

Hunter 64

Chapter 64: Badger's Den

There was little in his way as he made his way up the path. He was traveling on a slightly elevated hill, with a valley on each side as he ran at a brisk pace. A pace that could easily have allowed him to overtake some cars.

The road was steep, but it seemed almost... unnaturally made. Jake didn't call it a road for no reason. It was clearly formed in a very deliberate way, being nearly flat ground, with not a single beast in the way. And if one needed more proof, it only became more apparent as he got closer to the peak, with the entire route being perfectly flat.

On the way, he also conjured new arrows to fill his newly upgraded quiver. To no surprise, the mana requirement per arrow was way higher than before, easily a tenfold increase. An increase of no consequence considering that wisdom still was his highest stat.

As he ran, he also carefully observed his surroundings. From his vantage point, he could now see the area far better. It was much like he expected, with a general setup of mountains and valleys.

There were five mountains - four off to the sides and one that was more massive than all the others in the middle. If Jake's game theory held, the strongest beasts would, without a doubt, be found around or within the big mountain in the center.

After taking a good look around, he noticed that the valleys surrounding the mountain he was approaching all had one thing in common: An overflow of badgers. He had already killed an incredible number inside the valley he cleared out, but it seems it was only a small portion of their total number. Not that Jake was afraid of hunting the creatures to extinction.

Besides, this entire tutorial wasn't really a sustainable eco-system to begin with. Sure, beasts were fighting and killing each other, but the scale at which they did it was far too low. Every single animal also seemed to be a carnivore, which was also weird considering the abundance of vegetation. Though considering how levels and the system worked, it made sense for pretty much any living being to focus on killing.

Deciding to pick up the pace, he started sprinting as he got closer and closer to the top. The path didn't reach all the way to the peak of the volcano-like mountain but ended a few hundred meters below. But as he got closer, he noticed a hole in the side of it.

More accurately, a cave. The entrance wasn't big, perhaps only allowing a small car through, but more than large enough for Jake to enter.

As he got within 25 meters or so of the cave, he came to a halt. Charging in didn't seem like the best idea, even with his Sphere of Perception and danger perception. He didn't feel any particular sense of danger at the cave entrance, and his intuition told him nothing was off.

To be safe, he prepared a few poisoned arrows. With an arrow at the ready, Jake slowly walked towards the cave entrance. He was perhaps overly cautious, but better safe than sorry.

As he got closer, his sphere naturally encompassed the cave and allowed him to see... nothing - just an ordinary damn cave leading into the mountain.

Not a single beast or any living thing for that matter, and It was honestly kind of anticlimactic. Yet Jake decided not to lower his guard anyway as he slowly walked through the entrance.

The cave led into a tunnel that gave Jake flashbacks to a certain mushroom-filled one. Of course, this one had no mushrooms, in fact, It didn't have any light-sources at all. But it didn't matter; it wasn't long enough to prevent Jake from seeing light at both ends.

Getting closer to the end, he noticed that it opened up to a vast circular space - the hollow inside of the mountain.

Walking through the entrance, he found himself on a crevice overlooking yet another hidden paradise.

Despite what he had predicted, below him was a small forest. Calling it a forest was maybe overdoing it as there were not even a hundred trees due to the limited size, but it did look very serene and beautiful. It was more of a small thicket or grove, really.

A brief scan didn't reveal any beasts, which did make Jake rather suspicious.

Jumping down, he started walking through the small patch of greenery. He did find a couple of herbs but nothing else worth noting. As he made his way towards the center, an object suddenly entered his sphere - an object that was all too familiar to him.

A door. The last time Jake had encountered such a door, it had changed his life quite drastically after all.

He didn't hesitate as he approached the wooden door. After placing his hand on it, a message appeared just like the time with the Challenge Dungeon.

Tutorial Dungeon Discovered!

Dungeons throughout the universe offer groups and individuals a chance to pursue strength and treasures through exploring the pocket dimensions known as dungeons. This variant is only found within the Tutorials provided by the system to newly integrated races.

Requirements to enter: N/A

Requirements to enter met.

WARNING: Only 5 challengers allowed per party attempting the dungeon. Only one party allowed at a time. Note that dungeons can be entered and exited at your own discretion.

Enter Dungeon?

Y/N

Reading the message, it quickly became clear to him that this wasn't the same type of dungeon as the Challenge Dungeon.

This one seemed far... kinder. It didn't warn Jake of imminent death, and it even allowed whoever entered to just waltz right out if the place didn't strike your fancy.

Which removed every last shred of doubt if he should enter or not. Accepting the prompt, he felt his vision shift for a few moments before Jake found himself within yet another cave. A few moments later, a new system message appeared.

You have entered the dungeon: Badger's Den.

Objective: Defeat the Den Mother.

Reading it, he nodded at the simplicity. This dungeon seems more like the videogame kind, he thought, as he looked around the cave.

The cave walls weren't made of stone, but earth and soil, making Jake believe that he was literally in a hole in the ground.

He saw several small weeds and such growing everywhere, and when he knelt, he could feel the soil's moisture. This place was completely different than the inner area, where most everything had a rocky texture.

Even the soil was filled with small rocks and pebbles everywhere. But the ground here was clean, pure earth, the kind any gardener would go crazy over to have in his garden.

He didn't see any movement so far in his sphere, but then again, it only showed a long narrow tunnel in front of him.

The tutorial sure likes tunnels and caves; he thought to himself as he started walking forward. He was also pleased to discover that he still had all his equipment and that his spatial storage worked as expected. After all, the challenge dungeon had taken all his weapons, making Jake slightly afraid this place would do the same. A pleasant surprise for sure.

After walking for less than a minute, the tunnel started expanding. First, only a little, and then a lot, until it completely opened up into a vast underground space. This is also where he finally had discovered what he had hoped to find: Beasts. More accurately, badgers.

They were all nicely allocated around the place in small groups of 4 to 6, as they mulled about in what seemed like a small pre-determined area.

At the back of the cavern, he saw a badger that was all on its lonesome. The badger was far bigger and more menacing than all the others. Its colors were no longer the same mix of brown and black, but completely black with spiky fur on its back that had a purple sheen at the end.

He started by identifying the badgers in the small groups and was a bit surprised at their levels.

[Venomfang Badger – lvl 56]

It was nearly 10 levels above the ones he usually encountered outside. The most powerful he had met had been level 52. But this one seemed to only be on the lower end as he identified a slightly larger one from the same group.

[Venomfang Badger – lvl ??]

It was at a level he couldn't identify, but his intuition told him it wasn't that much higher than the other one.

On a side note, he still wasn't sure exactly what the level range for his Identify was. After he had gotten both his profession and class, it had gone up to common-rarity, where it still was. That had allowed him to use Identify on humans and to identify far more items than before, especially alchemical ones, likely also due to his Herbology and Toxicology skill.

But with levels, he was unsure. He hadn't been able to Identify the buffalo either, and now he couldn't Identify this badger.

Turning his gaze towards the big badger at the end, he noticed that the exit of this cave was located right behind it, meaning he would have to go through it if he wanted to proceed. He tried to also identify the badger, to some success.

[Alpha Venomfang Badger – lvl ??]

As expected, he couldn't see the level, though he could see the name – it was an Alpha. He could vaguely feel that while the beast was stronger than the others by far... it hadn't evolved to D-rank yet. He could only imagine the power-spike such an evolution would include.

The immediate increase of power from a beast evolving was far more than humans from what he could tell. The difference between a level 24 beast and one at 25 was massive. The latter could quickly kill several of the former.

For humans, however, it wasn't as big. Evolution did provide some immediate benefits but compared to beasts it could be considered minor.

He remembered when he got his level 25 race evolution; it didn't really change much. He did grow a few centimeters, but other than that, nothing really happened. He wasn't suddenly twice as strong and fast. But he did notice as time progressed that he adapted easier to his stats.

The difference for humans when evolving their race seemed to be more qualitative rather than quantitative. It didn't give a massive immediate stat increase, but was more gradual, as the stats provided by any evolved race or class was far more than before, with the race evolution just serving to build up the foundation for all those stat increases.

Of course, all this was discounting skills. Beasts tended to not really have many skills of note. They maybe had one or two, but that was it. The Venomfang Badgers, as an example, had venom on their fangs and... yeah, that was about it.

If he had to make a hypothesis, it was that beasts were more focused. He already knew that not all races possessed the same nine stats that he had. And even if they did, no one said it had to be as diversified as Jake's stats were.

If a beast didn't really require stats such as intelligence, wisdom, willpower, and even things such as perception as much as humans did, they would have far more energy left to focus purely on enhancing their body.

Of course, humans could do the same with their classes. Jake's own Ambitious Hunter being a great example as it only gave physical stats. However, his race provided a bonus to all stats, pretty much forcing a balanced approach to some extent.

When it came to skills, perhaps beasts also simply had passive ones, or maybe they just didn't really have many skills, to begin with. Jake only had two skills from his own race: Identify and Meditate, with the two others he had from external sources.

With the limited number of skills came little diversity in attack methods and strategy for beasts, which was likely for the best, seeing as beasts acted just like animals and used their instinct above all else, something a human didn't need to. Perhaps the most significant advantage of the more... enlightened races.

A bit hypocritical coming from Jake, who used his instincts and trusted his intuition far more than what any reasonable person should. But at least he also had his conscious mind to make tactical choices together with his instincts.

Taking out his bow, he took out one of the poisoned arrows he prepared before entering the dungeon and found that it still had the poison on it.

Due to Malefic Viper's Poison's passive effect, the toxicity of the arrow was still there. A nearly forgotten skill during his everyday fighting due to it merely doing its job passively, but incredibly valuable nevertheless.

Nocking the arrow, he fired a Powershot at the biggest of the badgers in the group he identified before. A total of 4 beasts were in the group, with only one being unidentifiable.

The arrow flew true as it struck the badger in the side of its head, penetrating into the brain. The poison was delivered directly into its brain, killing it nearly instantly. Or at least it wasn't getting up as it only lay there spasming on the ground.

This attack made all the other badgers perk up as they all turned towards him in an eerily simultaneous motion. A tendency they repeated as they all charged towards him in concert.

Nocking another poisoned arrow, he shot it towards the weakest one at level 56. The beast tried to dodge, but its forward momentum made it still get hit in the side where the arrow pierced straight through.

As the others were getting dangerously close by now, he Shadow Vaulted backward as he shot another arrow at the already wounded beast.

He repeated this vaulting tactic, firing an arrow, and then vaulting once more, as he slowly picked the beasts off one by one, kiting them easily.

The Shadow Vault seemed to confuse the beasts every time he used it, giving Jake perhaps half a second extra time per jump as the creatures took a bit to reorient themselves.

After a few minutes, two of the beasts were dead on the ground, with the remaining two now only limping after him. They had done an excellent job avoiding getting hit in their vital parts, often able to shift their position slightly to avoid him piercing their hearts or brains.

But in the end, it didn't truly matter. The poison worked its way through their system, slowly making them lose their lives.

As the final one dropped to the ground and the kill-notification came in, he also felt the level-ups' warm flow.

Checking the messages, he took notice of the levels of the beasts as well.

You have slain [Venomfang Badger – lvl 60] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 80000 TP earned

You have slain [Venomfang Badger – lvl 56] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 72000 TP earned

You have slain [Venomfang Badger – lvl 57] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 74000 TP earned

You have slain [Venomfang Badger – lvl 57] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 74000 TP earned

'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 34 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points

'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 40 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points

The one he couldn't Identify had been the one at 60, while he could Identify the ones at 57. He was beginning to have a good idea of where the cutoff was, but he was still not entirely sure. Luckily, he had plenty of subjects to test on.

Looking out over the cave of badgers and the fact that a single group of the things had given him a level... this hunt was going to be very fruitful.