

Chuck-24

The city isn't what I expect.

I've driven through Harrisonburg a few times, and it's a large city with a 'sprawling' suburbia leading to a vibrant city center.

Well, it was.

I've slowed my pace as we passed the 'Welcome to Harrisonburg' sign to look at the dilapidated houses, with the overgrown yards and vines pulling the buildings down. It reminds me of a documentary I watched on abandoned cities. Looking at this, I'd say no one's been here in half a century, not the nine days since the system changed the world.

No one ventures away from the convoy after a brave soul came out screaming from the house, chased by something that might have been a house cat before all this, but was now three feet tall at the shoulders with tentacles on its back. They stopped at the property line, hissed at us, then turned and walked back to the house, tail high.

It's past noon when things start to improve, the buildings do look like they've been abandoned for a quarter of a century, instead of half. Slowly their conditions improve and in the distance, I make out sky scrappers, one of which seems to be broken, the top ending jagged.

I can't be certain, but those might be on the other side of whatever is causing the buildings to improve. Maybe the same thing that keeps the trees from taking over the roadside inn.

A dozen blocks later I stop at the mass of people before us.

I can feel the relief of those around me.

This is going to be fun.

I glance at my willpower. I am not looking forward to this.

"How do you want to do this?" John asks.

"I don't."

"You're going to have to. No one's going to move without you."

I close my eyes. "This is what they've been wanting and complaining about since they grabbed onto me. Why can't they just run ahead and rejoice."

"It might have something to do with those people trying to rob us in that first town, or how there's no way to know what monster's going to be in a building, or if this whole city's one giant dungeon."

I start at him in horror. I am not dealing with another dungeon.

He shakes his head. "Dungeons don't work that way; if it's based on the video games. At worse, we'd be dealing with an open worlds instance."

"That's when there's a large event that's going to destroy the area and every player's invited to join, right?" Terry's been doing his best to educate me as I pull the pickup. He's realized that I'm something of a captive audience then.

"Something like that."

"That's not sounding any better than a dungeon."

“It isn’t.” John chuckles. “But I doubt it’s that either. We could get moving, the others are growing restless.”

“Any chance that’ll get them to go ahead without me?”

“Not-a-one.”

Limiting my response a growl directed at him costs me a sliver of willpower, and then I start pulling again. Only gained one skill in my training skills out of this day’s walk, but if it means I’m finally done having people following me, it’s worth it.

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There are a lot of people spread on each side of the road. They’re forming a line that feels like a ‘do not cross’ proclamation, except that they’re dressed in ordinary clothing, mostly not armed, and have a look of wonder on their face.

The only clearly armed and more serious ones are the group that is walking toward us. A dozen muscular men and women were armed with shotguns, rifles, knives, and swords. The only one not armed, not muscular, or looking mean, is the man leading them.

He’s not particularly tall, maybe a couple of centimeters shorter than my one point seventy-five meters. He’s lean and dressed so much better than the people with him, it screams politician.

I do my best not to look like I’m hurrying to get out of the harness, but I want the chance to run the moment this turns bad.

Why not kick his ass and take over? My father suggests.

There is no way he’s serious. There can not be one tiny part of my subconscious that thinks that what I’ve been going through this last week, but increased a hundred folds, is a good idea.

“Welcome!” the man proclaims loudly, throwing his arms up. “Welcome everyone to Barlet City! I’m Victor Barlet, elected mayor, and you have no idea how happy I am to see so many of you have made it to our great city, the only new city of the System Era.”

“Did he actually rename Harrisonburg after himself?” John asks under his breath. “Can you say ‘pretentious’ much?”

I don’t reply. Just being before him my willpower’s taking a hit. Not enough to worry, yet. But it’s not a good sign.

He looks us over. Hanz, Terry, and Elizabeth are on my left, John, Mary, and Bernard on my right. Mary and Bernard simply joined us when John called the others over. He wanted the team front and forward, in case this didn’t go our way.

Victor’s reaction to Hanz and Bernard is subtle, but I see the dislike. Probably because my perception skill’s now at fifteen, but also because growing up my emotional survival depended on picking up the subtle of clues my father gave as to what is actual mood was. I rarely got him right, but after him, others are easier to read.

His ‘welcome everyone’ certainly doesn’t include everyone.

“Where did you come from?” he asks me and not snapping or turning around and walking off costs me way too much willpower.

“Greenville,” I answer.

“That’s... that has to be the furthest anyone’s reach us from.” He looked around me

and his amazement seems genuine. “How did you manage to keep so many of them alive?”

“Great leadership,” John says, patting my shoulder, and I glare at him.

“Consider me impressed, as I said, you’re coming from further than we’ve had before and with a lot more people. Most of the survivors who’ve made it to Barlet City were in rough shape when they got here.” He raises his voice again “congratulation on making it to the best city you’ll ever find!”

He squeezes my arm. “Come, come. We have accommodations for everyone.”

I look at the mass of people and swallow, but I let him lead me forward. It isn’t like I’m going to be expected to deal with them, right?

“As you can imagine,” Victor says as we walk. “We have a lot of empty houses, even here, the change wasn’t smooth. A lot of people outside Barlet City were caught by surprise and didn’t adapt. They were eaten by whatever’s out there.” He pauses. “I’m sure you’ve gotten an inkling of what those might be on your trek here.” His smile makes me want to punch him, and my willpower dips below the three-quarter mark.

I ignore the mass of people on each side of the city’s entrance because acknowledging them will sap all my willpower.

“Now, I’ll have places ready for everyone in no time, and your... non-human travelers even have a section of the city to themselves.”

“What?” the surprise pulls my attention away from the worry about my lowering willpower. “What do you mean, a section?”

My question takes him by surprise. “Well, I mean that I’m sure they’ll prefer being among people like them.” He smiles and my hands close into fists.

Go for it.

This can’t be good for my willpower, but I’m not taking my eyes off this slime-ball. “You’re not segregating them.”

He raises his hands defensively. “I’m not, I swear, they’ll be able to go wherever they want, but they have needs they have to accommodate, right? Some...” he motioned to Bernard. “One like that can’t simply move into just any house.” He motions to Hanz. “What about you? An orc, right? We have a group of them. I’m sure you’ll want to meet them and be with them. Right?”

Hanz nods. “It’d be nice to meet others like me.”

“You sure?” I ask, surprised.

“Yeah, it’ll be fine. Like the mayor said, it’s not like I’m going to be forced to stay there.”

I look at Bernard, but he was his usual smile.

“We’ll be fine,” Mary said. “I’m sure that it’ll be good for Bernard to have a real place to sleep in made for his size.”

Okay, why are you fighting for them? I thought you wanted to get rid of them.

I close my mouth on my protest. As wrong as it feels to put people who are different ‘away’, it’s their decision to go along with it. And it means I’m free of them.

“Fine.” I stop walking. “I mean this is where you were all heading for. You can set up your lives while I keep going.”

“Going?” Victor says, “you can’t leave when you’ve just arrived.”

I raise an eyebrow and more of my willpower vanishes.

Hit him! It’ll make you feel better.

I am so tempted.

“I have to keep going,” I say through clenched teeth. “I’m due in Toronto.”

“I’m sure that whatever you had to do, before the world changed, isn’t that important anymore.”

I step into his space, and at least one sword is pulled out. “My mom’s birthday didn’t become less important just because all of this is different.”

“She might not even—” he stops and swallows as I narrow my eyes. He motions for the others to lower their weapons. “It’s alright. That’s on me. That was callous and unforgivable. At least, let me treat you to a real meal before you leave. And I can tell you where the enclaves of monsters our scouts have found are. You wouldn’t want to run into them and be killed and miss your mother’s birthday, would you?”

“If it’s the same to you, I’m going to take my chances with them.” I could do with hitting something right now, and if I stay here, you’re going to be it.

My refusal surprises him and he stammers.

“Come on Chuck,” Terry said, “he’s just being hospitable. We can hit the road after that.”

Victor’s surprised again but forces a smile. “Yes, you can, after you’ve had a good meal and the chance to rest.”

We? Fuck, does Terry think he’s coming with me? I doubt his mother’s going to be okay with that. This is a safe place for him, and them.

I glance at my willpower and somehow this had brought it down below a quarter. Fuck. I need to get out of here.

I look around for an escape, but there are people all around us. A lot of human-looking people. I put aside the question of where everyone else is because if I don’t get out I’m going to lose it and hit someone.

Victor’s still babbling about how good the city is, how we should settle in. Why can’t he shut up? I’m not fucking interested in his sales pitch, can’t he see that?

I don’t see a way out, it’s like everyone’s moved closer as we walk into the city. I consider just running through them. Even without adding my gloves, I can push them aside. Then I see a woman further away, in a looser part of the crowd. Is she too far?

Only one way to know.

Tag, you’re it.

I will myself in her place, when it doesn’t happen immediately, I grit my teeth and force it.

The people around me move away in surprise, and I walk, ignoring my nearly all-gone stamina as well as willpower. Unsurprisingly, my mana’s all gone.

When I’m alone in an alley and can’t hear anything other than the pounding of my blood I lean back against the wall and close my eyes. It makes the few messages on the side more obvious.

Willpower Training has gone up a level: Level 18

Use of Willpower to boost ability (Switch) successful, adding 13 willpower points to ability, duration, instant. Side effect, equivalent stamina burned.

Equivalent my ass, you mean proportional. I'm at six hundred stamina, and I had half that left from my walk getting to the city. Thirteen willpower isn't equivalent to three hundred stamina.

At least I'm alone.

I want to sit and rest, but someone saw me walk away, and I have no doubt Victor's going to want to get me back so he can go on and on about how great his city is and how I should give up my mother for it.

I grind my teeth and slam my fist into the wall until I no longer feel like pounding his head in. When I stop I can't decide if it took too long, or not enough. I didn't regain any willpower, but I feel slightly better.

I have no idea where I am, but I figure that if I keep walking in one direction, I'll get out of the city eventually.

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The buildings are in better condition, I'll give them that. The sun's now too low to continue. I haven't encountered anyone for a few hours, but I doubt a city is any safer than the wild after dark.

The pop-up appears as I step inside the store.

Shop, Tailor, unclaimed
Warning, you lack the minimum required mercantile skill Warning, you lack the minimum skill related to the shop, tailor. Raising the shop, tailor, level will requires 532% more. Raising the required skill to their minimum levels will remove the penalty Activating the shop will add, 0.003 percent to the zone, Harrisonburg, Town.
Do you wish to claim the shop, tailor, as your own?

No.

Well, John was right. Someone's full of himself renaming a city when the system kept the original name. But why is it a town?

What makes a town? I ask the system

System Query: Settlements, town

A settlement reaches the town status once the population crosses 10,000 people if the town does not then provide proper lodging for all the citizens within 30 days of crossing the threshold, those without lodging will no longer be counted.
Warning, citizens without proper lodging receive penalties to their health.

What's the population of Harrisonburg?

No response from the system.

What's the settlement progression?

System Query: Settlement

To qualify as a settlement, a settlement node must first be located and claimed. The zone of influence of a settlement is dictated by the population, the number of buildings occupied, and watch posts built.

System Query: Settlement Progression

Name/minimum population
Village 150
Township 1,000
Town 10,000
County[needs better name] 100,000
City 300,000
Metropolis 1,000,000
Megapolis 10,000,000

What's a zone of influence?

System Query: Zone of Influence

Zones of influence apply to two types of non-system-controlled environments. Settlements and roadside establishments

The zone of influence is an area surrounding them where the influence of the system over the nature of the world is mitigated, slowing how quickly nature grows, and keeping natural creatures away.

The size of the zone is governed by varying factors, depending on what creates it.

No wonder Victor's desperate for us to join. If the zone's size increases with the number of active stores, the population has to play a part, and if it's like Jordan's inn, higher levels will bring in new bonuses.

I doubt this is the only city left, but if he can make it the largest quickly, it might become the only one worth living in.

I wish him luck with that.

As soon as the sun's up, I am out of here.