”

Nothing visibly changed as Leif looked along the road that connected Trierluk Forest to Tern Inn and then to Tocksiturdle Swamp.

“Got ‘em. There’s a team of four in Trierluk hiding in trees. One of each race. Two fighters, an herbalist, and a thief.” He gasped. “Three levels sevens and an eight.”

Angie drew a breath through her teeth. “That’s going to be tough.”

“Maybe we can just ask them nicely to stop being jerks.” Gemina leaned closer and whispered. “You know how convincing Morgrim can be.”

Leif snorted. “We’ll be fighting them for sure.”

“How far in are they?” Angie squinted into the distance, but there was no way she’d see anything this far away.

“You know that massive oak halfway to the castle? They’re about fifty yards short of it on the right side of the trail.” He winced. “Ow. They just wasted a group of level twos. They must’ve gotten in before Ellie locked it down.”

Angie clenched her jaw and growled. “Well, let’s not give them any more opportunities to snipe at other folks.”

Leif blinked a few times. “Let’s get to it.”

“I’ll meet you down there.” Gemina kicked off from the balcony and did a couple somersaults midair before heading downward.

Naturally, her more direct route had her on the ground well ahead of her team. The fence rail became her next balance beam while she thought about their problem.

Clearly, going straight down the road would just turn them into targets. These knuckleheads weren't likely to hold their fire just because Morgrim was a developer, if they even recognized him from the photos in the Guildhall. Their best bet was to circle around and use the trees for cover. That would take longer, of course, but if her team was going to tackle a group two levels up, they'd need all the advantages they could gather.

She had no real confidence that they'd get through this without a fight. The sort of folks who'd ambush players five levels lower than them weren't usually the reasonable type.

So, they'd need to make sure Leif had restocked his potions after last night. He was usually pretty good about that, but checking never hurt.

After finishing her routine, she perched on a fence post until her team caught up. They started for the forest at twice their usual traveling speed.

"Three level sevens and an eight. What do you suggest?" Morgrim adjusted his grip on his warhammer.

"Seriously? Get your pal Ellie to pull the plug on these morons." Gemina shrugged. "But I'm guessing it's not that easy, or she'd have done it already."

"Yep, as long as they're in Trierluk, she can't oust 'em without confusing the AI. If we can get 'em back into this neutral zone then —" In an abrupt gesture, Morgrim aimed his thumb over his shoulder.

"Yeah. I like those prospects." She rubbed her chin. "You know they won't listen if we ask them to knock it off as nicely as we can."

"No, but we gotta try anyhow. Protocol." Morgrim rolled his eyes.

“So we ask, they tell us to take a long walk on the sun, then what? Repeat the request with more force?” Leif mimed punching someone.

“That, or see if we can get them to play a game of tag.” Gemina wagged her eyebrows.

“Right!” Angie nodded. “If Ellie’s watching, she could drop the admin hammer on them once we clear the forest.”

Morgrim stroked his beard. “That just might do it as long as they don’t know that it’s the forest protecting them. I like how you think, sprite.”

Gemina smiled and drifted back to fly next to Leif. “What you got for elixirs?”

He flipped open his bag as they passed Tern Inn. “I’ve got five heals and four antitoxins.”

“Good.” She gave him a thumbs-up. “Then let’s loop around behind them and use the trees for sneaking up. Morgrim gives his ‘stop being a dork’ ultimatum. They laugh and call us names that trip the prune filter, and then we either fight it out or play tag.”

A large crowd of low-level players congregated around the entrance of Trierluk Forest. The artists for this region had given the entrance to the forest a beautiful arboretum decked out with dark green vines that had purple flowers. The flowers hissed at anyone who came close. A warden stood in the way. Like the warden guarding the entrance to Tocksiturdle, this one stood as tall as Leif and was as heavily muscled as Morgrim – and high enough level to discourage anyone who thought about battling past him.

“All right, make a space.” Morgrim started pushing past the crowd. “Let us through.”

Angie and Leif followed in Morgrim’s wake as Gemina zoomed overhead.

Once they were in front of the warden, Morgrim faced the crowd and cleared his throat while flowers hissed their displeasure. “Listen up, folks. It ain’t good just hangin’ out here. No telling how long it’ll take to find and oust the vermin takin’ shots at y’all. As soon as we get the

problem taken care of, a system announcement will go out. Thank you.”

When he turned back to the warden, the huge NPC stepped aside long enough to let their party pass. The rest of the gathered crowd broke into a roar of complaints when the warden blocked the way again.

The forest, for all the dense trees, had a cheery disposition. Flowers grew in clusters here and there. Butterflies fluttered by. Birds sang sweetly in the trees, and cute bunny rabbits hopped along.

All that beauty hid the threats. Spear grass that launched real mini spears, squirrels that tossed golf-ball sized acorns, and mushroom that spewed laughing gas. Fun times.

When they were a couple hundred feet down the path, Morgrim turned the group to the right, off the beaten path and into the rest of the forest. They hadn’t gone twenty feet before the first acorn zoomed in and bounced off Morgrim’s metal helmet. A chucking squirrel chattered in a nearby tree.

Morgrim frowned and scooped up the golfball-sized acorn. “Really?” He flung it sidelong and whapped the squirrel on the head.

It took far more damage from the acorn and fell over dead.

“Whoa! Critical hit on the critter!” Gemina applauded.

“Yep. Not likely to get a real challenge this close to the edge. If we get past the oak tree, then we’ll find trouble.” Morgrim hefted his massive hammer and turned the group east again, paralleling the road. “Can you get a bead on them, Leif?”

The elf shook his head. “Farsight’s on cool down for another minute. Soon as I get it back, I’ll snoop again.”

“Definitely.” Gemina nodded once. “It would totally stink if they ambushed our ambush

of their ambush.”

A telltale swish of spear grass came from the right.

“Down!” Angie warned.

Gemina dove and crouched behind Morgrim. The barrage of spear grass zoomed past, each spear as long as her hand but only as wide as a soda straw.

Morgrim twisted around and rubbed his knuckles on her bare head.

She flinched away. “Hey! Not my fault if you’re big enough to hide behind.”

“Uh-huh. Some reason you don’t think your helmet is a good idea just now?” He asked.

She patted her head with one hand and rolled her eyes. “Forgot all about it.” Gemina reached into her bottomless belt pouch and thought about her helmet. It appeared in her hand, and she got it situated. “Better?”

“Better,” Angie said.

Gemina turned toward Angie. The tinkerer usually reminded everyone about dumb things like helmets and armor lacings.

“You told me not to nag you anymore.” Angie held both hands palm out.

Gemina sighed. “You’re right. I did.” Her cheeks grew warm. She mimed pinching something small. “Maybe you should nag me just a little?”

Angie nodded. “I’ll do that.”

“Uh-oh. They’ve abandoned their place,” Leif squinted and slowly turned his head side to side. To their left, a flock of brightly colored birds flushed from the trees and grouched about being disturbed.

Leif turned that way. “There they-Morgrim, look out!” He tackled the dwarf as Gemina launched into the nearest treetop.

An arrow with a black fletching thumped into the side of the tree Gemina stood in, and she jumped. “Get a tree between you and them.”

Angie, Leif, and Morgrim each scrambled to a different tree and crouched behind the bole.

“Leif, the name of the level eight?” Morgrim asked.

“Ruth Less. Level eight fighter, female human.” Leif slid his bow off his shoulder and nocked an arrow.

“Got it.” Morgrim drew a deep breath. “Listen up, Ruth. I’m Morg-”

“I know who you are. I just don’t care.”

“Yep, that’s Ruth talking.” Leif sighted along his bow. “I’ll lose Farsight in about half a minute.”

“Listen up. This ain’t the player-versus-player zone.” Morgrim put some extra growl into his voice. “You want to fight other players, go do it there.”

Ruth laughed. “I don’t think so. That’s too boring. I’d rather watch all the kiddies try to run. Makes the target practice more fun.”

Gemina clenched her fists and stomped her foot. *What a total jerk!*

“Kid, I ain’t asking. I’m tellin’. Clear out right now or get cleared out.” Morgrim took one of his hatchets off his utility belt.

“Don’t make me laugh. Even your highest levels are below ours.” Ruth chuckled. “We won’t hardly break a sweat.”

“Battle don’t always go to the strong or the race to the swift,” Morgrim yelled. “Now give this up and take it to the player versus player zone.”

Ruth’s response was rendered into goose honks.

Gemina snickered. “Well, the prude filter works.”

“Leif, are they grouped together?” Gemina asked.

“I’ve lost Farsight, but I think I can see them from this angle. They’re not camouflaged. So, unless there are orange, purple, turquoise, and blue-gray trees out there, they’re in a line.”

“Angie, get ready with that grenade.” Gemina tapped her chest corresponding to where Angie’s bandoleer was.

Angie nodded.

Movement and bright colors drew Gemina’s eye. The quartet were running toward them and no longer bothering with concealment. Her guts rumbled a bit, same as they always did in a lopsided fight. Silly, really. First, she couldn’t actually get hurt. Second, one of the perks of being on Morgrim’s team was that if they died, there were no respawn penalties. Still, her guts got growly every time.

Leif shot his arrow, hitting Nick Yerstuf, an elf, in the leg an inch below the bottom of the ring mail doublet he wore. Nick stumbled and yanked the arrow out just in time to get nailed by another one. If Leif could keep that up, they were golden.

Angie popped up and threw her grenade like a fast-pitch baseball. Ruth herself caught it, and it blew up before she could throw it again. Her health dropped to a quarter.

“Wow! Ground zero!” Gemina smiled.

Nick and Gunnar Killya, a dwarf, both took a third of the damage. The sprite, Kell D’Baddies escaped by flying up. Nick went down and vanished. Ruth and Gunnar quaffed healing elixirs and returned to full strength.

“Ruth’s mine.” Morgrim threw the last of his hatchets and readied his warhammer. “You two get the dwarf. Gemina?”

“I get the flying chick. Gotcha.” Gemina kicked off from the tree a moment before a mini crossbow bolt thumped into the branch. “Hey!” She zipped out of the canopy to find a turquoise-armored sprite with a smirk that begged to be slapped off.

Kell wore a mix of plate and chainmail, and must’ve put some major points into Strength to still be able to fly. Acrobat against fighter? This wouldn’t go well, not with a straight fight anyway, but Gemina had no plans to meet her adversary in battle for long.

Gemina drew her daggers, one in each hand.

After hooking the crossbow to her belt, Kell drew a knobby club from a bottomless bag. “Let’s see what you’ve got, kid.”

Before she could reply with her snappiest one-liner, Kell raised the club and charged. Gemina waited and dodged up and over, slicing with both daggers at the last second and scoring a couple hits. She spun midair and looked at the health bar over her opponent’s head.

Gemina snorted. *Just gotta do that forty-eight more times.* Still, if she could keep dodging that club, that just might work.

Kell laughed. “That’s it?”

“Would you like to know what these blades are coated with?” Gemina held up both daggers.

Absolutely nothing, of course. Playing with Morgrim meant playing squeaky clean. Tranq darts for her blowgun, no problem. Poison-coated blades? Absolutely not. Maybe Kell didn’t know that. Psychological warfare could even the odds.

Kell growled and charged again. This time, Gemina dove under the attack. She slashed with both daggers. One skipped off the breastplate and the other scored a very minor hit under Kell’s arm.

Gemina thumbed her nose at the other sprite. “Catch me if you can!” Twirling midair, Gemina wiggled her nose and whispered, “Improved velocity.”

She shot off toward the edge of the forest. Kell, of course, had the same racial trait and two extra levels of points to maybe bolster the skill, but this was the only chance Gemina had to beat a level seven fighter. Maybe all that armor would slow Kell down some.

Gemina stole a look back at Kell in hot pursuit, club at the ready and gaining fast. Too fast for all that armor she wore. Her equipment must be giving her some nice bonuses. The end of the forest was coming up, but could Gemina lead Kell over the border in time? More importantly, was Ellie-the-admin paying attention?

Yards short of the forest edge, a hard whack on the back of Gemina’s thigh cost her nearly a third of her health and sent her careening toward the trees below. Her heart thudded in her ears as she twisted around and dove through a gap in the canopy to land in a wobbly handstand on a narrow branch. She bent her elbows and pushed off, zooming back through the same spot in the canopy. She spun, looking for turquoise and not seeing it anywhere.

“Now where in the orange, polka-dotted elephant did she go?” Gemina muttered.

A tiny paper with a folded corner, the system notification icon, appeared in the upper left corner of Gemina’s vision. She focused on it and a transparent scroll opened in front of her, floating on air.

System notification: Trierluk Forest has been removed from quarantine. All players can continue quests in that sector. We apologize for any inconvenience.

The scroll faded.

Gemina punched the air. Kell must have crossed the line while looping around to come back. Ellie-the-admin had been paying attention.

She made her way back to where she'd left her party. Morgrim was talking to a tree trunk while Leif helped Angie chug an antitoxin elixir.

“— Think they deserve the ban hammer, personally.” Morgrim leaned his warhammer on the tree.

“I'll present the case, but I'll need statements from your entire party,” Ellie said.

Morgrim glanced toward the inn. “Once we get everyone healed up, we'll go to Tern Inn and tell our tales.”

“I'll have the recorder going, and thank your team for me. Second night in a row they gave up for admin duties.”

“Yep. Just recruit someone else tomorrow.”

“Let's hope there's no need. Signing off Ellie Vater.”

“Hi, guys, miss me?” Gemina asked.

Angie looked up and winced. “Apparently Kell didn't.”

Leif fished a healing elixir out of his bag. “One for you.”

Gemina swooped down and grabbed it. She slurped it down one swallow at a time until her health bar was full then capped it and handed it back.

“All right, troops. We got paperwork. You know the drill.” Morgrim pointed toward the road with his hammer.

Gemina wove in and out of the trees over their heads as they headed back to Tern Inn.