

Chuck-32

I lead Victor through the building with a hand on the back of his neck. He jerks anytime we walk by an unconscious man. I don't look at my handiwork. I'm focused on keeping him from trying to run or to speak. I'll process what I did later.

Probably by going looking for monsters to punch.

As we reach the ground floor, Samuel and Louisa are coming from the floor under us, with an older, tired-looking woman between them. She looks at us and her expression turns hateful.

"Georgina!" Victor says in a pleasant tone, and I squeeze his neck.

"Don't," I warn him.

She's surprised. "You resisted him?"

"No."

"Chuck needs his willpower to control his violent instincts," Louisa explains in my stead. "I expect that the more Mister Barlet tried to control him, the less appealing the results were."

The smile I give them makes them cringe.

You're finally getting the hang of that.

I force myself to stop.

"Then I'm grateful to you," the older woman says. "I'm Georgina Papinian." She glares at Victor. "The mayor of Harrisonburg."

Victor's response croaks as I squeeze again.

"You planning on leaving him a spine?" Samuel asks.

I shrug. "Depends on how much he tries to speak."

"That's a joke, right?" Samuel swallows. "Please tell me you're joking."

Victor whimpers.

"What do you want me to do with him?" If she's in charge, it's her decision.

"The first step," Louisa says, "should be to gag him so he doesn't convince anyone to help him."

"Does he need to speak?" Georgina asks.

"As far as we know." Louisa rips the inside of her blouse, balls it, and smiles. "Say 'ah' Mister Barlet." He shakes his head and I squeeze. His response is pained, but his mouth opens and it's silenced. Then she wraps a strip around his head and pulls him away from me.

With him muzzled, they relax.

Like he's who they should be worried about.

"Should I put in him the room we found you in?" Louisa asks the mayor.

"I think it's only appropriate." Then she looks thoughtful as she looks at me. "Tell me, Mister..."

"Chuck's fine."

"How is your control over your violent tendencies at the moment?"

I shrug. "It's fine. I have just under half my willpower left. All I had to do was let

Victor know what I'm capable of if it dropped, and he scared himself into staying quiet." Another lesson from my father. Someone's imagination will always come up with worse outcomes than anything you can threaten them with.

Victor tries to say something through the gag, and they tense. I glance at my willpower and it's steady.

"Then, could I impose on you?" Georgina asks, and now it drops by a sliver.

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The conference room is on the opposite part of the building where I found Victor.

"I was having an early meeting to settle issued with some of the road conditions when the first system message appeared," Georgina tells me while I look at the dodecahedron floating over the conference table. "There was confusion, as I'm sure you can imagine." She motioned to the shattered window, now covered by plywood. "Marcel turned into some spine-covered creature when the timer reach zero and threw himself out. The fall didn't kill him. He was running off when I looked out."

She looks at the dodecahedron. "It probably sounds stupid to you, but I was going through the list of classes while the others were arguing about what this meant. I've had to hustle my entire life to get where I am, was. I wasn't going to stop just because I thought this thing was insane." She places a hand on it and I step back.

"This appeared at the end of the countdown. I wasn't the first one to touch it." She smiles. "But I was the first one with the right class to interact with it."

I step back again as the air around it shimmers and a map appears.

"Welcome to the town of Harrisonburg. Population: thirty-one thousand and eighty-nine. It went up by nearly a thousand while Victor had me imprisoned. I wonder how many of those will leave once his influence over them ends." She looks at me.

"I'm not staying. You don't want me to stay," I add as she opens her mouth. "I'm going to be more trouble than I'm worth."

"You shouldn't undervalue yourself like that."

"Just being a realist."

She shakes her head.

"Why isn't it a circle?" I ask before she can start trying to fix me. "Shouldn't the town be centered on this building?" I can guess where we are on it by the road layout, and we're more to the East of center, almost twice closer to the edge than on the West. And we're near dead center, North to South. The blob-like area that I guess is Harrisonburg is composed of sections going from orange to green. With most of the green being around the town hall, but there's one to the northwest, in the middle of yellows, and an orange, just south of where we are. The outside is all red and has no details.

"That's now how town and cities are demarcated," she answers with a smile. "Before, the limits were governed by factors that included negotiating with neighboring cities, the lay of the land, and who could afford the best surveyor. Now... as best as I've been able to figure out, the population in an area, along with the number of active businesses and relative safety, determines what is and isn't part of the census."

She studies the map.

“What did you want to talk to me about?”

“Direct,” she tells me, smiling.

“I found out that when I don’t bother with social stuff, it’s easier for me to keep my willpower up. You told Sam to help Louisa with Victor, which she didn’t need. So whatever you want to tell me. You don’t want him to know.”

“It’s more that I’m not entirely sure I can trust him. He’s rather proud of his con artist class.”

“And you trust me?” I hope my disbelief carried through my tone.

She smiles again. “I don’t mean this as an insult, but unlike him, you’re a simple man to understand. You have a goal, and you plow through any obstacles to accomplish it.”

I open my mouth to object and close it as my willpower drops slightly.

If I take away anytime I gave in to one of the others’ influence, I did carve a straight line to where I wanted to go. And I did those mainly because... it was expected of me, and the path of least resistance. Even my protest would have been because I’m not supposed to admit to something like that, even if I know it’s true.

Anytime I play the social game, the price is some of my willpower.

I so can’t wait to be out of here.

“You said you aren’t staying. I’m sorry about that, but I understand that you have your own goal. What I am hoping is that I can convince you to stay long enough to do some work for me. I will pay you. If you haven’t realized it yet, money is still a thing, and as Mayor have access to less tangible rewards, like experience and bonuses to your attributes and skills.”

I want to refuse outright, but I’m stuck here for another five days at least. “What do you want me to do?”

“I didn’t even have a day to interact with this before Victor made his move, but that was enough for me to get a handle on it and notice some of the problems we’re heading toward. As short-sighted as Victor is, his actions only made those worse, although not on a time-scale that’s a problem if actions are taken right now.”

She taps the deeper orange to the south. Not quite touching the red on its east side. “That’s the area around JMU. The fact it’s not red means it’s included in Harrisonburg. There are a couple thousand people there and nearly fifty businesses. But the color means it’s precarious. From the information I have access to, my guess is that there is something there endangering the people. I also need whatever’s a danger there removed because Lake Newman is the center of a highly fertile area and we need to focus on being able to feed everyone here before winter gets here and that is the best place to ensure it.”

I can’t get a sense of the size of the area, but it abuts the interstate.

“That’s not telling you what kind of monster it’ll be?”

“It’s not even telling me it’s monsters, or that they’re why the town might lose that area. That’s my best guess.”

“I can fight things. I’ll even fight people if it gets to that,” I tell her. “But if that’s something about them being pissed that they aren’t getting a better deal or something, you want to send someone else.”

“If I thought this was an interpersonal problem, I’d have asked Miss Orellana to

handle it.”

“Alright. What’s in it for me?”

“What do you want?”

I fix my gaze on her. “You do get that negotiating is a social thing, right? Those cost me willpower. Tell me what it’s worth to you and I’ll tell you if that works for me.”

She chuckles. “If there’s a lot of people like you, I’m going to have to learn new negotiating techniques.”

I snort. “You better hope there’s no one else like me around.”

Quest: Food for the Future
Harrisonburg is in dire need of setting up farms to feed its current and future population, but the best land for it is currently under an unknown threat. Remove that threat by any means you are comfortable using.
Quest Generated by the Town of Harrisonburg
Rewards: improved relationship with the Town of Harrisonburg, 20,000 experience points, 2 attribute points, 3 skill points, 1000 dollars Consequence of refusal or failure: none
Do you accept the quest? Yes/No?

“You wrote that up?”

“It’s the best I can do with the level the town is at.”

“No consequence for me refusing?”

“I wanted to put ‘disappointing an old woman,’ but the closest the system would give me is a loss of relationship.”

I nod and accept the quest.

“I don’t know if it’s going to help, or make a difference,” she said as I turn, “but if anyone asks, could you tell them I... hired you to deal with the problems?”

“Sure.”

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I squat in a building only a few blocks from the town hall for the night, and as soon as I’m awake, I’m on my way.

My destination turns out to be across the road from the police station where I was held. If I’d exited in the daytime, I’d have known there was something off there. On the map, the mayor showed me. The area next to the orange one, the area where I’m standing, is a pale green. On this side, the buildings are in decent shape. I see wear, but nothing I’d consider out of the ordinary for a place like this.

Across the road... The building I’m looking at was large and had to have looked good, a few weeks ago. Now, the brickwork’s crumbled, and walls have fallen. The grass is overgrown and the trees look ancient. Even the decorative metal fence delineating the property’s rusted to the point of barely existing.

I step over it and I’m in a post-apocalyptic world. This is a place where no one has

come in centuries. Where household pets have been mutated into killers able to take on armies.

No one sane would ever set foot in a place like this.

And here you are, walking ever deeper into this place.