

Hunter 20

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 unto 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.