

We leave the assassin unconscious and tied in our room, then exit the way he came in. I'm surprised that Helen isn't complaining the entire time. Brandon just says the assassin probably isn't alone when I ask why we need to rush out the window, and that any other question can wait until we're well away from this place.

The caravans are surprisingly well lit, with a mix of torches, campfires and magical lights. We keep to the edges of them, so go around the entire thing. Once we're on the road, a long stretch of it has the sides lit by the caravans parked along each side.

I'm amazed at how many there are. Court only saw one or two a year.

Once we leave their lights behind us, Brandon still keeps us from activating ours. Fortunately, the moon is full, so I can at least make out the edge of the packed dirt and avoid tripping into the ditch.

"What was that about?" Helen demands.

"I told you, Dennis is in trouble and I—"

"Bran, no one pays ten thousand for a journal, not even if it contains the secret to the system." Her silhouette shifts. "Does it contain those secrets?" she asks me.

"No," Brandon answers.

"I don't know. I can't open the written parts, just the maps at the front. But Xander isn't after any secrets. He'd after a place called The Knox."

"What's there?"

"I don't know," Brandon says.

"I'm not asking you."

"What?" he asks and I walk into him. He turns. "You think Dennis is going to know something about it when I don't? Or do you really believe that I'd hold out on that kind of information when his life pretty much depends on it?"

"The second," she replies flatly.

"Fuck off." He turns and walks again.

"You stole father's journal when you first left, Brandon," she says with vitriol. "And lost it. When they forgave you, you left with mother's necklace, and never brought it back."

"I'm working on that!"

She snorts. "Somehow, you managed to gain her forgiveness again and—"

"I was a kid, Hel!" He bowls me aside and I don't think he realizes it. "I was a fucking stupid kid who thought those great adventures dad and mom went on was my destiny. Did it ever occur to you that I might have changed?"

"No. You haven't."

I step between them. "How about we focus on where we're going, instead of arguing? Maybe we're far enough to make camp for the rest of the night?"

"It's still not safe," Brandon says. "There's no way that guy worked alone, and his partners are probably already searching the grounds for us. The best thing to do is to keep going through the night and day. Silver, can your songs help with that?"

"The only song I have for this, is just a straight up buff, It'll probably counteract some of the debuffs not sleeping will cause, but I don't know how long we can go before they're too much."

"We'll see what happens. Can you sing us the buff now?"

"We can walk while I do it," she answers, opening her case, then passing it to me.

Our pace picks up as soon as she starts playing, and she continues doing so once the buff appears beside the ‘didn’t sleep well’ debuff. I don’t ask, because I’m pretty sure doing that will start these two arguing again, but the fact we’re all silent while she plays has to be why she continues.

\* \* \* \* \*

At first, I think the glow over the horizon is caused by the raising sun. Only it’s not lining up with the sky growing paler to the east. This is pretty much due south of us. And it’s also a lot more orangy than sunrises usually are.

“Is that a fire?” I ask, already knowing it can’t be. It’s too even.

“It’s the Hamilton ruin,” Brandon replies without slowing.

I can’t believe it. I’m seeing my first ruin.

No, my second.

I still feel some awe at the idea that it’s within sight.

“Does the glow have something to do with it being a ruin, or is it independent?” I catch up to the others.

“If you’re asking if all ruins glow, no, they don’t.” He smiles. “There’s no easy to see ‘here’s a ruin’ sign. If you come across one by accident, you find out about with when you get the system notification. As for this one, I don’t know if the ruin emits the light, or if it’s an object in it, or just the ground. If you want to learn about it, I can promise that the library in Detroit will have that information.”

“For a price,” Helen adds.

“Everything comes at a price, Hel,” Brandon replies casually.

She looks at me when she whispers, “Especially his help.”

This is going to be a long walk.

\* \* \* \* \*

I wake up with Brandon shaking me. “Breakfast’s over, sleepy head.”

“Sorry.” I’d just sat and rested against the post. I hadn’t even realized I’d closed my eyes. Unfortunately, the few minutes of sleep did nothing for the debuff.

“You’ll get used to it. There are days when exploring means working with constant sleep debuffs.” He pulls me to my feet. “Okay, because Hel will—”

“Stop,” I say. “Don’t make whatever you’re about to say her fault.”

“She will—”

“How about you be the adult this time?” I ask.

“I am an adult.”

Silver snickers.

“Then act like one?”

“Okay,” he finally says, looking all of us over. “Now that we have daylight, we’re going to leave the road. By now, every rest stop between here and Detroit will know about the reward, and the people after Dennis are going to ask any caravan they see if they saw a band of intrepid adventurers pass them by. Going through the wild means they can’t easily know where we are.”

“Aren’t there monsters in the wild?” Silver asks timidly.

“There can be,” Brandon replies. “But we’ll be able to handle them.”

By we, I’m pretty sure he means him, since my history of holding my own in a fight

isn't reassuring. Although Helen has combat magic, so maybe she'll be of help too.

We get off the road and cut through the forest, heading somewhat north. By the time we walk out of it, it's past noon. We stop for lunch, a refresh on Silver's song, as we head west through the plain.

\* \* \* \* \*

Well before the sun reaches the horizon, Brandon calls an end to the walk by a small lake with trees around half of it.

"Shouldn't we keep going?" I ask. "This is going to take longer than following the road, right?"

"Are you in a hurry?" He walks into the trees and we follow.

"Well..." am I? I mean, with going to the Knox, I've kind of committed to taking however long it's going to take. So wanting to get the quest done as soon as I can and return home is no longer an argument I can make.

"Dennis," he said, stopping in what might pass as a minuscule clearing. "Don't be in a hurry. This is a great life we live. The wild outdoors, no responsibilities. There's going to be enough danger that you don't have to add the stresses of city life. Just enjoy it."

I guess he's right. Other than the debuff, it's been a nice trek.

"I'm kind of surprised that we didn't come across any monsters," Silver says, picking a spot not too far from the pit Brandon digs and putting her bedroll down.

"Don't take the songs you're learning too seriously," he says. "In the wilderness, they aren't that common. You mostly have animals." He grins. "Now, those can get pretty monstrous since this far from everything they don't get culled, but with animals it's live and let live. If you keep your distances, they'll leave you alone. Make sure the ground's free of stones and branches before setting up. Another reason for stopping early is that we have light to make sure our beds will be comfortable. Dennis, add a shovel to the list of items you need to get, as well as an ax. You don't want to use your sword to cut down firewood, if you care about it at all."

"I will. Are we going to sleep under the stars? I have a small tent."

He looks at the sky. "Should be dry overnight, but you're welcome to set up your tent if it'll fit."

"You could have chosen a larger clearing," Helen comments, brushing the ground.

"You are welcome to pick whatever spot to sleep in you want, Hel. You can even deal with digging your own firepit, boiling your own water and cooking your own meal, for all I care."

He never looks up from the pit he's digging while he speaks, so her glare is wasted. He gathers small branches once he's done, then uses a firestone to set them burning. Once the flames are strong, he takes firewood from his inventory and places them in the pit, then adds a grill, a pot, and a kettle, as well as three water skin.

"Silver, can you see about getting the water boiling? Me and Dennis was going to have the first go at the lake and washing up."

"I can wait until you're done," I say, my face heating up.

"The lake's big enough for both of us. This way, Helen can vent without worrying about me or you overhearing." He grabs my arm and pretty much drags me with him.

Outside the trees, he lets go of me and by then I might as well follow. Which I

immediately regret as between two steps, Brandon's naked and I turn with a gasp.

"Sorry," I say, "I didn't think you were just going to..."

"I can't very well get in the water dressed, can I?"

"Is it a thing, not caring with being seen naked, among people who travel a lot?" I didn't see anyone get naked among Chuck's caravan, but there was definitely a sense of if there was a reason for it, it would have happened and not one of them would have minded.

He walks in the water. "I think it's more that city folks get hung up on it. Who's going to care out here if you let it all hang out? It's safe for you to undress, I'm not looking."

A quick glance over my shoulder shows his back is to me, and that the water is up to his chest. I send my equipment to my inventory and hurry to get in the water because turning to look definitely strikes me as something he'd do.

"System it's cold!" I can't help exclaiming, and Brandon laughs. "How did you not say anything?"

"And miss your surprise?"

"I mean, how did you not react? This is freezing. How is it so cold?"

He motions to where the stream at the side of the lake. "The water's flowing out, so this is fed from under the ground." He faces me. "You need soap?"

"I have that."

"Didn't mean to imply you weren't prepared."

"Oh, I'm definitely not prepared for out here. I thought I'd be traveling with a caravan, along roads." I lather myself.

"Sorry your plans got derailed."

"Not your fault. Xander's the one responsible for all this. And me, for getting angry and deciding he has to learn a lesson."

"Are you..."

I wait.

"If you've changed your mind about the Knox, we can just head directly to Kansas City from Detroit."

"I haven't." I dunk myself and rub the soap off my face. "And him sending those pamphlets basically telling anyone willing to kill me and he'll pay them isn't making me want to give him a pass."

"That's..." A shirt appears in his hand and he proceeds to scrub it with soap. "Okay, cool."

I guess that's the best I can hope for clean clothes out here, so I follow his example.

"How do I get it dry?" I ask once my shirt is... no longer soapy. I can't tell if it did anything.

"After we've eaten, I'll set up a rack by the fire to hang them on."

"Something else I should get, I guess."

"More like, learn to make," he replies with a chuckle. "It's just branches tied together."

I send the wet shirt to my inventory and start on my pants. "Can I ask you something? I know I said it wasn't my place to pry, but what Helen said during the night."

"I'm not going to charge you for saving your life, Dennis."

"Oh, I know. You did it cause I was in trouble and it's who you are."

“Err, it’s not quite. I mean, I didn’t just...”

I chuckle as he falters around. “I know you also did it cause you wanted a fight. She said you stole from your parents.”

“It’s like I said,” he replies tentatively. “I was a kid. I’d just taken my class, and dad had seen so much of the world, and his journal was filled with information. I wasn’t stealing it. I was going to bring it back once I’d seen a few of the places he wrote about. Once I had a journal of my own worth talking about. I didn’t set out to lose it, no matter what Hel thinks.”

“The necklace?”

He shakes his head. “That was for a different reason, and that’s all I’m going to say about it, Dennis. It’s not something I’m willing to talk about.”

“Okay.” I go back to washing in silence for a while. Brandon’s done before me, and there’s one last thing I need to deal with before he goes. “Can I ask for a favor?”

“It’s going to depend entirely on what it is. Believe it or not, there *are* things I’m not willing to do.”

“Can you act like the adult you are?”

His mouth shuts audibly.

“I’m not saying not you have any fun. Even adults know how to do that, I hope. But I’m just sixteen, and each time I have to get between you and Helen, I feel like my dad. Trust me, that is not a feeling I like.”

“Look, she’s—”

“Isn’t that what kids say? It’s not my fault, they started it.”

“You have not been hanging around the kind of adults I have.”

“Then maybe you should be better than them. All I’m asking for is that you don’t goad her and don’t play into it when she goads you.”

“This,” Brandon said in a severe tone, “is why I don’t like working with others. There’s always someone telling me to grow up.”

“You’re the one who decided to keep me around.”

He sighs. “Fine, I promise to *try* and be more mature about how I handle my sister.”

“Thank you, that’s all I—” I let out a cry as he stands and exposes himself to me before I can close my eyes. “System! Can you not? I didn’t need to see that.”

He pats my shoulder. “You should have asked that I be mature about something else, then.” Then he leaves me alone in the water and I can’t decide if I need to be angry or embarrassed.

\* \* \*