

“What...is that?” I point to the mound of green in the distance that seems too uniform to be natural. Of course, with the system ‘natural’ doesn’t have the meaning the old folks tend to associate with it anymore. But still, straight lines aren’t something I expect to see unless people of some sort are involved.

“I don’t know,” Brandon says, after studying it. He grins. “Wanna go explore it and find out?”

“Do we really want to waste time with pointless endeavors?” Helen asks, irritated. Silver peers at it. “I’m okay with going to see.”

It’s about midday. We’ve been walking since sunrise without a debuff. Seems that a bedroll on ground with nothing poking into us and comfortable weather is enough to avoid a ‘didn’t sleep well’ debuff. It’s not enough to give us a ‘good night’s rest’ buff, but that okay.

Brandon hasn’t commented or even smirked about what happened at the lake, and I’m glad. This...freedom people seem to express in the wilderness is taking serious getting used to. Silver and Helen seem to be more like me about that. Or at least, they left for the lake dressed, returned in different clothing and were talking jovially the entire time.

None of that, ‘me avoiding looking at Brandon to keep from blushing at the memory,’ for them.

Clothing dried by a fire isn’t comfortable. It’s stiff, and it itches. On that, Helen agrees with me, because when she took hers off the rack Brandon made, she looked disgusted at the idea of putting it on. Fortunately for her, she had options. I was basically out of them. I’d spent my time scrubbing everything I own. And for about an hour after we set out, I was itching.

The trek was odd in that Brandon kept his mouth shut for pretty much all of it. As soon as Helen noticed he was ignoring her, she doubled down on the barbs. He gave me a number of ‘do I really have to put up with this’ looks. And I get it. I’d talk with her, but it isn’t like I know her.

Okay, it isn’t like I know Brandon either, but we’ve shared two fights and...I’m just more comfortable around him because of that.

The thing is, when he isn’t looking annoyed at her behavior, her mounting frustration at his silence makes him grin, and I think it’s encouraging him to continue.

It’s utterly childish, but it tends to mean she stops after a few tries, and we have quiet for a few treens of minutes before Brandon says something about what’s around us, or gives advice of how to proceed, and she used that as her cue to try to get his goat again.

Brandon grins. “Majority rule. Off we go.” He wears an expectant expression until we’re close enough I make out gaps in the wall of green leaves. And it does look more like a wall than the side of a mound. Flat going up to a ‘roof’ with a series of peaks along it.

“Okay, not a ruin,” Brandon says.

“Should it be?” I ask.

“It could have been. Many of the old settlement that didn’t survive the system’s arrival turned into ruins. Like Hamilton.”

“But haven’t all of those been found?” Silver asks.

“Nothing’s been ‘all found’,” he replies, making the air-quotes. “And even if a ruin has been found before, it can still be your first time there. Which means a newly discovered ruin for me and Dennis’s quest. Sure, the bonus for being the first one to discoverer the ruin

is nice, but at this point, I don't expect to be the one doing that."

He walks to the corner of the structure, keeping his distance. Then he heads closer when we round it.

"Is that wise?" Helen asks, but without snark. Brandon doesn't answer. He grabs a handful of leaves and pulls, revealing a door-like opening.

I'm next to him before I realize I've moved, looking into a vast space, dim and tinted green by the leaves forming the roof. I make out metal ribs from the ground to the roof, with more spaced within, with thin vines partially climbing up them.

"What is this?" I whisper.

"No idea." He grins at me. "Wanna go in?"

I open my mouth to say no. I'm not an idiot to step into some unknown place. But I'm then taking a hesitating step across the threshold. When nothing happens, I step in fully.

He pats my shoulder as he passes me and strides in deeper. "I knew you had the explorer spirit."

Is that what it is?

"I call it being stupid," Helen calls after him from the doorway. "Don't come bitching when that spirit of yours gets you killed."

"Is it safe?" Silver asks.

"I think so. It looks like this was a warehouse of some sort and that the vines covered it over the years."

"Not a warehouse," Brandon calls, picking up something from the ground. "The walls were glass." He raises a broken pane of it.

"It was a greenhouse?" Silver asks, standing next to me. "It seems kind of large."

I move in, taking in the...peace? I glance at the upper right, but I don't have a buff. It doesn't mean the sense isn't real, just that it isn't imposed.

"They've made some pretty big things," Brandon says. "Before the system arrived. You saw the Tower, right? That was made before."

"But isn't it maintained with magic now?"

"No," Helen answers, still from the doorway. "It's used to check it to make sure it isn't about to fall, but it's holding up on its own."

"It is safe," I tell her.

"I'm going to leave the exploring to the—" she takes the three of us in. "To you."

The ground is dirt, and most of the glass lines the walls of leaves. I focus on one.

System Query: Flora, Jasminum
A vine that was imported to the region and thrived. Produces flowers and fruit seasonally

We exit after walking to the other end and back without finding anything more unusual than the structure itself.

We make it through a thick line of trees and see what's left of a house.

"Come on," Helen calls as Brandon heads for it, "I thought the goal was to go to Detroit. Not stop at every little thing that piques your curiosity."

“The point of life is to enjoy yourself, Hel,” he calls back. “And exploring places is a way me and Dennis do that.”

I sort of want to contradict him, just because of the mocking tone he directed at her. But I *am* curious to see what it contains after all these years. I give her an apologetic smile, then run after him, excitement bubbling up.

The house is up on a stone foundation with holes where window would have been. I make out undetailed space from the light pouring in. The door is still in place, and Brandon is testing it. Two large holes on each side let me see into what was a living room by the rotted seating arrangement, and the other one might have been a dining room. Two dormers are over those holes and the roof around them is caved in.

“Not kicking the door in?” I ask.

“Unlike what Hel thinks, I’m not stupid. This could come crashing down on us if we shake it hard.”

“Then maybe we should listen to her warning?”

He smirked. “Where’s the fun in that?” with the splintering of wood, he pulls it out of the frame and I step out from under the awning. The structure groans and creaks, but remains standing.

“Watch your steps,” he tells me, stepping inside.

I follow him, and the inside is more the hint of a house than anything else. Thick wooden beams still hold up the ceiling struts, but there is no attic left. On the right is the only wall still standing, past the living room, on the left mostly whole cupboard still hangs from a beam. I head right, testing the floor before me while Brandon heads left.

The door looks almost unnaturally untouched by time. The red paint has almost completely peeled off, but the wood underneath looks in good condition.

And that’s all it does. When I turn the knob, the whole thing turns, easily breaking out of the entirely rotted door. Pushing it open results in the rest of it falling apart. And a snuffle comes from the revealed space. A mass of short brown fur shakes itself and, as I stare at it, a head moves to look at me, small black eyes blinking.

Brown Bear, Adolescent. Level 7
A brown bear that isn’t fully grown. Brown bears are inclined to leave others alone, unless disturbed.
Perception check failed.

“Brandon!” I’m in my armor, with my sword and shield equipped, as it launches in my direction with an irritated roar. Its claws miss me, but the impact from its shoulder has me on my back with some of my health vanishing. I’m on my feet, then off balance as my left one breaks through the floor, only letting me swing wildly as it returns. I still feel the tip of the blade bite into its flesh, but I don’t celebrate the lucky hit. I doubt that cost it all that much health, and it sounds even more pissed off.

I’m up again, this time with better footing, but way to move, while it seems to know the floor instinctively.

“Don’t move,” Brandon says, then he’s coming down on the bear, and they’re crashing

through the floor.

Not moving is hard as more of the floor breaks toward me until I'm standing at the intersection of exposed joists. Brandon is in the basement, bashing the bear's head in and making a mess of it.

He stops and looks at me over his shoulder. His face is covered with blood, and he's grinning. "You okay?"

"Bruised," I reply. "Are you okay?"

"I'm great! We get to eat bear meat tonight."

"Is that wise? I mean, it's a wild animal. We don't know what's in it."

"Nearly all animal meat's fine to eat once you've cooked it," he replies. "It's monster meat you have to watch out for. Some of that stuff can be..." somehow his grin is larger. "Interesting." He hefts the bear. "Catch." He throws it in my direction and I step out of the way.

Then I'm flailing as that part of the floor gives out and I land on my back to a flash of health and some loss of it again. The bear's carcass lands next to me.

"Sorry."

I glare at him. "Do I even look strong enough to catch something like that?"

He offers me a hand. "Looks can be deceiving."

I take it and he pulls me to my feet. "How are we getting us and that out of here?"

He grabs the bear and throws it up and out; then he looks at me, grinning.

"I'll make my own way out." I notice a section of the wall going straight up without a floor above and I get a grin of my own.

He watches me as I cross to the other end of the basement, then run as fast as I can. When I reach the wall, it's just about turning it into a running crawl while making sure to never have more than one limb not touching it, and then I'm vaulting out and tumbling down onto the grass.

Hands grab on the edge as I stand, and Brandon pulls himself out.

"I was kind of expecting you to just jump out."

"That isn't in our power set." He dusts himself. "But you handled Momentum pretty well. I haven't seen a lot of explorers managing to go straight up like that. They usually pick an angle."

"I had a few days back in Court where I needed to be out of the house and away from my dad. I couldn't leave Base, so he led me to a section of his wall no one ever goes to and I practiced running up it."

"Run that by me again?" he says as we walk to the front of the house. "You were inside Base, but he led you to a wall that's part of him? Are you pulling one on me?"

"Base is the center of Court. He's the compound that Court grew out of. He's a node, like those that make cities, really. Only he's also a person. He doesn't have a body. Like us, he's the compound itself. He can change things however he wants, unless Grandpa Louis forbids him to."

"How does your grandfather tell something like that it can't—"

"He. Base is a person. I'm pretty sure he was an actual person once, but that isn't something he talks about."

"Okay, but how does anyone tell someone like that no?"

“Grandpa Louis is his commander, so that lets him—”

“Commander?” Brandon looks at me with an odd expression. “Like that’s his actually class, not just a title?”

“Yeah. It’s his class.”

“That means this Base person is a military node.” He throws the bear over his shoulder like it doesn’t weigh all that much. “I have no idea how someone could become one of those, but I thought they’d all been found and used to make fortifications for those military fanatics.”

“Military fanatics?”

“Yeah. Back before the system, there were a lot of groups who thought the world was going to end any day. So they accumulated all kinds of weapons. You also had the military, who was defending the country from its enemy. They had bases all over. That’s where the military nodes come from. There was a lot of fighting over them, and whoever won, used them to turn the place into fortress. Those places can make the kind of weapons magic wielders like my sister can only dream of matching. Those are places you want to avoid unless you like having someone look over your shoulder all the time and are ready to punish you for just thinking differently than them.”

“What happened?” Silver asks.

“Dennis found us dinner,” Brandon replies, not slowing.

“You can’t seriously think of carrying that thing for the rest of the day,” Helen says.

“Definitely not doing that,” he replies. “I’m dropping this in the greenhouse, butchering it, drying most of the meat, turning the rest into dinner for tonight and tomorrow, we’ll get moving again.”

“Are you going to let him do that?” she asks me.

“That sounds reasonable,” I reply.

“What about that quest you’re on? Don’t you want to get that done an over with?”

“There’s no rush. It’s not going anywhere.”

She grabs my arm and pulls me away from the other two. When she stops, she looks back—they didn’t slow—and lowers her voice. “Dennis, you will never amount to anything by following his lead. Brandon cares about nothing more than his own pleasure.”

“I think you’re not giving him enough credit. But what’s wrong with wanting to have some fun while you do things?”

“Fun doesn’t get things done,” she replies. “Fun doesn’t let you gain the experience you need to raise in levels, to have your name known by the people who matter. Only serious hard work does that.”

“Ah.” Okay, that explains a few things. “I think you’re forgetting to take something into account, Helen.”

“And what is that?” she asks in a tone that makes it clear she isn’t impressed with me.

“I don’t want people to know my name, that they matter or not.”

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