

## Chuck-28

I snap awake at the tentative use of my name.

“Chuck?” Albert asks again.

“I’m...” I trail off as I notice my health, stamina, and willpower are still low. I didn’t mean to fall asleep, but with that should have come an increase in regaining them. At least my stamina should be higher. The poison debuff is still there, as red as before. “I’m okay.”

The dubious look he gives me makes it clear my default answer anytime someone asks how I am isn’t going to work. Right, he can see my pools on the party screen.

He crouches next to me and offers me what looks like moss, but the color is more yellow than green, and the smell. I raise an eyebrow. Is he trying to poison me more?

“I found this in the den. Its information says it’s an anti-poison, but I can’t get any details. If we were a couple of weeks ago, I’d say it’s an adaptive reaction from being exposed to the Rabid’s poison, but with the system, there’s no way to know, and it hasn’t been around long enough for this to be a normal adaptation if that’s even a thing anymore.”

I take it. I don’t believe one word he’s saying. But he doesn’t know I have an ace up my sleeve. I study the moss.

System Query: Rabid Moss, Quality: normal, Type: Restorative
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Rabid Moss grows around the dens of Rabids and is a favorite of theirs, chewed on to alleviate upset stomach caused by eating food that didn’t go down without a fight.
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When ingested by another being, the moss will counteract any poisoning from a Rabid’s bite or claw.
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Is the system in league with Albert? Me dying here means his uncle doesn’t have to pay me. He gets to keep everything that was found. Does he get gain my experience from the quest too?

“What’s wrong?”

I barely stifle the snort. What isn’t wrong? I help his uncle and I’m sent on a death run as a reward with you to make sure I don’t come back. I lead hundreds of people to safety and not one of them sticks by me. The fucking system doesn’t even give me my reward for getting them to safety on top of that, so where do you fucking what me to start?

I don’t tell him any of that, of course. I can’t have him know I’m on to him.

“Nothing.”

Something in the upper right of my vision catches my attention. It’s faint, almost like the system doesn’t want me to see it, but it’s too late. I focus on it until I can make out the stylized form of a person surrounded by people out to kill him.

System Query: paranoia, Type: Willpower, Strength: mild
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The world is out to get you.
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Paranoia is the state of mind that brings about the irrational belief that others intend to do you harm.
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All social interactions suffer a penalty due to the lack of trust. Is mitigated by Willpower, medication, or, none
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Nice try, trying to convince me this is all in my head. I know what having someone out to get me is like, remember. I grew up with one. And this is what it looks like. Being all nice and trying to lure me into thinking I'm safe.

Well, fuck you.

"Chuck?" Albert backs away. "I'm not sure what's going on, but I think you should take that before it gets worse."

"Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you?" I throw the moss at him and summon my bar. "You would just love for me to eat that and keel over, right? Get to claim I sacrifice myself for you and your family?" I use it to push myself to my feet, then to keep me from falling over.

"Chuck. I fought at your side." He raises his hands placatingly. "We're together in this."

"Yeah, sure. That's why you stayed lying there while that thing nearly killed me."

"I saved you from it."

I snort. "You missed me and hit it instead. You think I don't remember how close that hammer of yours came to my head? You want me to believe that was an accident?"

"You two were too close, there was no—"

I swing at him and miss. I glare at the vitamin debuff.

You planned this. Well, when I'm done with him, I am coming for you, wherever you're hiding. I wrench my attention away from the debuff to focus on the traitor, but I can't see him behind the approaching steel-gray and silver mass.

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I groan as I wake up from what has to have been the worst nightmare in a while, and I get a lot of those. My head hurts. My health's still fucking low, but my stamina's full, and my willpower is closing in on half.

I open an eye and Albert is at a respectable distance from me, his hammer in hand, concern on his face.

Fuck, it wasn't a nightmare.

"Are you okay?" he asks tentatively.

"No." The poison debuff's gone. There's still the vitamin's debuff with two hours and forty-three minutes on it.

"I think their bite made you paranoid."

"Seems like it. It's gone now."

"I forced the moss down your throat while you were unconscious."

I am part way to my feet when I catch myself and my willpower drops as I fight my urge to kill him for that.

His hands tighten on the shaft of his very large hammer. I remember the head hitting me in the face. I look at my health, that buff, and the understanding I can't win a fight against him at the moment defuses most of my anger.

With that controlled. I'm rational enough to understand his reasoning.

"Thank you."

"So we're good?"

I want to snort. That isn't something I'll ever be, but I nod and he relaxes.

"You had me scared there. You nearly took that thing down by yourself. If I hadn't managed to knock you out, I don't know if I'd have won a fight against you."

I wait for my father's comment, realizing he's been unusually silent since I woke up. He remains silent.

"I'm just glad you did. How about we head back before something else comes at us?"

"You want your share of what I found?"

Again, my father is silent. "What did you find?" what's going on Dad? You never pass up a chance to tell me I'm going to get screwed over.

"A lot of broken metal stuff I took for Uncle Oskar's forge. Money." He grins as he hands me a little over five hundred dollars. It's one stack of twenties, wrapped like in the movies, and a few extra bills. There's something off about how they look, but I've never paid enough attention to them before to know how. When I add that to my inventory, instead of taking a slot, the currency amount simply goes up. I'm nearly at twelve thousand dollars.

There's a handful of knives, one sword he recognizes as his uncle's work. Clothing in various states of damage. The one thing that he found he can't explain is the shield. It's iron, in the form of a kite, with designs on it he's never seen before, nor have I. Almost abstract, but there's a sense of heraldry to the placement.

"Unless you want it, I'd like to keep it."

"I use both hands with my bar, so you can keep it."

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When we make it back to town, Oskar is waiting for us at the limit. It takes me too long to realize he'd get the message the quest was complete, but there's no way he waited there since there, is there?

Not one comment from my father.

I'm actually getting worried.

Oskar hugs Albert, and I step back when he approaches me. "I'm not a hugger."

"Welcome back, and thank you for getting rid of those monsters for us. Come, we'll see to your injuries, then we can celebrate."

"I'd rather just get my bar and head out."

He stops. "That isn't ready. I told you it'll take some days."

Right, he did.

What the Hell am I going to do with myself until then?

"Come, you both look in need of healing and no clothing."

"I have those." Once I'm healed, I'll change.

\* \* \* \* \*

There are two healers. One's human, like me. A man with clothing covered with dirt and who smells like grass and mildew. I'm mildly surprised his hair is brown, streaked with gray, and not green.

"Botanist," he tells me when he notices me studying him. "Before all this. Herbalist now. I haven't cataloged all the new plants growing around the city, or the new things the existing ones can do now, but I've worked out how to get poultices to deal with injuries." He looks me over and quirks a smile. "But you might have me going through most of my stock."

"Just take care of the worst of it. My endurance is high. I'll heal the rest in a few days."

"If you don't get in anymore fights," he replies dubiously.

The poultices he mixes look like mud once he's done mashing them, but there's a healthiness to the look. Like the brown-tinted green teems with life. I don't think too hard about the bacteria that has to be a large part of it. He applies them to my cuts and immediately my health climbs noticeably.

Albert is on the other side of the room, a Bogbear tending to him.

"I didn't expect to see another human here," I tell him, instead of asking if they thought I'd object to someone not human tending to me.

He raises an eyebrow. "Oh, I'm a Jarzabek through marriage. When the message to pick Bogbear came, it missed me."

"So you and..." I trail off. I know better than to make an assumption about who he's with.

He shakes his head. "She passed a few years ago."

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks. The Jarzabek kept me around even without her to explain how great I am, and then they didn't kick me out when I stayed human." He lowered his voice. "I think they feel the need to keep me for proper representation and all that stuff." He grins and speaks at a normal volume. "It wouldn't do to appear racist now, would it?"

"Ah ah ah," comes the reply from the Bogbear tending to Albert. The voice marks her as a woman. "Like we've ever cared what others thought of our strange ways and that we'd accept strangers in our midst. If we cared about appearance, most of us would look like you."

Her hands glow as she touches Albert's injuries. Her healing doesn't seem any quicker than his, but it's certainly different.

"Dear God no. I couldn't take you looking like me. Your voice out of my face? The horror." He grinned.

I keep my confusion from showing. I learned early that it's best if people think I'm just not joining in whatever they're talking about, instead of trying to explain I have no clue as to what it is.

"Sister-in-law," he tells me as if that explains anything.

Once the poultice loses all its 'glow' he removes it and the cut is only a thin line of pale skin. By the time he's done, my health is nearly full, my stamina is, and my willpower is

at the three-quarter mark.

“I’d say take it easy,” he tells me as he removes the last of the poultice, “but something tells me that’s not something you do.” I open my mouth to contradict him, but he points to a door. “There’s a bathroom for you to change. If you need clothing, I can get you some.”

“I’m good.” I could simply switch clothing here. Equip the new set and not expose myself in between. But I want to be alone to deal with something that’s becoming unbearable.

The bathroom’s understated. Cracked white tile on the floor, old wallpaper with shells on it. The tub looks like it hasn’t been used in years and I don’t bother trying the water in the sink. There’s a sense this building has only been occupied for a short time and they haven’t moved on to bringing it up to code yet.

I put on a clean set of clothes and put the remains of the old ones in the sink. Then I look in the cracked mirror.

Okay, Dad. What gives?

I can’t remember one time when my subconscious didn’t jump at the chance of responding to me with all sorts of put-downs, so the hours or so of silence from it while I returned from the quest, the lack of jeering while someone helped me.

Something is seriously wrong.

Talk to me.

What does it say about me that the silence from the worst part of myself is more unnerving than anything it’s ever said.

*You could have died.*

Except that. The way there is no jeering, no mocking. It isn’t my father rolling his eyes at my actions. That’s a tone I have never heard him use before. Not use and mean it, anyway.

That’s worry I’m hearing in his voice.

In my subconscious’ voice.

It never worries.

Laughing at me is the norm.

What the fuck is going on?

*You could have died.*

There’s an edge of anger now.

Isn’t that what you always aimed for? I counter. Glaring at my broken reflection, wishing it was him I saw.

*I thought you to survive! To do what you had to. I showed you how bad other people are. How horrible and dangerous the world is. And what do you do now that you have the strength and power to make it on your own? You throw yourself at each and every problem that comes for them! You’re going to get yourself killed!*

No. You showed how horrible one man could be and you tried to convince me it was everyone else’s fault. Do you have any idea how hard it is not to lash out at everyone because of what you did to me? Don’t you fucking put this on them. You were the only

monster in my life.

The snort is all my father this time.

Fine, one of two. I walked away from the second one, at least.

*Because I showed you—*

Yes, because I recognized the signs. And I knew them because of how you treated me.

Don't change the subject! What is going on?

He doesn't immediately reply.

*You could have died.*

This time, there is no emotion.

Okay. That's the best I'm going to get.

So what the fuck does it mean? My father never cared if I lived or died. I lost count of the number of times he put me in situations that could have killed me. And they didn't because I was lucky or stubborn enough to push through instead of giving him the satisfaction. So for my subconscious to use that as an excuse for its behavior doesn't make

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I hang my head, and my hands shake at the realization.

My subconscious.

I'm so used to it sounding like my father, I often forget it's not him. It's my subconscious.

It's all I can do not to crumble, instead letting myself down to the floor.

It's not my father who's scared I could die.

I hug myself.

Oh fuck.

I could have died.