

Chuck-33

The... dog goes down, and I can't take the time to appreciate it's the size of a wolf because the rest of its pack is on me. I dodge what I can, take the hits as I have to so I can bring their numbers down. Those numbers are my main problem. Little damage gets through my armor from each bite or claw that connects, but there had to be close to thirty of them when they started stalking me, herding me. Considering my armor, I don't think about what one of them can do to someone who's unprepared.

Each swing that connects kills one of them.

Despite their size, they are clearly dog. One of them was a poodle, the pink dye fading in the light gray of its natural color. I do my best not to think of what someone who does that to a dog deserves. There are a few pitbulls, German shepherds, one beautiful collie and too many mixes breeds to keep track.

When the last one drops, I've only lost a tenth of my health, but my armor has more rips in it. Terry could tell me if there's a way to check how effective it still is, but I don't have the time to waste with a search.

I'm in a... I think this used to be a park. But the trees are large enough I can't tell where it starts or ends. I ran into it hoping the dogs wouldn't follow me, but they were smarter than I am.

No Shit.

They had more waiting among the trees.

I use the sun to orient myself Easterly and walk.

I come across the ruins of buildings, destroyed by trees growing through them. When I leave this forest, it's because the trees grow ever smaller, the buildings not quite as apocalyptic looking in their crumbling. It's as if I'm walking back in time to when the world was normal.

Well, not quite as bad, at least. I can now tell what used to be roads from the rest of the ground. When I cross one, there's even a rusted sign telling me it's called Hillcrest. Things improve quickly on the other side. Trees are now what I'd consider normal, although I see motion in their branches that hint at something too large to be normal in them, but they stay there.

Then I come across the first cut-down tree, after that I see more of them, then holes where stumps were probably pulled, and I can see why, with the people working in a large garden that looks to have been planted months ago.

"Stop," a bull-woman orders as she notices me. She brandishes a hoe as she stands. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"I'm Chuck, and Mayor Papinian sent me to deal with whatever's threatening you."

"What makes you think anything's threatening us?" she asks.

"What happened to Mayor Barlet?" a man asks.

"He's in prison," I reply, figuring that's what they'll do with him. "For attempting a coup against Mayor Papinian."

“He said she’d died in the change.”

“I really don’t care what he said. I’m here to do a job and hit stuff.”

They all take a step back even if they’re at least a forty meters away from me.

What to go.

I can’t tell if he’s impressed or mocking me.

I take a breath. “The mayor has access to something that lets her see the status of an area. Yours is in bad shape and she figures it’s because something is threatening the people living here. I’m... better at bashing things than talking, so she asked me to come deal with it.” I glance at my willpower and the loss is just noticeable.

“So you’re like an enforcer?” an older man asks.

“I’m not here to get you to do what she wants, if that’s what you mean. Just to deal with whatever’s threatening to turn this place into an even wilder area. I’m guess you’ve noticed that things away from your area aren’t exactly normal.”

The bull-woman—minotaur, that’s their names—snorts. “It’s not particularly normal here either, unless you’ve missed how I look. Or that we planted these crops last week. If I wasn’t so busy trying to survive, I’d be pulling my hair out right now.”

“You could leave. It gets better just on the other side of Main Street.”

“Mayor Barlet said we have to stay here so the city can get bigger,” the man who asked about him stated.

The minotaur snorts again. “I’m not abandoning my Sorority.” A lot of the younger looking men and woman nod. This is the frat house area, I realize.

“Okay, then me dealing with whatever’s causing problem will mean you’re safe.”

“What makes you think we know—”

“Are you going to help or not?” I snap. “I have no interest in standing here playing whatever social game this is. Either point me in a direction, or tell me you don’t know.”

“You want the Behavioral Science building,” the older man says and points. “Just follow the Row until you get to Bluestone, then stay on it as it turned into Madison. At the end, there’s a walking path and you’ll see that part of the campus. It’ll be the tall building on the other side of the park.”

“Just head North-East,” the minotaur says. “I doubt any of the streets exist past the Food Hall. But if you make it, there’s going to be more people who can tell you more about what’s come out of the science building. We’ve only heard stories.”

Cue horror movie sound track.

Shut up.

“Thank you.” I follow the road, which deteriorates slowly, until it improves a little and again, I come across people. The largest building is kept standing by tree trunks, and booths have been set up in the broken facades. I attract looks, but no one bothers me. On the left, people come in and out of better looking buildings.

If a larger concentration of people slows the changes, this place was populated late after this started.

Look at you, all smart and stuff.

Beyond the buildings, a group of... if this was a novel, they’d be described as

adventurers. The one in the lead is an orc, muscular, armed with a club, and he straightened when he notices me approaching. With him is an elf, and two humans. The elf is a woman wearing a robe. One of the human holds a bow and the other casually flips a knife in the air.

There is something about them and tickles my memory, but I can't place it.

"You don't want to go any further," the orc tells me. Stopping well out of reach of his club and planting the end on the ground before him.

Great. More social games.

"I'm going to the science building. I'm not here to cause you trouble unless you start it, and I'll tell you right now, I've been traveling outside the city since all this started, so if you want to whip yours out and make this a measuring contest, I am going to wipe the ground with each of you."

The elf snorts and looks like she's choking on her laughter.

"You want me to show him the Leather Band aren't to be messed with?" the one with the knife says.

"I don't think that's a good idea," the archer says and I bite back my 'try it' reply.

"What do you want with it?" the orc asks, tone cautious.

"Mayor Papinian sent me to deal with whatever's been threatening people in this part of the town. The frat people tell me that's where I'm going to find it."

"Them," the elf says. "There's a lot of them."

"Okay."

"I don't think you get it," the orc says. "The best we've been able to do is keep them from stepping onto the Commerce. The one time we tried to hunt them down, it cost us Georges, and we barely made it back."

"What are they?" I ask. More information means I can end this quickly and find a quiet place away from people to wait for Oskar to be done.

"You aren't listening man, you go in there, you're going to get yourself killed."

"Kid, I'm going to do what I fucking want. If you think you can stop me, we can stop talking right now and turn this physical."

"What level are you?" the elf asks, and I look at her suspiciously. Going over if that information will give them some advantage.

"Nine."

She and the orc look at me in disbelief. The archer gasps, and the rogue—that's what he reminds me of—snorts.

"Yeah, right."

"You're serious?" the orc asks.

"Come on," the rogue protests. "No one can have gained that much experience yet. He's just trying to scare you."

"Okay." I start walking. "I don't give a fuck what you think. I agreed to do a job, and I'm going to do it."

"For a dead woman? Nice try." The rogue smirks at me.

I lose some willpower just contemplating explaining what Barlet did.

The orc steps out of my way and the rogue steps into it. I lose more willpower not bowling him over or hitting him.

I glare at him. "Move."

The smirk broadens. "Make me."

"Jim, move," the orc orders.

"I'm not letting him bully his—" the rest is a scream of surprise as I grab his collar and pick him up with one hand. He flails and his knife vanishes in the air behind him. I look around and toss him into a thick bush.

Then I am walking again.

"Wait up!" the orc calls and I groan internally. How dense are they?

Maybe they need an actual pounding to get the message? My father says.

I am very tempted.

"You're serious about going in there?" he asks.

Just one punch, and they'll know to leave you alone.

I still have a lot of willpower. "Do I look like I'm joking?"

"We're going with you."

"No."

"Look, those things aren't mindless mobs. You're what, tank? You're going to need some DPS and support. I'm Virgil, I'm a tank too, Janice is a cleric, so she's support, Jim's a pain in the ass, but he can sneak around better than anyone, and get in crits. Walter's range, so he's the DPS."

Some of what he says sounds like things Terry told me.

"I don't care."

"Come on, man. We need the XP, but we're not going to weigh you down. I'm level four, Janice is level three, Jim and Walt are level 2. If we want any chance of keeping our community safe, we need to be higher level."

My father snorts. *Like that's why anyone wants power.*

I stop and face him. He steps back and the others stop in their tracks.

"That's why you want to come?" I ask. "So you'll be able to keep the people here safe?"

"Of course, man. Why else—" he swallows as I narrow my eyes. "This place has become an MMO. I know, it's not a game, but that's the rules it works with now. My and my friends know how to work with them, but we've ended up in such a high level zone that we haven't been able to do any serious grinding. Like I said, all we've been able to do is push them back, and we don't get XP unless one of them dies. They've been too smart for that, but with you, I think we have a chance to get some kills. I'm not even going to ask you to be part of the party, so you won't to split your XP with us."

"Nothing in there sounds like you're doing this to protect people." It barely sounds English.

He takes a breath. "We need to be stronger if we want a chance of keeping the others safe. We're just about the only ones with combat classes."

I study him.

What are you doing?

| |
|---|
| You have invited Virgil StrongArm to join your party. |
| System notice: Virgil StrongArm is the leader of the Leather Band Party. Inviting him will invite his entire party. |
| Do you wish to invite Virgil StrongArm into your party? Yes/No |

The opposite of what you'd do.

Yes.

Thanks for reminding me of who I'm trying to be, dad.

That wasn't—

Virgil's eyes go wide and then he and his friends are on my party list.

"Who's Albert Jarzabek?" Janice asked, and I notice he's still listed there. I expected him to remove himself once we were back.

"Does he get a split of the XP if he's in the party but not here?" Jim asks, and I turn to face him. His hands go up. "I'm just asking. I just want to know if I should expect a slower climb, that's all."

"I doubt that's how it works," Janice says. "How many games do you know that lets a player get XP for not doing anything?"

"This isn't like any game we know," Walter says. "But I don't care about one more person to split with. This is going to be our first serious gain since this started. I'll be happy if I get to catch up to you guys."

I look at them, watching my willpower trickle down.

Hey, you're the one who wouldn't listen to me.

"We're good," Virgil says. "You lead the way and we follow."

"I'm not—" I close my mouth and get back to walking. That settles my willpower after that bump down realizing I was expected to lead again caused.

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The park the building stands behind of doesn't look the way I expect. It's overgrown, but not wild, like the rest of the woods and forests I've come across. There as sense of structure to how the trees are placed and shaped. The parking structure on the right is in the process of falling apart, as is the building on the left, but our destination is more... solid.

The sense of age is evident as we approach. The windows are all broken, the stone is weathered and moss covered in places, but unlike the other two structures, it doesn't look like the next strong wind is going to cause it to fall down.

There is a sense we're expected as we approach the entrance. The open entrance, even if the doors are closed. The glass they're made out more of them is shattered, spread out and crushed on the cracked bricks that make out the path in front of it.

I reach for the door and stop, looking around.

This reminds me a lot of the Walmart.