

“Welcome to Toronto,” Herbert announces as the road breaks out of the trees and fields of wheat open up before us. A lot of fields. There’s a rough circle around Court of two kilometers that’s all farms. Here, it goes as far as the eye can see. Where the horizon is filled with trees back home, this is filled with golden stalks.

“How many people are in Toronto?” I ask in awe. Court has a few thousands.

“System if I know,” he replies with a chuckle.

“And they need all of this?” Most of this has to be for trade. Back home, farmers keep some for themselves to sell at the market. I don’t know how much; that’s never been an aspect I cared about.

“I guess they do.”

“If you’re impressed,” Daz says, saddling up to us, “you need to take a tour around the periphery of the city. Really see how many of these there are.”

“You mean there’s more of them?”

He laughs. “A lot more. We’re at least five kay from Toronto proper, and it’s like this all around it.”

“Five kilometers of farms, around the entire city.” I can’t keep the awe out of my voice.

“On the land, at least,” Sasha says.

“No.” George joins us. “On the water too. There are hydroponic fields for some of the hardier vegetables.”

“I didn’t know you could grow them on water.”

He laughs. “I figure what you don’t know about growing food it vast.”

I nod, then realize the others have joined us instead of walking along the carts.

“We’re within Toronto’s civilized zone now,” Herbert said.

“Been in it for a while, actually,” Max adds. “But this close, the chances of monsters appearing are basically nill.”

“Unless Chuck’s involved,” Daz comments, and I look at Herbert for an explanation.

“Chuck is…” He searches for a while. “Bad luck, in a way, when it comes to monsters.”

“Or amazing luck,” Daz adds. “If you look at it the right way.”

Herbert nods. “Chuck draws them closer somehow. No one knows why. When I asked him, he said he didn’t either.”

“But do you believe him?” Max asks.

“I do,” Daz says, then he gives the archer a pointed look when he opens his mouth to comment.

“How ever you look at it,” Herbert says. “What happens is that his caravan is attacked by monsters disproportionately more often than any others.”

“We haven’t gone one back and forth on any trip since I’ve been here,” Sasha says, “without an attack like the one we had.”

“But we were in the wilds,” I point out. “Those will happen.”

“We’re never in the true wilds on a road,” Herbert says. “It’s simple existence reduces the wilderness on each side enough what should poke its muzzle out of the trees shouldn’t be tougher than a lever three or four Stoger, and not in the numbers we had to fight them.”

“But they came from deeper. We heard the trees fall, saw the path they made. Even with the road, the wilds are going to be higher there, right?”

“Yes, but they should be staying there. Monsters don’t travel out of their zones.”

“Unless Chuck’s involved,” Max says.

“No,” I say. “Court is attacked by monsters at least twice a year.”

“Those are different,” Herbert says. “They’re monster waves. They exist to attack a settlement. They grow along with it until it’s a city. Then they go away.”

“Cities have enough problems internally without needing the extra stress of being attacked,” George comments.

“So because of Chuck, monsters get pulled to the caravan…” I look down the length of it. “Why are there so many carts, then? I’d think that word would spread and no one would want to risk it.”

“With risks comes rewards,” Daz says.

“Or long stay in jail,” Sasha adds.

“No jail in the wild, that’s the beauty of them,” the sneak replies with a smirk.

“And faster skill gain,” Max says. “So Chuck’s caravan draws a lot of people looking to fight; guards are never a problem. And because of that, merchants are willing to travel with us.”

“Not to say of the deal Chuck has with them,” George says. “They get to keep part of what they harvest from our kills.”

“*Our* Kills?” Helen says. “When have you ever joined in?”

“I join in spirit,” George replies. “I join by keeping your bellies full and morale high.”

“But yes, they get to keep some of the spoils just for harvesting them,” Herbert says.

“Why do you say harvesting? They just access their inventories and take what’s there, right?”

“They haven’t gone over harvesting as part of your classes yet?” Herbert asks. “You were going to be a guard, right?”

“They don’t start us on guard related stuff until we have the class.”

“Okay. Then, after you’ve emptied the inventory, you can get more if you butcher the corpse. It’s mostly extra meat, hides, and bones, but those with high enough skill have been known to pull out the unexpected gem, or precious ring, or something small like that, but valuable.”

“How does a ring end up as part of any kind of reward for killing a monster?” I ask, perplexed.

“The system puts it there,” Max answers

“Or they ate someone who had it,” Helen adds.

“No way,” the archer says. “No one goes in the wilds wearing something that valuable. The system throws that in as an incentive to get people to risk their lives, and to get them to spend their points on the skill.”

“That implies the system wants something,” Helen replies. “It doesn’t want anything, it’s just there.”

“I’m just saying—”

“How about we stop the religious talk before it gets to blows?” Herbert warns.

“Sorry boss,” Max says, and Helen smirks.

There are groups of people who think the system came here for a reason. What that reason is varies from group to group. Grandpa Louis says that most of them started on the day the system appeared, and that they were those people whose lives weren’t going well before that. They saw the system as the answer to their prayers that God hadn’t bothered with.

He had to deal with a group like that. It’s how he ended up as a Commander. With a gun to his head, was the way he described it. When they started showing up in Court, he wanted them kicked out, but the Mayor said Canada was built on inclusion, and she would not start going against that.

That was before I was born. We’ve had a few mayors since. After one group tried to take over Base because they saw him as ‘The Voice of the System’, tolerance for those kinds of groups dropped in Court.

Again, before I was born.

Now days, there are a handful of them, but they are the quiet types. They get together on the ninth of June every year and hold a celebration to remember the arrival, but beyond that, it’s easy to forget they’re around.

“So, if I want that extra stuff, I want to get Butchering as a skill?”

“Yes, if you’re going to be a generalist,” Herbert says.

“Get Cryptozoology,” Daz adds. “Knowing what you’re dealing with can give your skill a boost. But that’s only if you’re going to be wandering around a lot,” he says, grinning at me, “and won’t always be encountering the same kind of monsters.”

I make a mental note to get them. Just for the extra meat, it’s worth it.

“Alright, let’s get back to the rounds,” Herbert says and the others complain.

“We’re in the city zone. Nothing’s going to happen,” is the gist of it.

“Then you get to explain yourself to Chuck directly when bandits burst out of the field and you aren’t ready to deal with them.” That silences them and they move on to walking along the carts in pairs again.

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The sun is two hands span over the horizon, if I look to the side of the Toronto skyline, when I smell something, and wrinkle my nose.

“Told you, you’d smell the Caravan Market before you saw it,” Herbert says with a chuckle.

“You said it was on the other side of the city.”

“That’s the West Market. This is the East one.”

The road went from packed dirt to cobbled around noon. The farms were a mix of grain and vegetables, and they all had people working them. Then the field end and instead of a different one, it opens to a field of tents and wooden buildings.

“You’re going to want to watch where you step,” Herbert warns me as, at the front, Chuck turns his cart onto the path leading to it. “No one’s ever cobbled the place.”

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I pull my feet from the mud with a squelch. Even though I’m told the rain stopped well before we arrived, there is not one dry spot, and anywhere the animals walked on, it’s mud up to my ankles. I am so glad the armor’s boots go up to my calves. I don’t want to

think about walking in this with my everyday boots would have been like.

However hard it is to walk in the stuff, the animals had no problems pulling the carts. Carts and wagons left the caravan to go to tents or buildings as we progressed further in. We passed one with people lined up by the door; they were all dressed in armor and armed.

When the last of the cart we guarded left, we continued on behind the ones following Chuck. Each group of guards joined us as they had nothing to guard and we were a large, mostly happy, group as we entered a fenced off area with a larger and better built building at the back. Chuck and the four carts behind him headed for a barn, and the rest of us congregated, talked and rejoiced at having made it to the city.

The sun had dipped to a few fingers over the horizon when I decided I might as well go. I'd reached Toronto, so there was no point in hanging around. I tried to find Herbert, or one of the others, but gave up when no one could point me to where they'd gone.

So here I am, a few steps into the muck and wondering if I have the strength to make it to the road, when—

“Where do you think you’re going?” Chuck demands, behind me.

I turn as he approaches. He pulls his feet out with the same squelching mine did, but he doesn't seem to feel the suction. Then again, I saw him throw a level twenty-three Stoger across a battlefield. He probably doesn't even know the mud is trying to suck him in.

“I figured you did your part,” I answer hesitatingly. “You got me here in one piece, so I’m going to head out.”

“Just like that?”

“I’m not sure what else there is to do... I mean, I got the sense me saying thank you isn't something you're waiting for.”

He rolls his eyes.

Chuck Dorval wishes to Trade with you
Chuck Dorval is offering you 5000\$
What do you wish to offer Chuck Dorval in return?

Next to that is a place I can put an amount, or items.

“I don't understand.” It's not like I have anything of value; well, of that kind of value.

“It's your pay.”

“Pay for what?”

“What do you think? The work you did.”

“Oh.” Wait what? “No, you don't have to pay me. You said that guarding the caravan was—”

“Stop it, kid.” He runs a hand over his face. “I'm give you the money, you take it. That's it.”

“But—”

“I swear, kid. You start on some explanation of why you don't deserve it, or some other bullshit like that, And I am... I don't know. But I'm going to do something.”

“Slap me?”

“I don't hit kids,” he replies with unexpected harshness. He takes a breath. “I

appreciate you might be worried there're strings attached, but I—”

“It’s not that,” I protest. “It’s just that—”

“You can’t stop, can you?” he asks, perplexed. “It’s some sort of automated response. You just have to explain how you aren’t worth whatever someone else wants to give you, don’t you?”

“No. I—” that isn’t it. “I mean, I don’t think I’m worthless.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I’m not,” I protest. “I helped. I even saved someone.”

“And you’re refusing payment.”

“Is that why you want to give this to me? Because I saved someone? I don’t—”

“Not that exclusively,” he replies in exasperation. “You’re getting paid for pulling your weight in that fight. Everyone who did gets a cut of the spoils.”

“You could have said that from the start,” I say meekly, accepting the money.

“Well, no one else argues against getting it. Most people just take what they’re given.”

“Thank you.”

He looks at me, and I can’t tell if he’s about to scream, or maybe hit me, even if he says he doesn’t hit kids. Then he takes another breath and his expression softens.

A little.

“Look kid. Herb told me your plans. How about I hire you full time instead? The money’s good. As you saw, you’ll get plenty of chances to train. I’m going south after this, so it’s not like you’ll be in Court anytime soon. Give your dad time to explode and then calm down. Your grandpa will appreciate knowing you’re safe.”

I shake my head. “I have this quest to do.”

“Why the fuck am I not surprised. You’re just like—” he closes his mouth with a shake of the head. “Okay, then be careful out there.”

“Do you have any advice?” I ask as he turns away. “For the city, I mean.”

He snorts. “Don’t go in. Too many people, most of them assholes. Why do you need to go in?” he asks.

“I’m going to need supplies and a place to stay for the night.”

“Look around, kid. You’re in the middle of a marketplace. About the only thing you can’t get here is stuff you need your points to buy.”

“That’s kind of what I need to deal with, too.”

He nods. “As for the night.” He points to a building with lanterns hanging on each side or the door and lots of light coming from the windows in the approaching evening.

“That’s an inn. Tell him I sent you, and remind him that if he charges you more than twenty bucks for a room, I’m going in there and pounding him through a wall.”

“Isn’t that kind of harsh?”

“Maybe you missed that, but that’s what I do. Anyway. It’s just so he knows you aren’t making up who sent you. Don’t abuse the knowledge, kid.” He turns and walks away.

“Thank you,” I call after him.

“Don’t get killed,” He replies, then grumble something I don’t make you.

It takes me five arduous steps to get on more solid ground, then I’m heading for the inn’s door and the hope of a good night’s sleep.

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