

## Chuck-36

The next floor's only different that it has 'labs'. Classroom where they do applied studies instead of sitting and listening to someone drone on endlessly. Jim's description, not mine. I went to the school of hard knocks, as stories like to call learning stuff directly from living it. Or, considering my father, me surviving it.

The Labs have been cleaned out by someone or something able to think. Everything's been taken and there's no damage anywhere.

The monsters are more of the same. Virgil things they're tougher, but I'm not feeling it. They go down just as easily as on the previous floor. Janice administers the death blow to any we don't have to kill to keep from dying, so all of mine, most of Virgil and Walter, but none of Jim. He's just greedy.

We don't find incubation tubes on this floor, but on the next one. Eight in the men's and nine of the women's restroom. One in each of the stalls again. Half are occupied, and we destroy them.

I can feel the increase in the strength of these monsters. As well as in their craftiness. We're ambushed twice in the halls, and once in a classroom. Some of them have discovered they can hand from the ceiling.

Once it's cleared, Virgil's level six, Janice five, Walter four, since the halls don't give him a lot of opportunity at range with us in the way. Jim's sixth level, because he's been hogging all his kills.

I'm still level nine.

Walter talks about scaling experience as the reason. I'm too high level for the area, so I'm not getting as much out of it. I don't care. My combat skills are climbing nicely from all the fighting.

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The fourth floor is different.

"Down!" Walter yells as I shove two of the larger Goblinoids against the wall with my bar. I knee one where it should hurt, and it just snarls at me. The other claws at my face and I roar at it.

"Damn it Jim, I can't shoot it with you in the way!"

"I have it!"

I step back just enough I can slam my bar in their necks before they move. Instead of that breaking, the wall gives and they fall back into a conference room, by the long table already broken into two and the dozen chairs littering the floor.

They take advantage of the space by flanking me.

I take advantage of it by building up momentum as I ran at one, swinging my bar like a baseball bat. Not how it should be used, I can sense that, but I really don't give a fuck right now. And neither does my bar as its head goes flying.

The other tackles me, and we're down. My bar skids away and my health drops as it claws at my back. I get my hands under me and push enough it's unbalanced, and I get to my

feet. My bar's too far to use, so I raise my fists.

I can't hit worth shit, so it's a good thing I'm damned good at dodging now. I'm even worse trying to kick as my one attempt nearly lands me on my back. When I see Walter, as I dodge another slash, he just stands there looking at the fight through the broken wall.

"What the fuck are you waiting for?" I snarl.

"He's your—"

"I'm not the fucking thief. Shoot this thing so we can move on."

Two arrows and the Goblinoid goes down finally.

I pick up my bar and stalk toward the archer. He backpedals as I approach.

"If you ever—" I growl, then Virgil is in my way, hands up.

"Whoa there, calm down. We're on the same side."

"You call leaving me to be killed, being on the same side?" I glare at the orc.

"Walter wasn't doing that. He's just now kill stealer."

"This isn't a fucking game!" what is it with these kids? "You want to let Jim died because he's an idiot, be my guest, but if you ever don't take the shot that might save me, you better fucking hope I die, because I am going to make you pay for it!"

"We get it," Virgil says. "You've just been better at taking them on than us, I'm sure —"

"You really want to make excuses for someone else, Virgil?" I demand.

"Look man, I get we're all revved up from the fighting, but we are on the same side. We'll make mistakes, but that doesn't mean with intend to let anyone of us be killed."

I search his face for some indication he's playing me, but I can't fucking make sense of his expression. So I make it a conscious decision. Other than Jim, they've all been working to help each other, including me, since the start. It can be a ploy, so I won't see the betrayal coming. It's the kind of thing my father would pull, but I know from experience that not a lot of people are like him.

So I chose to believe Virgil and breathe to calm myself, while actively ignoring my father's voice telling me how much of an idiot I am.

"Alright," I say once I'm calm and yes, this is costing me willpower. "I apologize for snapping, Walter." More willpower vanishes. "But keep in mind I'm more interested in surviving than accumulating experience. I'm not going to bitch if you steal my kill."

Janice snickers and Jim's unhappiness is obvious enough I see it, not that I get why either of them's reacting like that.

"Alright," Walter says.

"Now that this is dealt with," Virgil says, "Janice, care to heal us and we'll keep moving? Walt, keep watch, since you're the least hurt."

"Sit," Janice tells me. "How hurt are you? It looks bad, but with the amount of health you must have, I don't know how it correlates."

"I'm down to a sixth." I sit and lean against the wall.

"That was a good jab," she says, placing her hands on my chest. I raise an eyebrow. "You saying you won't bitch in that tone, after all the bitching Jim did when Walter and Virgil had to rescue him because he wouldn't back down from a Goblinoid that's stronger

than he is.”

Is that why Jim looked hurt?

“You should try to be more careful, though.” She smiles at me. “It’d be a shame for a man like you to end up killed because he was rash.”

I get lost trying to take apart what she might mean. It could be a threat, but then why is she healing me? Then there’s the smile. Why the fuck is she smiling? Is she expecting me to smile back? I don’t react and keep my willpower up.

“I’m healed,” I tell her when my health maxes out and she doesn’t take her hands away.

“Oh?” she’s still smiling. “I guess you are. Try not to get yourself killed.” She moves on to Virgil, then passes by Jim to go heal Walter. Jim glares at me, the orc’s expression I can’t read. Once she heals Jim, he stalks to me.

“Don’t get any idea.”

Then he walks off.

Fuck, I hate dealing with people.

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I stare in the office from the doorway along with Virgil.

The door was ripped off, and we’d heard sounds inside, so we expected a Goblinoid, and we got one, but neither of us expected it to be... grading papers? At least it’s looking at remnants of papers, holding a broken pen and scratching through it, breaking the pen further on the desk.

“What’s going on?” Jim calls from further back, and the Goblinoid’s head snaps in our direction, sending the cracked glasses flying off his bulbous nose.

With a roar, it launches itself at us.

Virgil’s faster, his sword cutting an arm off before it lands. It doesn’t slow it, and we go back, to give each other maneuvering room. Before we can do anything else, there’s an arrow in its eye and it falls back.

Virgil gives Walter a look. I nod at the archer.

“You think it was actually grading papers?” Virgil asks, and I shrug.

“It was grading papers?” Janice is next to us, looking me over for injuries.

“I’m fine.”

“I’m the cleric,” he replies, and again, she’s smiling. “Yep. You’re fine. Do you think it was one of the professors?” she looks for a name plate among the door’s debris.

“I hope not,” Walter says, “because then we’ve been killing people.”

“We haven’t I tell them.” With the number of Goblinoids we’ve killed, and the way the system seems geared toward making killing people more rewarding, we’d all be much higher level at this point.

“And you know that how?” Jim asks.

I shrug. “Even if they were people, they’re mindless monsters now, so we’re doing them a favor.” I’m not telling him about the slant in the system. I have no doubt he’ll exploit it.

“That’s kind of callous of you,” he replies.

“It’s practical. If you don’t want to kill them anymore because of that, it’s your decision.” I start walking again.

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Jim’s still killing Goblinoids.

*Like there was ever any doubt he’d stop.*

We make it to the stairwell on the east side of the building. The central stairs to the top floor have been collapsed and these are the only other to go there. It reinforces the idea that whoever’s behind all this is up there.

The next indication is when Jim hurries back down those stairs.

“There’s guards,” he says. “Armed with clubs.”

“How organized are there?” Virgil asks.

“I should I know? They’re still Globlinoids, so they probably aren’t that smart, but these are definitely the biggest I’ve seen. Their skin also looks tougher and they move in pairs. What I could see through the window makes it seem like they are doing rounds, and I made out one on each side of the door. Unless we have another way to go up, I think we’re looking at a lot of harder fighter.”

“You should be happy,” Walter says. “Harder means more experience.”

There’s another look exchanged, and Jasmine chuckles, then looks at me and nods to them.

“Is there another way up?” I ask, ignoring all the social interplay.

“So long as you’re fine with climbing the elevator shaft.”

“Then we have to worry about opening the doors.” Walter points out, “and they could also be guarded. I don’t think any of us can fight those things hanging from the walls or cables.”

“Then we deal with these, and any that we encounter,” Virgil says. “But we do it as a team.” He looks at Jim. “For real this time. No going after something twice your size and bitching when you need rescuing.”

“I wasn’t bitching,” Jim protests.

“You have a plan?” Walter asks.

“The fifth floor is basically one corridor with rooms along it.” He traces a path in the dirt. “He only branches here, then there’s the door leading to the patio there. If they are patrolling like Jim thinks, that means we’ll only encounter them in pairs. So long as we don’t do anything stupid, we can deal with that no matter how strong they are.” Again, Virgil looks at Jim.

“Hey. I’m not the one taking them on all alone.” He looks at me.

“Chuck can take the damage until me or Walk can help. You can’t.”

“Fine. What’s the plan, oh great leader?” he asked the orc.

I’m almost sure he expects me to react, but even if I was, I wouldn’t. I’m not playing any of their games.

Virgil glances at me and when I don’t react to that either, he continues. “Jim, you scout ahead. When you see a pair of them, you pull them to us. Walt peppers them with

arrows, if they die. That's good, if now, me and Chuck finish them. Janice heals us when it's all over."

"Heals Chuck, you mean," Jim grumbles.

"How do we deal with the two up those stairs?" Walter asks.

Virgil looks at me. "Want to test how strong they really are?"

I smile at him.

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Virgil counts down with his fingers from five.

The two of us went up the stairs as quietly as we could, quiet enough the two on the other side of the door didn't react. He's next to the door. I'm standing in front of it. The door opens toward us, so instead of giving them even that little warning, I'm kicking it out. We're counting on that being enough of a distraction to give us the advantage.

When he hits zero, I slam my foot against the latch hard enough the door frame flies into the hall along with the door. Virgil is out before me, taking on the Goblinoid on the right. I follow, shouldering the one on the left away before it can go to its partner's help.

The corridor keeps me from using my bar to full effect, which might be for the best; it's in bad shape now. But it also keeps the Goblinoid from swinging fully. Even over head, the ceiling gets in its way.

It has to be two meters and a half tall. I won't be surprised if it masses in the range of five hundred kilos with the muscle on it. My dodge comes in handy, especially since, the one time I'm not fast enough, one blow from that club takes out a quarter of my health. It doesn't matter if it is because it's *that* strong or my armor's in that bad of a shape. I focus on not being hit after that and landing hard jabs anytime I can.

When it finally goes down, the biggest victim of the fight is my stamina. Virgil looks equally exhausted.

"I hope Walter can weaken them," he says, "because at the speed I regain my stamina, there's no way I can deal with two fights like this in a row."

I nod. And we're dealing with patrols, which means we won't be able to just sit and wait for it to be completely restored between fight.

Jim steps out of the stairwell and looks at us. "We're screwed, aren't we?"