

Chuck-14

The air is humid, musty, earthy, but with an oiliness to it. The ‘unconscious’ debuff is vanishing. My health pulses slowly, but faster than normal. It’s just under a fifth. I didn’t think there was any left when I blacked out.

I listen to the movements around me. People moving about.

“You think he’ll be able to use that?” Terry asks and metal moves, clangs together as it falls.

“I think so,” John answered. “I think those things are all the same size, but even if they aren’t, he can use that one to hit stuff with.” He chuckles. “He enjoys doing that.”

“I don’t.” I sit up and groan as a pain debuff flashes and vanishes. No shit.

My arms, chest, and legs are covered in bandages. Long wraps wrapped around my limbs. “What’s this?”

“Sports wrap,” John says, producing a small bundle. “They dropped from the spider things. They give a small healing boost, then boost the natural rate for like an hour, so you’re going to want to stay still.”

I push myself to my feet. “We can’t afford to sit here for however long it takes for me to be a full health.” I pop-in a vitamin and a warning appears. This is my fourth one. One more today and I get to find out what the side effects are. The way my day’s going, I give it ten minutes.

My hit points jump to nearly full.

“This is for you.” Terry hands me a barbell when I join him by the burned remains of the giant spider thing. It’s heavy.

Item: Barbell, Steel, Quality: Good

A bar designed to hold weights for the purpose of building muscle mass, but with alternative uses when creativity is applied.

“It dropped with the loot?” I ask, and Terry smiles at my use of his way of describing it.

“It was part of its legs.” Terry motions to the metal debris on the floor.

Getting in tight with the guy who knows the most, smart, my father says. It’s been a while since you’ve had any, too.

I want to scream at him he’s sick for thinking that, but he’s a part of my subconscious, so some sick part of me considered this. Fuck, I’m even sicker than I thought. I move away from Terry and crouch to look at the sports equipment spread among automotive parts littered around the burned netting. Golf clubs, two more barbells, which I take. Aluminum baseball bats, aluminum hockey sticks. I don’t remember the legs looking like anything close to those.

“You might like these.” John points to a stack of weights. “They were in a duffel bag that appeared after you killed the last of the small spiders.”

“Loot Chest,” Terry calls.

“There was also a hockey shoulder pad, baseball helmet, golf gloves. Each identified as armor.”

“You took them?” I look over the weights: four fifty-pound, four tens, two fives, four twos.

“I’m not interested in looking like I’m from some low-budget fight flick.”

“I’d take that over being dead.” I put the weights in my inventory and wished the set counted as one slot.

“Ouch. That’s harsh.”

“What?”

“You just called me stupid.”

“No, I didn’t.” I go over what I said. “I just said it’s better to look bad, and be alive, than dead.”

“Those aren’t the words or the tone you used, Chuck.”

My willpower dips as I stifle the sigh. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to call you that.”

“You need to be more careful about what you say to others.”

There goes more of my willpower as I don’t scream at him, ‘why do you think I don’t want anyone around me?’.

“Do we have everything we need from here?” I ask instead.

“Are we bringing the rest of the stuff?” Terry motions to the sports equipment that were the spider’s legs he divided into categories. “They can be used as weapons.”

“Can the golf clubs be stacked in one slot?”

Some vanish as Terry touches them, then reappear. “Only if they’re exactly the same.” He touched the baseball bats and they all vanish. Same with the hockey sticks.

“I’ll take them since I have the most inventory. How are you for space, John?”

“I have two feet slots.” The man has a plastic helmet on, as well as large shoulder and leg pads. The leg pads are from a hockey set, the shoulders aren’t hockey, like he thought. Probably football. He does look silly.

“See, that’s why I didn’t want to put them on. But you were right. They provide a lot of defense. We should give it to Terry.”

“I’m not wearing that.” There’s outrage in his tone.

“Terry,” I reply, and lose more will to not snapping, “you need to be—”

“Geez, you sound like my mom.” He snaps his fingers and a sheet of ice covered him. “Got armor when I got to level two. It’s going to scale, so that’s why I don’t have to wear *that*.”

John sighs. “Any chance you’ll wear it, Chuck? It was your idea.”

“With Terry having armor, you’re the most fragile.”

“Maybe your class comes with armor?”

John shakes his head. “I’m all range. Everything I see I can get is about increasing that, making me more accurate, or making my shots do stuff they can’t. I am not made for small spaces.”

“If there’s a next time, you can stay with those outside,” I say and get a glare. “What now?”

“You think I’m going to be a coward and—”

“That isn’t what I said! If getting in here puts you in danger because everything’s too close to you, then the smart thing to do is leave you outside where you can one, survive, and two, keep people safe.”

John closes his mouth. “That isn’t how...”

“I’m sorry,” I say through clenched teeth. “Can we agree to ignore how I say something and stick to what I say? I don’t have the willpower to deal with this all the time.”

“You can rebuild it by hitting stuff, right?”

I look at Terry over my shoulder.

“What? You’re a lot easier to deal with right after a fight. I figure that’s why.”

“Hitting things when stressed isn’t a good way to deal with things, Terry,” John says.

“It isn’t ‘hitting stuff because he’s stressed,’” Terry replies, sounding annoyed. “Did you read anything from the system queries? We all have flaws and they come with ways to deal with them. What’s yours?” Terry asks me.

Careful.

This time I listen to him. These are the kind of questions that give smart people the insight needed to control and manipulate others. How many times did I fall for my father’s helpful and understanding tone and tell him why I was having difficulties?

And just like with him, Terry is someone with a lot more information about how things work than me. I want to believe he’s only trying to help.

“Not be around people.” Maybe if my father had been the only one to use that kind of information against me.

“Really?” Terry asks, genuinely surprised. “There’s actually a mitigation method that made people be alone? That seems counter to having a team system.”

I sigh. “It’s not one of those. I just don’t like being around people.”

“Oh, so what are they? There should be more than one. If you look at your character sheet, you’ll—”

“I know where they are, but I’m not telling you.”

“Oh.” His face falls. “Look. It’s not because I’m a kid that I can’t—”

“That’s not why.” Why is dealing with people so damned hard? My willpower’s already below half. As much as I don’t want to fight anything, I hope there’s something to punch, otherwise, I’m afraid one of them will be my target.

“Then why?”

“Terry.” And more of it vanishes as I stop myself from snapping. “I have my reasons.” He isn’t happy, but he nods.

A few pills to boost my willpower sound appealing right now, but those potential side effects stop me. Still, this might be the first time I understand people who got addicted to medications.

We redistribute some of the equipment, then exit the sports, outdoors, automotive

section.

“Are we braving the shoe section?” John asks. “Footwear is important if this is going to be a long walk.”

I bring up my map, and instead of the one of the region, I’m looking at what we’ve explored of the Walmart, us, and the others. They are systematic about going through the grocery section. I swipe to the other one and try to remember information.

“We’re around fifty kilometers, seventy at the most, from Harrisonburg. We should be there in a few days, even with those people,” I add without meaning to, then decide I don’t care. I don’t have to willpower to spare on people who aren’t here to be offended.

“Sixteen kilometers to ten miles,” John says. “Let’s call it thirty miles. I want to be generous and say three days, but the stragglers are slowing us down. I don’t think we made five miles a day in the last two days.”

“We could leave them behind,” Terry says, voicing my thought and I look at him severely. I’m the guy who doesn’t care for other people. “It makes tactical sense. If a few people are putting a larger group at risk, you don’t keep them around. This is an escort quest, right?”

“Kid,” John said, “this isn’t a game.”

Terry stares at him.

“It isn’t a game,” John repeats, “even if it looks like one. We don’t just abandon people because we don’t like how they’re acting.” He pauses. “If that was how things went, Chuck would have left us behind from the start, and where would we be?”

“Okay, I didn’t do anything special for anyone here,” I tell him. Where did he get that idea?

“You got us going after the plane. If it wasn’t for you, we’d still be there wondering what to do.”

“I walked off. You bunch followed me. He got you all to follow me.” I point to Terry.

“You waited for us.”

“No, I—” I remember something. “He got me to wait for the rest of you. You want to put this on someone? How about his shoulders? Seems to me he’s better equipped to think of other people.”

“Yeah, except he wants to leave a bunch of them here because they aren’t doing things the way he wants. I saw how you looked at him. Even you know that isn’t how things get done.”

“You want to know how I know that?” I asked. “It’s because that’s what I want to do with them. With the whole fucking lot of you. Leave you here so I won’t have this bullshit put on my shoulders.”

“So why haven’t you?” Terry asks, and I close my eyes at the pain he’s trying to hold back.

“Because that isn’t who my mother raised me to be.” Much to my father’s chagrin, I hope. “It doesn’t mean it’s easy.”

“Life’s not meant to be easy, Kid. Keep that in mind when you want to abandon people just because they don’t agree with you.”

Terry nods, looking chastised.

“Let’s rejoin the others,” I say. “Hopefully, they had better luck with supplies.”

I keep a wary eye on the sections to my right and left. Shoes on the right, with only one entrance we pass without incident. On the left is another wall of shelves we can’t take anything from until we reach the electronics. There an aisle branches to the left and in the much too far distance, I can see the pharmacy.

The electronics section is dead.

Not only are none of the televisions working, but they are melting off their shelves. As are the sound systems, amps, even the plastic boxes containing cardboard boxes with cellphones in them have stuff dripping out of them.

More telling to me is that, unlike every other section, this one isn’t limited to one entrance. It’s open the same way it would be in a regular Walmart.

“That’s nasty,” Terry says.

“You think there’s something wrong with the... dungeon?” John asks. “I get technology stopped working, but nothing like that happened to our stuff.” He takes a smartphone from his pocket as a demonstration. Other than not turning on, it’s fine.

“Maybe it’s a more extreme version?” Terry says.

“Unless the system tells us,” I say, walking again. “We’ll never know.”

Half a dozen steps and John points to the back. “The stock room’s that way.”

“Isn’t that just going to be a much larger room with monsters in it?” I ask. “The aisles seem to be the only ‘safe’ zone.” Unless something reaches out of one to grab me.

“It would mean more chances to get stuff,” John points out. “More monsters mean more drop. And unlike the sections, the odds are all we’ll encounter there, are more Walmart zombies.”

Terry snickers.

More vitamins, at the very least. And even with the restriction on them, more of those can only be a good thing.

I look at the dungeon’s map. The other group has cleared only one more lane in the entire time we argued, then made it here, putting them halfway through. But because they are taking their time, they are in a better state than us.

“Okay.” I summon my banged-up barbell to my hand, “but we go slow, and John, stay as far back as you can. I take the lead, Terry halfway between us.”

I step into the electronics section and ready myself for anything. Part of me screams the dead look is an act, but nothing happens as we walk through it.

“Either of you needs to go?” I ask, indicating the restrooms.

“I’m good,” John replied. “I’d hate to be caught with my pants down in there.”

“Yeah, I’m good too,” Terry says.

I push through the double doors leading to the stockroom, ignoring my father’s voice screaming I am making the biggest mistake of my life.

Right, like this comes anywhere close to *that*.