

Chuck-8

I'm out of the bed to the smell of bacon and eggs and conversation. The sun's still low out the window. I'm fully healed, so I had a good night's sleep despite yesterday's stress.

I returned from my isolation late in the evening; the party having quieted down. Hanz was drinking a beer and told me about the room that was set aside for me, after complaining that his high constitution meant alcohol wasn't affecting him anymore. I didn't ask for details, or why they'd set a room for me. I didn't want any more problems. I was out as soon as I laid down.

Elizabeth is at the propane stove, with Terry and Deloy at the table, along with a few more teens from the groups who added to ours yesterday. At another table, a makeshift one, adults are watching over them. A mix of some that joined with the teens, a few from the religious group, and one or two, I have no idea if they were even with us yesterday.

The teens were already comfortable with Deloy's non-human looks, while the adults eyed him with suspicion. Even Elizabeth glanced at him and Terry as she worked the pan.

"There's plenty of bacon, eggs, and toast on the table, so serve yourself," she said. "There's a hot pot of coffee, too. Considering I have no idea if the stuff in our inventory will keep, I'm going as much as I can."

"How much propane is left?" Instead of thinking about breakfast, I'm thinking about tomorrow and the next days.

"John?" she called to the adult's table. "Propane?"

"Two cans for the Coleman. I have some for a grill, but the only grill we found was busted." The man is one of those I can't place. He's stocky, with a hint of a Texan in his accent, and balding, although he looked to be no older than I am. "Do you need one already?"

"Just getting an update," she replies. "John went through every house yesterday and collected what he could. He has sixteen inventory slots, and he's stocking up on canned and long-term stuff."

It's good someone was already thinking about that yesterday, instead of partying like it was nineteen ninety-nine.

Or cutting yourself off from everyone in self-pity.

I ignore the voice. It's called self-care, not self-pity.

"How are we for food?"

"A lot of it was eaten last night."

"I—we should reach a Walmart today. Hopefully, it will still have canned food and fresh stuff we can eat as we travel."

"We?" she asked, clearly trying not to smirk.

"Trust me, the thought of walking off in the night crossed my mind. But the creatures in the plane, the destruction we've seen getting here, and Deloy's talk about everyone leaving are making it clear even to me that we have to stick together."

You don't have to sound so happy about it. I stifle a sigh and rub the bridge of my nose.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine," I reply, harsher than I mean to. "If you couldn't tell, I'm not a people person."

She chuckles. "I did notice you kept your distances. I had to stop Terry from running up to you a few times."

"Thanks. His enthusiasm for all this is..."

"Maddening? He just has his deepest wish granted and we're getting pulled along."

"Being a wizard?"

"More the life as a video game. Now he has rules he can figure out and push to their limits, instead of having to muddle through with guesses that what he was doing got him the results he was after."

"Chuck!" Terry called. "What skills do you have and can you teach them to me?"

"No."

"Come on. You have to have some good ones since you're old."

"Terry!" Elizabeth chastises him.

Kids, my father's voice says, and this time I agree with him. He never had time for kids other than me. Lucky them.

"I'm going to walk around." I'm already getting a headache and lost a sliver of the green bar.

"We're going to have everyone ready to go within the hour," the woman seated next to John says as I head out of the kitchen. She has the same accent.

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It takes an hour and a half to get everyone ready. By the time they're done, there are clear divisions. Those who no longer look human are on one side. Then are those I'm calling the enthusiasts. Most of them are on the younger side, with a handful of adults. They aren't particularly bothered by our non-humans and seem to consider all of this one big adventure.

Then are the reluctants. They're going along without protest and doing what's needed of them to help, but there's a clear sense they can't wait for this to be over. There's a sense of blue-collar workers to them. People who've had to put up with life's unfairness and have become tougher for it.

And finally the deniers. They want nothing to do with any of this, especially anyone who no longer looks exactly human. Business Woman is in the lead, but her group had diminished.

The reason John and his wife didn't ring a bell was that they'd kept to that group all day yesterday. Somewhere in the evening, they accepted this was how things were and decided to help instead of being a burden.

When we're moving. And it doesn't take long before I know this isn't going to be an easy day. Someone is in the process of building a barricade across the road using cars they are pushing into place. There isn't enough to cover more than half the road, but if they're willing to do that, I can't imagine them letting us pass without trouble.

Hanz is next to me before I have to look for someone. "Trouble," he states.

"Tell the others to stop. I'm going to go talk with them. Hopefully, once I explain we're just passing through, they won't cause problems."

Hanz snorts. "You have a lot more faith in people than I do."

That isn't something I hear often, or even think. He's gone before I can tell him I have no faith in people. I'm just doing the opposite of what my instinct, masquerading as my father's voice, tells me to do.

I start forward.

I'm not alone by the time I get close enough to make out people and be noticed by them. Hanz, John, Deloy, and Griffin, who offered to come and keep an eye on the Worgen when proved impossible to convince him to stay back. At least Elizabeth had Terry in hand.

"That's far enough," a woman calls, stepping in front of the partially built barricade. She's thin, older, and has a severe look to her, with her hair tied back in a bun and dressed in jeans overall. "This is my town and I don't much like strangers."

"We're just passing through," I answer.

"Hi Misses Brimhall!" Deloy calls and I glare at Griffin. He's supposed to keep him under control.

"How the Hell do you know my name?" she demands.

"It's me, Deloy."

She narrows her eyes. "Deloy Lesueur?"

"Yes, Ma'am." The grin on the lupine muzzle isn't pleasant, especially when showing teeth as he is.

"I always knew you were a monster, you and your entire family."

"Hey, don't talk that way about my family."

I put an arm before him to keep him from moving in front of me.

"Someone's got a rifle," John whispers, and I look for them. Finding a man partially hidden behind the car further away holding something to his shoulder and maybe aiming in our direction. If John can tell what that is; he had better eyesight than I do. Does it even work?

"Like I said. We're not looking to cause trouble," I tell her. "We're just looking to pass through."

"You and a whole lot of people." She nods behind me. I don't turn. I really hope they all stayed back. If there's a working firearm and it's used. There's no telling who will be shot.

Just make sure it's one of them and you'll be fine.

Now is so not the time.

"Let us through and we'll be gone before you know it."

"See, that's where I don't think I can agree with you. People aren't going to just walk through here and leave my town alone. That's what we're making this blockade. And there's monsters with you. I've already seen what those things can do. Half the town's destroyed because of them."

"We're people," Hanz says.

“Don’t look like any people I’ve ever seen before. And you bunch look to be doing okay, while I’ve got a town to rebuild. So how about you give me what you’ve got and I’ll think about letting you through?”

“No,” I answer, jaws clenching. That’s a never-ending cycle and whoever gives in never wins. “Ma’am, I’m taking these people through. I’ll make sure they don’t touch anything, but you aren’t extorting us.” The green bar dips. I do not need this right now.

“Buddy,” she says, “you don’t tell me what’s going to happen. This is my town. I decide what—”

The gunshot happens at the same time as I’m spinning off balance and a quarter of my health vanishes. I’m on the ground, the pain is intense, and an icon flashed and I focus on it.

Crippled, Left arm

The crippled limb cannot be used until the condition causing the crippling had been removed. Subsequently, maximum health is diminished by 10% until the crippling condition has been remedied.

“Son of a bitch!” I snarl. I have my barbell in my working hand and use it to help me to my feet. “I’d just finally healed!”

“You shouldn’t have threatened her!” someone yells. There are a dozen men behind her now. Hanz, John, and Deloy are looking at me in shock. Griffin is looking at the group before us, expression blank. It’s too late not to show how we feel.

I’m pissed. “Lady,” I start through clenched teeth. “You’re going to get out of our way, or I’m going to unleash our troll on you.”

“Don’t talk to her like that!” one of the men comes at me and I react by swinging the barbell to force him to stay back. It connects with his head and he goes down. The way it’s caved in tells me he isn’t getting back up. I swallow the bile.

They can all tell; by the horrified look on their face.

“What did you do?” She demands.

“He had it coming,” I snarled back, “trying to jump me.” I hate the words because they are what my father’s voice is whispering to me. “I tried to do this nicely. You fucking shot me and then had him attack. You want to blame someone, blame your-fucking-self. Now, unless you want me to bash in someone else’s head in, you’re going to back off and let us through!”

They’re gone before my ears stop ringing from my own scream. Or maybe it’s the blood loss. My health is going down slightly.

“Get the others, and make fucking sure someone is guarding the rear, because if they fired unprovoked, I don’t put it past them to shoot us in the back.”

Griffin is next to me, while John pulls a still stunned Deloy with him toward the others. “I think I can help with this.”

“There’s a bullet in there.”

He nods. “No exit wounds.” He pulled the shirt away. “Small caliber too. I don’t know how this is going to feel.” He places a hand on the wound and I bite back the pain as he presses. “Don’t let this get to you. You didn’t—”

“Don’t even fucking try to make me feel better about what I did. I just killed a man.”

“I’m pretty sure he was going to kill you.” His tone is flat, and he’s focusing on what he’s doing.

My reply is a scream as something in the wound moves. When it stops, Hanz is holding me up. I wipe the tears away. They’re from the pain, I tell myself. And I can see faces in the buildings lining the street watching us. That is a lot of people.

“We need to move,” I say.

“I don’t think we need to worry about them,” Griffin replies.

“I didn’t know salesmen were such experts on human psychology,” Hanz snaps.

“They just saw Chuck here take down a man with one swing. They’re imagining the worse right now. There might be a handful of brave ones, but that isn’t the sense I got from them. They are thoroughly cowed.”

I don’t like the pride in his voice.

My health climbs a little, and the crippled icon seems paler. I try to move my arm, but it doesn’t respond.

“We should move the body before the kids see it,” Hanz says.

I send the barbell back to my inventory and grab a leg, pulling the body behind the cars. I want to throw up the entire time, but I don’t let it happen. I did this. I’m going to damn well suffer for it.

By the time it’s hidden from view, the group is passing the barricade. Bernard is on one side, looking menacing without trying. Elizabeth and Terry on the other, along with someone with scales I don’t know and Deloy.

We never even checked with him what he wanted to do, but now there’s no way he can stay here. They are going to rip him apart for having been part of this, even just as an observer.

I let everyone pass, joining Hanz and John in the back. I can feel the eyes on us the entire way through the town, but we don’t see anyone.

Once on the other side, I relax enough to feel the impact of what I did. I walk away and behind a building, where I throw up.