

## Chuck-54

Turns out there's a limit to how much one inventory stack can hold. A hundred and sixty-eight of the same item. I know that from stacking jerky into them. I have three stacks, my payment for helping defend the town, as well as the extra meat from the Wilder Boar I took on myself. That's going to last me a while.

I hope.

The stack size seems arbitrary, and when I query the system, I just get a 'this is the standard size' kind of response. It's not the first time it's given us odd numbers to work with. Could be a computer thing, or something else.

I munch on another piece of jerky as I'm forced to deal with this family again.

"You don't want to continue with us," I tell them.

"We do," Maggie replies. She's really getting annoying. She's even more in my hair than Deloy, because him I can send off to do stuff, while her...

I don't need my mother's voice reminding me she's simply being nice because we saved her and her family, but damn if she doesn't make me want me to—

I rip a chunk of jerking off with my teeth.

"We're not staying here," her father says. "They're savages."

I snort.

"They aren't even interested in growing vegetables," his wife adds.

"Where ever you're heading next has to be better than this," the husband states.

"Fine. Then make yourself useful and help pack the truck." I don't know what they think they're going to eat while we're on the road. Because we don't have anymore vegetables than they do here. And I'm not wasting time foraging.

Maggie's the last of them to leave me, and she gives me a look that's got to mean something to normal people, when she finally does.

Would I feel better or worse if I tried to understand it?

I can't wait to reach Winchester and dump all these people off.

"You know," Larry says as I put on the harness. "You could stick around. I think this place would suit you."

I glare at the veterinarian and he smiles.

"There's too many people."

"Plenty of wilderness for you to go into when you feel like ripping someone's arm off and munching on it."

"Are you insane? I wouldn't eat a person."

"True. We do taste rather horrible. Although, now that we're forced to return to a more natural diet, it should improve."

"You speak like someone who's tasted human."

"Read about it. Cannibalism was fairly well documented."

"Then you can resort to that if you ever get tired of the meat the system sends your way." With the harness secured on me, I attach it to the pickup.

“Didn’t expect someone wild like you to let others turn you into a pack animal[wrong term, I think].”

“I chose to do this.” I lean forward until the harness presses against my chest and shoulders, and adjust it. “It’s the only way I have to get stronger. The weights for my barbell barely register anymore.”

He watches me. “They tell you that?”

I sigh. “Look, maybe you missed this, but I’m kind of dense. Why don’t you say what you have to say instead of dancing around the bush and hope I’ll get it?”

“The thing with people,” he says, “is that they’re sneaky. It’s why I prefer working with animals. You always know where you stand with them. Like you, they don’t put up a front. They just tell you how it is.”

I roll my eyes. I’m always putting up a front. That’s why I’m not punching him or anyone else when they get on my nerves.

“So you think this is because one of them convinced me it was my idea?”

“Have you at least considered it?”

*Never thought I’d say that, but he might be more paranoid than you are.*

“I have. No one even suggested I do it. It was my idea because I needed to work out. Are you done?”

“You should still—”

“You’re done.” I lean forward, then push against the weight. There’s complaint from behind as the pickup starts crawling forward.

Larry gets the message and walks off.

I keep it slow until John tells me all the dried meat’s in the back, then I pick up the pace. I pull past the turn to get to the dirt ramp. Turns out the official highway ramp’s only a few kilometers north. The road to reach it doesn’t get as bad as what we had to travel on out of Harrisonburg, but Terry still has to clear the way for us. He’s quicker at it. His spell level reduces how much mana it costs, and he’s at the point where, so long as we keep the pace slow, he regains nearly as fast as he uses it up.

Going up the ramp is something of a test. The incline isn’t much, but that, combined with the now uneven terrain, adds just enough strain that Albert, Elizabeth, and Hanz have to get behind and push. Deloy is there too, but his strength doesn’t compare to theirs and even then, they barely register, but we make it up and onto the highway.

I’m again surprised by how normal it looks. The asphalt is cracked and grass is growing in them, but compared to other roads, this might as well be from before the system appeared.

If this was Michigan.

Getting up it gains me a point in strength and endurance training.

Then, the trek is easy.

Except for dealing with Deloy and Maggie.

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“You know,” I tell Deloy as I take the harness off. I can feel my father wringing his hands in delight at my plan. I’m not happy with it, but I’m out of options. If I don’t do

something to stop Maggie from bothering me, I will wring her neck. And really, this isn't so much manipulating the boy as it is making him realize something he's probably too oblivious to notice. "Maggie could probably use some company."

"Huh?" He's looking around the foliage off the side of what's left of the exit. The barely legible sign said this was the off-ramp to Woodstock, Virginia. No one's getting off here anymore. The ramp's gone, eaten by trees and bushes. It does leave this part of the road wider, so it's where we make camp.

Deloy's searching for tracks. Practicing his tracking again. The kid needs a life, so this is for his own good as much as it is mine.

"You two are about the same age, right? You should hang out."

He looks at me. "Why?"

"Because there's no one else her age here."

He looks around and makes a face. "But she's human."

"Deloy, that's racist."

He rolls his eyes. "It's a fact, she's human and I'm a—"

"Person. You're both people. The fact the system assigned you—"

"I picked this." He crosses his arms over his chest. That I know mean's he's getting defensive.

"Sorry. The fact you decided to be a Worgen doesn't mean you aren't a person, and people should spend time together."

"I don't see you hanging out with any of them."

*He's got you there.*

I thought you wanted me to do this.

*And you're doing a stellar job of it.*

"Do you see anyone my age who looks lonely?"

He opens his mouth to reply, then closes it. "I guess not," he says. "But I'm not lonely."

"Maggie probably is, and she could use the company of someone her age."

"But my training?"

"You don't have to spend all your time with her. Just go talk with her. You never know, she might like what you are."

"Humans aren't supposed to like monsters."

"You're not a monster, Deloy. Trust me on that."

He shrugs. "I don't know."

I take his shoulders in my hands. "Deloy, it's good for you, too. And it's just until Winchester. They're going to be staying there, and we'll continue on."

He smiles and there's something else there I can't read. "You mean that?"

"Of course." Why would they want to stick around once we reach that city?

"Okay, I'll talk with her, but she probably won't like me, anyway."

"Just try."

He heads in her direction.

“John,” I call. “I’m taking thirty.” I point at the trees in the direction I plan on heading.

“I’ll come looking if you aren’t back by then.”

“Make it forty-five, then.” I walk into the foliage.

The ground inclines quickly and steeply, but the trees make for good hand-holds. When I reach the bottom, I can’t hear the people above, or anything other than the forest. There isn’t even a remnant of street or building to be found.

I sit at the base of a tree that might be a century old, or have sprouted a couple of weeks ago. With the system, it’s impossible to tell anymore.

I pull the item from my inventory and look at it again.

System Query: Wild Core, Quality: Fine Type: Boar(inactive)

Wild cores are created within creatures defined as Boss by the system. Upon killing the creature, there is a chance the core will drop as a reward. If it does not, the creature will reform, with the quality of the core dropping by one level. Upon reaching trash level quality, the creature becomes a normal creature of that type. Wild cores are sought after by those who wield magic, as they can power many types of creations. Wild cores can also turn creatures into Boss type creatures.

System note: Wild cores can only come into being within an area defined as wild. The presence of an active wild core in an area automatically lowers that area by as many levels as its quality to a minimum of uncivilized if a settlement node is present.

It looks like a stone, streaked with a lighter material that is cooler to the touch. A crystal of some sort? I’m not sure I’d pay this any attention if I saw it on the ground.

“Any idea how I’d use that thing?”

Silver pauses to look at me as he steps out from between trees, then he continues and sits two meters away.

“Me neither.” I could ask the system, but I’m trying to relax, not get a headache. I send it back to the inventory and pull out the dungeon core.

System Query: Dungeon Core, Quality: Normal, Type: Indeterminate

The Dungeon Core is where all dungeons start from. Cores can appear naturally when the concentration of the required elements is high enough, or be manufactured. To activate a dungeon core, it must first be primed by implanting a creature’s energy imprint on it. The higher the intelligence of the creature chosen, the higher the potential of the dungeon will be. Once primed, the core must be implanted within the environment to become the dungeon.

If the environment comes with delineations, the dungeon will begin its existence within those limits and will need to grow to expand beyond them.

System note: Dungeon can only exist in areas designated as wild. The presence of a dungeon makes it impossible for an area to lose the wild designation. Attempting to bring a

dungeon into being in any other area will fail and may result in the destruction of the core.

This core does not have an imprint.

The cloudy blue crystal is as it was before. Implanting gives a clear sense of how I'd use it. But I have no idea how I'd imprint some creature's energy on it. Was that what science guy was trying to do with his machine? Imprint himself on this?

*Who cares. It's yours now. You can use it to make yourself a dungeon.*

And what am I going to do with something like that?

*Get rich. It's like business. The more it grows, the more you get out of it.*

The Walmart made it seem like I'm going to have to feed it people for that to happen. *That was a Walmart. Those places exist to suck the soul out of people working there. Yours won't have to be like that.*

I'm not so sure.

"You know where there are any dungeons around here?" I ask Silver. He looks at me again, but that's it. I motioned to the distance between us. "I guess me being healthy means you're being cautious again. That's wise. We can't be trusted."

*Not with an attitude like that you won't.*

I put the core away and stand. Silver watches, but doesn't react. I pull my bar out of my inventory and move until I'm in the middle of a very small clearing. There isn't enough space for me to swing my bar around, but that's what I want. I can hit good enough at this point. What I want to practice is control, and that means I need obstacles to not hit as I swing.

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The sun is high and hit like my bar today. Even I'm moving at a fraction of my usual pace. The only thing keeping me going is the knowledge that by the end of the day, we should be in Winchester and I can finally go off on my own.

"Why won't he just leave me alone." Maggie stomps next to me and it cost me willpower not to growl at her. A lot of it. Getting Deloy to take her out of my hair's proving tougher than I thought. He's trying well enough. She just won't go along with.

*Then explain things to her.*

Now? When I can barely keep from biting her head off?

*You think your mood's going to get any better with her yapping about next to you? Might as well do this now while you have the willpower to spend.*

I don't know if there's enough willpower in the world to deal with her.

"Maybe he likes you."

"Yuck. Have you looked at... him? He's all furry and his face." She shudders. "He's like an animal."

"He's a person, just like you."

"He's nothing like me."

"He's a k—teenager. He's probably around your age, and he's the only other one here."

“Terry’s our age.”

“He’s seventeen.” I remember what I thought of anyone below eighteen once I passed that mark. They were kids, I was an adult. “Look, Deloy’s kind of lonely. He hides it by keeping busy but only works so much. Maybe you could just talk with him? You never know, he might not be as bad as you imagine.”

She looks behind us, but instead of scrunching, her face remains smooth as she goes through expressions I can’t decipher. “I don’t think that talking is what he’s after.”

“Then, if he makes a move, you tell him no. He’s mature enough to take it.” And by tonight, you will all be out of my hair.

“I guess.”

“Thank you.” I smile at her, and she smiles back. Then I’m focusing on putting one foot in front of the other. My willpower is a hair above the halfway mark as she leaves my side.

*That went easier than I expected. You’re getting good at this.*

Don’t remind me.

*I’m sure this performance was worth a level. How about you?*

I don’t want to know. There’s a reason I worked so hard at not getting those notifications.

*Come on, just think about it. The system will respond.*

You think about it, if you want this so much. Now leave me alone before I bite your head off.

*I would love to see you try that one.*

I don’t reply, and he doesn’t add anything.