

Chuck-23

One step.

One more step.

Then another, and another.

The buffs from the meals at the inn are gone, so it's easier to push myself to the point where my stats-related skill will go up. The downside is I can't do this quite as long.

Four days of pushing myself pulling the pickup has given me two points in strength and endurance, as well as one in health, from all the damage I'm causing myself by pushing past my stamina. My willpower training is up to fifteen as a consequence, strength training only to 21, and endurance training hit thirty.

It's all good, but not the way I want it to go.

Strength is what I want to go up since that is what governs the damage I do. Being able to soak up more is nice, but the faster I can end a fight, the less damage I need to worry about.

Every evening, once we stop, I've headed out into the ever-growing woods lining the road to find creatures to fight. Like the bears and cougars around the inn, they are variations on the local wildlife. Wolves with spikes for fur. Lynxes with foot-long claws, and one that blinked around without crossing the space.

As tough as they were, they weren't enough for me to go up a level.

I brought the bodies back for those interested in working on the related skills. Without the bonus they got from working under the supervision of someone with the teaching skill or the rewards Jordan gave them, most of them aren't interested, but we have three cooks and six butchers. Along with the foraging parties John set up, we have good food after a long day of work, even if it isn't of a quality or complexity that grants buffs.

My health drops to half. The sun is now closer to the horizon than not. I keep pushing until the trees near the road thin enough we'll be able to settle down there, then stop.

As I catch my breath, the kids jump out of the pickup and run around.

"Everyone," John calls, "remember to stay close to the pickups. This isn't the inn. We don't get any protection. And don't wander into the woods, no matter what you think you see. I don't want another Mirabel, understood."

Mirabel was one of the religious groups. She was found two days ago inside the woods, mauled by one of the lynxes, by the size of the gashes on her body. No one knew why she'd wandered away. No one on patrol had noticed her leave, which had caused John to give everyone a dress down about not paying enough attention.

Since the start of all this, she was the seventh person to wander off. Only the third whose body we found.

Out of a group that's now above two hundred, I consider this reasonable, but John takes each one personally. Maybe he should have taken the guardian class instead of me.

I stand there in my harness until my stamina's full again. My willpower's not even close to half, but my trek in the wood will take care of that.

I gave up trying to train one specific aspect of my fighting in each battle and just focus on the fight. Consequently, my staff skill is going up faster, having hit twenty last night. Block and dodge are at eleven, parry is at twelve. When each crossed ten, details about the fight became clearer, and it felt easier to defend. The same when my staff skill hit twenty, figuring out how the creature would move in an attempt to avoid my strike was easier, so less successful for them.

My bar lost a few centimeters in length to one of the lynxes; its claws easily cutting the steel. I've been careful since, but it's a reminder that it's my only weapon. Considering how much it takes to kill them with it, I'm not looking forward to fighting one bare-handed.

"You sure that's wise?" John asks, like he does every evening. "You should at least take a couple of ranged fighters for cover."

"I need the solitude." I don't even have to think about my response. It's out as I walk, and he doesn't bother replying.

I caught the sniper he sent to watch over me that first evening after the inn, and I gave him a solid piece of my mind about it. That it was only words cost me too much willpower and my father's goading didn't help.

I didn't bring back what I killed in the woods after that altercation.

I search the ground for tracks and follow what I think are those of some mid-size animal. Tracking is at nine, so I don't have any idea what I'm doing yet, but just trying has—

Tracking Skill has gone up a level: Level 10

—helped.

I'm off the mark. I have no idea what I'm following, but they aren't anything's tracks. Something caws over me and I wonder what the birds have been turning into. Those I've seen in the day, flying over the convoy, seem normal enough, but this one sounded too big to be anything normal.

I locate actual tracks, something of the smaller size, maybe that of a normal wolf. I can't tell anything from the shape of the paw pads. Maybe at a higher level, or it's a different skill entirely, taxonomy or something.

I hear a stream and the tracks head in that direction.

When the trees are thin enough, I can see the bank I stop at the sight of the fox seated on the boulder. It's slightly larger than what I think of as a normal fox, nothing on the creature level of what I've been fighting. It's still not a normal fox, the way its silvery fur shimmers in the light makes that clear.

I whisper an unintended "wow."

Its head snaps in my direction and I freeze. It doesn't search, it looks right at me. Or maybe it's my imagination; it goes back to looking into the distance over the stream.

Easy kill, my father says and I almost shush him. He can be as loud as he wants since he's in my head.

Maybe it's an easy kill, but it's also the first creature not to attack me on sight and because of that, I decide it's more a normal animal than whatever the system is turning the

others into.

I step back and the crunching of the leaves and branches under my foot is loud even to my ears. When I look up, the fox isn't on the boulder anymore.

Should have killed it when you had the chance.

I have my bar out and head for the bank to have space to move, but before I reach it, the fox jumps at me from the side.

I see it early and I reposition myself. I can tell where its motion will take it, so I swing there with enough strength to break it in half. Only my bar passes through it, leaving trails of smoke behind.

The fox lands on my chest with what sounds too much like laughter and digs its claws in before bounding away. Reflexively I strike it again, and the bar passes through as if it was made of smoke.

So much for normal.

It lands and takes its time turning around, then it sits and, while there is no way lips on a muzzle can move that way, smirks at me.

“Oh, don't even think of being smart about this.” The claws did little damage through my armor, but if I can't touch it...

It runs at me. This time, when I swing, it dodges, moving more like a liquid than a solid animal. It slashes at my leg as it passes by, and I lose another sliver of health. When I turn, ready for its next attack, it's sitting there, preening.

I go on the offensive, and it simply looks at me with a bored expression. It watches the bar as it moves through its body, then looks at me with this 'what did you expect' expression. With a scream, I swing at it again and again.

Then I scream in pain as it slashes at my hand, then it's between my legs, only missing my heel's tendon by a hair. It doesn't pause this time, turning and coming at me again. I curse as my bar fails to stop it, and I lose more health.

I stream to stop myself from going after it. It's playing me.

My stamina is nearly down to half.

You're letting some dumb animal trick you.

That is no dumb animal.

I watch it watching me and I wonder which of the two of us is the smarter one.

Not you.

Shut up.

There has to be a way I can hurt it.

Or you can run away, you're good at that.

I'm not leading that thing back to the others.

Why not? One of them's bound to be more attractive to it than you.

It runs at me, low to the ground, and I ready myself. Not to hit it, but the ground, using that to send it flying. As I wind back, timing my strike, it's in the air in a leap that borders on the majestic, except for those claws and fang.

I'm so surprised by it that I don't even consider my next action as I swipe at it with

the back of my hand. The impact sends it into a tree and it shakes itself as it stands, looking at me with hate.

So it's just my bar that can't touch it.

About time you caught on, or did you miss the cuts it gave you?

I swear, dad. If you don't shut up, I am going to kill you.

Have fun with that.

I really hate it when he gets me forgetting he's just a voice in my head.

I put the bar away. "Well, I was thinking of hand-to-hand fighting."

It studies me, before running at me. I can see how it moves, and I try to time my punch with its jump, but I miss it. Wide enough, I'm pretty sure my bar would have hit it, then passed through it.

It bits through my vest before bouncing away, and it occurs to me that it's getting through a lot of armor to hurt me. One of the others wouldn't last long against it.

Skill Acquired: hand to hand, Level 1

You have gained the skill to hit moving things with your fists.

I dismiss the pop-up and focus on trying to make use of that skill.

As slow as my loss of health is at its claws and bites, it still has me down to almost half when I finally land a blow.

I take the time it's getting over the surprise to set hand to hand as a skill that's up so I can track it. It's already level three.

When it looks at me, it seems more perplexed than angry.

"I'm not the smartest around," I tell it, "but I do learn."

My father laughs as it basically proves me wrong, leaping and bounding around me, cutting and biting as I swing as best as I can.

Hand to hand Skill has gone up a level: Level 4

Make that mean something.

My next punch connects and when the fox gets back to its feet, it wobbles.

Finally.

It attacks with more ferocity this time; as if anything before was just a game.

Hand to hand Skill has gone up a level: Level 5

Dodge Skill has gone up a level: Level 13

My health drops below a quarter before I score a third hit, and this time it has trouble standing. It faces me again. It doesn't even think of running off. This is personal for

it too. I can see it in its eyes. I'm an affront, and it's going to remove me or die trying.

I hit it again.

"Walk away."

Don't be an idiot.

Fuck off, dad. I'm not doing this to kill it.

Liar.

I am not.

It comes at me again, snapping almost rabidly.

I don't hesitate in bringing my fist down and shattering its body.

Told you.

"You should have walked away."

You have killed a Ghost Fox,(indeterminate). You gain 6000 XP.

Its fur is amazingly soft, even covered in dirt and blood.

I stop as it glows with a soft blue light that concentrates over its head until it's a small gem. I reach for it, hesitate, then take it.

Item: Ghost soul, Fox

Ghosts are a special class of creatures. Upon death, their souls become solid, turning into a colored gem that is sought after for its magical property.

If the gem is left alone, the Ghost will become a soul again, and reform its body.

I smile. "What do you know? You get to keep on living." I put the gem under its body, pet it one last time, then head back to the others. I'm don't with fighting for today.