

We threaded the snow-covered ruins filled with people galloping everywhere like excited electrons. Herald Stone lacked a scientist title to know if that simile was accurate. We were careful not to bump into anyone to avoid any trouble. Scratching my tusk in amusement, I observed dozens of players steal each other's kills.

*Does this really count as kill-stealing though?*

It meant taking credit—literally, as in getting Artas and loot—for a monster that someone made more effort to kill. But that wasn't what was happening here. A bazillion skills pounded a monster into oblivion the moment it appeared that no one could claim someone stole a kill that was rightfully theirs. How could anyone claim the majority of the damage was their work?

Even if that was the case, which most players accepted, being quite sporty about it, some arguments still flared up. We caught trails of angry shouting as we looked for the camp. Such didn't go on for long because everyone would run to the next monster that spawned in this area.

"Didn't expect this to happen." Melonomi looked around with a judging eye. "I thought it was going to be all unity and cooperation with more players now. Guess I was wrong."

"With no big bad common enemy, it's every Mardukryon for himself." I slightly smiled at two groups butting heads over a Fengharl that recently died. "Makes me feel nostalgic."

"Why so?" Paritor asked.

"I've seen this play out many times, people fighting over monsters," I said. "Kind of a poetic irony."

I didn't elaborate that my memories were from my childhood gaming days more than a decade ago. Back then, we flamed each other through chat for kill-stealing, and I didn't realize how amusingly ironic it was. Now, people's virtual selves yelled at each other. *Ah, technology.*

To paint myself a Mother Core Online veteran, I instead said, "When I started this game, I usually jumped to a newly discovered race to get a feel of it. And this—" I nodded at the arguing parties "—happened so often I lost count. Since everyone started low-level in a newly discovered race, we all fought over the same monsters, and issues like this unavoidably cropped up."

Kezo laughed, "Good times. There's always that guy who thinks he 'owns' a monster because he saw it first and makes a big commotion out of it. Don't worry, this will lessen as we progress and more and more players drop out of the Great Hunt. In a day, monsters will outnumber players. Another day and a single monster will be difficult to kill for the average party."

"That doesn't mean the competition is going to get less stiff," I said, channeling my Venerated Veteran aspect. "The intensity will increase as days go by, even as the competitors decrease. Strong teams will start to take things seriously. I'd like to think they wouldn't argue with each other over kills, but we know that's not going to happen."

"Especially with Luds around," said Nitana.

"I want to stir clear of that guy," said Megan, "but another part of me wants to kill-steal him."

"We can try," I said, grinning at Megan.

"It can't be helped," said Kezo. "Some people just have an attitude when they get competitive. At times, I do too, so I don't judge. We really shouldn't be toxic."

"Kill stealing is part of the Great Hunt though," I said. "It's how people react that can be toxic."

“Can I try to kill-steal now?” Megan asked, devilishly waving her wands. “I’ll probably not get any, but whatever. It’ll be funny if I do. These guys will be really surprised if I get a monster from under their noses.”

“You’re turning evil,” said Nitana. “The date’s going to your head.”

“Nu-uh. It’s just—”

“We should avoid fighting with other parties,” Megan said with an edge to her voice. “I didn’t sign up with your party to make enemies of people. I’m not a confrontational type of person.”

“There’ll be no confrontations with anyone,” said Kezo. “I assure you that. We’re going to have a fun and relaxed Great Hunt.” He stopped walking to turn around and give us a double thumbs-up. Then he tilted his head, looking up to think. “Maybe not too relaxed. Relaxed while doing our best, that’s it. There’ll be times we’ll fight with other parties, especially if we can’t avoid entering a PK zone, but we won’t be toxic about it.”

“Sheesh, PvP stuff,” said Melonomi, clicking her tongue. “The part of the Great Hunt I hate most. I’ll be happy not to set foot on any PK zone, but that’s not going to happen since we aim to get far.”

“Fortunately, the Great Hunt’s starting area isn’t a PK zone,” I said.

The areas surrounding the village were ‘safe zones’ to protect beginner players—players couldn’t kill each other unless they turned on their PvP settings. Further out, zones where PvP settings were compulsorily switched on emerged. The main ‘late-game’ of the Great Hunt was killing off the competition so no one could kill-steal the valuable monsters you were targeting. Or killing others to steal their monsters—this was probably more the case.

“When we do run into PK areas,” said Kezo, “we’ll just keep clear of the hardcore players. They’d be busy fighting each other. So long as we don’t try kill-stealing them—”

“I’ll try!” Megan piped.

“No, you won’t,” Nitana snapped.

“—we’ll be mostly safe,” Kezo finished.

“And if someone does try to take potshots at us,” I said, “you’re there to protect us, Kezo.”

“Kezo’s previous party used to place within the top five on the leaderboards,” said Paritor. “I distinctly recall it. Your presence is sufficient deterrence.”

As Kezo walked, he scratched the back of his head. I couldn’t see his face, but I bet he was blushing... if Mardukryons could blush. The magma lines on the parts of his skin uncovered by his armor flared brightly. That could be it.

“Tha-that was mostly because of my party,” said Kezo. “Teamwork played a large part in my old party’s success, as it will in ours. It’s not a one-man show. Oh, we’re here—this is the camp. I’ll get quests from the head Hunter-Warrior to get us going, though I’m not too sure we’ll be able to complete any today.”

The camp was set up in a wide flat area that used to be an ancient Mardukryon plaza, similar to the stomping grounds of the Living Statue. It was a circular formation of a dozen or so burrows, surrounded by a dry moat filled with spikes, and a low wall made of earth that they had dug plus debris from the ruins. Each crater had a large tent sitting in it, with crates and weapon racks littered inside and around them. And in the middle of the circle of tents was an even larger one, reminding me of a circus tent—this was where Kezo was headed.

This must be a permanent base camp that the NPCs fixed up every Great Hunt. That made sense since they'd need a secure line sending their booty back to the village. *Hebe, booty*. I hadn't visited this area before, so I didn't know what it looked like when there was no event.

NPCs cleared the moats by melting the snow and boiling the resultant water away with fire spells. Quite interesting to watch. While moats filled with water were great for protecting medieval castles, they would have no use here. The water would freeze and monsters could walk over it, safe from the spikes, and attack the camp.

But there was no worry about the camp getting attacked, was there?

The monsters here, even the event ones, were weak and posed no danger to the average Hunter-Warrior. And there were loads of Hunter-Warriors here. Only Buvalu, the strongest Mirdabon, and a boss monster that roamed everywhere instead of staying in a fixed spot, could be a threat. However, that encounter was very rare.

"What quests did you get?" I asked Kezo when he returned.

"The usual," he replied. "Kill sixty Hailstorm Crabores, gather three hundred Fengharl Fangs, those sorts of tasks. I signed up for several quests, but we're not going to do them now."

"Impossible to do now, with every monster gone in a blink," I said, looking around. "I haven't even seen a Hailstorm Crabore."

"Don't worry, we'll be able to complete this tomorrow, when monsters get stronger."

"If not the quests, what are we doing?" Megan asked.

"We can continue our practice—" Kezo began.

I squeezed in my suggestion, "How about we hunt for Ichors?" My partymates looked at me. "There are Ichors in these parts, right?" I continued, leaning forward and lowering my voice. "The leader of the Frost Imps drops one. And the Hoarfrost Yews also have one. We can collect them while doing the Great Hunt."

"Good idea, Herald," said Kezo. "I know of six Ichor locations, minus the Frost Imps, so that's five."

"Paritor knows four other than the Frost Imps," I said, looking at Paritor with a raised brow.

Paritor rapidly blinked before answering, "Ye-yes. It is my pleasure to lead you to the sources of Kruos Ichor Sliver I have discovered."

I knew that he considered for a moment keeping withholding the information. Then I turned to Melonomi, putting on the most hopeful expression a Mardukryon could. Paritor already committed to sharing what he knew. She'd find it hard to keep clinging on to her secrets.

"And you know of five Ichors, right?" I asked her, though I suspected that she was lying and knew more locations than Kezo.

But Melonomi didn't say anything. She looked away from my gaze.

I could guess what was going through her mind. The six of us committed to complete Bawu's cure-all potion and escape Mardukryon mountain. But we didn't promise to reveal how to get more Ichors. My hunch was that Ichors would be the limiting factor in the number of *servings*—I didn't know the correct term—for Bawu's potion. Ichors couldn't be sold in the auction house, so, other than finding them yourself, the only

other way to get more was buying from players. And that'd be tough convincing them to sell an obviously valuable item for cheap. Or at all.

“Once we recreate the recipe, we’ll be famous—you’ll be famous,” I pressed on. “You planned to get your name out there and apply to be an MCO game correspondent, right?” Melonomi subtly nodded, though still looking away. “Then we should get as many Ichors as we can to ensure success. Who knows? Crafting the potion might only have a slim chance—we need lots of backup ingredients.”

“Yeah, I’ll tell you about the Ichors I know,” she said. “But it’ll probably just be the same as what Kezo and Paritor have already found.”

*So, that’s the game you want to play?* “Let’s go with the Frost Imps first since they’re nearest,” I said.