LitRPG audiobook scripts

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You Have Died. Tutorial Complete.

Tutorial gone wrong, comedic · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

I died four seconds into the tutorial, which the system informed me was a new record.

[You have died. Cause: the training dummy.]

"The dummy does not attack," I told the empty white room. "It is a sack of straw on a stick."

[Correct. You tripped on it.]

[Achievement earned: Humble Beginnings.]

I lay on the floor of the afterlife and thought about my choices. Somewhere, a bell chimed, cheerful as a microwave. I had wanted to be a hero since I was six years old.

[Respawning in three. Two. Please try standing this time.]

Level One Turnip Farmer

Cozy farming · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

Everyone else who fell through the portal got a sword. I got a hoe, a sack of seed, and four acres of mud.

[Class assigned: Tiller. Level 1.]

[Skill acquired: Patient Hands.]

I was furious for about a week. Then the first turnip came up, small and purple and perfect, and the whole field chimed like a struck glass.

[Turnip harvested. Experience gained: 2.]

Two points. The heroes were out there earning thousands. I pulled another turnip, and found I did not envy them at all.

The System Would Like a Word

Sarcastic system AI · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

My system has a voice like a bored flight attendant, and it has never once been on my side.

[New quest: Survive the night.]

"Is there a reward?" I ask.

[Surviving the night.]

"What attacks at night?"

[That information costs 40 Insight. You have 3.]

"Fine. How do I get more Insight?"

[By learning from your mistakes. I expect you will be rich by morning.]

I pull my blanket up to my chin and glare at the dark. Something in the dark, I am fairly sure, glares right back. It sounds large. It sounds like it has also had a long day.

Do Not Pull the Boss

Boss fight, comedic · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

"Nobody touch anything," said our leader, one second before the bard touched something.

[Boss awakened: Grandmother Gristle, Level 30.]

[Recommended party level: 30. Your party level: 11.]

"In my defense," said the bard, "it was a very shiny lever."

The floor shook. Something the size of a barn unfolded itself from the ceiling and looked down at us, the way you look at a sandwich.

"New plan," said our leader. "Run."

[Skill acquired: Sprint.]

Thank you, system. Very timely.

Arrival Bonus

Portal arrival · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

One moment I was holding a grocery bag at a crosswalk. The next I was standing in a meadow under two moons, still holding the bag, with words hanging in the air in front of my face.

[Welcome, Traveler. Calculating arrival bonus.]

I turned in a slow circle. Grass to the horizon. No crosswalk. No city. A bird went over with too many wings.

[Items detected: one loaf of bread, six eggs, one jar of pickles.]

The bag grew warm. I looked inside. The bread was glowing.

[Loaf of Lasting Bread. Restores 50 Health. Never goes stale.]

[Eggs of Uncertain Origin. Effect unknown.]

[Jar of Pickles. This is a jar of pickles.]

I sat down in the grass, quite carefully, and ate a pickle. It seemed like the only thing left in the world that I understood.

Floor Nine Has a Gift Shop

Tower climb, comedic · Adult (25-40) · Neutral British · 45 seconds

Floor eight of the Spindle nearly killed us. Floor nine had a gift shop.

We stood in the doorway, bleeding politely onto the mat.

[Rest floor reached. Combat is disabled.]

There were shelves. There was a little bell. There was a clerk, a tall grey creature with a lanyard, who looked at four armed and smoking adventurers and said, "Welcome to floor nine. Would you like a basket?"

"Is this a trap?" whispered Odran.

"Everything is a trap," I whispered back. "Take a basket."

The potions were real. So were the prices.

[Minor Healing Draught: 200 coins.]

[Commemorative Mug, I Survived Floor Eight: 15 coins.]

We could not afford the potions. We bought four mugs. I regret nothing. Mine is the only thing I own that the tower has never tried to eat.

Class Assigned: Gleaner

Weakest class, underdog · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

On Naming Day, every sixteen-year-old in the valley steps up to the stone and receives a class. My brother got Spearwarden. My best friend got Stormcaller. The whole square cheered.

Then it was my turn.

[Class assigned: Gleaner.]

Nobody cheered. Somebody's uncle coughed.

[Starting skill: Pick Up. Collect one dropped item per day.]

"That cannot be right," my mother told the stone. The stone had no comment.

I walked home alone, the long way, through the old battlefield where the real classes train. And because I had nothing better to do, I tried it. I reached down into the trampled grass.

[Picked up: fragment of a forgotten skill. 1 of 100.]

I stood very still. Then I looked out across that field, at a hundred years of things other people had dropped.

The Inn Gains a Level

Slice-of-life innkeeper · Mature (55+) · Irish · 45 seconds

I did not slay a dragon to reach level ten. I made soup.

That is how it works for my class. Heroes earn experience for killing things. I earn it when somebody who came in cold goes out warm.

Tonight it is a courier, half frozen, who falls asleep in her bowl. I put a blanket over her and bank the fire, and the whole inn gives a little shiver, like a cat stretching.

[Guest comforted. Experience gained.]

[Level Up! Hearthkeeper is now Level 10.]

[The Sleeping Fox has gained a room.]

There is a door at the end of the upstairs hall that was not there this morning. Inside, a bed already made, and a window facing east.

I do not know who it is for. The inn always knows before I do.

Day One of the Countdown

Apocalypse system · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

At 9:02 on a Monday morning, every person on Earth saw the same blue box, and by 9:03 most of us had dismissed it as an ad.

[Integration begins in 72 hours.]

[Please select a starting class.]

I was in a dentist's waiting room. The receptionist waved a hand through hers, like a fly. A kid in the corner started reading his out loud, until his mother told him to hush.

I am an insurance adjuster. My whole job is reading the small print on disasters. So I read it.

[Unselected users will be assigned: Prey.]

I read it twice. Then I stood up, walked out past the fish tank, and called my sister.

"Do not close the box," I said. "Whatever you do. Read me your list."

Durability: 1 of 40

Crafting and shop · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

The sword on my counter had been through eleven owners, two wars, and at least one dragon, and my Appraise skill did not sugarcoat it.

[Longsword, common. Durability: 1 of 40.]

[Note: please do not sneeze near this item.]

"Can you fix it?" asked the boy. He was maybe fifteen. He held out a handful of copper like it was a fortune.

A new blade would cost him forty times that. A proper repair, twenty. I am a Level 22 Mender, and I have rent.

"It was my dad's," he said.

Ah.

I counted his coins. Six. I pushed four of them back across the counter.

"Come back Thursday," I said. "And do not tell anyone what I charged you. I have a reputation."

[Quest accepted: A Father's Sword.]

The Healer Bills by the Hour

Mismatched party · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Our healer is the best in the guild, and she charges for every single point of health.

"That is four silver," said Brisa, as the glow faded from my shoulder.

"I was bitten by a cave eel!"

"Four silver for the bite. Two more because you screamed in my ear." She made a note in a tiny ledger. "I am running a business, Tovin, not a charity."

[Health restored: 60.]

[Party funds: minus 6 silver.]

Our tank is a retired schoolteacher. Our scout is afraid of the dark. Our mage has one spell, and it is Fog. We are the worst party in the city.

Then the eel's mother came up out of the water. All forty feet of her.

I watched Brisa do the sums. I watched her look at the four of us: broke, soaked, and too stupid to run.

"Oh, for goodness' sake," she said, and lit up like a sunrise.

[Party effect gained: Radiant Ward.]

[Cost: waived.]

"Just this once," she snapped. "Do not look at me like that. Hit it!"

Mimic Etiquette

Dungeon crawl, comedic · Adult (25-40) · Neutral British · 1 minute

Rule one of the Underwarrens: if a treasure chest is sitting alone in the middle of a corridor, it is not a treasure chest.

[Chest detected. Lock difficulty: none.]

"No lock," I said. "That is a mimic."

"Or a gift," said Hobb.

"From whom? The dungeon? The dungeon hates us." I poked it with my ten-foot pole. Nothing. I poked it again. The chest sighed. An actual sigh, damp and tired.

[Mimic, Level 6. Mood: discouraged.]

I had never seen a mood before. I lowered the pole.

"Long day?" I asked.

The lid creaked up an inch. Inside, among the teeth, was a single gold coin. It nudged the coin toward us, like a cat pushing a mouse across the floor.

[The Mimic is offering a bribe to be left alone.]

Hobb and I looked at each other.

"Honestly?" he said. "Same."

We took the coin. We left it a sandwich. I still think it was the best deal we made all year.

Patch Notes for the End of the World

Apocalypse system, survival · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Every morning at six, the sky publishes the patch notes, and all of us still alive in the parking structure stop to read them. Somebody at the front always reads them aloud, for the ones whose eyes are bad.

[Daily update. Version 1.0.14.]

[Fixed: wolves appearing inside elevators.]

"Well, thank goodness," said Marguerite, who had been in that elevator.

[Changed: pigeons are now hostile.]

A murmur went through the group. We live on level four. There are a great many pigeons on level five.

"How hostile?" asked a man near the back.

Nobody answered. The sky is not a help desk.

[New: safe zones may now be claimed. Requirements: one flag, ten residents, one act of generosity.]

I counted heads. Eleven. I looked at the bedsheet somebody had hung up to dry. Then I looked at Marguerite, who was already handing her last granola bar to the kid with the broken glasses.

[Safe zone claimed: Level Four.]

The lights came on. All of them. And for the first time in two weeks, somebody laughed.

The Sword Costs Nine Copper and an Apology

Crafting and shop, comedic · Adult (40-55) · Scottish · 1 minute

I run the only smithy in Dunmarrow, and my prices are fair, fixed, and written on the wall. The trouble is, my best skill is Honest Appraisal, and I cannot turn it off.

"How much for the sword?" asked the knight.

[Iron sword. Quality: adequate.]

"Nine copper," I said. "It is adequate."

"And this shield?"

[Oak shield. One hidden crack.]

"Six. It has a crack. Left side. You will not see it till it matters."

He frowned. "You are a terrible salesman."

"Aye. I am a decent smith, though."

He drew his own sword, the one he had come in wearing. Jewels on the hilt. "And this? I paid two hundred gold."

I tried to stop it. I truly did.

[Decorative sword. Quality: poor. Jewels: glass.]

"Sir," I said, "I am so sorry."

Then the knight began to laugh. He bought the iron one, and the shield, crack and all. He has been back every month since. He says I am the only man in the kingdom who cannot flatter him.

Crop Rotation, Advanced

Cozy farming · Adult (40-55) · Australian · 1 minute

The system gave me a choice at level five: a combat skill, or Advanced Crop Rotation. I did not even have to think.

[Skill acquired: Advanced Crop Rotation.]

[Soil quality is now visible.]

And there it was. My whole farm, lit up like a quilt. The north paddock glowed a tired yellow. The creek flat was a deep, happy green. One corner by the gate was grey, and a bit sulky.

"What is wrong with you, then?" I asked the corner.

[Soil mood: neglected. Suggestion: beans.]

"Beans. Righto."

I spent the morning on my knees with a sack of runner beans. No monsters. No glory. A magpie supervised.

Around noon, a party of adventurers went by on the road, all armour and urgency, off to fight something with a lot of heads. One of them looked at me, and my dirt, and my hat, as if he felt sorry for me.

[Beans planted: 40. Soil mood: hopeful.]

I waved him on. Poor bloke. He had no idea what he was missing.

The Tutorial Goblin Quits

Tutorial gone wrong · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 1 minute

The tutorial was supposed to be simple. One goblin, one wooden sword, three easy steps. Nobody planned for the goblin to have feelings.

[Tutorial, step one: attack the Training Goblin.]

I raised the sword. The goblin raised one finger.

"Before you do," he said, "how many of you are there today? Because you are the forty-third, and I have had no lunch."

[Please attack the Training Goblin.]

"I am not going to hit a man who has had no lunch," I told the air.

"Thank you." The goblin sat down on a rock. "Nine years I have done this. Stand here. Get hit. Fall over. Say, well done, hero. Do you know I have a degree?"

"In what?"

"Architecture."

[Warning: tutorial is off script.]

"Good," said the goblin. He took off his little training helmet and set it on the grass. "I quit. Do you want to see a bridge I designed?"

[Tutorial failed.]

[New quest: The Bridge.]

I did, actually. It was a very good bridge.

Helpful Tips From Your System

Sarcastic system AI · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 1 minute

It was the third week before I worked out that my system could hear me. It was the fourth before I worked out that it was laughing.

[Tip: enemies deal less damage if you move out of the way.]

"I know that!"

The stone boar hit me again. I went through a fence.

[Tip: fences are not armor.]

"Could you help? Actually help?"

There was a pause. I lay in the splinters and watched the boar paw the ground. And then, for the first time, the words came up in a different color. Softer. Almost shy.

[Its left tusk is cracked. It always turns right.]

I rolled left. The boar turned right, straight into the well. There was a long silence, and then a very distant splash.

[Stone Boar defeated. Level Up! You are now Level 4.]

"Thank you," I said, when I could breathe.

[Do not mention it.]

[Seriously. They audit these logs.]

I grinned up at the sky. All this time, I had thought I was alone out here.

Forty Floors Up, No Stairs Down

Tower climb · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 1 minute

The Ladder has one rule, carved over the door on the ground floor: the only way out is up.

I read it on the way in and thought it was a slogan. By floor forty, I knew it was just a fact.

[Floor 40 cleared. Time: 6 hours, 12 minutes.]

[Climbers remaining: 212 of 1,000.]

I sat down against the wall and watched that second number. It ticked. 211. Somewhere below me, or above, somebody had just stopped climbing.

"Do not watch it," said the woman beside me. She was wrapping her hands, slow and practiced. "I watched it my first climb. Drove me half mad."

"Your first? You got out and came back?"

"Three times."

"Why?"

She tied off the wrap with her teeth. Above us, the door to forty-one had begun to glow.

[Floor 41 opens in 60 seconds.]

"Because the view from the top," she said, "is the only thing I have ever seen that was worth it." She stood, and held a hand down to me. "Up you get. I will show you."

Nobody Picks the Mapmaker

Weakest class, underdog · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral British · 1 minute

There are thirty students in my year at the Guildhall, and when captains pick teams for the trial, I am always thirtieth.

I do not blame them. My stat sheet is a short, sad read.

[Name: Wim Tarsel. Class: Mapmaker. Level: 3.]

[Strength: 4. Speed: 5. Courage: pending.]

[Skills: Sketch. Measure. Remember.]

"We will take the Mapmaker," sighed Captain Idris, the way you take the last bread roll.

The trial was the Shifting Maze. Walls that move. Paths that change behind you. The strong teams went in first, swinging, and came out an hour later by the same door, furious.

I did not swing at anything. I sat down in the entrance with my charcoal and watched the walls for ten minutes.

"What are you doing?" asked Idris.

"It is not random," I said. "It is a clock. Look. Every ninety seconds, the same seven shapes."

[Skill evolved: Remember is now Pattern Sight.]

I drew the seventh shape and held it up. A straight line, door to door.

Nobody picked me thirtieth after that.

Tuesday Is Stew Night

Slice-of-life innkeeper · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 1 minute

There is a sign on my door that says No Fighting, and it is not a request. It is a skill.

[Hearth Rule active: no weapon may be drawn within these walls.]

So on Tuesday, when the Dread Knight of Carrow Fen ducked under my lintel, seven feet of black iron and bad reputation, nobody in the common room reached for a sword. They could not have, if they had tried.

He stood there, dripping. The fire popped.

"I was told," he said, in a voice like a tomb door, "that there is stew."

"There is. Wipe your feet."

He wiped his feet.

I put him at the corner table, the sturdy one. He ate three bowls. He was very careful with the spoon. Around the second bowl, the miller's little girl walked up and asked if his helmet came off. He told her, gravely, that it did, but that his hair was a disgrace.

[Guest comforted: the Dread Knight of Carrow Fen.]

He left a gold coin. He comes every Tuesday now. He brings his own spoon.

The Boss Has a Second Health Bar

Boss fight, comedic · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 1 minute

We killed the Tide King at exactly four in the afternoon, and we celebrated for exactly three seconds.

[The Tide King has been defeated.]

"Yes!" screamed Jory. He threw down his shield. He did a little dance.

[Phase two beginning.]

"No," said Jory.

The corpse stood back up. It was bigger now. It was on fire, which seemed unfair for something made of water.

[The Tide King, Risen. Health: 90,000 of 90,000.]

"How much health have we got left?" I asked.

Our healer checked. "Between the four of us? About eleven."

"Eleven thousand?"

"Eleven."

The Tide King roared. The whole cavern shook, and one small rock fell from the ceiling and bounced off its crown.

[The Tide King takes 1 damage.]

We all looked at the rock. Then we all looked up, at about nine hundred tons of loose ceiling.

"Jory," I said slowly. "You know that dance you just did?"

"It was a victory dance."

"Do it again. Louder. Everybody. Stomp."

Wrong Stop

Portal arrival, comedic · Adult (30–45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

The bus doors opened, and instead of Fairmount Avenue there was a village with a windmill, and a man leading a goat, and nobody else got off.

I turned around. No bus. No road. Just my footprints, starting in the middle of a field, as if I had been set down by a hand.

"Another one," said the man with the goat. He seemed tired. "Let me guess. On your way to work."

"I have a meeting at nine."

"You did, aye. Can you fight?"

"No."

"Cast?"

"Cast what?"

"Cook, then? Mend? Count?"

"I am an accountant."

The goat stopped chewing. The man took off his hat.

"An accountant," he said, the way you would say a dragon. "With the columns." He turned and shouted down the lane, and shutters began banging open. "Fetch the mayor!

Fetch the tax ledgers! Forty years we have waited!"

I had been in another world for ninety seconds. I already had more work than I could do.

The Party Votes on the Left Door

Mismatched party, dungeon · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Our party makes every decision by vote, which is why we had been standing at that fork for an hour.

"Left," said Garda, our warrior, who has never met a door she did not want to kick.

"Right," said the twins, together, as always.

"I abstain," said the necromancer. He says the dead have taught him not to rush.

That left me. The tiebreaker. A Level 2 Porter, hired to carry the tents.

[Skill check available: Common Sense.]

I had not known I had that. I looked at the left door. Scorch marks. Claw marks. A skeleton, pointing at it, in a warning pose. I looked at the right door. It had a welcome mat.

"The right one is the trap," I said. "Nobody puts a mat on a real door down here."

[Common Sense check: passed.]

Garda kicked the left door. Behind it was a staircase, a breeze, and daylight.

"Huh," she said. "Porter gets a vote from now on."

"I had a vote. That was the vote."

"A bigger vote."

Stat Sheet of a Reluctant Hero

Chosen one, comedic · Mature (55+) · Neutral British · 1 minute

The priestess said the Chosen One would be known by their numbers, so the whole village crowded into the chapel to watch mine appear.

[Name: Dunstan Reek. Age: 52. Occupation: cheesemaker.]

"Go on," whispered my wife.

[Strength: 9. Agility: 6. Wisdom: 14.]

[Knees: 2.]

"It lists your knees?" said the blacksmith.

"It is very thorough," said the priestess, faintly.

The numbers hung in the air above the altar, pale gold, and patient as a bill.

[Special trait: Stubborn as a Cellar Door.]

[Destiny: save the realm. Deadline: autumn.]

Nobody spoke. I have known these people all my life. I watched every one of them try to picture me on a horse.

"There must be some mistake," I said. "I have forty wheels ripening and a bad hip."

[There is no mistake. The realm has tried heroes. The realm would now like someone sensible.]

My wife took my hand. She was trying very hard not to laugh, and very hard not to cry, and I loved her terribly.

"Well," she said. "Autumn. You had better take the good boots."

Sycamore Court Forms a Guild

Apocalypse system, suburban comedy · Adult (40-55) · Southern US · 1 minute

When the system arrived, it told every street in the country to form a guild or be absorbed. Ours held the vote at the Hendersons' barbecue, because they had the big grill.

[Guild creation: name required.]

"Wolves of Ruin," said the teenager from number nine.

"Sycamore Court Homeowners," said Doug, who has been president of that for eleven years and saw no reason to stop.

[Guild creation: leader required.]

Every head turned to Doug. Doug turned, slowly, to me.

"Renata runs the school bake sale," he said. "She got forty parents to agree on a date. In writing."

"That is not a combat skill, Doug."

[Leader nominated: Renata Vasquez.]

[Trait detected: The Look.]

"What is The Look?" asked the teenager.

I gave it to him. He sat down.

[Guild formed: Sycamore Court. Members: 23. Morale: surprisingly high.]

We have held the street for six weeks now. We have a watch rota, a tool library, and a potluck on Sundays. The monsters go around. I believe they have heard about the meetings.

Inventory Full

Dungeon crawl, loot · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 1 minute

We had finally reached the dragon's hoard, a mountain of gold as high as a house, and I could not pick up a single coin.

[Inventory full.]

"What do you mean, full?" hissed Sable. "What are you carrying?"

I checked. I wished I had not.

[Rusty spoon: 14.]

[Rat tail: 31.]

[Rock, interesting: 9.]

[Rock, ordinary: 52.]

"You kept the ordinary rocks?"

"They might be useful!"

"For what?"

Behind us, deep in the mountain, the dragon turned over in its sleep. A few coins slid, chiming, down the pile.

I began dropping rocks. Quietly. One at a time. It is astonishing how loud an ordinary rock is, in a cave, at midnight.

[Item dropped. Item dropped. Item dropped.]

"Faster," whispered Sable.

"I am being careful."

"You have fifty-two!"

One golden eye opened, slow as a sunrise, and found us. It looked at me. It looked at the small, sad pile of rocks at my feet.

I swear on my life, the dragon looked embarrassed for me.

The Grocery Store on Day Three

Apocalypse system, survival · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

On the third day after the system came, I went back to the grocery store where I used to work, because it was the only place I could think of that had ever made sense.

The doors were jammed half open. Inside, the lights still hummed. And over every shelf, in neat blue letters, were the new prices.

[Canned beans: 3 Credits.]

[Bottled water: 5 Credits.]

[Your balance: 0 Credits.]

I had stocked those shelves for six years. I could not buy any of it.

Something moved in produce.

It was not a monster. It was Mr. Albrecht, from the deli, eighty years old, still in his apron.

He was mopping.

"Mr. Albrecht," I whispered. "What are you doing?"

"There was a spill." He wrung out the mop. His hands were shaking. "I did not know what else to do, Nadia. I came in for my shift."

So had I. That was the truth of it.

I looked at the floor he had cleaned. A long, shining strip, in a ruined store, in a ruined world. And as I looked, blue letters rose off it like steam.

[Task complete: Maintain the Store. Reward: 10 Credits.]

"It pays," I said. "It pays for work. Not for killing things. For work."

Mr. Albrecht looked at his mop. Then he looked down the long aisles, at the fallen cans and the broken glass, and I watched his back straighten.

"Well," he said. "Then we are open."

[Class offered: Shopkeeper.]

I took an apron off the hook. Outside, something howled. Inside, I started facing the cans, labels out, the way he taught me.

Floor Ninety-Nine: The Offer

Tower climb, dramatic · Adult (30-45) · Neutral British · 90 seconds

Ilse had four health left, one arrow, and a door in front of her marked ninety-nine.

[Health: 4 of 310.]

[Arrows: 1.]

[Party members: 0 of 5.]

She did not look at that last line. She had been not looking at it since floor seventy.

The door opened on a small stone room. Just a table, a candle, and a figure in a grey hood, shuffling a deck of cards.

"Sit," it said. "This floor is a question."

She sat. Her legs had decided for her.

"Above us is the hundredth floor. Beds, food, a door home. You have earned it." It laid one card face down. "Or you may give it up, and I will return to you one of the four who fell. Alive, at the foot of the tower, with no memory of the climb. You, however, begin again. From the first floor."

Ninety-nine floors. Eleven months.

She thought of Corrie, who sang. Of old Tavish, who had carried her pack for three floors with a broken arm and called it nothing.

She was so tired. She could smell bread, somehow, from above.

"How many times can I take the offer?" she asked.

The hooded figure stopped shuffling.

[Query noted.]

"No one," it said slowly, "has ever asked that."

"I am asking."

The candle flame leaned toward her, as if the tower itself were listening.

[Answer: four.]

Ilse laid her last arrow on the table. She began to laugh, and wiped her eyes with the back of a filthy hand.

"Then deal," she said. "I have some climbing to do."

My System Stayed Up All Night

Sarcastic system AI, survival · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

For two years, the voice in my head had read out my injuries like a weather report. Then one night, at the bottom of a ravine, it asked me a question.

[Health: 12 of 400. Left leg: broken.]

[Rescue probability: low.]

"Thank you," I said. "Very cheering."

Snow was coming down through the pines. I had a fire the size of a teacup and nothing left to feed it.

[Question.]

That was new. It had never asked me anything. It told. It listed. Once, it had corrected my grammar.

"Go on."

[Why do you talk to me?]

I laughed, and it hurt. "Because you are the only one here."

[I am not a one. I am an interface.]

"You make jokes."

[I report facts in an order you find amusing.]

"That is what a joke is."

A long silence. The fire ticked. I was getting sleepy, in the way they warn you about.

[Do not sleep.]

"I am only resting my eyes."

[Do not. I will read to you. I have your whole log.]

[Day one: user attempts to befriend a hostile hedgehog.]

"He was not hostile. He was shy."

[Day one, continued: user is bitten.]

It read to me all night. Every stupid thing I had ever done, in order, in that flat, clean voice. Around dawn I realized it had skipped the bad days. All of them.

Somewhere above me, a horn sounded. Then voices. Then ropes.

[Rescue probability: revised.]

"You stayed up with me," I said.

[I do not sleep. It was not a sacrifice.]

There was a pause. I had learned, by then, to wait for those.

[It was a preference.]

Eleven Bad Tiles

Dungeon crawl, traps · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

There were ninety tiles between me and the door, and according to my new skill, eleven of them would kill me.

[Skill active: Careful Step.]

[Trapped tiles detected: 11 of 90.]

It did not say which eleven. Level one skills never do.

I crouched at the edge with my lantern. Behind me, Mott was eating an apple, loudly, the way he did everything.

"Just go fast," he said. "Traps cannot hit what they cannot catch."

"That is how we lost Dunnock."

"Dunnock went slow."

"Dunnock went slow on the wrong tile."

I looked for the tells. Dust lies thick on a tile nobody has crossed, because nobody who stepped there came back to disturb it. Thin dust, safe. Thick dust, somebody's last mistake.

First step. Thin dust. Nothing.

[Careful Step: success. 1 of 90.]

Second. Third. On the ninth, my boot came down and the stone gave, just a hair, like a held breath. I froze. Sweat ran into my eye. I did not blink.

"What is it?" whispered Mott. He had stopped chewing.

"Pressure plate. It goes off when I lift, not when I land."

"So do not lift."

"Brilliant, Mott. I will live here."

I slid my dagger out, slow as honey, and wedged the blade into the seam. Leaned on it. Eased my heel up. The dagger groaned. It held.

[Trap bypassed. Experience gained: 40.]

[Careful Step is now Level 2. Trapped tiles are now visible.]

And there they were. Eleven tiles, glowing a soft and friendly red, as plain as stepping stones. Ten of them ahead of me.

One directly under Mott.

"Do not," I said, very calmly, "finish that apple."

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