

I settle my breathing as I raise the bow and line up the shot at the deer grazing in the meadow. I almost release the arrow, but it raises its head, looking around. I wait, keeping an eye on my draining stamina. It's not fast, but it is noticeable. There's only so long I can hold the tension until my arm will shake.

It lowers its head again to graze. I realign my aim, then release the arrow. I hit it, and instead of running off, it startles, then falls to the ground.

Your archery skill has gone up. You are now level 20

I stare at the dead animal through the message, too surprised by what happened to think of dismissing it. Then I grin.

I one shot it!

It's what I was trying to do, but the head's hard to hit. Until now, my attempts have resulted in complete miss, or hitting elsewhere and having to track it until it settles so I can take a second shot. That's good by itself. My tracking skill is still way too low compared to the rest, even with now being at thirteen.

I've spent the last ten days training hard, one-shotting everything I aim at is the goal. But it's going to be a long time before that's reliable. As good as this kill feels, it was mostly luck.

I crouch and study the hit. In the eye and through the brain.

Very lucky.

The smart thing to do is loot the corpse and keep hunting. With effort, I get the carcass over my shoulders.

But I don't get to show the others this shot if I do that.

Sounds increase as the trees thin. The pace we agreed on put us closer to the Toledo trading camp than I'd like. Close enough for the voices to carry when the wind's right, like it is now.

Toledo is a camp, instead of a town, even with all the people living here, because it doesn't have a settlement node. If it did, it wouldn't be considered wilderness. Brandon says there used to be a city here, but it either didn't get a node when the system appeared, or something happened to it.

The one story I have of something happening to a node is one Base heard of. A city where the rules don't work the same way as anywhere else. Even the people living there were different until they were pulled out of the city's zone. He doesn't know how that happened. Since no one knows how the system works, he says it's impossible for anyone to figure out what's wrong with that city.

There was talk of stopping at the camp for the day. As busy as it is, Brandon assured me that if I wanted, there would be some place with rooms for us.

I didn't want to.

Brandon went along with what I want, again.

Silver didn't care either way.

Which left Helen. It was clear she wanted to. She doesn't like roughing it the way we've been doing. I even offered for her to take a room while we stopped on the other side of the camp, where we are now, but as much as she doesn't like roughing it, she doesn't

want to be alone even more.

Brandon almost said something about that, but one glare on my part kept him quiet. That's been proving more effective since Detroit.

"The mighty hunter returns," he announces without looking up from his book. "And victorious at that."

I drop the deer next to him. "Take a look at that."

He looks, at first amused, then whistles. "Congratulation."

"What happened?" Silver joins us, leaving an annoyed Helen where they'd been practicing.

"He one-shot it," Brandon says with pride. "Which is harder than you'd think."

"I got lucky," I reply.

"Oh, that's for sure, but it means your skill's now high enough that's a possibility."

"It's been one since his skill passed thirteen," Helen calls. "Come on, Silver, you need to keep practicing."

"It's not working," she replies. "I just don't get what you're explaining."

"Then you need to work at it harder. It's just a question of time until you get a level."

"Maybe she's just not magical," I offer.

"She can already do magic," Helen counters. "So she can learn this."

"How about you two take a break?" Brandon says.

"How about you mind your own business?" she replies, harshly.

"That's enough, Helen," I say before Brandon can escalate. "Silver, do you want to keep training tonight?"

"No. I haven't been able to focus for the last hour. I have too much music in my head."

"Then call it done for the day." I lower my voice. "Don't let Helen push you around. She means well, but her outlook on life is different than yours."

Helen fumes silently.

"You going to loot it, or butcher it?" Brandon asks.

"I'm going to get more usable meat out of looting it." He snorts as I sigh. It's not like we need more meat. His cooking skill's higher than mine, and mine is high enough I can mostly smoke jerky without rendering it inedible.

With all the hunting I've been doing as training, we have enough jerky to last us until the system vanishes. And butchering is a good skill to have when dealing with high-level monsters. Court has butchers just to go through the monsters after a wave.

I change into the dirtiest pair of pants I have. They've been cleaned each time we've stopped by water, but they've become my defacto butchering pants, and there's only so much blood water along can get out of them.

I catch Silver glancing at me, then hurriedly looking away as I carry the carcass away from the fire and them, and I chuckle to myself.

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Breakfast is stew Brandon had simmering over the fire all night, made from the many chunks of meat resulting from my atrocious butchering attempt. With a carcass the size of the deer, I ended up with not even a treen of cuts that could then be sliced thinner to smoke.

It doesn't mean the rest isn't usable, just not easily usable, or particularly tasty. Gristle isn't something I have the cooking levels to deal with. Stew isn't as easy as it looks to get right. At least if you want to enjoy the experience of eating it.

What Brandon manages to make with that, a few spices, and time, is something I don't mind eating each morning.

"Brandon," I start, while we eat. "Since you're familiar with St-Louis, why aren't we heading there directly, like we did with Denver?"

"Because the wilderness between here and that city is nothing like what we went through. We were never so far from a settlement or an official road that the wilderness levels became more than I could deal with. Down here? There are places without settlements or roads for hundreds of kilometers around. That means creatures potentially in the fifth, sixth, or higher treens. Even Helen, with her destructive magic, can't deal with one of those. Only the stupid travel that far from anything."

"Or the brave?" Silver asks.

Brandon snorts. "I've yet to hear of anyone returning from a venture that far. So I'm sticking with stupid."

"So we go through Wayne, then Indianapolis, and then St-Louis?" I ask to confirm the plan.

"Are we stopping at any of those places?" Helen asks, and her attempt at sounding casual comes across as forced.

Brandon either doesn't notice, or, more likely, ignores it. "We're going to have to stop in St-Louis. We need information about route thirty-one south of there. I've traveled it, but nothing jumped out at me as unusual. Even if they don't know about the ruin itself. There will be something. Those places don't exist without affecting the areas around them. They're like cities, in a way. They change the wilderness the closer to them you get."

"What's Wayne like?" I ask.

"Farming town. Maybe five hundred people, but fields as far as you can see." He nods toward Toledo. "More people in this place than there."

"Do they have places to stay?"

He chuckles. "There's always places to stay. People staying means people spending money. Not that a place like that has much interesting to spend on. There is a stop on the outskirts, if you want. Getting a room shouldn't be a problem. Most caravans go to Indianapolis through Columbus outside of harvest season."

"And that's about a treen days from here? How far to Indianapolis from there?"

"At the speed we're traveling? Two treens, maybe a bit more."

"And that's going to have places to stay?"

Brandon laughs. "It's got a club. So a place to stay isn't going to be a problem."

"How does it compare to Detroit?"

"Anywhere is better than Detroit," he replies somberly.

"But is it a decent place to spend a few days?"

"Yes. It's a good city, all things considered."

"Are you okay with waiting until we're in Indianapolis?" I asked Helen.

"If we can stop at some of the stops before that, yes. I want a proper bath, at least."

"The next official stop is at Wayne," Brandon says. "Anything before that is like

this.” He motions to the area of packed dirt we spent the night on.

She isn’t happy, but nods. We finish eating and are in the process of packing up when someone calls out a hello.

I’m in armor before I’m done turning, and the minotaur takes a hurried step back with a nervous chuckle.

“Sorry,” she says. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Well, you did,” Brandon answers in a casual tone. He isn’t in armor, but he’s ready to fight.

“Sorry,” she repeats. “Are you heading toward Wayne, or coming from there?”

Brandon: No!

She’s dressed casually enough for travel. Her leather armor is more supple than hard. There’s a hammer at her hip, but it doesn’t look like it’s ever been used.

Helen: Don’t be an ass, Bran.

The problem is that it’s just what I see. I have no way to know what’s in her inventory. Or if she has a second equipment build like me and Brandon have. With that, she could be ready to attack us with as she took a step toward us.

I hate that I’m seeing the potential threat, instead of just another traveler. I should let her travel with us, just for seeing her that way.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “But we’re traveling on our own.” I almost change my mind at her disappointment. I want to change my mind. But losing safety to having a stranger around while we sleep is too much. Even with keeping watch. I don’t know what level she is, what her skills are. She might be able to take me and Silver on with ease.

“Okay. Good travels then.” She gives us a small wave and walks on.

“Was that—”

“I’m not taking a chance with our safety,” I cut Helen off harshly as I watch the minotaur. Only once I can’t see her anymore, do we get back to packing and then traveling.