

27: Hunted

Rain let off two quick pulses of detection in quick succession. The first he used to search for animals, and the second for metal. To his disappointment, he had found that he couldn't search for both at the same time in a single pulse. The range of detection with his chosen modifiers was up to 20 meters, but the mana cost had only grown to around 18 per pulse due to the increase in channel mastery. He could now reduce the intensity by another ten percent, saving a few mana each time he used the skill.

He and Val were moving through the forest as silently as they could, separated by about 5 meters or so. The effort of keeping silent so as to not startle away any potential game had slowed them down considerably. Rain winced as he stepped on a dry branch, the snap of the wood shattering the silence. He forced his attention back to watching his step and scanning for any sign of movement. After another minute or so, he let off another double pulse of detection. He found that his mana regeneration was mostly able to keep up with their slow pace. His total was draining slowly and currently was around half full, but they'd been at it for over two hours without stopping. The quick lapses in his senses when he used aura focus barely even phased him at this point.

Rain came to a sudden stop as his latest ping caught something. He had been registering hits on his animal scan infrequently, but nothing large enough to bother with. This ping, however, had come back from his scan for metal. He motioned to Val, who was watching him to see why he had stopped. Val followed him towards the source of the ping. Rain pulled up his skills menu and let off another burst, using amplify to boost the resolution this time.

He was a bit apprehensive about it, as by his calculations the improvement to his skills would push the resolution negative. He'd asked Jamus about what might happen earlier, but the man hadn't been concerned. To his relief, his brain didn't start leaking out of his ears or anything. The skill screen showed the resolution as 2.04mm, so clearly the formula had changed once the power of the skill pushed the resolution negative. He didn't worry about it further, focusing on the feeling of the metal object beneath his feet. It wasn't far down, only just below the surface.

"What is it?" Val whispered as Rain knelt and started to dig at the ground.

"Metal. Hang on."

Rain felt something in the dirt and grabbed it, pulling to reveal a scrap of leather harness with a piece of metal attached to the end.

"What... is this?" He said to himself.

"Looks like a piece of a <something>," Val answered, peering over his shoulder.

Examining the object, Rain tried to place the word Val had used. Suddenly, it clicked in his head as he recognized the object.

Oh, a bridle. Someone must have taken a horse through here long ago and threw this harness away when it broke. It's all rusty... Still, I should hang on to it.

He tucked it into a pocket and rose, using a quick blast of purify to clean the dirt off his hands. It looked like Val wanted to ask him a question, but the man suddenly froze, motioning for Rain to stay still. Very slowly, Val nodded over Rain's shoulder and started to raise one of his hands.

Rain turned to look at what had caught the man's attention. Through a gap in the trees, Rain saw a large, fuzzy shape moving out from behind a bush. It was quite far away, 50 meters, perhaps. Rain couldn't identify what type of creature it was. Suddenly, there was a flash of white light and the animal dropped to the ground, unmoving.

Rain turned to stare at Val. The man was pointing at the creature with a single finger on his right hand.

"Got it. Come on."

Rain gulped. Whatever skill he had used to shoot the creature had been silent and instantaneous, the flash of light the only thing that gave it away.

What was that? He sniped it from so far away... I knew the range of my auras wasn't as good as spells like firebolt, but damn. Whatever that was, it was instantaneous. It wasn't like those blue missiles Jamus fires, not at all. I'd have no hope of dodging that. Is this guy really only level 5?

Rain followed Val through the trees towards the animal. As they got closer, Rain saw that it was one of the boar-rabbit creatures. There was a blackened hole in its forehead about the size of a pencil eraser right between its eyes.

That was a hell of a shot. Is that spell guided at all? If not, he's got amazing aim.

"Nice, it's a big one. You think one lagoon is enough for the four of us?" Val asked, grabbing the creature and slinging it over his shoulder.

"Lagoon? Oh, so that is what they're called. Should be fine. Tallheart doesn't eat meat."

“Ah, I forgot about that. I haven’t seen a cervidian in quite a while.”

“So you’ve met one before?” Rain asked as the pair started making their way back to the clearing.

“Met one? No, but I saw a pair of them on the road about a year back. They used to be more common, but not in... not where I’m from.”

Rain didn’t miss the hesitation in Val’s speech. It seemed like he was reluctant to reveal his origin, so he decided not to press him. It would be hypocritical, after all.

“What happened to them? The cervidians, I mean. Tallheart didn’t want to talk about it.”

“You don’t know?”

“No, there aren’t any cervidians where I’m from. Tallheart is the first one I’ve met.”

Val took a moment to consider this, then explained. “They were... hunted, I guess is the best word.”

“What?”

“There used to be a cervidian kingdom, but the <something> conquered it around 1000 years ago. The remaining cervidians spread out, tried to fit into human society. Many were killed or <something>. The survivors struggled on until about 100 years ago. To crush resistance, Potentate Fecht put a bounty on cervidian antlers across the <something>. I’m surprised you don’t know all this.”

“That’s horrible! What the fuck? You can’t just... hunt people!”

“They don’t see them as people, not in the <something>.”

“What is this <something>? I keep hearing about it, but I don’t know the word. Who was... Potentate Fecht?”

“Who *is* Potentate Fecht, you mean. He’s still alive, unfortunately. The formal name for the <something> is the <Something> of Adamant, or the Adamant <Something>. <Something> means ‘many kingdoms’, but in practice, it is just one. The potentate holds absolute power within its borders.”

Yikes, 100 years ago? This potentate guy must be ancient if he was in power back then. Sounds like this... Empire of Adamant is a place I reeealy don't wanna visit. Hunting a race to extinction? Fuck.

“How old is this... Fecht?”

“Old. Very old, but he doesn't look a day over 40. I've tried waiting for him to die, but it hasn't worked so far. Someone needs to stick a knife in him.”

“You... want to kill him?” Rain asked, keyed-in to the bitterness in the man's tone, “I mean, I understand why someone might want to, but this sounds personal.”

“The cervidians aren't the only ones who have suffered under the empire.”

“Are you from the empire, then?”

Val stopped and shot Rain a cold look.

“I am not *from* the empire. I was born there, raised there, but I am not *from* there. I want nothing to do with them. There are many that feel the same, but they cannot openly disobey.”

“Sorry, I didn't mean to insult you. It doesn't sound like I'd want anything to do with them either. I can't believe anyone would hunt down people like that. Didn't the cervidians flee from the country?”

“They tried. The empire's reach is long and the bounty still stands. The bigger the antlers, the higher the reward. Even outside the empire's borders, cervidians can't rest easy, especially if they are high level. The antlers give it away, you know?”

“So that's why Tallheart can't go into the city.”

“Right. If the wrong people knew he was out here, someone would come for him. The empire's agents, maybe, but more likely an opportunistic adventurer. Jamus took a big risk, telling me Tallheart was here. At least he had the <something> to tell me once we were out of the city.”

They were nearing the clearing, so Rain let the conversation drop. They had made better time through the underbrush now that they were freed from the need to keep silent. When they broke through the trees, Rain saw that Tallheart and Jamus had returned. The pair were sitting near a campfire in the center of the burned circle that Rain had created. Jamus was stirring a small cauldron hanging on a wooden frame over the fire.

“Ah, there you are,” Jamus greeted them, rising to his feet, “You should have told me you were going hunting. I was worried.”

“Oops, sorry.” Rain shrugged. “What are you cooking?”

“Potato soup! No, you can’t add the lagoon to it. It would ruin the flavor, and besides, Tallheart couldn’t eat it.”

“Right, of course. We’ll make another fire. Val, do you know how to skin a lagoon? I’m not very good at it.”

“Sure, got a knife? I lost mine.”

“Here you go,” Rain said, handing him his belt knife. He averted his gaze as Val walked a little ways away to work on the dead lagoon.

“Hey Tallheart, you ok?” Rain said, passing the tall man as he walked towards the wood pile. “I’m sorry, about earlier, I mean.”

“I am better. Speaking with Jamus helped.”

“Just wait till you try some of this!” Jamus chimed in, “It’s impossible to be sad with a stomach full of potato soup!”

“Life is not that simple, Jamus.” Tallheart rumbled staring into the fire. The mage ignored him, adding a pinch of something to the bubbling pot.

Rain shook his head and grabbed some logs to start a new fire. He piled them nearby and transferred a burning branch from Jamus’s fire to get it started. Soon, Val walked over with the skinned lagoon and skewered it on a stick over the flames. Rain used purify to clean up the blood, drawing a surprised look from Val.

“It works on blood? Well, that’s handy,” he said, watching as the skill washed the gore from his hands.

“I know, right? You just wait, it gets even better.” Rain replied.

“Oh?”

“You’ll figure it out eventually,” Rain said, with a smirk. “Anyway, Val, this is Tallheart, Tallheart, this is Val.”

Tallheart looked up from the flames, watching the black-coated man warily. “Hello,” he rumbled, sounding a bit reluctant.

“Hello, Tallheart. It is nice to meet you,” Val said.

Tallheart didn’t respond, going back to staring into the flames.

“It’s ok, Tallheart, I talked to him while we were out hunting. He’s cool.”

“What does his temperature have to do with anything?” Jamus asked, looking at Rain curiously.

Rain looked around the clearing at the confused faces staring back at him. “It’s just an expression. I didn’t mean... never mind. He isn’t dangerous, Tallheart.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone you are here. In fact, I’d like to stay here, if you don’t mind. I owe Rain, and I can’t afford to stay in the city,” Val said, in a hopeful tone.

Tallheart sat, silent, considering.

“Come on, don’t be so grouchy, Tallheart. Here, the soup is ready,” Jamus said passing him a wooden bowl and a spoon.

Tallheart took the bowl from Jamus and eyed it skeptically. He mechanically took up a spoonful and tasted it. He paused, then took another. Jamus smiled.

“Very well, he may stay,” Tallheart rumbled.

“See, like I said, soup fixes everything.” Jamus was beaming as he filled his own bowl.