

Chuck-35

“There’s a half a dozen of those Goblinoid,” Jim says, reappearing by the door of the lecture hall. “Along with one of the leader types.” It’s unnerving how even watching for him, I didn’t see him exit the only way out of the room. I didn’t even get a message about my perception check failing.

So much for abusing the system, huh?

This is the fourth and last lecture hall on this floor. Only the first one had Goblinoids in it. Then there were the errant ones in common rooms, or corridors. Enough, I gained a level in most of my fighting skills.

“How do you want to do this?” Virgil asks me.

I lose a bit of willpower not rolling my eyes at the question. At this point I’ve worked out he isn’t being sarcastic when asking me, but respecting my role as team leader. Not that it’s a better reason to defer to me, but he shows me respect, so I can show him some in return.

“Your way worked. You and me go in and distract them. Jim and Walter take every opportunity we give them, and Janice patches us up once we’re done.”

The orc smiles. “You’ve heard the man.”

Jim’s already no longer there as we turn to the door, then we going in and I set about regaining the little willpower the interaction cost me.

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“Level four, baby!” Jim exclaims, then collapses on a chair.

“Still third,” Walter says. “Which is your fault, you sniped two of my kills.”

“You still got a share of the XP.”

“But not as much as if I was the one who’d killed it. Stop stealing my kills.”

Virgil looks at me, waits, then shakes his head and focuses on them. “Calm down, both of you. Jim, let Walter catch up. We’re not gaining anything in the long run by going up at the expense of another one in the team. Janice?”

“Still third,” she says, healing me. “The only experience I’m getting is completing my healing quest line, but it’s basically nothing compared to what can be gained killing the monsters.” She sighs. “I always hated those games that focused solely on fighting. But on the plus side, all this healing is raising my spell, and that’s making it less expensive to use.”

“Is it enough to balance the increase in damage we’re going to take as the monsters get stronger?” Walter asks and she shakes her head.

“Then we need to find a way to get you in the fight so you can get some kills,” Virgil says.

“I’m not a fighter,” she replies. “I barely have any health.”

“Then we hold one down while you cut its throat,” I offer.

“That’s sick,” she replies, while the others look at me.

“Why?” I ask when I can’t work out who reasons to say that.

“I’m not killing some defenseless monster.”

“It is a monster,” Jim says. “It’s kind of why they’re there, right?”

One of them gets it at least.

“It does feel wrong,” Walter says. “There should be some challenge to the gain in XP.”

Virgil looks at me. “Do you think this is some balance issue in the system?”

“Why are you asking me?”

He closes his mouth on his reply, rubs his face, then nods. “I’m not comfortable with the idea either, but we need to think about our survivability as a party. Once Chuck leaves, we might have to rely on quick healing to take on larger monsters. Do you get an area heal at some point, Janice?”

“Not that I can see, but I only see one tier above the one I have access to, so who knows. I will be able to take a mana boost once my second tier opens, so that’s going to help.”

“If it’s like me, that’s at level five,” Virgil says. “Okay. Going forward, we hold the leaders for Janice to kill and we aim to all be level five. Then we can go up at our own rate for a while.” He pauses and looks at me. “I mean, if you’re okay with not killing the pack leaders.”

I shrug. “I’m not great at holding back when I fight, but I’ll try.”

“All healed,” Janice says, patting my shoulder. She moves on to Virgil and she’s already started healing him when I remember to say.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” she replies.

That’s why I hate socializing. It took me years to figure out that no one meant it when they said that.

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“The vending machines are stocked,” Walter says as we walk by a room with a collection of them.

“Unless one of them has something perishable, we can come back later for them,” Virgil replied.

“I wouldn’t touch anything that’s gone bad in those anyway,” Janice mutters.

“Stairs are clear,” Jim calls from inside them. “Next floor sound quiet, but you guys know how sound proof the offices are.”

“The professor and TA’s offices,” Virgil tells me. “Some like to scream at their students, but you can’t tell from the halls.”

“The first floor has four classrooms,” Walter says, “three workrooms, and too many offices for me to remember.”

“We clear the classes first?” Virgil asks me and I nod.

We go up the stairs, and the first two classrooms are clear. Disaster zones, but clear of monsters. The third one has two that we subdue for Janice. She’s reluctant, but finally administers killing blows.

The last classroom surprises us as it first looks untouched, and then explodes in chaos. When Jim wakes a dozen sleeping Goblinoids.

I rush in, throwing tables at those closest to him, then I'm between him and them. A glance tells me he's still breathing, then I focus on the fight.

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Janice is now level four, as is Walter.

Jim's alive.

"I can't believe there's critical miss in this thing!"

"Did you get a notification?" Walter asks.

"No, but what else can it be?"

"You failing the skill?"

"It's too high," Jim snaps, and that makes the other chuckle.

"So this was a nest, or something?" Virgil asks.

"Who knows," Jim replies. "This game makes no sense."

Janice finishes healing us and we move on to clearing the offices.

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There's only the occasional Goblinoid wandering the office's corridor, and we hold them for Janice to finish. She doesn't hesitate as much. There are a lot of offices. And Walter tells me there's four floors like this one, then the top floor has the labs.

"Guys?" Jim calls from a doorway ahead. "You're going to want to come see this."

Janice glares at him when she notices he's in the doorway for the women's restroom. At first glance, the room doesn't look any different and I expect it to. Stalls, counter and sink. No urinals, since it is the women's restroom. Jim points into a stall and...

"That's different," I say. Instead of the toilet, there's a clear tube larger enough to hold someone. The base is metal, engraved with symbols I can't decipher and has pipes connecting that to the bottom of the tube. The top is raised off, held by a contraption of pulleys and ropes.

"It gets stranger." Jim pushes the door to the fourth stall in.

It, and the stall before, has the same tube, but this one has something in it. A white skinned being nearly the size of the Goblinoids we're been fighting. I check the next five stalls. Each has a tube, and each has one of them, although the last two are smaller, less developed.

"This is where they come from?" Janice asks.

"I thought they were just made by the system," Walter says.

The ones with Goblinoids in them also have the pulleys and ropes. I check the previous one and find the start of the rope tied to a pipe at the back of the tube.

"You guys realize what this means?" Virgil asks.

"Someone is making them," I answer.

"We're getting a boss monster!"

I look at him, at them. Even Janice is grinning.

"Should we rush to the fifth floor?" Jim asks.

"Is that where the person making them is going to be?" there's been too many impossibilities at this point to bother understanding how it's possible for someone to make

monsters in tubes.

“Of course,” he replies.

“We’re not rushing,” Virgil says. “For one thing, we don’t know that’s where they are.”

“That’s where the lab equipment is going to be,” Walter points out.

“This is the behavioral building,” Janice says. “I don’t think there’s going to be anything there that lets that be possible.”

“I don’t think there’s anything in any of the labs that would make that possible before the change,” Walter replies. “But now? For all we know, water and food coloring is all it took.”

“We’re still not rushing there,” Virgil says. “We’re grinding the floors.”

I almost ask what he means, then remember Terry talking about me fighting to gain levels as grinding.

“These guys have been beating our asses until Chuck got here to help. Whoever’s being this is going to keep the strongest ones with them for protection.”

“It could just be another monster,” Jim says.

“Can monsters reason?” Janice asks.

“I don’t know,” Walter says. “Virgil, what’s reasoning like for you?”

“Very funny, Walt. Orc is a species, not a monster.”

“Then I think that by that reasoning,” Walter smirks. “We’re not dealing with a monster.”

“What kind of person would make something like that and unleash it on the people living around here?” Janice asks.

“A monster,” I answer. “There’s been plenty of human ones before this happened. I doubt they all went away.”

You’re still here, so that’s true.

“So... if the boss is a person, how are we doing this?” Jim asks.

They all look at me.

“We kill it,” I tell them. “That’s what you do to monsters.”