

Chuck-48

We head due East the next morning, which, unless things changed even more than they have, will get us to the eighty-one, or what's going to be left of it. At this point, I'm no longer confident there's going to be anything more than flatter ground for Terry to clear as we go in a Northerly direction.

We reach it as the shadows stretch from the trees on the other side of what's left of the highway stretch enough to reach us. There's still plenty of light we can tell the road's clear, but that we aren't getting on it unless someone has a way to make the truck fly.

"Can you throw it up?" Hanz asks me.

"I can't even throw one of the metal junk pieces a dozen meters up."

"That's more like thirty feet," Albert says.

I climb up the incline; it's got to be almost sixty degrees. Even without the bushes and small trees and a four-wheeled suspension, there's no way anything drives up that. Once on the road, I consider trying it anyway.

The pavement is so cracked it might as well be paving stones, but it's still relatively flat, and the only thing growing in the cracks is a thick, moss-like plant that gives under my feet without breaking.

I crouch and study it.

System Query: Carpet Moss
Carpet Moss is a flora that grows on the surface of other objects. It is resistant to most concussive damage, but fragile against heat and water-based attack. In certain culture, it is used in the protection of buildings
Perception check successful: Carpet moss is an ingredient in health related potions. Your skill is not high enough for further details

"It sucks we can't get on here now," Terry says as he reached the top. "I'd be able to take a break."

"There's going to be an on-ramp at some point," I answer.

"You think that's still going to be there?"

I shrug. "If nothing else, the terrain's going to give us a better incline to get onto this."

Terry looks both ways while John, Hanz and Albert join us. "Why do you think it's not overgrown like the other roads?" he asks. "There's no sign of civilization around here."

"A Trade route?" Albert offers. "It would make sense."

"How would it know where to put one of those?" John asks.

"How does it know how far to extend a civilization's zone?" the bogbear counters.

"The people in it."

"That's not it," Hanz says. "I asked around while we were in Harrisonburg, spoke with some of the people running the city. I didn't get to see whatever the thing is that runs

everything, but had them explain some stuff and parts of Harrisonburg with higher populations and even density will still be considered more wild.”

“Why are you asking about stuff like that?” Albert asks.

The orc shrugs. “I was a city planner before all this. If there are ways we can control and influence how the zones develop, I want to know.”

“It takes into account commerce, too,” I say, and they stare at me. “It’s in the system stuff you can find.” My willpower starts to drop. “I crashed in an abandoned store the first night there and the system offered for me to take ownership. Looking into what that meant, I came across the rest.”

“You looked through the system’s help files?” Terry asks, staring at me and a smile forming.

“Not on purpose,” I snap, but Terry doesn’t lose the smile.

“No, that’s a good thing,” he says. “You went looking for information without me having to tell you.”

“I needed it,” I reply dismissively and head back.

“Now you just have to plan ahead for what you’ll need and read up on that.”

“Terry, look around. Planning’s not going to help anything.”

“That’s not true, you just—”

“I tried it! Then you went and—” I close my mouth and ignore my dropping will power. Fuck, I’m hungry.

I hurry down the incline. By the truck, Patricia’s arguing with the recuees.

“Chuck!” she calls before I can walk off into the woods. “Talk some sense into them, will you?” she walks off, leaving the four of them looking at me sullenly.

I so don’t have the willpower to deal with that.

I reach into the cooler and grope around until I find jerky. It’s a good thing I’m going out to hit something after this, because we’re nearly out.

“What is the problem?” I ask, tearing a piece of the dried meat away with my teeth.

As one, they take a step away from me.

I sigh and chew. The act and the taste calm my nerves and the loss of my willpower slows.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, breaking a piece out with my fingers and popping it in my mouth.

“She wants us to work,” the father says, pointing at Patricia. The words are sharp. The motion is like he’s throwing something in her direction.

Perception check Successful
Lawrence Wilter is indignant

What the fuck does he have to be indignant about? I chew harder and take out a handful of jerky out of the cooler.

“Chuck,” Terry starts to say, but stops. I don’t look away from the five, waiting for

some sort of explanation. Terry walks off.

The father's expression softens to something I have no idea what, but he doesn't elaborate. The mother's clinging to him and she's holding the youngest. He had the next youngest close to him, which leaves the oldest girl.

"Can I speak with you?" I ask, motioning away from her family.

"Maggie," her father says in a tone I do know, and which causes her to stiffen and walk towards where I indicated. I never acted defiantly when my father used that tone, but I saw a lot of kids my age do it and I was always amazed at how brave they were. Back before I understood that emotional torture wasn't how every father dealt with a disobedient child.

With the pickup between us and them, she turns to face me, arms crossed over her chest, standing stiff. I'm pretty sure she's throwing that defiance in my face now. That's something I at least know how to deal with. I watched my father disarm too many angry people not to have picked up a thing or two.

"Maggie, is it? Do you prefer your full name?"

"Maggie's fine," she replies, the words sharp.

I offer her some jerky, but she shakes her head. I pop another piece in my mouth. If I go slow, I should manage my willpower through this.

"Alright Maggie, can you tell me what Patricia asked your parents to do?"

"She wanted them to help set up a spot for butchering animals."

"Your parents object to that?"

"You don't butcher animals. That's monstrous."

"Your family is Vegan."

"You have a problem with that?"

"No, to each their own." I eat another piece of jerky. "There's probably edible plants around here. I'm sure you've grown skilled at finding them." I smile at her and her posture relaxes slightly.

I'm glad to see you were paying attention. You could make this a whole lot easier, you know.

Not going there.

"I know it's been tough for all of you, surviving among those monsters. You probably don't need us, but you agreed to come with us."

"And because of that, we have to throw our morals out the window?"

You're making harder on yourself.

Shut up. Even if she was a guy, I wouldn't go there.

Just saying.

"No, but you also need to understand that we made it this far doing things our way. We're not asking any of you to join in and eat meat with us, but don't you think it will be easier on everyone if your family helps out? That it's going to be easier on you?" I give her the smile I've seen my father use anytime he needed to calm someone, and it's having an effect.

"How can you do that to something that's alive?"

My father's chortle nearly makes me laugh, and I bite into jerky instead. "Have you seen what animals have become since the world changed?"

Hesitantly, she shakes her head.

"I haven't killed anything that didn't try to kill me first. Those monsters that killed and ate your neighbors, they were probably someone's pet before. The world's kind of gone crazy, don't you think?"

Her nod is hesitant.

"So, doesn't it make some sense that we have to do something crazy to survive it?"

She bites her lower lip.

"Do you think you can convince your parents to help? If not with preparing the meat, then another part of the cooking? Do you object to tanning hide? If you do, that's fine. I'm not asking for anything you'll find objectionable, just that your family does their part, so everything gets easier for everyone. Do you think that's fair?"

She nods.

"Good. When I get back, I'll check in on you. Now, you should get back to your parent."

I turn to head into the wood.

"Thank you," she says.

"It's my pleasure," I reply, closing this the way my father always did.

You have gained a level. Manipulation is now level 8
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I am impressed.

I ignore that message, but I'm also impressed with how little my willpower dropped. I guess eating while dealing with people is the way to go.

When I no longer hear anyone, I summon my bar. "Let's go scare up some wildlife."

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I return with the carcass of something that might have been an elk before the change over my shoulders. Now its antlers are metal and sharp, its hooves end in claws, and when it kicks, that packs one hell of a punch.

Although that might be the same as the original. I'm proud to say I've never been kicked by an elk before. I'm also pleased that the silver fox didn't feel the need to help.

"Again?" John says, looking at the dead animals spread on the tarp. There's seven of them, the largest the size of a bobcat. "How do you keep finding the big ones?"

I shrug. Looking toward Maggie and her family, stirring whatever is inside large pots.

John followed my gaze as she smiles at me. "She got them to agree to help with the stew, although they aren't happy about it."

"So long as they help. It doesn't matter how happy they are. We'll be dropping them off at the next settlement, anyway."

He looks from them to me. As I put my kill on a clear space of the tarp. "Albert, you want me to practice my butchering on this, or you prefer your higher skill for it?"

He looks up from whatever he's doing with the hide and the frame. "Practice on something small. The way you've been eating, we need to make sure we have as much meat for jerky as possible."

I nod to the family as I grab the bobcat size animal and summon a knife. Immediately, they are looking at the pots. John gives me a look, which I ignore as I skin the animal.