

Guarding a caravan isn't exactly boring, but it's not exciting either. We have twelve carts assigned to us, and it's our job to make sure they aren't attacked. Animals aren't a problem, since we scare them, but as soon as they left the farms behind, they were in the wild. And there are monsters there. Rich said monsters aren't afraid of people, and Herbert, who spent the afternoon at my side confirmed it.

The smarter ones know better than to take on a caravan of this size, but smarts come with levels, and with those also comes power. So monster who are smart enough to stay away, can also be strong enough not to be scared of a large number of people. He added that we shouldn't be in an area with those kinds of monsters for a day or two. This close to Court, the level of the wild was low enough no monster should be a problem to beat.

We walked the length of our assigned carts and back, then Maxwell took Herbert's place. On the way back from that circuit, I encounter my first monster.

Forest spider, Level 2
The smallest of the wild spiders species
Perception Check Failed

"You think you can take it on?" Max asks, pointing to it at the edge of the trees, and I equip my sword. Then take the time to resize the team screen so it isn't as distracting.

"Definitely." I wish I had a shield. I don't rush. I watch it skitter forward, trying to get a sense of how it will move.

Perception Check Failed
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So that needs a lot more work.

It attacks before I expect it, but I get my sword between us, flat side impacting with it, and I push it to the side. I swing and miss. Try again to the same effect. I learn is that a longer reach than I expected as its leg pierces my side and I lose some health. It scratches me, and there goes a bit of health again, but I swing and lob that leg off. It backs and I glance at my injuries. Neither is as bad as I expected, but don't have the time to question it.

We miss a lot of hits, and it's stamina that's dropping instead of my health. Maybe a tenth, so I'm good for a while. A swipe connects, and it's leaking icky gray fluid from its carapace.

When I step back to catch my breath, it attacks and I manage to not be where it strikes, except for one, but it's the side of its leg that connects, so I'm sent to the ground, but don't lose health.

I'm up and swinging, and swinging some more, and more. The only thing that happens is that my stamina goes down. On the plus side, it isn't landing any hit either. I'm sweating and panting and I can't tell if it's even tired as it skitters left and right, like it's planning a feint.

The fight is ended with an arrow through its head and body, pinning the twitching mass in place until it stops moving.

"You good?" Max asks, stepping by me to pull the arrow out of the dead spider.

I nod, panting. "I would have gotten it."

"Probably, but how about you tell me what you did wrong?"

I narrow my eyes. "This wasn't training."

He chuckles. "All of life is training. If you can't think of it that way, I'd say that as soon as we reach Toronto, you need to get on the next caravan going home."

"Fine, Grandmother."

"No idea who that is, but if she's who you're reaching for as a comparison, I'll consider myself honored." With a jerk of the hand, most of the ichor flies off the arrow, then he wipes it as he motions me toward the caravan, where Sasha, Dax, and Herbert, along with the drivers on the moving carts, are looking at us.

Great, this must have made quite the impression.

"So? Mistakes?"

"I didn't take the time to plan. It's just level two and Herbert said monsters around here wouldn't be all that smart. I thought it would be easy. Then I just continued making the same mistake."

"Why didn't you start with shooting it with your bow?"

"I...didn't think of it. But I don't have arrows, so thinking about it wouldn't have done me any good."

"So you need arrows. A quiver?" We reach the others and Sasha looks at my injuries.

"Do you have an ability that lets you soak damage?" she asks.

"No, I d— Yes, I do. I have Taking it on the Nose. It makes my endurance more effective in soaking damage." That was why the damage wasn't as severe as it felt.

She sprinkles a powder on the injuries, then whispers words I hear, but don't that actually make sense. Part of me wants to think I understand them, that they make sense, but at the same time, I know it's gibberish.

My health slowly goes up to full.

"Those were magical words, right?"

She nods. "I'm not strong enough to do significant magic without the use of ingredients and words of power."

"I didn't know that was how magic worked."

"It doesn't all work that way," she says, "but I didn't take a class that gave me those kinds of bonuses."

"I don't ask," Herbert instructs, and I close my mouth. "I told you, class doesn't matter here. Just what you can do to help. If Sasha wants you to know what it is, she will tell you."

"But she won't," Dax says. "You're welcome to join the betting pool on what it is. I have a treen on her being a necromancer."

"I'm not," she replied softly. "I told you that before."

"And that is exactly what a necromancer would say, so I'm keeping my guess. Good showing, kid. When you want pointers, come find me." The grin makes it clear there's going to be more involved than him helping me fight better.

I swallow and fight the urge to put someone between me and him, then he walks off.

"Ignore him," Sasha tells me. "Unfortunately, I can't do anything about the damage to your armor."

I look at the slice, the puncture, and wince.

“I take it you don’t know how to repair it?” Herbert asks.

“We have people in town who take care of the guards’ damaged armor. I know how to maintain it, and I have a kit, but not how to do repairs.”

“Tonight, I’ll introduce you to Dutches, she should be able to fix that before morning, but you’re going to want to get that skill, in fact, you’re going to want to get all the skill of the people who would have taken care of helping you if you’d stayed in Court.”

I nod. I hadn’t considered everything that went into maintaining what I have when on the road.

“Do me a favor,” Max says, “look at your fighting skills.”

I form the query, and...

Query, Skill list, Combat	
Archery	4
Blocking(Shield)	16
Dodging	16
Kicking	16
Parrying	17
Punching	15
Quick-Nocking	2
Sword Fighting	18

“I gained two levels in sword fighting,” I exclaim. “And one in parrying.”

“I figured that’d be the case.”

“How? I mean, I know skills go up faster in the dungeon and that guards gain more in monster waves, but I thought it was just because of how much monster they had to fight. Or that it’s something dungeons do.”

“Real fighting,” Max says, “when your life is on the line, leads to learning what you’re using faster. You’re low level enough that you should see gains from each decent fight for a while; but that’s going to slow around your second treen. It’s going to take ever longer fights, or more of them, to level the skills.”

“It’s why us combat types,” Herbert says, “tend to get better a lot faster than most other classes.”

“It’s also why lots of us get killed pushing themselves too far too fast,” Max adds.

“And now that the lesson’s done,” Herbert says, “time to get back to our posts.”

We hurry to rejoin our assigned wagons, and Evelyn is who I do the next circuits with. This one is spent in complete silence.

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