

The next morning's travel is quiet.

Still no buff from a good night's sleep. When I asked Brandon what I'd have to do to get it over breakfast, he replied I'd have to invest in a much better quality bed, as well as a magical tent, since it isn't just the bed that governs getting those buffs.

Helen didn't say anything then, or after. I think our discussion unsettled her. Like she can't understand how I'm not interested in becoming famous. How being a 'lowly' guard is enough for me. I guess growing up in a city like Toronto, instead of a tightly knit community like Court, leads to different expectations out of life.

After a few hours, Brandon goes from heading mostly westward to entirely south.

"Is there a problem?" I ask him. Like me, he has the Direction Sense ability, but he's been to Detroit before. So where I get nothing when I think of that city, he knows exactly in what direction it is. Just like if I think of Court, I can turn to face it and know that if I walk in that direction, I'll eventually find myself there.

For him to change direction means he's noticed something.

"We're getting close to the Nation of the People," he replies.

"Are they people we want to avoid?"

He looks at me in surprise. "No. They're fine people. Only get pissy if you get bossy with them. They have history of being pushed around by those in power before the System, so they don't take well to anyone who tries now that they're able to be their own people again. The problem is that the trade road passes through their town, and there's a market."

"Which means my picture and the amount Xander is will to pay for my journal will have circulated."

"Yeah. Like I said, the People are nice enough folks. But it's a town, and there's no way to know who there won't be like the others."

"You'd know about that," Helen says, in a sharp tone.

Brandon closes his eyes and grinds his teeth. And for a moment, I think that after the morning of peace, this will make him blow up. But he lets out a breath and gives me a 'you know I'm doing this for you, right?' look. I give him an encouraging smile in return, and he rolls his eyes.

"We'll reach the road well east of the town. We might have to wait for a gap between caravans, but then we can cross unnoticed and go the long way around."

The road comes into view with the sun high, so we have lunch under the cover of the forest while the caravan passes. Once we can't see them, and there isn't another one approaching, we run across and lose ourselves among the trees.

The forest quickly turns into marshland, and we're all soaked to the knees, with Helen being wet and dirty from tripping. It takes a solid glare on my part to keep Brandon from commenting while Silver helps her. When we reach a river, she dunks herself under as we cross it, then changes into a dry set of clothing without slowing us.

As the sun reaches the horizon, we top a steep hill, and I stop as I see the town of... was it really called 'The Nation of the People'? Or did they just think of it as a nation and not a town? In the distance.

Regardless, it is a sight.

It's big. I mean really big. I can't see the wood palisade as it winds around and away in nothing resembling a circle. The most striking element after that is how... empty it looks.

Oh, there are buildings, and a good number of them, but there is so much space between them. There are clusters here and there. But otherwise it's a lone building with plenty of space before another. There might be small fields here and there, next to some houses, but that seems to be an exception.

"What do they do with all that space?" Silver asks with awe in her voice that echoes how I feel.

"I know, right?" If I climb on the palisade in Court and look over my town, all I see are rooftops, with space for roads and the occasional yard. It's lighter close to the walls, as that hasn't been filled with houses yet, but we don't stretch out like they have here.

"Brandon, how come they're so spread out?"

"No idea. I never thought to ask when I traveled through before." He motioned westward. "Come on. We want to put some distance before we stop for the night. The hunting parties should all be back inside before the sun disappears, but people out here have a habit of thinking anyone they cross who isn't on the road is out to no good." He grins at me. "Unless you think you want to practice fighting against them, it's not a good idea to have them walk into our camp."

We walk into another forest when we barely have enough light to see the trees and Brandon has us continue for a while with his light crystal to navigate by. When we reach a clearing, we make camp. Dinner is dried bear meat and water. Then, Helen and Silver huddle for magical discussions, while Brandon leans against a tree with a book in his hand.

"Is that a different book?" I ask.

"Yeah." He looks at the cover. "I finished the history of the Appalachians last night."

"Who are they?"

"They were what people called the natives who lived in those mountains well before the System arrived, but the book is about the mountains themselves."

"Why are you reading about mountains? And in a book from before the system?" It looks old, and with being able to access information from the system directly, there aren't a lot of books being written anymore. Dad's always complaining about how we're going to lose our history this way. But it's just a question of asking the right question, so I don't see his concern.

"For research."

"Why bother researching that? Isn't your build about fighting?"

"Well, ignoring that you never know the kind of details from the past that will lead you to a ruin, it's easy experience. Why wouldn't I do it?"

"How is reading experience?"

He stares at me. "Haven't you looked at your class?"

"Yes."

He looks at me expectantly. So I bring up... where could there be anything about experience by reading? Well, there's only one section on my sheet that has anything that gives experience, so I bring up my active quests.

Dennis Carpenter's Active Quests
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
Ruin Explorer Quest, step 2: Have Discovered 2 Ruins
An explorer always finds the discovery of a ruin rewarding.
Rewards: 4563 experience
Cache Explorer Quest, step 2: Have found 2 Caches
Sometimes, finding a hidden cache can be a reward in and of itself.
Rewards: 4563 experience
Research Explorer Quest, step 1: Research 1 subject
The past isn't always contained within ruins. Sometimes it is in tomes that the rewards lay.
Rewards: 2197 experience
Fighting Explorer Quest, step 3: Have fought 6 different creatures
The Explorer doesn't only learn in dusty tomes and through ancient ruins. They also have something to learn from the creatures of the world.
Rewards: 6929 experience

"If it's supposed to be in my quests, I don't see anything about reading."

"Really? You don't have the research quest?"

"Yes, but what you're doing isn't research," I reply. "Research is about trying to learn about something in depth, not just reading a book."

"I'm not just reading," Brandon replies. "I'm learning about the Appalachians. It's one subject, and when I'll be done, I will know it quite well."

"Come on. There's no way the system counts that."

"The fact I'm working on step nine of my research quest says it does."

"But I've gone over the maps in Aaron's journal often enough, I can probably draw a few from memory and that quest is still on its first step for me."

"Maps aren't a subject. But they're a good place to start from, especially maps from another explorer. Since all the places he marked on them are places of interest, so someone will have written a book about them. Researching places you plan on going to is always to your advantage, beyond advancing the quest."

"But I'm not planning on exploring ruins. I'm going to be a guard."

He gives me an amused look. "Okay, but even then. It's an extra ability point every four steps. Do you really want to say no to that?" He offers me a book.

I take it. 'Lord Dorchester-Man behind Toronto?'. I raise my frown from it to

Brandon. “What use do I have for something that had to have happened years before the system in Toronto?”

“Centuries,” he corrects. “And the use is advancing your quest. The system doesn’t care if the information is useful or not, just that you learned it.” He opens his book. “Word of warning. It knows if you’ve learned something or not. So you need to actually read what’s there, not just skim it like it’s a random system query.”

The book is kind of thick. I’m not getting through this anytime soon. “Where did you even get this?”

“At the club, before we left. I always leave the books I’m done with and pickup new ones.”

“And they let you just leave with them?” I open the book and squint. Why is this written so small?

“One of the perks of being a member of the club, which you are, I’ll remind you.”

“I’ll just give this back to you when I’m done.” If I ever get down. If it’s all written this small, and a quick flip thought shows it is. I might not be done by the time I’m back in court.

“Sure.” He smiles. “I have a satchel full of books you can read afterward.”

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