

Chuck-26

I stare at Oskar in disbelief.

He just told me it's going to take him six days to make my bar.

My father snickers.

Six days stuck in this city, surrounded by people.

I glance at my willpower and I don't notice a drop, this has to have cost me something.

"Something is wrong?" Oskar asks.

Fuck yes something's wrong. Keeping *that* to myself costs a sliver of willpower.

"When I stopped you from killing that man," I say carefully, "I was on my way out of town. I'm not a city person. I—" I run a hand over my face and ignore my father's warnings. "I'm not good around people. Is there anyway you can have it done sooner?"

He considers me, then shakes his head. "I will not do inferior work. You brought back my daughter's ring. I will not cheat you that way."

I lose another sliver not yelling at him to cheat away. I open my mouth to ask how long for a normal steel or even aluminum bar when he continues.

"But if you do not want to remain while I work. There is something other you can help with. Something outside of the city." He takes a step back in surprise and curses in something that might be Polish. Then he's reading and thinking.

"Are you about to send me another quest?" I ask.

He nods, then notices my expression. "Do you not want one?"

Don't I?

Tell him to throw in experience and money, and that bar, two bars, no, make it three, and all the money he has.

"What does it cost you to give it to me? Where do the rewards come from?"

He reads again, swipes to a different tab, reads some more. Swipes. Considers.

"There is different ways. He says. The one the system calls basic gives a little experience and one extra thing, small too. I can decide on more experience, it one point in the skills or magic. If add something physical, like money, it must come from me. There is a advance quest. It is much the same, but I can give more. But I must pay, or pay back, the experience it will give you. It is two points to me, for every three I put in the quest, so it is not bad deal."

"Don't." I'm not having him indebt himself for this. Who knows how badly this system will screw him over with interests and such.

"It is not simple quest. There must be appropriate reward."

"Will the bar be appropriate?"

You realize he just conned you into staying in town, right?

Shut up. This quest is outside, and once it's done, nothing says I have to stay in here. I can stay outside and come back once the bar's ready.

His nod is slow. "Yes, making your bar will be good payment. Do you not want more

experience? You need it to grow stronger now.”

“There’s going to be monsters to kill as part of that quest?”

Oskar nods.

“Then that’s going to be plenty. Just make the bar the reward.”

He nods and is reading again, or mentally writing. He wrote that first one and I never saw him type.

| |
|---|
| Quest: Attack from the wild |
| Monsters have been raiding the Jarzabek neighborhood from outside the town. Hunt them down and exterminate them for a reward. |
| Quest Generated by Oskar Jarzabek. |
| Rewards: 2000 experience, the making of a weapon of your choice, pending agreement with Oskar Jarzabek. An increase in reputation with the Jarzabek clan. |
| The quest can be shared with the members of your party. Do you Accept the quest? Yes/No? |

I raise an eyebrow at the wording, it almost sounds like the system wrote this.

“I try for better wording,” Oskar says. “The system will not let me name the weapon in the quest. It must be choice agreed between us.

“The experience?”

“It is basic, I do not add to it.”

“It says I can share it.”

“The system added that. I did not know about groups until now. There are many, other to help you will be good.”

I accept the quest, then bring up my combat tab for the party window, it’s empty. The other’s left over the last day. Makes sense.

“I don’t have a party, but it’s not a problem.”

He purses his lips, which look weird on a muzzle. “My brother helps. I do not want you to die for helping.”

“I don’t—” I grind my teeth and lose another sliver of willpower. He wants to help, not have someone watch over me. I force my breathing to slow, count the breath until my paranoia settles down.

“If you do not...” he trails off as I shake my head.

“It’ll be fine. This is why I don’t like being around other people. I don’t always catch myself in time to stop myself from losing it on them.” Although, having a willpower bar to check is making it easier to manage my outbursts. “Where are those monsters?”

“I can only say where they have come into the city. Albert has chased them twice, but not to their...lair. The last time, they ambushed him and he returned badly hurt.”

“And you’re sure he’ll want to go back?”

Oskar rolls his eyes. “He is young and brash. He looks for fights. He as already agreed to help and is on his way.”

I raise an eyebrow. There goes a little more of my willpower to keep my reaction limited to that. Did he plan all this ahead of time? I didn't see him call anyone. I have trouble believing him nearly killing the other guy was part of a setup to get me involved, but I can't dismiss it outright. My father was that skilled.

"There is a messaging window for people within the clan." He shrugs. "I do not know if there is other ways to talk over distances. But the Jarzabek stay in contact."

A likely story, my father says sarcastically.

At this point, it is. I'll have to query the system about it to confirm.

"Uncle!" a bear-like man steps into the forge. He's definitely younger. His fur's a more vibrant brown, with red highlights. "More fighting!"

"Yes Albert," Oskar replies with a tired sigh, "more fighting."

"How old is he?" I ask, because I get solid Terry vibes from his enthusiasm.

"Too old for this behavior."

Albert scoffs. "Can't ever be too old for a good fight." He looks me over. "You, him?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Him?"

"The guy I'm going to kick ass with. You look like you can hold your own in a fight." He raises his fists. "Show me what you've got."

Oh, this is going to be fun.

I cross my arms over my chest. "No."

The grin he gives me is way too pleased. "What," he says, stretching the word as his smile somehow grows more, "you chicken?"

My willpower drops a lot as I close my fists and keep from pounding his head in.

"Albert, stop!" Oskar orders, and the reaction is immediate. Albert freezes as if he hit the pause button.

I take a step away from Oskar, unable to keep my wariness from showing.

"I am sorry, Albert as ability to anger people."

I nod, trying to determine if he's ignoring my worry that he just stopped someone in their track, or he's oblivious. I miss a lot of social cues, so it's not impossible. "I tend to do the same."

Oskar shakes his head. "It's ability called Taunt. It causes people and monster who hear it to attack him. Albert uses it too much."

That explains the drop. "And that?" I motion to the still frozen Albert.

Oskar sighs. "I am elder...leader of the Harrisonburg Jarzabek. It gives me small power over the family. Will you behave?"

I open my mouth to demand what I did to deserve that question, but he's reading something.

"Good."

"I hate it when you do that," Albert says.

"Then do not act like brat. You are adult."

An adult. Good. I step to Albert and fix my gles on him. "If you ever do that to me

again, you're going to find out how violent I can get, got it?"

The smirk that was forming breaks as he studies my face. He backs away, raising his hands. "Sorry, sorry. I was just—"

"You don't want to piss me off, Albert."

"I wouldn't like you when you're angry?"

"No, you wouldn't."

His expression tells me I missed something, but I don't care. He looks to Oskar. "I'm sorry Uncle, I'll be on my best behavior."

"Good, Chuck will help, if you are nice, he can share the quest with you."

I stiffen. I never told him my name. I take my time turning and lose more willpower not to demand to know who told him.

My expressions confuses him for a few seconds, then he looks bashful. "Apologies. The system told me your name when you accepted the quest. I... I should not have presumed."

"Wow," Albert says and I have to fight not to turn my glare back on him.

My father's screaming that he's lying, that someone betrayed me, and I almost believe him. It's happened too much in my life. I want to pound his head in until he tells me. And my willpower continues to drop. It's nowhere near the four fifth mark, but I can't think of one way to stop it from dropping.

No, I can think of two.

As enticing as one of them is, I pick the other and walk out of the forge. Once outside, I head toward the edge of the city. I hear someone hurry after me, then follow a distance behind. I don't turn to confirm it's Albert, because I'm not sure how I'll react to the satisfied smirk he's got to be wearing.

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"Is it safe to get closer?" Albert asks.

I've been among buildings that have been taken over by nature for fifteen minutes with him trailing behind me.

"Because if you're still wanting to do the quest my uncle gave you, and you're not just leaving us to our well deserved fate, you're heading in the wrong direction."

And now I have to make the decision.

I stop. Bring up the quest and as I stared at it I notice a change, then an addition appears.

| |
|---|
| Quest: Attack from the wild |
| Monsters have been raiding the Jarzabek neighborhood from outside the town. Hunt them down and exterminate them for a reward. |
| Quest Generated by Oskar Jarzabek. |
| Rewards: 2000 experience, the making of a Jarzabenuim Barbell staff. |
| The quest can be shared with the members of your party. |

The Quest is active.
Do you wish to abandon the quest?
Consequences of abandoning the quest: none.
Yes/No

You don't owe them anything, my father says hatefully.

He's right and my mother doesn't contradict him. Those occasions are rare enough it give me pauses. She's usually there to remind me there's good in people, despite appearances at time.

The fact the quest can be dropped makes me hesitate to do it. It's not a bind until death kind of contract. How much of my anger was rational? And what kind of response does it entitle me to?

I ignore my father's scoffing.

Albert taunting me, warrants my anger.

Oskar knowing my name, his reason for knowing it... I just have to look at the quest to see his name there, so it makes sense he'd get my name as part of me accepting it.

It's going to be tough getting use to people knowing it without me telling them.

So Albert is the only one I'm justified in my anger.

I turn and keep my expression neutral as I watch him. He seems penitent. Eyes downcast, shoulders slumped, he's even scuffing the ground with a foot under my stare. The problem is that I know how easy it's to fake with how bad I am at social cues.

So I take my own advice. Take the words, not the tone. Or in this case, the actions, not the context, or lack thereof. If he's planning something, it'll show at some point.

"Where are the monsters?"

There's a flash of happiness, maybe eagerness, then he's unsure. "In that direction. I haven't been able to follow them all the way to their lair."

I head in that direction and he falls into step with me. I bring up the combat tab and consider the empty party window. It isn't that he deserves to be in it. It's how practical it will be to keep track.

So how the hell do I add someone?

When the system doesn't automatically give me an answer, I'm annoyed, then amused.

Query, how do I had someone to the party.

System Query: Party, adding members

To send and invite to a potential member of your party, focus on them and the desire for them to be part of the party.

I glance at Albert. When nothing happens, I stare at him and think of the party list.

Do you wish to send an invitation to Albert Jarzabek to join your party?

“What?” Albert asks, worried.

“Do you want to be part of the party?” it’s only polite to ask before sending the invitation.

“What’s that?”

I frown. “How old are you?” Don’t all kids know that stuff?

“Twenty-six, why?” is that suspicion in his tone?

“And you don’t know about video games?”

“Sure, I loved city builders and management simulators.”

“And they don’t have parties in to kind of games?”

“I guess not.”

It is so odd to be the one knowing something about video game mechanics and trying to explain it. “It’s the thing that lets us keep track of each other while we do the quest.” That works.

“What does that mean?”

Or not.

“In your combat tab, there’s a party window. For me it’s on the upper right. I think it was on the left the first time I brought it up. In it you get the names of the people in your party, along with an indication of what their pools are at. It’s lets us know who’s in need of help. Which isn’t going to be helpful here since we don’t have a healer, but it’s what it does.”

“That’s what that thing is?”

“Don’t you form groups with the others to take on the monsters?”

He shrugs. “Not of lot of people in my family want to go out and fight. We’re mostly blue collar workers. Artisans, now, I guess. My mom’s a baker, dad’s a carpenter. They aren’t happy that I’m a fighter, but it’s my class, so there’s not much they can do about it.”

“What about the others?”

“You mean the humans? They stay away, unless they come in to cause trouble, but that doesn’t happen often. There are laws still, and most people respect them. There’s police who patrol, not often, and when they do, they stick to the edge of Creature Town.”

“Creature Town?”

Another shrug. “It’s what I call it, the part of the city where all of us non-humans have been pushed to. My family has the neighborhood, but we’re the only ones with any kind of organization. The rest is just a mess of different creatures who used to be people. Not all of them chose to be what they are, you know?”

“And you did? You chose to be...that? What are you?”

“I’m a Bogbear, well, that’s the closest English translation. Didn’t my uncle tell you?”

“He said it’s a family story and not shared with strangers.”

Albert snorts. “It’s an old family legend. How long ago the Jarzabek were a proud clan of Bogbears who lived in a forest in Poland, we kept humans from cutting it down, we

lived off what it provided and made crafts with it. Anyway. After that it's sort of the usual. We became prideful, took things for granted, and we were punished and turned into what we were acting like. Humans." He shrugs. "It's just a story. Before the change, there were no such things as Bogbears."

"And you just turned into it? All of you?"

"No, I'd kept my race as human when I filled my sheet, but as soon as the timer hit zero I got a message about how the family's elder had decided our race as Bogbear and we got the option to change it to that."

"Oskar?"

"No, he's just the elder of those in the city and surrounding area, if there's any of us who survived. I have a cousin who kept the race she'd pick, elf. But most of us went with the change."

"Why?"

"Why not? It's my family."

"You didn't think he might be wrong? It's not because someone's in charge that have to go along with what they say."

"It's part of our history, I guess. And for me it worked out, Bogbears have great combat oriented bonus." He showed me his claws. "And those."

"I've seen what they can do." He raises an eyebrow, but I don't elaborate. "So, do you want to be in the party?"

"Sure."

I bring the window back and agree. A second later I get a new message.

Albert Jarzabek has joined the party.
You have 1 party shareable quest, do you want to share it with the member of the party?
Yes/No?

My father is adamant I don't, and I don't do the opposite out of hand, like I often do. When I share it, it's because I decide that Albert deserves something as payment for helping me.

Even if I get the sense the fighting's going to be enough for him.

Just like me.

"A weapon from my uncle?" He looks at me in awe.

"You're going to have to talk it over with him." Oskar might not have realized I could share it.

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Fifteen minutes later we're in a part of the city that looks like it's been abandoned for centuries, instead of a few decades. The further away we are from the system official Harrisonburg, the faster the changes seem to happen. Around us are tall trees with the remnants of buildings.

"It didn't look this bad a few days ago."

Bad? I like this. I like how evidence of people being around has been removed. Nature taking over. We're being put in our place. The system has that going for it.

Wonder how long until someone finds a loophole and corrupts that too.

"Over there is where I was ambushed last time. I don't know where to go now."

"You came here alone?"

"No one else wanted to. Like I said, blue collar people. Get one of us angry enough and we will rip you apart, but most of the time they prefer the nine to five. What about you?"

"Never did the nine to five." I look at the ground as we approach the ambush and even with the accelerated growth, I see the tracks.

"Independently wealthy?"

I snort. "Too disruptive in an office environment. I had anger management issue."

"Had?"

I shrug. "Found work that keeps me on my own, built coping systems. Now that the system give me a way to see what's happening to my willpower I watch it like a hawk." He point. "They went over there."

"How can you tell?"

"Tracking skill. There's no maximum according to the system's information, so it's pretty low, but it's enough I can see them." I trace the shape of a paw.

| |
|--|
| Perception skill failed to give you more information |
|--|

"Can you teach me?"

"I'm no teacher. But just trying will eventually give it to you." I point to one. "See that?"

He shakes his head.

"Just look at the ground and try to notice them. I'll point them out." We move slowly, and I keep pointing a paw print. I don't mention that there are a lot more tracks as we advance, and of different sizes. This isn't one monsters using this trail over and over. I can make out four different sizes and I suspect that my skill isn't high enough to tell me there's more than one of them for each size.

| |
|-----------------------------------|
| Skill Acquired: Teaching, Level 1 |
|-----------------------------------|

| |
|--|
| Teaching is the ability to pass along your knowledge to a younger generation, and the foundation of a strong society |
|--|

I glare at the message as Albert woops in joy.

No, I am not a teacher. That isn't what I was going, I was just... fuck it. It's not like the system gives a damn.

"I got tracking! What's wrong?"

"I got teaching," I reply, barely masking my anger.

"Wow, you really don't want anything that might make people be around oyu,do you?"

I glare at him and he raises his hands. "That was a joke." He pauses. "You really didn't get I was making a joke?"

I sigh. "I'm bad at the social stuff."

"Is that why you didn't react to my 'you won't like me when I'm angry' comment?"

Now that he says it like that, and I'm not pissed, there's something familiar about it. Then I chuckle. "Right, Banner."

"Oh, thank God, for a moment I was scared you were too old to know about those movies."

I glare at him, then close my mouth. "That was a joke, wasn't it?" I guess.

"Wasn't it obvious?"

I shrug. "I told you, I'm bad at the social stuff. I miss most of the tone that tells you what's what." I pause. "Which means that I don't always realize the tone I'm using when saying something. So pay more attention to my words than how I say them, if you can."

We continue in silence. There are now enough tracks I'm worried one of them will hear us. Moving carefully gains me a two levels in stealth, and I glare at Albert when he exclaims at gaining one of them.

Twenty-six my ass. I was more mature when I was sixteen.

See, I did raise you well, my father says.

Oh, shut the fuck up. It was a survival mechanism to how you treated me. And it doesn't make up for everything else, I'm still dealing with.

Quickly Albert's steps become quieter with the rapid gain of the first five or so levels.

Then I stop him as I hear growling and snuffling in the distance.

We move to a stone boulder, which I realize used to be part of a wall and look over it.

The pack of large creature in the bowl-like clearing is going to be a problem. At a glance, I make out more than thirty, with four distinct sizes to make the paw prints. As I study them to get a sense of how the fuck we can do anything against those numbers, a message pops up.

| |
|---|
| Perception skill successful |
| Monster: Rabid. Rabids are wild monsters driven by hunger and violence. Their presence will quickly lead to the decimation of entire population if not exterminated or culled regularly. Skill too low to get more information. |

I open my mouth to tell Albert and realize we are too close to speak.

This is going to be a problem.

I bring up the party window and set it to stay open. I focus on his name and think 'talk to'

A new window opens. It's blank.

Okay, now, how does this work? I think at the window

Chuck: Albert, can you hear me, I mean read this?

He raises an eyebrow

Albert: Of course, don't you know how chat windows work?

Chuck: It's my first time, didn't know they were a thing until Oskar mentioned it as part of your clan thing. They are monsters called Rabids. There are a lot of them. As much as I'm a fan of just wading in and bashing things, we need to think this over.

Albert: we aren't walking away. Those things have hurt my family and some of the others. If you're too chicken-shit to—fuck, I shouldn't, damn it where's the backspace on this thing.

He looks at me, scared, but I'm just amused. Having to read it takes away my usual gut reaction. This might be a safer way for me to talk with anyone.

No wonder messaging is so popular.

Chuck: I'm not saying we're going to retreat, just step back somewhere we can talk and plan. I don't intend to die here, despite what my father thinks. Fuck, who do I—

I will the window closed. Okay, it might not be that great. I nod the way we came and move before Albert can reopen the chat window.

My father's laughing at me, and for once, I can't tell him to shut up. If Albert pushes, it's my fault.