

Chuck-11

I think 'yes', and the door slides open.

The discussion on if we were going in was quick. Regardless of Terry's explanation of dungeons being places with monsters, we need the supplies.

So, barbell in hand, I enter and immediately I know something is wrong. The building isn't dark. The lighting isn't great, but this is a concrete box without any holes except for the door. With the lights out of commission, it should be pitch black a few meters away from the door.

Beyond the turnstile is the first display products, shelves of small kitchen appliances in boxes: coffee machines, mixers, blenders. To the left, in the distance, is the grocery section. To the right, beyond the displays of discounted products, should be the pharmacy.

The registers are abandoned.

I can't see anyone, but there's sound in the distance, motion, beyond the shelving blocking my view of the rest of the store.

"Food and medicine," I say. "Those are first. Camping's in the back, so we're going to gather those here before we venture further. It sounds like people might have been stuck in here, so we're going to bring them out with us if they want to come."

"Those aren't people," Terry said. "Dungeons in games only have monsters."

"This isn't a game, Terry," I tell him, biting off the annoyance. "Hanz, you, Elizabeth, and Griff take on the food. You have the largest inventory, so you'll make quicker work of that. Once me, Terry and John have gone through the pharmacy, we'll join you. And then we can all go for the rest."

"We shouldn't split up," Terry says.

"Kid's right," John adds. "First mistake they always make in horror movies is to split up."

"First mistake is for those actors to sign up to make those movies," Hanz says.

"Not a game, not a movie." The green bar flashed and drops slightly. I take a slow breath. "There's too much to cover for us to stick together." I step through the turnstile and a shiver runs down my spine.

I curse mentally and wait for the message to appear. It doesn't, so I go to the right.

"I know, you think—"

"Terry." The green bar takes another hit. "I'm not good with people and you aren't making it easy to keep my temper in check."

"You have a willpower stat, you just have to—"

"I think that's what he's saying, Kid," John says. "He'd going through his pretty quick not telling us to go fu— away."

I turn into the first aisle. Meal replacements are shelf-stable at room temperature, so they'll serve as an emergency food supply. Finding the stock in the back would be more

efficient; if I had any idea where that'll be. I reach for the largest display, containers of powered meals. This might put to the test how many of one item one inventory slot can take. I pull and it doesn't move. I lose it and yell as I slam my shoulder into the shelf, to no effect other than my willpower bar going up slightly.

I slam a hand on it and curse under my breath. "Terry?" I don't turn.

His tone is wary. "If this was in a game, it would all be part of the scenery. There's only a few games that let us interact with everything in a dungeon. Most only give us rewards for killing monsters or finding loot boxes."

I let out a breath.

"You hear that?" John whispers.

Someone is approaching from deeper into the pharmacy area. More like shuffling. Maybe Terry's right, but it could be someone who's injured. "Stay here."

Leaving them behind, my father's voice says. *I approve.*

I really wish the man was here right now, so I could hit him and regain some willpower. I step around the shelf and carefully advance, checking the aisles I pass. The... person sounds further in, but I've read enough thriller not to dismiss any hiding place. I check into the dispensary to see if anyone is hiding there, then continue.

At the end of the dispensary, I look left into the aisle and hear the shuffling on my right.

I turn and stare.

This should be funny.

The half-decomposed body in the Walmart overshirt(wrong term) shambling toward me is the representation of the joke of a stereotypical Walmart worker, or the Walmart Zombie. Overworked, half dead asleep on their feet, and only here out of desperation and lack of better work.

It really should be funny.

I extend the barbell to stop it—not dignifying that with a gender—from advancing any further. It keeps coming, the end of the bar squishing through its chest. Bones break with far too little resistance as it takes steps after shuffling step.

This isn't funny at all.

"John, Terry," I keep my voice calm, "go with the others. I'll be there in a minute."

Did the system do this to the employees? Turning a few people into non-human beings is one thing, but there's no intelligence in those milky eyes. If this was a person a few days ago....

Put it out of its misery, the voice says with a glee I don't want to think about, but I have to agree with the thought. I step back and pull the barbell out before giving it the strongest swing I can. I don't want to just hurt whoever this used to be. I want to end their suffering.

It goes through it easily, bisecting it into two and the pieces fall into a mush that makes me fight to keep my stomach's content where they are.

I'm turning to rejoin the others when I notice a bottle in the mush. Swallowing my disgust, I use the barbell to move it out, then sacrifice one of my shirts to clean it. I

consider throwing it out then, but Terry said that the way to get anything in a dungeon is by killing monsters or finding loot boxes, so it's going to see more use. Back in my inventory it goes.

I vaguely remember an economy podcast talking about loot boxes. Something about them being tantamount to getting kids into gambling.

The bottle's white with only 'Vitamins' written on it.

What—

Item: Vitamins, Quality: Good, Type: Restoration
You are holding a bottle of vitamins capsules (content 30). Vitamins restore 50 points of Health, Mana, and Stamina, as well as 5 points of Willpower. It also removes 2 hours from the hunger counter and restores 4 hours of sleep.
Warning: Taking more than 4 capsules in a day will result in side-effects

I almost dismiss it out of annoyance, but the meaning register in time. This is basically a survival pill. If the warning is real, it's limited, but beyond the hit points, being able to add eight hours before eating, or sixteen to sleep is significant. The restoration to mana, stamina, and willpower will probably be useful to anyone not going through their willpower at the speed I am.

I look at the combat log

You have hit a zombie (mediocre), blunt damage. 6 Damage,

You have killed a zombie (mediocre). You gain 100 XP.

Mediocre is right.

What'd you expect out of a Walmart Zombie? The laughter is morbid.

I dismiss the log and consider searching through more of the pharmacy aisles. The sound of shuffling is still there, and if each zombie gives a bottle of these.

"What'd you have?"

I jump and curse. "I told you to go join the others," I snap.

John levels an unimpressed look at me while Terry takes a step back. "We can't. There's some invisible wall blocking the way."

I look at Terry and he steps back again.

"Chuck, you need to calm down."

I am calm; I say mentally, because I can feel how tense I am. This is costing me too much willpower. I scream and hit the shelves. It doesn't restore any, but it stops the descent. I'm under a fifth. Way too low if violence is how I cope with stress when I can't eat. With I have enough control to hit something, instead of someone, if I hit zero?

I would hope you don't. You are my son, after all.

I take one of the pills and my willpower climbs by maybe a quarter.

“Sorry, Terry. I’m not...” yeah, there is nothing I can say that isn’t going to come across as lame after this display. “Do you know how to get around the wall?”

He shakes his head. “Some games will subdivide the sections in dungeons you can’t move forward or back until you cleared it. This doesn’t feel like it. I think it’s keeping us from rejoining the others, even if we’re on the same team.” He shrugs. “Like you keep saying, this isn’t a game, so what I know isn’t entirely accurate.”

“It’s still better than not knowing anything,” John says, and I nod.

I never thought I’d feel like not playing video games would be a mark against me.

“So we clear this and...” I have no idea.

“Then we can see if the wall’s gone, or if we need to follow a specific path,” Terry says. “That’s really popular with dungeons, locking the players into one specific way so the designers can control stuff like difficulty and rewards.”

“I got this for killing that.” I hand the bottle to John while indicating the mush that was the zombie.

“That’s disgusting,” Terry says, but doesn’t sound particularly bothered. Maybe there’s some truth to how violence in video games desensitizes kids. He takes the bottle John hands him, then frowns as he reads. “How hard was it to kill it?”

“Easy. It’s a mediocre zombie.” *Walmart Zombie, come on, you can say it.* “I did six-point of damage and it went down.”

Terry raises an eyebrow at me and I keep my breathing slow and steady. “I checked the log.”

“You—” he clamps his mouth shut and I’m grateful. I heard the mockery in that one word. I don’t need the stress and I’m glad he realizes it. He nods and hands the bottle back. “That seems like a lot for a quick kill.”

“Maybe whatever’s behind this isn’t calibrated yet?” John says. “That message when we entered did say this place wasn’t rated. We should take advantage of it.”

“It’s probably going to get harder, but if the rewards also increase, it’ll be good.” Terry is grinning. “Can I kill the next one?”

Now, why can’t you be more like him? My father asks. Because you showed me what terror is, asshole. Terry hasn’t experienced that worse life has to offer yet. Normally I’d wish he never does, even if I knew it would eventually reach him. But no, if this system isn’t turned off, I get the sense that harsh is going to be the norm going forward.

“Sure,” I say.

“Chuck, I don’t think—”

“I can handle it.” Terry takes the lead.

“He’s just a kid,” John tells me in a reproachful tone.

“Who knows more about this than either of us. He’s entitled to reap some of the rewards. If for him it’s killing monsters, I’m not stopping him.” I follow and he whoops with joy as in the next aisle are two zombies.

“Really?” John says as Terry blasts them away with a jet of water. “Walmart Zombies? Doesn’t this thing know how insulting that stereotype is?”

“I don’t think it cares. For all we know, those were actual workers here when things changed.”

“Oh God, I hope not.”

Terry returns with two white bottles. “Same as you. They aren’t worth much. Either of you figured out how to get the XPs you need to go up a level?”

I shake my head as I take one of the bottles. The message that comes up when I ask for it is identical. I pass it to John.

What are you doing?

“Keep that one, Terry. These are too useful to hoard. Everyone will get one.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” John says.

Listen to the smart one, my father orders as I control my breathing. I could really use something to snack on right now. The green bar drops a little.

“I’m listening.”

“These should go to anyone actively participating in combat, then those handling healing.”

Never mind, ignore him.

“That’s going to cause dissension.”

“Chuck, until this is fixed, there’s no way to avoid dissension. What you need to do is manage it. Make sure people you can trust have the resources to back you up.”

Okay, not that stupid after all. Take them all and leave them behind. You know better than to trust them.

“None of us know each other,” I answer.

“Point,” John replied. “But the six of us braved the parking lot and came in here.”

“That doesn’t mean we can’t trust the others,” Terry says. “I like Mary and Bernard.”

“Liking doesn’t mean you can trust someone, kid,” John says. “But in this case, I agree with you. Those two are good people.”

“Can we deal with this after we’re out of here?” I ask. What I don’t say is ‘can you guys deal with it while I’m not around?’ I hate the expectation that I’ll make the final decision is going to be left to me.

“I guess it’s your turn,” Terry tells John.

“I’m not sure those are worth wasting bullets on.”

“There’s bound to drop as rewards. Loot always includes ammo for available weapons.”

“I think you’re taking for granted these are still available, kid.” John pats the holstered gun at his hip. “For all I know, no one’s going to be able to make them anymore that all the machines turned off.”

Terry rolls his eyes. “Do you have any idea how many historical re-creators there are out there? I bet that no one’s going to be snickering at their back once they’re the only ones about to make or repair your gun.”

“How do you know about those kinds of people?” John asks in a tone that leaves no doubt how little he thought of them.

“The internet, duh.” Terry takes the lead and John shook his head.

“Kids these days.”

“I think that’s saying’s no longer means what we’re you to,” I reply, thinking about the number of them who now know more about the word than anyone my age or older.