I found myself staring at the simple but beautiful dwellings of the crustecars who lived here. Berry's people did not have houses, not as I understood it. Instead of walls, they built fences, and inside those were their accommodations and the things they valued, only sometimes separated by sheets and curtains for privacy.

The constant noise caused me to look back, to see and hear the colorful crustecars behind me, keeping the bridge clear of the dark and foreboding cursetaceans trying to climb it from the moat. The soldiers were yelling at the rest of the caravan still outside, and they ushered in a wagon, causing me and my party to make way and step to the side.

We watched the centaur wagoneers keep running, beyond the bridge, beyond the war, beyond the moat, beyond the shelters outside the walls, and finally through the gates that led into the city proper.

"We made it," I said.

"Yeah."

"Hooray!"

"We did it!"

"What do we do now?" Berry asked, staring at the enclave of her people. Crustecars of different colors were still going about their normal daily routine while a war raged outside. The moat still had to be guarded, for the enemies rising up from the mud and past the plant traps had only gotten more numerous. Many crustecars refrained from directly participating in the fighting, but instead supported their compatriots as they screamed from the pain of their duty. Others yet cleaned and cooked and handled other chores, completely used to the chaos outside.

"We can go there if you want?" I suggested.

"...Yeah. I have to. But later, please. I'm not ready yet, and we're all tired."

"Fair enough," I shrugged. My party walked past the crustecar dwellings, and then entered Orila City through the southern gates. It was quieter here than the chaos outside, but it was still pretty fucking bad. We went past the sortying soldiers, questing adventurers, and busy craftsmen, all to find a bed to collapse in. Granuel was kind enough to go get the paperwork done for our quest, and hear the formal dismissal of the caravan.

Our job was done.

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I woke up to a new day, only a thin sheet of fabric concealing my full demonic form. I hugged Moonwash tighter into my embrace as I luxuriated in the soft mattress, and even softer pillows. This was the best inn in town, and it was better than I expected for a military outpost that saw constant battle, if exponentially more expensive.

That was fine. We were rich. What was money for if not these rare comforts?

“Good morning,” Moonwash greeted.

“Mornin’.” I gave my lover a tender kiss on the lips, before I fell back asleep.

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Angerly had already ordered food from downstairs by the time we walked out in comfortable tunics. We had just taken a bath, the door to our full suite was locked, and I took the rare opportunity to just be myself around my friends.

Breakfast consisted of eggs and small game, along with a side of some freshwater fish. There was an entire ocean *right there,* but people could hardly go out there to catch anything with the state of things as they were. It was still a damn delicious meal, and we laughed and talked as we enjoyed this peaceful moment in a peaceful city.

“No it’s not,” Therick said.

I looked around the peaceful and opulent room we were in. “Looks peaceful to me.”

“Well, *here*,” Angerly rolled her eyes. “It’s still a warzone out there, I bet.”

“That’s what our walls are for,” I spoke in a posh accent. “To keep their blood out of my dress.”

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We went out together a few hours later, dressed once again in our full adventuring attires. Just as our getup would suggest, we walked around the oasis at the center of the city, and found ourselves back at the Adventure Guild. Granuel turned in our quest, got paid, and then took an open quest for cursetacean subjugation. We needed to take the smaller part of the right pincer of every kill to be presented at the guild later.

With a new goal in hand, we squeezed through the crowded streets, and made our way to the northern gate.
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“I don’t know if I’m ready! Maybe we should save this for tomorrow…” Berry second-guessed herself just as we stepped beyond the thick walls. The chorus of violent noises slammed towards me the moment we stepped outside, for while there was no big engagement and the bridges were all raised, the crustecars were still fighting the tireless cursetaceans. One shriek in particular stood out, feeling more urgent than the grunts of terrible but expected pain. Another followed, then another, and when I followed the trail of sound, what I found were people fleeing from a handful of cursetaceans that had somehow broken free of the muddy moat.

“We have to help them!” Berry pleaded, now anxious in a different way, but I was already moving before she could even ask.

A watching kobold soldier yelped as I suddenly appeared and slaughtered a cursetacean in front of her. I heard the screech of a crawling *crustecar* woman, and I killed the *cursetacean* chasing after her before she could lose another of her once six legs. I charged away before she could thank me, and rammed my sword into the head of a cursetacean about to devour a crying child. I stepped away to find my next prey, but I only stood there and panted while marinating in my most violent desires, for that was the last of the enemies that had gotten inside.

“Hey Haell,” Angerly smirked as she walked up to me with everyone else. Her eyes glanced over to the dead monsters. “You okay?”

“Never better.” I smiled back. “Anyone feel like healing my arms?”

“Oh! Of course!” Granuel focused his nature magic on the sandy shores.

“I’m on it,” Moonwash said with her hands out, until finally a bed of flowers grew around me and soothed my wounds.

I sighed and leaned against her, as I beheld the continuing carnage. The crustecar people wailed briefly for their fallen, and then they took the bodies away to be mourned whenever they might have the time. The world continued to churn despite the deaths, and soon they were cleaning up the mess that had been made, and fixing what structures had been broken. The soldiers didn’t care at all, as they berated the crustecars for having failed in their guarding of the moat. The inhexes were deployed where they saw fit, but they had not reacted fast enough earlier when enemies had actually breached the moat.

“Thank you…” a voice muttered. I looked over at him with a child held in his three hands, and I reasoned he was the father or some other guardian figure of the crustecar boy I just saved.

“You’re welcome.” I smiled, though it could not be seen through the mask as always.

“Yes.” He looked intimidated, but pushed through. “We don’t have much, but if there is anything we can do for this great favor you have given us…”

“Think nothing of it. But…” I noticed how one of my friends was fidgeting, clearly wanting to ask for something. “Berry, you want to take over?”

“Oh! Ummm…” Berry hesitated, but this was a band-aid that had to be ripped off at some point. “Do you know of Billory?”

“I… knew of a Billory,” the crustecar man answered, “Billory, spouse of Kart, Rob, and Lena?”

“Yes. That’s the one.” Berry made her equivalent of a gulp, as she visibly grew nervous and distressed. I placed a hand atop her carapace to try and calm her down, and it did help. She asked a question that she dreaded and knew the answer to. “W-where is she now?”

He went silent for an awkward few seconds. “She’s dead. I’m sorry.” The crustecar man glanced at his kin, still fighting and being whittled down little by little to this day. “I can take you to what’s left of her family, if you wish. I believe Rob and Lena are still here.”

It wasn’t just one parent, but two who had died in her absence.

My friend cried, and I cursed the world that had brought her such sorrow.

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After seemingly an eternity of sadness that made even me shed a single tear, Berry had collected herself enough to speak again. “I… I’d like that please. To see who’s left of my family.”

“Of course.”

We followed our new crustecar acquaintance through the paths made in between the fence houses. I noticed that there were other sorts of structures right by the walls. From elevated buildings and offices for the soldiers, to similar structures for a few select stores and businesses, and then the cramped barracks that the inhexes were stuffed into.

The local crustecars who lived here looked up at us as we passed. They were clearly curious, but also nervous and afraid. Some even scrambled to get out of our way. I certainly
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didn't mind being respected, or even feared for the right reasons, but not like this. It felt wrong.

"Berry?" someone asked once we neared the particular fence house we wanted.

"Berry, is that you?" Another crustecar perked up.

"BERRY!" Now everyone had noticed.

"Big sister!" All their many legs began to move as crustecars of all levels and ages rushed towards their loved one now returned. Berry yelped as she was swarmed by a million hugs and kisses, and we all just watched on fondly as we remembered how nervous our friend had been for this meeting.

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"Hey… Where's Billy?" one of them asked just as things began to calm down. He was Rob, a father of Berry, and his carapace was a deeper shade of blue.

"H-he's dead," Berry informed them, and the gathered crustecars all chorused a haunting wail in unison. They also had terrible news to share as Berry learned of who exactly had died during her absence. She had only been gone for about a decade, yet already there were so many people who she could never meet again. The crustecars of this era lived such short and fleeting lives, and Berry knew it, but I was sure every confirmation remained a spike through her soul.

"Hey, Berry." I tapped her on the carapace once there was a lull in the conversation. "We'll let you catch up, okay?" I thumbed towards the perimeter where *cursetaceans* were trying to cross even now. "Call on us anytime."

"Oh. Okay. I will."

"Great." I patted her on the back one last time, before I led everyone else away.

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"I want to smash something," I said as we sat down to rest. My gaze was focused on the *cursetaceans* climbing out of the moat, and the *crustecars* that screamed as they killed the enemies that looked similar to them. *God fucking damn it, why are their names so similar!? It's confusing.*

"Of course you do."

“We know.”

“Enjoy, Haell.”

My eyes narrowed, and I turned to my friends. “*Right.* Thank you for the support.”

“You’re welcome.”

I sighed and shook my head, all with a smile on my face. The wrath mana roiled inside me as I reveled in the endless hatred that I felt. I made it to the moat, then looked down at the crustecar woman who was cringing and hesitating to crush a cursetacean’s head. She knew what the action would do to her, the purple sheen of her carapace was already covered in scars, but at this rate the monster would free itself and potentially kill her instead.

“May I?” I asked.

She looked up at me, uncomprehending. “Huh?”

“May I take this fight, and kill that cursetacean?” I clarified.

“Oh. Uhm. If you want…? But they’re very dangerous and–”

She could not finish the rest of her sentence as my greatsword slammed into the creature’s head and killed it in one strike.

“Uhhm, are you okay?”

“Oh yes. Perfectly fine. Never better,” I confirmed as I inspected my arm and the blood that dripped past the gaps in my armor. I relived the moment of that kill through my memory core, and then I replayed it again. *As many times as it takes. As many times as I fucking want.*

As I thought, I had overdone it. I could’ve killed that accursed monster with less force. I didn’t need to suffer this much damage for it.

“W-where are you going now?”

“To kill more cursetaceans.” I gave her a big thumbs up and ran towards the whole buffet of monsters for my wrath to devour. I just had to sit there, and my prey would come to *me*.

During this whole slaughter, I accessed my memory core, and adjusted the amount of force I used each time. At times I would undershoot, and at other times I would strike so hard that the sandy ground below me cracked. What added to the difficulty was that all these cursetaceans were different. Even if they were to hypothetically have the same Levels–which they didn't–their physiques and a thousand other factors differed. People, animals, monsters; none of us were born equal.

Moonwash healed me whenever I needed it, and my friends also tested their mettle against the cursetacean scum, if not to the same extent. The inside of my armor was disgusting by the end, as chunks of flesh rolled stickily against my arms that had been torn and remade so many times.

"Hey, Haell. Everyone." Berry greeted us when we returned with a weary sigh. A massive weight had been lifted off her shoulders, for it was better to know, no matter how tragic. "Wanna come with me? To meet my folks?"

"I would love to." I gestured for her to lead the way, then grimaced when my gauntlets squelched wetly because of the movement. This filth needed to be exorcised.

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AN:

Hooray! A hundred chapters! Here's to a hundred more!

It ended up being a short and more slice-of-lifey chapter, but those need to happen sometimes!