

“Fuck off,” The rapist says. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“I’d say that when it comes to four on one fights,” the newcomer says as I pull a healing bar to my hand, “evening those odds definitely concerns me.”

I’m careful as I tear the wrapper off, even if their attentions are all on him.

And it isn’t like they’re wrong to look. The guy’s tall, has to be nearly two meters and muscular. Short, messy blond hair and blue eyes, stubbles on a square jaw. Posing like he is, with his chest puffed and a devilish smile, makes for a striking figure. What he’s wearing, though, doesn’t strike me as ideal if he’s planning on taking them on. An off-white shirt with a deer-skin vest that has lots of pockets. Definitely not a lot of protection, unless it’s magical. His pants are gray jeans. His boots look to be hard leather, at least, and the backpack next to him makes me realize he doesn’t have a sword, or any weapon.

“Then we get to kill two morons today instead of one.”

I bite into the healing bar and make a face. It tastes worse than I remember.

“Murder’s illegal in Toronto,” the guy replies, looking serious finally. My health crawls up. It wasn’t that slow before, was it?

“What are you going to do? Turn us over to the police?” the woman says mockingly.

The guy cracks his knuckles. “Never bother with them, but it means I don’t have to worry about you reporting me for bodily injuries, seeing as I’m pretty sure you’re wanted now.”

Come on, climb already. Eating more isn’t speeding the healing up.

They rush him, and I force myself to my feet. I am not letting him get killed over trying to rescue me. I use the wall to support me while I reach my sword and they pound on him hard. The offensive moves I catch him do are to bat the knives out of his attacker’s hands.

The blade scrapes the ground as I pull it up, and the woman looks over her shoulder. Her nasty smile momentarily distracts from her exposed breasts.

“I’ll deal with him,” she says.

Looking away from them, bouncing as she approaches, I notice how muscular her arms are.

I move away from the wall, then pull my eyes up from her breasts to her face, felling my cheeks burn. “I can give you the time to cover up, if you want.”

“Oh.” She grins and shakes her chest. “Not a fan of boobs?” I can’t stop my eyes from dropping. I didn’t know they got that large, not that I’ve seen any exposed like that. Women in Court stay covered up in public. The one place I have seen women’s—well, girl’s—chest is when we go swimming, and other than Felicity, who got hers first, everyone else’s were barely noticeable.

“Or maybe you just haven’t ever seen real ones before,” she adds. She can probably see me blush through my tan as hot as it’s burning. Her sigh sounds forced. “I wish I could take you for a spin and show you a good time, but I have a job to do.”

I lunge, swords first, forcing her to sidestep. My would be rescuer’s face is cut and bloody; I think he has a limp.

Her punch costs me a fifth of the health I’d gained and staggers me back. Fortunately, no debuffs.

Can’t get distracted by the other fight. I have to win this one so I can go help him. I

swing to force her back as I regain my breath and how she bounces on her heel does something interesting to her—

I duck and slash.

Focus. Don't let a pair of breast be the reason you get pounded to the ground again.

She pauses to look at the thin red line along her side and smirks. "Lucky hit."

I so wish I could contradict her.

I focus on her movement, not her—

Her movement.

I try to use them to maneuver myself toward the other fight, but she's not letting that happen. I lunge with a few thrusts, I slash, and thrust again. Then, somehow, she's way too close to me, and I see stars as her fist hits my face.

I push myself off the ground, pleased that I'm still holding my sword, and she helps me with a boot to my stomach, sending me up, then on my back. My health is back close to a quarter, but crawling up way too slowly.

"You swords people," she says mockingly, "and your confidence the extra reach makes you invulnerable."

I snort, then groan in pain. "I wasn't taught to be overconfident." I roll on my side and, watching her, not her—

Will you stop that?

I push myself to my feet.

"So, this is what? You not being good?"

I shrug and groans. "I'm just sixteen." I spit blood. "Only got my class a couple of weeks ago. I think I'm managing okay, all things considered."

The look she gives me isn't mocking, more surprised and worried?

"Okay," my would-be rescuer says, "now we're going to have fun."

"Sorry, kid," she says, stepping in my direction. "But I have a job to do."

"And I have to stop your friends from killing him." I straighten, wincing at the sharp pain in my side.

"Kid, he looks way older than you, and he's about to get his ass handed to him." Her statement is punctuated by the sound of a fist hitting flesh hard. "You can't even stand up to me. They are going to—"

The rapist hits the wall next to me.

She turns, and I see my rescuer grab one of his attacker by the head and raise his knee into it hard enough he lifts off the ground and doesn't move when he lands.

"Wait," the last one standing says as he's grabbed by the collar. "This wasn't—" the fist in his face silences whatever he was going to say to explain what they'd been doing to me. He falls to the ground, limp.

"You son of a bitch," she snarls, running at him.

"Now, now, no need to insult my mother."

I can't tell if she's too fast for him to dodge, or if he let her hit him, but he's grinning as he spins from the punch. He blocks her next one and shoves her away.

"Too good to hit a woman?" she says.

He snorts, wiping the blood off his lips. "Wanted the chance to say that was a good

hit. Way better than what these three managed. Took way too long for them to get me down where I wanted to be.” He grins. “You’d have had me there in a couple of hits.”

“I’m going to have you down to zero before long.” She runs at him.

“That’s not happening.” He steps aside, then plants an elbow into her back that almost sends her to the ground. He casually turns as she regains her footing and motions for her to attack again.

His head snaps to the side from the punch, but she goes staggering away from how hard he hit her.

I’m...

I mean, I know how hard she hits. And he just let her hit him.

“Fuck,” she says, panting and wheezing. “This wasn’t supposed to—”

He’s on her, hits hard, and down she goes. He straightens and stretches like his body can’t be a wall of bruises, then grins at me. “You okay?”

“You look worse than I feel,” I reply. I know. It’s dumb, but it’s the truth. His face is covered with blood from the cut lips and cheek and forehead.

“You don’t look so good, so I know I don’t feel that bad. You really should have stayed down, instead of asking for more punishment.”

“I couldn’t let them kill you.” I call another bar from my inventory and offer it to him. “It’s going to help you heal.”

He looks me over. “No offense, kid, but exactly how were you going to keep them from killing me, if there was even a chance they could have managed that?”

“I don’t know. I just couldn’t stand there while they beat the crap out of you. It looked like you couldn’t do anything against them.”

His smirk doesn’t look pleasant, with him covered in blood like that. “Had to let them get in enough hits that my Grit Strike ability kicked in. That isn’t as easy to do fighting people when my other ability means most of the damage they do gets soaked.”

“Taking it on the Nose?” I risk. I doubt explorer’s the only class with Grit Strike, but there can’t be that many of them. Actually, I can’t remember any abilities with the same name when I was looking over what class I wanted to take.

“Yeah, you know it?”

“I have it,” I say, then add as he looked from the woman to the blood I spilled as she beat me up. “It’s just level one. The Momentum tree is the one I’m focusing on. I took it because I figured I’d be a guard, back home, and that made the most sense, but Momentum let me get out of the hole I was in, and I left home and I redid my build and realized that Taking it on the nose isn’t all that great, so—”

“I’m going to stop you right there, kid.”

“My name’s Dennis.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Dennis. I’m Brandon. But trust me, Taking it on the Nose is the best tree the Explorer class has. You soak damage, you hit hard, you regain stamina and you just keep on doing it over and over until you win.” He grins. “Best tree ever.”

I can’t help the chuckle at his enthusiasm. “Clearly, you like getting hit more than I do.”

“Getting hit’s half the fun,” he replies, sounding like he means it.

I offer him the bar again. “You want it? Or is suffering from your injuries also part of

the fun?”

“Nah.” He takes it and rips the wrapper off. “Suffering’s no good once the fight’s over.” He takes a large bite and almost spits it out. “Fucking System, this stuff’s vile.” He looks over the bland packaging while I finish my bar. “At least it works. But you can keep the rest for yourself.”

“Isn’t there a healing spell under your tree? Or have you not reached that yet?”

“Recuperate,” he says between bites. “Got it. Also, have a proper healing spell, but with barely a treen in my Aether attribute, I don’t have much mana to put into that. What are you doing in here? Definitely not the place for kids.”

“I’m looking for the Champlain Club.”

He opens his mouth and closes it on what I think was going to be a snarky comment. “Well, you’re an explorer, so I guess it makes sense, but how are you so far off the mark? The club is—” he looks around then points “—a few blocks in that direction.”

“All I was told was that it’s in the middle of Adelaide.”

“They didn’t say how to find it?”

“I don’t think they knew.”

“Who did you ask that knows where it is but not how to get to it?” there’s a hint of suspicion in his tone.

“A guard in the town hall told me it was in Adelaide, and one of the shopkeepers on the other side of Richmond said it was in the center.”

“What about the person who first told you about the club? The other explorer that got you moving in this direction?”

“Oh, he...” how am I explaining that? I bring the journal to my hand. “After I got my class, I found this journal. There’s a bunch of maps in it, and on the one for Toronto there’s a note saying to check in with the Champlain Club. Aaron, the previous owner, didn’t write why or how to get there.”

“Really?” the suspicion’s all gone. “You have someone else’s journal? That’s cool. I figure you didn’t kill him. You don’t have that killer vibe.”

“I... found his body.”

Brandon nods. “In a ruin, I’m guessing. The wandering type explorers all tend to end that way, or so I’m told. It’s why I’m going the fighting route.”

“So you can end on the ground at someone’s feet?” I say before I can stop myself and I’d have been ashamed if Brandon didn’t burst out laughing.

“As if. I’m the best there is.” He crumples the wrapper and tosses it aside. “Come on, let me show you how to get to the club. I’m heading there myself.”

I grab his discarded wrapper and inventory it, then follow him.

He makes what feels like blind turns to me, before stopping at an intersection and indicates something scratched in the wall.

“When you find this, put it to your right to get to the club, and your left to leave this rat infested place.”

“What it is?” I look at the scratching, tilting my head. It’s not the only one there, and even if it looks like an ‘x’ over a ‘p’, I have no problem believing I saw it before and didn’t notice.

“The club’s mark. X and P, Explorer.” He says it like it makes perfect sense, and I

take it at his word.

At the next intersection, I look and find it. Then follow him, who hasn't paused. I have no idea where we are in relationship to the outside by the time the alley broadens into something resembling a road, but I can now spot the marks at a glance.

The place finally feels like it's part of the world, with the sun shining down on us. The road splits, and on the outside of each fork, the buildings are like the rest of this place. Looking ready to fall over, leaning against each other, and sucking up the light. But inside the fork, the lone building there is almost bright.

The white stone on the large two story building is chipped in places and broken all the way to the backing in others. The place is old and has seen hard times, but it withstood it. Where I think there used to be large windows on the ground floor, wood covers them. Not planks hammered in place to prevent the weather from coming in, but lumber put there carefully to fill the space. It might be there to keep the other occupants of Adelaide from getting in, but there was care to make it look good in the process.

I follow Brandon up the stairs to the set of double doors, which he pushes in, announcing.

"Welcome to the Champlain Club!"

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