

Your Archery skill has gone up. You are now level 7

Your Archery skill has gone up. You are now level 8

Your Archery skill has gone up. You are now level 9

Your Archery skill has gone up. You are now level 10

Your Archery skill has gone up. You are now level 11

Your Sword Fighting skill has gone up. You are now level 19

Your Willpower Training skill has gone up. You are now level 9

You have gained a level. You are now level 3

You have 3 skill points available. You have 1 attribute points available. You have 1 ability points available.

I whistle, then wince. My chest hurts. The meal boosted my healing speed, but I still have ways to go until my health it maxed out, therefore the pain's all gone.

Five levels in archery, just from this battle. One in sword fighting, which means I must have been close to going up already, considering how few strikes I got in. And I somehow raised my willpower skill.

And I'm level three. So more points to spend. Not that I'm spending them now. My attribute point will probably go to strength, but since I'm no longer in court, I need to rethink my plan for my abilities. I have time, so that's good. The skill points will go into new skills, Definitely leather working, and I will look for those magical repair kits. Sewing seems like a good idea. Repair my clothing, along with my armor.

On the battlefield, along with the Stoger's body by the carts, people are working. As soon as it was over, they descended on it and accessed their loots. There are none of exclamations of joy at whatever they find I'd expect from getting spoils from a fight. There's a sense of business to the proceedings. I guess that if, as Sasha and Herbert implied, this is something that happens regularly, maybe it is just business to them. The thing that gets done once the battling is over.

"If it isn't the hero of the hour," Sasha says, grinning as she approaches. "I'm surprised Daz hadn't offered to take you in and see to your injuries."

"He promised he'd stop offering that to me." My ears burn at how I'm sure Daz would have gone about seeing to them.

"He...promised?" She kneels next to me. "Just what did you give him in exchange for that to happen?"

"Funny," Daz says, stepping around the cart with an arm full of the nicknacks it

contained. "I do have self-restraint, you know."

"I know you do," she replies, placing a hand on my chest. "You keep it tied up in the last wagon of the caravan. This is going to take a bit. I used up most of my mana on the field."

"It's okay," I say as she starts whispering almost words. "This is going to be faster than the normal way." I close my eyes and wait.

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"Careful."

I jerk awake as Daz keeps Sasha from tipping sideways.

"Sorry," she whispers. "I'm tapped out."

"You need to stop doing that." He looks at me. "You going to be okay?"

My health is just above three-quarter. "I'll be fine. How long was it?"

"Almost two hours." He takes her in his arm and carries her away.

I stand and stretch, trying not to wince at the soreness.

"Thank you for saving me," A woman says. She's younger than I thought from the glance I'd gotten of her. A few years older than me at most.

"Your welcome. It's what I'm here for."

"Is there anything I can do to repay you?"

My mouth is open to protest that she doesn't have to offer herself to me like that when I realize that isn't what she means. Herbert's talk and Daz's advances have me thinking that's all the people in the caravan think about.

"I..." I can't think of anything. I am not going to ask for money, even if this wasn't how I was paying my way to Toronto. "No, it's okay. I mean it," I say when she looked to insist.

"Okay, then. If you need something." She motions to the righted cart. "This is where I'll be, putting everything in order."

"Do you need help with that?"

She looks at me. "It's okay. After the excitement, I need the monotony."

I feel like insisting, but she's climbing onto the cart.

"How are you feeling?" Herbert asks.

"Better than before Sasha healed me."

He nods. "How about you tell me what was going through your head?" His tone is on the harsher side.

"Excuse me?"

"Were you looking to be some sort of hero? Gain Chuck's gratitude?"

"Someone was being attacked," I reply. "What was I going to do, wait for someone to show up and hope they were going to get there in time?"

He searches my face. "That's it?"

"What else is there?"

"You realize you could have died, right?"

"Do I need to go through this with you, too? Daz basically called me an idiot for going to her rescue," I add at his raised eyebrow.

"He wasn't entirely—"

“She. Was. Being. Attacked.” I wait, and as he opens his mouth. “Please tell me it’s not common practice to let people die if you think you can do something to help among you people. I was starting to like some of you.”

“Dennis, it isn’t—”

“She. Was—”

“I get it.” He sounds annoyed and amused. “It’s just that—” he shuts his mouth as I open mine. “It’s going to get you killed,” he hurries to say once I’ve closed it and I glare at him.

“That’s what training is for.”

“Which you don’t have. I don’t know what you think sixteen in your sword—”

“Nineteen.”

“What you think that does, but you don’t just take on monsters you know nothing about, on your own, not with that level of skill.”

“Then don’t leave me on my own.”

He places a hand on my shoulder. “Dennis, go home. No matter how bad things are with your dad, getting yourself killed out here is not the solution.”

“I’m not looking to get myself killed. I have a quest. Once I’ve accomplished it, I’m returning to Court and really hoping my dad’s cooled down enough we can talk.”

“How did you end up with a quest that’s taking you out of Court? I looked at the board and everything’s local.”

I start to tell him, then close my mouth. He breathes out. He did say the rules were different out here. “Were you close enough to hear when I told Chuck the armor was given to me?”

“I’m taking you lied.”

“Not... really? The letter that was with it said I could take it, and the whole thing came with a quest. Aaron was an Explorer who died in a ruin outside of Court. But he’s from Kansas City, and the quest is about delivering a letter to his family. Everything I’m wearing was sort of the payment to get me to accept the quest.”

“You came across another explorer? That’s kind of lucky. That’s not a common class.”

[a note. A reader pointed out that how I had Dennis get his class created the kind of loophole that changed the entire story. So while I haven’t corrected the previous chapters to take into account what I am mentioning here, going forward, it is how getting a class when someone isn’t in a settlement works, or even if they are in a settlement. If by the time the countdown reaches zero, the person hasn’t picked a class; the system assigned them the class of the closest person to them. Along with that, to minimize the chances of it happening. The older generation has been telling stories of ‘classless’ people and the horrible life they had to endure.]

“It’s not the kind of luck you’re thinking about.” I sigh. “I was stuck in the ruin on my choosing day. An asshole shoved me down there. I don’t want to talk about it.” He nods.

“And when the countdown ended, the system assigned me the class of explorer.”

“It assigned it to you? I thought that if you didn’t pick a class, you went classless.”

“I did too.” I shudder at the memory of that despair. “And being an explorer felt kind of too specific, so I explored a while more and came across Aaron’s body, the letter, the quest and the equipment.”

“So, the problems with your dad is because he thought you were classless?”

I roll my eyes. “His problems go way deeper than that. He figured I was a farmer, for some reason, and too pissed about me going ‘gallivanting in the forest’ to let me explain what actually happened. He was ready to sell me to one of the farmers instead. Fine, I’m exaggerating, but he was in talk with one of them to take me on as an apprentice.”

“Why would your dad think you were a farmer if you were in the middle of the forest?”

“Fuck if I know.” The swear escapes before I realize it, but Herbert just nods thoughtfully. “There was nowhere in Court I could get away from him since he knows just about everyone.”

“And your grandfather’s in charge.”

“That too. So I figured the quest gave me a reason to leave for a while.”

Herbert nods again. “Alright, I guess I can see why you don’t want to go back. In that case, I’m going to give you some advice for when you’re in Toronto, and beyond it.”

“I’m listening.” Finally, information about the city.

“In Toronto, stick to the major roads. Have your sword at your belt, but don’t keep your hand close to it. You want people who pickup on your being new to the city to know you’re armed, but not that you’re eager to use it. That brings the constables down, and they aren’t known to listen to explanations before bringing you in. And once jailed, it takes a while for the judge to see you.”

I nod. That makes sense.

“You’re going to Kansas City.” He looks up as he thinks. “I think that’s somewhere west, more than south. Don’t go through Detroit. When you’re ready to leave, go to the west end Caravan Market and find one that’s going to Buffalo. At the Market in that city, you’ll get one that’s going to take you in that direction, if not one that goes there directly.”

“Okay. Will it be hard to find?”

“No, just have someone point you to Lake Way. Take that west and you’ll hit the market.” He chuckles. “You’ll probably smell it long before you reach it, if the wind’s right. But there’s one thing, and this is probably the most important, if you want to survive your stay in Toronto and beyond.” He looks at me expectantly, and I nod. “Dennis, you need to lose that hero streak of yours and start putting your survival before that of strangers.”

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