

Chuck-49

I unhook the harness from the truck and unequip it. It's a lot easier than working myself in and out of it. The downside is that it exchanges it for my vest, instead of counting as another layer. Terry says it's a balance issue. The price to pay for the expediency. I still want to argue that feels too much like something only a video game would do, but that's what the world is now.

It surprises me that I still have the occasional trouble with that.

"I don't know if I can clear that," Terry said, pointing to the underpass that is blocked off by thorned thickets. There's definitely a Sleeping Beauty feel to them.

"Should we be on the looking for dragons?" John asks, checking the skies.

"They can't survive here yet," Terry answers. "It's in the species' description," he adds at the man's incredulous expression. "They need more mana than the world has right now."

"Is there anything you haven't read about the system?" John asks in disbelief.

"Come on, it was one of the available choice at character creation. You think I wouldn't have taken that if I had the chance?"

"Why do you say you can't clear the way?" I ask, to get us back on track. I don't bother trying to sound pleasant. It's been a long day of pulling and keeping that family busy when we stopped. That underpass is the last obstacle before the on-ramp on the other side.

"I don't know how stable the road above it is. It looks like that's supporting it."

"The steel beams should hold most of it up," John comments.

"You really want to risk this on a should?" Terry counters. "If the road falls in, there's not clearing it."

"Then we're going on from this side." I point to the gentler incline of the off-ramp. The foliage is lower, bushes more than anything else. I can probably pull the truck through them if it comes down to it.

"Doesn't that put us on the wrong side of the road?" John says.

"Does anyone care?" I counter, and he shrugs. "Will spend the night here. In the morning, Terry, you clear the way, and we get on the highway. If it turns out there's someone enforcing people traveling on the right side, I'm sure there's going to be a spot with the median is flat and we can cross over."

I turn and head back to the truck.

"We're staying here the night," I call, and immediately, the father and mother are grumbling. I look at Maggie and she smiles at me before nodding. She'll keep them in check. "Patricia, get the food prep area ready. I'm going hunting."

"We're good for a few days," he replies as I head into the trees.

"I need to hit stuff," I reply.

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The bar connects with the... bearcat's head, and it doesn't seem to notice it.

"You know," I tell the silver fox, watching. "You can help out at any point."

The bearcat's got the body of a bear, the head of a puma, and the armor of a tank. At least that what the thick fur feels like when I connect and it's twice my height. The one advantage I have over it is that I'm faster, and I do mean one. One hit from the thing sent me flying through the trees and cost me more than half my health. I can't afford to be hit again.

With thirty on my staff skill, I'm now able to hit targeted points more often than now, and I've taken advantage of it. I've hit all the vital points: the head, the chest, the kidneys. I even scored an upper strike between its legs and it didn't react to that.

I winced at the imagined pain that hit should have caused, and he didn't even have to shrug it off.

Silver joined me as soon as I couldn't hear the others, he stayed well out of reach, but didn't seem concerned about my presence as I looked for tracks. I ignored the smaller ones, both because something the size of of an old world rabbit wouldn't feed me, let alone the others, and because something dying of one hit isn't all that satisfying.

Of course, it's only satisfying if it's the one who dies and not me.

I dodge and evade as many of its swipes as I can. When I can't, I block them with the bar because I discovered that it somehow dissipates kinetic energy. The blow that sent me flying only pushes me back a couple of step if I intercept it with the bar.

The real downside of that is the damage the bar's taking.

I score a hit in its side, and it roars in anger and pain. That's one more weak point found. It doesn't like being hit in the knees, the wrists and now, the side—both sides, as hitting the other one causes it to react the same way.

Alright, I have a list of targets. Let's practice hitting them and see if it speeds up my skill gain.

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I drop to my knees panting a second after the bearcat falls and doesn't get up, finally. My stamina is flashing, and I can't see any left. I didn't lose any health from overexertion, so I have some left, but—the line becomes visible again.

That isn't the kind of fight I want to have again.

I look up and Silver's seated two meters away, looking at me, head canted.

"Thanks a lot," I say bitterly. "We both know it couldn't have hit you, so why did you let me deal with it alone?" Its expression doesn't change. "Sorry, that's not fair. I started that fight, not you."

I drop on my back. What I see of the sky through the canopy is dark, with some blue to the west, edging toward purple. I raise the bar. It's still in one piece, but Oskar would be pissed at how little care I've taken of it.

System Query: Lunarium Barbell, Quality: Poor, Type: Tool, Improvised Weapon: staff

A barbell made of Lunarium. Barbells are tools designed to hold weights on each end for the purpose of strength and endurance training. As a long straight metal bar, it makes for good improvised staff.

Barbell crafted by Oskar Jarzabek

Currently increasing from Poor quality to Okay. Maximum quality possible: Superior.

What is Lunarium?

System Query: Lunarium

Lunarium is a metal made of one of the base metals infused with the light of the Luna.

Lunarium's properties vary based on the skill of the crafter, the phase of Luna.

Lunarium is a material exclusive to the world locally identified as Earth.

Base Properties include self repair, speed depending on crafting skill and lunar phase.

Damage altered based on the lunar phase. A chance of affecting spiritual creatures, based on the lunar phase.

I tilt my head to look at Silver. "Is this why you've been trailing me? To see if I'm going to be a responsible human and use this power with care?" I chuckle. "I'll point out I didn't need it the last time we tussled." Its upside down expression is even more indecipherable.

My stamina is up to a tenth. I want to close my eyes and spend the night here. The peace. The quiet. The rustling of other animals.

Yeah, sleeping here's not a great idea, especially not with that there, attracting all sorts of scavengers.

I push myself up, send the bar to my inventory, and consider this beast. As strong as I am, can I even carry it? I'm trying to put it over my shoulders when the ridicule of my situation hits me.

Why am I making this so hard on me?

I send the bearcat to my inventory. I don't even feel it there. I do find out it's called a Taxicorical, when I check my inventory to confirm it's there. I suspect the system's making the name up, but it isn't like I have a way to call it out on it.

"Alright, I'm heading back. See you for tomorrow's evening hunt?" I ask Silver before I head to the others. It follows me until we can hear them, then it vanishes into the underbrush.

I step into the light of the fire.

"You're back!" Deloy exclaims.

"I told you he was fine," Terry said. "You have to start checking the team screen since you're on it now."

"I did!" the worgen exclaims. "Did you see drop? We should have gone to help."

"I was fine." My statement doesn't calm him.

"Looks like it got away," John says, smirking.

I grab a tarp from the back of the pickup and stretch it down out of the way. Then I drop the bearcat on it with my own smirk. With a muttered, 'Show off.' John turns and heads away.

I set about butchering the beast.

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Pulling the pickup while on the highway, even as damaged as it is, is easier on everyone. Not having to stop even thirty meters is definitely easier on me. I can find a rhythm and stay with it. We should be in Winchester in a few days like this.

John and Patricia are walking alongside me, discussing stopping for lunch when Deloy run in our direction.

“There’s a town!” He points to where we’re heading, panting. “Along the highway.”

“How big?” John asks.

Deloy shakes his head. “Didn’t get close enough to see, but I smelled the smoke, the meat cooking, saw it trail up. There’s a lot of fires.”

“How far?” Patricia asks.

“I don’t know. I ran for half an hour to get back?” he looks at me, and I nod since he expects the acknowledgment he did good.

“Are we risking it?” John asks. “Even Harrisonburg wasn’t all sunshine.”

“It’s going to be a few hours before we reach it,” Patricia points out. “Unless some of us hurry ahead.”

“I don’t think we should separate,” John says.

“I can scout,” Deloy says hopefully.

“No alone,” John says.

“I was alone, and I was fine.”

“If I’d known you’d were planning on leaving the group, I’d have—”

“You’re not my father!” He looks at me. “It was okay that I scouted ahead, right?”

I nod, feeling an odd sensation at his deferral to me over John.

“See.”

“Chuck,” John says. “He’s a kid.”

“I’m nineteen.”

“He’s a worgen,” I say. “He has claws, he’s strong. He knows to be careful. He’ll be fine.”

With a whoop that makes me question the age he claims to be, he runs off. John exchanges a look with his wife and Patricia joins Elizabeth and Albert.

“Look,” John starts. “Are you looking to take charge? Is that what this is about. I’m okay with it,” he adds as I try to figure out what he’s talking about. “But we need to be on the same page.”

“Why do you think I’m trying to take over?”

He motioned to the vanishing Worgen. Deloy’s fast.

“You were being kind of harsh on him,” I say. “The fact he scouted without you knowing about it shows he can do it.”

“That’s not the point. I made a decision, and you contradicted it, and because of how the kid looks to you, he just took it and ran off. You said you weren’t interested in being in charge, but last night you were telling Pat and the others to get stuff going.”

“I was just telling them we were done for the day.”

He looks at me. "What about that girl?"

"Maggie? What about her?"

"What exactly are you doing with her?"

I narrow my eyes. "What are you insinuating, John?"

"You have her telling her parents what to do. And they only do it because they're terrified of you."

"Did you listen to them bitch that first night? They weren't interested in anything we were doing, and they certainly weren't interested in helping out. Maggie was at least willing to talk, explain her situation, and listen to my suggestions. I asked her to explain things to her family and clearly she did."

"I think you're not seeing what's actually happening."

"It doesn't matter, we can drop them off at that town and they won't be our problems anymore."

"What if they want to continue with us?"

I stare at him. "In what world do you think they'd pick us over a town where they'll be safe?"