

Chuck-6

“It’s empty too!” Hanz yelled, returning from the house that was a hundred meters off the road. Checking the houses hadn’t been my idea, but it was a good one.

Of course, that’s why you agreed to it, my father’s voice mocks. It’s got nothing to do with all that experience you’ll be gaining.

I’d wanted to smack Terry for telling everyone to follow me. They didn’t need me, and I certainly didn’t want them slowing me down. But before I’d given him a piece of my mind—I wasn’t hitting a kid—people were moving. Bernard and Mary were the first to reach me and the relief on the troll’s face was scary. Hanz and Terry’s mother had been right behind them, with Griff not far behind and a handful of the others trailing.

I sighed and gave in.

Quest: The Way of the Guardian, 2
The guardian does more than protect, they guide to safety. In this time of changes, guide the people you’ve rescued to safety. Reward: 50 XP per person you bring to safety.
Do you accept the quest? Yes/no?

I look at the quest again. It hadn’t been why I accepted it, I tell myself again, and ignore the laughter. It had served as a reminder that I was trying to be different from my father, who saw the world and people in it only as there for his amusement or to help him get what he wanted.

I wanted to be a better man. And as hard as it was, it meant leading those people to a place where they would be safe.

Maybe that was Greenville, still a kilometer ahead, and he could move on alone after that.

“No sign of fighting in this one.”

Since leaving the crash site, they’d come across houses every few hundred meters. Farmhouses mostly. And they’d picked up around twenty people. Almost fifty traveling with him. Nearly a thousand experience points just for enduring them. I still haven’t looked at the tabs beyond the first one with what Terry called the overview and the inventory one.

The red bar, still barely at a fifth, the yellow one appearing every so often with a little of it vanishing, and the green one which had dropped as I came to terms with not traveling alone and was hovering a bit over the halfway mark, were reminders enough things were different. I didn’t have to see the numbers for my health, stamina, and willpower.

Tonight, I promise myself, I’ll find a quiet spot and go over everything. I can’t hope someone who knows something about what’s changed, like Terry and Mary, will be around to explain things to me.

The orc falls in step with me. “Do you think something about this system caused everyone to leave their homes?”

“It isn’t everyone.” On top of those we picked up, a handful preferred staying in their houses and defending it.

“Still, it seems strange to have just so many empty houses. That one gas station that got ripped apart by crystals was freaky.”

“People run when they’re scared, it’s in their nature.”

“You really believe that?”

Fuck. Another of the things my father ingrained in me slipped through. Every time I think I finally got everything he put me through behind me, something like this happens.

My father laughs.

The green bar dips a little more. I eat a trail mix bar and it goes up, but not back where it was.

“Not everyone, but a lot of people do that. If they didn’t start moving as soon as everything stopped working, the plane crashing probably got them moving. We’re probably going to find them in Greenville.”

He doesn’t comment, and I appreciate the silence.

“Have you gotten any quests yet?”

The green bar dips as I stifle a groan.

“I think that’s going to fall into the too personal questions now that they are a thing.”

Hanz smiles around his oversized incisors. “So you’ve gotten one.”

“Terry could have told me about those being a thing, now that everything runs like a video game.”

“The kid does seem to know a lot about it. Which is fortunate for us. I’m just a casual gamer.”

“Yes, I have a quest. No, I’m not telling you what it is.”

Hanz nods. “I have a proving my worth one. I have to fight ten creatures who are at least three levels higher than I am.”

“Isn’t that asking to get killed?”

“Says the guy who took the place of a kid about to get crushed by an angry troll. Who then ran toward a crashed plane without knowing anything about what would be there, fought fire creatures, and threw himself out of a plane.”

“The first one was a reflex. I didn’t know it would happen. People could have needed help. And I fell out, not threw myself out. I certainly didn’t have a quest telling me to do any of that.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to piss you off.” He slows and falls behind.

Finally. Not the fastest on the uptake, is she?

He. Fucking gender people right. You asshole.

I hate that while it’s my father’s voice, it’s my subconscious using it. It means I’m the one who thinks that about Hanz, and I know better. I know he’s just trying to be friendly. But fuck, is it nice to finally be alone. Even if the crowd isn’t that far behind me.

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The houses are closer together before we pass the sign saying we’re entering

Greenville. The sun is close to the horizon. I gave up on reaching the Walmart today not long after leaving the crash site.

These houses are no more inhabited than the ones before. Less even, as we don't add to the crowd. One house is gone, all that remains is splinters around it. Another is missing a wall, and the other is partially inside a tree that's a few hundred meters in height and that while it looks like an oak, I've never seen one with purple leaves.

In the distance, I see a higher density of buildings, as well as smoke.

There are five houses within two hundred meters of where I am, three of them are two stories. If needed, we can spread everyone further.

Look at you, thinking of others. Your mother would be so proud.

Yes, she would.

I turn and motion for Hanz to check the houses closer to the group. I head to the two-story one on my right. There's a sense it isn't occupied; a lack of the usual sound the people would cause, of technology.

As I climb the porch, something inside the house roars, then the door explodes open, and it collides with me. I kick it off, get a sense of brown fur, roll to my feet and I have my barbell in hand. It jumps at me again and I swing, hitting it on the side of the head. He crashes and I take the bar in both hands and ready myself to slam one end into its head.

"What is wrong with you!" it yells at me, grabbing its head. It—he?—sounds young.

"Me? You attacked me. I'm defending myself."

"I'm a monster. That's what I'm supposed to do. Have you looked at me?"

"It isn't because the system turned you into that, that you have to act like an animal."

"What? No. I picked this."

"You chose to be..." I look him over. Lots of brown fur, triangular ears, narrow muzzle, ripped jeans over muscular legs with clawed feet. "A werewolf?"

"A Worgen! Damn it, don't you know anything?" He stands and wobbles. I take a step back, not falling for the feint. "Fuck. How strong are you? That hit took out a third of my health. Oh, right, head hit. There's a multiplier for that."

"Okay, who are you and why did you attack me."

"I'm a monster." He speaks the words slowly, as if I'm not all that bright and the green dips down to a third as my knuckles turn white. "And the name's Deloy. I live here."

I sent the barbell back to my inventory before I lose my battle of will with my anger. If I punch him, I, hopefully, won't do so much damage as to kill him.

"Where are your parents?" I ask, taking a chance.

"Hell if I know. They left this morning for work with the sun as usual. They should have been back by now, but with this, I figure they might be awhile... if they come back at all."

"Is there anyone else here with you?"

"Nah. That was the Adkin's house. They left before that explosion in the distance. That sent the Fielding running." He points to another house, further away. "Zoeanne, Boyer." Another house. "Slinked off toward the trees, she didn't look human anymore. She was kind of far, but I think she was slimy."

The kid is so casual about any of this, it's scary. Does he realize it's real? I look at the approaching group and maybe he's about to get the wake-up call my strike didn't give him.

I smile. "You say you're a monster? How about you turn around and look at what a monster can be."

Puzzled, he does, takes one look at Bernard, and with a scream of fear, he's behind me. The satisfaction that engenders in me would have made my father so proud, as is the fact I am enjoying it so much.

"What is that!"

"Troll," Bernard says, slapping his chest. "I troll."

"And your name is Bernard," Mary says patiently.

Bernard frowns. "I troll. I named Bernard." He looks at Mary and when she smiles, he straightens.

Maybe in keeping away from everyone, I missed something important. I thought he was smarter than that.

"I'm Hanz. You need help there?"

"I'm fine," Deloy replies quickly.

"I'm okay," I say.

"Oh, right. He'd mean you, not me."

"Oh, oh, oh," Terry exclaims. "I know what you are. You're a Worgen. Did you attach Chuck?"

"Of course. I'm a monster."

"Worgen aren't monsters," Terry says. "They're with the alliance, not the horde, and even the horde aren't monsters. They're just the faction that looks less humans, and that's just a conceit of the programmers who made the game. Wait, does that mean this is a game?"

"No," Elizabeth says. "Maybe you just think he looks like what that is. He just looks like a horror movie werewolf to me."

"Worgen is the name of my species," Deloy says. "So, I'm not a monster? The description says that I'm a vicious fighter."

"Can you turn human?"

Deloy frowns, then swipes the air before him. "I'm not seeing anything about being able to do that. I have steel claws and that's it. It's part of my Steel Warrior class."

"Okay, then you're not like the Worgen in the game. Or maybe you get the ability later."

"Okay. That's enough." I rub my temple. I know they aren't doing it to get on my nerves, but I'm running out of green and I don't want to find out what happens then. "We're shutting down for the night. Elizabeth, why don't you take Terry and Deloy in. Hanz, can you deal with the others? I need to find someplace to be on my own for a while."

"Me and Bernard can stay here."

"I don't want that in my house," Deloy says.

"Young man," Mary replies. "He's my husband of sixty years and you will treat him

with respect. I don't care how tough you think you are. I have raised enough children to know how to tan someone's behind."

"My wife," Bernard says with pride.