

“This is the lounge and dining area,” Brandon says. He points to the woman behind the counter that takes up half the wall on our right. “She’s in charge. Through that door is the kitchen. You go in, and the odds are you’ll be what’s served tomorrow. The cook hates people. That other door leads to the stairs and baths. Upstairs are the rooms.”

The room is large and... I don’t know. There’s something of an old feeling to it. Possibly the wooden floor, which is polished by people walking on it, instead of any work from the people who placed it. You can tell by how uneven it is, following path between tables and to the bar. The walls are plastered, and have paintings, skulls and tools or weapons hanging on it. Trophies? At the back, there’s a larger skull over the fireplace.

“Is that a dragon?” the long muzzle, open to show pointed teeth, the elongated skull, with horns flowing back. It definitely matches drawings I’ve seen.

“Yep,” Brandon says with pride, and I expect he’s about to claim he put it there. “First thing that got hung when the club was opened, is what I heard.” Okay, so maybe he isn’t quite the braggart that something about him clamors that he is. Still... I focus on the skull

Dragon Skull, quality: excellent, Art

A rendition of what a dragon skull might look like, by artist Ramona Vincent. Taking inspiration from other dragon-like creatures of the world, as well as ancient art of the creatures human legends claim have existed at one time, Ramona fashioned what she imagine a dragon’s head might be shaped as when the world is able to support their existence.

“It’s a sculpture,” I say, somehow hurt at the deception.

“I never claimed it was the real thing,” Brandon replies with a smile.

Well, he’s got me there. And I could have focused instead of asking.

My outburst has gathered the attention of the people spread throughout the room. The half we’re in has tables, maybe a treen of them. Three are occupied by men and women, one group is entirely non-human. I recognize an orc, a bear-like being and one that’s scaled, but doesn’t have the lizard-like head I’m expecting.

“The club as a complete non-discrimination rule,” Brandon whispers when he notices me watching them. “If you have a problem with them, it’s best you keep it to yourself.”

I look away before it turns into staring, and the system pops a window. “I’m fine with them. Court’s the same way. I just haven’t seen many of them. More today than in my entire life.”

The other half, the one with the fireplace, has plush looking seats, some close to the fire, others clustered together. Other than one cluster of four people, the men and women there sit alone. Some are looking up from a book, other were staring before them. One was swiping the air, removing any doubt as to what she are doing.

The other things they have in common is that they look older. Like they were born before the system. I turn to ask Brandon if that part of the room is for the old folks, but he’s already heading to the counter.

It’s wood, the front made from one slab of wood with carved panels. The foot rest looks to be brass, or bronze, same as the legs on the stools. The woman on the other side is

older, at least forty. Her skin is almost the same color as the foot rest's metal. Her hair is curly and so golden it might be glowing.

"Marygold!" Brandon exclaims as he reaches the bar, arms extended and leaning over to embrace her. "How is the brightest woman in all of Toronto?"

"She's not letting a man covered in blood touch her, that's for sure." She has a hand covered with a washcloth against his chest.

Brandon laughs. "It's not mine, and you should see the other guy."

She glanced at me. "He looks fine, and not as bloody as you."

Brandon looks over his shoulder, perplexed, then grins. "Not him. Him, I rescued. The one—"

"You, Brandon Hills," she levels a serious glare on him, "rescued this young man?" the tone is utter disbelief.

"I came across some of the local rats mugging him," he says. "What was I going to do?"

She looks at him.

"He did," I say in his defense. "He took on three of them by himself. I tried to help, because it looked like he was trouble there, at the start, but the woman they were going to rape kept me from helping."

She fixes Brandon again.

"It was four against one," he says, with the insistence it should be explanation enough. Then he sags. "I was itching for a fight and they were there."

"There's the Brandon I know and like." She looks at me. "Don't feel bad, kid. But I need to keep him honest, or he's going to start believing all the stuff he likes to say about himself."

"I don't—" Brandon closes his mouth at the glare.

"How about you give me five dollars and you go wash up? The tub's filled and warm. I'll even have a beer and bowl of stew for you once you're done." She looks at me again. "Seeing as you're with him, I'll offer you the same deal if you want."

I look myself over and my armor's mostly blood free. She didn't hit me in the face too much, so I was spared that. I am dusty, but I'd rather— "I'll make do with a washcloth, if you can spare one. I'm actually looking to buy something. I was told I could get a magical repair kit for my armor."

Brandon has the money on the counter and heads to the door on the left of the bar as she looks me over, and eyebrow going up in surprise. I look at myself again. Is my armor dirtier than I think?

"Those aren't exactly cheap," Marygold says, handing me a wet rag, "and unlike what stories want you to believe, they aren't something that'll magically fix everything wrong with it. One of them is basically only good for patch up work. The worse the repair it needs to fix, the fewer times it'll work."

"I'm going to learn how to do the repairs myself, but I need something to help me until my skill's high enough the work's going to be reliable."

"Okay. It's five hundred dollars."

"For how many?" I ask, stunned at how expensive they are. Okay, so they're magical, but it's just to do patching. It can't take that much work, can it?

“One,” she replies with an expression that questions why I asked.

That’s a lot of money. Yes, I have it, but I have to be careful, otherwise I’m going to be without when I need it the most.

But, the point of this is to get ready for a long journey. I don’t think I can count on someone’s generosity on the next caravan I’ll travel with.

“I’ll take two.”

She raises an eyebrow again, and a trade window pops up. It lists foods and drinks, along with equipment. The prices for what I bought at the caravan market are slightly cheaper here. The repair kits are highlighted, just under the normal ones, with the price and I select two and agree to the exchange.

I know it doesn’t actually weigh anything, but my pockets feel lighter somehow. Not that my money’s in them either.

“How about I get you some stew and a beer so you’ll stop looking at me like I killed your puppy?”

“Sorry.” I shake my head. “I didn’t expect things to be so expensive. And do you have something other than beer?”

“I have wines, ales, meads. First time to the big city?”

“Something without alcohol? Orange juice?”

She stares at me. “Kid—”

“My name is Dennis.”

My interruption seems to take some of the bite out of her expression. “Dennis. Where are you from? Do you have any idea how expensive something like orange juice is?” I shake my head. “I’m from Court. It’s a few days east of Toronto.”

“Are you some rich kid, out for an adventure?”

“No. My dad’s a carpenter.” And the son of the Commander, and I live within Base, who can make things out of other things and... maybe that makes me some rich kid out for an adventure?

“I’ll take the beer,” I reply, trying not to sound dejected. Then take the mug and bowl to a table trying to ignore the gazes following me. The stew is good. The beer is... I’m not touching that again.

I eat slowly, trying to workout how I feel.

I never thought of myself as different. My friends never treated me like some of the wealthier kids. Folks always treated us with respect, since Grandpa Louis is the Commander, but never like it meant that much. The mayor is treated with more reverence than Grandpa Louis, and all he does is make decisions about how the town runs. Grandpa Louis and Base basically keep us all safe.

I’m just like all the other kids in Court, I tell myself.

“I feel like a new man,” Brandon says, putting a bowl and mug on the table before sitting. “You get that kit?”

I nod, then wince slightly as I remember how much it cost. I feel Brandon’s eyes on me.

“How much did she charge you for them?” he asks, tone cautious.

“Five hundred each.” I try not to feel the sting to wherever my money is kept.

“What the fuck, Marygold?” He exclaims, standing. “I save him from muggers and

you go and rob him?”

My head snaps up. What?

“He didn’t protest,” she replies.

“You have got to be fucking me. Have you looked at him? You see that he knows nothing about the world and you go and scam him?”

I look down and try not to shrink.

“It’s not my job to pamper people, Brandon. This place isn’t for those who can’t deal with hardships. You know that.”

“That doesn’t mean you... Forget it.” He drops in his seat. “I’m sorry about that, she... you okay?”

I nod. “I’m not—” My throat closes up on me. My eyes sting.

“Look. I’m sorry if what I said came across as harsh. With saying you don’t know anything about the world. I hate that she took advantage of you, and when I’m pissed, I don’t really think about what comes out of my mouth.”

I nod again. “I guess you’re right. I don’t know a lot. Back home when we have to buy something, the prices are marked, and that’s what we pay. If we don’t like it, there’s going to be someone else in town who sells it for cheaper.” Of course, that’s mostly dad, and other folks. When I want something, I just reach into one of the inventories at home and take it out. Base doesn’t let me have just anything I want. I learned that when I was younger and thought he had to give it all to me, but I don’t think dad ever bought food, like the other families do. The fridge is basically always stocked.

Base keeps it that way.

I dry my eyes. “I didn’t realize it was so different out here.”

“This is all I’ve ever known,” Brandon says. “Born here. Toronto I mean. On the north side. Not the best part, but we managed, then...” he trails off. “Anyway. Since you’re new at the adventuring thing, first tip. Always haggle. You’ll be amazed at what a good story will get you.” He points to something hanging on the wall. “I brought this in from my expedition, AK-47, circa nineteen-sixties. That’s how they counted the years before the system. It’s about sixty years BS.”

“Before System,” I say. “They do teach history back home.”

“Well, when I handed it over to Marygold, and told her all it took for me to get it, that earned me a lot of good will.” He winks. “If you get my meaning.”

I nod, even if I don’t, really. “And was it true? What you told her about it?”

“Who cares?” He chuckles. “It got me in her bed. That’s all that matters.”

I stare at him as he digs into the stew with gusto, then decide it doesn’t matter how he goes about—well, I don’t think it qualifies as charming her, but if sleeping with her was what he was after, it isn’t my business how he goes about it.

I finish my stew, then force a bit more of the beer down because I’m parched. The stuff is horrible.

I take the journal and look through the maps. Herbert spoke about Buffalo, and the guard indicated it was across from the lake. Aaron has to have drawn a map of it, or of how to get there.

I find one with Toronto over a dot, Mont-Real over at the right edge of the paper, Detroit on the left edge and Buffalo at the bottom. No lake, but maybe Aaron didn’t

consider them important. At the top is a dot with Sudbury, and a question mark next to it. The lines connecting them aren't straight, so I figure they represent the actual roads.

A dot a little to the right of Toronto is marked as Darlington Power Station, and I look up in its direction, knowing vaguely I'm right. I think about home, and get the same thing, only now my sense I'm correct is stronger.

Along the route going to buffalo is a dot marked Hamilton, and closer to Buffalo, one marked as The Falls.

Brandon mutters something, and I look up. A man approaches our table. He's at least in his thirties. His clothes are on the finer side. They remind me of something the mayor might wear to a function, although here there's a sense it's a more practical version, instead of just to appear wealthy. He's tall and lean. His black hair is cut short and it's graying at the temples. His beard is neatly trimmed and has no gray in it at all.

"I see your father decided to get out," the man tells me. He's looking at me, so there's no doubt I'm the one this is for, even if it makes no sense.

"Xander," Brandon says. "Why don't you go back to your chair and reminisce about all those great times you claim to have had?"

"Mind your own business, Hills," the man says, not looking away from me. "This is between me and Sentino's kid."

"He is my business, Poop, seeing how I rescued his ass."

"It's Pope," Xander snarls, finally looking away from me to glare at a grinning Brandon. "If you aren't going to respect me, I am going to have to teach you to do so."

"You mean have one of your flunkies beat me up?" Brandon says dismissively. "Since you definitely don't have the guts to take me on."

"Xander," Marygold calls from the bar as the man takes a step in Brandon's direction. "You know the club's rules. No fighting in here."

"I'll be happy to accompany you outside," Brandon says.

Xander takes a breath and steps back. "You don't have to worry, Mary. I won't be the one to break the rules." He looks at me. "I'm going to make you a deal, kid. I'm going to give you ten thousand dollars for your dad's journal."

Brandon whistles in amazement, and all I can do is stare at Xander in disbelief.

"What's in there that's worth so much to you?" Brandon asks.

"Something that's mine," Xander snaps.

"It can't be yours if it's in that journal."

"Sentino kept it from me. He never did anything with what he uncovered. Probably didn't even understand what he had." He looks at me. "So you don't either. Sell me the journal."

"I can't—"

"What, you think that just because your dad gave it to you when he lost the balls to keep exploring it makes you an explorer like him?" He leans forward, and my protest dies under that hateful glare. "Let me tell you something about your father I am sure he never mentioned. He was nothing more than a coward and a thief. Nothing in there is his. He stole all of that from better people than him. You hang on to that, and all you're going to do is wallow in the shit his legacy drops on you. I'm doing you a service by offering to take it off your hands."

“How about this?” Brandon says, cutting off my protest. “We find whatever you’re so interested in, and then we let all the clubs know about it and you can join everyone else going for what’s left?”

“The Knox is mine!” Xander snaps, then straightens and glares hatefully at Brandon, who is smirking for some reason. “Fuck this.”

Before I can react, Xander grab one side of the open journal, but when he pulls, it doesn’t move. I don’t even feel tension in the pages as I tighten my fingers to keep him from taking it.

Xander lets go. “Of course, the bastard bound it to you. This is your last chance to do this peacefully, Sentino. Take my offer.”

“Don’t,” Brandon said as I shake my head. Neither of them can cut me off if I’m not saying anything.

In the following silent glare, I speak. “The journal isn’t for sale. If you’d come here and explained why you wanted and why, I would have shared the information with you.” Okay, so I wouldn’t have been able to, with the journal locked until I finish the quest. But he needs to learn that being polite is more rewarding than being a demanding asshole. “But after this. You can kiss whatever you want in this journal goodbye.”

Xander leans forward. “Do not cross me, kid. Your father did, and he regretted it. Ask him about that when you go crawling back home.” He turns and heads for the door to the stairs before I can even try for a reply.

Brandon is flipping through a book, scanning the pages. “Check your journal for anything mentioning the Knox in it. I’ve heard the name before, but I can’t place it.”

I lower my voice. “I can’t.”

He looks up from his books. “Why not? Your father gave it to you, didn’t he?”

I shake my head. “I found it with his body. It has the map that got me here. But all the information is locked behind a quest.”

“Can I see it?”

I hesitate, considering someone already tried to steal it, but then hands it over. As with me, only the first quarter opens. “Just maps,” he mutters before handing it back. “Look through them. If this is important enough Xander Poop was willing to pay for it, there has got to be a notation of it on one of the maps.”

I can’t help the chuckle. “Brandon, I don’t care what it’s about. I’m not going after it.”

He stares at me, stunned. “Don’t you want to know what the big mystery is?” I shake my head and he narrows his eyes. “What kind of explorer are you?” he asks, sounding genuinely curious.

“The one only interested in fulfilling his promise to Aaron, then returning home.”

He seems to have trouble processing this. He tries and fails a few times to say something, then. “You’re serious?” I nod, and again he has trouble saying anything. “Okay. It’s your choice, really. Nothing I can do about it. But I think I’m going to stick by you for a while.”

I send the journal to my inventory. “I can take care of myself.”

He snorts. “That mugging I saved you from tells me the opposite, but it doesn’t matter. Xander isn’t going to drop this. And he isn’t like those muggers. The people working with him are nasty.”

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