

Hunter 11

Chapter 11: Friend or foe?

Jake kept his promise of being on the lookout for the rest of the night. It turned out to only be a couple of uneventful hours until the artificial sun rose once more. Looking on as the scrambling group got up and gathered their things, he seriously doubted they had gotten any sleep at all.

Their current campsite was compromised, and they had no clue if more enemies would come, so they needed to find somewhere new. Their entire initial plan of finding water and food and all the usual survival crap turned out to be a damn waste of time. While they still needed food and water, they needed levels far more, so sitting in one spot was just stupid.

They got packed up, and Jake was surprised to see even Joanne up and about with a makeshift wooden leg. It was essentially just a big stick of wood bound to her thigh and what was left of her leg. It looked uncomfortable and certainly not fit for any big movements, but he saw determination and grit to keep going on her face. Jake felt respect for the woman, as she refused help, and they started walking.

They started moving further away from the huge wall in the distance. Jake had a theory based on where the pillars had been and the wall only being visible behind them, that this entire place had a spherical design. The fake celestial bodies also indicated a dome-shape. Moving inwards toward the center of the dome would hopefully allow them to find more beasts. They had been very sparse in the outer area, after all.

It took little time before they came across another group of beasts. This time it was a group of deer-like creatures, the very same that the badgers had been eating on the first day. There were seven of them total, and after using Identify, he found them to be between level 2 and 4, with the biggest among them at level 5.

Jake decided not to interfere, first of all, because he was not sure how much experience killing lower-leveled enemies would give, and because the entire purpose of this exercise was for everyone to build fighting experience. They started once more laying a long, elaborate plan, but Jake shut them down real hard and told them to get their shit together and move.

They had three casters and an archer; plenty of ranged firepower to take down some of them before the fight would even truly begin. Jake had given them all the potions he had looted the day before, so they were more than covered in that department. He did keep the stamina potions, though, as they were rather unnecessary for his colleagues at this point, and Jake had a theory he wanted to test out. Something for a more opportune time.

The fight went rather easy, as Jake had predicted. Bertram easily tanked the biggest deer and even an additional one, while Theodore, Jacob, and Dennis took on one each. The final two deer-like things had already been killed or disabled by the initial barrage, making the fight effectively five versus nine, with Jake not participating.

Theodore managed to kill his deer quite easily as it was only level 2 by landing a swipe on its neck, cutting it open. His style was a bit reserved and defensive, but he had a good build and didn't lack confidence. He was also rather good in spotting openings, and Jake was even fairly sure he saw him throw in a feint.

Dennis took a bit longer with his two daggers cutting away at the beast. He was by far the fastest in the group besides Jake, and he also used his active ability, which allowed him to have small bursts of speed here and there. He did hesitate a bit and clearly didn't like fighting, but he got the job done nevertheless.

In Jake's honest opinion, Jacob was the worst combatant in their group by quite a margin. He panicked nearly instantly when the beast got close and just swung his sword back and forth. The casters did decently, Joanna having the worst accuracy, which Jake could honestly not blame her for considering her circumstances. Ahmed was by far the best, having quite the accuracy and aiming for vital spots, with Lina falling somewhere in between.

Caroline had little to do during the actual fight as her healing skill was touch-based, but she was fast to call out potential dangers and even went and healed Jacob mid-combat at one point. She was actually surprisingly good.

Casper was also decent, but Jake was kind of biased when it came to archery. His results did speak for themselves though, as he did get in some good shots, even taking down one of the deer solo when they first engaged.

The entire ordeal took only a couple of minutes, with the last opponents to die being the big deer that slowly got whittled down by Bertram taking its hits with his shield, and the casters and Casper shooting it to death.

Jake did not get any credits for the kills as he did not actively participate, confirming his suspicions that you had to do damage or contribute in some way in order to earn experience. His moral support and oversight did not seem to count as actual helping.

The gains were also decent. Disregarding TP, they had a couple of level-ups, also resulting in race level-ups. This also truly confirmed the hypothesis that race leveled up every second level in the class.

Without further ado, they moved on and ran into a couple of smaller groups of beasts over the next couple of hours. Jake only had to step in once when a quite big level 7 badger ran past Bertram, heading straight for Lina. However, it was easily killed by Jake with an arrow to one of its legs followed by another that hit the thing in its right eye, likely penetrating the brain as the beast fell dead immediately.

They did sustain some injuries, the most dangerous one being when Theodore took a nasty bite to one arm and had to drink a healing potion. The minor injuries, like scratches and such, were healed by Caroline after every fight. While she could not do much in combat, her healing was invaluable as it allowed them to always stay in top condition, and healing also seemed to remove any chance of infection in the wound. Assuming that was still a thing. Oh god... can bacteria get levels? A thought Jake quickly threw all the way to the back of his mind. Happy thoughts, happy thoughts...

While a healing potion could heal injuries too, and in general, worked way faster, they seemed to have some kind of cooldown. If you drank one, you couldn't drink one for the next hour. Why this was, they didn't know. Heck, they didn't even know why they knew. Theodore just said that he did right after drinking one. System-magic or something. They did not know if there were adverse effects from drinking another or if it just wouldn't work, and quite frankly, no one wanted to test it out either.

After another rather tough fight and a round of healing, everyone was getting tired as they had also passed their fourth hour since they set off in the morning. The last group they killed was a small group of the deer-things again, so they decided to make camp and roast the things over a fire. They also found another small stream nearby, allowing everyone to rehydrate. Jake purposefully did not eat or drink anything during this time.

He wanted to test exactly how the health and stamina resources worked and their relation to daily necessities. He wanted to see if potions, primarily stamina potions, could counteract the need for sleep and sustenance. But that was for a time where he felt any actual hunger or need to sleep.

They sat gathered around a small fire eating the roasted deer that, it has to be mentioned, was quite a bit better than badger meat. It was short-lived, however, as their peaceful break was interrupted when Jake heard what sounded like metal rubbing against metal. He got up from the log he had been sitting on and motioned to the rest of the group to get ready for a potential conflict.

The source of the sounds was soon made clear, as out of the bushes walked a large man in full metal armor identical to Bertram's, also carrying a shield and sword. He was on the older side, in his late forties to early fifties, but his presence did not indicate any weakness due to age.

Quite the group followed him. Jake counted fifteen, with more potentially hiding in the dense foliage behind them. There were mainly warriors which made sense as half of the basic classes were variants of the class. The rest were casters with only one archer from what Jake could see, and not a single healer in his line of sight.

Jake made quick eye-contact with Jacob, which his former leader instantly understood as he went forward. While Jake certainly was the strongest in their group when it came to combat, he was likely the weakest when it came to negotiation. And while Jacob sucked in combat, he was top tier when it came to social interactions.

The first one to speak was not Jacob but the middle-aged warrior.

“Well, hello there, my name is Richard,” he said in a friendly voice as he looked over their group, his eyes stopping on Caroline for a second, as he continued. “We saw the smoke from your fire and decided to investigate - no need to worry. We have no intention of fighting anyone. So, who might you people be?”

The man was quite well-spoken and had a relaxed expression on his face. Looking at the situation, Richard's group had them outnumbered by quite a margin. Jake had no confidence in fighting so many enemies whatsoever if things turned for the worse. If a fight did happen, it would either be a one-sided slaughter or him and his colleagues scattering like the wind, with likely only Jake making it safely away with the others hunted down one by one. In other words, fighting was out of the question.

“It is good to see other humans at last!” Jacob smiled brightly at the man as he stepped forward. “My name is Jacob, and these are my colleagues from before this so-called tutorial. May I know why you have sought us out? We have no desire for any unnecessary conflicts either.”

“Ha-ha, of course not, we humans are meant to stick together!” the man answered with an exaggerated belly-laugh, as he suddenly seemed to turn serious. “Mine and two other groups, much like yours, have decided to team up in order to get through this purgatory that refers to itself as a tutorial. Of course, we need all the people we can have, so we would love for you and your friends to join us.”

Jacob instantly caught onto how he used the term ‘team up’. It didn’t take a genius to see that only a single leader existed in the group in front of them. Richard may claim for it to be a team-up, but clearly, it was simple assimilation.

Jacob didn’t let his thoughts show, but he kept smiling as he nodded, “It’s good to hear that other groups are also doing well out there. May I have a talk with my colleagues first? I am sure you understand that a decision like this is best made unanimously.”

“Of course! Of course! Take your time!” Richard agreed though Jacob was quite clear it was just words. They had to find a solution fast.

Richard motioned for them to stay as his group allowed Jacob to retreat slightly, motioning for Jake and the others to do the same. During it all, Jake kept an eye on the other group in case they tried something. Richard shot a glance at the archer that had been standing at his side from the very beginning, and Jake noticed said archer going slightly forward, clearly intending to listen in with his high perception. His second in command?

As they got a small distance away, Jacob turned their backs to the other group and addressed them. “What do you guys think of them? A bigger group would be safer, and I think that their offer is-”

He kept talking positively of the offer as he looked around and saw that Jake had knelt down and written some words on the ground with his fingers:

THEY LISTEN

BAD FEELING

CAREFUL

Jacob nodded, having already expected it. Hence why he kept his true thoughts hidden. Jacob promptly removed the words with his hand, acting like he was just dusting off his shoes. He continued speaking as he received reluctant looks from those around him.

“... but we are familiar with each other, and we seem to function well as a team. There are also certain drawbacks to big groups, such as a higher need for food, and it may end up provoking some of the stronger beasts or something like that.”

The others had also seen Jake's scribbles and nodded along to what Jacob said. None of them liked it, and they got a bad vibe from Richard and his group.

Jake saw the other archer out of the corner of his eyes, subtly shaking his head at the middle-aged warrior who frowned at the seemingly unexpected response. But he quickly wiped the frown off his face as he put on another smile and approached their group once more.

“I understand if you are reluctant, but working together is in the best interest of everyone here.”

“It certainly is, but- “

At this point, Richard directly turned to Caroline, who stood at the back and interrupted Jacob. “Young lady, you would not happen to be a healer, would you? It would be greatly appreciated if you came with us.”

Caroline looked shocked and confused but didn’t manage to say anything before Richard turned back to Jacob and the rest of them.

“Your colleagues don’t have to come, you know? They can, but you could also go with us alone - safety in numbers and all that. I can promise you an appropriate position in our group, and that we will do anything we can to keep you safe. There will, of course, also be levels aplenty. If you just come with us, I am sure we can solve this amicably.”

Even Jake, with his horrendous social skills, could interpret the undertone in that one.