

StoryLine-3

I fight to keep my breathing under control as another building crashes down. That thing's big. How long do I have to delay them? A minute, two? Are they scent driven? Maybe I should have taken the Cryptozoology classes behind my father's back.

The dust flies ahead of the last building falling down and I stop breathing. Not only so I won't choke on it, but because the form I make out is big. Like three times taller than I am, four times wider? Five? It's no longer moving, other than scraping a hoof and ripping the stone out of the paving.

I can't run.

Oh, do I want to run. There's no way I can do anything against something that big.

But if I run, it might go after the others.

Two minutes. Two minutes, then I run. I run toward the front, and hopefully it chases me so others can take it down.

The dust thins as it settles. It's a quadruped, twice as tall at the shoulder as at the rear. Okay, not as big as I imagined, but still bigger than I can hope to win against. This is going to be about avoiding being rammed. My dex training skill is maxed out, as are my running and jumping. My armor's on the lighter side, so penalties will be minimal.

I should be okay.

I glance at the buff on the upper right.

Roger's Revitalizing Bars

1:23

Just stay there for another minute plus, big thing, and you can chase me to your heart's content.

More dust settles, and something on its back moves.

It's got a rider.

The rider drops off, and I can make out the muscular form of a Ramthom. It steps forward, making motions toward the beast, which calms, the way Mitchell's attack dogs do when she signals them to stand down.

The Ramthom wears hides for clothing, with a belt that's too fine. That's something it's taken off a victim. A club appears in its hand as it equips it, and it bangs it against its large horns twice, then comes to a stop five meters from me.

Okay, this I have a chance against. And if it gets to that, I can definitely outrun it.

It bangs the club against its horns twice again with what feels like insistence.

Okay... what does that mean?

I raise my sword and touch the flat of the blade to the side of my head—and it runs at me, head lowered to make the horns the first thing I'm going to feel.

If it connects.

I easily step aside and slash at it. The hide clothing is thicker than I thought. It swings and I block the club. The strength nearly sends me off my feet. I regain my footing in time to deflect its next swing, and even that throws me off balance, but I score a slash at its arm

and it backs away with a series of grunts and shaking the arm.

It snorts at me, takes a step and pauses, looking to the side.

Are they clever enough to try to fake me out? I just flick my eyes in that direction and don't see anything. It shrugs and comes at me again.

I stay out of its reach, watching, studying. The attacks aren't wild. Ramthoms aren't smart the way we are, but they're not dumb monsters either. They are smart enough to learn to ride that beast, after all.

Grandmother teaches that anyone who learns to fight, instead of blindly flailing about, learns bad habits. If we can find those, we have to exploit them. It's easier to do with a higher perception skill and with knowing what style they're using. But in the end, it's all about patterns, and that's mainly about paying attention and—

The graze stings and I curse, backing away. That was a tenth of my health. It snorts; laughing.

Oh, Laugh all you want. As soon as it's healed, I'm going to—

Why isn't it regenerating? Where's my Regen buff? It can't have ended already!

I parry and back away as it attacks.

Can't panic. Don't panic!

Parry. Parry, dodge.

I can still win this.

Dodge, jump, parry.

Nope, it's time to run.

I turn for an alley, and it's before me.

Shit!

I back, look for a way out of this fight, but it's fast, always before me. Backing me toward...

The snorting behind me is deep and I smell the humid air the beast exhales. Which means I am way too close to it. I side step, turn for the alley.

The club hits and I'm sliding on the ground, half my health gone, like that. And a stunned Debuff flashing.

Come on, Dennis, Will the thing away, get to your feet and run.

Willpower check unsuccessful.

That's never been my strong suit.

Fifteen seconds.

The Ramthom walks toward me, club trailing on the ground. It's taking its time, but if I don't will the debuff away, I'm a sitting duck.

Will check unsuccessful.

Why didn't I train that!

Ten seconds.

They're supposed to get easier to will away as the timer expires.

Five seconds.

Willpower check unsuccessful.

It raises its club over its head. It's not looking at me in anger or anything like that. Is that respect? What? It respects that I fought, and that I lost and—

It staggers back.

The debuff ends, and I scoot away from it, as it staggers again. All I have of the reason it's doing that is the impression of a blur, and I'm not sure I didn't imagine it.

I reach the wall and my back screams in pain as I try to push myself to a sitting position. Not happening until I've healed a bit.

There's someone next to the Ramthom. He's dressed in black: pants, shirt, and jacket. He has a sword in one hand, thinner than mine that seems to... glow in black? And a knife in the other. He plants that in the Ramthom's side, then gives me a smile and a wink, and he's not there anymore. He looked young. A lot younger than I expected from someone with an ability to... teleport? Turn invisible? There's no way that's low level.

He's on the other side, but the Ramthom's not taken by surprise this time. The club comes down and I fight not to look away as he raises his sword to block it. I know how hard that thing hits.

The club connects with the sword and stops.

The guy smirks as the Ramthom's expression turns comically surprised. He doesn't mass that much more than I do. He's leaner than I am and we're about the same height. Then he... blinks, and he's walking in my direction, the sword and knife vanishing from his hands.

As he dusts off his sleeves, the Ramthom drops to a knee and its head falls to the ground, rolling until its horns stop it.

I think I'm going to be sick.

I turn to throw up and the pain in my back stops the reflex.

He crouches and fixes his green eyes on me.

It's the eyes, along with the all black, that finally makes who that is sink-in.

"You're Rich," I say, then groan.

"And you're in bad shape," he replies, then smirks. "But you put up a good fight. Gotta ask, you brave or stupid?"

"What?"

"There's no way you thought you could fight a Bulldozer, so why'd you stand there, waiting for it to arrive?"

"I couldn't let it follow the townsfolk."

"Okay, so loyal. Not sure if that's anymore commendable. Can you move your toes?"

"Yeah, nothing's broken." I'd get a debuff if that had happened. "But my back hurts like hell."

"I doubt that."

"Thanks, by the way."

"What for?"

"Saving my life."

“Oh. You’re welcome. Want to do me a favor in return?”

“Sure.”

“Don’t mention this. Me being here; me saving you.”

“Why? Don’t you want people to know you helped?” He can use the good rep.

Anytime his name comes up around my father, he shuts the conversation down hard. As far as he’s concerned, Rich has no business being allowed in Court. None of the old folks talk about him, although they all seem to know of him, by the way they grumble when asked about who he is.

Because I want to know who he is. We all do.

“Yeah, that’s not going to help, especially since I’m not supposed to be here.” He snorts. “As far as Chuck thinks, I’m all the way down in Arizona, and I’d like to keep it that way. What’d you say?” he smiles at me and ... I swallow.

That look, the heat in his eyes. The way he licks his lips. It’s doing something to me.

He touches my cheek, and I shiver. “I’ll make it worth your while not to mention I’m here.”

I nod. Yeah, I definitely want what he’s offering, not that I have any idea what it is, but I know it’s going to be—

The relief hits almost as hard as the club did as my health replenishes.

His expression is mischievous as he looks me up and down. “You’re cute,” he says, stands, and vanishes in the process of turning.

I’m still processing when the beast, the Bulldozer, Rich called it, scraps a hoof down and reminds me it’s still there. So I don’t want to be. I stand and... well, that’s embarrassing... rearrange myself.

I’ve had dreams with guys that affected me like this, but it’s never happened to me for real before.

Well, Rich is good looking.

I shake myself. This is not the place to swoon over anyone. My health isn’t maxed, so I stretch to test my limits. My back’s sore, but no longer painful. Hopefully, I’m done getting into fights now.

I pick up the sword, send it to my inventory, and pause as I turn to leave.

Did he?

He must have.

I head for the dead Ramthom, not looking at the neck or head. The Bulldozer doesn’t react. I touch the body and think ‘access’.

Its inventory appears before me—are monster inventory size dictated by their strength, like people’s are? I never asked about that—with my small one next to it. What it’s wearing on one side, since it’s still equipped, then the content. I’m not touching the meat. I’ll eat monster meat, but not if it’s on two legs and acts like it can think even a little. That’s too close to eating a person.

It’s got a set of bones that looks to have been shaped. A stone knife, some rough copper circles, and a golden ring, and a set of horns that look too much like the ones that are on its head for me to think about. I move the ring and the knife to my inventory, then the copper goes into my last slot. Because I’m sure the redsmith can use more copper.

Then I’m off and heading back toward Base.

