

Chuck-43

“I did say we should have taken highway eleven instead of forty-two,” Patricia Owen says as the pickup comes to a stop. John is behind the wheel. I was more than happy to be with the others in the back since I could close my eyes, pretend to sleep and be left alone.

“Pat, forty-two’s going more in the direction we need. The eleven just takes us to the eighty-one—”

“Which is an interstate, so better to drive on,” she cuts him off as I jump out of the back.

“But any gas station requires getting off it, and we have no idea what the exits are going to look like.”

“Then we just walk to the station, grab as many contains as are left and...”

I’m too far ahead to make out the rest. And I don’t want to be there when the screaming starts. Terry joins me as I crouch to study what’s left of the road. The pavement is beyond cracked. The trees growing through are small enough a good ax will take them down and far enough apart we can easily walk through, but they’re no longer thin enough the pickup can push them down. These will break and possibly rip the fuel or break line out, maybe puncture the fuel tank.

“I think I can take them down,” Terry says.

My father snorts, so I force myself to look at him. “How?” I can feel my father roll his eyes. Other than me, he never had much use for kids. Not useful enough, was his preferred saying.

“Frost jet’s a cone attack. I got it at level five. Anything in the cone for six yards takes damage. I should to enough to ‘kill’ the trees.”

“You think that’s going to work for long?” John asks. “Seems to me the trees are growing ever faster the further away from Harrisonburg we are. They might be feet across well before we get to Winchester, let along Cross Junction.”

“Seems that the change is gradual,” I reply, thinking back to how thin the vegetation was when we left this morning, and when I stayed in the wild. “We’ve been in a wild zone for a while, but it wasn’t the sudden change the map led me to think.”

“Wild zone?” John asks.

I motion around. “All this. The mayor has access to a map showing the level of civilization, or something. The higher that is, the less of an effect the wilderness has. Keeps trees growing at a reasonable rate, pets from turning into feral creatures, I think. Harrisonburg’s not all at the same level, but we were in the wild not long after we started driving. Creature Town’s right at the edge.”

“So this is just going to get worse.” John sighs. “I think Pat’s right. We should have gone on highway eleven and taken I-eighty-one. It’s wider, better maintained, and the trees are cut further back. It would have let us drive faster, maybe make it to Winchester today.”

“That’s assuming how far they are from the road means anything,” I point out.

“Why was the road to Harrisonburg clear the entire way?” Terry asks. “The trees were

growing a lot on each side, but it was mostly cleared, even if the pavement was breaking down.”

I shrug. He’s worked out more about what’s going on than I have. If he doesn’t know, I’m not even going to try to guess.

“Might have been because it was early in the change,” Patricia says, and I ready myself for their argument to restart.

“Might be,” John replies. “No way to know, really.”

“What are we doing?” she asks. “Going back and trying to get to the eighty-one or pushing ahead?”

No arguing. I relax. They probably worked it out before John left the pickup. I tend to forget that married couples aren’t like my parents. Dad purposely kept arguments going for days as a way of exhausting my mother. Forcing her to give into his games out of sheer exhaustion. It says a lot about the strength she had, that she never let one of his victory stop her from fighting.

“Chuck, that was for you,” John said.

I look over my shoulder. “What?”

“What are we doing?” Patricia asks. She’s smiling, so she isn’t annoyed with me not answering her initially. But why is she asking me?

John chuckles. “You’re the guy in charge, Chuck. Aren’t you used to us asking you how we’re proceeding by now?”

I keep hoping you’re going to grow a pair and make decisions on your own. Not saying it out loud costs me willpower.

Then tell him to fuck off.

They are right. The road will improve as we go back to Harrisonburg. Then it’ll be easy to get onto highway eleven and that has a ramp to the eighty-one only a couple of kilometers out.

“We’re continuing. Once we reach Broadway and Timberville, highway two-eleven will take us to the eighty-one.”

“Are you sure that—” Patricia stops as John places a hand on her arm and shakes his head.

“Broadway and Timberville are towns,” I say. “so the wild’s going to diminish as we get closer. They can’t be more than ten kilometers from here. Then it’s a couple of kilometers to the interstate.”

“How do we deal with this?” John asks.

“I can clear the road,” Terry says.

“How long will that take?”

“That I don’t know. I doubt it’s going to be like video games and they’re going to despawn once they’re out of hit points, so we’re going to have to push them out of the way.”

“I can do that,” I say.

“That means stopping and starting the pickup all the time,” John points out. “That’s going to waste a lot of diesel.”

“If we made another harness, I can pull it.”

“I have the one you used on the way to Harrisonburg,” John says, and I raise an eyebrow. “The way inventory works, it’s simple to just store it there in case it’s needed again. I don’t have as many slots as you, but one isn’t going to—”

“Hand it over.” I motion when he opens his mouth. “Like you said. I have more slots than you, and I’m the one using it.”

And this way, he won’t be able to feel like he owns you.

That’s not why.

Keep telling your subconscious that.

With a shrug, it appears at John’s feet, and I take it, storing it away. “Once Terry clears fifty meters or so, I’ll hook it up. We’ll have a sense of how fast we’re going to proceed, then.”

“Any idea when the other town’s going to affect the wild?” Terry asks as John and his wife return to the pickup. Terry steps forward, places his hands together in a cone before him, whispers a few words and a snow blasts out. I can feel the cold it generates. The trees ahead and to the side turn white as snow accumulates, then something snaps and comes crashing down, then another, and more. I count half a dozen crash I can’t see due to the blizzard emanating from Terry’s hands.

When he drops them and the snow stops, I’m looking at a winter wonderland worthy of the best up North winter with bright green leaves on either side. I whistle, impressed, and Terry smiles.

The smaller trees on the roads are still standing, but anything over a meter and a half had shattered and fallen. I push the closest tree with a foot and the trunk snaps. The cone affected still radiates cold, but the heat is quickly coming back, causing more trees to snap and fall.

“How often can you use that spell?”

“If I rest while a section’s being cleared, I can probably do this all day long.”

I nod. “The hands and words, that’s how magic works?”

“At low level, they’re required. The higher my spell level, the less ‘components’ are needed to cast it, but I can keep using them. Think of it as me lowering my level for each component I remove from the casting. As low as I am now, have to use them all to have an effect, but eventually, I’ll be able to do this just by pointing. That, I can’t take away since it’s how I ‘tell’ the spell the direction it has to blast in.”

“And you’re going to be able to do more?”

“Of course, the higher the level of the spell, the more damage I do, the further it will reach, or wider I can make it. I’m pretty sure that once my magical ability is high enough, I’ll be able to modify how the spells work. Maybe even make brand new ones.”

That’s going to make him dangerous at some point.

“And clearing the road counts as practice, right?”

“Yep.” Terry smiles.

Might be best to look for a different way to proceed.

“Then rest up. Once I’ve cleared the road, you can freeze the next section.”

You’re ignoring me, aren’t you?

The smaller of the trees are simple enough, some shatter into smaller pieces as I push them aside with a foot. They remind me a little of fruits that have been freeze-dried as it crumbles under my fingers. The larger ones don't break as much as I push them, and they have more mass, but by the time it's enough to test my strength, Hanz, Elizabeth, and Albert are there to help.

Terry's earlier question about when the next town will start affecting the wild makes me wonder too, as well as if there's a way to know what kind of zone I'm in. And because I'm trying to be better about it, I do more than wonder.

How can I tell what zone I am in?

System Query: Zones
Sub Query: Identifying Zones
Zone are automatically identified when a settlement node is used by someone ranked Mayor or above, or someone who had been granted access by a person of the proper rank.
Zones can be identified through the use of magic, abilities, or skills.

What skill can be used to identify the zone I'm in?

I reflexively close my eyes as a list scrolls by too fast for me to follow. It doesn't help, but it also ends quickly enough and the window goes away.

Hanz glances in my direction, but continues pushing the tree to the side with me.

Do I have a skill that lets me identify the zone I am in?

Perception

How can I use the perception skill to identify the zone I'm in?

System Query: Perception skill
Sub Query: relating to zone identification
Any perception check of the surroundings has a chance of identifying the zone. Once the skill reaches level 125, the identification of a zone is automatic.
Odds of identifying a zone can be affected by bonuses granted by spells, abilities, or species

What species can—I stop. Considering how long the list of species was when this started, I might be staring at a scroll for far longer than I want. Time to take a chance.

What category of species gets a bonus to identifying the zone they are in?

System Query: Species
Sub Query: relating to zone identification, broad category

Any species with a connection to their surroundings gains a bonus to identifying the zone they are in. The closer to the surroundings considered native to the species, the larger the bonus.

That seems to mean that any wild species will get a bonus.

That's going to include every teenager out there.

Teenagers aren't a species. I glance to the pickup, where Deloy's sitting on the hood.

Are Worgen connected to... what surrounding would this be? Is nature too broad?

Aren't every species connected to their surroundings in one way or another? Humans are definitely connected to civilization.

Are Worgens connected to nature?

System Query: Worgen

Sub Query: native environment

While Worgen have evolve beyond their origins, joining the ranks of more advanced civilizations, they remain tied to their wilder roots. Worgens gain a 50% bonus when identifying the subcategory of wild zones identified as Forested.

What do you know, there's a kid out there that has a use. Of course, that's only if his perception skill's any good. Isn't it convenient how you're expected to train him in tracking?

Shut up, I tell my dad's voice as I straightened.

"Terry," Han calls. "I think you're good to freeze the next section." He looks at me. "Unless you think we need to widen this more than what's needed for the pickup?"

I shake my head, heading for it. "Deloy," I greet him, pulling the harness from my inventory.

"Sorry." He slides off the hood.

"You still interested in learning how to track?" I ask, reaching under to hook the harness on the axle.

"Of course. I want to contribute too."

I feel the smile form. "Good, then we'll start when stop for the night and I'll turn into the best tracker around in no time."

"That is so cool. Terry's right, you're the best, Chuck."

Skill Acquired: Manipulation, Level 1

Manipulation is the skill that makes people do what you want them to, while thinking it's all for their benefit.