

Brandon explained that The Split is where the three trade roads meet, as we approach it. Before the system, there was a city there, but for a reason no one knows, it died in the early days, and now it's a ruin.

"It isn't worth bothering with," he adds as buildings become visible in the distance. "They're sending people in every day, so the loot and monsters don't have time to grow beyond level five."

"I thought they got tougher the deeper you went in."

"You're thinking about dungeons. Ruins replenish overtime, and the longer something is there, the higher level it becomes. They have caps, based on how large they are, but that also affects the regeneration, somehow."

"So, this is only good for low-level explorers?"

"And anyone with a combat based class at low level. We just get bonuses to operating in them. Everyone gets something out of killing monsters."

Not long after that, with the sun still a good hand's width from the horizon, the fields around the three large buildings become visible, and they are filled with wagons.

"That doesn't look good," Helen says. "Should we push on?"

"Let's check," Brandon replies. "We might get lucky."

I glance at Helen, and she closes her mouth on her opinion. Not why I did it, but I'm glad not to listen to them bickering again.

The ground's packed so hard that in places where liquids were emptied on it, it pools instead of soaking in. I don't want to think what this place turns into when it rains.

The closest one to the road is basically a box, patched together with field stones over what might have been a structure from before the system. The dining room seems small, but that might be because of how packed it is. We wait by the door while Brandon goes to the counter and Silver keeps her violin case behind her, out of sight.

He returns, shaking his head.

The other one is less boring. It has a large ground floor, with a section on one side having a second floor, extending over part of the rest, and in what I'm guessing is the center of the building are two more floors with the roof extending to a point. The surface that isn't field stone is brick work, old and new.

The dining area is larger, maybe, but just as packed. We stay by the door again until Brandon waves us over.

"They have one room left," he tells us. "But he won't hold it for us while we check the other inn."

"What's the room like?" I ask before Helen comments. I could see the snark in her expression already.

"Small," the man replies. He looks like he's had a long day and humoring us is about the last thing he wants to do. "But it's got a bunk, so two if you don't have to sleep on the floor."

"Can the bunk fit me?" Helen asks.

The man snorts. "But the window is on the back, so you aren't going to smell the animal's shit all night."

"Can you deal with the floor?" I ask Helen. "Or do we risk the other inn and keep going if they have nothing?"

“Which means it’s the ground when we sleep,” Brandon replies in a forcefully neutral tone.

“You just want people around so you can charm your way into one of their beds,” Helen replies.

“Tell you what, Hel,” Brandon says dryly. “Just for you, I’m going to sleep in the same room as you. Will that make you happy?”

“You can take the bunk,” I say. “I’ll take the floor.”

“No, I should—”

“I’m shorter than you.” I barely keep myself from snapping. “So I’ll leave more space for Helen. And,” I add, as she’s about to comment. “We’re taking up our host’s time arguing. How much is the room?”

He visibly relaxes and a transaction window pops up before me. Four hundred is probably way more than it should be, but at this point, I just want this done with before the two of them bicker.

I agree to it, and I get another window informing me that room eight has been assigned.

“Through that door, the number’s on the door.”

I motion for Brandon to get moving and place myself behind him. Door number eight is the next to last one and, as promised, it is small. The bunk bed is on the left, with a chest between it and the wall. The door only opens enough to clear the doorway before the wall stops it. The window’s shutters are open and I can barely smell animals.

“He wasn’t kidding,” Silver says, putting her case on the top bunk.

The shutters latch, so I’ll be spared being rained on if the weather changes. “I’ll set my roll along the wall here, if you think you’ll fit at a diagonal,” I tell Helen.

She doesn’t look happy. I’m pretty sure if I’d let Brandon make the decisions, she’d be out of here just on principle. She sets her bedroll down and adjusts it so there’s just enough space for mine under the window. Hopefully, neither of us moves or our feet will be hitting each other.

“How secure is the room?” Silver asks. “I want to leave my violin in it. I don’t want a repeat of this morning.”

“You don’t want the money?” Brandon asks, testing the mattress while I access the room’s options.

“If I’m going to perform, I want it to be when I’ve planned on it. I’ve never been ambushed like I was this morning before.”

“There aren’t any settings for that,” I mention.

“You wouldn’t get those on a room this cheap. How much do we owe you?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I reply.

“Dennis, you’re not paying for the lot of us.”

“You did for us yesterday. The only option for allowing others to come in is a team option. I don’t see anything for individuals.”

“Shouldn’t we form a team?” Silver asks. “Seeing how we’ll be traveling together.”

Brandon looks ready to argue with me about the room, then relents. Instead of saying anything, a pop-up appears inviting me to join Brandon Hill’s team.

“Of course you set yourself up as leader,” Helen grumbles as I accept.

The small window appears in the top left of my vision with Brandon's name on top, mine under him. Silver appears as Brandon smirks.

"All you had to do was send the offer before me. I'd have gladly accepted it without complaining."

Somehow, I doubt that. Helen's name appears as she glares at her brother. Next to our names are the health, mana, and stamina bars. All full. I give the team access to the room.

"One of us should stay in the room at all times," Brandon says, indicating the window. "That won't stop someone from coming in."

"I thought inns were safe places," Silver says.

"They're safer than out there, but you don't get the kind of security in roadside inns that will keep thieves out. It's why I don't like being on the ground floor. Upper floors at least start with a handicap for anyone looking to steal from me."

"Do we have a reason to go out there?" I ask.

"I could use a bath," Helen says.

"Okay." I cut Brandon off. "I'll stay in while you three take care of what you need. Is there a place I can wash my clothes?" I ask Brandon. "I'm running low on clean ones."

"In the tub you'll wash in," he replies. "That's a service I've never seen offered in roadside inns."

"There might be good money in it," Silver says.

"Then you are welcome to start it. I do not deal with other people's dirty laundry."

"You barely deal with yours," Helen replies.

"I deal with mine fine enough. I just don't need it to smell of rose petals and honey every fu—"

"Can you stop?" I ask, rubbing my temple. "Can you two just not talk to each other instead of bickering? I'm not going to ask why you can't seem to stand one another, since I don't think that's any of my business, but Brandon, you asked Helen to help. And Helen, if being around him was going to be too hard on you, you should have told him no."

"You don't know him like—" she closes her mouth as I look at her. "He gets in—"

I glared at Brandon as the smirk forms, and he looks away.

I don't say this often, but thank the system I'm an only child.

The two of them leave the room exchanging angry looks, and Silver gives me a reassuring smile as she follows them.

Alone, I sit on my roll and rest my head against the wall. I hope I don't have to get between them every day.

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I forgo washing my clothes because there's nowhere to dry them. Hanging them in the room means they'll drip on me and Helen. I'll figure something later.

I get food on the way back, and Silver heads out.

Brandon is the last to return, and it's full dark by then. He reads for a bit by the light from a medallion he wears, then it's dark and I try to sleep.

It doesn't come easy. I keep wanting to move to make myself comfortable, but I'll hit Helen's legs if I do.

I guess I do fall asleep, because the next thing I know, I'm startled awake by a weight on my stomach. Then someone curses as I turn to get it off.

“Wha?” Silver exclaims.

“Watch it, Bran,” Helen complains sleepily

“Fucking—” A voice I don’t recognize and I fight to fully wake up.

In the faint light coming from Brandon’s medallion as he sits up, I make out a dark form tittering in the middle of the room.

He lets out a pained cry when Helen punched his legs without looking.

“Damn it, Bran, hold it till morning.”

The light reflects off an edge as the man raises a fist, but Brandon catches it. He winds to punch, but curses as he gets caught by the under lip of the top bunk.

I kick the back of the man’s knee, and he tumbles back over me. My attempt at putting him in a choke hold is interrupted by Brandon’s added weight. Then it’s one punch and the man’s still.

“What’s going on?” Helen demands, sitting up.

“Well, for one thing,” Brandon replies. “I don’t have to go.” He searches the man, then curses. “Anyone here have thieving skills? I can’t get into his inventory.”

“Why do you want access to that?” I ask.

“Let me,” Helen says, then says something my mind refuses to understand and light shimmers over her fingers. She reaches past Brandon and touches out assailant. Translucent inventory slots appear over him.

Brandon reaches for one containing a piece of paper, looks at it and lets it fall. Another one goes the same way. The third has him cursing. He turns it to me and I activate my ring to see what’s on it. The head is definitely mine. Next to it is a rendition of Aaron’s journal.

Under that is written: *Reward 10,000 dollars for the delivery of the journal to Xander Pope.*

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