

Chuck-44

Skill Acquired: Manipulation, Level 1

Manipulation is the skill that makes people do what you want them to, while thinking it's all for their benefit.

I can't believe this.

My entire life I've fought against being like him.

I angrily swipe the message away again and concentrate on pulling the pickup. Why can't the thing be heavier? This feels like I'm just pulling a heavy shopping cart. I need something that's going to take all my focus.

I bring the message back.

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And glare at it.

So I won't do this. Again, I swipe it away. This time attracting Albert's attention. I turn my glare on him and he lets himself fall back until he's out of sight.

I am nothing like you. I think preemptively.

No argument there.

I've done everything I can not to become like you.

Yep.

That's why I kept away from everyone!

I know.

And now this!

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I point at the message.

Yes, I've seen it the previous seven times you glared at it.

You don't have to sound so fucking proud of it. Again, I swipe it away. I wish this system came with a delete function so I could be sure I never see that message again.

Look, my father says in that so understanding tone of his I learned to hate early on, you're missing the point.

I get the point. This thing's doing to do everything it can to turn me into you.

No chance of that ever happening, so you can relax. Look at the kid.

Almost against my will, I glance to the side. Deloy is bounding in and out of the tree line like he's some pup and the fact that on this side there's snow and ice and on the other there isn't is the most amazing thing in the world.

How old is he? Eighteen, nineteen? He's acting like a child.

That's not such a bad thing. I wish I'd had that option.

And how long do you think he's going to survive in this new world? At least what I put you through made you tough enough, barely, to manage that.

I snort. Then I glance at Deloy again. Remember the man who shot me after finding him, how easy it was to kill him without even meaning to. This system wants us to kill each other. How many people out there have realized how easy it is to gain experience from killing another person? Are taking advantage of it?

The kid thought he was a monster, chose to be one. What would have happened if you hadn't come by and knocked some sense into him?

That's not what I did.

It was the result, so don't argue.

I'll—

What happens when he gets pissed at someone because they treat him like a monster and he accidentally kills them, then realized what he gets out of it?

That... gives me pause.

He's barely out of his teen, if even that. How likely is it he's going to listen to any advice you outright tell him? You've read enough books, seen enough families at all those stops, with the teens yelling and complaining at every instruction their parents gave them. You think he's going to be any different?

He agreed to let me train him.

Because you told him what he wanted to hear. That it would make him the best out there. See where I'm going with this?

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I really wish you'd stop obsessing about the wording. Manipulation isn't an evil thing. It's a tool. And you're a good person, despite all my work, so you're going to make good use of it.

I so wish you were here so I could punch you.

Go ahead, I'm sure your face can take it.

I growl. Then I have to stop pulling because Terry's stepping to the tree line ahead of us. I so want him to push harder so I don't have to stop after forty minutes of pulling.

Then convince him it's best for everyone if he tries harder.

I nearly rip the harness off in my hurry to get out of it in an attempt to get away from his voice. I hate how he can go from making sense, then use that and tempt me into screwing

things up. Terry's a good kid. He doesn't need me around telling him what to do.

"Chuck?"

"What?" I snap at Albert, and he steps away, hands raised.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?"

My willpower drops as I grind my teeth. I so want to tell him to leave me alone.

"What do you want?"

"Just to talk, I—"

"It's never just talk," I snap. "It's always about getting me to do something. So what do you want me to do?"

"Calm down? I don't know what's happened while you were pulling the pickup, but we can all pickup on your bad mood."

"You think it's as easy as deciding I'm going to calm the fuck down? How am I supposed to calm down when each and everyone of you is there, waiting for a chance to make demands on me? Just like you're doing!"

"Do you have a debuff active?"

"I don't have a fu—" I notice the paranoia debuff slowly turning orange. How the fuck did I not notice it sooner? I growl and close my eyes. It costs me half my willpower, but it goes away.

This is your fault, I tell my father's voice.

"Feeling better?" Albert asks, then he steps away again at the look I give him.

"What do you want?"

"I'd like for you to calm down. I know it's not easy. But the way you've been growling anything someone walked by those like fifteen minutes isn't doing anyone any good."

"Why hasn't any of them told me something before?"

"Hanz's doesn't want to offend you," Albert says, lifting a finger. "Elizabeth doesn't want to get in a fight with you with her son where he can see." Another finger. "John's pretty sure one slap from you will kill him." Another one. "Wolfboy's busy pissing on all the trees in the area."

"He's what?"

"Which leaves me as the only one who can take a punch from you and get back up. I also think I'm the only one who knows about that debuff issue of yours. I also have an idea what's it like to have anger issues. Mine are nothing like what I've seen of yours, but I've gotten into my share of fights just because someone pissed me off."

"You seem pretty calm for someone with anger problem," I growl.

"Because I've learned to pay attention to how I feel, and recognize the signs, then—"

"I know the signs." I motion around us. "It's the moment there's people around me. That's why I want to be alone."

He rubs his face and stumbles over his muzzle. "Have you heard of meditation?"

"I'm not sitting around humming at the world."

"That's—" he gives me a look I can't decipher and I'm not bothering trying my skill on it. "That isn't what meditating is. It's just one way some practice it. All you have to do is

find a quiet space, and quiet your mind.”

“Is that a joke?”

“No, it’s—”

“I already told you I want to be alone and not one of you will let me.”

He closes his eyes and sighs. “A quiet place isn’t the same as being alone.”

“Nobody here’s certainly quiet.”

He cracks a smile. “All you need to do is get away, and make that space your own, one you’re comfortable in. Surround yourself with things that calm you.” He taps the hammer at his hip. “Maybe put the staff my uncle made on the ground before you. Then you close your eyes, focus on your breathing and use that to get your mind to quiet down.”

My father snorts. *Oh, I would love to see you calm the mess that’s the thing you call your mind.*

“You think I’ve never tried that? Do you know where my mind goes if things get quiet in there? It goes to all the ugly places you don’t want to look in. Because, unlike you, I’m not able to stop it from doing that.”

“So look.”

Even my father’s speechless at that one. I narrow my eyes. There is no way this isn’t some trick.

Perception skill check failed

Of course, now you fail.

“Meditating isn’t about not having anything go through your head. It’s about paying attention so you can decide what to do with it.”

“I know what I want to do about it. I don’t want to look at it.”

“And how’s that going?” Albert asks. “We no loner live in a world where we can fill our head with noise to drown all those things we don’t want to acknowledge are there. And the way your mood went foul just pulling that pickup tells me you don’t know how to keep that away without it.”

“Get to the point.”

“Meditating is a way to take control. It’s not easy, and it’s not perfect. I still lose my temper every so often. But it no longer happens just because someone gave me a sideways glare, and when it does, I get it back under control before anyone ends up in the hospital.”

He’s an idiot.

Of course you think that. He sounds like he’s got his life under some control.

He’s lying. You know that. Or he’s deluding himself.

“Sitting down somewhere quiet,” I say.

Are you fucking kidding me?

“Just paying attention to my breathing.”

“And using that to let you mind quiet down.”

“That sounds like something a conman would try to sell me.”

“I’m not asking for money, and I’m not telling you it’s going to be easy. It’s not. It took me years to see noticeable results, and I gave up on it multiple times. But my mom talked me back into it and now I’m happy about it. I doubt I’d have survived to see this new world otherwise.”

“All right. I’ll try.”

“That’s all I ask.” He reaches for me.

“Don’t.”

“Right. No touching. Sorry. The way the system works, meditating’s a skill, and you’re going to be able to see your progress. It’ll make it easier to stick with it.”

Or see how you’re not progressing at all.

Shut up.

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I glare at anyone approaching as I take off the harness. Which amount to Albert and he turns around. I figured I’d try his focusing on my breathing thing while I pulled, and all that did was send my mind down memory nightmare lane. I did not need to remember my father’s smirk as the bully he talked me into standing up to beat the crap out of me. A lesson to toughen me up, he said afterward. A lesson in getting me pissed, he meant, so that the next time I saw that guy, I had my foot planted in his balls before he did anything.

Which got me expelled.

And got my father to buy me ice cream.

I was accepted back a week later. My dad explained the situation, or so he said. I accepted it back then. Now, I expect there was a fair amount of threatening involved.

Deloy whoops from a branch, then jumps over to the next one over. What is he, a monkey?

“Get down from there,” I order.

I think he’s ignoring you, my father says as Deloy throws himself at another tree, nearly missed the branch he’s aiming for and then scrambles up it, laughing.

Or he didn’t hear me. “Deloy, down!” He looks at me before getting to his feet and jumping to another tree.

Definitely ignoring you. He might need a better incentive. Maybe threaten a spanking. That worked well with you.

Because you trained me to fear those. And he’s nineteen. You don’t spank a nineteen-year-old.

That didn’t stop—

Don’t even go there.

Still, he’s not entirely wrong. We have thirty minutes before Terry’s cleared enough to make it worth pulling the pickup.

“Deloy, how about we get some tracking training in?”

“Maybe later.”

“How about now, instead?”

“I don’t feel like it.”

My father's laughter isn't helping, neither is my dropping willpower.
"I thought you wanted to become the best. You think the best just train when they feel like it?"

Oh, good one.

I didn't—

Deloy stops as he's about to jump again.

See, you're using it to get him to make good decisions.

Shut up. I wouldn't have said that if he's done what I told him.

Deloy climbs down the tree and in two bounce-like four-legged steps, he's before me.

"How do we start?"

"We start by taking a stroll in the woods."

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Teaching Skill increased in level, Level 3
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Manipulation Skill increased in level, Level 2
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That's just because Deloy couldn't keep from wandering away. I preemptively tell my father, and he doesn't comment. The kid has the attention span of a gnat. If not for his species bonus to the forest environment, I doubt he'd have picked up anything despite me gaining two levels in teaching in the process.

This time when I stop pulling, John watches me.

"I'm not going to snap at you."

"I think we should stop. We have a little over two hours' light left, and we should use that to set up camp."

I check my watch, winding it in the process. Nearly seven in the evening. "Good idea. I'll—"

"How about you take it easy? You've been pulling most of the day. You've done your part."

"I can—"

"Maybe you can go sit down somewhere quiet," Albert offers, and I glare at him.

"I tried it. That's why I nearly bit your head off at the last stop."

"Try it again. I can take the screaming."

Maybe you should test his punching resistance. And if that's too high, I'm sure it would be nice to test your bar on him.

"It's going to take time," the bogbear adds, "but you have to stick with it."

Didn't I say something like that to Deloy?

And you had to resort with some clever manipulation to get him to stick around and work.

Train, I correct him. And am I a teenager who just does what he feels like because the

other option is hard?

“I’m going to be somewhere in the woods,” I tell John. “I’ll come back at some point.” If nothing else, being away from everyone will be nice. “Please tell Terry not to come looking for me?”

“How about Deloy?” John asks, smiling.

“I doubt he wants to see me again today.” I walk into the trees without looking back and they quickly swallow any sounds of people. A few minutes later, I find a small grove of trees. A nearly perfect circle, about three meters in diameter, surrounded by tall trees. I sit against one and take my bar out. In the canopy’s shade, the green vein in the metal glow slightly.

I lay it across my crossed legs and close my eyes.

Just focus on my breathing.

You know this is a waste of time, right?

Use that to quiet my mind.

Look, if you’re going to be away from them. Why don’t you train?

I’ll do that later.

When you feel like it?

No, after I’ve given this a try.

This isn’t going to work. You know all the dark stuff that in your mind, it’s just—

Be quiet. Please. Just, for once, let me try something that might help me.

It won’t, but I guess you won’t understand that unless you go through it, so have fun.

I wait a few seconds, then pay attention to my breathing. It’s fast, because of the argument. Even mentally, arguing with my father leaves me breathless. Not that I ever argued with him when he was part of my life. The consequences of arguing with my father were... memorable. I witness them with my mother, because she often argued with him. It never started as such. My mother wasn’t the kind to argue. She talked and explained, but got you to see her point in a reasoned manner.

But my father didn’t care for reason and with a few words of his own, he could get her twisted around in her arguments, make her doubt what she’d said. Lose her extremely long patience. Then the snapping and screaming started. And he joined in. Once my mother lost her temper, my father rejoiced in pushing her ever further.

He never got her to hit him, which I think was his goal. Prove that she was worse than him, because he never laid a hand on us. He didn’t succeed, and she paid for it. But in what he put her through and what he forced her to watch me go through.

It’s a fucking miracle she kept her sanity through all that and was able to course correct some of the stuff he had me believing after he left our lives.

Fuck.

I focus on my breathing again and this time; I try to get my mind to be quiet.