

Changing-10

Richard looked at the strips of meat on the racks.

Skill Acquired: Preserving. Level 1.

It's not cooking, but it's a way to making sure your food lasts longer. While the results can be eaten, the skill produces lower quality foods compared to meals cooked with an equivalent skill.

Looking at the rotted strips, he understood what had gone wrong. The humidity. Even with Jackson and him keeping the fire going through the night, the air had been too warm and humid and instead of drying, the meat had rotted. He'd need to enclose the next try in a container so the heat would dry the air as it pulled the moisture out of the meats. That or he could—

“How much salt do you have?” He asked Jackson who had a kettle on the stone at the edge of the fire.

“I grabbed the box of table salt you had in your cupboard before we left.”

“That's not going to be enough.” He examined the results, discarding the obvious failures. How had he known he'd need more salt? For that matter, how had he known about a smoker, or salting as a way of preserving meat? Had he seen, or read, something on preserving food? The former was possible, he could watch anything he wanted online, and YouTube had been an easy place to spend the hours. The latter was far less likely.

Richard hadn't been one to read books on survival, even once he'd been installed in his cabin in the middle of nowhere. His escape plan had always relied on taking Jackson's pickup and using what he had in the cabin for supplies. Where ever he was, he knew there would be a town within an hour's drive.

The third option was that the system had granted him the knowledge. The possibility raised interesting questions; like if it could do that, could it remove something? He'd erased his middle name from his character sheet, but Richard knew it was Benoit. He couldn't think of a way to test if the system could remove information, but he figured that if he kept trying to preserve food, he'd find out if it provided him with information.

He scraped the rot off one strip and was left with a decently dry and not too funky smelling piece. As he studied it a window appeared.

Item: Jerky, Type: Food, Quality: trash.

Heals one hit-points and one mana points on consumption. Can be used as an ingredient in cooking. Due to the low quality, there is a 25% chance to gain a trash quality poison on consumption. (loses stamina twice as fast for an hour, stamina regeneration takes twice as long. If stamina reaches 0, the person is incapacitated) if used in cooking, the success of that skill will adjust the chances of poison.

You have gained a Level: Study, level 4

“Jackson.” Richard threw the piece of jerky to the man. “Breakfast.”

Jackson smelled it, then focused on it. He looked up after a second. “You trying to poison me?”

“So you have gained the Study skill.”

“Yeah. I picked it up not long after the lynx. When did you get yours?”

Richard smiled. “Early.”

Jackson threw the piece of jerky in the fire. “Keep working on whatever skill lets you make this. Even without the one in four chance to be poisoned, healing one point for eating that isn’t worth it.”

“You seem to be taking it rather well that food can heal us now.” Richard continued studying the pieces of jerky.

“We fought a twenty-foot bear, a lynx the size of a small horse, and two cannibals. It’s going to take a lot more than that to surprise me at this point.”

The two of them had moved the two hunters away from their camps after taking anything useful. When Richard had searched the man he killed, on top of the items on his person, the inventory window opened too, but it was empty, which lead Richard to think they hadn’t found out about it, else, why carry the body parts in a bag? Jackson had confirmed the man he had killed also had an empty inventory.

They’d hoped the distance from the camp would keep the animals away since they could eat the corpses. It had either worked, or there weren’t any animals in the area. The bag of body parts, Jackson had buried out of respect.

Richard’s inspection gained him another trash piece of jerky and another level in Study and Preserving. He could now visualize what the smoke-box would have to look like. Actually simple to make. With the right materials, he suspected he could even assemble a makeshift one, although, the quality would be poor since he had no skill for building things at the moment. Making a portable one would be even more difficult.

With the inspection done, he added the wood of the rack to the fire and ate a breakfast of canned fruit.

Mixed fruit, canned, Type: food, Quality, okay.

A variety of fruits that have been cut, boiled, and sealed, removing just about everything that makes fruits worth eating.

He needed to obtain better food as soon as he reached a town.

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“Do you think that this whole thing is what made them cannibals?” Jackson asked.

They’d been walking for hours now. They’d reached route 655 an hour after they set out, and had been following the road south ever since. Jackson said it would take them to Timmins, and Richard had no reason to doubt him.

Richard looked at his shadow. It was close to noon. “The system? I doubt it. It didn’t change either of us in any fundamental way. It did cause them to kill the people

they were hunting with.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You mean other than the bag of limbs?”

“Yes, other than that,” Jackson replied, annoyed.

“Their levels. We killed that bear, those lynxes and I lost track of how many animals that attacked us, and we didn’t go up a level. Jeffrey, the one you killed, was level three. I suspect that Walter, the one I killed was even higher. How much experience did you get from the kill?”

“Thirty thousand, it’s the first round number we came across.”

“Forty for me, so at a guess, Walter was fourth level. If each level earns you ten thousand, I’m four-fifth to level four. He would have had to kill six or seven people. Jeff maybe a few less. I passed over-reaching level three too fast for me to notice how much experience I needed.”

Richard decided he needed to train his study skill quickly. He needed to get reliable results when he checked other people out. He could speed up his leveling if he was—

“You’re making plans to kill people, aren’t you?” Jackson asked.

Richard sighed. Thrust the psychologist to know what he was thinking.

“You know I won’t let you. This change isn’t an excuse for you to go on a killing spree.”

“You realize that is exactly what anyone with an ounce of commonsense will be doing, right? The higher our levels, the stronger we are, the better our chances of surviving whatever else we’ll encounter.”

“Not at the expense of our humanity.”

Richard raised an eyebrow. “I think you’re giving humanity too much credit. You certainly give me too much.”

“Richard, you can’t—”

“Fine, I won’t kill anyone who doesn’t give me a reason.”

Jackson eyed him. “You agreed too easily.”

“One, I expect plenty of people will give me a reason to kill them. Unlike you, my faith in humanity leans toward the pragmatic. Two, we’ve established that my odds of surviving are better with your help, and at this time it’s not worth sacrificing for the pleasure of killing someone who isn’t asking for it. And three, things are going to change eventually, and you won’t matter in the equation anymore.” He smiled. “I’m a patient man, you know that.”

Jackson sighed. “I’ll take it and hope that by the time you decide I’m no longer useful there’s enough distance between us it won’t be worth it for you to come after me.”

“Make me work for it, and I’ll make your death quick.”

“I should put a bullet through your head right now.”

“If only your humanity would let you, right?”

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The ground shook; a slow and long rumble.

Richard unsheathed his knife and looked around. On the right was a tree farm growing Christmas trees. On the left was a quarry, they'd passed a sign indicating the company that owned it was called aggregate something. Maybe a gravel quarry.

Jackson had his gun out as the following shaking was accompanied by a gravelly scream coming from the quarry.

Richard was running for the hill separating the road from it. By the time he reached the top, all was quiet and the ground at the bottom of the pit was fuzzy with settling dust. As he watched, one of the dunes of gravel shifted and leveled itself to the ground.

"What was it?" Jackson asked.

"No idea."

"It must have been big for us to feel it."

The ground shook again, more violently this time, and something erupted from one of the pits. A tentacle shot up and fell in their direction. Richard ran back to the road, the sound of crashing behind him causing him to look over his shoulder. The tentacle left a gully wider than he was tall as it pulled back toward the quarry.

"You feel like taking it on?" Jackson asked. "I'm sure it's worth a lot of experience."

"Too high a risk it'll kill me, but you have infinite bullets, feel free to try it."

"I'm not the one who wants to get as powerful as he can as fast as he can."

"I intend on surviving first and foremost, we should put more distance between it and us. There's no telling if it can move, or if its tentacles can reach further."

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An hour later, and with the sun close to the horizon, the small plane in the middle of the road came into view.

"No killing who's there," Jackson warned, taking out his gun.

"Not unless they try to kill me."

"No provoking them either."

"I don't have the bullets to waste."

They approached, each on one side. Richard was disappointed when it turned out to be empty. "What is it doing here?" He opened the small cargo space.

"There's a small airport in the area. They must have been on approach when everything stopped working. They glided to the closest flat stretch."

"At least they were smart enough not to overburden themselves. I have three suitcases with clothing, two of women, one man."

"It's a four-seater, so them and the pilot. They must have headed for Timmins."

"How far are we?"

"I don't know. We're not reaching it by nightfall, that's for sure."

"Do you want to use the plane as shelter for the night, or push on?"

He looked at the plane. "We push on, I don't trust that to protect us from whatever is in the quarry if it's able to get out."

Richard nodded, and they left the plane behind.