

Chuck-50

The ramp off the road's homemade. The concrete side's been broken off, and dirt packed until there was a path through the trees leading down to a road. A wooden, hand painted, sign just before the path tells us we're entering Mount Jackson, and that they'll accept anyone except trouble makers.

Deloy was right. There's a lot of smoke coming up, and it has a meatiness to it.

I walk to the start of the downhill path. It's barely wide enough for the pickup to fit. It feels firm as I stand on it, but I don't weight the thousands of kilos it's got to weigh now.

"Are we risking it?" John asks.

"Unless we want to risk monsters or anyone wandering by leaving with it, we don't have a choice."

"You have the keys to it."

"Which I haven't use getting it here. I'm not the strongest person out there, let alone monster."

"Then, we're going to have to be careful. If the sides give out, the pickup's done for."

"First time I've had to worry about sliding off a ramp in summer."

"At the speed we'll be going, a skid can't happen."

"You've clearly never had to get your car out of the ditch in winter." I turn and head to the others.

"Then I'm letting you handle this."

"Okay, we're going down that hill so we can reach the town. I don't think the dirt's packed hard enough some of it isn't going to give, so it's going to be important we keep the pickup centered. Hanz, Albert, I'm going to need you in from with me in case the incline's too steep for me to control the descent."

"I can make it harder," Terry offers.

"Freezing it?"

He nods, and his face contorts. "I guess that's a bad idea."

"It's helped us get here. Elizabeth, I'll need you on the left side in case the pickup starts to slide. On the right..." until I know if I'll need the extra help, I can't put either Hanz or Albert there. They're the strongest after me.

"I'll do it," Deloy offers.

"Me too," Maggie adds, stepping forward.

There's no way they'll be able to do anything if the pickup slide, but I nod. Deloy needs to feel useful, and this will hopefully show her family she's a woman of her own, instead of just their daughter. I'll just have to pay attention to that side.

I pull the pickup to the start of the incline and make sure everyone's in place or out of the way. The front wheels get on the dirt without sinking. That's a good start but means little. That's only a fraction of the weight. Half the pick is over the dirt when it cracks and the front wheels sink a couple of centimeters. Pulling it gets slightly harder, but I don't forget that this incline only gets worse and that once all that weight is on the dirt is when

things can get tricky.

I know the rear wheels make it on the path when the pickup stops moving. They sunk a quarter of the way and the displaced dirt cracks the half meter to the edge.

“John, I’m counting on you to keep watch on the sides.” This time, when I pull, my feet sink in before there’s movement.

“The wheels aren’t sinking any deeper,” he calls. That’s good, hopefully.

Two full steps and I’m where the incline increases. Three more and the pickup reaches it. “Will the undercarriage clear?” I ask as I keep pulling.

“Looks like it,” John replies. “The wheels still aren’t going any deeper.”

The pulling gets easier, then.

“Chuck!”

I no longer feel the weight of the pickup and turn, readying myself. The front collides against me. It’s not fast, but its mass pushes me down and the dirt breaks under my feet instead of giving me any traction.

Hanz and Albert are next to me, and the pickup slows.

Just as it starts sliding to right.

“Someone hold it!” I yell, then all movement stops.

“We’re not over the side,” John calls.

No shit.

“Whose the strongest between you?”

“Twenty five,” Hanz says.

“Twenty-three.”

They glance at me. “Albert, let go. But be ready if there’s any movement.”

“I’m kind of curious what your strength is,” Hanz says as the bogbear slowly lets go.

“Thirty.”

“Really? The way you’ve been pulling this thing, I thought you were a lot higher.”

I feel the weight of the truck more, with Albert no longer holding it, but it doesn’t move. “Go see the side, but don’t try to do anything. Any shifting might send the pickup down.” I raise my voice. “John, how far from the edge are we?”

“If by edge you mean where the drop was, maybe ten inches. But there is no edge anymore. It crumbled away and the wheel’s almost over that. Not sure what will happen when we start moving again.”

What will happen, as things stand, is the pickup going over, and since I’m still attached to it, me with it. I try to unequip the harness.

Equipment can only be unequipped when not currently in use
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That’s what I was worried about.

“Terry, can you make a wall of ice to keep the pickup from going over?”

“Give me a minute. Oh, I’m so happy I didn’t use all my points,” he mumbles after a few seconds. “Got it. Let me check how it works.” More silence. “Okay, everyone, move out

of the way.”

Cold erupts, then there’s ice on my right. At a glance, I can tell it isn’t well lined up. “Any change you can adjust it?”

“Sorry, this is a cast and it’s done spell. It’s meant to stop incoming attackers, not support something falling.”

“Means that might not help if the pickup slides,” Hanz says.

“How about thickening it or adding a second one?”

“Let me try.”

Another flash of cold and the wall’s close enough it’s on the dirt. It’s angles away further down, but we’ll deal with that when we get there.

“We have a problem,” John calls as I’m about to take a step forward.

“What?”

“The wheels in the ice.”

“Sorry,” Terry says. “Like I said, it’s made to stop attackers not do stuff like this.”

I close my eyes and watch my willpower drop as I don’t yell at him. I rip a piece of jerky apart and as I chew, I carefully step away from the pickup. When he doesn’t move, I motion for Hanz to do the same. Okay, at least we have time to figure something out. Not a lot of time, I realize as I notice the ice is melting, but time none the less.

I unhook the harness and send that to my inventory. Now, if the pickup falls off, I’m no longer going with it.

“I’ll stay here, just in case,” Hanz says. “So you can go look at the situation.”

The situation isn’t good.

“I tried to keep it from sliding,” Deloy says, “but she was no help.”

“I tried just as hard,” Maggie replies.

“That’s enough,” I say. The side of the incline is gone, like John said. Now it’s also covered in ice, as is the wheel.

“If we had someone with fire or heat, we could melt this and not worry about the rest of the ice breaking.”

“We can still break just that section. Or carve it off,” John says.

“This is half a meter of ice. That’s not something we carve easily. And there’s no way to know how breaking this section will affect the rest of the ice.”

Johns looks at me, then nods. “Right, you’re Canadian.”

“Actually, all my problems with ice happened in the US.”

“We still need to get this moving,” Elizabeth says.

The front wheels are still centered, so if we get the back ones in line, the edge isn’t a problem anymore. “Anyone have chains?” I feel around the left side wheel well, reaching all the way to the back from some place I can hook it. When I look up, I’m met with blank stares.

“Anyone has load straps?” more blank stares. “We need to start being better prepared.”

“Seems to me you’re the expert at driving problems,” Pat says. “Shouldn’t you have

been thinking of this?"

"I—" I close my mouth and force myself to shift my glare to the distance. More willpower gone. "I wasn't thinking I'd be dealing with a pickup after the world changed." I summon my harness and disconnect the two heavy straps from it. At least they are easier to look around the axle than a chain.

"This isn't a lot to grab on," I say as I hand one short end to Elizabeth and Albert. "Try not to have it slip. When I give the word, John fire at the ice so it'll break and you two pull. We need to get the back centered again."

I get back in front with Hanz, who already has his shoulder against it. "Our job is to make sure it doesn't slide while they pull?" he asks.

I nod and take position.

"Now!"

The gunshot's a lot louder than I expected, and the pickup shifts to the left as the ice shatters from back to front. Then we're fully centered again and I smile, holding the heavy truck in place. We are back in—

The ground shifts under my feet, and the dirt flows to the right, taking us with it.