

The trees shaded us from the afternoon sun, but they also blocked out the wind. The still air was hot and humid, and I was sweating like a pig in no time. Shasa stopped under a huge pine tree and raised her face, sniffing the breeze.

“That way,” she whispered. “I think we’re getting close.”

Jenny tightened her grip on her spear, and scanned the branches above us suspiciously. “Great. This time we’re ready for the little bastards.”

Yes, we were hunting murder squirrels. We’d survived their first attack and gotten stronger in the bargain, so cleaning up the rest of the pack seemed like a logical way to earn some more points. I had my rifle slung and a force missile ready to cast, because I doubted I could hit something as fast as those squirrels with a bullet.

Had these woods looked like this yesterday?

On the drive in I’d noticed that the area was an irregular patchwork of small farms and wooded plots, but the trees along the highway were mostly young or medium-sized. Now we kept encountering clumps of much bigger trees, and huge tangles of dense underbrush. It was hard to believe the town was just a short walk away.

The map had called this the Deep South Safari Zone. Was the System trying to turn it into a jungle? That would make sense, but the implied level of resources was staggering. Where would it end? Could the System change the climate and weather patterns in a zone to fit its theme? Was the terrain going to start changing? How do you even fight something that operates on that kind of scale?

“Ooh, pretty.”

I brought my gaze back to ground level, and found Shasa examining a large bush. Dozens of huge purple flowers sprouted from a mass of greenery that reached well above my head, and they did seem remarkably pretty. I took a step closer, trying to place the species. Surely I’d have seen pictures of something this striking before?

Shasa buried her face in one of the flowers, inhaling deeply. “So nice,” she groaned.

“So pretty,” Jenny agreed, drifting towards another flower. Her voice was soft and relaxed, like when she was going into trance for me.

“Relax, and smell the flowers,” Shasa murmured.

“Relax, and smell the flowers,” Jenny agreed, spear slipping to the ground.

“Pretty... wait.” I stopped, blinking slowly. Something wasn’t right.

Shasa pressed her face further into the giant flower. It seemed to withdraw in front of her, and she moved to press herself against the bush’s branches in an effort to stay close. They parted to let her in, enfolding her in a leafy embrace. Little green tendrils started to explore her clothes, looking for a way in, but it didn’t matter that the plant was moving. I needed to look at...

...look at...

I tore my gaze away, and lobbed a fire missile into the middle of the bush.

An inhuman shriek rang out, and suddenly there was movement everywhere. Small shapes covered in fur and leaves erupted from the underbrush, rushing me in a snarling tide.

I threw a flame missile into the mob, more by instinct than plan, and backed away as I tried to gather my wits. The burst of fire panicked the little monsters, breaking their charge and sending them scurrying in all directions. But they’d be on me again in seconds.

I pulled my pistol, and shouted. “Jenny, wake up! Shasa, help me!”

I shot one of the leafy shapes, and it stumbled with a yowl that sounded an awful lot like a wounded cat. Were those animals, covered in some kind of parasitic vine? Half a dozen house cats, a

couple of dogs, and some smaller things that might have been ordinary squirrels. Shit, was it going to do that to the girls if I didn't get them free in time?

"Tom!" Shasa shouted. "What's happening?"

I threw a fire missile at one of the bigger vine monsters, blowing its forelimbs off and setting it on fire. "Shasa, the bush is trying to eat you! Tear free, and come back to me."

"Eat me? No! Let go, you stupid fmmph!"

There was no time to look at her struggles, because the vine zombies had gotten over their fear of fire. The whole mass of them rushed towards me, trying to bring me down with sheer weight of numbers. A gun wasn't going to save me from this many monsters. I needed an area-effect attack, now, or I was going to get torn apart.

Good thing I'd spent my last universal enhancement point preparing for a horde of murder squirrels. I raised my free hand, and met the charge with a sustained jet of flames.

It didn't have the physical impact of my fire missiles, but the flame jet did a pretty good imitation of a military flamethrower. I waved it back and forth over the leafy horde, setting the monsters on fire. They shrieked, howled and chattered in pain, and their advance dissolved into chaos. Some of the plants around them caught fire as well, leaving the smaller creatures surrounded in a sea of flames.

A burning vine zombie the size of a large dog emerged from the conflagration, and jumped on me. I staggered back, stumbling on a tree root and falling as I tried to fend it off. Jaws lunged for my throat, and I wedged my bracer-clad forearm between them.

I hit the ground hard. The monster's burning leaves scorched my arms, and claws ripped at my shirt. I'd lost my gun somewhere, and I couldn't focus on a spell with a hundred pounds of monster on me. Flames licked at my feet, and a smaller monster sunk its teeth into my leg. I fumbled desperately for my knife.

Then a blur of steel smacked the beast off my chest, and sent it flying fifteen feet into a tree trunk. Shasa stood over me like a furry Valkyrie, eyes wide and chest heaving, with a bloody mace clutched in her hand.

"Tom!"

"Shasa! Thank god."

I snatched up the little beast that was gnawing on my leg, and tossed it into the nearest fire. It made a terrified noise that I ignored in favor of casting around for my pistol.

Shasa knelt next to me, looking me over and sniffing at me. "Are you alright, Tom? I was so scared!"

"Just a little banged up, I think," I said, levering myself up. Ah, that's where my gun went. "Where's Jenny?"

Looking around I saw that the smaller vine zombies were all dead or dying, roasted by my flames. The other big one was lying in a patch of burning leaves with its skull caved in, an obvious victim of Shasa's mace. Thankfully the fire didn't seem to be spreading very fast.

Shasa looked around worriedly. "Jenny? Oh, no! The flower monster got her."

"Then we're getting her back. Jenny, wake up! Get out of there!"

My leg was bleeding, but it held my weight. I kept shouting as I limped over to the bush, but there was no response. The monster's flowers waved menacingly, trying to draw my gaze, but I knew better than that. I holstered my gun, and drew the long combat knife I'd bought just a few hours ago.

Jenny was completely wrapped up in the outer branches of the bush, and dozens of little green vines had emerged from the interior to grow around her. Her face was still buried in one of those giant flowers, and she offered no resistance at all as they searched for openings in her clothes.

"No! Don't eat Jenny!" Shasa cried, and started to rip at the branches. I joined her, pulling branches away and cutting vines with my knife.

The bush didn't like that. The whole thing quivered, making a sound that reminded me of a rattlesnake, and the faint scent of the flowers grew stronger. But it was too late.

"Hold your breath and help me pull her out, Shasa," I ordered.

The branches had only had a loose grip on her, and the vines were too weak to resist Shasa's strength. Together we pulled Jenny out of their grip, and dragged her well away from the plant monster.

Jenny was completely out of it. Her eyes were open but empty, her face slack. Snapping my fingers in her face didn't get any response. Then I saw the vine tendrils in her ears, and for a moment I was terrified that we were too late.

I put a hand on her forehead, and cast my diagnostic spell. Fuck, those tendrils really were trying to burrow into her brain. She couldn't hear us because they'd already perforated her eardrums, but thankfully that's as far as they'd gotten.

"What's wrong with her?" Shasa asked. "Why isn't she moving?"

"The bush was starting to turn her into one of those vine zombies," I said. "I need you to guard us while I fix her. Can you do that?"

"Yes, Tom! Nothing is getting past me."

"Good girl."

Extracting the vines was nerve-racking. I kept expecting them to grow hooks, or leave seeds behind that would continue the infection, or something horrible like that. Thankfully they didn't seem that sophisticated, or maybe the System just hadn't gotten around to implementing sneaky multi-layered infestation schemes yet. Maybe we'd get lucky, and it would never get around to that kind of horror movie stuff.

At any rate, I was able to gently extract the tendrils from Jenny's ears without leaving anything behind. Then I healed her eardrums, and gave her a jolt of energy to try to counteract the drugs that were keeping her entranced.

"Uh!" She jerked, and her eyes focused. "Tom? What happened?"

Before I could answer Shasa swept her into a hug. "Jenny! I was so scared I thought you were dead the bush ate you and you wouldn't wake up but Tom fixed you are you okay now?"

"Huh?"

Jenny was still pretty groggy, and it took a few minutes for her to really wake up. When she finally grasped what had happened she groaned, and laid her head on my shoulder.

"Sorry, Tom. I guess I really don't have any resistance to being hypnotized."

"Well, next time maybe knowing it's going to turn you into a zombie will help."

She flushed. "Um, not really. Did it seriously do the ear tendril thing? That's like something out of a hentai manga."

"Yeah, except it doesn't do anything sexy to you, it just eats your brain and uses your body as a puppet."

"You don't know that," she pointed out. "For all we know I'd still be in there. Just a helpless passenger, watching while the monster uses my body to catch more prey..."

“Tom, I think she needs more fixing,” Shasa said, giving Jenny a look that was somewhere between confused and horrified.

“Wait, did I say that out loud?” Jenny said. “Fuck, my brain is mush right now.”

“Yeah, I can tell,” I said. I sighed, and rested my head on my knees for a moment.

In action movies the heroes can get shot, drowned, burned, blown up, and thrown out of a building and it barely slows them down. But after two serious fights in less than an hour I was done in. The claw marks on my chest and the bite on my leg were still oozing blood, I had burns and bruises everywhere, and I felt like I could sleep for a week.

The girls didn’t look any better. Jenny wasn’t hurt much, but she was barely there mentally. Shasa was more alert, but those scrubs she’d been wearing were in tatters and she had scratches and burns all over her legs. They didn’t look too bad, but it had to hurt like hell.

I did a quick diagnostic on Shasa to check for hidden injuries, made her wounds stop bleeding, and then did the same for myself. That left me at about half mana, and I’d need a good rest to get back to full.

“It’s time to pull the plug on this wilderness expedition,” I decided. “We need more people and better gear before we can try this again. But I’ve got some unfinished business to take care of before we leave. Shasa, stay on guard while I do this, okay?”

“Okay! I’m guarding.”

I wearily climbed back to my feet, and walked back to the hypnotic bush. The fires I’d started were burning out, and while the one flame missile I’d hit the bush with had done a lot of damage it was nowhere near enough to finish the thing. Was there a vulnerable core somewhere in that mass of foliage, or did it work like a normal plant?

“Tom, are you sure it’s safe to get close?” Shasa asked. “What if the flowers get you?”

“Aw, no one’s domming our dom, cutie. He’s immune to that shit,” Jenny assured her.

It didn’t seem to have any branches that could reach out and grab people, but I wasn’t going to bet on that. I scooped up Jenny’s fallen spear, and backed away.

Then I cast flame jet, and smothered the damned thing in fire.

It made that rattling sound again, but I didn’t care. It had used all its zombies the first time around, and I wasn’t going to get close enough for anything else to affect me. I held the spell for several seconds, waving it around until the whole bush was thoroughly ablaze. That left me uncomfortably low on mana, but the thing didn’t seem to have a way to put itself out.

“Yeah, burn the stupid flower monster,” Shasa said.

“That’s kind of hot,” Jenny added.

“Well, yeah, it’s on fire.”

Jenny giggled. “Silly puppy. No, I meant watching Tom burn things is sexy.”

“You think everything is sexy.”

“No, only sexy things. And things that make me think about sexy things. Which is a lot of things, because I’ve got a huge imagination. Massive.”

“Uh huh. Tom, I think Jenny is in heat.”

I ignored the byplay, focusing on my target instead. How did killing plant monsters work? There was no mist rising up from the flaming body. Did plants not give enhancement points? Was the mist flammable? Or maybe the problem here is that plants don’t die as easily as animals. There are a lot of species that can survive getting burned down, and just grow back.

Was it my imagination, or was there some kind of bulky stump thing in the middle of that mass of burning branches?

I spun up a force missile, giving it good penetration and a bit of explosive power, and threw it at the stump. It blew apart in a satisfying spray of broken wood, and the remains immediately caught fire. Thirty seconds later streamers of glowing purple mist started leaking out of the wreckage, snaking across the ground to gather in a ball ten feet or so from the edge of the fire.

"Got it," I said.

"Hey, this one's a different color," Jenny observed.

I opened my status screen, and scooped it up. "Huh. Yeah, I'm getting some magic from it."

"Cool," Jenny said. "You should take it, then. You're the magic man."

"Makes sense. In that case you two should split the physical points from the zombies."

Trying to distribute the points equally was as much of a pain as I'd expected. It seemed like every one of the little balls of mist held a different amount of enhancement energy, and while bigger balls tended to have more energy it wasn't a simple linear progression. In the end all we could do was eyeball it and try to keep things reasonably close.

I ended up with almost a full point of magic and about a tenth of a physical point from the bush, while the girls each got about half a physical point from the zombies. Not a bad haul, but the fight had been a lot more dangerous than the one we went into the woods looking for.

Retreating back to our cars felt about a thousand times as dangerous as going into the woods. Shasa and I kept a sharp eye out, but I was keenly aware that I didn't have enough mana left for any kind of fight. Jenny was pretty out of it, leaning on me for support and stumbling along at a slow pace. I kept expecting the squirrels to ambush us again, or something else to take advantage of our weakened condition.

Apparently the monsters weren't that organized, though, because it was only a few minutes before we reached the edge of the woods. I stepped out into the parking lot, and looked around.

The place was pretty busy by now, with dozens of cars and pickup trucks in the parking lot. Shoppers came and went, pushing carts full of building materials. It was a strangely normal sight, all things considered.

On second glance, though, it was clear today wasn't an ordinary shopping day. Half the shoppers were openly wearing pistols, and there were fewer women in the crowd than you'd normally expect. There was also a cluster of men were setting up something tall and green next to the store's entrance. A platform maybe ten feet off the ground, with a ladder leading up to it and some kind of netting they were spreading over the top. Was that a hunting blind?

Yeah, it was. Which would give a guard an elevated position where he could keep watch over the whole parking lot, while being hard for monsters to spot. He'd be in the shade, too, and naturally the whole group had rifles. Any giant animals that tried to eat the shoppers here were going to have a bad day.

Jenny let go of me to stumble over to the cars. She sat on my hood, and ran her hands through her hair. "Whatever that bush drugged me with must be starting to wear off, because I think my brain's getting back in gear."

"Glad to hear it," I said. "But we're still not going back out there today. If we keep having these close brushes with death it's only a matter of time until we get killed. We need to be a lot better prepared before we try again."

"You're probably right," she conceded. "Maybe we could hook up with those kids?"

“Maybe, but we need to recover and regroup first. Let’s find that hotel Beth was talking about, check into our rooms and get cleaned up. Are you safe to drive?”

“I wouldn’t want to risk a freeway, but I think I’ll be okay following you across town. It’s only, what, a mile away? Less? Just drive slow, and don’t leave me behind.”

“Sounds like a plan. Shasa, maybe you should stay with her just in case.”

There was a Walgreens just a couple of blocks from the Home Depot, so we stopped there first to pick up a big load of snacks and first aid supplies. People stared at our bloody, battered condition, and the sales clerk offered to call 911. But I waved off their concern, and we piled back into the cars.

The hotel turned out to be surprisingly close. There was a highway that ran past the edge of town, and at some point some developers must have decided it was a good place for a retail district. So there was a whole cluster of hotels and restaurants along the road, with the Home Depot at one end of the development and a Walmart at the other end. The hotel Beth had picked was in the same development, behind a cluster of small businesses.

I had to give her credit for trying. Most of the places we passed had motel-style layouts, where each room had a door opening onto the parking lot or an outdoor balcony. Not ideal under current conditions, since it meant every room was directly exposed to attack by any animal that wanted to break the window. The place Beth had picked was more of a proper hotel, a boxy building four stories tall with just a handful of entrances on the ground floor. As long as we were on one of the upper floors it ought to be pretty secure.

Unfortunately it became apparent as I pulled into the parking lot that it was right at the back edge of the development. On one side it was surrounded by businesses, but the other side was an open field dotted with bushes and clusters of small trees. On the other side of the field, maybe a hundred yards away, the fields gave way to another patch of forest.

“Not completely indefensible, but we’ll have to keep an eye on it,” I mused to myself as I got out of my car.

Jenny followed my gaze, and nodded wearily. “Forget having my own room. I’m sleeping with you tonight.”

“Me too!” Shasa agreed. “We’re a pack, we should stay together. What are we doing here? I smell lots of people.”

“Down, girl,” I said, patting her head. “Just watch. We’re getting a place to rest up.”

I led the girls into the lobby, which turned out to be full of people. There was a worried-looking family checking in at the front desk, and several others ferrying loads of luggage and grocery bags up to their rooms. Off to one side a sheriff’s deputy stood with a cluster of men in a mix of camouflage and hunting gear, most with rifles slung from their shoulders.

The family ahead of us finished up as we reached the front desk. The woman behind the counter looked up from her computer as I reached the counter, and gave me a concerned look.

“Are you alright, sir? Do you need me to call 911?”

It wasn’t that bad, was it? My shirt was in tatters, badly stained with dried blood, and I guess I was pretty scratched up underneath. But none of the gouges had been deep enough to be life-threatening once I stopped the bleeding.

“No, I’m sure they have bigger problems to deal with right now,” I replied. “We’re a little beat up, but no serious injuries. I just need to rest a bit to get my mana back, and then I can fix the rest of the burns and scratches.”

“Oh, did you get healing? I wish I’d thought of that. Learning French and getting over my health problems doesn’t seem like such a bargain with all these stories of monster attacks going around.”

“Tom?” Beth poked her head out of a door behind the counter. “There you are! I was getting worried.”

“We had a couple of nasty encounters, but we pulled through,” I said. “Important safety tip, just because you’re in a parking lot doesn’t mean nothing will come after you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Beth said. “Well, I’m glad you’re alright. Monica, this is the rest of my party. Go ahead and give them their keys.”

“Yes, ma’am. Can I see your ID’s and a credit card, please? Love the ears, by the way.”

“You mean me?” Shasa said. “Thank you! I like them too. I can hear really well.”

I handed over my driver’s license and a credit card, and then realized we might have a problem. “Shasa here doesn’t have ID. She was a dog yesterday.”

“I’m still a dog,” Shasa objected. “I just have hands now. Look, I can pick things up!” She picked up one of the pens on the counter, and held it up proudly.

Monica blinked at her in surprise for a moment, and smiled. “Opposable thumbs are pretty cool, aren’t they? Well, if you’re with M-, ah, Ms. Beth then I suppose we can make an exception for you. What’s your name, sweetie?”

“Shasa.”

“Okay, and do you know how old you are?”

“Ooh, ooh, I know that one! I’m about a year and a half old, so that’s twenty in dog years.”

“I see. Well, aren’t you a big girl? I think I’d better put you in the system as a dependent, though.”

“What’s a depenmen?” Shasa asked.

“It means if there’s any complicated human stuff that needs to be done, people should talk to me about it instead of trying to make you figure it out,” I put in.

“Oh, okay. Yeah, that sounds good. All that stuff makes my head hurt. I have enough trouble just remembering how bathrooms are supposed to work.”

Jenny put an arm around her, and cast a reassuring look at the clerk. “We’ll make sure she gets that one down.

“Good, because you don’t want to know what the cleaning charges are for that kind of mess. Alright, here are your room keys. Ms. Sowel, I’ve put Shasa down as your roommate. You have adjacent rooms, so it doesn’t really matter. Numbers 314 and 316. The elevator is right over there, and your rooms will be on the left as you exit.”

“Great. Beth, is everyone else still here?” I asked.

“Earl went to volunteer at the hospital. Bob, Amanda and Sara were all upstairs last I checked. I think everyone needed some time to make phone calls and get their bearings, but we were planning to meet for dinner.”

“Makes sense. Okay, we’ll get settled in and get back in touch in a bit.”

It was going to take multiple trips to carry the pile of luggage and supplies we’d accumulated up to our rooms, even with Shasa helping. The rooms were pretty nice, though. They were extended-stay suites meant for business travelers, with a sitting area and a tiny desk in the front, a kitchenette and a small dining area to one side, and a bedroom that was actually a separate room from the rest of the suite.

Neither girl had any intention of getting separated from me, so we put all our luggage in one suite and piled assorted sheet metal and armory supplies in the other. Although we barely had all our luggage inside before Jenny pulled out a fresh outfit, and headed for the bathroom.

"I'm completely gross after all that sweating and fighting. I'm going to get cleaned up before we see anyone else. Shasa, have you ever had a shower?"

"Is that the thing where water falls on you? I never got why humans would want to do that," Shasa said, wandering into the bathroom. A moment later a startled yip jerked me attention away from setting up my laptop. "Eep! Tom, Jenny, there's another dog in here! What do you want? Hey, don't look at me like that! This is our territory."

Jenny reached the bathroom before I did, and groaned. "Shasa, that's your reflection."

"My what? What's that? Wait, how did you get over there with her? Look out, she's right next to you!"

I holstered my pistol, and facepalmed. Right, dogs don't understand reflections.

"I'm too tired for this shit," Jenny groaned. "Shasa, that's not a real dog. It's just a trick for showing you what you look like."

"But she's moving!"

"Yeah, it's a really good trick. Look, come stand over here and look at it from the side. You can see there's a wall there, right?"

"Oh, yeah, I see it now. Tricky! So she's trapped in another room, and this is just a window?"

Jenny sighed. "No, Shasa. There's no other room. The mirror shows what the room we're in looks like."

"But then who's that other dog? I'm the only dog in this room."

I held back my laugh, and looked into the bathroom.

"Have fun explaining the mirror dimension," I told Jenny. "I'm going to head downstairs and get the rest of the ammo."

"Traitor," she joked. "Fine, I'll handle her this time. But you get to field the next one."

"Deal."

I was seriously considering the merits of buying a dolly. As it was I had to make several trips, which got tiring fast. About halfway through the process the deputy with the group in the lobby stopped me. "Excuse me, sir?"

I looked down at the clearly labeled 1,000-round box of ammo in my hands, and the bags full of empty magazines and rifle maintenance kits stacked on top of it. Back up at the sheriff's deputy, with a whole posse of good ol' boys packing rifles behind him. Remembered the holstered pistol on my belt. This didn't look good, did it?

"Yes, officer? Can I help you with something?" Be polite, Tom. Be very polite.

"I just wanted to ask about the armor," he said, pointing at my bracer. "It doesn't look like commercial work."

"Oh, this? No, I made it earlier today. Hand on a sec, let me put this load down."

I set my burden down on the counter. Beth noticed the label on the box, looked at the cop, got big eyes and quietly ducked back into the room she'd come from. I suppressed an urge to sigh, and turned around to face the group.

"I threw this together once I realized I needed some protection," I said, unlatching the bracer to show off the whole design. "The outside's just sheet metal, but that's enough to deal with something trying to bite me. The rubber padding on the inside is basically just stapled in place, but that seems to be getting the job done so far."

"That's pretty slick," one of the other men said. "You do this for a living?"

“No, I’m an engineer, not an armorer,” I said. “My day job was designing oilfield equipment. But I got a metal shaping power from the System, and it makes stuff like this a lot easier. I made a helmet for my dog, too, but I haven’t had time to design a full suit yet.”

“I can tell,” the cop said, nodding at my bloody shirt. “What happened there?”

“Giant squirrels, believe it or not.”

I described the encounter with the murder squirrels, and found the whole group was keenly interested in hearing details. I backtracked to the encounter with the giant possum, and then went through the fight with the hypnotic bush and vine zombies.

“That’s quite a story,” one of the men said when I finished.

“Hypnotic bushes and plant zombies? That’s some crazy shit,” another added.

“You should get him in the militia,” someone suggested.

The deputy shook his head. “Now don’t go calling it a militia until we get the mayor on board. We’re just deputizing you fine gentlemen to assist with our duties, namely the defense of civilian lives.”

“On day one? That’s quick work,” I said.

“The sheriff’s not one to pussy foot around. I’m Deputy Summers, by the way.”

I shook his hand. “Tom Wilson. Are things as bad out there as it sounds?”

“Worse. The department’s lost two good men already, and another in the hospital. I’m rounding up volunteers so we can put two men in every car, and start posting guards at key locations. The city police are doing the same, and we’re starting to get refugees coming in from the local farms. We must have gotten a hundred calls about animal attacks already, and it’s getting worse.”

“We’re in for some rough times,” I mused.

“You gonna be selling that armor?” One of the men asked.

“Sure, once I figure out a workable design. The store’s got enough sheet metal in stock to make a few dozen sets. It’ll get harder after that, but there’s bound to be someplace in town that has a pile of steel sitting around.”

“I’m sure we can come up with something,” the deputy agreed. “Would you expect to be ready to sell by tomorrow, or will it take longer?”

“Tomorrow afternoon should be fine,” I said. “Here, let me give you my number.”

I pulled a business card out of my wallet, crossed out the office number and scribbled my room number on the back. The deputy carefully filed it away in his own wallet.

“I need to get this group organized now, but I’m sure the sheriff will be in touch. Stay safe.”

“You too,” I replied.

He shook my hand again, and then turned back to the group of armed men he’d been organizing. I listened to him detailing their assignments for a few moments, as an idea began to grow.

Sell armor, buy monster meat, and level up by eating instead of running around in the woods. It was kind of crazy, but it just might work.