

## StoryLine-9

“Hello?”

Still no answer.

The light's still strong, so I'm under an hour of walking in the darkness. The class is still there, so I haven't walked by them so much I've stepped out of range, but I have no idea if I'm getting closer. All I have to go on really, is that they are inside the ruin.

Well, I hope they are.

They could be somewhere outside, but it feels like I'd be skirting the range then and I'd have stepped out.

The plan is simple. Keep going until the light dies. Then, I find a spot to sleep. It'll hopefully be daytime again when I wake up and go from hole to hole in the ceiling until I've worked out where they are, or the class disappears and I can't find it again, which should mean they've left on their own.

The ground opens up before me, and I look down into the darkness.

They could be under me, that would be... problematic. How many levels? Does the class come with an auto-mapping ability? It gave me the skill, so maybe not?

“Hey, System. When do I get an auto-mapping ability?”

No response. I'll at least know the answer to that question once I look over my class abilities.

I walk around the hole, and the next one I come across is in the ceiling. Stars and a waning crescent moon. The sky is the one thing my dad enjoys. He grew up on a farm, so it was something he got to watch a lot, and even then, the cities were close enough to encroach. Now, even in Court, the nights are dark. Base doesn't believe in wasting power for sleeping people, and the town itself has to use oil or magic for its light. Neither of which are cheap.

At the next intersection, I make a right, and a while later, the class vanishes from the list. The light is fading now, so I'm close to two hours of exploring.

Just how much of the place have I explored at this point?

### Darlington Nuclear Power Station Ruin, 33% explored

Okay, that's nice. If I've explored all that, how about you give me a map of it?

And nothing.

The class returns to the list within two steps, and I continue in that direction when I reach the intersection. When the light is low enough I have difficulty making out more than a few steps ahead of me, I know it's time to look for a place to—

Is that light further ahead?

It's not daylight. It's still full dark outside, and it's green, instead of... well, sun colored.

The chemical light dies before I reach it, but I can tell it's coming from an opening in the wall now. And it's lower.

When I reach it, all that's left of the door are crooked hinges. Inside are untrustworthy metal stairs going down, and the light is stronger, and much greener. It also moves slightly.

“Hello?” I call again. Light would be what I'd got for if I was hurt.

The stairs creak when I put a foot on it. I look next to it. That's what, three meters to the floor? I can drop it without killing myself, right? If I get hurt, I have healing bars left. Bars I should keep for the trek back home. Even during the day, the forest can't be a safe place.

I straightened and look to the left.

Thoughts of home pull me in that direction with a certainty that's uncomfortable.

How much of Court have I explored? I ask the system.

### Town of Court, 87% explored

That must be what it meant by the more I've explored a location, the more precise my sense of where it is will be. It's comforting to know I don't have any chance of missing it once I head home, just because I'm not where I thought I was in relation to it. Doesn't matter if I don't know where North is anymore.

I know where home is.  
I put more of my weight on the stairs and they creak louder, but they don't break.  
Stepping as lightly as I can, I hurry down and catch my breath once I'm on solid ground again. I chuckle. That was as scary as being pushed into the hole by Rich.  
I straighten. But it was my choice. I grin and look up the stairs. I'm going to have to go up them to get out of here, I just know it. Are they going to break them?  
The idea they can is scary, but it's also... exciting?  
Oh, dad would not be okay with me contemplating this.  
But after I've found whoever else is down here.  
The room is vast in all directions, and the light comes from beyond a railing further before me, shining up onto a ceiling of broken things with ripples.  
I step to the railing and look over it in the process of testing how solid it is and freeze.  
The water's so clear I can see the green glow coming from the circles on the floor, and that they are raised slightly. The color reminds me of the chemical light, only more intense, much more green and bright.  
It's magical in how beautiful it is.  
I step away.  
Yeah, it's probably magical period. And that doesn't mean it's good for me. I look around. Magic in the wild has a tendency to attract creatures that feed off it, as well as anyone not smart enough to stay away.  
Anyone like some kid of got conned into following a mostly stranger into the forest. As well as... I realize, as I see the form stretched on the floor further in, anyone else who might come here.  
"Hey! I'm here." I run for them. "Are you okay?" They don't react to my voice, which is a bad sign. They're unconscious, not asleep. I don't bother focusing on them. People are one of the few classes of being that we can't get anything off of with skills. It takes magic or high-level abilities.  
Blood loss is the most likely reason someone makes it down here, stretches and then loses consciousness. I won't be able to get them to eat, so I'm going to have to make bandages from my shirts and hope my first aid's high enough to...  
I slow as I make out their features and position.  
They are stretched on the floor with their hands on their chest, and a book under them. They aren't breathing, and their head is a skull.  
I'm too late.  
By quite a while, too.  
The body wears armor in good condition. Leather with buckles. There's a wrap around their midsection with a dark blotch on my side. That would be the fatal injury, I guess. They wear gloves and boots that match their armor.  
I approach cautiously.  
The undead aren't something that occur naturally, or so the old folks tell us, but I'm next to water with glowing stuff at the bottom. I don't think that was natural even before the system showed up.  
Then I breathe easier. If this was a monster, just looking at it would have told me that.  
Hmm.  
I focus on the body.

### Aaron Sentino, Class: Explorer, dead.

Well, that confirms it, not a threat. Although I didn't know the dead lost whatever keeps us from doing this to the living.

I crouch next to him. "Hi Aaron, I'm Dennis. Somehow, you being here gave me access to your class." I hesitate. "I hope you don't mind, but I'm hoping the reason you're down here is in that book. I'd rather not go through your inventory right now. It feel... disrespectful."

There is no resistance when I move the hands off the book. The cover is leather, engraved with symbols that are meaningless to me. The corners are metal, a way to protect them, but also something that isn't cheap. I wouldn't leave it in the open like this. Unless I wanted someone to pay attention to it.

"Okay. I guess you want me to look at it." First things first, I focus on it.

Aaron's Never-Ending Journal
This is the Journal where Aaron Sentino recorded his notes while exploring
Perception Check failed

Alright, other than the never-ending part of the name, seems ordinary enough. I pick it up.

Aaron's Never-Ending Journal
This item can be bound
Do you wish to bind this item? Yes/No
Notice, prerequisite for binding not met. Accept the quest: Aaron's last will and testament to be able to bind this item

And you're trying to give me a heart attack. Pop-ups have to come with a warning before they just show up like this.

No quest message, so I guess I'm not binding it. Not sure I want to, anyway. It's his journal, not mine.

I open it, and only the cover responds. The rest of the book is one block, as if someone dumped glue in it. Must be some way to lock away private stuff.

There's writing on the first page at least. In small, immaculate hand writing.

*Okay, let's start with the important stuff.*

*You screwed up. I have no doubt you tracked me down, and that you're reading this right now, but the jokes on you. That stab didn't kill me, and while I'm sure the poison that came with it will since none of my healing potions got rid of it, I made it as far as my ability let me. So I hope you had the most entertaining trip getting here, and now you can go away. My journal is locked behind a quest that I've set so neither you nor anyone working with you can gain.*

*Ain't it fun what the system will let someone who knows stuff do?*

*Anyway. Go away. You fucked up. I'm dead and what you're after is forever out of your reach.*

*For anyone else, read on.*

*My name is Aaron Sentino. I'm an explorer.*

*That's kind of it, really. I was born a few years after the system arrived and always wanted to see what was out there. I saw a lot of amazing things I documented in my journal, as well as places you should probably stay away from.*

*Lots of dangerous places in this new world of ours.*

*But those tend to be the most fun to explore.*

*So, you've noticed the journal's bricked (old term from before the system. It's got something to do with phones and how they could be rendered as useful as a brick.) right now, this page is all you can read. It's going to remain this way unless you accept my quest. (It's coming. I've set it so you could read all this before being bothered with it.) once you do so, if you are able to. I know you. You're going to try anything you can think of to get access to the information. Screw off. I outsmarted you. Anyway, if you can accept the quest, the first quarter of the journal will un-brick. I've moved all the maps there to help you navigate. The one relating to the quest will be the first one. The others will lead you to various ruins I discovered over the years. But no notes. Sorry. I had to make hard decisions to protect the information in here, and that's one of them. Anyway, I doubt those will interest you, or whoever accepts the quest.*

*Us Explorers are a rare breed, in the grand scheme of things.*

*So the quest. It's simple, really. I need you to deliver a letter to my wife. It'll be among the map pages. I didn't seal it since there's no way for me to keep you from opening it with the means I have access to in this place, and in the time I have left. I just ask that you respect my privacy. And if it's you, you think I'm stupid enough to put anything about what you're looking for in a letter to my wife? She's an herbalist and you know that already. Other than my stories and the things I brought her back, she's never cared about this beautiful, wide world of ours.*

*Kansas City has always been enough of the world for her.*

So, my Quest is for you to deliver my letter to her in Kansas City. It's possible it took so long for anyone to find my body that she's dead, then hand it to my daughter, or one of her children. Anyone of my bloodline will do.

Your reward... Well, I have two Ability points I'd yet to assign, so that's yours. As well as the twenty-five thousands experience I've accumulated since gaining my last level. I'd give you more, but it turns out the system considers anything before that last level 'used up'. What else? Four skill points and two spell points. Never been one for magic. The traveling I could do with my abilities was always enough. Maybe they'll serve you better. I'd give you more, but anything else will be more useful to you to accomplish the quest than after.

So, all my possessions are yours should you want them. The one thing I ask that you not sell is my ring. I do think it's going to help you, but if not, I'd like my family to have it. If she's old enough, my daughter might demand my sword, but I'm really hoping she's also old enough to have equipment of her own by then.

Things of interest you'll find on me are my sword. It's enchanted. Just a bit more damage and an edge to go through armor. My armor's excellent quality, so if you take care of it, it will see you through most problem of the combat kind. The ring, as I said, can be of use. I have almost ten thousand Dollar on me as I write this, but no way to know if he took it. I wouldn't put that past his petty self, just to screw with the help you might render me. If it's gone, I'm sorry. You'll have to sell my stuff, which you probably don't need, anyway; it's highly explorer centric, after all.

So, that's about it. Thank you ahead of time for either taking the letter to my wife, or handing this to someone who will.

I hope the system is always in your favor.

You have been offered a quest by Aaron Sentino
Aaron's last Will and testament
Aaron as asked you to deliver a private letter to his wife in Kansas City
Rewards: On accepting the quest, partial unlock of Arron's Never-Ending Journal, gain the ability to bind Aaron's Never-Ending journal to yourself. On completion of Quest: 26,324 experience, 2 ability points, 4 skill points and 2 spell points Consequence of refusal or failure: None
Do you Accept the quest? Yes/No

I sit and think about it.

I mean really think about it.

This isn't the kind of thing I can just accept or refuse and not think about it anymore. Maybe this isn't something that's life change for most people, but for me? If I accept it, it means leaving Court. Not forever, obviously, but I don't know where Kansas City is. I've never heard about it before, so it can't be anywhere near. I mean, I've heard about Albany and that's weeks away on the other side of the St-Laurence River.

The problem is that I don't know anyone I'm sure will deliver it if I give it to them. Oh, there's Chuck's caravan, so plenty of people on it will go on to further places, but I don't know any of them. If I got Chuck to say yes, he'd do it. Dad knows him and, while he doesn't quite like him, he always said he's a man of his word. But if there's one thing I know about Chuck is that he doesn't venture beyond Toronto anymore, so he'd have to pass the journal on to someone else and... How do I know they'll deliver it.

Okay. So I have to be the one to do it. It's the only way to be sure the letter makes it to its destination.

But it's not like I have to leave right now with it.

I know. It's skirting what Aaron wants, but he said it that it doesn't have to be exclusively to his wife, so if I stay in court for a few years, become a guard, long enough to make my dad happy. Okay, become a craftsman of some sort for a few years. Then, once I'm in my mid-twenties and I've demonstrated that I am a responsible adult, I can leave on this quest.

Yep, that's what I'll do.

I accept the quest.

You have accepted Aaron's last will and testament.
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Do you wish to bind Aaron's Never-Ending Journal to yourself?
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Yes/No
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Yes.

Now, no matter what happens, no one can take this from me.

It shimmers in my hands and I feel some of the pages come loose. Like the details of my class, studying this will wait until I'm home. I go to send it to my inventory and realize I have a problem. It takes up the inventory spot using the last chemical light freed.

I look at what Aaron's wearing.

Just how am I going to carry all of this?

I smile.

Well, the same way he did.

I'm going to wear it.