

Chuck-15

The air is dark and murky. Like a low-budget TV show version of a swamp. Each side a wall of shelves, this time with boxes that, again, we can't take. I make out openings on the left and right further in, and the corridor itself seems to stretch on forever.

I shudder. I've had nightmares in corridors like this. My father, following me as I do everything I can to escape his reach. At least there aren't any monsters in the corridor.

The first door is on our left, double doors like the ones closing off this section, with a dirty window on each side letting me see movement inside, but no detail. Seven, maybe six of them.

"Be ready," I whisper, then I push the doors open and rush in.

Walmart zombies, with their blue vest and looking like they should be falling apart. I break two of them with one swing of my barbell and push forward. A spike of ice flies over my shoulder and explodes into another. Then a fourth explode further in.

There are more than eight.

A lot more.

I swing with abandon, trying not to rejoice in the violence. There's still a worry these were people at some point. But they are still trying to kill us. I should try to subdue them.

But it feels so damned good to be able to hit them as hard as I want and watch them break apart.

My health bar drops a little, but my willpower maxes out. A worthy trade.

Three more breaks under my swings, and I find myself with breathing room. I'm about to turn to attack from the back when I notice another zombie standing alone at the back of the room.

The same blue Walmart vest, but this one is muscular, and his head was a yellow smiley face. Not a grinning yellow face. The buttons you're always seeing on the blue vest. His head's the button, but large and round.

It's creepy.

I rush him and swing as hard as I can. I hit, but he doesn't break. He hits back. The punch costs me nearly a fifth of my health, and I block and parry. Not only is he strong, but he's also faster than the usual zombie. Nearly as fast as I am.

I manage two more hits, the last one staggering him back, at the cost of another fifth of health.

"Down," John calls and I drop. The explosion staggers the Smiley but he's still standing.

"Terry?" John asked.

"How of mana, need a sec."

I swing at the zombie again, and now, my hits come with a noticeable effect on him. Chunks fly off.

The face turns into a frown, which somehow makes it even creepier, and it roars. I stagger back, and an icon starts appearing, red, a person arms around themselves.

“No,” I tell it and a quarter of my willpower vanishes as the icon turns yellow. “I am not scared of you,” I snarl. Down to half will and the icon vanishes. I give him a roar of my own as I run at him and I hit him over and over. He gets in a few hits, but they hardly register.

The swing connects with his next and the yellow button face breaks off.

I glare at the dissolving form. “You’re not fucking scary.”

There’s only a bag left in its place, and I’m using the barbell for support. My health is flashing with only a sliver left. There was an icon before that, but I can’t bring up details. I was too focused on the fight.

I pull up a vitamin from my inventory, but before I can take it John grabs my hand.

“How many have you had?”

The urge to lie is strong. What I do with my body is none of his business. My father’s voice encourages me, as usual. Which is why I tell him. “Four.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea to have it then? We can take a break.”

“Normal healing’s too slow.”

“We can turn around, join with the others, finish the grocery section, then leave.”

I shake my head. I’m not letting this thing win. “There’s no telling what kind of stuff we can get from here. If it keeps to the theme is which part of the store we’re in, the stock room has everything.”

“This one had more armor.” Terry shows us a blue vest with a blank name tag and a yellow smiley button under it.

John takes it and hands it to me. “Put it on.”

“You’re kidding right?”

“No. It doesn’t matter if you’re the toughest of us the way you keep getting hit. You need the extra protection.”

“That thing’s ugly,” I reply.

“So’s your corpse going to be, Chuck. We all need to survive this.”

You need to survive.

Oh, shut up.

I take it.

System Query: Walmart Employee of the Month vest
Only granted to those who have pushed themselves to the limit for their master. Absorb 20 points of damage per hit. Add more pieces for additional effect.

I’m tempted to throw it back in John’s face, but that damage absorption is significant. One punch took out a fifth of my health, it put them in the thirty points of damage range. I want to roll my eyes at the idea of numbers meaning anything in a fight. But in this new world, they do. I’d be in much better shape if I’d been wearing this. I wouldn’t have to take this fifth vitamin.

I frown at my willpower, it’s still at half. I got into that fight, so why didn’t I regain any? That’s a problem for later. I put the vest on and stop as I’m about to take the vitamin at

Terry's snicker.

John is doing his best not to smile. "Welcome to the family," he said, pointing to my chest. I look at the vest. Where the name tag was blank, it now reads

Hi, My name is Chuck.

What the fuck?

System Query: Walmart Employee of the Month vest, bound.
Only granted to those who have pushed themselves to the limit for their master. Absorb 20 points of damage per hit. Add more pieces for additional effect.

System Query: Bound items
Certain items bind to the user on first activation. Bound items can not be lost, sold, or given away unless the binding is broken. To break a binding, please see the system store[error: system store is currently unavailable]

I hurry to take it off and breathe easier when it happens. I store it in my inventory and swallow the vitamin. An icon appears with the symbol for a pill with lightning through it. It's red and a timer counts down from one hour.

My health goes up by close to a third, and I don't feel any different.

"Put it back on," John tells me.

The point was to make sure I wouldn't be stuck wearing it all the time, anyway. So I equip the blue vest. The name tag still says my name. I should have brought a jacket to put over it.

"Does the room have anything?" I ask Terry, who is still smiling at me. That gets him searching.

"How are you feeling?" John whispers to me.

"Fine."

"Chuck, you're dealing with side effects now."

I glance at the clock, and John noticed the way my eyes moved. He raises an eyebrow expectantly.

"Nothing's happening I can notice right now, but I have a timer counting down. It's probably how long it's going to last."

"Or it's when it's going to kick in."

I shrug. There's nothing to be done about it.

"Don't take another one."

I raise an eyebrow. "I'm going to do what I have to do to finish this thing. But the armor's going to help."

“I have a case of canned soup,” Terry says. “I’m not breaking it to check the details because it counts as one item in my inventory. There’s also a case of socks and one of pillow-cases.”

“We’ll take the socks,” I tell Terry.

“We’ll take everything,” John contradicts me. “We can’t afford to not take something we can carry.”

“What are we going to do with pillowcases? Even if we find pillows, I think we have more important stuff to look for.”

“And when we run out of inventory space, we’ll start working on what’s more important, until then we take everything. As for what we can do with pillowcases? It’s fabric. That can be turned into a lot of useful stuff.” He studies me. “You’ve never been caught in a hurricane or dealt with the aftermath of one, have you? You don’t know what’s going to be useful, so you grab everything you can,” he continues before I can answer. “How many slots do you have free?”

“Eleven,” I say after a check.

“Then we’re good for a while.”

I put the cases in my inventory. “Okay, let’s move on.”

The next room is easier to deal with. The Walmart zombies hit don’t cause me damage. So I clear it out mostly by myself. We get a case of jeans out of it. In the next room, I act to keep the zombies away from John and Terry as they shoot them. The next one we do the same until the Employee of the month is left and I fight him.

I don’t even lose a fifth of the health I have left from its hits. The room contains a case of crackers. Like the vitamin, they don’t have a brand name, they’re just crackers. One case contains school backpacks, and the last gun ammo, which John is eager to take.

Once I’m done dealing with the cases, I find Terry grinning at me, hand behind his back.

“This is yours.” He offers me a yellow Smiley face mask.

“That’s not going to happen.”

“Come on,” he says, grinning. “It’s an employee of the month face. It goes with the vest.”

“Terry,” I sigh and glance at my willpower. It’s gone up from all the fights, even the one against the Smiley, so I have the luxury of explaining myself. “That thing looks ridiculous. I don’t care how many bonuses it has. I’m not putting it on.”

“Please? You don’t have to keep it on if it doesn’t help.”

“Why aren’t you putting it on?” I ask.

“Because it binds and you’re the one who started on that set.”

“How do you know it binds? I didn’t find out until after I put it on.”

“Did you read the description?”

“I read what popped up, yeah. It told me the armor and what only the devoted got it.”

“That’s just lore. I mean did you study it? You get more information on an item when you study them. It’s based on your perception, so the higher that is, the more information you get. Mine’s at seven, so it told me it binds when I studied it.”

I take it and look it over. It's like the yellow button on my vest, only large enough to cover my face.

System Query: Walmart Employee of the Month face, bound.
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Who wouldn't love someone with that smile plastered on his face? With this on, the other employees will respect and fear you. They will only attack if you enter their minimum attack triggering range. Add 10 points of armor to the Vest. Add more pieces for additional effect.
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Perception check Failed

"It failed."

"Yeah, that can happen. Our skills are kind of low I think. We just have to practice it more."

"With this on, the Zombies should leave me alone."

"Until you get close to them," Terry says. "They're monsters so their job's to kill us."

"But that means he can move around a room and get the stuff without fighting anything," John said.

"I don't think so. I didn't pay attention, but it would be stupid for this dungeon to be designed without anything guarding the loot. And I'm willing to bet that even if Chuck can get close without fighting anything, taking the loot will trigger combat."

"At which point they're all swarming on you," John says unhappily.

"This adds ten-point to the damage absorption." I turn the mask in my hands. "It's probably going to make the Smiley ineffective against me."

"So you're going to wear it?" Terry's way too happy about this.

"In here. Out there I doubt it's going to be of much use."

"We can see how it works in the next chamber," John says. "We'll stay by the door and if they attack, we can shoot them in the back." He takes out his gun. "I can fire real bullets now."

"But they can't explode," Terry points out.

John smiles. "Kid. When I'm holding this, they can do a lot more than explode."