

Chuck-25

Finding clothing my size at the tailor's shop isn't easy. I'm muscular and shorter than average, so anything that fits my frame ends up long. I don't get a prompt asking me to pay, or claiming I'm stealing. So I take anything that fits me. I fill a third of my inventory slots with full sets of clothes that will have me look more businessman than I've ever looked in my life, then I'm out of there.

The morning's dreary, with clouds covering the sun, and shadows moving among them in a way that makes me think really large bird. If not for that note about there not being enough mana for the dragon class to be accessible, that's what I'd think I'm seeing.

I don't try to imagine what else it might be.

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I never thought about how big a city or town was, I realized as, an hour after I set out, I'm still among the inhabited part of Harrisonburg. It's not a dense population, and more people look like they're barely hanging in, but I'd have expected to be out of this by now. I mean, even with bad traffic, an hour of driving would let me cross a city like this from one side to the other, and there's no way I was that far on the other side when I stopped for the night.

I can tell I'm crossing into a different neighborhood as it happens. It's not the system telling me, it's the people or lack thereof for a block, then, they aren't human.

I sort of remember Victor saying he had the non-human section of the city at the edge of town, so I must be getting close to being out of here.

Finally.

I'm looked at as I pass, but there's no disdain or hatred. The cynic in me gives it a few weeks of being relegated to the fringe before no humans are allowed in here or they rebel and force their way deeper in.

Someone cries out in fear, and I reflexively look in that direction. A bear-like person holds a human by the collar and shakes him while a second, shorter one, looks on. They're too far for me to make out expressions.

So maybe less than a few weeks.

I continue for half a dozen steps before she speaks.

Charles.

That's all it takes. The reproach in her tone does the rest. Reminds me that it's my choice to be a good person or not, not my father's. That he would easily walk by and never think of what could, or will, happen to the man back there.

It's not my problem, I tell myself. It doesn't make me a bad person, just someone with their own problems to deal with.

The memory of her tone makes me turn and head for them, just as the bear pushed the man down and raises a hand. I don't have to see the expression to know the intent.

Tag, you're it.

The claws rake my new shirt and chest and I get a pain debuff and I grit my teeth,

make fists, and don't punch the bear person back. I ignore my falling willpower.

"What the fuck?" He steps back in surprise. "What happened? Where did you come from?" He looks around. "Where the fuck is he?"

"You mean the guy you were about to kill?" I demand through clenched teeth.

"I wasn't going to kill him," the bear says. No, not bear, there's something almost lupine to his feature. "Just scare him."

I look at how much health his blow cost me, take into account he slashed my chest, and that I was standing while the other man was on his knees. That if he's in a city, he probably doesn't have a class or the levels to give him a lot of health or toughness. Not to say the boosts the switch gave me.

"You were going to kill him," I state.

The surprise on his face tells me it hadn't been his intent, so there's that. Maybe he's still adjusting to the changes, and this is a misunderstanding I kept from turning into something worse.

"He would have deserved it," the man said, anger taking over.

Or maybe not. I lose more willpower not turning and walking away.

"No one deserves that."

"He stole from me! And whatever you did, let him get away!" he points a clawed finger in the distance behind me. Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I'm aware of my charge moving away rapidly.

That's what you get for listening to her.

Fuck.

"What can someone steal that's worth killing for?"

He reaches for his neck. "My mother's wedding ring! It's for my daughter, for when she'd ready to marry!"

Fuck. "I'll get it back."

He eyes me suspiciously. "You helped him getaway, why should I think you're going to do anything to help me?"

"Oskar," the other one says placing a hand on his arm. By her voice, she's probably a woman. "Please, it is not worth making anyone angry." Her accent is foreign.

"They don't want us here, but they won't let us leave, and they steal from me! I am the angry one."

"I kept you from killing someone," I state. "That's all I intended to do. I wouldn't have let you kill him even if I'd known, but since I caused him to escape, it's my responsibility to fix this."

Oh, clever. Let him think you'll help, so he won't try to stop you from leaving.

The bear looks at me suspiciously. "I want to trust you, but you're human, how do I —" he steps away in surprise, then his eyes move left to right as he reads something. He looks at me, then nods and taps something.

Quest: My Daughter's Wedding Ring, has been offered to you
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You caused the guy who stole it to escape, so you go get it back for me. It's silver engraved with Celtic knots and has emeralds around the band.
Quest Generated by Oskar Jarzabek.
Rewards: \$50 dollars, 1000 experience, an increase in reputation with the Jarzabek family(edit added by Oskar Jarzabek: there's a lot of us around, so it's worth a lot.)
Consequence of refusal or failure: a drop in reputation with the Jarzabek family(edit added by Oskar Jarzabek: there's a lot of us around, so it's worth a lot.)
Do you accept the quest? Yes/No?

I think yes.

You're an idiot.

Oskar looks surprised and then suspicious. "I'm not kidding when I say there's a lot of us. We're all over the country and even if they won't all look like this, they're still going to be my family and they'll know what you did if you run. We're not a forgiving family."

"I'm going to bring the ring back." I glance at my willpower, which has stabilized near with about four-fifth still there. "How did you cause that quest to generate?"

Oskar shrugged. "I was trying to think of a way to make sure you'd have to keep your word, and that popped up. The writing added as I thought and when I was done, you were the only person I could send it to. I don't know half of the stuff I can do now."

"You know more than I do, then," I mutter as I turn.

"Remember," he calls after me, "you run and we will find you."

They'll have to find you first, right? Right? Come on, Chuck, tell me you're not that much if an—

Shut up. Unlike you, when I screw up, I fix it. I don't convince your kid that he played a part in it and so should be the one doing the work.

Fortunately, unlike the switch, there doesn't seem to be a range limit to me knowing where my charge is. I'm lucky tagging the person I'm switching with is a reflex. They were probably close enough that I could have done it without, and then finding the thief would have been impossible.

If I bring up the map, his position is on it, but because I haven't explored this part of the city yet, there's no information. Not even the Harrisonburg city map that was in the atlas I absorbed to gain access to this map. The major roads are there, as are the large features, like the forests and mountains. Not that those seem to be accurate anymore, but anything smaller than secondary highways isn't noted. Buildings certainly aren't.

So getting to the thief isn't going to be a straight line.

Query, Reputation.

System Query: Reputation
Your reputation indicates your standing within specific groups and can be accessed via your social interaction screen. Your reputation will shift

based on how your actions affect those groups. Note: even unintended actions will affect reputation.

Your reputation can be altered by someone with sufficient influence within the group, regardless of your actions.

Reputation changes can only be included in quests if the person generating it has the needed influence within the group.

I find my social interaction screen and the top has this warning.

Warning, all social bonuses are lowered by 15% due to: Bad Temper, Mild, Paranoia, mild, Avoidance Personality Disorder, mild

Might as well just walk.

There's only one entry on the screen.

Jarzabek Clan: -100

Yep, they already hate you, so there's no point in doing this.

I'm surprised Barlet City isn't there, considering how I walk off on its mayor.

Query, clans, and social groups.

System Query: Social Groupings

Groups are formed when multiple people join for a common cause. Groups are only recognized if they have more than 10 people within it and the cause is long term. Groups can be dissolved on purpose or through entropy.

Groups can grant bonuses to the members if they are large and influential enough.

Note: Adventuring parties are not considered Social Groupings.

I'm sure Terry's going to be annoyed it took me this long, but. Query, Adventuring Parties.

System Query: Adventuring Parties

Adventuring Parties are groups put together for the purpose of one specific quest, dungeon, or task. Note: For long-duration groups relating to Adventuring, see Guilds, Adventurers.

To qualify as an adventuring party, the group must comprise a minimum of 4 people and can be as large as 10. Adventuring parties can see each other's physical pools in their party window, found on the combat

screen.

Adventuring parties do not automatically gain bonuses for being formed, but if a class with a 'leader' sub-classification is put in charge, that class will grant bonuses.

System and dungeon-generated quest rewards are scaled to accommodate the size of the party at the moment the quest is accepted/dungeon entered.

And there's a reason for someone other than me to be in the lead.

My Charge is now stationary, and in less than fifteen minutes I'm looking at the building he's in. A one-story house in a deserted neighborhood that had to be upscale before the change. Considering the lack of impossible growth in the vegetation, we're still within the control of Harrisonburg. It makes me wonder how far the control extends, compared to the number of people here, and why there's so much extra space.

I study the house, moving around, trying to get a sense of what to expect. I can see more than one person moving inside but—

Perception check Successful

Skill level: 15

You can determine that there are 5 - 15 people within the structure

That's a large range, but better than not knowing at all.

Too many for you.

I snort. There's no way they're that strong living under the protection of a city. I'd still prefer to get the thief out here, but the only thing I have access to is my switch ability. Getting him out while I end up inside isn't the plan.

I walk to the door and knock forcefully.

The little noise I can hear stops.

If they're hoping I'll think the house is empty, they're going to be disappointed. I bang my fist on the door again. Before I do it a third time, I equip my employee of the month armor, minus the mask, since I'm still hoping for a peaceful resolution.

I bang my fist again. "Don't make me kick in the door!" I yell afterward.

The door swings open and I'm looking at the muzzle of a gun. "What do you want?" the man holding it asks. Over his shoulder, I see three others, two men, including my charge, and a woman, around a table with too much gold jewelry to be theirs.

"One of you," I stare at my charge, "took something that doesn't belong to him. I'm here to take that, and only that, back to its owner."

"The Silver Hand doesn't give back what it takes," the man holding the gun tells me.

"That's all I want," I tell my charge. "You give that to me, and I walk away without causing problems. You don't, and I'm taking it by force since you took it the same way."

"I said," the man says, pulling the hammer on the gun. I punch him in the stomach

before he finishes. He flies back as the gun fires, missing me, but causing a debuff to appear. I ignore it, the way my ear's ringing tells me what the problem is, but it isn't going to affect this.

Since they aren't interested in doing this peacefully, I equip the mask, completing my set, and my smile has to match its own at the fear that appears on their face.

This, I decide, is going to be fun.

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I have a new entry on my reputation screen

Silver Hand Guild: -1000

You should have killed them.

I roll my eyes. The toughest of them barely scratched my armor. Killing them would have been cold-blooded murder.

You wouldn't have this bad reputation with them if you had. And think of the experience you'd have gained. People are worth a lot, remember?

I do, and I hate myself for how I found out.

Fortunately for me, the quest Oskar gave me came with a marker for where I hand it in.

It's deeper into the neighborhood, and there are a lot of bear people like Oskar here. I mean too many for them to have turned all turned like this randomly. I see a few humans, mostly kids. And someone who reminds me of Steve from Walmart, except for her skin being pale gold.

The marker leads me to a hard with the front torn out and the sound of metal banging on metal coming from inside. The already warm temperature of the late morning goes up drastically once I step inside, even with the open front letting it out.

At the back, highlighted in silver light, Oskar is banging on an anvil, next to a forge right out of a fantasy story. He finishes banging, puts what he's working on back in the bright red coal, and turn, taking off the biker's goggles he's wearing.

"You came back."

I raise my hand and let the ring dangle from the delicate chain it was on when my charge, an Erwin Stravinsky, finally handed it to me.

He rushes before me, then gently takes it. He looks it over before kissing it. He glances to the side and nods, smiling.

Quest Completed: My Daughter's Wedding Ring

Reward: \$50, 1000 experience points, +850 reputation with the Jarzabek Clan (1000- social Debuffs)

The silver glow around him vanishes, then Oskar hugs me and I tense.

“Thank you! I wasn’t sure any of you were worth trusting anymore, but if you’re a decent human, maybe there are others.”

My father snorts.

I keep my mouth shut, as the cost of willpower, which makes it fortunate that fight replenished it, and as gently as I can move him away from me.

“You’re a blacksmith?” I ask to direct his attention away from me.

“I did it in my youth; before I had to move to the city. Now I can do it again.”

“What do you make?” I look for examples of his work, but I don’t see any.

“Few things,” he says in disappointment. “The only thing people want right now are weapons to keep themselves safe.” He raises his hand. “Not everyone has these.” He looks bashful as he lowers it. Maybe he’s realizing when he almost did with them. “So I am practicing swords and making metals.” He motions to the forge. “I am now level five, so I am able to create one mix. I am still working on it.”

“Level five? In a city?”

“What level are you?”

“Seven, and I’ve been fighting monsters pretty much since this started.”

He looks at me. “Your class must make you powerful.”

“I guess? I haven’t looked into how I compare with others.”

He nods. “My class lets me do this.” He motions to the forge again. “It is not nothing, but I am not made for fighting. This... this is who the Jarzabek’s are.” He shakes his head. “It’s my family history. Not for strangers.”

The admission seems to make him uncomfortable.

“My brother, he is a warrior. He is level three, not because there is little for him to do, but because he gets more for each of his levels. Maybe you are the same.”

I nod. “Terry says I’m a Tank. It’s a video game term.”

“World of Warcraft, we now live that game.”

“So, what else can you make?” I’d rather not have yet another person thinking of this as a game.

“Weapons, tools. If it is metal, I make it.”

“How about a bar?” I ask, summing my barbell and showing it to him. It’s even more scratched and scuffed now, but it’s still solid.

“Steel,” he said, taking it. “That is rare.”

“I got it in a dungeon. I don’t think it’s something Walmart usually sells.”

“It isn’t something I’d expect to be used as a weapon, and not by a warrior.”

I shrug. “It’s what I had on hand for my first fight and I’ve gotten used to it. Can you make me one? And how much would you ask for it?”

He looks at the forge yet again and smiles. “I can, and I will charge you a reasonable price.”