

The repair Dutches did is obvious. A section about the size of my hand around where the gash was is new leather, stitched in a matching style to the rest; and she oiled it, too.

Leather chest, Quality: Good, Type: Armor
A well-made piece of leather armor
Perception Check Failed

“The quality’s the same as before,” I comment.

“That’s what you get for having an expert doing the work,” she replies, sounding amused.

“Thank you.” I unequip my jacket and equip it.

She snaps her fingers in disappointment. “And here I was thinking I’d get to see young flesh.”

“I’m not wearing this without a shirt underneath. It’s going to get sweaty, and that makes it hard to maintain the leather.”

“I thought you had people taking care of your armor, back in Court,” Herbert said.

“Grandmother’s big on making sure we know how hard everyone’s job is. So we’ll respect them and the work they do. And I know how to maintain my armor and what to do, so that’s not going to be impossible.”

“Good to know some people are told that it’s not magic that fixes things, all the time,” she adds.

“Thank you again.” I pay her, and she holds my hand a little too long, but lets it go with a smile.

“You know where to find me if you need anything repaired.” She climbs into the back of her wagon, and we head to our fire, where the others are packing up and hanging the rolled tents and beddings on the side of the cart.

“Daz, you’re with Dennis this morning.”

“Yes!”

“Herbert?” I trail off.

“Sorry, but you get a turn with everyone.” He closes his eyes. “That’s not what I mean, Daz.”

“I didn’t say anything,” the man replies, grinning.

“That smile says enough.” Helen says.

Herbert walks to Daz and leans in, lowering his voice, but not enough. “Don’t scare him off. You do, and you get to explain it to Chuck.”

I’m not running off. I don’t care what Daz tries, I’m not going to just quit because of it.

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I give Daz as much space as I can as we walk along the wagons. I’m off the road proper, and this part is wet and mushy. Five more paces, and I’d be among the trees lining the road. I think that would qualify as me running off.

“How about I make you a deal?” Daz says and chuckles at the suspicious look I give him. “I promise to stop hitting on you if you answer my questions.”

I snort. "I'm not giving a blanket yes to that."

"Fair enough. Answer my first one, and I'll call the deal met. You can decide if you want to answer the rest afterward."

"And if I don't, I'm fair game?"

He chuckles. "I'll do my best to resist you."

It's not like I can do anything to force him to stop. "Fine. What's the question?"

"What happened to you?"

I roll my eyes. "That's way too broad to count."

"What I mean is that I know I come on strong. But you're acting like instead of taking you to bed, I'm going to disembowel you. That's not something that happens without reasons."

We walk by two carts before I work up the guts to answer him. It's not like any of that's going to make it back to Court and my dad.

"There was this guy," I start and pause. Like 'guy' is enough to describe Rich. The stories make him bigger than life and seeing him in person, seeing him rescue me, made them feel truer, instead of not.

"He must be someone to leave you speechless after just that."

I shake my head to clear it. "He's a lot. His name's Rich." I study his face, but he shrugs. "He's something of a legend among my friends, and I got to meet him. He looked at me like you do." Or maybe I imagined it, hoped he did? "And implied we were going to... do stuff together, if I went with him."

"He came on strong."

"No. He came on sneakily. It was all looks and implications, and... I wanted to. So I went with him. We went out of town, to the forest, and he screwed with him. He said it was in good fun, scaring me like that, and... I believed him. Then we reached this ruin and a hole. He shoved me down there and left me to die." We reach the end of our carts and Daz nods to those guarding the next set.

Instead of walking along theirs, they seem to be positioned every third.

"You know I'm not him, right?" he says once we turn around.

"That's kind of obvious."

"What I mean is that if you agreed to my advances, I would take you to bed. Not trick you in trying to kill you."

*That's way you say.* I shrug.

"I'm sorry that was your first almost experience. I'm glad you got out of it in spite of what he wanted."

"I got lucky."

"Still amazed that's not a stat. Luck. I know people who can't seem to get it to fall on their side and others that can't seem to ever fail."

"Maybe it's a secret attribute. There's a lot the system doesn't show. That you only get if you give it the right query."

"And you think asking 'what's my luck attribute' isn't enough?"

"Did it answer?"

"Nope."

We walk in silence for another cart. "What do you do?" I ask, almost asking for his

class.

“I guard the caravan.”

“But why? You said you’re a sneak. Don’t those go around planting knives in people’s back?”

“You’re thinking assassins, who can be sneaks, but not always.” He is quiet and I figure that’s all I’m going to get. “I was a different kind of unsavory character.”

“What happened?”

“Surprised you aren’t asking what kind I was.”

“Herbert made it clear your class isn’t any of my business, and I figure that falls close to that.”

“My class is thief.” He grins. “Thief of hearts.” He sobers. “Pockets, buildings, doors, and windows. If there was a lock keeping me out, I had to get in. Stole money, stuff, and secrets. Those are what led to me being here.”

“You’re running away from bad people?”

“No. As far as they’re concerned, I’m dead. Came pretty close to making it a reality too. Health bar was flashing and dropping steadily, legs were broken. They’d taken everything in my inventory other than my undergarments.”

“Someone saved you.”

He nods. “Sasha saved me. Healed me enough on the spot I wouldn’t outright die, then brought me to where she was staying and nursed me back to health. When I was good, she just said I could leave. Never asked I repay her, but felt kind of wrong to do that. Got in a few scraps because of my sticky fingers after that and she kept patching me up. Finally figured the best thing I could do was getaway from the temptation the city represented and joined a caravan. She stuck with me for some reason I’ve yet to understand. And after a few of them, we ended up here. Met Herbert and we joined his team.”

“And the hitting on guys?”

He laughs. “I love guys, Dennis. I love every part of them. I can’t help it. I see one and I just...” He smiles. “I promised I wouldn’t hit on you anymore, so I’m going to leave it at that.”

“Doesn’t that get you in trouble? I mean, did you hit on Chuck?” I have no idea what the smiles he gives me means.

“I think my sex life is probably not something we should talk about, considering where you stand on it.”

I open my mouth to press, then to say I’m okay with it. Only to have those green eyes flash in my memory, that smile, with its promises of pleasure. The pain of landing at the bottom of the pit.

“What’s it like growing up in a small town?” he asks, and the rest of our patrol is spent comparing small town versus city living.

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“Dennis,” Max calls as the carts ease off the road onto another pull-off. “You’re getting in more fighting training.” He points to the edge of the trees and I focus on the things I can see moving in the shadows.

Green Goblins are a subclass that has adapted to forest living, enjoying climbing trees, making items from leaves, and killing errant passerby
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Perception Check Successful
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Green Goblins travel in small bands of 3 to 7 individuals and enjoy coating their weapons with rotting meat, rendering them mildly poisonous.
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“We need to take them on so they’ll scatter and won’t threaten the wagons?” I ask. I can’t make out how many, but since I know it can be as much a half-plus treen, I figure those shadows are in the higher range.

“No, *you’re* taking them on.”

I equip my bow. “Okay, but you should get ready to help. There might be as much as seven of them.”

“You’ll be fine.”

“What?” I stare at him as he starts to turn. “I’m not skilled enough to take them on by myself. You saw what happened with the spider.” I look at Herbert.

“You’ll be fine. They’re just level three and you have a bow. You’ll take them down before they get close.”

“But if they do, you’re going to come to my help.”

He shakes his head. “It’s only combat if you’re in actual danger.”

I find myself looking at Daz, and his expression is somber. Not a joke or an offer for him to help me, for the right price.

They’re serious about me taking those on alone.

“Can I at least get more arrows? My quiver only has twelve.”

“He has a point,” Daz says.

Max comes to me holding a quiver. “Unequip yours. You can use mine for this fight.”

Quiver of Unending Arrows, Quality: Excellent, Type: container, Enchanted
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A quiver that supplies an archer with as many arrows as they need.
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Perception Check Failed
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“I’m taking it back after your fight,” he warns.

“Where can I get one?” I equip it to my belt.

“I doubt anyone sells something like this. Or that it would be affordable. I found mine in a dungeon.”

“You went into a dungeon? How was it?”

He motions to the tree line. “You have a job to do and people depending on you to succeed. Take the time to aim.”

I take an arrow and I’m surprised to see the shadow of another remain behind, becoming solid when the one I pull is fully out. I put that out of mind as I nock the arrow and find my target. Unlike the ones in my quiver, these have large metal heads.

It’s standing still next to a tree, maybe a meter in height. On the slim side. I aim for its chest and take slow breaths. With the fourth one, I let go. It hits, and the goblin drops

into the shadows.

Sounds come, and I force myself to ignore that it can't be only seven of them to sound that loud. Fortunately, another form moves to the edge of the light and I aim. Its skin is more gray than green, with maybe brown mixed in, bald with a nose that's so large it could be a snout. It's a little stockier than the other one. Four breaths and I let go. Another hit in the chest and it drops back. This time, the legs remain visible and they twitch as I nock another arrow and wait. They go still as another one steps over them and looks in my direction.

I aim, and let the arrow loose on the third breath because it lurches forward. I miss and see two more behind it. Running too.

I'm done aiming. Time to go with quick nocking. I fumble the first two, but get the third in and shoot. I hit the first one in the shoulder and stagger it, letting the other two overtake it. I hurry to take an arrow, fumble it, and curse.

Speed isn't going to help.

I take an arrow and nock it and let go. I miss, I also miss the next four, and as I reach for another arrow, it's clear I can't shoot anymore. I send the bow to my inventory and equip my sword. The one on the left has what might have been a jaw with teeth still attached, the other a short spear made of a bone with the end broken into sharp looking shards.

I parry the spear, my swing missed, and block the jaw with my arm, cursing that I don't have a shield as the teeth leave marks on the leather. I kick spear holder away, swing, and miss, jaw holder, and then—

There's a short, thick sword in its head. Daz smiles at me as Herbert dispatches the other one.

"I thought I was supposed to deal with them on my own," I say, offended they felt the need to come to my rescue.

"And you had to believe it for this to be a life or death situation," Max answers, motioning for his quiver back.

"The downside," Daz says, "is that this only works once. You're going to be stuck with slow skill grown until your next real fight."

"Which probably won't take that long," Evelyn says, "considering how the previous trips went."

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