

We walked around the perimeter of the massive golem monstrosity, double-checking that, even if it continued to burn completely, it wouldn't spread past the clear area around the barn. Once we were sure we were safe, we stopped by the massive hole the monster had torn in the side of the barn.

The interior of the old wooden structure was dark, even with the hole in the side. The light from the vine monster's exit only reached so far, and with most of the windows clogged with green vines, the only natural internal light source was the hole the massive tree made in the roof, and even that was tight.

The tree itself was huge, as thick as an SUV, with an even wider base that chewed into the ground inside the barn, thick roots tangling with the stables and other animal pens. There was no sign of the animals, and I couldn't really see much in the way of tools, not through the thick vine web that filled what would have been empty space around the tree.

I honestly couldn't imagine domesticated animals surviving very long in this world.

At the base of the tree, I could just make out some chunks of rubble, the remnants of the stone I platform, what was once the pedestal for the blue POI crystal. It seems like the fast-growing tree had overtaken and destroyed the pedestal, tearing it into pieces with its thick roots. Thankfully, the crystal wasn't there with the remains, but instead embedded in the tree, ten or so feet in the air. It had vines and branches wrapped around it, holding it firmly inside the wood, several crystal spines being used as anchor points for long, spindly plant limbs.

"So... how are we going to get it down?" Barry asked, both of us stepping closer, looking up at our target. "You got a ladder?"

After looking around for a ladder and finding none, we were forced to improvise. We spent ten minutes making a rinky dink stairway to the crystal, using blocks of wood, chunks of stone, pieces of the barn, and just about anything we could get our hands on. It wasn't the sturdiest of structures, leaning heavily against the tree for support. Danny volunteered to climb it and retrieve the crystal, taking my dragon claw knife with him to carve it free. He very carefully climbed the wobbly stairs before spending a few minutes hacking, carving, and prying the crystal free.

When the wooden growths had finally released our prize, the fireman dropped the knife for me to grab before slowly starting to work the crystal free. He still had to wiggle and pry, but when he eventually pulled it free, he carefully climbed back down before presenting me with the crystal. I had him put it down on a nearby root so I could wrap it up in my jacket like we had done with the first one.

While Danny was working on retrieving our prize, Barry and I weren't idle. Instead, we set to work walking around the golem, examining it and harvesting anything we thought was useful. We had clearly established that monster parts would be what carried us forward, so we

quickly gathered some branches and vines from the tree, as well as the golem. We made a few large piles, preparing for us to return on the bikes.

When Danny was done, and we were walking away from the barn, crystal wrapped up in my jacket and tucked under my arm, Barry paused alongside the massive golem monstrosity. When I noticed, I stopped to look back at him.

"What?" I asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I was just thinking... there was definitely a green glow coming from inside this thing... right?" He asked with a frown. "And the smaller ones too..."

"Yeah, there was. What about it?"

"Well... if there is anything worth collecting, it would be the glowing core of a massive vine monster... right?"

I considered his words for a moment before nodding in agreement, gesturing for Danny to follow as we returned to the monster. It took a bit, but with our spears, knives, and axe, we managed to hack at the monstrosity, eventually revealing a green, slightly charred, semi-translucent core. It looked similar to what I knew petrified wood could look like, with a shell of burned material around the outside. It was also in several pieces, the smallest of which was about the size of a softball and the largest closer to a soccer ball. We carefully extracted all of it from the monster's chest, laying it down near the other piles of materials before once again leaving.

As we left, we stopped at each golem corps to dig out their cores and gather anything useful. Then, when we were done with that, we spent some more time inside the overrun store, gathering everything useful, including all of the seeds we could find. Finally, we spent some time gathering samples of the fruits growing from the alien trees. Once we were done, we finally left the farm behind, only to return a few minutes later with our bikes, loading everything we had gathered into the carts. In total, it was nearly two hours after we retrieved the crystal before we finally started making our way back home.

The ride back to the bastion was tiring, especially when we ran into a trio of feline monsters. They were mostly just an annoyance at this point, especially since they didn't have the numerical advantage they usually did. We killed all three of them pretty easily, especially when Danny stunned two of them with the shock spell cast through his axe, the charged energy causing two of them to collapse at once, giving us plenty of time to dispatch the third and finish off the other two.

When we finally arrived back at the bastion, we guided the bikes to the steps, crossing the grassy area surrounding our home. We were met by a group of people interested in how our trip went, the group quickly growing when I revealed the POI crystal.

We headed inside, and Alissa spent some time looking over Danny to make sure his rubs were indeed only bruised since we still weren't sure if setting bones was required before we used the healing spell. When she was certain he was fine, she let some of the kids use their healing spells on him, almost completely healing him. Barry and I also got a check-up, and Alissa gave us a clean bill of health once she was done.

With Alissa satisfied and Danny taken care of, I joined Sally in her heart, quickly making good on my earlier statement of adding a second story to the flat, which was what people had started calling the living quarters addition. The second floor held sixteen rooms, with thirty-two beds in total. Even with the addition, Sally said we had plenty of energy left over, so I considered adding a third floor, maybe stylized as a barracks, similar to what we had on the third floor of the tower.

Unfortunately, Sally was quick to point out that having a permanent residence that was barrack style or any other blatantly inferior living space would really set a precedence for different groups. Having ten beds as a buffer in the tower was one thing, but having it above the main living space was another. Ultimately, I decided she was right and settled on making the roof of the flat a railed-off space for whatever people wanted to put there. I even added pillars and a roof over half of it so it was still usable in slightly inclement weather. It ended up looking like a rooftop deck or veranda.

Still, even after that, I had material left. Rather than try and figure out something fancy, I instead created the foundation for a massive wall surrounding the entire bastion clearing, right up to the barrier. The material, which might have been enough for a second floor of the flats, went surprisingly far as a foundation, which Sally attributed a different metaphysical weight to a wall and a complicated living space, especially with so many beds, meaning another potential link into the powers that the bastion granted.

In the end, I had enough material to make the five-meter wide foundation go all away around the bastion. This wall would probably take a while to finish, but it would make the perfect thing to sink extra POI crystal material into. When it was done, I could focus on making normal flat living buildings spread around the whole space rather than being forced to waste meters raising them up off the ground.

I also used the opportunity to carve a second storage room below the tower's existing room. That process took even less "material" than the wall foundation had, especially because I left it completely empty and removed the food stasis from it. All it had was the Sally-run environmental controls the rest of the bastion had.

When I was done building with Sally, I left the bastion to see Jessica, Kate, Anthony, and the few civilians accompanying them off to the library. They were bringing the newly offloaded bikes, as well as the golf cart, because I wanted to bring a good number of books back with them. Not only were they great educational material, but they would help keep our morale with

entertainment. We could also guarantee the quality of our book storage while the library would be left unwatched.

The bastion just so happened to have a brand new storage room, just waiting to be filled with books. A perfectly controlled storage room was ultimately a much safer place to keep books than a typical building.

When the library team left, the rest of the civilians started moving shelving into the new storage, getting it from the nearby apartments. Sure, it would look a bit haphazard, with dozens of different shelf styles, but for now, it would do. Maybe, in the future, we could get a woodworking crew to make real shelving.

Honestly, I was surprised by how eager the civilians were to help. Maybe my mind was spoiled from having watched so many shows and movies or read to many books where lazy and stupid people ruined a good situation for everyone, but as far as I could see, everyone seemed happy to pitch in. Charles and I talked about it, and we came to the conclusion that after seeing so many people die, especially so recently, having something tangible to work for, something we could achieve and push ourselves for, it really straightened people out. We both assumed it would become a problem eventually, but for now, we enjoyed an eager work group.

While everyone worked hard, after dealing with the golems and retrieving the POI crystal, Barry, Danny, and I had more than earned a break. Danny headed to his room to sleep off the remaining soreness from the first golem fight while Barry and I headed to see Roger.

Originally, the young man had tackled being our unofficial crafter alone, but with the fire station group's arrival, that changed. As we stepped down from the kitchen and eating area, we found him, the civilian who had joined him not long ago, as well as Jason and a second civilian. All of them were examining the material we had brought back, minus the fruit, of course.

"Roger, how's it going?" I asked, getting the young crafters' attention.

"Oh, hey, guys. It's certainly going. This wood is really interesting," He said, turning over an arm-length branch. "Lots of flexibility, but still really strong. The dragon teeth cut it, but... well, watch this."

He first demonstrated the flexibility of the branch by literally flexing it, the wood bending to nearly ninety degrees without any signs of breaking. Roger was clearly struggling to bend it so far, and he eventually released it with a breath of air, the wood snapping back with an impressive amount of energy. He then pulled out a knife, just a simple pocket knife, before carefully putting the branch on the table. Everyone else stepped back, and Roger slammed the blade on the branch, trying to stab it with the tip of his knife. He then showed me the damage, just a small divot in the wood.

"The dragon claw knives we've been making cut it much easier, but it's clearly tougher than normal wood by a significant degree," He explained. "It's too flexible to work as a handle for the axes, but that's fine since we claimed even more bones from the Dino-Dogs."

He nodded to a set of nearby shelves, which showed rows and stacks of harvested bones, scales, teeth, and claws.

"That reminds me, how would you feel about heading back to the dragon?" He asked. "It's going to be... well, it's gotta be a mess by now, but from what you guys described, there might be more scales, and I want some of its bones."

"I think... I'm worried that area might be dragon territory," I explained. "We haven't seen them anywhere else, in fact... I'm not sure, Roger. It's something we should discuss together."

"That's all I ask, I would love to work with dragon bones, but I'm not gonna ask people to risk themselves too much to get it," He agreed with a nod. "So... I assume the same thing popped into your head when you harvested that stuff that popped into mine?"

"That, if there was anything that resonated with bramble, a vine golems wood, and its wood heart thing, would be it?" I guessed, Roger smirking and nodding. "Yeah, when I was helping Barry dig the first one out."

"Should settle the debate if it's random or if it matters where the material is coming from," he said, gesturing to the pile of golem parts.

We still weren't sure what triggered the connection between our spells and our weapons. We had gotten very lucky with the spears, especially with how useful they had been with the golems, and the axe shock energy wave had been a pleasant surprise, but it challenged our assumption that fire stuff plus fire stuff equaled better fire stuff.

"Give us a few hours, we will cook something up to test it out," He promised, rubbing his chin and turning back to his workstation "Maybe a maul? Or some kind of staff?"

It was clear we had lost him, prompting me to snort and Barry to shake his head. Together, we headed back up to the kitchen area, where we managed to put together a small meal of jerky, potentially from a feline monster, and some canned fruit before making our way out of the tower and up to the top floor of the flat. Already, people were setting up chairs and tables as an outdoor eating area. One civilian was setting up a grill, while another two were talking about how they would get a few picnic tables, which was stolen from an outdoor eating area attached to one of the nearby apartment complexes, up several floors.

We both sat down on the railing, looking in, eating our lunch, and unwinding after our morning adventure. Eventually, when we were done, we lent a hand to the civilians, moving over

picnic tables and bookcases and getting out new spaces set up. Beyond that, we were killing time, waiting for the library team to return.