Hemirtal-16

Finding the location of the battle was easier than James expected. The ground was still trampled. There was no blood, but gouges left by the fight were still visible, and a few broken pieces of armor and weapons were lying around.

For something that had happened a while ago, time had remained very still here. James didn't think nature bothered with respecting the dead. If this had been real, all traces would be gone. But as a game, the player needed to be able to tell the fighting had happened.

"It's called show, don't tell," he told Barkley, who was sniffing around the battleground. "Although there is such a thing as too much of one." The wolf looked at him and canted its head. "What? Of course, I know about storytelling. I have to be able to craft a good tale if I'm going to con people." He stopped and looked around. Then up. "Okay, I probably shouldn't be too free with what I say. I don't benefit from crowd noise to cover up what I say. And I doubt privacy laws apply in a game."

He crouched and studied the ground until Barkley was in his face again, licking him. Laughing, James pushed the wolf away, who went back to sniffing the ground.

"Alright, we have our starting point, but there is no obvious trail to follow, and—" he looked up "—no other glowing light to guide us. At three, I expect my tracking skill is too low to be of any help. How about you Barkley, can you sniff out the direction they went in?"

The wolf raised its head at the mention of its name, then started digging.

"I don't think they went underground," James said. Every MMO he'd played was geared for teams. He could count on one hand the games that kept in mind some people liked to solo. The mentality was that those people could get stand-alone games. James enjoyed both. Playing with others let him play them on top of the game, and playing solo allowed him to be himself for a while.

Having a strong social aspect, Hemirtal would be a team game, and in this case, there would be one person with a tracking class. James paused. Or rather, someone with a tracking module.

A quick search got him the tracker, stalker, and hunter modules. The tracker came with the disarm skill, as well as ambush ability. The stalker with camouflage as a skill and back-stab as the ability, and the hunter with butchering and preserving.

The bonus to the skill when having a module was fifteen levels, which, having experienced it, he knew was significant. Those gremlins had gone down a lot easier with his sword module. And with his recasting ability, he could switch his modules around. The problem with that was that he wouldn't be able to get back to his default for a full day.

He needed his sword module to win any fight, and his manipulation module was, well, him. To buy a new slot it was… he had to look that one up. Fifteen fame points since it would be his third, and it was five points per 'slot level'. Not something he could afford with his current sole point from rescuing Ferdinan.

He was going to have to do this the hard way. He watched Barkley struggle to pull a bone out of the hole he'd dug, and then James walked to the perimeter of the battle zone to look for any signs of where the winners had gone to.

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Finding the trail was the work of nearly an hour, and got James two levels in tracking. Unlike the battleground, nature had taken its course since then and regrown, but he knew he had the right path when a broken branch highlighted in green, then a displaced rock further ahead. Looking at the numbers, he gained a bonus to the roll with each subsequent check for the next clue on the trail.

He figured the rationale was something to the effect that since he already knew where the trail went; it was easier to follow it. He had no penalties, which hinted at the goblins not trying to hide their passage. Even once he was out of the trees and approaching the mountains, he still picked up details showing where they'd gone in the broken earth where they'd stepped, then more moved stones.

He didn't know if it meant anything, but there were no visual clues that they were dragging anything. Did that mean Hendrik had been taken prisoner instead of killed and his body dragged away? The quests he'd experienced weren't sufficiently consistent in their quality for him to know if it meant anything.

He saw the cave entrance just as something in the rock face distracted him. A darker highlighted area. He approached it. Studied it and got a message.

> You have found a coal vein
> Coal is used as a more efficient replacement for wood in fires, as well as to power smithies, and potentially for upgrades to settlements.
> System note: You do not have a map, therefore you will have to rely on your mining skill to find the vein again.

Right, he had the skill. Which made him wonder where the town's miners worked. Was there an actual mine, or was the ore system generated only as needed to cover the basic requirements? There were hints in what he read players were responsible for growing the town, but he hadn't looked into how that happened.

Something else to research before he got into the game officially.

He returned to the trail, only to be unable to find it. He looked at the cave, which it had seemed to head for. How sneaky did he think the programmers were?

He wasn't one of them, so not very. He headed for the cavern.

It was rough, clearly something intended to look natural, but the ground was even. Barkley growled and James placed a hand on his head. And drew his sword.

A dozen steps in and the sunlight was gone, but the cavern wasn't so dark he couldn't see. He couldn't make out details, but he knew where the walls were, as well as the intersections. When the tunnel split, he went right and was immediately confronted with a creature attacking him.

He blocked something metal, swung and connected with flesh, then he suffered a series of hits. Quickly enough, he realized he was facing more than one enemy. The lack of light had to be costing him. He was hit again, a head blow that time, and the world spun as a stunned debuff appeared. His opponents pressed their advantage, and James died.

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> You have died, current respawn timer is set at four minutes. Please use that time to log out and stretch your legs, see the sun, your family. Remember, Hemirtal is a game. There are more important things you can do.
> You have lost 1 FAME point.

Four minutes, James thought, looking at the respawn timer tick down. Even if he could log out, that wasn't enough time to do anything. The game shouldn't be recommending it yet. Although, how long could someone sit in the dark with nothing but the game's documentation as a distraction? The lack of comfort would encourage players to log out, which the game seemed to encourage.

He chuckled. How often was it a game wanted the players not to play? Most of them seemed built to ensure players didn't want to leave, with quest building upon quests, rewards pushing them to want more.

James had spent days and nights playing some, so he had to appreciate that Hemirtal built in a reason to log out. He brought up the settings with the logout button grayed out.

If he had the option, when would he have enough? Ten minutes in the dark? Half an hour? Because he had a hard limit as to when he'd be pulled out, He'd go for aiming not to die. He wanted to at least find out what had happened to Hendrik before his time out up, and with a 'special' as the reward, James suspected it was a quest line that wouldn't end in the cave. The question was just how involved was it? And how difficult for a lone player to accomplish.

The timer flashed zero.

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James was sitting on his bed in the inn.

He hurried out, not waiting for Osborn to return his greeting. Did the NPC have some rationalization for players leaving their room without first entering them?

He headed for the quartermaster and bought a shield and a lantern. He considered a map, but those were too expensive for what he'd get out of it. He ran for the forest, estimating where the cavern was. He made it halfway to through the town before he had to slow and let his stamina rebuild. He wasn't built as a runner.

He ate a loaf of bread, then ran. He slowed, running still too much, even with the regain stamina buff. A fast walk was all he could manage, and once the buff ended, his stamina dropped slowly. When it hit the last quarter, he ate another loaf, and it rebuilt completely before the buff ended and this way he made it through the forest, only to find he didn't recognize the mountain face.

> Congratulation, you have brought the skill Running to level 1.
> Keep going and you never know, you might actually be able to go places.

He checked the skill while the disappointment of not being where he wanted passed.

Running
Running is the ability to travel faster and for longer. Each level in the running skill increases the speed you can run at by 1% and reduces the cost in stamina by 1%

"Nice skill to have," he said. "When you know where you're going." The battleground was still highlighted in green, so he had that as a reference point, but he hadn't checked where it was when he entered the cave. Could he locate the patch of coal and use that to find the entrance? Would he get a bonus on his skill since he'd already found it once? He was definitely investing in a map early when he was back in the game.

He headed toward the mountain, keeping the green blow to his right at what he thought was forty-five degrees, and hoped something would be familiar.

He stopped when something in the distance ran in his direction, arming himself. He hadn't encountered roaming monsters yet, but he was outside the town's protection, so they had to be around.

The form resolved itself into a wolf, and focusing, James saw the yellow hungry tag over it. He smiled as Barkley slowed, then stopped before him, panting. He gave the wolf the last piece of gremlin meat.

"Hey Barkley, I'm glad to see you again. You look like you made it out of there okay." He checked the wolf's fur while he ate. The tag turn green and Barkley looked at him. James offered him a loaf of bread, to which Barkley eyed him.

"Sorry, it's all I have left. If I die again, I'll make sure to get you something. Or better yet, we can kill those things and you can feast on them." He stood and looked around. If he could find the cavern. He looked at Barkley and smiled. "Barkley, take me to the goblin's cavern."

The wolf woofed and turned, running toward the mountain.