

StoryLine-6

I cry out as pain flash at the same time at my health bar, with some of my hit points vanishing.

Debuff: Broken bone, left forearm
You have broken a bone. All actions where this arm is required suffer a 75% reduction in success chances. Maximum Hit points are reduced by 10% until the bone is healed.

I channel the pain as I turned on my back. "What the fuck?" I yell at Rich, who's a dark form against the sunlight.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well, fucking, what?" The pain lessens enough I wince at my use of a swear word. There's a strict policy of no swearing in my household. And I've just done it twice. I've sworn before, but it was for the sake of swearing; I didn't mean it then. I fucking mean it now.

If my dad was here, he'd smack me upside the head.

No. If my dad was here, he'd do a hell of a lot worse than smack me at this point.

"You were wondering what was done there, weren't you?"

"And you thought shoving me down here and breaking my arm would a funny way to get me to find out?"

"It kind of was," he replies with a chuckle. A bunch of something lands next to me and bounces on the green moss that covers the ground. Must be why I only have a broken arm and lost what... a third of my hit points? A fifteen meter fall has to hurt more than this.

"I have a broken arm, asshole!" I wince as I grab one of the packaged bars. "Food healing isn't going to do shit for that!" It's rough paper

"Maybe you should look at it, instead of bitching."

I roll my eyes and look at the bar in my hand.

Carlisle's Advanced Healing Bar
Perception Check: failed

"Who's Carlisle?"

"No idea. But you can see it does more than restore hit points."

"I failed my perception check."

"You're going to want to work on that then."

"It's maxed out! You know how it works when you don't have a class."

He says something I don't make out as I rip the end of the wrapper with my teeth. Then I bite into the bar and almost spit it out. "This is vile." It's only the promise of healing that makes me continue to chew, and then swallow.

"Medicine isn't supposed to taste good."

"Says who?" I'm not done eating it that my heath is already crawling up. I've never eaten something that did that before. Mister's Roger's bars all need to be completely eaten before they'll start working.

It's still a struggle to finish it. Then the pain lessens as the debuff vanishes. My hand tingles as sensation returns, then I can move it and my fingers without problems.

"How much can this thing heal?" I ask in awe.

"More than some classless kid like you's going to have." The mocking drips from his

tone.

“Then maybe would shouldn’t have pushed me?” I ball the wrapper and put it in my pants pocket, filling that inventory spot. The three other bars go in my inventory, with my knife. Let Rich try to get them back. “Tell me you have rope, or another way for me to get out of here.”

“I have rope.”

“Then throw it to me and get ready to haul me up.”

A coil of rope lands next to me.

“Really?” I look up. “You must think this is funny, don’t you?”

A bunch of somethings land in the center of the coil. A glance and all I make out are thin off-white cylinders.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting you ready for your adventure.”

“Rich. Whatever you’re playing at ends now. Pull me out so I can go home. It’s going to be dinner time when I get there already. Any later and my dad is going to ask Base.”

“Based isn’t going to say anything.”

“He’s going to tell him he can’t find me, which will tell my dad I left. He’s not going to care how I did it. I’m grounded, so I’m not supposed to leave Base.”

“I guess he’s going to have to learn to be disappointed,” Rich answers with a chuckle.

“No, he’s going to be pissed. Now pull me out.”

“Can’t do that.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m pretty sure you can do whatever you want.”

“You got that right.”

“Then pull me up!”

“Not doing that.”

“Rich, this isn’t funny.”

“Look, this is your chance to find out what this place is. I’m not going to take that away from you.”

“Take it away then. I don’t care.”

“I do. I’m sure there’s a way out, somewhere. This used to have tones of entrances and exits, back before the system. Some of them have to still be around, right? You’re a resourceful guy. You’ll find a way.”

He turns and walks out of sight. “Oh, and Dennis. Happy birthday, since I don’t think I’ll be seeing you again before that happens.”

“Rich!” I wait a few seconds. “Rich! Get back here and pull me out!”

He’s fucking with me, again. This is just like when he vanished in the forest. Only this time I’m not going to act like some scared kids. “Rich! You fucking asshole. Get back here so I can kick your ass!”

I pick up the rope and look at it, I can probably use it to get myself up there.

Reinforced Hemp Rope, 5 meters.
Perception Check failed

I look up at the hole. That's definitely more than five meters.

"Rich!"

I look around. A wall in a place like this will have bunched of hand holds, right? Even with only eleven as my climbing skill I can manage that and not break my neck.

Right?

"Rich?"

The only surface I make out at the edge of the circle of light moves away from the whole, and as far as I can tell, it's just more moss.

Send the rope to my inventory and pick up one of the cylinders.

Chemical light, 2.5 hours
Perception Check: Failed

Five of them. Enough to last me through the night.

I swallow the lump. That's just part of him messing with me.

"I'm not scared, Rich! You're wasting your time!"

I'm really am not scared. They go in my last inventory spot.

I swallow the lump again. It's almost as if he knew what I could store.

No. It's still just him...

He's messing with me.

"Rich? Please come back!"

I look around. Outside the circle of light, it all darkness. Vast and terrifying dark—

No.

I sit and cross my legs. Rich is going to come back for me.

He has to.

"Rich?"

Silence.

"I'll..." the memory of him pressing against me, his breath against my ear, doesn't make me react the way it did. It's no longer a promise of the things he could make me feel. Now, it's a hint of... "I'll do whatever you want, Rich."

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I pull my knees to me to get my feet back into the light and dry my eyes.

He left me here.

I can't convince myself otherwise anymore.

It's been long enough that if I don't move, the darkness is going to reach me. It's going to swallow me whole and there isn't going to be anything left.

The asshole left me here to die!

I'm on my feet.

Fuck that! I'm not some crybaby who feels sorry for himself because he got taken in by a pretty face and hot body. If he thinks I'm going to sit here and wait for someone to come rescue me, he's got something else coming. I must have close to a tree before my Choosing day starts. Thirteen hours is plenty to get myself out of here and back to Court. Dad's going to be pissed, and I'm going to be grounded until the system leaves, but I'll be

home. I'll be safe.

I stare into the darkness. You don't scare me.

I stand there.

Much.

Okay, maybe more than that. But Grandmother said something about fear.

"I don't care if you're afraid. Fear's a good thing. It tells you when you're about to step into something you aren't ready for. That's normal, and that's healthy. It's when you get to decide if you turn around and go home, or press forward and find out what you're made of."

Okay, this might work better if I had the option to turn around and go home. I would.

Okay. If I stand here, nothing changes.

It's scary, but in the darkness, I have options.

I take a step out of the light.

I take another, and another. With the fourth, it's dark enough that I pull a chemical light out of inventory.

I wish Rich had told me how to turn this thing on.

I shake it, then do it again close to my ear. There might be something in it.

I close my eyes and hold it in my open palm. I take slow breath to prepare myself.

Then I open my eyes and focus on it.

Chemical light, 2.5 hours
Perception Check: Failed

I sigh.

When I have a class, whatever it is my dad lets me have at his point, I'm maxing my perception.

I look up from the chemical light. The only option I have is to cut it open and hope that's—

I squint. Is that light in the distance? It's faint, but there's something there. I must have been out of the light long enough my eyes adjusted and now I can make it out.

I can't make out anything between here and that, but... at least that's something to go toward.

The ground becomes firmer close to the halfway point. No longer moss, but... I can't see it. It's cold to the touch. Smooth and flat. I continue, and soon enough I make out the light coming through a rip in the ceiling. It reminds me of a metal sheet that's been ripped into two by an ax, the edges all jagged.

There's plenty of places I could hook a loop of rope on to climb up, if this didn't look to be further away from the one Rich pushed me down. I look at the floor. It's metal. This would really hurt. Maybe cost me all my hit points.

I'd love to have seen Rich explain that to my dad.

What am I thinking. Rich's not going to explain anything. The only one who knows I left with him is Base, and he was pretty sure Base wouldn't talk.

I look ahead. More darkness, more of that to the left and to the right—

"Wow."

I move to that wall. There are buttons and levers and blank screens. When I press a button, it makes a click, and it looks like there might be texts under it, there's no light to make it readable. The flick of a switch gives me a sharper click, but nothing else.

There's a lack of lights and the screens don't show anything, but this looks a lot like Base's command board. Except that it's a wall of it.

I wonder if there's a node somewhere in here?

Wouldn't that be something to return home with?

If I can bring it. Grandpa Louis talked about how, before he got his power armor upgrade and then made his way back to his truck, the node that is Base was difficult to move.

Still, I could bring someone here to show them. Maybe this can be annexed. Maybe Base can use it and make himself reach further.

Of course, that hinges on me finding a node in here, which takes me away from looking for a way out.

The sky is growing darker. Getting home today's no longer happening. Even if I could get out using this hole, full dark will hit while I'm in the forest, and I'm not dumb enough to be in there during the night.

So the plan is to find a way out, then hole up until morning.

I run a hand over the buttons and smile. Maybe I'll see this again before Dad grounds me.

I step back into the darkness and move until there's nothing else. I wait for my eyes to get used to it and... nothing.

There's the light behind me, but nothing ahead to guide me.

Okay. So I have to forge ahead in the dark without knowing if there's anything there. I'm not that dumb.

I have a chemical light in my hand and consider. I mean. It's not like I have anything to lose, right?

Chemical Light, 2.5 hours
Perception Check: failed

Nothing lost. If I didn't need to wait something like an hour between checks, I'd just stare at the thing until I go a success. Without that, all I have are my wits.

I feel it for an etching, some indication of where I need to cut to release whatever's in it that makes the light.

Go slow and pay attention.

I pull my knife out of inventory as I kneel and put the cylinder on floor. I put the edge in the center and put weight on it as I pull. It bends slightly as it cuts, then I wince as I feel something crack. If I broke what made the light and—

The cylinder emits a faint glow.

In anything but this complete darkness, I'd never have noticed it. I shake it, and the light evens out, but too faint to do me any good. Okay, so I cracked something inside and this happened. Makes sense that if...

I bend the cylinder hard, and something breaks, spreading light inside until a greenish glow shows I'm in room with more buttons and switches and screen. Under a screen is a slot

I can fit my hand in.

Are every walls like this? What was this place?

The older folks talk of technology, from before the system, back when anyone could have something similar to Base, less the being able to think by himself, changing his layout, or growing as he gained experience, but it wasn't things like this. That felt like Base. It was stuff they carried in their pockets. Things that let them access something the sounds a lot like the system, although they keep talking about cats being stored in it for some reasons.

That always makes them chuckle when they talk about that.

I guess it makes sense some places had more of whatever that was than others. Even now. Base has more than even Toronto, in some way. Toronto's just a city, it doesn't think, it can't act. It's just a node there to let someone manage the city.

Base does that, by himself if needed. He and Grandpa Louis aren't even sure he needs a Commander to function, even if he didn't exist until Grandpa became the Commander. That was when the system arrived, so they have no way to know if he'll go back to not being someone if Grandpa stops being the Commander.

I reach an intersection, and realize there's a possibility I'll get lost. Rich said this place used to be big, so I can't wander aimlessly. The wall's not metal. I can cut into it with my knife. It's not much, but better than nothing. I mark an arrow in the direction I'm going. A doorway leads into a caved in room. The next one is only half caved in but moss has taken over the rest.

The next one's ceiling is bowed in, but holding. I make out roots between cracks. Lockers line a wall, and there's remnants of... clothing, maybe? One looks like the shoulder and neck of a shirt, but it breaks apart when I touch it.

The one thing I find that looks solid enough to take is a pair of gloves.

Safety Gloves, condition poor
Perception Check: successful
A pair of gloves made of strong fibers to protect against accidentally brushing against sharp edges and objects. Any skill dependent on fine hand and finger motions suffered from a 10% penalty while the gloves are equipped.

I put them on and immediately understand the penalty. They are stiff and bulky. The description makes them sound like dad's work gloves, but his are thin enchanted leather. A gift from Grandpa [louis's husband] before he died.

I put them in my other pant's pocket.

I'm officially out of inventory slots

Sucks not having a backpack.

And that's not going to change all that quickly. I'm going to have to raise my strength and strength training to increase my internal inventory. Strength can only be raised with points, so that's not going to happen fast, if at all. I doubt there's anything in what dad's going to let me have that is strength based. So whenever I gain a level, I'm going to have to sacrifice something if I want to increase it.

Strength training is a skill, so I can practice it, but it only increase my inventory on the treen level, while Strength does it on the half minus and half plus. So it's one thirteen levels I can reach through ever longer practice, or one one level six and then thirteen, then nineteen, then twenty-six and so on.

Trying to count the way the old folks do it gives me a headache.

It's so much easier in treens. I get an inventory increase from strenght on the treen half minus, then it's a half plus, which makes the treen, then a half minus for another increase, and the half plus for the next treen so on.

None of that having to count six plus seven plus six and more all the time.

I don't care what they says. Math before the system must have sucked!

I realize the light's dimmed when I stumble over something and end with a mouth full of moss. Better than losing teeth to metal floor, but still sucks.

That's two and a half hours of me... lets call this exploring, because I really don't want to think about wandering aimlessly in the dark. I doubt I can expect to see light from holes in the roof anymore. Maybe the stars, but it's safer for me to look down while I walk. Broken ceiling implies broken floors, and it's only luck I haven't come across one at this point.

I don't intend on falling in a hole again.

My stamina's at the three quarter mark. Nothing I've done has been too strenuous. With my endurance training, I can explore all night with minimal penalties, but my max stamina is going to keep dropping with each hours of sleep I don't get.

I crack another light.

I'm not stopping just now.

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I'm not lost.

I can't be lost. I've been marking every turns I made.

Well, I know I forgot one, but I went back and marked it.

I yawn.

I think.

I don't think I forgot to mark too many other turns.

I yawn again.

My stamina close to the quarter mark, and that's after taking a rest not too long ago.

Fifteen in endurance training really sucks.

What time is it? You'd think the system would give us a clock. A compass would be nice too.

Fuck I'm tired.

I pull my last light—

Last?

I can't have been walking around this place for ten hours. It can't be that large.

At least it's not a dungeon.

That would have sucked.

The only dungeon near Court's is a day's walk north east. Every three months there's an expedition there to gather parts for kinetic engines. I was hoping to go on one of them

once I had a class, but now that's never going to happen.

I sit and rest against a mound of moss.

This is the closest to adventure I'm ever going to get.

I close my eyes. A break's going to be good, let my stamina go up just a bit, then I'll get moving again.

Maybe I'm not cut up for adventure after all.