

Chapter 72:

Rat Race

Stone-chewer rats were around the size of house cats, with grey fur, protruding teeth and oversized, talon-like claws. Jason watched as a half dozen of them struggled to scratch away the leeches digging into their flesh. One writhed around until it fell into the water.

“Colin, what did I say about letting them go in the water?”

The rats, it turned out were heavy, and after falling into the water didn't come back up. The leeches on them had no such problems, crawling out after the rat had died of either the leeches' ministrations or from drowning.

“How am I meant to loot them down there? The ones hidden away in those nests are one thing, but this is throwing away money.”

The rats were all dead and all the nearby leeches crawled back into a pile. Jason looked at it.

“I'm sorry, Colin,” Jason said. “You're doing all the work, and here I am complaining. I know you're doing your best, buddy. Good job.”

The leech pile started undulating with what Jason assumed was happiness. He pulled up the quest screen.

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

Rats have infested the water tunnels underneath the Cavendish District of Old City. Clear out the nests and eliminate all the rats.

- Objective: Clear out rat nests 5/6.
- Objective: Eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/44.

“One more nest to go. That's a lot of leftover rats for the last one. Or are the others roaming around loose?”

Jason was curious why some quests showed him the exact number of monsters why others didn't, but he wasn't going to complain. He pulled a pocket watch from his inventory and saw they were making good time. Colin might be slow, but its ability to sense life was unerring.

Looting the lesser monsters only produced lesser spirit coins, but they were welcome nonetheless. Most things were paid for in lesser coins and it saved him using the moneychanging services of a brokerage.

Moving further into the tunnels, he followed Colin's leisurely lead. He noticed a change in Colin's behaviour as they went further. Throughout the hunt, leeches had been breaking off in batches to seek out rats inside tunnels and various unreachable nooks. Now they were all slowly converging in the one direction.

"One big nest it is, I guess."

➤ Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/43.

Jason looked at the message that popped up. Normally it told him when he had progressed the objective, but he hadn't killed any more rats. He looked at it again.

"The objective used to be forty-four rats," he mused. "Did some old lady with a broom kill one?"

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- Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/43.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/42.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/41.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/40.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/39.
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"What's going on there?"

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

- Hidden objective discovered: Find the secret of the final rat nest 0/1.
 - Quest cannot be completed until all hidden objectives are completed.
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"All hidden objectives? There's more?"

Jason wanted to pick up the pace, but without Colin leading the way he could easily go off track in the maze of tunnels. He considered for a moment, then lowered his hand close to the ground. The cut on his palm was still there, as his rapid regeneration only worked while the familiar was inhabiting his bloodstream. The leeches crawled into his hand, vanishing as they touched his blood. He wondered if he should have washed them first. Finally, only one leech was left, sitting in his hand.

"Alright, Colin. Lead the way."

Jason moved forward at a brisker pace, hand held out in front of him. Holding Colin out in front of him, he could move his hand side to side. The leech would rear up when Jason was holding it in the right direction, letting him find the right path at every junction.

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- Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/38.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/37.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/36.
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“Is someone killing them off? What do you think, Colin? Is it going to be super easy? No, I don’t think so either.”

- Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/35.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/34.
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Colin pointed Jason at a tunnel that looked like it hadn’t seen maintenance in a long time. Mortar was loose, bricks had fallen out of the walls. All the tunnels were wet, but here some kind of fungus was growing, in places almost completely obstructing the path.

“That is a lot of fungus.”

- Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/33.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/32.
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“If I were being honest, Colin, I’d admit to becoming a little concerned.”

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

- Objective complete: Eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/31.
 - Quest cannot be completed until all hidden objectives are complete.
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“Hidden objectives,” Jason grumbled. “I better get some solid loot for this.”

He looked at Colin in his hand.

“Yes, I know other adventurers don’t get a quest system. Shut up.”

A sound, a low rumble, came rolling through the tunnel.

“What do you think, Colin? The sound of a hidden objective?”

The rumble grew louder and clearer. It wasn't an earthy sound, but a sloshing. The water flowing through the middle of the tunnel started running faster and higher, splashing against the brick walkway.

“Ah, crap.”

Water came surging down the tunnel, raising the water level and overrunning the walkway. Jason stood still as the water rose halfway to his knees, not wanting to be knocked over.

“This isn’t good water,” Jason said. “Is this stuff going to clear out?”

The surge of water passed, dropping back to its normal level. Jason guessed it to be a normal function of water tunnel operations. Jason took a few unhappy, squelching steps, then was struck by a horrible revelation.

“Oh, bloody hell,” he exclaimed, slapping a hand into his face. “I totally forgot I can walk on water.”

He continued down the tunnel, squelching boots accompanied by a stream of grumbling.

“I see you did just fine,” Jason said to the leech still in his hand. Then he noticed a circular welt.

“Do you try to eat me while I was distracted?”

The leech waggled its toothy maw back and forth innocently.

“Don’t act nonchalant with me, Colin,” Jason said. “And after I gave you all that blood pudding yesterday.”

Continuing on, Jason paused as he heard scurrying from somewhere ahead. It sounded loud for a rat, even the oversized stone-chewer rats. In any case, all the stone-chewer rats were gone. The sound got closer, and a ratling came rushing out of a side junction.

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

- Hidden objective discovered: Eliminate [Ratlings] 0/12.
- Quest cannot be completed until all hidden objectives are completed.

Ratlings looked like mice, but stood on their hind legs, half the height of a human. They were also cowardly, usually running from any confrontation, but this one didn’t even slow down as it approached. It tried to barrel past Jason, but bounced off, tumbling from the walkway and into the water. Unable to swim, it splashed about ineffectually as the water flow carried it away. Jason pulled a knife from his inventory, cutting into his hand, sending blood and leeches splashing into the water after it. The rest he let pile at his feet.

“Make sure it doesn’t survive,” he told the leeches, then started off down the tunnel it had emerged from. Whatever the ratling had been running from apparently filled it with more fear than Jason had.

“Too bad monsters didn’t see me in the mirage arena.”

➤ **Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 0/11.**

“This again? I don’t think there’s an old lady with a broom killing ratlings.”

He heard squeals of fear coming from further down the tunnel. Five more ratlings came scrambling out of the tunnel, rushing toward Jason. This time he was ready, smashing one into the wall with a low kick as he grabbed another by the throat. They were weak and cowardly creatures, and he ended both quickly.

➤ **Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 2/11.**

The other three made it past him. Two of them tried leaping over the water to the opposite walkway, but only one made it. The other fell short, splashing into the channel. The third one dashed past Jason as he killed the first two, leaping over the pile of leeches.

“What kind of effort was that?” Jason asked Colin. “Now I have to go running after them. Go catch that other swimmer.”

As leeches piled into the water he started chasing the other two. He started with the one on his own side of the tunnel. Letting out just enough light from his cloak to turn pitch dark into shadowy gloom, he shadow-jumped ahead of the creature, grabbing it as it ran right into him. A quick knife slash and it was done.

➤ **Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 3/11.**

“That other prick has run right off.”

Dropping the light down to nothing again, so it wouldn’t see him coming, he started hunting it down, which took the better part of an hour. He took solace that the leeches had used the time to catch up with the two ratlings that had fallen in the water. In the meantime, another pair of ratlings had mysteriously vanished.

➤ **Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 6/9.**

Jason took stock as leeches crawled back out of the water at his feet. There were three ratlings left. He set off, Colin lagging behind. He didn’t slow down, leaving Colin to follow as best it could.

“Three to go.”

➤ Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 6/8.

“Alright, two to go. Some kind of monster suicide pact? Did the ones running away chicken out and refuse to drink the punch?”

Pausing at another junction, he wasn't sure which way to go. A sudden squeal of fear and pain gave him a path. The sound didn't last long.

➤ Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 6/7.

Jason moved in the direction of the suddenly cut-off screaming.