

Changing-8

The slash cut the lynx's paw off, but it did nothing to scare it away. He pounced at Richard and he moved out of the way so the claws were only a scratch on his cheek. He stabbed it through the skull as it landed and the bottom right square flashed. Experience as it died. He turns, staying low, watching and listening for more of the damned animals.

Every half hour, it felt to Richard, an animal had attacked them. A fox, a wolf, even a pack of squirrel, at one point. It was as if the first thing this change had done was to remove any fear of people animals had had. They'd been easy kills, Jackson almost shot all of them before they approached and Richard cutting those that made it through.

Richard's reluctance to use his gun had nothing to do with his enjoyment of killing with a blade. Animals had never been something he cared to kill, but unlike Jackson, he had a limited number of bullets. Until he could resupply, he wanted to keep them for when it really mattered.

"I think that was the last of them," Jackson said, looking over his gun as he scanned the forest around them. "How did they get this close without us noticing?"

"Lynx. Felines. Predators. Take your pick. Richard answered, calling a strip of jerky out of his inventory, and ate it.

Jackson had been the one to discover he had a personal inventory that broke the laws of physics. It was twenty-five space in which they could put whatever they wanted, and if items were the same, they stacked. Very video-game.

"You say that like it's an answer."

"The three describe killers with an affinity to move silently and undetected. They were level four, by the way."

"How do you do that?" Jackson complained. "I looked at them. Like you said, and I don't get anything."

The strip eaten, Richard healed ten points, the few minor cuts vanishing. "It's more than looking, it's seeing into them. Looking for what they are."

Jackson's reply was cut off by the crunching of a branch. They looked at one another, Jackson mouthing a curse and raising his gun. That had been a big branch, Richard thought. Remembering the bear from the morning, he thought it might have been a trunk.

The silence was near-absolute. Even the wind seemed to be waiting. The birds had flown off a while back. Richard looked through the trees. With all the time he'd spent on guard during their walk, he'd gained a perception skill, as well as an extra level in it. It had saved their lives a time or two, but Jackson had noticed approaching animals at least three times as much. How a psychologist had a higher perception than he did was something Richard would ask the man—Jackson pivoted and became still—after they dealt with this new threat.

Something moved and Richard focused on it. He didn't have to be able to see it clearly to use his study skill, although it seemed to have an easier time if it was fully in his sight. Whatever it was, it was larger.

Use of Study successful, Level 1.

A box appeared over the form moving in the trees. Master Lynx, Level 11.

Richard found himself at a loss. That couldn't be a lynx. The form was the height of a pony.

"What the fuck?" Jackson said as it came into view, shouldering thinner trees out of its way. The lynx's shoulder had to be the height of Richard's chest, and it was massive. Its gray fur was the reason it had been difficult to see, but how it had been silent with the size of those paws.

It looked at them, bared its teeth, and hissed.

"Jackson, I suggest you start shooting now." With the man's first shot, the lynx focused on him and Richard vanished.

The trees provided him ample coverage, and he approached the lynx's side. He didn't expect he could climb its back, or get close to its neck. He could still make use of stealth to ensure his first strike mattered.

"This thing seems even tougher than that bear!" Jackson yelled, backing through the trees. "I don't know if that knife of yours is going to do any good!"

Richard was next to the lynx, opposite the side Jackson was firing on. A stab wouldn't work, not without being able to reach the spine or knowing where the heart was. Opening it was his best bet. He dug the knife in deep, feeling more resistance than he'd expected, and pulled across its side.

The knife was yanked out of his hand as it spun. Then he was flying in the air, his health bar dropping close to half, but the time he landed between trees and rolled. He had another bleed icon and he ignored the incoming lynx to eat a strip of jerky to stop the bleeding before that killed him.

It jumped and somehow missed him, landing next to him, panting.

"I swear," Jackson said. "There is no way fur could be this resistant against bullets." He stood before the downed lynx, put the barrel against an eye, and fired. The lynx shuddered and was still.

After the fourth Strip of jerky, Richard was mostly healed and stood. "Any idea where my knife went to?"

"Last I saw, it was still on its side."

The exposed side was intact, which meant he'd either have to turn it over or be lucky. He decided to start with luck and placed a hand on the lynx, thinking *search*.

A window opened before him and, among the lynx furs, meats and bones, there was his knife. He willed it back in its sheath. He wouldn't even have to worry about cleaning it, and moved the meats, bones, and furs to his inventory. He figured if they were available to collect, they had some value. Maybe he could make more jerky. The question was, how much game-like would preparing food be?

"That's still freaky," Jackson said. The lynx's body now looked like a corpse an expert had skinned and gutted. It was the same with each body he's pilfered that way, although the size meant he had much more from this one.

Richard shrugged. The body was cleaner than those he'd left on jobs for the Firm. They'd tended to use him to leave messages to whatever opposition they were dealing with that month. Richard had never cared for who the Firm worked with or against. So long as they let him loose once in a while.

He took off his jacket and looked at the bloody tear in the side as well as his shirt. How much damage would it have done if not for his armor?

“Is that still as effective?”

Richard studied it.

Armored Jacket, medium. Quality Fine: a shirt of advanced polymers designed to help survive most small arms as well as knife attacks. Armor 50. Negates edged weapons' benefits against armor. Weight, 8 kilos. Currently damaged: effect reduced if damaged area targeted.

“It'll be fine.” He put it back on.

“That doesn't look fine.”

“I'll make sure no one gets a chance to hit me there.” He looked up. “How far do you think until we reach the road?”

“I have no idea. We've been following the trail all day. I'd have thought we would have reached it already.”

“I doubt we have more than two hours of daylight left.”

Jackson looked at the sky too. “I say we walk at least an hour before we make camp. Hopefully, we'll reach the road before that.”

* * * * *

They didn't.

The camp consisted of digging a pit with the emergency shovel Jackson had taken from his pickup, along with a box of flares and a portable radio.

“In case the power comes back,” he'd said.

Richard hadn't pointed out the problem wasn't power. The old generator and old fridge had worked fine. It was more advanced technology that failed. Like that emergency radio. And even if it worked, did any of the stations?

The fire going, Richard made a rack with branches next to it, then took one of the smaller pieces of meat and cut it into strips.

Skill Acquire: Butchering. Level 1

Taking a knife to meat is a simple thing. So long as you aren't particularly picky about what you end up with. 25% chances of achieving the cut you aim for, +1% per level

Richard looked at the mess he ended up with and placed the one thing that could be described as a strip on the rack. The rest he dumped in the frying pan for Jackson to do something with. He didn't feel hungry, with all the strips he'd eaten to heal himself,

but he didn't know if hunger was another thing that had changed.

"Have you been deployed in the field?" Richard asked as he worked the next piece of meat.

"You know I've been in the field," Jackson replied, drizzling butter over the meat before placing the pan on a stone in the fire.

"I don't mean supervising my work. That was just you being in an office, listening in and watching cameras. I mean, have you had to get your hands dirty before today?"

Jackson moved the frying meat before answering. "I've had to kill; since that's what you really want to know. I was in my thirties. I wasn't officially in the field, but the agent I was supervising had gotten in trouble and the support he'd been promised was nowhere to be seen, so I jumped in. Saved his life, ended one."

"What happened afterward?" Richard looked at the mess, more ground beef than strips. He put that in his inventory for once Jackson was down and proceeded to butcher another chunk.

"I was screamed at for leaving my position. For ruining a mission. The support was nowhere in sight because the agent was supposed to be captured. It was part of a disinformation job. He knew a bunch of wrong things the Firm wanted other governments to know."

"You were used."

"I was kept in the dark. There's a difference. You never seemed to care before." Jackson emptied the frying pan on a plate and offered it to Richard. The food didn't look appetizing, but he needed to eat. He placed more of the hand-ground meat in the pan and place the plate next to him.

"Before, I didn't have to depend on you to survive. You've handled yourself well today, but I have to wonder what you'll do when we have to fight people and not animals."

"Or not people," Jackson said. "Did you look through the list of possible races?"

Richard shook his head.

"There were orcs, trolls, Minotaurs, to name a few. More I didn't recognize. So it's possible others will have chosen not to be human."

"So you're leaning toward this being real?"

Jackson focused on the frying meat. When he looked up, he looked worried.

"What's the point of putting us in VR this advanced and then letting us walk all day in the forest, killing rabid animals? If this was some government, they'd go for information, right? Things either of us knows about missions. The best way to do that is to make us think the Firm needs us. Or something like that. This feels too pointless to be planned."

Richard nodded and added a fourth strip to the rack. His butchering was now up to level four. Soon he'd be able to cut the figure of prime minister Hartel in one of those slabs of meat.

The fried meat wasn't bad. Bland due to neither of them thinking to bring spices. Even the butter had been a last-minute thing on Jackson's part because he'd realized that whatever food they brought would have to be prepared over a fire.

Richard had stopped at a dozen stripped, and another four level of butchering. Skills seemed far easier than his abilities to raise. With all the vanishing he'd pulled through the day to gain surprise on attacking animals, he'd only gained one level, and now in less than three hours of butchering meat, he was level eight.

But his stealth had only gone up two levels, and that was a skill too. Possibly the more involved a skill was, the more difficult to level it was. He checked on his soon to be jerky and found it still wet.

"How do you want to handle the night?" Jackson asked. "I don't think we can afford to both sleep."

"You trust me to be awake while you sleep?"

Jackson sighed. "We had that discussion at the start. We need each other to survive."

"You sleep. I'll keep watch."

"You sure? I can—"

"He ho!" someone yelled. "By the fire, done shoot us."

Richard was up, searching the darkness and cursing the way the fire ruined any chances to even make out what was out there.

"Who's there?" Jackson called back, not seeming bothered.

"I'm Walt, with me is my son, Jeff. We're hunters and things got crazy today. Car's dead, phone won't work. We were kind of wandering until Jeff saw your fire. Any change we can join you?"

"Of course," Jackson said before Richard could say anything.

The man ignored Richard's glaring. What was he thinking?

He made out two forms at the edge of the fire. "That's enough." Richard studied the larger.

Use of Study unsuccessful, Level 1

He shifted his focus to the other.

Use of Study successful, Level 1

The box appeared with Jeffrey "Jeff" Fenetry: Hunter, Level 3 over him.

Richard was impressed. What had they gone through for him to reach level three in one day? He and Jackson had fought their share of animals and he hadn't crossed over to level two yet.

"Richard, they're like us, you don't have to be paranoid."

Richard didn't bother rolling his eyes. No one was like him, and very few were like Jackson. He looked the form over. Jeff had a canvas bag in his hand. Light-colored at the top, black at the bottom, reflecting the firelight.

"Hey," the other man said, "I get it. Things have been crazy. No idea who you can trust anymore, am I right?"

“Yeah,” Jackson replied. “Forgive my friend. Richard wasn’t the trusting type before all this started. Where were you hunting?”

“By Kamiskotia River, a bunch of us were hunting for a few days.”

Richard tuned out the words. The bag nagged at him. The shapes pressing against it. He knew those shapes from somewhere. And the way the firelight reflected on the bottom part of the bag, as if it had been painted with...

Richard drew his gun.

“Richard!” Jackson yelled as he fired.

Jeff was quicker than Richard had expected, jumping out of the way. “Distract them!”

The larger man pulled the rifle off his shoulder as Jackson drew his pistol, cursing loudly. With the first flash of gunfire, Richard vanished. The darkness had to work to his advantage. He stepped around, pulling his knife. He needed to take down the larger man. He was the unknown quantity.

Richard was five feet from the man when he turned, and there was the flash of gunfire. The impact staggered Richard back, but he barely lost any health. Armor for the win. He fell back and groaned, watching the man approach.

“I don’t know what gave us away, but the experience is as good if I have to work for it than if I shoot you in the back.”

Or I in the front, Richard thought as he pulled the trigger on his gun three times. Four bullets down.

The man staggered back, his front turning dark in the firelight. The man had his hands over the injuries. Richard holstered his gun, he wasn’t spending more bullets on him. He tapped the box with the combat log. He wanted to appreciate this.

He grabbed the retreating man by the hair as they left the firelight. He pulled him close, ignoring the ineffectual punches at his stomach. The bullet had only done five points of damage, the strikes didn’t get by his armor.

“I will tell you,” Richard whispered, looking the man in the eyes, “one monster to another, that I respect what you did. But you shouldn’t have considered me or Jackson your victim.” He smiled. “Keep an eye on your combat log. This should be impressive.” He slammed the knife in the side of the man’s neck.

Critical strike. Damage 260 hit points. Base 11* Knife skill Bonus*20 for critical

You have killed Walter “Kit” Fenetry, Hunter, Level 4. You receive 40,000 experience

You have gone up a level, Level 2. you gain +2 dexterity, +1 intelligence. You have 3 attribute points to distribute, you have 1 ability point to distribute, you have 1 skill point to distribute, you have 1 spell point to distribute.

You have gone up a level, Level 3. you gain +2 dexterity, +1 intelligence. You

have 3 attribute points to distribute, you have 1 ability point to distribute, you have 1 skill point to distribute, you have 1 spell point to distribute.

You have gone up a level, Level 4. you gain +2 dexterity, +1 intelligence. You have 3 attribute points to distribute, you have 1 ability point to distribute, you have 1 skill point to distribute, you have 1 spell point to distribute.

Richard smiled as the life left the man's eyes. That explained things somewhat. People were worth far more than the animals in the forest. He let the body fall and turned.

"What the fuck was this?" Jackson demanded, gun aimed at him, the body of the young man at his feet. By the blood on Jackson's clothes and the cut across his chest, he hadn't been able to end his fight at a distance.

Richard nodded to the bag. "Look in there."

"I swear Richard, if this was about indulging your need to kill, I'm going to end you here and now."

Richard slowly put the knife back in its sheath. "I promise you, Jackson, this was justified. Look in the bag."

Jackson grabbed the bag and upturned it, looking at his red hand when he let go of it. He looked down at the severed hands and arms at his feet in confusion. Richard counted four pairs of hands.

"Oh dear God." Jackson ran behind a tree and threw up.

Richard stepped to the appendages and studied the hands. Three pairs had thin and delicate fingers. One pair looked no older than Jeff had been. The fourth was the rugged pair of a man. Turning an arm he found human bite marks on it, different sized mouth. Both of them had partaken in that meal.

"Tell me those aren't what they look like," Jackson said, wiping his mouth.

"They are exactly what they look like, and by the bite marks those two were cannibals."

"How the fuck did you know?"

Richard looked up and smiled at Jackson. "How do you think I moved the people I killed in the twenty years I was out from under the Firm's thumb? I know what limbs in a bag look like."