

Chuck-46

One foot in front of the other. Slow and steady wins the race, like the turtle said. Not that this is a race.

“You sure this is fine?” Albert asks behind me. He’s sitting on the top of the cab. Hanz is in the driver’s seat, Elizabeth in the passenger. Patricia is standing among the metal in the bed, or was. I don’t have the strength to check with all the added weight they represent.

“I want the extra weight. I don’t feel it as much without you in there.”

“Can I ask a personal question?”

“Can I stop you?” I snap and reflexively look at my willpower. It didn’t drop.

Albert chuckles. “I’ll take that as tacit approval. Are you doing this to get stronger or because you feel you need to punish yourself for something?”

I snort. “So I can’t think.”

He doesn’t respond.

“Chuck,” John calls from ahead, well, only a dozen meters ahead now. He’s motioning for me to stop. Terry’s seated, leaning against a tree, letting his mana regenerate. Deloy is... somewhere. I have no idea if he’s goofing off or practicing his tracking like I told him to do.

Asked him to do.

Same thing.

No, if you had told him to do it, you’d know he was doing it.

“What’s up?” I ask, not stopping yet.

“Does that look like a building to you?”

Now I have to stop. My stamina is already visibly going up. This is doing more of my endurance training skill than my strength one, which is why I wanted the extra weight. I get out of the harness and join him.

He points to a lighter patch of trees ahead of us and after searching, I make out something that could be a building.

“I told you we should have gone to the eighty-one from Harrisonburg,” Patricia calls out.

“No now, hun,” John replies, glancing at me.

I ignore her comment, so my willpower’s fine. She’s his responsibility. I try to work out if this might be Linville, or some random building on the side of a secondary highway. It’s not easy to keep track of on foot without a map or a GPS. I can’t even tell if there used to be a road where we stand.

Maybe she’s right and we should just head south until we reach the interstate... if that’s even there anymore.

“We should check it out, if nothing else.”

A building three stories tall, in an area that’s clearly wild. If that’s not a recipe for a dungeon, I don’t know what is. But he’s right. If nothing else, we need to figure out where

we are.

I nod and start walking.

“Break time, everyone,” John calls out. “We’re going to investigate what’s ahead.”

Terry’s at my side before he’s done talking. “You think there’s going to be monsters?”

“Hopefully not.”

My father snorts.

Fine, I hope there is, but I’m not telling Terry that.

“I didn’t find any tracks,” Deloy says, falling into steps with me.

“Did you actually look for them?” I ask before I can stop myself.

“Of course.”

I level my gaze on him. I don’t need my perception skill on that one to know he lied.

“I swear, I did.”

I try a different tactic. “Deloy, it is fine if you didn’t spend the entire time practicing your tracking skill. You’re still a kid. You’re allowed to want to have fun.”

And I hate myself the moment he looks away. I was sixteen the last time my father used a similar line on me and he’d made me feel like a four years old. Deloy’s nineteen.

“I didn’t,” he whispers. “Sorry.”

“I told you, it is okay.” I put as much conviction as I can into the words, hoping I can undo the damage. That my father isn’t commenting doesn’t comfort me. “You don’t need to impress me, Deloy. The training is for you.”

Manipulation Skill increased in level, Level 7
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No fucking way. This wasn’t me manipulating him. I mean it. I’m doing that for him.

Interesting. You didn’t gain a level in lying with that one.

Shut up! This is your fault.

How is it my fault? You’re the one talking with him. I stayed out of it entirely.

You’re the one who started this by getting me to manipulate him initially.

Now you’re shifting the blame so you’ll feel better.

“I’ll do better, I swear,” the wolfboy—wolfman says. And I hate myself even more for the way he looks at me. Like I’m this great person he needs to please.

I hear the others behind us and use them to not have to think about what I just did. “Hanz, how about you and John check further ahead in case there are other buildings, and other things. Albert, you want to take Deloy and go around on the left? Make sure everything’s clear? Elizabeth, you and Terry can take the right?”

John looks at me, frowning, before heading ahead with the orc. The others separate, leaving me alone with Patricia.

“You know,” she says, smiling. “If I even suspected you’re trying to take me away from John, I’d say you planned it, so we’d end up alone.”

I glance at my slowly dropping willpower as I head for the building.

“You can say it, you know. No need to hold it in.”

“I’ve got no interest in you.” My willpower stops dropping.

“I know. That’s why I said ‘if I suspected’.”

I sigh. “We you not play mind games with me?”

“That’s not... alright, I’ll be more careful what I say.”

The building is covered with so much vines I can’t tell what it used to be made of. Concrete or metal, since it’s still standing. I have trouble finding the door, then I have to rip vines off to expose it, cutting myself in the process. The leaves are tough and the edges sharp. It’s like everything in this new world is designed to hurt us.

She steps away from me as I reach for the handle.

Nothing happens when I take hold of it. No warning about entering a dungeon, so that’s good. Opening it ends up being me ripping it out as too many vines prevent it from swinging. The inside is dark, and the light coming in through the doorway reveals a mossy interior. It’s like everything that was in the lobby was converted into the same thing, but made of moss.

I step away. I’m not going in there.

Looking around and expecting them, I can see other buildings through the foliage.

“This is the town you expected us to hit, isn’t it?” Patricia asks and my willpower drops as I steel myself against the following comment.

Which doesn’t come.

She’s just looking at me, so I nod.

“Yeah. I didn’t realize it would be empty.”

“Maybe not empty,” she replies. John and Hanz are returning, accompanied by four other. Two adults, a man and woman, a young woman, and a child. They look in bad shape. Emaciated, their clothing falling apart. And they clung to each other as if their lives depended on it.

I hurry to them.

“We found them huddled in a building in the process of collapsing around them,” Hanz says. “We had a bitch of a time convincing them to leave it.”

“Or that it wasn’t so you could eat them,” John adds.

“We don’t do that,” Hanz says. But the four with them shy away.

“You’re safe,” I tell them. “We have food and clean water. We’re heading to Winchester, so we can take you with us.”

My father’s chuckle makes me realize I’ve just taken on people, but this time I shove the annoyance aside. These people actually need help, unlike the previous tag-alongs who just couldn’t get off their asses to make their own decisions.

“What happened here?” I ask.

“The world went crazy,” the man answers and I lose a little willpower not reacting to the obviousness of the statement.

I look at John. “I didn’t press for answers. I figured it was best if we got them among other people first.”

When he doesn’t take that as the obvious opening to start asking question, I glare at another drop in willpower and ask them myself.

“Where is everyone?”

“They left,” the man says.

“All of them?”

He shakes his head.

This is going to be painful. And costly.

So I need to stick to the minimum.

“Why didn’t you go with them?”

“I built that house with my own two hands. I wasn’t going to abandon it just because half the town turned into…” he glances at Hanz. “Things.”

“We should have,” the woman whispers.

“Probably,” the man admits.

“Why didn’t you follow after those who left?” I ask. “This didn’t happen overnight, right? It took a few days.”

Elizabeth and Terry join us.

“The… monsters stopped those of us who tried,” the young woman answers when the other two don’t respond. “A lot of us died right then. They’ve been picking us off slowly since then.”

“All clear,” Albert says, as he and Deloy join us.

“Are you sure?” John asks as I look around.

“I swear,” Deloy answers, “I carefully checked for tracks, and there’s nothing.”

“I’m not doubting you, Deloy,” John replies. “It’s just that these folks tell us there’s a monster around.”

“Monsters,” the young woman says. “There’s more than one.” He hugs himself. “There’s a lot of them.”

I take out my bar and continue scanning around. Terry’s hands glow blue-white as he does the same.

“Terry, do you have a spell that can tell you if there’s anyone around?” I ask.

“No, I’ve been taking defensive and offensive spells only. You know. It’s a big bad world out there.”

John unholsters his gun. “Information gathering is part of being prepared, kid. See if there’s something like that next time you get to pick another one. Chuck, you keep them safe? I think it’s best if we head back to the truck and get out of here ASAP.”

“That’s not exactly going to be fast, hun,” Patricia says. John takes out a second gun and hands it to her.

“It’s better than—”

The cry that erupts among the trees chills my blood. The four in the center of our group fall to their knees, whimpering and holding onto each other. When I swallow and feel my knees tremble, I check my willpower, only to catch the debuff turning orange,

Fuck no.

“They’d giving out a fear Debuff!” I yell, as my willpower drops to a sliver, but the debuff’s gone. My yell turned into a scream as I run at the first thing I see moving. I make

out fur and bark and leaves. It's big, whatever it is, and there are a lot of them.

I slam my bar into it like it's a baseball bat. My form's horrible—hey, I can tell that now—but it is so satisfying when the impact sends it back into those trailing. Then I plant myself there and I wait.

I hear gunshots. Albert yells that think he does when he goes in battle. Waves of cold pass over me. Those are the only signs I get the others are in their own fights.

I block, strike, parry, and dodge. When a hit gets through, I lose a sliver of health. The armor the Jarzabeks gave me is good. I slam the end of my bar into the head of one of the monsters and green goo erupts on the other side as it drops.

You have gained a level, current level 10

Yes. Finally.

I bring up the list of ability as I dodge, then strike the closest one. I'm searching through the abilities when the punch sends me flying and a quarter of my health vanishes.

Okay, this can wait until after the fight. I get to my feet.

Not if you get hit like that again, it can't.

The one who hit me is larger than the others. When I slam the bar into it, it staggers, instead of flying back.

I catch a patch of white out the corner of my eyes at the treeline, and almost turn to see what it was, then remember I'm in a fight. It costs me willpower not to give into my curiosity, but this is one situation where willpower is not something I have to worry about.

I dodge and block, the force of the blow managing to send me on my back. My bar takes the next two punches—the monster's not too bright as it tries for a third one. The white flashes by, behind it, and it roars, reaching for it and giving me the time to roll and get to my feet. Whatever—it can't be that—that was is. It's gone by the time I slam the end of my bar into the thing's throat. It's doesn't go through, like it did the other's head, but it's clear it needs to breathe by the way it clutches at it and struggles to breathe.

It's probably slowly suffocating, but I help it along. It takes three hard hits on its head before it drops. Then I'm bringing the others down and rejoining the group around our, still alive, rescues.

"Everyone okay?" I asked, and before anyone answers, a name flashes in the party window as his health drops to ten percent.

"Terry!" Elizabeth yells.

Terry's a hundred meters away, with a monster the size of the one I faced looming over him, more approaching. His health's still dropping, and he's out of mana. They can all see that and we're helpless to save him. Even if I switch places with him, we don't have a healer, so he'll just...

Don't you fucking dare.

"You guys deal with it," I tell the others as I pick my tier three ability. "Tag," I say, glaring that the monster. "You're it."