

The next day Barry, Danny and I left pretty early, hooking up the bikes to their carts and heading off. We had a decent trip to complete, and we were supposed to make it back in time for the second team to go out to the library when we got back. Getting up early felt normal at this point, so by the time I was out of bed and heading down to the kitchen, I was ready to go. We left with a healthy dose of wariness about what we might encounter, both on the way and when we arrived at our destination.

Mabel's farm was enough of a local staple that there was plenty of signage to direct us there, even if Danny didn't already know the way. It was in the same general direction as the fire station but far past it, outside the central, heavier populated parts of the town.

Honestly, I underestimated how nerve-wracking it would be to leave town again, considering the last time we did, we came face to face with a dragon. Before we left, Barry joked that he was all set to do more driving, but Jessica just slapped the back of his head.

We were working with an even smaller team than usual, with Kate, Jessica, and the other firefighter, who I now knew was named Anthony, staying behind. They would be heading the mission to the library after we got home, so I wanted them fresh and ready to go. I had assured everyone that if we ran into anything too difficult to handle, we would retreat for more support. I would not let Barry convince me to kill another dragon.

With the three bikes, we made quick work of the distance, leaving the town behind us as we traveled the back roads of Danten. When we finally stopped alongside a dirt road, which cut off from the main asphalt one and into the treeline, we had been riding for twenty minutes. Admittedly, half of that was navigating the busy, clogged streets of the central town, but it was still noticeably further than Crazy Abe's.

"Alright, guys, let's get our game faces on," I said quietly, all of us climbing off our bikes. "We leave the bikes here for now, tucked into the woods a bit. Then, we can come back for them when we are done if there is anything worth taking. For now, keep your eyes open for anything strange."

I got a series of nods, and we started to make good on my plan, leading the bikes into the woods. They wouldn't pass a close inspection, but it got them off the road and out of the primary eyeline, which would do for now. When we were done, we started heading down the dirt road, towards our final destination.

Overall, our primary goal was the POI blue crystal, assuming this was actually a POI like Danny insisted it was. He claimed the plants and orchards were twisted and overrun, but there was no way to *really* know until we went in and investigated. Our second objective was securing seeds and farming equipment. Once the area was secured, we were free to make a couple trips back and forth if necessary. At least some of those trips would include a few civilians and the golf cart to help move things around.

The gravel, stone, and dirt path kept our steps muffled as we walked, all three of us clutching our weapons as we did. We took it slow, keeping our eyes and ears open, waiting to see what Danny described. Eventually, after a minute or so of walking, we reached the entrance to the farm, marked by a sign before the forest-lined road opened up into a huge clearing.

The clearing was only secondary in our minds, however, as the sign immediately drew all our attention. I remember coming here when I was in middle school and again with my family later, so I remembered vaguely what the sign was supposed to look like. It was mostly white, with a happy, cartoonish cow waving to you. "Mabel's Farm" was written on it in big, bold letters, along with "Family run since 1924". While the sign only looked slightly worse for wear now, you could hardly tell because it was absolutely choked with vines and living growth.

All three of us stepped closer, still keeping watch for anything strange, to examine the thousands of vine tendrils that were tangled around the normally friendly and welcoming sign. They were a deep forest green, with thick branches as big as my wrist and dozens of finger-sized vines emerging all over them. They were wrapped tightly around the post and boards that made up the sign like they were trying to tear it down.

"Well... something is going on here," I said softly. "Unless this place really went downhill in the last eight years..."

"It... wasn't this bad when we were here last time," Danny revealed, getting a wide-eyed look from Barry and me. "We didn't go much further than the sign, but the vines hadn't reached it yet."

With that concerning fact, we pushed further, eyes peeled, stepping carefully through the vines that nearly covered the ground. As we crossed into the clearing, we could see the small orchard that ran along the entrance. Hundreds of trees lined up down this side of the clearing, taking up a good fifth of the entire farm space.

The trees themselves were twisted and alien, with knarled purple and red bark and deep blue leaves. Every single one of the trees was heavily laden with a fruit I didn't recognize. From memory, I knew these trees were supposed to be producing apples, which didn't come in a semi-translucent blue and generally didn't grow this early in the year, at least not like this.

While I was very tempted to focus on the new fruit and twisted alien trees, I knew we needed to stay focused on whatever threat the POI would throw at us.

As we slowly walked deeper into the farm, generally making our way to the mom-and-pop style store that was located just next to the large parking lot, we tried our best to stay off the thick vines that covered the ground. They were spread out all over the place, linking with trees and covering rocks and gravel. It was like one giant green spider web, and we were walking deeper into it.

The building itself was no exception, the structure suffering a similar fate to the sign, with the same green vines covering almost every inch of it. There were still a few places I could probably squeeze in, but the door was basically fused in place with overgrowth. There was an old, rusted-out tractor, one that was probably twice as old as me, sitting in front of the store. It was also overwhelmed with vines, but these looked slightly different. Rather than seeming to spread out seemingly at random, these seemed knotted together, growing off the tractor like a bulging, corded, wooden cancer. I took a step closer to it, only to let out a strangled curse when it *shifted*.

The mass of vines and plant matter coiled and pulled, the rusted metal of the tractor protesting at it pulled away, bending and creaking as the weakened metal failed. More vines converged from the ground, snapping and breaking away as the whole mass grew and grew. Finally, it almost stumbled forward, a pair of thick, knotted legs taking shape as it partially unfurled, revealing a tangled, wooden, viney golem with thick corded arms and a stumpy sort of head on top. Its chest was glowing faintly green, the light just peeking out from the cracks and seams in the tangled vines.

As it moved, it let out a long, creaking, cracking groan, somehow sounding an awful lot like what a tree would, if they could make sounds. It was strange and very off-putting, especially as it got louder and angrier as it focused on us.

“Hit it with fire!” Barry called out, raising his spear, only for me to reach down and slap his spear down.

“NO, if we start a fire, the whole farm will burn!” I shouted. “Lead it into the parking lot first!”

The large wooden golem stepped forward, the ground vibrating as its large mass slammed down with each step. It swung out with its arm, the corded vines partially uncoiling until it was shaped more like an arm-thick whip, almost three meters long. The limb swung at us, forcing us to duck or dive. Danny tried to block it immediately, raising his newly made Dino-dog axe, the same style as Kate’s, and holding it up against his arm. The thunderous blow slammed into the bone shaft aft the axe, lifting Danny off his feet and sending him tumbling backward with a gasping shout.

“Focus, keep it off him!” I shouted to make sure Barry kept his eye on the dangerous monster.

Using our clearly superior speed, we harassed the monster with seemingly useless pokes and cuts with our spears, keeping its attention on us and luring it away from the overrun shop. Finally, when we were ten or so feet away from the store, I waited for one last wide swing of its arms to roll closer and slam my spear into its chest. I quickly cast a flame burst through the spear, feeling that the spell had left my hand and pushed through my weapon. The fiery glow of flames drowned out the subtle green glow from the golem’s chest as fire burst from every gap

and seam in the vine golem's torso. I quickly crawled away as the golem started swatting at itself ineffectually, trying to put itself out.

All the while, its previous wooden groan was now a higher, much more pained scream, like a log being overheated, the steam whistling as it cooked. The pain was clear as it slowly burned more and more, until finally collapsing to the ground, breaking apart as whatever magic had animated it failed.

The second it broke apart, both Barry and I ran to Danny, who was slowly staggering to his feet. He had clearly been knocked silly by the impact and landing, but he shook it off and stood with our help.

"I'm fine, just got thrown for a loop," He assured us, letting out a deep breath and wincing. "Ribs might be a bit bruised, but I don't think they are broken."

"Good, you are going to hang in the back unless we really need you. Our spears seem to be better suited for these things anyway. Assuming there are more of them."

"Oh, there definitely are," Danny assured me. "That was what we heard, what spooked us away. And we could definitely hear more than one."

"Dammit, well, it was wishful thinking anyways," I said, looking around again. "Well, keep your eyes open for weirdly clumping vines. Let's start with by clearing out the store, then we can move on to-"

"The giant, massive tree growing out of the overgrown barn?" Barry suggested, getting my attention.

The younger man was standing about fifteen feet away, where he could see past the store. I made my way to him, looking where he was pointing. Sure enough, in the distance was a large red barn. Something in the back of my head told me it used to contain a couple of horses and a few large pigs, but now, it was completely overrun. Vines had burst out from nearly every single window that the barn had, with several extra holes that looked like they were made from the vines themselves. But rampant growth wasn't even the most eye-catching part.

From the roof of the barn came the top of a massive tree, maybe twice the size of the surrounding forest. The bark was a normal-looking brown, but I could see hundreds, maybe even thousands, of green vines coming from it, going back down into the barn or crawling around the roof to cover the walls and everything else. Judging by how far away we were, the tree was monstrous.

"Dammit... yeah, that's a solid bet."

We made our way to the store, spending a few minutes going through it and making sure there wasn't anything dangerous inside. In order to get inside, we had to carefully pry open an already broken window, sliding through gingerly to avoid making any noise. We found a dozen or so boxes of seeds, small packages meant to sell to people coming to visit. The packages included a large range of seeds, all of them edible. Even just one of the boxes would have been an incredible boon, but finding multiple could make an incredible difference.

I knew, the second we found the boxes of seeds, that making a place to grow them had just jumped up to the top of the to-do list. The sooner we planted them, the sooner they would grow, and the sooner we could start adding fresh foods back into our diets.

When we were done clearing the shop, we left through the same window we used to enter. We then spent a minute or so walking around the parking lot area, looking for the path that would lead us deeper into the farm. As we got closer to the surprisingly intact dirt path, I gestured for everyone to stop.

"Listen, we need to kill every vine golem we see even if we could outrun them, because getting pinned between two of those things will most likely kill us," I pointed out, both Danny and Barry nodding with wincing, the former rubbing his side. "Judging from the first one we killed, as long as it's not sitting in the middle of flammable material, Barry and I can use the flame burst to take them down quickly, as long as we hit them while we are stabbing them. But we *need* to pay attention because I have a feeling fire will spread pretty quickly here."

"Why not just burn it all down?" Danny asked. "The crystal thing you brought back from the school didn't exactly look flammable."

"Well, for one, I'm not willing to make that gamble. The system might have given them a durability counter or a melting temp, I don't know," I pointed out, shaking my head. "I'm also really hoping that some of this food is edible, even if it looks strange. The woman who ate the root fruit was fine this morning, which is a good sign, but having another natural food source relatively nearby can only be a good thing."

"Yay, more food roulette," Barry said, shaking his head and rubbing his face. "God, I would kill for a Big Mac... with like seven large fries... and-"

"Don't think that just because Jessica isn't here means I won't hit you," I said, doing my best to ignore how badly my own mouth watered. "Danny, I want you in back, keeping your eyes open for any surprises. Barry, you're with me. We are going to lure any golems we see back onto the road, then hit them with the flame burst. Ready?"

When both of my compatriots nodded in confirmation, I turned back to the road and led them forward. We had only made it a few dozen feet down it before Danny spoke up.

"Guys, there's something here."

I turned to find Danny looking at the ground, about five feet behind us, where the ground was beginning to crack and push up. A large stone shifted, revealing a mass of vines as another massive golem tried to claw its way out of the ground. Before it could fully emerge, Barry called out as well.

“Fuck, there's one here too!” He said, pointing his spear to where the ground was starting to move about five feet further down the path.

Rather than panic, like I was tempted to do, I instead waited for a moment, the large vine golem rising further from the ground. When I could clearly see it, I jabbed out with my spear, once again using it to cast flame burst directly into the golem. The same creaking screech emerged from the expanding holes, partially muffled as the ground shook. After a few moments, the ground collapsed downward and settled, and the partially hidden golem was destroyed.

I turned, expecting to see a partially emerged golem attacking Barry, only to find the younger man had already dealt with his as well.