

Hunter 19

Chapter 19: Everybody Loves Blue Mushrooms

Challenge Dungeon Entered!

Objective: Survive to the end of the dungeon while accomplishing all challenges represented along the way. Failure to complete challenges may result in death.

Jake felt his vision shift as he blacked out for a brief moment. When he opened his eyes again, he found himself standing in a giant hall. Looking around him, he saw only shattered stones and broken pillars littering the ground, all of it the same monotone gray color. The only slightly different thing was the braziers hanging from the ceiling emitting a faint blue light.

To his horror, the braziers emitted light not through magic or fire, but by being stuffed with glowing blue mushrooms, the same kind as in the cave. It seemed like even in deadly challenge dungeons, one cannot escape the power of fungi.

He also noticed that his bow, daggers, and quiver were all mysteriously gone, and checking his satchel, so were all his potions. He really hoped the system would give those back...

Shifting his attention back to the hall, he began looking for where to go. The only entrance or exit was through an opening that looked like it once held a door. Walking through it, he entered a long hallway. It was filled with the same blue light, emitted from even more mushrooms, but this time growing on the walls. Not exactly an improvement.

He found himself in yet another hall after walking through the hallway, nearly identical to the one he had arrived in. This hall was a bit cleaner, a bit less broken, and even a few cracked pillars were still standing. Casually strolling into the room, his danger-sense exploded as he swiftly retreated into the hallway he had just entered from.

A long metal spike penetrated the floor where he had just been standing, piercing into the solid stone like it was butter. To make it worse, Jake then heard a sizzling sound as he saw the ground slowly being eroded. Stupidly, he decided to walk forward and get a closer look.

Before he could examine it properly, another spike came flying straight at him. Like the first, this one was also easily dodged. Jake didn't consciously need to avoid attacks like this; he simply had to follow his instincts. At least that is how he justified moronically walking back into a room he knew wanted to kill him.

Triggering the second spike wasn't completely useless, though. He had noticed it came out of a small hole in the wall, one that disappeared right after firing. He did a few more tests and noted down where in the wall the spikes came from.

After a bit longer, Jake felt confident enough to make a run for it towards the hall's exit. Sprinting forth, he quickly dodged the three spikes that were fired after him. A few seconds later, the second barrage came, and he avoided these just as easily.

As he moved in between two pillars that marked the hall's midway-point, they both fired spikes at him simultaneously. Jake was surprised as he was forced to throw himself on the ground before they hit him, barely managing to roll away as another spike came from one of the walls.

What the fuck is this supposed to be? he yelled in his head as he scrambled back on his feet. Luckily the two pillars didn't shoot again, giving him ample time to keep going.

With no time to waste, he kept running as he closed in on yet another two pillars just in front of the exit. To his slight annoyance, these two didn't do a thing as he safely ran past them, finally leaving the spiky hall behind. Only to find himself in another mushroom-filled hallway.

Nothing was happening in the hallway as Jake breathed out in relief, the blue mushrooms now slightly less sore on the eyes. Without his bloodline, the very first hallway would have likely killed him, or at least maimed him badly. Was this place just some bullshit deathtrap?

A single scratch from those spikes was enough to erode the stone floor, and as he looked back into the hall, he saw smoke rising from where the spikes had hit. Whatever was on those things would likely eat through him in seconds.

As he got up and walked to the end of the hallway, he was met by another system message.

Dungeon Challenge: Collect at least four silver mushrooms in the next room.

0/10 silver mushrooms collected

What the hell is up with this dungeon and mushrooms, he grumbled to himself. At least these were silver mushrooms. That must be an improvement, right?

Standing at the opening to the challenge room, he inspected it thoroughly. He saw small pedestals scattered across the hall, each pedestal holding a single silver mushroom. He could currently only see seven pedestals, but he assumed there to be ten in total based on the system message. The rest obscured by pillars.

He felt like the system was taunting him by only requiring four mushrooms. He would, of course, try to collect all ten. There had to be some kind of extra reward or bonus tied to not just doing the bare minimum. Also, it just seemed more fun that way.

This hall had the same design as the last two. But everything was in even better condition, with the pillars barely having a few cracks. The pedestals also adding a lot of flavor to the room. Moving into the hall for only a brief moment, he confirmed that this hall also fired spikes at people. Very rude.

After planning his approach carefully, a very detailed plan appeared in his mind. A plan that could roughly be boiled down to 'just wing it'. Entering the hall after getting a running start, his sphere informed him that the wall behind him closed itself off when he was five meters into the hall, leaving only a single exit in the distance.

He dashed towards the first silver mushroom and was met with a few spikes heading towards him as expected. It took little effort to avoid them with his high perception and agility, as he approached the pedestal with caution. He kind of expected another trap but was pleasantly surprised when nothing terrible happened.

1/10 silver mushrooms collected

One down, he thought, as he threw the mushroom into his satchel and sprinted towards the next one. Another spike was fired towards him after taking only a few steps, followed by another shortly after.

After having collected four mushrooms, he confirmed that the frequency of spikes was increasing with every mushroom acquired.

He danced across the hall while attempting to stay as far away from the walls and pillars as possible. There were several dangerous situations, one particular event standing out where he nearly got hit by three spikes fired at once, one of them coming from a particularly tricky angle.

He barely avoided getting hit during the final sprint as he rolled over the 10th pedestal, using it for cover and collecting the last mushroom in one fluid motion. The spikes were coming rapidly by now, and without his current stats and bloodline ability, he doubted that he would have been able to gather all ten without dying.

With all the mushrooms in tow, he made a mad dash towards the exit, practically rolling into the next hallway. This one was, to everyone's surprise, also covered in blue mushrooms.

Checking his satchel, he found the expected eight mushrooms, the last two still held in his hands as he placed them into it. The system then once again made its appearance by informing him of his completed task.

Dungeon Challenge: Collect at least four silver mushrooms in the next room.

10/10 silver mushrooms collected

Challenge completed!

He had kind of hoped for a reward or something for collecting all 10 mushrooms. He looked at said mushrooms and used Identify, only to be met with the generic [Mushroom] message. The skill frankly did more harm than good at times.

He proceeded through the hallway, and as he got to the end, he half-expected another challenge room like the others but was instead met with a new kind of hall. If it could even be called that.

This hall was rather weird. The walls and ceiling looked the same as all the others, and everything was the same bland color palette, but that is where the similarities ended. The pillars were now gone, and nearly the entire floor-space was replaced with a huge basin of water, extending from wall to wall.

The only parts of the floor not underwater were several platforms and the beginning of the hall itself.

Exiting the hallway would make him step onto a small ledge just in front of the many platforms. On it were growing even more of those damn mushrooms. The hall itself was also significantly smaller compared to the other ones.

The platforms positioned in the water were small and circular, looking kind of like giant water lilies. They were around 1½ meters in diameter, enough for one person to stand on, but not much more. From where he stood, he saw a blue, glowing symbol of sorts on each of them.

As he fully entered the room by stepping out of the hallway, a system message appeared.

Dungeon Challenge: Make it to the other side of the hall by using the platforms. The time limit per hall is set to 15 minutes.

Make it to the other side of the hall: 0/3

Time remaining: 14:59

But just as he thought 'that doesn't seem so hard', he was met with a follow-up message.

All stats reduced to a static 10. All skills are disabled. Stats and skills will be restored upon completion of the challenge

He instantly felt a wave of weakness wash over him as he knelt down on the floor. His senses dulled as he was struck with vertigo. He felt sick to his stomach and felt like throwing up. It was like he had just gotten done running four marathons while lifting weights on an empty stomach.

Soon after, the feeling went away just as quickly as it had come. But the weakness remained. Jake tried using Archer's Eye and found it unresponsive.

It felt weird to lose his skills; in fact, everything felt off. It was like he had returned to before the system and the tutorial. Well, except for the tiny detail that he was stuck in a room that was likely going to kill him in fifteen minutes if he didn't make his way through it.

Having reduced stats, of course, made the entire challenge quite a bit more complicated. But that didn't mean Jake had time to waste as he began analyzing the room. Using his Sphere of Perception, he saw tha-

Wait, what?

Blinking in confusion, he felt that his bloodline ability was still active. It hadn't even weakened or been affected in any way. Why did it still work? Was it not considered a skill? But even if it was not, he knew that perception increased its potency, and yet with his perception reduced to only 10, it worked like if he still had unnerfed stats.

It was a mystery that he had no answer to, but a pleasant surprise nonetheless. What exactly was a bloodline ability? Why did he have one while others seemingly didn't?

Focus, Jake, focus, he admonished himself as he forcefully dismissed the thoughts. He had more important things to deal with than pondering on bloodlines, such as how not to die. Walking to the edge, he began inspecting the platforms and the symbols engraved on them.

The symbols were intricately made depictions of different animals. Jake saw three different types, the first one a coiled-up snake with a... with a damn mushroom in its mouth.

Suppressing his desire to yell profanities, he inspected the second type. It was another snake-like creature, but this one had wings and spikes growing all over its body — a winged serpent of sorts. The serpent was flying above a myriad of other creatures. He saw both different animals but also human-like depictions.

These animals and humanoid creatures were kneeling or prostrated on the ground, looking up towards the serpent in either worship or fear. Some of them held weapons and looked to be doing rituals, while others simply prayed.

The third and final engraving was what he identified as a wyvern. It had small hands attached to its wings, and like the winged serpent, had spikes growing out of its spine. It looked murderous, to say the least. This wyvern was on a mountain, roaring towards the sky. Like it was angry at the heaven above.

Was this a depiction of the growth cycle for the small snake? Did it evolve from a snake to a wyvern? He had assumed that evolution was a used trope by the system, seeing as he had a race, and said race could level up. The big (G) in front of [Human] also a huge indicator. But it was still quite something if a small snake could turn into a wyvern.

He had an intuition he was spot on, but the problem was still what the hell he was supposed to do with these platforms and engravings. His only way to the other side of the room was by jumping from platform to platform. He had no desire to enter the water as he had a suspicion that it was not even water based on the clearly poisoned or acid-drenched spikes from the last couple of halls.

After looking around a bit more, it struck him how the blue glow on each platform reminded him of the light given off by the mushrooms. Said mushrooms were growing around where he stood on the ledge, the only other kind of object present. As he looked at the first symbol's picture with the snake eating a mushroom, he got an idea.

He covered his hand with some cloth from his cloak as he picked up one of the mushrooms. He was still a little afraid that the things were poisonous to touch with his bare hands. A fear that would be especially bad to put to the test with lowered stats. He went back to the edge of the ledge with mushrooms in hand and threw one of the mushrooms on a platform depicting a small snake.

The instant the mushroom made contact, it was absorbed into the platform, and the blue glow disappeared. Waiting a bit to see if anything more would happen, the blue light returned after only ten or so seconds.

He tried the same with the other two kinds of platforms but was met with no response. The mushrooms were absorbed, but nothing more happened. Jake tested throwing mushrooms at different platforms for a bit and built up the courage to finally touch the blue buggers without any protection. It didn't seem to poison him, so maybe the things weren't that bad after all?

With his testing done and time ticking down, he had reached a conclusion. After a mushroom hits a platform with a mushroom-eating snake on it, the blue light will disappear for ten seconds, and throwing a mushroom on an already deactivated platform will refresh the countdown.

Noting down the platforms' positions, he saw several with mushroom-snakes on them between him and the hall's end. The room was well lit, and he could see the depiction of all the different symbols on all the pillars quite clearly. After observing for a while, it clicked for him.

This was clearly a maze. Jake designated the glowing platforms as kill-zones and the non-glowing ones as safe. So, he needed a path where he only had to jump between secure platforms. And such a path existed where the only pattern he had to go on was the snake platforms. He was rather confident in his deduction, and he could quite honestly not afford to stall any longer as he looked at the timer.

Time remaining: 3:24

He started plucking mushrooms and put a bunch in his satchel and held a couple in each hand. He threw a mushroom on the first platform, and saw the light disappear. Please don't kill me, he pleaded internally as he jumped.

He landed safely on the platform with nothing happening. He briefly thanked the clearly evil, yet slightly benevolent, mushroom god as he threw another and jumped to that platform as its light disappeared too.

After repeating the same for the following platforms, he finally made it to the other side. He looked at the timer and rushed through the hall's exit and found himself in another nearly identical one, as the system appeared again.

Make it to the other side of the hall: 1/3

Time remaining: 14:59

This room also had the mushrooms on the starting platform and a newly added pedestal with a beautiful red pillow of silk placed on it. Lying on the pillow was what looked like a dagger. He quickly tried to use Identify on it but was met with no response.

Shit, he thought, having briefly forgotten that skills were disabled. The dagger was made from what looked like bone. Ornate markings depicting a snake decorated its handle, giving Jake a very culty vibe.

He picked up the dagger, momentarily afraid to be cursed or something, but was luckily met with nothing. Scouting out the room, he quickly concluded that no path with only mushroom-eating snake-symbols existed, meaning he couldn't repeat the same tactic.

He nevertheless picked up some more mushrooms and also tested throwing one on a snake-platform, confirming it to be disabled for 10 seconds just like in the previous room. The other platforms also ignored the mushrooms like before. The size of the room and layout were also nearly identical. Indeed the only difference was the pattern of the symbols and the dagger.

As the counter steadily counted down, his mind worked on overdrive to figure out the solution.