

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

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 Jakes'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.

Chapter 12: A splitting provocation

The mood of the conversation shifted, and the smile on Jacob’s face was gone. Jake was also working in overdrive, analyzing the situation. Should he take them by surprise and shoot the man? Even if he tried, he had no confidence in landing the shot. And even if it did hit *and* somehow managed to kill him, chances are it would end badly if the other side retaliated, or more accurately, *when* they retaliated as he seriously doubted they would just take getting their leader killed lying down.

Caroline was also looking incredibly nervous at this point, hiding a bit behind Bertram, who had a stoic look on his face. The situation was tense, to say the least. She did not look at all like she wanted to respond positively to his... ‘invitation’.

Richard looked on as he flashed a light smile, but his eyes were still rather cold. The ones behind him also seemed to have tensed up too and had their hands close to their weapons. He finally started talking again, breaking the silence before they reached a breaking point.

“I’m just going to be honest with you all, healers are scarce in this place. We had one, but he died within an hour of entering the tutorial. Three groups, thirty people, and only one fucking healer,” he said as he spat on the ground, clearly frustrated. “So, young lady, I am serious when I say that you would be treated well. We need you far more than you need us.”

He turned back to Jacob again, continuing.

“You agreed that we humans are meant to stick together, right? We have no healer. We have only a handful of healing potions. There are no medical supplies, no hospital, no doctors, no nothing. Does she not have a responsibility to help her fellow man? I want to solve this peacefully with everyone walking away happy, but I don’t exactly have a choice here. We need a healer, one way or another. We only need the healer. The rest of you are free to choose what you want to do.

“Just know that her joining us is non-negotiable. Not having a healer is just too risky in this place, and I have already lost too many good men and women unnecessarily. If you and your colleagues join us, you will be treated like everyone else. We will make hunting parties based on optimal setups, with the healer joining my own party naturally. I can even promise that if you don’t wish to fight, we offer protection as long as you contribute in other ways. Just think it over carefully.”

Richard seemed to be done talking as he gave them space once more. He had thrown the ball in their court, and now the question was just what to do...

They could try and run, but they were clearly outnumbered, and their levels too low. Jake had a feeling that the majority of the opposing party was at level 5 or above. He said they had run out of healing potions, which indicated that they had done plenty of fighting. *Fighting is off the list.*

The second option was to join them. Jake did not like that option at all. He got a bad feeling from them. He did not doubt that Caroline would remain unharmed, but what about the rest of them? Would they be used as meat-shields or what? They would clearly not allow them to act autonomously in fear of them leaving with Caroline.

The third option was just to hand her over. They would likely let them go, as while humans were worth hunting, they were far more dangerous than beasts in most cases. Additionally, they would have to try and not antagonize Caroline more than necessary. Jake doubted anyone would want a healer who wanted nothing more than to kill the people she healed. Or worse, refuse to heal at all.

Needless to say, Jake was not a fan of just handing her over. One reason was that they would end up with the same issue that Richard's group currently had. He was hesitant to voice his thoughts when Theodore started talking.

"Maybe we should just go with them. Imagine not having access to any kind of healing or medicine in this shithole. It would make even the best desperate. We don't even know them, why are we taking an antagonistic position?" Looking around at the others, quite a few of them nodded, while others stayed silent.

Jake could easily see Richard smiling in the other group, clearly approving of the direction their conversation was currently taking. Theodore did have a good point, though; they were clearly desperate. Who were they to reject helping the other group? Without a healer or health potions, a single bite or claw wound could become infected and fester, making even small scratches and injuries fatal.

Jake also thought back to his own objective. He had decided that he wanted to try and help his colleagues learn how to fend for themselves. If they joined a larger group, they would be significantly safer from the beasts.

According to Richard, Caroline, one of the few people Jake actually cared about, would be safe for sure. He did not doubt the middle-aged man when he guaranteed that he would do anything to protect her. Who would be stupid enough to piss off or kill a walking hospital in a forest filled with dangers?

Jake, however, was not at all open to her going alone. It would leave the other eight without a healer. He also had serious doubts that Caroline would ever agree to leave them behind. Especially not Jacob.

As the discussion continued, Richard and his crew patiently waited, as the decision to join was slowly reached. But there were still reservations. How would they be treated? Would they be considered outsiders? What reason would Richard have to keep them around after already getting his hands on Caroline? The predominant fear being that they would be treated more like hostages than members.

Jake had said nothing so far. He had kept silent, listening, and taking in the conversation. Richard seemed not to care what they thought as long as they joined. No, Jake needed insurance. He needed something that would keep them safe and treated well.

He had no intention of joining either way. He had decided to go his own way last night already. He needed strength, and he needed power. And he did *need* power. He could feel himself becoming restless from not progressing.

It would be foolish not to grasp an opportunity to rise above what he currently was. More importantly, he also wanted to. He wanted to hunt, fight, and encounter challenges. And he would not be able to do that if he stayed with any group.

Jake thought of his desire to hunt. He thought back to right after he had killed the three attackers the day before, and the feeling of accomplishment and fulfillment - the feeling of power. Basking in the feeling, he channeled his bloodline, as a faux smile of never-ending confidence appeared on his lips.

“Richard, is it? What’s your level?” He asked in a calm voice.

Richard looked over at them, truly noticing Jake for the first time. A young inconspicuous man completely covered in the cloak given out to all archers. He found nothing remarkable until he looked at the man's face. His eyes were practically glowing, and he had a confident smile on his face, with a trace of excitement hidden deep beneath. Not a single sign of fear or worry evident, almost as if he wanted a fight to break out.

"I am level 9 in my class, and we have a couple of others in our group at level 7 and above," Richard answered truthfully, not being afraid of sharing it. The ones before him were clearly office workers or something similar before this tutorial. The only odd one out was the archer who gave him a bit of a different feeling.

Either way, they had leveled from entering until now, only resting for a few hours. They had played it safe due to not having a healer, but he doubted a single individual could outmatch them. He also doubted the man was actually strong as his colleagues couldn't hide their confused looks at how he acted. *Or did he even have his own allies fooled?*

"And who might you be? Your level, too, if you don't mind?"

Jake looked back at him with a small sigh of disappointment. It was not an act either. He had genuinely hoped that the man was stronger. From what he had

seen, level 10 seemed to be a power-spike for monsters, and humans may experience something similar.

“Well, that’s slightly disappointing, I was hoping for you to be stronger,” Jake said. “As for my name and level? I am Mr. eat-shit, and I am level go-fuck-yourself.”

Richards smile faded significantly. Jacob, Caroline, and all the others were gobsmacked at what the hell Jake was doing openly provoking the man. Especially how Jake kept up that weird daring demeanor, despite them being outnumbered so badly. Had he gone crazy?

“I thought we were close to reaching an agreement here?” Richard asked, more than a little annoyed at the unexpected development. Who was this archer that he hadn’t even bothered noticing before? What gave him confidence?

“Oh, fairly sure they’re joining you, but I am not. I have bigger prey to hunt,” Jake said, still smiling at the man as he walked closer to Richard and his camp. As he got closer, he felt a prickling sensation making him aware of the danger lurking behind the man. He distinctly felt three archers who likely had their bows aimed at him in case he tried something.

“I just wanted to make something clear. I will leave my former colleagues to you, so do take proper care of them. Of course, if something happens, we would have issues,” Jake said as he was only a single step away from the middle-aged warrior.

Richard was a good ten centimeters taller than Jake, literally looking down on the archer. Yet he was unsure of how to act. He had a weird feeling that the man in front of him was unusual, but he refused to back down and appear weak in front of his men.

“Hoh, issues? What kind of issues would that be?” He said, squinting down at Jake while taking half a step forward to tower over him.

Jake's smile widened. “The kind of issues where I get convenient prey served on a silver platter. Do you believe yourself superior? Do you think those three archers will land their shot before I remove your head? Do you think their arrows have any chance of hitting? Do you honestly think that you are the predator in this scenario?”

Jake said as he opened his arms wide out to the sides, watching Richard tense up as he dropped the smile and turned serious as he looked at the man.

“Because you’re not. You can take them, train with them, fight with them, and survive with them. But I will be watching. A single misstep, and I will hunt you and all your pals down one by one. Sweet dreams.”

Jake turned around and started walking away.

In his sphere, he saw the archer that stood just behind Richard had begun drawing his bow, but Richard raised a hand indicating for him to stop, only to see Jake had made the exact same motion. Making both of them stop as it became clear the man could somehow still see them with his back turned.

Jake walked back to his colleagues, who stood there and looked confused at him.

“You are leaving us?” Casper managed to mutter out.

“Yeah, it was my plan all along. I have my own goals for this tutorial. If you join them, you should have a much higher chance of surviving than on your own. Don’t worry, I will check in occasionally.” Jake said, smiling at them. Not the threatening, borderline maniac smile that he had given Richard, but a friendly one.

“Do take diligent care of everyone, Jacob, and don’t let them bully you or anyone else,” he finally said, as he turned towards the forest intending to leave.

“Wait!” Jacob called out and ran up to him, hugging him and covertly passing him one of the satchels he had been carrying. One containing all the health potions from the attackers last night as well as Jacob’s own three health and stamina potions.

Finishing the hug and distancing himself, Jacob looked at Jake and smiled.

“Take care out there, my friend, and please do come back and check in whenever you can.”

Jake nodded and walked away from their camp. There was no heartfelt goodbye from any of them, but Casper, who yelled to take care. He had a strong feeling he wouldn't see them for quite a while, but even without showing himself, he hoped the power of the threat would remain. However, he was pretty sure that dear Richard would give him an opportunity to truly hammer it home soon.

He had seen Richard whisper something to the archer as Jake walked back to his colleagues earlier. Looking over once more, he saw said archer he had guessed to be his second in command now gone along with some of the light warriors.

Jake smiled as he entered the bushes and walked at a brisk pace directly away from the clearing. He could not see them anywhere in his sphere, but he knew they were coming. Richard did not strike him as a man who took threats very well, and sending a team after him to remove a potential threat was perfectly in character.

Picking up the pace, he started sprinting to create some distance. His heart was still pumping from his acting before. He didn't quite know how he had found the confidence to do that, but in some ways, wasn't there a thrill in that kind of challenge too?

Excitement bubbled up in his stomach as he found a spot that was simply *perfect*.

He smiled as he thought of his pursuers. They would arrive soon, he felt it. He started retracing his steps for ten or so meters by stepping in his old footsteps, as he got close to a tree. He had purposefully walked close to it on his way here for this purpose, after all.

Moving in accordance with his basic stealth skill, he felt it activate as he quickly climbed the tree, finding a good hiding-spot among the leaves. Soon they would be upon him, and he was ready for them. All thoughts of how they were human beings, not even entering his mind for a second. Today they were simply prey.

They seem to have misunderstood something, he thought as he waited. *I am the one hunting them.*

Chapter 13: Nicholas (1)

How troublesome, he thought as he pursued the archer on Richard's orders.

Nicholas, an archer himself, was silently running through the forest with six of his companions. Four archers and three light warriors made up the hunting party. In his

opinion, it was total overkill to send seven men for a single archer from some corporate office.

Seriously, what the fuck was up with that guy? Spewing off some cliché bullshit to look like a badass. He had to hold himself back from cringing during the entire thing and barely managed not just to shoot him in the back as he walked off.

Sadly, Richard didn't want to spoil the relationship with their new healer. While the guy did do some weird stuff, it was nothing to make Nicholas wary of him. It was totally unnecessary to send so many, but Richard was nothing if not thorough.

Ultimately, he did, of course, understand why Richard sent people after him. Either he was for real, and a serious threat, or he was a lunatic, in which case he would be a chaotic threat. In both cases, the issue was best nipped in the bud.

Nicholas himself had been one of the people who entered the tutorial with Richard, and he worked for the man before the initiation. Richard ran a private security firm and had employees contracted in several offices in their city of operation. Nicolas was just another faceless employee, but his track record had earned him some amount of trust, which had netted him the right-hand man's position in this tutorial.

Finding a healer was fortunate. Having none was quite honestly hell, especially for the warriors who often got minor injuries, being forced to be in melee and all that. They had a healer when they first got here, but he got impaled by a huge stag in one of their first fights. This left them with only a limited amount of healing potions, made worse by having to waste them on what a healer could fix in minutes for just a bit of mana.

Even luckier was that the healer was a part of a team of laymen who were clearly inexperienced when it came to battle. And yet he had been asked by his boss to pursue some archer with a big mouth who decided to play cool. He did not buy the guys bullshit at all.

He personally wanted to just bet on the guy getting himself killed, but Richard was not the kind of man you rejected. He was their leader, with pretty much everyone just calling him 'boss'. Earned not through nepotism or posturing, but sheer competence.

Nicholas didn't question his decision, but it did suck a bit that they had to take in a group of weaklings. He doubted a single one of them was even level 5. At least the healer chick looked nice, and the red-haired caster was quite good too. The one he found the most annoying was that crippled middle-aged woman - the very definition of a burden in his opinion.

I am sure Richard will find some way to fix it,

he thought. How would they be to blame if the newbies had unfortunate accidents during combat? As long as they could get the healer on their side, all was fair game.

They had been running for a while and finally reached the area where Mr. Bigmouth had entered the forest, as they all entered stealth. They had a rule that every archer and light-warrior had to pick stealth at level 5, as Richard wanted a strong scouting-force, and as this situation proved, assassination-team.

They snuck through the underbrush as they scouted ahead. The guy had not exactly been sneaky, leaving clear footsteps in the underbrush. While none of them had a tracking skill, it did not mean that tracking was impossible. You just had to do it the old-fashioned way.

As they followed the footsteps, they suddenly seemed to stop in the middle of a small clearing.

Before any of them could react, he heard something pierce through the wind, followed by a thud. The light warrior at his side, falling over with an arrow stuck in the back of his head, dead as dead can be.

WHAT THE FUCK, was his immediate internal reaction as he acted.

“TAKE COVER!” he yelled as he ran for the trees, quickly hiding behind one. Peeking back into the clearing, he saw two corpses, one of the archers now also dead, shot during their retreat. *What the fuck is going on!?*

He activated Archer’s Eye and started looking up at the trees. He had a feeling their attacker was up in one of those, and it didn’t take long before he spotted the enemy. It was another archer based on the fact that another arrow flew out from a tree crown.

Nicholas nocked an arrow and went out from behind the tree, firing where the arrow had come from. He got no feedback from his shot as he quickly backed behind the tree once more. He peeked around it once more, his high perception and skill both working on overdrive.

Before he found anything, he heard another scream sound out. He charged over to where the scream came from, dashing between trees. Arriving at the location, he saw a wounded archer with an arrow in his chest, and luckily, he was still alive. Nicholas quickly ripped the arrow out and took out his last health potion, making the man drink it.

The wound visibly healed, and the now healing archer opened his mouth: “I got a shot in,” he barely managed to say, still heaving for breath as his lungs healed. “In the stomach, I think.”

The man fell, still out of breath, while the potion did its magic. Nicholas left the man to lick his wounds as he heard more yelling from his comrades all around him.

Jake was still smiling to himself as he examined the arrow in his stomach. He considered ripping it out and drinking a healing potion, but looking at his health, it had only gone down a measly 50 points. Not even one-sixth of his total health after his new title. Ripping it out would only make it bleed more, making him lose more health, and quite frankly, it barely affected him. It hurt like hell, but it was more than manageable.

His initial ambush had gone well, killing two of them right off the bat. He also felt the sensation of level-ups, but he decided to ignore the system messages for now. It wasn't the time to get distracted.

However, the third target he had gone for had been prepared and had been outside his sphere when they spotted each other, resulting in them both landing an arrow on the other. Jake narrowly missed the man's heart, but still landed a fatal blow. If the man did not have any healing potions, he would bleed out in minutes. Or drown in his own blood as it filled up his lungs. Jake wasn't a doctor, but he was pretty sure it would be one or the other.

From the bush he was now hiding in, he focused on his sphere as he moved out, sneaking in between trees. He saw a lone light warrior hidden behind a tree in his sphere, the tree itself posing no obstacle to his perception ability. His initial plan had worked out

perfectly, baiting all of them into the middle of a small clearing, and then attack, making them split to all sides. Divide and conquer and all that.

Jake threw a small rock to the left of the warrior as he approached from the right. The man turned instantly towards the sound, and Jake promptly charged forth, sliding up behind him, putting his left hand across the man's mouth, and using his right to slit his throat. The man managed to yank his dagger behind in an awkward last-ditch effort, hitting Jake in his left shoulder.

The man went limp with Jake holding him until he got the notification. When it came, he let the corpse go as he looked at the knife wound on his left shoulder. It hurt, but it barely did any damage, and he could still easily use it.

Three, maybe four down. At least three to go, including the archer leading them

He had seen the archer in charge of their little assassination-troop. He was fast, faster than Jake, indicating that he had a higher level. And not by a little either, Jake estimating the man to be at least level 7 or 8.

Jake began sneaking towards his next target as he tried to stay hidden. He had already decided to leave one alive to send a message if possible, but it sure as hell was not going to be their leader.

He had already spotted the one he wanted to function as his messenger. It was a young archer, could not be more than seventeen or eighteen. Jake was looking at him at this moment and could both see and feel him shake in fear. He kept throwing glances towards the clearing where the two corpses were.

Jake decided to ignore the kid and instead started looking for another target. From the way the kid had frozen up, Jake saw no scenario where he would prove an issue.

Jake felt no one in his sphere as he moved and saw nothing either. He closed his eyes and focused on his hearing. At first, he heard nothing but the ambient sound of the wind and the occasional beast or bird, until he picked up another, more relevant sound - labored breathing.

He silently snuck towards the sound of the breathing, and soon the last light warrior appeared in his sphere. Unlike the others, this one had decided to cover himself in leaves and parts of the underbrush, practically invisible in combination with the basic stealth skill as he lay prone on the ground. Jake doubted he would even be able to spot him using Archer's Eye.

Luckily, Jake did not need his eyes to see him. The man was hidden well if you looked at him, but with an omnidirectional sphere, what he was doing barely counted as hiding. Jake decided to get a vertical advantage and climbed a tree to ensure his attack would prove lethal.

From up there, he had a clear shot right at the man. He sure had done a decent job hiding, as Jake could not even spot him from above, mainly due to him lying completely still. Jake nocked an arrow and drew his bow, aiming for the head.

He found it interesting how not a single of the basic outfits for any of the classes provided any protection for the head. Even the heavy warriors didn't have a helmet, despite their otherwise full armor. The only thing remotely close was the hoods on the cloaks that casters, healers, and archers had. But that did not exactly provide a lot of protection against an arrow to the head.

The only true protection seemed to be provided by the toughness stat, maybe vitality, and perhaps endurance to some extent? He did not know exactly, but he did remember the light warrior class not offering any stat points to toughness and only one to vitality. In other words, their level advantage meant little to nothing if hit, except for maybe one or two levels in race.

Which was exactly what led to the hidden warrior dying without even knowing how. All that was left was what looked like a stack of leaves and sticks with an arrow sticking out it. A red liquid slowly soaking the underbrush around the arrow.

Jake confirmed the system notification of him getting the kill, and checked his list of notifications quickly, finding only 4. Meaning that the archer he traded arrows with earlier still lived. *Must have used a health potion*, he thought.

He decided to go finish off the archer, doubting he had gotten far. While a healing potion did renew the lost health points instantly, it still took a bit of time for the body to fully mend and judging from where he had hit the arrow, the guy was hopefully still down for the count.

Jake climbed down from the tree and snuck towards where he had fought the archer. He still had to be careful with the leader of the hit-squad on the loose. The guy had decent skill judging from his fast reactions to the initial ambush, and his accuracy was quite decent judging his return-shot.

He quickly found the archer who had done nothing more than drag himself to the other side of the tree Jake had left him at. He was still heaving for breath, as his lungs had just finished healing, and was not in any condition to put up a proper fight.

While it was not exactly exciting prey, an enemy is an enemy. The archer had covered his body and face with his cloak and made sure that blood was clearly visible as he tried to sit completely still. Likely hoping to fool Jake into believing he was already dead.

Jake was off to the side of the man, still sneaking, as he drew his bow. The man had his vision blocked by his hood, completely unaware as death approached.

Jake aimed and fired the arrow. The moment he released the arrow, his danger-sense went ballistic, and he barely managed to move a bit to the side as an arrow entered his sphere and struck him in the back. A wave of immense pain struck him, making him grit his teeth, barely managing to stumble behind a nearby tree, narrowly dodging yet another arrow.

He slumped down behind the tree and quickly ripped out the arrow still in his stomach and the one in his back. The one in the stomach was narrow, only penetrating muscle mostly, but the one in the back had hit something important. He quickly drank a healing potion and felt a cold sensation spread throughout his body. The potion itself was tasteless like water, not that he had any time to think about flavors at the moment.

He couldn't help but smile to himself despite the pain as he confirmed the kill notification for the already wounded archer. Afterward, he quickly opened his status page and threw all his free points into perception. He didn't even have time to look at his stats before his danger-sense acted up again, as he had to slide around the tree, avoiding another arrow.

His smile grew wider as he got to temporary safety once more. The archer was outside his sphere, despite it becoming slightly stronger from the increased perception given during his level-ups and the allocated free points.

Whoever this leader was, he wasn't an amateur. He knew his way around a bow, and unlike many others, he didn't hesitate. Jake felt the excitement practically boil in his stomach as he felt his wounds heal. Finally, he had found a worthwhile opponent. His terrible taunt and equally terrible acting had been one hundred percent worth it.

Chapter 14: Nicholas (2)

Nicholas did feel slightly regretful sacrificing his comrade in order to get the drop on the archer. Not because his former ally died, but because Nicholas had failed in killing the enemy. After he had given the wounded archer a healing potion, he decided to hide in a tree twenty or so meters away, with a clear line of sight to the wounded man.

In other words, he had set up his ally as bait.

The enemy archer seemed to have a perception skill of some kind or something that achieved a similar effect. A way of locating nearby individuals at the minimum. He first thought it was perhaps the Basic Tracking skill, but he had also seen the archer use basic stealth. Which would either mean that the man had unlocked two skills, hence being above level 10, or had some other means he was unaware of.

Ultimately it did not matter. What mattered was killing the bastard, and his trap had worked like a charm until the very last moment.

As he timed his shot with the enemy archers, the man reacted as if he had eyes in his back, and managed to slightly swerve to the side, lessening the damage from the shot

significantly. Nicholas cursed to himself as he shot another arrow, but once more, the man stumbled to the side, dodging without even turning around. Before he could fire another shot, the guy had already fled to safety behind a tree.

He jumped down from the tree he had been in and started running to the side while still keeping a good distance. He spotted the archer once more and quickly shot another arrow, but once more, he managed to slip around the tree.

What followed was a cat and mouse game, where Nicholas kept shooting arrows whenever he saw the other archer as he slowly got closer. Based on the movements of the other archer, he must have consumed a health potion, putting Nicholas on a timer before he would be back in top condition.

The entire thing was frustrating and only got worse as the other archer started returning fire. Neither of them seemed inclined to enter melee range, and with a good twenty meters still between them, they entered a standstill.

Jake felt quite a bit better after avoiding a couple more arrows, and he even started shooting back. His life was in danger at every moment, and he had a couple of close shaves, the other archer being both faster and stronger than him. He was enjoying every moment of it.

They both dodged and weaved in between trees, firing arrows back and forth, neither finding any luck. Jake was absolutely fine with this stalemate, as he started to feel better and better, his high vitality helping to heal his internal injuries.

Despite a healing potion's magical effect of restoring Health Points, it did not instantly fix the body. That was all up to the person's vitality. A stat that Jake had no lack of due to his [Bloodline Patriarch] title.

As they shot at each other, they ended up slowly moving closer together. The initial twenty meters became fifteen and then only ten. With less than 20 arrows remaining, the other archer finally entered Jake's Sphere of Perception, making the physical barriers between them far less relevant as he no longer needed to rely purely on sight.

The forest was quite a sight at this moment, with tens of trees having arrows stuck in them. Some were low on the trunk, while others were closer to their tops, as the two archers periodically climbed them in order to get any advantage.

Jake could feel the other archer becoming more and more frustrated throughout the fight, and when he entered his sphere, Jake finally confirmed the big frown on the man's face.

Jake smiled to himself as he called out. "This is fun, right?"

"What the fuck do you want?" the other archer yelled back.

"A name I would prefer. Name's Jake!" he replied.

"And why would I care about that?" the other man once more yelled, clearly not enjoying their exchange whatsoever.

Jake saw that the man was spending his time conjuring more arrows. Not that he had much to say as Jake was doing exactly the same. The other archer, however, was down to only eleven arrows, with Jake still having nineteen. Based on the other archer's skill level, he had likely counted them and knew he was at a disadvantage, leading him to endure the conversation to buy time.

“It would be a shame to just end up as another random notification of experience and tutorial points gained, wouldn’t it?” Jake replied, honestly.

The other man had skill to be sure. Despite his clear frustration with the situation, he still kept his cool, had a methodical approach, never losing control of his emotions enough to hamper his performance. This would not be Jake’s last fight with life and death on the line against a strong enemy, but he wanted to know the name of his first, at least. He slightly regretted not getting the name of the three assailants he had first killed, but the situation had not exactly called for a name-exchange.

“Still trying to act cool, huh? Get a grip; you are making me cringe over here,” he sneered back. “But if you care so much, then my name is Nicholas.”

“Well, nice to meet you, I guess. Was my taunt really that bad?” Jake asked. He had tried to make himself seem like a total badass, but, thinking back; it came off more as him acting like a fifteen-year-old’s version of a badass.

“Cringeworthy enough to make me want to get rid of you even without Richard ordering it. Seriously, what the fuck was that?” Nicholas asked, counting his stock of arrows. *Eighteen.*

“Seriously, that bad? I guess I should apologize?” Jake answered questionably, more than a little embarrassed. *Never going to do anything like that again. Ever.*

“Still going to kill you,” Nicholas answered, as he saw that he was now up to two dozen arrows. “You fucked up really bad, you know. Making an enemy out of us. Do you really think your friends will be safe after I kill you and return to tell how full of shit you were?”

“Okay, I guess this means talk is over,” Jake muttered as much to himself as Nicholas.

The conversation at this point would lead nowhere, but Jake was happy enough that he got a name to call his opponent. Jake exited from behind the tree and jumped to the side, shooting another arrow at Nicholas, who managed to dodge it quite easily.

The purpose of the shot had only been to interrupt his conjuration of arrows.

The game of shooting back and forth resumed, but Nicholas quickly noticed his disadvantage at the closer range, as the other archer seemed to always know what he was planning, despite having no line of sight. They were close enough that they ended up grazing each other here and there, but nothing even close to lethal.

Nicholas briefly considered running away but decided against it. He would be far more exposed trying to run, and even if he did manage to get away, it would achieve very little. An enemy archer of considerable skill would still be out there, and the next time he could

easily get the drop on him or one of his allies. Much like how they had gotten ambushed today.

And all of that was ignoring Richard's reaction to finding out that he had gotten his entire squad killed by a single man. He at least assumed they were all dead at this point, as none had shown up despite the lengthy battle.

Nicholas, instead of running away or getting more distance, decided to close the gap. As a part of his job before the initiation, he had training in hand-to-hand, and his skills with a knife were not to be scoffed at. While he had limited experience with a bow before the tutorial, the system had even given him a rank-upgrade to his one-handed weapon skill once. He had picked archer because he believed a ranged weapon would be superior to a melee one, despite light warrior perhaps suiting him better in retrospect.

He ran back and forth between the trees, and while the distance was only reduced by inches at a time as they kept shooting back and forth, he did make constant advances towards his opponent.

Jake, on the other hand, was fine with the other archer deciding to get closer. While he most certainly preferred ranged combat, he was not afraid to meet the enemy in melee. Not because he had any confidence in his abilities with a melee weapon, but because he unconditionally trusted his instincts at this point. They were not perfect, and he had taken several wounds during the fight, but it was nevertheless extremely reliable.

He suddenly got an idea as something appeared in his sphere while dodging yet another arrow. He kept dodging towards a certain tree while returning fire at opportune times.

Finally, he got to the particular tree he had been aiming for, having increased the distance to a good eight to ten meters once more. He dodged behind the tree he had been running towards, as Nicholas followed close behind. It was at this tree that Jake had killed the wounded archer at the beginning of the battle.

During the course of combat, they had moved around so much that they eventually switched locations from where they had started, as they both circled the forest from tree to tree. This meant that Nicholas could not see the dead archer from where he was now hiding. Jake, on the other hand, standing behind the tree, right next to the fresh corpse.

Jake once more smirked as he hoisted up the dead archer, leaning him against the tree in preparation. He then got out from behind the tree, firing yet another arrow. Jake purposefully stayed around this tree, as Nicholas finally got within a couple of meters.

Nicholas charged for Jake as he circled the tree where the archer was hiding. As he got around it, he instantly saw a person coming towards him, and with no hesitation, he stabbed for the throat. He smiled as he felt his knife sink into flesh as he looked at the face of his opponent, hoping to see the look of terror in his face.

What instead met him was the dead eyes of the comrade he had sacrificed earlier. Before he could process what had happened, a knife came out from behind the corpse, penetrating deep into his chest.

With a cough of blood, he fell backward, the knife being ripped out in the process. A warm feeling spread from his chest as blood poured out. He knew his heart had been hit and that he was done for as blood filled his mouth.

Jake looked down at the archer who was collapsed on the soft underbrush of the forest. His eyes still open as he struggled in vain. His vitality still kept him from an otherwise instant kill before the system as his health points were fast depleted.

“Good fight,” Jake stated solemnly.

“Fuck y-” Nicholas tried to say, as he coughed up more blood. Not even attempting to speak again before the final vestige of life left him.

Jake sighed as he got the notification confirming the kill. He went forward and closed the man's, no, Nicholas's eyes.

At one point, he had considered cutting off the head of this leader to send a message to Richard that his threat was serious, but he could not bring himself to defile the corpse of someone who had given him the best fight of his life. It would also be just a bit too cliché.

Jake instead decided to bury his fallen opponent's corpse, but first, he had some unfinished business with the last member of the hunting party. He walked towards where the archer had been frozen in fear and found him still in the same place, clearly attempting to hide.

He had no respect for this young man, only pity. He was barely an adult, if one at all, and he had been thrown into this messed up tutorial with beasts, monsters, and people out to kill him. People like Jake.

The kid's attempt to hide was rendered rather pointless by his constant shivering, making it easy to find him even without his sphere. The kid had his dagger in his hand, hidden under the cloak, but he had either lost or thrown away his bow at some point.

As Jake got closer, the archer started shaking even more, and finally summoned the courage to look up, only to see Jake in a blood-red cloak that used to be brown at some point. Before the kid managed to scream, Jake ran forward and easily disarmed him by giving him a solid punch in the gut, making him kneel over. His knife dropping to the ground.

"Your pals are dead, kid. Return to Richard and say that Nicholas fought well and do remind him that I was serious when I told him that I would kill him if he does anything to my friends. Oh, and say that he is free to send more people after me, I enjoyed it," Jake said, as he looked at the kid, who was clearly thinking that he was going to die.

The kid looked up with terror and hesitated at Jake's words. The man in front of him was, in his eyes, a monster in human skin. Out of nowhere, two of his friends had died, and as he was getting his bearings, he heard screams all around him as everyone panicked.

He had frozen up, not daring to move as he feared yet another arrow would come out of nowhere and end his life without him even knowing how. He instead hoped, no begged, that the others would win and come get him. But now everyone was dead, including the seemingly invincible Nicholas, who even the super-scary Richard respected as his equal. Worse yet, now this monster was standing right in front of him.

"Hello?" Jake wondered aloud as the kid still just stood there shivering. Hadn't he heard him?

The kid quickly tensed up before he quickly started running haphazardly, nearly falling over during his first couple of steps, until he got his bearings and started sprinting.

Jake was a bit confused for a moment but just shook his head as he looked at the kid running. It looked more than a little silly as the kid bumped into several trees on the way running like the devil was chasing him.

When the archer left his line of sight, Jake finally slumped down to the ground, tired as hell. Turns out that fighting someone to the death for the better part of an hour was exhausting.

Chapter 15: Diverging paths

As Jake was relaxing, he reflected on how weird stamina was. He was not tired per-se, as he did not feel like taking a nap, and his muscles did not ache or anything like that. He had not felt even a second of exhaustion during the fight itself, and yet the second the battle was done, he felt drained.

It was likely just mental exhaustion over physical exhaustion now that he was thinking about it. There was no stat for that. *Or does willpower help with that?* Naturally, he didn't know, so he could only guess, but since he hadn't really felt less mentally taxed even with the stat increases, he felt like it didn't.

It did kind of make sense that it was tiring to focus on interpreting the feelings from his Sphere of Perception all the time while also being under constant pressure. At the moment, it was still active, vaguely making him aware of everything within 8 meters or so, but he was not really directly using it. He couldn't really put it into words, but he guessed one would say it had an 'active' and a 'passive' mode.

Not that he had any clue how it worked. He just knew what was within it. He did not expressly 'see' anything; he just knew the shapes and sizes of everything. It would take a lot of experimentation to truly figure it out if it was even possible ever to do so, and for some reason, Jake doubted he would get any answers from just sitting there. Instead, he decided to go through his system notifications and level-ups. And boy, were there notifications.

****You have slain [Human (G) - lvl 3 / Warrior (Light) - lvl 6] - Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 365 TP earned****

****You have slain [Human (G) - lvl 2 / Archer - lvl 5] - Experience earned. 243 TP earned****

****You have slain [Human (G) - lvl 3 / Warrior (Light) - lvl 7] - Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 471 TP earned****

****'DING!' Class: [Archer] has reached level 6 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (G)] has reached level 3 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

****You have slain [Human (G) -lvl 3 / Warrior (Light) - lvl 6] - Experience earned. 394 TP earned****

****You have slain [Human (G) -lvl 3 / Archer - lvl 7] – A small amount of bonus experience earned for killing an enemy with a class above your class level. 654 TP earned****

****You have slain [Human (G) -lvl 4 / Archer - lvl 9] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 1167 TP earned****

****'DING!' Class: [Archer] has reached level 7 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

The gains were good, and he was especially surprised to see that Nicholas had been level 9 with quite a lot of tutorial points too, indicating that he had indeed killed a lot of beasts. He was strong, after all. It made Jake wonder if Richard lied when he said that he was level 9, but it was honestly inconsequential for now.

He only had a single free point left from the last level-up, as he mid-way through the fight threw all his points into perception. Perception was, without a doubt, the stat that he liked the most, and he felt like it had great synergy with his bloodline ability. Based on that, he decided just to drop his one free point into perception, as he opened his newly upgraded status menu.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (G) – lvl 3]

Class: [Archer - lvl 7]

Profession: N/A

Health Points (HP): 257/340

Mana Points (MP): 88/140

Stamina: 151/210

Stats

Strength: 21

Agility: 22

Endurance: 21

Vitality: 34

Toughness: 13

Wisdom: 14

Intelligence: 14

Perception: 37

Willpower: 12

Free points: 0

Once more, he confirmed the weirdness of the endurance stat. Due to the level-ups, his maximum stamina had increased by 40, making his current also increase by 40. Which ultimately led to him having more stamina than when he began the fight. He also decided to check the tutorial panel now that he was fiddling with menus.

Tutorial Panel

Duration: 63 days & 2:27:39

Total Survivors Remaining: 987/1200

TP Collected: 4629

So many people have died, and not even the first day has passed, he thought. 213 people dead. More than one-sixth of the total amount of those who had entered the tutorial. Not that Jake helped that statistic in any way, being personally responsible for nine of those deaths.

He had no clue if his TP was a lot or little, but according to the rules, he got half the TP of people he killed, so he assumed it had to be a lot. If Nicholas gave him 1167, he would have had double that at 2334 which was still only a bit over half of what he currently had. Not that he had any idea what those damn points could be used for quite yet.

His amount of points was rather respectable, though, as Nicholas had been level 9, while Jake was only level 7. But it did kind of make sense, as he took the accumulated points of people who had killed plenty of enemies to get to their levels. He also had no clue exactly how much TP different enemies gave. He had gotten over 300 from the level 10 boar, and that had been a shared kill.

For the badgers, he got 4 points from the level 3 ones, and 8 from the level 4 one. The sample size was way too small, but maybe the points just doubled for every level? Though that seemed insane. It did kind of fit with a level 10 boar giving a total of 512, and him getting 300 plus of that on a shared kill.

But that would mean a level 11 beast would give 1024, a level 12 2048, then 4096, and so on. It just seemed way too extreme to work like that. A level 20 beast would give a whopping 524.288 points, which was just absolutely insane if true. Granted, he had no idea how strong a level 20 beast would be, but he doubted they would warrant such a huge point increase.

Once more, he shook his head at his useless internal thoughts. It was a waste of time to think about, and he would just have to go hunt beasts to find out how many points each level gave easily.

He closed all his menus and got up feeling refreshed in both mind and body despite only relaxing for ten minutes. He walked over to where he had fought Nicholas walking up to the dead man's body. Jake could still see the unwillingness on his face, but nothing could be done about that. They had fought, and Jake had come out on top.

He had already resolved himself to give a respectable send-off for the man, but quickly met the obstacle of not having anything to dig with. He refused to leave the man's body for a bunch of overgrown badgers or deer to eat, so just leaving the body out in the open was not an option. Logically, it was a waste of time, but one could not always remain logical.

He instead decided to make a small fire. Fire was rather easy to make by creating sparks with two daggers, one of which he had taken from one of the dead archers. It was in no way a glorious pyre, but it got the job done. He watched solemnly as the corpse burned, nodding towards what had once been a powerful enemy as the flames consumed it.

Despite being in the same place for a couple of hours while preparing and burning the body, no one showed up. Jakes guessed that Richard had decided not to send any more would-be assassins after him for now.

With him being done there, he went to a nearby river and washed himself and his cloak. He bathed in full clothes, his dress-shirt and pants still on. The only thing he took off was his shoes and socks, as getting them wet somehow seemed too much.

After cleaning himself and having his cloak return to being more brown than red, he decided to set out once more and finally get his solo-hunting underway. Excited to finally get started, he smiled and ran into the depths of the forest once more, like a child entering an amusement park.

Richard had sent Nicholas and the other fighters with the stealth skill off nearly an hour ago. They knew to return to their original camp once the job was done, and he had nearly expected to meet them there. It took a good 40 minutes to walk with the newbies to their camp, arriving with little hassle along the way.

The situation was kind of awkward as they walked, but Richard had talked to the young man named Jacob and found him to be rather competent. He was good at reading people, and his group of survivors clearly listened to him and respected him. He was protective of them, but Richard only saw that as a bonus. Despite only interacting with the young man for a bit over half an hour, he had already come to have a modicum of respect for him.

The only thing he was annoyed at was the lack of information he got on the archer he had sent Nicholas after.

Jacob claimed that he had been their co-worker before the initiation, and that was about it. He seemed to barely know the guy. The only thing he knew was that he was good with a bow and that he tended to like being alone. It was annoying, but ultimately it mattered little as the archer was likely already dead by the time the point was discussed.

Or at least he assumed he was. But the lack of the kill-squad who went after him returning made him worried. The young man had been self-confident to the level of being ridiculous, and Richard was starting to fear that it had not all been bravado. Most of it had been without a doubt as he was pretty sure he remembered one of his lines being from a movie, but the paranoia still crept up on him.

Losing a member or two would be more than annoying. They had poured quite a few resources into them after all, raising them all to at least level 5. He had not for a second considered them being wiped out.

Nicholas was too good for that, in his opinion. He was at the same level as himself, and Richard had no confidence in fighting the man head-on. He was strong before the tutorial, and in here, he was only stronger. He did have a small fear that Nicholas would one day turn on him, but it did not seem too probable so far. Either way, he saw no scenario of that arrogant bastard or an archer surviving.

Arriving at their small camp with the newbies, the new arrivals looked about, with Richard nodding at the progress in his absence. The camp was basic, to say the least, but they had started constructing some make-shift huts using sticks and leaves, with some grander buildings already being planned. If they had to spend over two months here, they would have to make safe shelter eventually, and no time was better than the present.

After waiting another quarter of an hour, he saw someone running towards the camp, and he didn't immediately recognize him. A haggard teenager with cuts and bruises all over stumbled out the trees, making him get a better look. At first, Richard was happy as he recognized him as one of Nicholas' men but soon frowned as he noticed him being alone.

Getting a closer look, he saw the pure terror still present on the face of the youth. Richard instantly turned serious as several questions quickly popped up in his head. Could they have met a dangerous beast out there? Another group? Where was Nicholas?

He took a brisk walk towards the kid, as he practically collided with him. Before the kid could open his mouth, Richard cut him off:

"What happened? Where is Nicholas? Where the hell is the rest of your squad?"

"D... dead," the kid barely managed to stammer out.

Richard momentarily froze.

"Did Nicholas kill them?" he asked. If Nicholas had betrayed him...

"He... died..."

“WHAT!?” Richard yelled out, clearly scaring the already terrified kid. The kid barely managed to explain in bits and pieces how they had gotten into a fight and killed off, but Richard interrupted him.

“If he killed everyone,” Richard yelled, taking a deep breath as he looked down on the kid, “then why the fuck are you alive?”

At this point, the other people in the camp had noticed the commotion, including Jacob, who decided to get a bit closer and listen in. He knew that Richard had sent people after Jake and had hoped that his friend could somehow get away. It was an open secret that no one talked about.

But it sounded like it had gone quite different than he had hoped. He was honestly unsure whether he should be happy or not that his friend had killed a bunch of people.

The young archer was nearly pissing himself at this point. He gritted his teeth and explained what had happened in more detail. How they had been ambushed, and two people died as all they could do was try and get to cover. He told everything he knew, leaving out only the fact that he had hidden cowardly for the entire thing.

“He left me alive because he wanted me to deliver a message,” the archer said. “He told me that Nicholas fought well... and that he was serious about what he said earlier.”

The teenager left out the last part of sending more people. He was scared that it would only make Richard madder and that he would actually do it. If that happened, the teenager was sure that he would also be forced to go.

Despite leaving out the last part, Richard was still fuming. He was red in his face but, at the same time, very hesitant about what exactly to do. He looked at the kid, who, in turn, looked like he was contemplating if he should say something.

“What else? Spit it out!” He said, staring angrily.

“Boss... he was not normal. He... he enjoyed it... smiled while covered in blood... a monster.”

Richard was taken aback. He would normally yell more at the kid, but what he saw before him was not just a scared kid, but someone utterly terrified. Reprimanding him would do no good. He instead turned to Jacob, who stood not far away.

Jacob was also shocked at what he heard, especially the last part. He knew that Jake was strong, and he knew that he was rather particular when it comes to fighting... but to describe him as a monster.

But as he thought back to during the night, the blood-soaked Jake stood smiling amidst three brutally slain corpses... he got it. If he had been on the other side of that, it would have been utterly terrifying.

“What the hell is up with that guy?” Richard finally asked as he looked over at Jacob.

Jacob decided to stand his ground. He had heard what the kid said. Jake was out there, and he was a genuine threat from the sound of it. He was his group's strongest bargaining chip along with Caroline. And Jacob was nothing if not a good businessman.

“He is my friend and coworker like I told you, and he is particularly good with a bow. And when it comes to fighting, or ‘hunting’ as he calls it, he gets a bit in the zone per-se. He is weird, he is a loner. I quite honestly don’t understand much about him, but the one thing I do know is that he’s my friend.”

Richard looked at Jacob and saw no indication of the man lying about anything.

Whatever he is, Richard thought, he isn’t worth it.

He had lost enough good men for one day.

Chapter 16: A bit of hunting

The arrow whistled through the air towards the unaware boar. It penetrated deep into the chest of the beast as it whimpered and walked only a couple of meters before collapsing. The second beast wasn’t any luckier as an arrow hit it first in its snout, followed by another to the eye shortly after, ending its life nearly instantly.

The final overgrown pig managed only to get hit by a single arrow before it finally saw the attacker. A rather unimpressive man stood on a small hill overlooking the clearing.

Brown hair and eyes, a mediocre face, donning a cloak with a color palette a mix between brown and dried blood.

It charged at the man, and with its head kept low, managed to avoid any fatal hits. However, it helped it little as the archer dodged the boar just before it hit him and proceeded to stab his dagger into the side of the beast.

Squealing in pain, it tried to hit him with its tusks, only to once more be evaded and have yet another dagger plunged in its throat. It barely managed to gurgle out a few noises before it, too, collapsed.

Jake smiled to himself as he ripped his knives out of the beast, cleaned them on his cloak, and put them back in the two sheathes he had in his belt. He was starting to enjoy having two melee weapons, having kept the one he took from one of Richards archers.

He even considered getting the dual-wielding skill at some point, but that was for when he got his next skill selection. And speaking of levels, he took a brief look at his notification, noticing none had been gained yet. Then again, it was only the first group of beasts he had killed since burning Nicholas.

****You have slain [Boar – lvl 5] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 16 TP earned****

****You have slain [Boar – lvl 6] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 32 TP earned****

****You have slain [Boar – lvl 8] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 128 TP earned****

The one thing he did get out of it was to confirm his temporary theory that each level of the beasts doubled the amount of TP earned. He still severely doubted that it would work like that all the way, as the multiplication would just get silly at some point.

He also took notice of the part about bonus experience. His current level in his class was 7, yet he was counted as at a lower level. The only explanation he could find was that level was based on his Race Level and not his class level.

It did seem a bit imbalanced working like that, though. For him to kill a beast at his own level was incredibly easy. Even if one ignored his bloodline, he believed that even someone as untalented in combat as Jacob could manage a beast with an equal race-level as his own. Were humans simply favored by the system?

He had also noticed that the levels of enemies did indeed increase as he moved further and further into the forest. The place was huge, and he looked forward to knowing what was at the center of this whole tutorial area. In the beginning, the tutorial announcement had mentioned beast lords or something, so perhaps those were there.

Not that it mattered at the current time. What mattered now was levels. He felt free for the first time since entering the tutorial. Like the entire world was open for him to explore. Well, the entire world currently being this tutorial area.

Jake, however, quickly noticed a problem. The number of beasts in this area was severely lacking. So, to find more, he kept running inwards towards the center of the tutorial area.

After only half an hour, where all he encountered was a group of low level badgers, he finally came to a big clearing with a waterhole in the middle.

Around the water, he counted five deer and what looked like a stag. It had a huge crown of antlers and seemed to be teeming with power. The antlers themselves were unnatural, to say the least, literally glowing with dim light that he saw reflected on the surface of the water.

Jake quickly used identify on it and was pleasantly surprised.

[? – lvl 13]

Higher level than the boar. Even before using Identify, he could feel that it was stronger. And the antlers also made him believe that the beast had some kind of magical ability. Jake himself was only level 7, and he was a bit unsure if trying to take on this particular group was a wise move.

The five other deer around the stag were also all level 8 or 9. He was confident that he could kill a couple of them before they managed to reach him if he used good positioning, but if they did catch up to him... yeah, he was not going to outrun them. Four legs are better than two and all that.

The boar had also only been level 10, and it took him all his arrows, and that didn't even kill it. While he doubted that the stag was as resilient as the boar despite its higher level, the fact that it likely had magic was enough of a deterrent.

He thus decided to ignore them for now. After another level in his class, his race would also level, granting him quite a bit more power. By then, he could consider giving it a shot. Though waiting for his level 10 skill would probably be wiser.

He quickly backed away from the clearing and went on his way to look for other prey. It did not take him long to come upon another group of beasts.

This group consisted of what looked like a mix of giant chickens and ostriches. A type of flightless bird, based on the fact that their wings were way too small and their build way too bulky. From their long legs, he also assumed they could run at quite a high speed.

They had long necks extending up to a tiny head. What made them remind him of chickens was the fact that he could hear them clucking. They, however, did not peck at plants or for insects but instead at a dead badger.

Are there really only carnivores in this damn place? he thought. It just felt like a kind of fucked up and unoptimized eco-system that, quite frankly, made no sense. There were plants and trees everywhere, and yet not a single animal ate them. Or maybe the docile birds did. Damn those weird-ass birds.

He had attempted to shoot one down on several occasions, but whenever he tried, they just dodged the arrow like it was nothing. He could not identify them, so he had no idea if they were secretly overpowered super-beasts. But whatever they were, they seemed to have no concerns aside from increasing the ambiance in the forest with their chirping.

But back to the ostriches, which he had decided to just call them. He used Identify on them one by one, finding all three to be level 8.

They were good prey. Their necks were incredibly exposed if hard targets as they moved constantly while eating.

With no hesitation, he raised his bow and fired an arrow, already drawing another before the first one hit. It hit one of the ostriches and penetrated straight through its neck, hitting a tree behind it. The beasts that hadn't been hit raised their heads from the badger they had been pecking at and spotted Jake as another arrow came. The one that had been hit only made gurgling noises as it spasmed on the ground.

Disappointingly his next arrow missed as the giant birds managed to avoid it. Not really intentionally, though, as they were just shifting their legs to get into a better posture to attack.

As with all other beasts, the ostriches charged over at Jake the second they spotted him. He managed to shoot another arrow, hitting one of them in the chest, only doing insignificant damage based on it barely reacting. They reached him in mere seconds, as he tossed the bow to the side and drew both his daggers.

The ostriches fighting style revolved around quick pecks with their beaks, reminiscent of a snake trying to bite, and powerful kicks. Without his danger sense, he would have been pecked to death within seconds.

The flaw in the ostriches fighting style was how exposed their necks were when they snapped forward. With a backhanded blow, he managed to plunge his dagger into the neck of the one he had wounded earlier. This, however, left him open as the other kicked him. He barely managed to raise his other arm to block as the heavy force of the foot hit him.

The impact made him fly several meters through the air as he felt his shoulder dislocate. He barely managed to get up and roll to the side as the beast was once more upon him.

He had lost both his daggers at this point, as he had dropped the one not currently stuck in an ostrich's neck when he got kicked. He knew where it was due to his sphere, but the beast didn't look like it wanted to give him time to pick it up. It didn't help that it was pretty much standing on it either.

The beast attacked again, and Jake dodged it once more, biting through the pain from his shoulder as his arm hung uselessly to his side. Dodging was easy enough with only one enemy left and his forever-present bloodline ability. The ostrich finally managed to slip up as it attempted to peck him but ended up smashing its head into a tree instead.

Jake was once more reminded of the power of the peck when he saw it penetrate its beak into the tree. The power working against it this time as it was unable to pull it out from the tough bark again, leaving it stuck. Jake quickly pulled an arrow from his quiver and stabbed it through the exposed and immobile neck.

The beast struggled for a bit before it, too, finally fell dead from the blood-loss. He quickly checked his notification but was quickly disappointed by the lack of any levels.

****You have slain [Ostrich - lvl 8] - Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 128 TP earned****

****You have slain [Ostrich – lvl 8] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 128 TP earned****

****You have slain [Ostrich – lvl 8] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 128 TP earned****

He was still completely unsure how the hell the system decided on the names of these beasts. Most of them seemed just to be ‘generic animal’ even if they weren’t completely equivalent to that animal. Then there was also the big piggie that, for some reason, was called an Irontusk boar. The tusks weren’t even made of iron!

Shaking his head, he once more questioned why he wasted so much time pondering on meaningless questions, which in itself was a meaningless question.

Looking at his side, he inspected the shoulder that was clearly dislocated, and while he knew that you could ‘snap’ it into place, it was not something he had ever done or tried. He had seen some videos on the internet of it done, and it seemed easy enough...

What followed was Jake spending a bit over half an hour positioning his arm in weird ways, slamming his shoulder into trees, and doing weird movements trying to snap it back in place. The pain was excruciating as he cursed himself for not just drinking a healing potion or something.

Decided to take a break from his self-inflicted torture, he sat down on a stone as his shoulder sent waves of pain throughout his body. As he wondered how the hell to fix it, he suddenly felt his arm shift slightly as it snapped into place.

It turns out that his body would heal something like a dislocated shoulder by itself if he just gave it a bit of time. The wonders of vitality, it seems. So, spending thirty minutes turned out to just be an incredible act of masochism for no damn reason. He was even pretty sure he saw one of those damn birds throw a condescending glance at him.

Jake once more cursed himself as he collected his things. He picked up the bow he had dropped earlier as well as both daggers. He had to get his annoyance out on something and quickly found another group of ostriches, only two of them this time: one level 8 and one level 9.

This fight, however, went way easier as he picked the level 9 one off right away and managed to injure the level 8 one with two arrows before it even reached him.

Instead of trying to dance around evading it, he baited it into pecking a tree, followed by a quick decapitation in one swift swipe of his knife.

****You have slain [Ostrich – lvl 9] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 256 TP earned****

****You have slain [Ostrich – lvl 8] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 128 TP earned****

****'DING!' Class: [Archer] has reached level 8 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (G)] has reached level 4 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

This fight netted him the levels he wanted. He briefly considered going back for the stag now but decided against it. The ostriches had reminded him that a beast could easily take you by surprise, and it would be quite stupid to suddenly get insta-killed by some mega magic antler-beam.

He instead proceeded to hunt down more beasts in the area. He mainly found lower-leveled deer and badgers, but any kill was worth it. He got a couple of scratches here and there, the worst being when he engaged a group of four low-level badgers, all not above level 4.

It, however, quickly turned out that there were not only four badgers. Instead, another seven were hidden in the nearby bushes, and they all ran at him simultaneously. The following fight turned out to be grueling. He managed to kill three of them before they reached him but had to bring out his daggers for the remaining eight.

None of them were above level 5, but he took a lot of damage as he cut them down one by one. His sphere of perception in concert with his instincts and danger perception allowed him to minimize the damage he took, but avoiding all attacks was impossible.

He ended the fight with only 56 health remaining. His cloak once more blood-soaked, now also filled with holes and tears. The worst part was that the whole thing did not even give him a damn level.

And to make a shitty situation even shittier, then the entire horde only gave him a measly 62 TP. Most of them had been level 2 and 3, with only one at level 5, making the points given abysmal. He quickly told himself that he would not waste time on beasts too far below his level anymore.

He quickly drank a healing potion, refilling his health pool completely—the potion restoring nearly 300 HP.

Add another question to the list: How much does an inferior-rank healing potion heal?

He sighed as he got up, looking at the carnage around him. Only a couple of hours had passed since he last cleaned himself, and he was now once again covered in blood from head to toe.

While he had to admit he was thoroughly enjoying himself in the forest, he did kind of miss the ability to take a nice warm shower. He would have to bring that up with the manager of the tutorial at an opportune time.

Chapter 17: Loot

Jake considered taking a quick trip to clean off all the blood but decided against it. Chances are, he was going to get dirty again from all the fighting one way or another. He instead picked up his bow, which he had dropped during the fight with the horde of badgers.

He started looking for more prey to hunt. While walking, he also conjured more arrows in order to fill his quiver. He had no idea what he would do if he did not have this magical quiver. He imagined having to make every single arrow manually and shivered at the thought.

While walking, he got an idea that could perhaps help alleviate his issues locating prey. To find something to hunt and get a good view of his surroundings, he found the biggest tree he could. The thing easily exceeded 80 meters and towered over the nearby trees.

The climb itself was surprisingly easy. The stats had made Jake's grip strength strong enough that he could grab the small imperfections in the rough bark and easily climb. It took him a couple of minutes as he finally got above the tree-line of the surrounding trees and activated his Archer's Eye.

His vision turned sharper, and he looked around him. He could see the spot where they had initially entered the tutorial, and in the distance, he still saw the vast wall. His suspicions that this whole place was a sphere was only fortified as his now even more improved vision allowed him to see details he couldn't before.

The curvature of the wall in the distance was slight but noticeable. It was bending for sure. Jake could not see the base or top of the wall properly, but if his guess of the spherical design were correct, they would naturally extend to the sky.

After looking a bit more around, he saw something glinting in a tree a couple of hundreds of meters away from him. It was slightly above his eye-level and was in another of the super-tall trees, one even more massive than the one he was currently sitting in. He was nearly 70 meters up at this point, and this glinting object was perhaps 100 meters up.

Despite his Archer's Eye's effectiveness, he could not see what it was, only increasing his curiosity. He decided to climb down the tree and head towards the even taller tree with the shiny object. Who doesn't like shiny things, right?

On the way, he encountered a small group of deer, all level 7, which he easily killed. Once again, not getting a level. The only thing he got out of it was a bit of TP and even more blood on him that he couldn't be bothered washing off.

He quickly reached the tree, and once more, started climbing. It went easy enough like before, as he got further and further up. He kept looking at the bark as he rose, searching for what had been reflecting the light.

Finally, he spotted what seemed like a hole in the tree trunk above him. When he got up there, he saw that the opening was more than big enough for him to climb into. The tree was, after all, massive, having a diameter above five meters. When he got into the hole, he finally spotted what had returned the light.

A shining box of either bronze or brass with pretty decorations of jewels was sitting on a small wooden platform. The hole was far from big enough for Jake to stand in, but he could still crawl. Before he crawled to the box, he focused on his Sphere of Perception and looked for any potential traps.

You may call him overly paranoid, but Jake found it rather suspicious for jewel-boxes to be found in giant trees. And yet his suspicions were unfounded as he saw nothing indicating a trap or any foul play. It was just a perfectly normal jeweled box in a perfectly normal tree-hole. He was unable to see what was inside the box even with his sphere, and quickly found the reason as he used Identify on it:

[Magical Jeweled Lockbox (Uncommon)] – A system-created magical lockbox enchanted with the ability to block off all types of attempts to peek inside before opening.

He nearly got the sense that the part about blocking out peepers was directly aimed at him. *Sorry for having an omnipresent perception-ability, I guess?*

The box was able to block him out and was apparently created by the system. It was also the first uncommon-rarity item he had encountered since entering the tutorial. It was the highest level of rarity he had seen thus far everywhere; everything else was at most common-rarity. Well, that was ignoring his bloodline ability and the translation skill, which did not have any rarity-ranking besides just being unique.

His suspicions of the box were lessened, but he was still a bit unsure if it was safe to open. Then again, unless the system was just being a complete dick, he saw no reason for an all-powerful entity to leave a killer-box in a tutorial. Though it could be a mimic? Everyone loves mimics, right? *I hope it isn't a mimic.*

While the tutorial had not been benevolent in any way, it did seem to have a sense of fairness. Such as beasts not hunting at night, water being plentiful, and the beasts being edible. The beasts were also all relatively passive, only really attacking if you attack them first.

Having decided to risk it, he crawled to the box and found it had no lock, despite it being called a lockbox. Only a small mechanism that you could turn for it to open. He opened the box, once more cautious as to what was found inside.

And what he found inside was a pair of leather bracers. They seemed to be made from very high-quality leather, and he quickly identified them.

[Leather Bracers of the Novice Rogue (Uncommon)] – A pair of bracers made of fine leather, originally designed for new initiates in the Order of Umbra. Enchantments: Self-Repair. +5 agility, +3 strength. Increases the effectiveness of all stealth skills, further amplified while remaining hidden in the shadows.

Requirements: Lvl 5+ in any class or humanoid race. Stealth-based skill.

Well, if that isn't something, Jake thought happily reading through the item description. While he had no idea what the Order of Umbra was or whatever, the bonus to the stats and his stealth was more than welcome. Also, the fact that they could apparently self-repair was pretty damn cool.

But the mere fact that such equipment existed hidden in this forest was a huge discovery. So far, Jake had not been looking for things like the lockbox with his sphere of perception, that while passively active at all times, did not really make him notice anything that was not moving unless he was looking for it purposefully.

He could have moved past several of such lockboxes already. Or perhaps not. None of the other humans he had encountered so far had any equipment not provided during the introduction, so such lockboxes were likely not just lying around.

Jake picked up the bracers from the lockbox, and as soon as he had them in his hands, the box slowly sank into the wooden platform. He could see that the box was not actually merging into the tree with his sphere; it was just... disappearing. When the final part of

the box sank into the wood, all traces of the container having ever existed vanished with it. Very similar to what had happened with the giant pillar at the beginning of the tutorial.

He put on the bracers, finding it relatively easy. The leather was strong, far more robust than any other material he had seen with that kind of flexibility. He could likely even block swords and daggers with them, as their cutting resistance seemed extraordinary.

After fully equipping them, he didn't actually feel any different. He tried fiddling with them a bit, making sure they were strapped correctly and all. As he was beginning to wonder if they were broken or that he didn't meet the requirements to equip them, he got the idea to inject mana into the braces as he had done with his quiver.

The response came instantly. Jake felt his mana flow into the bracers completely unimpeded and immediately felt a warm rush through his body, similar to when he leveled up. He felt the strength and especially the agility as 5 extra stats were not a minor matter at this stage. It was more stats total than a level in his class.

Taking out his dagger, he tried cutting the bracers, finding little leeway. What he did find, however, was the small mark he made on the bracers quickly disappear in only a couple of seconds. That repair function sure seemed handy, as he had absolutely no experience in maintaining any of his gear.

This could also be seen as his daggers had dulled slightly compared to the beginning, but they remained sharp enough to kill beasts. He had a feeling they would soon start to become dull, though.

Finding nothing else interesting in the tree, he climbed down after scouting a bit around, taking advantage of his tall vantage point. Besides the vista being quite beautiful, he also

spotted a group of animals that he did not immediately recognize when he was halfway down the tree and decided to make them his next target.

He could have spent some more time experimenting with how exactly the equipment worked with the system, but he was far more interested in testing its effects in combat. He could do stuff like that later. Right now, he was looking for a fight.

After a brief stroll that was faster than his pre-tutorial top sprinting speed, he arrived at the hill where he had seen the beasts. These were... different. They looked like hairless rodents or rats or something. Molerats perhaps? Either way, they were as ugly as sin.

Their frightening appearance was only made worse by their size. The beasts were big. Not dog-size big, but pony-size big. Despite them being on four legs, they were nearly at Jake's eye-height. Inspecting them, he was not very surprised.

[??? – lvl 10]

[??? – lvl 10]

There were only two of them, but both were level 10. The same level as the big boar. But he was different than he was then. He had leveled plenty, and he even had the new bracers that increased his offensive power significantly.

These rats had weak defenses on his initial assessment, which made him confident in facing them. Even if he could not kill both, killing one and then escaping would also be worth it.

But more so than any logical justifications, he just wanted to fight them. A hunt had to not be utterly unbalanced to be interesting after all.

He decided to get a bit more tactical as he climbed a nearby tree. The two rats were both situated on a hill, just idling about. He could attack them on the hill, but if he decided to run, they would chase him in a downward slope, which seemed like a bad idea for several reasons.

Instead, he would bombard them from a tree and force them to come to him.

After finding a suitable tree, he climbed it and got in position. Chances are they could climb trees, so he decided a spot where he could also conveniently shoot down the trunk in case they followed up after him.

He nocked an arrow and drew his bow. He lined up his shot and waited for the one closest to him to stop moving. Finding his chance, he released the arrow and saw it fly true, hitting the rat in the side of its head, penetrating all the way into the brain as he had hit its ear-canal. He was quite proud of that one.

The beast squealed in a noise far louder than anything he had ever heard before. It was loud enough to make his ears ring, as he missed his second arrow due to feeling slightly dizzy. The molerat-thing he hit in the brain earlier somehow started rushing toward him with its friend but was unable to properly run, as it kept stumbling and making spasms. It ended up falling over itself as it started just scratching at the ground.

However, Jake had little time to think as the uninjured molerat still got closer, leaving its squirming friend behind. He managed to get his dizziness under control as he shot another arrow, hitting the now formerly undamaged beast in its back.

The mole only hissed a bit as it reached the tree, yanked its claws into the wood, and started climbing in small jumps. Jake turned his bow towards it and had a clear shot down the trunk. As the beast was climbing head-first, he managed to hit it in the side of its head.

What followed was another loud squeal; this one, however far closer to him. The pain was unbelievable as he lost all hearing, and he felt blood drip out of his ears. All his senses were completely thrown off, and he nearly stumbled and fell down from the tree.

He managed to steady himself, however, as his danger-sense kicked in. The beast was just about to bite his leg off, as he managed to barely grab a branch above him, lifting his legs. The beast was about to bite him once more as he swung back and kicked it square in its ugly mug.

The rat made another squeal as it lost its grip on the tree and fell down. Jake was somehow thankful that his eardrums had already ruptured as he was unable to hear this squeal. He could still feel the vibrations in the air from it, though, showing just how ridiculous it was.

The beast landed pretty hard on the ground, and the far-too-large rats' problems only got worse as an arrow once more struck it. It tried to get back up and climb the tree again, but Jake kept firing arrows at it every time it tried, making it fall back down, time and time again.

After a bit, the beast ran out of strength and collapsed. It was still making small movements but appeared unable to get back up.

He then turned his attention towards the rat he had first shot. He had not yet gotten any kill notifications, so he knew it was still alive.

What he saw was the beast clawing at the ground around it, still trying to make it to him. It walked like it was blackout-drunk. Jake guessed he had managed to hit the beast's brain in a pretty important place, yet not somewhere important enough to kill it. He felt a tinge of pity as he fired more arrows at it.

After he had shot a couple, he got a notification from the other one that had finally bled out beneath him. Less than half a minute later, the other one also died.

****You have slain [Molerat Screecher – lvl 10] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 500 TP earned****

****You have slain [Molerat Screecher – lvl 10] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 500 TP earned****

****'DING!' class: [Archer] has reached level 9 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

He breathed out a sigh of relief as he finally got the level. The name of the rats was not surprising and also had more flair than the lower leveled ones. 500 TP was also not the 512 he would have expected if the double-TP-every-level-hypothesis held true, which meant that sadly there would be no level 30 beasts giving millions of TP a kill.

He was now convinced that something happened at level 10 to make the beasts significantly stronger. The huge boar and these rats had been far stronger than level 9 beasts. Their stats at least were higher by quite a considerable margin.

Jake sat down on the ground to relax for now, as he allowed his ears time to heal. He at least hoped they would recover. His health points had barely been dented, so drinking a healing potion would be pointless. After only a couple of relaxing minutes, he heard something pop, and sound once again returned to his world.

He smiled at the wonders of vitality as he climbed down from the tree. There was no time to waste sitting around doing nothing. Time is of the essence and all that. After all, there were more beasts to hunt, and from his recent discovery, also loot to be found.

Chapter 18: Finding a challenge

Jake ripped his knife out of the fallen Irontusk Boar, the same kind he had killed when he was still with his party. The level 10 beast had been quite the challenge for their entire team then, but this time he took it down solo with little trouble. It still took a bit more than twenty arrows in total, but the beast did fall. It was by far the most resilient beast out there.

Like its brethren, this one was surrounded by a bunch of small level 1 and 2 boars. All of which were quickly culled during the fight.

The boar was strong, fast, and a boss when it came to taking hits. But all it did was charge back and forth, attempting to trample him. He just had to kite it around and make it smash into things until it died.

However, his reason for attacking this particular boar-group was not solely for the sweet experience. The reason was that he had spotted an object in his Sphere of Perception hidden within a hollow log in the middle of the pig's clearing.

In the log was hidden a small box. However, this box was not a nice jeweled one, but just bronze. Using Identify confirmed it indeed wasn't as good as the jeweled one.

[Magical Bronze Lockbox (Common)] – A system-created magical lockbox enchanted with the ability to block off all types of attempts to peek inside before opened

Nevertheless, beggars can't be choosers. He opened the lockbox and found a small round object. It looked like a stone coin. Not wasting any more time wondering what exactly he was holding, he identified it.

[Tutorial Equipment Upgrade Token (Common)] – Upgrade any basic starting item from the Tutorial to common-rarity.

An item that was by far the most game-like he had encountered. Just a straight-up upgrade token. Not that Jake was in any way disappointed by the result. The thought of upgrading his cloak or bow was a welcome one.

He did not even consider upgrading his knife despite how much he used it. After all, his goal was never to use the dagger unless absolutely necessary, and a stronger bow would allow him to kill things easier.

His quiver was also out of the question because it was already common-rarity. Quite self-explanatory, really.

It was a toss-up between the bow and cloak then. Looking at this cloak, it was tattered and badly damaged, so Jake wondered what the effect of upgrading it would be. If it mended the thing, it nearly made it worth it.

The bow would likely increase the damage he could do. He had thought that his increased strength would make the bow less effective by now, as he would draw it fully. He even feared that he would end up snapping it at one point. However, the bow held up strong, and he did not feel its durability reach any limits quite yet.

In fact, it almost felt like it kept getting more durable along with him. Like it somehow adjusted to his higher stats and kept the string taut and the wood healthy and resilient. It was a bit like some of the more modern compound bows with adjustable draw-strength.

Those used technology and physics, though. While Jake's current wooden bow used magic or system-fuckery of some kind. Ultimately it didn't matter much; what mattered was that his current bow was still capable of fully supporting his fighting style.

Thus, he decided to try and upgrade his cloak. He took it off and laid it across a stone as he held the token up. He wondered how to use it as a window popped up.

Use [Tutorial Equipment Upgrade Token (Common)] on [Archer's Cloak (unranked)]?

He quickly agreed as the token turned to dust that was carried off by the wind. At the same moment, his cloak rapidly mended and was cleaned of all the blood and dirt. It was like new again. It didn't look like it had changed much except for a good dry-cleaning in a quick visual inspection.

Touching it, however, it felt far less coarse than before and far more comfortable to wear. Jake quickly focused on it and used Identify.

[Archer's Cloak (Common)] – A cloak handed out for the Tutorial, now upgraded with a token. Made of resilient cloth that is resistant to slashing attacks. Enchantments: Self-Repair.

Requirements: Tutorial Attendee. Archer Class

While certainly less impressive than his bracers, the self-repair enchant itself made it worth it. Finally, he would not walk around looking like a murderhobo. Well, he kind of still looked like a murderhobo, just one wearing a nice cloak.

He felt quite a bit better now that he didn't have the constant smell of sweat and blood enter his nostrils at every moment. He proceeded to scout a bit around, looking for more lockboxes. Finding nothing, he noticed it starting to get a little darker. He opened the tutorial panel to see what the time said.

Tutorial Panel

Duration: 62 days & 15:22:58

Total Survivors Remaining: 965/1200

TP Collected: 7335

It had been around noon when they entered this place. With the timer saying 15 hours now, that meant it had to be around 6 pm or so?

He thought about what his plans for the night would be. He did not feel tired in the least as of yet, the improved stats doing work. He also took small breaks between battles. While the physical exertion did matter, mental exhaustion was the real killer. He had to stay sharp.

Hunting in the night was certainly an option, but he had no idea how the beasts would react. They seemed not to be very active, but he doubted they would just leave him alone if he started to attack them. The problem, however, would be finding them hidden in the shade of the trees.

His Sphere of Perception offered him a great way of scouting his immediate surroundings, but it provided no way of seeing far ahead.

But then he thought of some caves he had seen earlier when he looked for loot. His sphere would be incredibly useful in a small closed-off space. And it would be completely dark, something mattering little to him with his sphere, but it would likely handicap the beasts living in there somewhat.

He did realize that caves were not the ideal place to fight for a ranged combatant like him, but he decided to give it a shot anyway. Besides, what place would be better to hide lockboxes than caves?

But before then, he still had daylight to burn, beasts to hunt, and loot to... well, loot.

He spent the next couple of hours looking for boxes and killing beasts, but quickly noticed the issue of finding high-level beasts. He still had the stag to go back for, but the beast still gave him a distinct sense of danger.

He tried to ignore anything below level 8 but did kill a couple, but quickly noticed a huge issue. Humans.

Several groups were still up and about, walking the forest in groups. Jake avoided them like the plague, but that did result in him missing out on several beasts to kill. He wasn't going to attack other humans either. While Jake had killed quite a handful already, all of

them were in self-defense. Alright, he did bait some of them to attack him, but it was still *kinda* self-defense.

Either way, he wasn't going to go full psycho and begin hunting people. So he stayed hidden.

By the time the moon was out, and it was starting to get really dark, he had barely killed anything, and found no lockboxes or gotten any levels.

The only positive aspect was that his new cloak turned out to be great, especially when he combined it with his new bracers. They were incredibly strong, and he even had a level 9 badger bite down on them, discovering that its teeth were unable to pierce all the way through.

The cloak also got some tears and a few small holes during his hunt, but they repaired themselves quickly.

He was currently sitting on a root leaning against a tree as he conjured more arrows. It started to get too dark to hunt properly, and the beasts had also begun going idle. He had seen a group of deer that all seemed to be sleeping.

He decided to finally head to one of the caves he had seen embedded in a hill earlier, with it being too late to hunt anymore. Or perhaps calling it a hole in a hill would be accurate, as it did not actually consist of rock.

He got to the cave, which, yes, he had decided to call it a cave anyway, and looked inside. It seemed rather unassuming like most of the other caves he had encountered, but this one gave him a bit of a special feeling. He couldn't quite put his finger on why, but he felt like there was something special about it.

Walking inside, he quickly found himself in complete darkness after barely entering and taking a single turn. The hill hadn't been that big from the outside, but the path was sloping downwards.

As he walked, he found no beasts or enemies of any kind. All he saw was a musty cave. As he got in further and further, he spotted faint light in the distance. His sphere instantly made him aware that the source of light was small fungi.

Getting closer to them, he saw they were glowing blue mushrooms. Intrigued, he tried using identify, only to be met with a generic [Mushroom] message. Yeah, he was going to avoid touching those as he walked in further.

He quickly noticed that he was walking in a circle, with the downward pattern continuing like a spiral staircase. The mushrooms only got more numerous as he descended, soon not only being on the ground but also the walls and the ceiling.

When dark-green moss also started appearing on the wall, he considered going back. He was not very educated when it came to fungi, but he knew that they could be dangerous even if you didn't touch them.

And he currently found himself in a small closed-off space surrounded by them, with potentially deadly spores floating in the air all around him. His Sphere of Perception was

quite overpowered, but it did not allow him to spot minuscule objects like spores or particles of dust.

Fungi liked to grow in damp places, with the cave certainly fitting that criteria, but so do human lungs. The fact that a fungus can take root inside the body was precisely why they could be so dangerous.

He remembered some friends of his family who had a bad case of mold in their house, and they only found out when their youngest kid got really sick. It was an invisible, silent killer.

And these were glowing magic mushrooms. Even if they were just normal ones if they managed to infect him and take root within his body, would healing potions even do anything? Would his vitality simply accelerate their growth?

But on the other hand, this place was unique. And if Jake had learned anything from videogames or novels, it was that unique and interesting places contain something equally unique and interesting. That, or it was a bad game.

No risk, no reward, he thought to himself as he kept walking.

More and more moss and mushrooms were growing on the walls as he got further in, and by now, he could not avoid stepping on mushrooms as he walked. Small spores were swept up, visible in the blue light, as he touched the mushrooms.

He covered his mouth with the upper part of his cloak, trying to minimize his intake of air as much as possible. His danger-sense was silent, but then again, he had no idea if it worked on passive threats like this. Assuming it was even a threat.

After another ten minutes, he had descended quite a bit, and the mushrooms were at peak-growth. The moss had also gotten so bad that it hung from the ceiling.

Turning back now would be too late if these things were infectious anyway, so he decided just to keep walking, hoping to find something worth his time.

After walking for over an hour, he started to regret ever going to this place. Nothing had changed for the entire hour; it was just more of the same. He even guessed he was stuck in a loop or something and tried stabbing an arrow into the dirt-wall to serve as a marker.

After walking for another half an hour after that, he had still not encountered his arrow. If he wasn't walking in a circle, exactly how far had he gone? He had to be hundreds of meters down by now.

The only positive aspect was that something good just *had* to be down here. Either that or the system was a massive troll.

A quarter of an hour later, he finally reached the end of the tunnel. What met him was not a dirt wall, however, but a wooden door. The door looked rotten like it had been here since ancient times, with no apparent door handle.

Looking at his Sphere of Perception, he saw nothing behind the door, making him wonder if this was even a door or just a door-shaped wooden wall. Was it some kind of big wooden shield, maybe? He tried to use Identify on it but got nothing.

Getting nothing from any of his usual means, he did what any reasonable person would do in his situation. He poked it.

Tutorial Challenge Dungeon Discovered!

Challenge Dungeons found throughout the multiverse offer danger and rewards hand-in-hand, being known as natural treasures. This variant is only found within the Tutorials provided by the system to newly integrated races. Enter at your own risk.

Requirements to enter: Must be below level 10 in any class or race. Must not have a profession. Must be top 5% in Tutorial Points.

Requirements to enter met.

WARNING: Challenge Dungeons cannot be entered in groups. Only 1 challenger allowed per dungeon.

Enter the dungeon?

Y/N

I found something for sure, he thought.

Earlier, he thought that lockboxes with loot in them were the most game-like element he had discovered so far, but this was literally a dungeon. Okay, maybe the whole stat-thing is also very game-like, but seriously, *dungeons*.

It was well hidden, and he had no doubt it would be dangerous. The requirements to even enter were also quite something. As it required one not to have a profession, did this mean it was related to unlocking one? Or did it have something to do with how strong he was allowed to be?

The last tutorial points were also interesting as it confirmed him to be in the top 5%. With less than a thousand people alive, that put him in the top 50. He wasn't sure if he should be happy about it, though, as he knew the only reason for that was killing humans.

Not entering the dungeon did not even occur to him. The thing he desired the most was a good challenge. And this dungeon literally had '*challenge*' in the name. How could he say no?

He checked his equipment, making sure that everything was as it should be. His stamina was still high, and he did not feel even a whiff of fatigue.

He didn't hesitate any longer as he accepted the challenge with great excitement.

The 93rd universe had been integrated. The enlightened natives had entered their tutorials as the multiverse's forces moved to capitalize on the great shift. Capitalize on the natives and even the tutorials themselves.

For a new universe to be integrated was not a monumental event only for the universe in question, but the entire multiverse. It brought not just expansion but change.

Powerful entities moved to take advantage of the changes. Paths had been opened to even the mightiest of beings. It was an excellent opportunity to break through their limits or further expand their influence.

Others were fearful of the change. Feared what it would bring. These did all they could to solidify their positions.

But some... some did nothing.

An entity laid in its realm of desolation as it was stirred awake by the great shift. Its eyes opened as it stared into the void.

"The 93rd era has begun, huh," it muttered listlessly before closing its eyes once more—the significant expansion and change of little interest. Yet it couldn't help but hope that this time something would change. A hope it quickly quelled from its mind as it entered meditation once more.

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.

Chapter 20: Death & courage

As the timer ticked down, he assessed the situation. He knew what to do about the snake platforms, and as he had been given a dagger, he assumed it would have something to do with deactivating either the winged serpent or the wyvern symbols.

If his whole evolution theory was correct, he likely had to do something with the winged serpent symbol. The picture was the same as in the room prior, depicting a winged serpent flying over humanoids and animals, who all submitted before the beast.

If he had to feed the mushroom-eating snake mushrooms, did he have to feed the winged serpent too? It seemed probable. There was just one tiny issue. The only other thing than itself in the picture was other living things. And he was the only human or animal present; he didn't like where his logic was going.

But he would have to figure something out. The knife was clearly there to cut something, and the only things he had to cut were stones, mushrooms, and himself. And as much as he would like to go on a rampage slicing and dicing mushrooms, he was pretty sure what to cut. *Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained.*

He lifted the knife and made a small cut in the palm of his hand. Because that's what you're supposed to do, right?

He hissed in pain as it started bleeding. Standing at the edge of the platform, he threw out a few drops of blood, luckily hitting one of the symbols with a winged serpent on. When the blood touched it, the blue light disappeared, just like it had when he fed the small snake mushrooms.

Smiling to himself, he nodded at his brilliance. *Not that hard.* He started looking for the pattern he would have to jump as he wrapped up his hand in the cloth of his robe. This room's path was a bit longer than the last one, but it should be manageable. *Alright so first there... then there...*

The seconds ticked by as he mapped out the route in his mind. But he soon noticed an issue. Not with his intended path, but his hand. It hadn't stopped bleeding; in fact, it felt like it was getting worse.

"Fuck me," he cursed out loud as he'd just put himself on an even tighter timer.

He quickly went for the pattern he had decided on and started throwing mushrooms and blood all around him as he leaped on the first platform. It made his bleeding hand hurt as it was unwrapped from his cloak, but quite frankly, he wasn't sure it could get any worse.

As he got a bit over halfway, he started feeling dizzy and nearly stumbled. The blood was coming out at a frightening speed, and his attempts to put pressure on the wound didn't do jack shit.

He kept pushing forward as his hand began to feel cold, a coldness that soon spread up his arm. A sense of weakness began to overtake his entire body as he finally made it to the last platform and, with a half-hearted leap, tried to jump into the next hallway.

His half-heartedness resulting in him not getting all the way, hitting the ledge hard. He managed to hang on with his barely functional arms, but his feet ended up barely touching the water.

The moment they made contact, he felt a stinging pain. He hauled himself up with a rush of adrenaline, but as he tried to stand up, he heard a weird sound like someone was squashing rotten fruit.

Falling on the ground, the feelings of pain and dizziness were overpowering. He looked behind him and saw the fate of his feet. Both were rotting stumps as blackness spread up his legs, already up to his thighs.

He tried crawling forward, but his knees gave in as even the bone was rotten. He was so close to being all the way into the hallway.

With desperation, he used his hands to claw himself forward. His entire body was cold, but the debilitating pain from his legs made him focus. Even then, his vision started to blur as he kept crawling. Vision in his left eye suddenly gave out, followed by the right eye as he was blinded. The rot had spread to his lower body by now, already reaching the navel.

His mind was blank, yet he kept clawing at the ground, moving him forward inch by inch. It wasn't even clear if you could call him conscious any longer. His instinct to survive was the only thing still hanging on. The rot had already reached parts of his lungs, and breathing became impossible. Soon it would reach his heart, and no matter how powerful his instinct to survive, that would be the end.

As death was mere moments away, he crawled the last few centimeters, fully entering the hallway.

Challenger fully restored. Challenge continuing.

Make it to the other side of the hall: 2/3

Time remaining: 14:59

Jake opened his eyes with a jolt as all feeling returned to his body. He was already standing up before he could process what had happened. His body was healed, the knife-wound and rot all gone, and even his clothes restored.

His heart was still pumping fast, and his entire body stiff. It took him around a minute before he finally calmed down, fully realizing what had just happened. Realizing that he was no longer in danger.

He had more or less died. He'd felt himself die. While the feeling of coldness and emptiness was physically gone, it still dominated his mind. For the first time since he entered the tutorial, he had truly faced death. His bloodline ability had offered no warning, and he had no response to his body being slowly devoured.

If the system had not healed him when it did, he would be dead. There was nothing he could do about it. He enjoyed fighting; he enjoyed dancing between life and death, dodging fatal attacks by the skin of his teeth. To feel the rush from coming out on top.

But against that water, or whatever that liquid was... it wasn't really an enemy. It was just there. If he died fighting a strong opponent, even if it was a mindless beast with no ability to comprehend his sentiment, he could accept it.

Dying here alone, his only companions being mushrooms... he couldn't accept such a fate. He wanted to die fighting, not lying on the ground helplessly, slowly being corroded by some shitty toxic dungeon water.

On that thought, what the fuck's up with this shitty dungeon? Aren't dungeons supposed to be loot-filled caves with strong enemies and cool bosses? Not just a bunch of sucky halls with even suckier traps. Was this one of those puzzle-dungeons nobody likes in videogames? Could you even call this shithole a dungeon to begin with?

His despair and concern turned to anger as he shifted his attention back to the present. He had lived, he was alive, and he wasn't going to die in this fucking place. With newfound resolve, he proceeded into the final hall.

On the way, he picked up the bone dagger that had been placed in the hallway with him. He had dropped it during the last challenge, but it appears that the system wanted him to have it still.

If the next challenge were like the others, he would perhaps have to cut his hand once more. This time, however, he swore to make the wound smaller and to not dilly-dally before beginning. Also, to not be a freaking moron and cut his palm. Why was that even a

thing? The palm has many nerves in it, and you move it all the time, making it hurt even more.

The next hall was yet again pretty much the same. Except for the pedestal with the dagger and the pattern of symbols, nothing had changed. But as he looked at the design of the platforms, he was taken aback.

There was no longer a maze. Instead, all of the platforms were neatly organized in rows, meaning one could take the entire trip while only stepping on a single type. Did this mean that one could just throw a couple of mushrooms and go the easy snake-route?

No, that felt wrong. Jake tried to throw a mushroom on the snake platform, and it indeed did turn off for 10 seconds just like all the others. Was this a free room? A mind game? A trap?

He looked at the rows and noticed that only the middle one solely consisted of the wyvern symbols. The wyvern was sitting on a mountaintop, roaring towards the sky. There was nothing else shown in the picture.

The others he had to feed something, give them what they wanted. But what did this wyvern want? There were only two objects on the entire image, the wyvern, and the mountain. He doubted a bit of blood, or a mushroom or two would satisfy it.

The only clue he could see was it staring towards heaven as it roared. Was it angry at the sky? But that led to the question... why it was just sitting on the mountain? The wings were open as if it wanted to take flight.

A thought suddenly entered his mind. He wasn't sure if it was his own intuition or maybe even the dungeon itself implanting that thought. But somehow, he felt like the wyvern looked... hesitant. He wasn't sure if 'afraid' would be a better word, but something within the wyvern held it back. The roar was not one of anger or indignation, but one of doubt.

It was only a feeling, but his intuition told him he was right. At least partly. What the wyvern truly needed was courage. The willpower to advance and face its fears. As he thought this, the platforms appeared to respond as their glow increased.

At the same time, every other platform but the ones with wyverns on turned off. Jake instinctively knew he could move down any of the different paths towards the exit and move on safely. But he didn't.

Instead, Jake decided to feed the wyvern courage. Without hesitation, he sprinted towards the still glowing platforms with the blue symbols of the wyvern. He leaped onto the first platform, and his danger-sense instantly went insane.

He didn't stop for even half a second as he jumped onto the next platform with a wyvern on. Through his sphere, he felt the platform behind him be consumed by a torrent of the acidic water shooting up.

He repeatedly jumped, leaping from one platform to another until he reached the end, every platform behind him consumed by the water.

As he stood there, the challenge passed, he looked back and saw all the other platforms crumble to dust. He turned to the doorway and proceeded out of the hall, leaving the entire room behind him in shambles.

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: 3/3

Challenge passed!

Hidden challenge completed: Show the courage to do what's necessary. Hidden bonus room unlocked.

All Stats Restored. All skills are reactivated.

A wonderful feeling went through his body as all of his stats returned. It only lasted a few moments as everything returned to normal. He was amazed that he did not need to adapt to his body being strengthened so drastically.

But then again, it was only him returning to the same strength he had around... shit, only half an hour ago.

As he read through the message, he also realized that he could indeed just have taken the easy path. If his guess was correct, then the previous room was a test to see if the challenger would take the obvious and easy route, or take a risk like he had.

He smiled to himself at his foolhardiness. *Well*, he thought, *at least I would have died on my own terms if it failed.*

Entering the next room, the one he assumed to be a bonus one, he found himself in *yet another* hall. This one was far bigger, though, so that's something. There were no pillars like the first or a massive basin of killer-water like the subsequent ones. It was just a long hall with a gigantic mural carved into the wall at the end.

He walked closer, and as he did so, he could finally see the whole carving. It clearly told a story. As he stared, the images began to move as he felt his consciousness be sucked into it. The moving pictures displayed the same snake from the symbols as it crawled on the ground, eating mushrooms.

It only continued for a few moments as the snake consumed mushroom after mushroom. The same tiny snake soon began fighting giant beasts, but they were all left half-rotten in its wake. The little snake slowly grew in size, before it finally grew wings and soared into the sky.

It flew over the landscape, spitting out a mist that consumed the very land beneath it. At other times, humanoid beings of different shapes were shown kneeling before the great serpent as it lazed around on a vast plateau.

The winged serpent kept flying across the land, killing all that came in its path, with the humanoids following it like its humble servants.

Finally, it showed a battle between the serpent and a ridiculously gigantic bird-like creature. The snake won and once more soared into the sky as it grew larger and larger before finally morphing into a wyvern.

This wyvern then rampaged through the land, killing all it came across. An army of the same kind of bird it had killed earlier was consumed by a mist of poison that surrounded the scaled beast. It had no rival and slaughtered everything it came across; not even its humanoid followers were spared from the onslaught.

At last, the wyvern found itself on a mountaintop, surrounded only by the desolate world below. A wasteland of its own creation. As it lay there, it roared towards the sky. The mural then displayed the passage of time, as the wyvern simply idled. No new grass or trees grew, no new life emerged. The land in which it had grown up was dead.

The wyvern stared towards the land it had created and finally found courage, no longer hesitating. It opened its wings and soared towards the heavens. The sky was shattered like was it made of glass, as a colossal explosion consumed the great wyvern.

The mural's final part was the once small snake emerging from the exploding planet, now no longer a wyvern, but a dragon. It soared upwards into the stars as an entire universe opened up before it. Hunger evident in its eyes.

After the images stopped, Jake stood in front of the mural for quite a while, just staring at it. It had shown the small mushroom-loving snake's complete evolutionary path, from a tiny creature to a dragon.

He marveled at the beautiful carving, where the scene was frozen on the image of the wyvern breaking through the heavens.

He laid his hand on the mural as a warm glow entered him. At the same time, he heard the wall off to the side open up, showing the exit.

You have witnessed the will of a true dragon.

+10 willpower

As the glow disappeared, he did not feel any different. His willpower had always been his lowest stat, and now it nearly ended up doubling. He wasn't quite sure what the stat exactly did yet, but hey... free stats are free stats. He decided to take a look at this status for the first time in quite a while.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human(G) – lvl 4]

Class: [Archer - lvl 9]

Profession: N/A

Health Points (HP): 350/350

Mana Points (MP): 150/150

Stamina: 238/240

Stats

Strength: 24 (27)

Agility: 25 (30)

Endurance: 24

Vitality: 35

Toughness: 14

Wisdom: 15

Intelligence: 15

Perception: 43

Willpower: 23

Free points: 3

He had experienced growth all over, especially in strength and agility with his new bracers. It appeared, however, that the stats weren't actually active here inside the dungeon.

The most pleasant surprise, however, was seeing his stamina refilled. When the system restored him, it didn't only heal his injuries, but also fully renewed his resource pools. This meant he could keep going even without any potions or rest.

After closing his status menu again, he turned back to the mural, trying to imprint it on his mind. This was the path to power by an extraordinary being. He respected the snake, despite its ludicrous love of mushrooms.

Bowing towards the mural as a sign of recognition, he turned towards the exit, making his way forward. A ludicrous desire entering his mind.

I would love to fight that dragon one day.