

A Secret Base, and a Rotten Stench

Zaen did not want to go outside and babysit his brothers. He was perfectly content sprawled across the couch, game controller in hand, one leg hooked over the back while the other extended all the way to the armrest, despite his father's complaints that feet do not go where heads and hands belong. This position was scientifically proven to increase his one-hit-KO ratio in Assault of Terralon IV: The Redacted Operation. Yes, he would absolutely be happy to remain dangling in this way for the entirety of his Saturday, but his mother would not have it. "I did not retire from military intelligence only to have my living room commandeered as a war zone," she told him, powering his game off before he could save, and cutting off his indignant protest. "Now, *please*, go keep Styx and Drymidus from getting into trouble. You remember what they did to the neighbor's cat last week." It was true, Ziggy's owners were still threatening to press charges, but Zaen did not see why that meant *he* was in charge of preventing another similar incident. He probably would have argued further, protested longer, complained obstinately about his rights, but his mother had that militant look in her eyes, as if she were once again an officer giving an order, so he set aside the controller and trudged outside.

Their home was situated on a large lot, paid for by the Legion after his parents' retirement. Zaen was never sure how large, or where exactly their property ended, as it blended almost seamlessly into the public forest behind them, but he was pretty sure they had at least an acre to call their own. He shielded his eyes as he stepped outside; there were only a few insubstantial clouds attempting to block the sun's obnoxious rays. Once his eyes were adjusted, he searched for his younger brothers. Styx was climbing trees, as usual. Zaen had taken to calling him "Sticky", since he can scale just about anything. Drymidus, however, was nowhere to be seen.

"Great... already lost one," he muttered under his breath. "Hey, Sticky! Where's Drymidus?"

Styx paused in climbing, looking down at his older brother.

“He’s at the bottom of the... oh. I dunno!” he called with a shrug, continuing his ascent. Zaen sighed, running a hand through his hair.

“The two of you were supposed to stay together!”

“He’s the one that wandered off!”

“Still your fault! Get down here!”

“But Zaaaaeen, I’m almost to the top!”

“Then you better start moving, ‘cause it’s gonna take awhile for you to come down!” Zaen barked orders like his father did: sarcastic, but decisive, expecting his brothers to obey. Styx began his descent, his lips forming words muttered too quietly for Zaen to catch. The elder brother headed impatiently into the deeper woods before Styx’s feet reached the ground. His footsteps crunched heavily on the first fallen leaves of the season; perhaps his boots were propelled into the ground by hands thrust deep in pockets and shoulders hunched low.

If Styx was an inadvertent imp, then Drymidus was a wayward cherub. Styx sprinted through rooms, knocked into vases, spoke impudently. Drymidus meandered timidly, avoided heirlooms, mumbled ‘pleases’ and ‘thank-yous’. However, Styx was at least predictably troublesome. The problem with Drymidus was that he lived in his head. Some wayward idea came to his mind, and he would be gone, and it never made any sense where he ended up. Finding him in these woods was bound to be a tedious task.

After about an hour, Zaen and Styx found themselves standing beside a wide cave, torn open like a jagged wound in the steep hill. The branches obstructing its entrance were broken or pushed aside, and the cobwebs within were broken at roughly Drymidus’ height.

“Typical Drymidus, finding a place like this to crawl around in,” Zaen sighed, pulling his cellphone out of his pocket and shining the light inside. “Hopefully he’s still in there. Otherwise we’re going to be searching for him until dinner.”

“It smells. I’m not going in with you.”

“You’re right. You’re going in before me.” Zaen gave Styx a shove into the admittedly odorous cavern. The younger turned back with narrowed eyes and a curled lip, but trudged forward. Zaen ducked slightly and followed, his cellphone still illuminating the uneven ground a few feet in front of them. Fortunately, there seemed to be only a single path; never did the tunnel split, or branch off. Every once in awhile, Styx tripped over some memory of previous human exploration: a waterlogged and molding magazine, an empty cigarette carton, the broken handle of a switchblade knife. Long after they had lost sight of the entrance, Zaen grasped Styx’s shoulder. “Hang on. Do you hear that?” Deeper in the darkness, they heard the interspersed mumbling of someone deep in thought. The voice was high, but boyish. “Dammit, that’s him for sure,” Zaen sighed. “Drymidus! What on earth are you doing way in this cave?!”

“Zaen? Zaen, come look what I found!”

“If it’s another poor cat...” Zaen mumbled. Nevertheless, he tugged Styx deeper into the cave to the somewhat wider chamber that Drymidus had ‘discovered’. The kid was a pain, but he usually managed to dig up some interesting stuff. Zaen found him standing in a corner by some decrepit wooden furniture, surrounded by a flickering halo of lantern light. It appeared Drymidus had managed to find some matches and oil.

“Zaen, look. It’s... alchemy.” Drymidus spoke in an awed whisper, and gestured with a flourish to the scarred wooden table beside him. It was littered with mismatched jars, beakers, and

boxes. Each of these dusty containers contained this ingredient or that: teeth from some poor animal, the shriveled root of a long forgotten plant, an unidentified powder that seemed to ripple in the light. Basically, either the collection of a raving lunatic or the tools of a first-class swindler.

“Drymidus, come on, no one’s practicing alchemy out here. You could probably dig half this shit up in the front yard.”

“No way! This is Ithryroot! It’s an important component in appearance-altering solutions, and it only grows in northern Kharsova! And this powder is *obviously* ground from petrified Balticade. You don’t find these things just anywhere!”

“Well if these ‘ingredients’ are so valuable, why are they just sitting here gathering dust? Why would someone leave all of their very important alchemy supplies to rot?”

“Maybe they couldn’t find the cave anymore! Maybe this is like... buried treasure!” Though dashing the hopes of his younger brothers was one of Zaen’s favorite pastimes, it was hard for him to argue with the bright, eager face of Drymidus, whose eyes were wide with fascination behind his too-big glasses.

“Fine, fine, so you found some poor old dude’s alchemy kit,” he conceded.

“*And* I found this cave! It could be, like... our secret base!”

“Sure smells a lot for a secret base,” Styx interjected.

“Well, we’d have to clean it. Duuuuhh.”

“Or we could build a treehouse. I mean, sure, you found this cave and all, but I’m just saying, treehouses don’t reek like raw sewage...”

“Guys. Come on. We’re not building a treehouse, and we’re not making this cave our ‘secret base’. I don’t think it’s even *our* land. Let’s just head back home. You both need to bathe.”

Drymidus and Styx simultaneously lifted their right arms to give themselves an investigative sniff.

“I don’t smell that bad,” Styx protested.

“Yeah, me neither!” Drymidus piped up. Zaen tried and failed to resist the urge to roll his eyes.

“We’ve all been crawling around in this dank cave. Trust me, you stink. Now let’s get going.

Drymidus, put out that lantern... but be careful, there’s broken glass.” With a whine of protest,

Drymidus blew out the small flame in the lantern, leaving the room in darkness aside from Zaen’s phone flashlight. “Follow me.”



Zaen was ready to start punching children. Two children, to be specific.

“Zaen, wake up,” Styx whispered, poking his cheek.

“Come on, come hang out with us,” Drymidus pleaded, shaking his shoulder. “We’re gonna go visit our secret base!”

“Have fun,” is all Zaen answered, rolling away from them.

“Zaen, you have to come too!”

“Mom said we can’t go that far unless you go with us!”

“Pleaaaaaasseeeee?”

At this point, Zaen didn’t even know which twin was talking. Their voices shared identical annoying pitches and irritating timbres. “Later,” he grunted

“But we wanna go *now*!”

“Yeah, so we can have time to play before lunch!”

“Come on, you’re not sleeping anymore!” Zaen bit back his retort, that he would be sleeping,

were it not for a pair of insistent younger brothers who felt the urge to disturb him. With a heavy sigh, he sat up and kicked his blankets off onto the twins.

“Fine, fine. Let me go shower first.” They two boys cheered from under the quilt.

Atypical for his age, Zaen kept a meticulous personal hygiene regimen. His shower was stocked with carefully organized bottles containing shampoo, conditioner, body wash, facial scrub, anything he thought he would need. Every morning he kept the same fastidious routine, never failing to wash, rinse, and repeat. By the time he finally emerged, his dark hair still a bit damp, Styx and Drymidus were slumped against each other in the hall, exhausted by their own boredom. Styx was the first to notice his eldest brother’s presence.

“Is that a mirage? Drymidus, it’s been so long, I don’t know if that’s really Zaen,” he whispered, his voice raspy with mock-weakness.

“Yeah, yeah. Come on, let’s go see your stupid cave.”

“Secret base!” Styx corrected, jumping up and dashing outside. Drymidus followed, letting his twin do most of the talking on the trek back into the woods.

Once at the cave, Zaen grabbed the hoods of each of his brothers. “Before we go in, I’m making some rules. First, I get to be the boss--”

“--but Zaen!”

“I found--”

“You guys can’t be here without me, so I’m the boss. That’s that. The other rule is that I get to make whatever rules I want. Ok?”

“Fiiine,” they sighed in unison, grumbling and kicking at rocks. “Can we go now?” Styx asked

eagerly. Zaen waved a dismissive hand.

“Yeah, go ahead.” The two sprinted ahead, skidding on the muddy rocks and ducking under stalactites. Zaen followed, actually taking in the details of the tunnel this time. When he passed the knife handle, he picked it up and tucked it in his back pocket. The wood was worn with use, but was still sturdy enough to be repaired. His father would be proud of his resourcefulness.

By the time Zaen arrived in the wider “room”, Styx and Drymidus were well at work setting up their own sections of the base. Drymidus, not surprisingly, had claimed the alchemy table. He organized the various vials and pouches and boxes to his liking, and then set to work on dragging over rocks to use as a chair, or wall, or spare table. Styx must have found something special in an alcove across from his twin, and he was currently setting rocks in a ring around a puddle of groundwater clear enough to see his face reflected back at him. Zaen sat back against a wall and pulled out the knife handle, testing its weight. He flipped it over in his hands a few times, finding where the previous owner’s thumb must have rested. His fingers curled naturally around the grip. In the course of his examination, he found a pair of initials crudely carved into the base: NC. Turning the handle sideways, he could almost see his own initials, if there was a line across the C to make an A. He smiled at the thought that he was somehow meant to find it here. Like fate or something.

“Zaen? Did you hear me?”

“I think he’s asleep.”

“His eyes are open!”

“Dad sleeps with his eyes open.”

“I’m not sleeping, Styx,” Zaen sighed, tucking the handle back away. “What is it?”

“We found something...” Drymidus mumbled.

“But we didn’t do it, we swear! It must have already been here!”

“What is it?”

“Look, this isn’t like with Ziggy, we swear!”

“Yeah, we honestly just found him like this!”

“*What is it?!*” Zaen demanded, looking between the shrill boys.

“J-just come see,” Drymidus mumbled. He turned and led Zaen into a corner of the room that smelled particularly awful. And in moments, Zaen saw the reason.

The corpse must have been there for at least a week. Flies settled on his glazed, still open eyes, and maggots were squirming from his swollen lips. His skin was marbled with green streaked veins. Beneath a tattered plaid shirt, the stomach bloated to the point where the ribs expanded grotesquely. The figure’s nails appeared more like claws, and his tangled, shaggy hair was matted with dried blood. Zaen made a choking sound and turned away, covering his nose and mouth.

“That’s disgusting,” he managed to cough out, holding back his queasy stomach.

“Don’t tell Mom, okay? R-remember how mad she was when she finally found Ziggy’s body? She’d never let us come back here if she saw this!”

“Drymidus, this is not a cat... this is a human being! Or, uh, was... anyway, we can’t just cover it up!” He started walking away, the stench of the corpse making him want to gag again.

“You know, you’re going to get in trouble, too, ‘cause you let us come here,” Styx added.

“Mom might even ground you from sports, or video games.” Zaen frowned and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“It’s not my *fault*, though.”

“It isn’t our fault either, Zaen! C’mon, don’t do this to us!” Drymidus begged, clinging to

Zaen's free hand. At last, Zaen sighed and nodded.

"Fine. As the boss, I'm making a new rule. Nobody can talk about the... thing in the corner over there. And one of you has to find something to cover it up so we don't have to look at it. We'll just pretend it isn't there. Got it?" Zaen looked between his brothers, each of whom gave solemn nods. "Once you cover it up, let's go home. It's getting late anyway. I'm hungry."



It had been a week, yet Styx and Drymidus still had not lost interest in their cave. They dragged Zaen out to it every day. Drymidus enjoyed blending the various alchemy ingredients together; he had managed to make something that made his breath smell like lavender, but that was about the only solution that had worked, and Zaen still was not positive whether or not Drymidus had simply been chewing on the dried lavender plants. Styx would climb the rock walls and find all sorts of odd things: a cheap plastic ring, some marbles, a magazine with pictures of half-clothed women--he and Drymidus had enjoyed giggling over how it must have been covered in cooties--, even the missing blade for Zaen's knife handle. The twins had taken to stealing air freshener from their mother's closet to spray near the forbidden corner, as the stench was growing unbearable. Zaen just wanted to forget all about it, return to AoT IV, but his mother seemed to be of the opinion that he needed to spend more time with the little twerps he was mysteriously related to.

"Why do you guys like it here so much?" he asked one day, carving at a piece of wood with his knife. It was supposed to be a bear, but still just looked like a misshapen lump of wood.

"There's cool stuff," Styx answered, flipping through the so-called cooties magazine.

"I'm learning things," Drymidus replied, blending two powders together and then sniffing them.

“And you still don’t wanna tell Mom about... y’know...” Zaen nodded his head towards the corner.

“No!” they both shouted in unison.

“We just don’t wanna get in trouble,” Drymidus sighed.

“Yeah, we don’t wanna be grounded again,” Styx added. Zaen gave a light sigh and left it at that.



Two weeks. The twins behavior had turned... strange. They stopped with the air freshener, since Drymidus had apparently come up with some other way to mask the smell; in Zaen’s opinion, it was not working. Conversation within the cave was all but absent, each brother absorbed in his own task. With little else to do, Zaen had brought in a larger hunk of wood to use as a target as he learned to throw his knife. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. The steady cadence was like an extra heartbeat in the room, reminding everyone of their fourth guest. The muscles in Drymidus’ back were unusually tense, and jolted with each successive impact.

“Zaen, just stop,” he finally grumbled, turning to face his brother. Zaen rolled his eyes.

“What am I supposed to do? You guys dragged me out here. Besides, I’m the boss.” He never missed a beat in his throws.

“That’s still stupid. You shouldn’t get to be the boss when *I* found the cave!” Drymidus protested, his tone laden with mutiny.

“Fine, you want me to leave? I’ll just tell Mom about your little alchemy experiments and the dead guy you’ve been hiding in the corner!”

“You better not!” Drymidus jumped up, holding an empty glass jar. The walls amplified the sound of his advance towards his older brother. Zaen’s face twisted into a snarl as he lifted an arm like a shield.

“Zaen! Drymidus! What are you doing?” Styx called, finding his feet as well.

He took one step in their direction before a sound down the tunnel made them all pause, and swivel their heads cautiously towards the entrance. Heavy, authoritarian footsteps echoed off of damp walls. In moments, the three were blinded by the harsh beam of a fluorescent flashlight. Zaen raised a hand to shield his eyes, barely making out a uniformed silhouette.

“I’ve got them. Inside the cavern,” a clear voice spoke, followed by the signature buzz that always occurs at the termination of a radio conversation. The light slowly lowered, leaving the three brothers blinking like infants first entering the world. “Boys... do you have any idea how much you’ve worried your parents?”

“What? Why?” Styx asked, his lips turning down in a pout. “We come here every day.”

“And stay until midnight?” the officer inquired. Styx slowly shook his head, but his brow furrowed deeply as he searched his memory for the time they seemed to have lost. The officer offered an empathetic smile and nodded. “I remember doing the same at my age. Why don’t we go back up to the surface now? The search party’s probably waiting.”

Zaen was first to leave, his long legs carrying him back to the woods with a swift stride. Styx trailed behind him, glancing back every so often at his twin. Drymidus dragged his feet as he walked with the officer, his expression a curious blend of a nervous pout and a resentful scowl. Once the four of them had emerged, the brothers were caught in their mother’s arms. Zaen pretended not to be distracted as the officer walked off. He pretended not to hear as the officer called in the crime team,

claiming the cave smelled like a corpse and should be examined. He merely hugged his family more tightly and told himself they had climbed out of the cave for good this time.



Zaen followed in the footsteps of his parents, rising in the ranks of the military. He served on the battlefield, saw the horrors of man's violent side. The more lives he took, the less hope he retained for his own.

Drymidus outgrew alchemy and found a new way to self-medicate. He could maintain a facade of normalcy to his parents, but he could not lie to his own body as he filled it with poison. Instead, he numbed himself further and replaced lofty aspirations with a craving for one more needle.

Styx observed the world through media and learned to hate his own reflection. He told himself he was keeping in shape, preparing for the military like his older brother. When a week without food resulted in a hospital visit, he realized he lacked even the strength to stand on his own.

One other man left the cave that day, only to be placed underground at a more appropriate location. Investigators' best efforts found no suspects, no perpetrator. For a long while after, media outlets still retold bizarre post-mortem actions with eager horror.