

Chuck-27

We've made it half a dozen steps when the growl stops us. Then it's more than one. On each side and ahead of us.

Seems we weren't as quiet as we thought, and they are more cunning than I gave them credit for. I have my bar in hand when those ahead become visible. Three of them, this close, I see the lupine features, but there's also something raccoonish in the darker mask around their eyes and the intelligence in them. Their paws don't look able to grasp tools, but at this point, I'm not putting anything past the system.

The foaming at the mouth they all share explains their name.

Rabid, Minor
Rabids are wild monsters driven by hunger and violence. Their presence will quickly lead to the decimation of the entire population if not exterminated or culled regularly.
Perception skill check successful: the bite of a Rabid causes a poison that, if not resisted, will slowly erode the willpower.

Is the information because I sort of remember that if someone's bitten by a rabid animal and it doesn't get treated in time, it drives them mad? Or is that the kind of information I can expect even with my low perception skill?

"Their bite's poisonous," I tell Albert as I dismiss the message. He's holding a large hammer. I don't have the time to ask about that because my warning acts as the start signal and Rabids run at us.

I equip the mask, then don't try to be clever, to even precise. I let whatever my skill with my bar means guide me as I use it to keep them from sinking their teeth into me and cave-in their skulls. I catch Albert staring at me, and the distraction nearly cost him his leg. In the party list, his name flashes in green and I expect that means he's poisoned.

We're wedged apart, and the Rabids are ganging up on him. They're either reasoning, by the bodies piling up around me, that he's the lesser threat, or instinctively knowing he's weaker.

Or, they can just see our stats. Who knows with the system?

I tag Albert as I break another, smaller Rabid. I hope the healing will do something about that poison.

I swing as hard as I can at the empty space before me. You're it.

The bonuses must pile up because my bar slams through one Rabid after the other before they can react to the change in their opponent.

When one bites and makes it through my armor, a green icon flash, and immediately fades away. My name's not green, so I that means I'm not poisoned. I don't need something else eating away at my will.

The bonuses from the Switch go away as I look at the carnage around us. And the drop in stamina hits, but I stay on my feet. I'm below half, and there's more incoming.

"Albert?"

He leans on his hammer. The handle's longer than I realized, panting. "I'm good."

Decision time.

Flight or fight.

"We have incoming. Probably the rest from the clearing. Are you good enough, or do you want to run?"

"I don't run," He replies through gritted teeth, straightening. The glare he gives me says there was something in my tone, but I just care that I know what to expect from him. Now I just have to hope he can withstand the fight.

"What's the poison like?" I ask.

"What, you think it's fun?" he snaps.

"I need to know the effect! I didn't get that information."

"I lose one willpower per hour until it's treated. I'm good for almost two days, so don't worry about it."

"Any information on how it's treated?"

"No," he says after a few seconds, sounding worried.

As I see the first Rabid head, I remember a detail. "I can't switch with you for another fifteen-minute, so don't count on me to save you again."

"I didn't need saving!" he charges ahead with a scream, his hammer high.

Yep, you still have a way with people.

Why doesn't anyone listen to what I tell them?

I charge after him, and I've caught up by the time the Rabids reach us. These are fewer, but they are larger. I throw myself in front of Albert, to both his and my father's protest. I take the claws and bites, one of those that get through poison me.

Deal with that later. If there's one thing I can count on, is that this fight will boost my willpower.

But it costs me hit points. A lot of it, and stamina.

I'm leaning on my bar by the time the fight's done. My health is below a fifth. My stamina slowly reappears.

My willpower is full.

Albert is cut, bitten, down on one knee, but he's alive.

I consider that a win.

"I think—" My claim of victory is interrupted by a rage-filled howl. And I get a debuff and I fight against the urge to back away from whatever is coming. Albert's on his back, crawling away, eyes filled with fear.

No!

The trickle eating away at my willpower takes a large bite, then stops with one quarter left.

Willpower paid to cancel Fear debuff

I straighten and pop in a vitamin before grabbing my bar in both hands. I get the warning about side effects if I take too many, and my hit points increase, going from just under a fifth to slightly above it.

I need better healing.

When whatever howled doesn't immediately appear, I get angry, angrier. It owes me a fight for that willpower I lost. I am not going to be denied.

Then the head becomes visible over the rise, it seems larger than those we fought. The shoulders appear, definitely larger. The arms are thick with muscles, and as the clawed hands become visible, I realize it's on two legs, and those are hands, not paws.

Rabid Pack Leader, Good

Rabids are wild monsters driven by hunger and violence. Their presence will quickly lead to the decimation of the entire population if not exterminated or culled regularly.

Once their numbers become large enough, one of them will fight for dominance, becoming the pack's leader.

Pack leaders are smarter, stronger, and more agile than regular Rabids and if they are of a high enough rank, can gain extra abilities.

You forgot to include walks on two legs and can probably rip the bar out of my hands.

You should have run when you had the chance.

Not a chance. I'm not like you.

Foaming spittle drips from its mouth, and I hope I imagine the sizzling and smoke coming off the grass where it lands.

I don't wait for it. I rush it, swinging hard. It steps aside, then backhands me into a tree. My health drops to a fifth and I pop another vitamin as I push myself forward. The bastard is chuckling at me.

I run at it again. This time, when I swing, my grip is more centered, so that when it steps aside, I can pivot the bar, one end against my side as I change its direction. I only scratch its side, but it's enough to take away whatever mirth it had.

When it comes at me, it's with murder in its eyes. I block the first swing, stopping the sickly green claws from slashing me, but the force shoves me away and off-balance. By the time I regain my footing, the claws are coming at me again. I jump out of the way enough that the slash only takes a sliver of my health, but it leaves an 'infected wound' in its wake. My health bar starts to turn sickly orange.

Fuck.

Should have listened to me.

I run at it with a scream. It steps around my attacks, but this time I can tell when it goes on the defensive, and I have the butt of my bar in its chest hard enough it's staggered

back, and when it pulls its hand away from the impact point to look at it, it's surprised enough it shows me the blood on it.

Somehow, I'm surprised by how normal red its blood is.

It's on me fast enough I'm one, not over it, and two, pretty sure it tricked me.

It's a third vitamin to keep my health from dropping below a fifth again, then I'm on the offensive, surprising it with how vicious my father taught me to be. While I think of it as an it because it's clearly not human or even sentient, it's definitely male, and that part's as sensitive to it as it is to the rest of us guys, and I pound on that blow after blow. Enough that if it survives this, it's never having kids again.

It survives my assault because when I have to pause as my stamina flashes below one-tenth, its foot sends me flying again. I hit the tree. Might even be the same one with how soft the wood is. Not that it keeps my health from dropping much too close to nothing.

I pop another vitamin without thinking about it. But its effect is barely visible. I do think about the next one, but it's not like I have a choice.

You have taken 5 vitamins within 24 hours.

Enacting randomized side effects: Dexterity reduced by half.

I push myself away from the tree and nearly trip over my feet in the process.

This does not bode well.

I stay still and wait for it. Its legs are covered in the blood it's still losing from the damage I caused. I might be able to wait it out and have it die of blood loss. I notice my health drop a minuscule fraction.

But then again, I might die from that infection before that.

Its walk is slow, but it's coming.

I tighten my grip on the bar.

It comes in range and I swing, miss by a mile, but I don't let that stop me. I go at it again and miss. The third time hits, but it's deflected, and I realize I'm way too close when it has its hand around my neck.

My feet leave the ground, and it brings me up to eye level. There is cunning there but mainly hate. Its breath stinks as it opens its mouth, giving me a close-up view of those large, sharp teeth.

Don't just hang there, do something! I didn't raise a quitter!

What the fuck do you want me to do? The only of the pools I have anything I can work with are my mana and willpower.

Switch with that thing! I know who he means.

Still on cool down. And I'm glad because I don't know if, even with all my willpower restored, that would be enough to keep me from sacrificing Albert.

My father's scream is echoed by another. Me and the Rabid turn our head in time to see the hammer swing at us. It passes close enough to me I can tell the steel is veined with silver. It impacts the Rabid's face with the sound of shattering bones.

It drops me, and I hear more impacts before I hit the ground and my hearing grays out. I fight to stay conscious, and there goes a lot of my well-earned willpower.

You have eradicated a pack of Rabid. You have ensured that none of the creatures will return to this area for some time. Bonus experience: 15,000
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Quest: Attack from the wild, Completed
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.
Return to Oskar Jarzabek to claim your rewards

I'm wondering how the fuck I'm supposed to do that when I can't even move, when Albert looks down on me.

"You alive?"

"Yeah," I replied, wondering if it might be best I wasn't.

Don't even consider that. Do you have any idea how scared I was?

Cry me a river, dad. You don't give a shit.

"You're looking better," I tell him. He is. Most of his cuts are closed, some I only know he was injured because the fur hasn't regrown there yet.

He grins. "Us Bogbears heal faster than you folks." It falls. "Didn't do anything for the poison, though."

"You got time, right?"

"Not as much. Getting myself up took half my willpower." He drops next to me. "I didn't know I could use that to overcome status debuffs."

"You have anything for healing?" I'm not taking another vitamin and risking another side effect. Although I don't know if I get one side effect per vitamin I take beyond the fourth, or if I'm good with that one effect no matter how many I take afterward.

Albert shakes his head. "We have a healer in the neighborhood, but he's not high enough level to make potions."

"Food can have healing bonuses."

"No one with that skill high enough we've noticed that." He looks at me expectantly.

"Came across a roadside inn on the way here. The owner was a cook before and he has a high enough skill his meals heal."

"You should tell my uncle. That might be worth convincing someone to focus on that." He smiles. "I got a level out of this. You?"

"Yeah," I reply, not telling him I got two.

“Since we got the eradication bonus, are you okay if I go search the clearing for anything worthwhile?”

He’s going to cheat you.

“Go ahead. I’m going to stay still and hope I heal faster than that infection.”

“I thought it attacked our willpower.”

“The pack leader’s claws were coated in gunk. That’s the infection that’s killing me.”

“Shit, maybe I should take you back then. Uncle Oskar would shave me if I let you die.”

“You could just claim it got me. Keep the fame to yourself.”

I can’t read the look he gives me. Something in the range of stunned.

“That’s not who I am.”

My father snorts.

“I’ll be fine for a while. If it comes down to it, I have something I can take, and now that the fighting’s done, I can deal with the side effects.

“Are you sure?”

“I said I am.”

He steps back in surprise but doesn’t reply. Then he’s gone, in the clearing’s direction.