

Hunter 45

Chapter 45: Shadow Vault & Instincts

In a small corner of the tutorial forest, a very peculiar thing was happening. A man was repeatably jumping around, more times than not, finding himself smashing face-first into a tree. He seemed to turn into something resembling a shadow, quickly moving forward and then turn back to his normal tangible form with every jump.

This weird man was naturally Jake testing out his newly acquired Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra. The skill took quite a bit getting used to, which was the reason why he needed to practice it as much as he did.

The skill was quite simple, actually. With little to no warning or preparation, Jake could speed up his movement in any direction he was currently moving, turning into a shadow-like substance, and then appear once more whenever he reached his designated target, or the uptime of the skill ran out.

When he was a shadow, no physical object could touch him, instantly making Jake want to try phasing through walls. Sadly, that hope was quickly squashed. While he could phase through small things, he had no way of getting through a tree, for example. If he thought back to his fight with that caster William, he also doubted he could get past the wall of iron. He found that objects with a high mana density were harder to phase through, and a conjured wall had to be very mana-dense.

He could, however, phase through smaller objects. So, dodging through the swing of a sword, a thrown dagger, or an arrow was entirely possible. Though he did notice, it increased mana consumption when he did so.

The reason why he kept crashing into things was due to the speed increase and the disorientating effect of suddenly accelerating. It was like suddenly stepping on an escalator going far above what any safety standard would ever permit.

One moment he would move normally, and the next suddenly accelerate several times that speed for less than a second. The skill itself wasn't teleportation, but just swift movement after all. However, it could easily appear as if he had just teleported to the untrained eye when he used the skill at maximum output.

The fact that he took on the characteristics of a shadow only made it more challenging to use. It was like suddenly becoming weightless, and everything just felt... off. The fact that it moved in a direct line also made it even more confusing.

So, he trained. As one says, practice makes perfect. While he wasn't exactly aiming for perfection on his first day with the skill, he needed to be at least able to use it without accidentally getting himself killed during combat. He could totally see himself crash into something far more dangerous than a tree.

The damage he took to both his health and mana pools when he crashed into objects like trees was already quite insane, to begin with. The sudden momentum coming to an instant stop as he hit the tree made his mana instantly drain by several hundred points, and his health points drop even more.

One lucky thing with the skill was that it also phased all his equipment. Even if he had a bow in his hand, it too took on a shadowy look. He tried it with a couple of different things and found that pretty much anything he touched would get Shadow Vaulted with him. It did increase both mana and stamina consumption of the skill, though.

He also discovered with some experimenting that the enchant with his boots did indeed reduce stamina expenditure. And despite it saying it was only by a "small" amount, it turned out to be quite significant. It wasn't just a straight-up percentage decrease but had some more advanced math behind it.

If he did a small vault, consuming only 5 stamina with the boots as an example, the cost got reduced by a whopping 3 points. In other words, a 60% reduction. However, if he did a more extended vault, consuming 30 stamina, the boots would only reduce it by 10 points or so, aka around a 33% reduction.

His maximum consumption from a single vault so far had been 78 stamina, and then it had reduced cost by 17, which was a weird 22% or so reduction. Quite honestly, the math behind it stumped him, and he decided just to write it off as the system doing system things.

There clearly was a pattern somewhere. He doubted it would just be entirely random. Jake just didn't see the value in crunching the math and trying to discover the formula. Without it, he already had a good feeling for how much stamina he was consuming, and he didn't exactly have time to calculate much during combat. Especially not with a defensive skill.

The vault also consumed mana, of which no reduction was available. The cost was around the same as the stamina counterpart – not counting the reduction. The mana expenditure got a lot higher, however, if he phased through objects of any kind. Luckily, Wisdom was still his highest stat by quite a bit, and he didn't really use much mana during normal combat, to begin with. So, despite the relatively high cost of dodging through objects, he could manage.

He couldn't help but think of how useless the skill would feel if he only had his archer class, however. The mana consumption would drain him in only a few vaults, leaving him with a dead skill. But with his current resource pools, he could easily make tens of high-power jumps. If he could avoid smashing his head into things, that is.

But he was getting better. And fast. In only a few hours, he had gotten the short jumps down and was quickly able to move a few meters back and forth in quite fluid movements. The long vaults were still quite hard, but that too was improving drastically for every minute.

Quite honestly, his bloodline abilities felt like a total cheat here too. His sphere was utterly unaffected by him turning all shadowy and kept him completely aware of his surroundings. He 'knew' when he was about to hit something, and he seemed to slowly be able to train his instinct to understand the skill better.

A vital distinction had to be made between moving on instinct and moving deliberately with thoughts behind every action. If Jake tried to dodge a sword swing intentionally, he had first to register the weapon approaching, then he had to decide to evade, and then the method he would use to avoid. If he decided to use Shadow Vault, he would have to use the skill, and all the decisions related to that, like what way to dodge, how far, and how fast.

If it was done instinctually, however, only the first step was needed. And that was more than handled by Jake's overpowered danger perception. By then, he simply had to not fight what he already instinctively wanted to do and vault. It was like he just 'knew' what was best to do without deliberating it.

Everyone would naturally rely on instinct there. A boxer blocks based on intuition; when someone throws something at you, you lift your hand to block instinctively. Jake just took the entire concept to another level. He didn't just raise his hand to block something thrown; he would catch it out of the air and fling it back if it was an attack. Of course, his instincts weren't flawless.

Relying so much on only his Instincts could also easily backfire. Jake wasn't omniscient, and feints had a considerable effect on him. His instinctual reactions also ultimately relied on himself. If he was attacked by a skill he could in no way understand, his instinct wouldn't know how to respond appropriately either. His danger perception did help quite a bit there, but it too had many flaws.

If he had to bring up an example, it would be during the fight with William. The final attack had hit him hard. He had been showered with pieces of metal and shot back, taking a lot of damage. His instinct hadn't managed to react, and his danger perception had only activated at the final moment.

The same was true for the daggers that William controlled to attack him with. Their ethereal movements were hard to understand, making his instinct only able to try and keep up with their attack-pattern. His danger perception made him aware of them at all times but felt more like a constant buzzing telling him that those daggers are dangerous.

The way he had won the fight had also been straight up against his instincts. To dodge or block an attack was the most natural thing to do, so his instinct naturally screamed at him to do so. Instead, he had chosen to ignore the attacks and get hit, ultimately gaining an opening to win.

If he listened solely to his instincts during that fight, he would likely never have had the chance to land a hit before either he or the caster ran out of resources. While he would undoubtedly have won that battle of endurance, he didn't believe the other party would be stupid enough to stick around long enough to run out. Though, of course, Jake could be wrong.

There is also the fact that five daggers in the back barely fazed him. They penetrated a few centimeters into his flesh, dealing barely any real damage. With his high vitality, he could have taken dozens of those daggers, the only real problem being the pain.

Pain his instincts naturally wanted to avoid. To feel pain is just the body's way of saying: "dude, you should stop doing that."

In the end, his instincts were only a guide or an emergency tool for when his thoughts couldn't keep up. It did also have aspects he couldn't at all understand, however. It seemed to, at times, make him aware of things. It allowed him to get vague feelings around things, such as how strong a beast was compared to himself or how much damage a specific attack would do before it even hit him.

Many warriors of the multiverse likely could do many of these things. Sensing the power-level of others wasn't a new concept at all. Learning how much damage something would do also seemed like a relatively simple ability if one had enough experience on the battlefield.

Even beasts were able to determine how dangerous attacks were. Jake saw several of them avoid the more damaging attacks while just tanking the weaker ones. Of course, it depended entirely on the beast.

In the end, he could only sigh at how many unknowns there were. Bloodlines and their associated abilities were only for the holder of the bloodline to truly understand. The system offered no advice, only a simple explanation of the bloodline. And even that had many examples of holding minor flaws or lacking information.

Not that Jake had any complaints about his bloodline. He wasn't delusional. He knew it was his greatest weapon. He knew it was the only thing he had not been granted by the system, something that belonged to him and him alone.

As he sat there, relaxing, he heard some noise above him and felt like something was looking at him. He focused on his sphere and saw one of the weird-ass birds staring down at him. It was rare they got so close... in fact, this was the first time one of them had ever entered his sphere, and...

Birds aren't real. The Sphere of Perception confirmed that.

When he focused on the bird, all jokes aside, he didn't see a physical animal but pure energy. A mana density that was just... utterly insane. Jake couldn't even find the words to describe how ridiculous it was.

Jake felt confused, but he didn't let it show. He still felt a gaze upon him. It was clearly originating from the bird, and yet it wasn't...

It made him think... who or what was observing him? The birds were clearly just mediums of some kind... scouts. Based on their mana density, it wasn't related to any of the survivors. It felt far closer to the power shown by the Malefic Viper than himself.

Was a god behind those birds? If so, why? Did the system allow a god to directly observe like this? Could the god interfere? He didn't think it was the system itself making them; it appeared far too omnipotent to need conjured super-birds to keep an eye on people.

Also... those birds had been around since day 1. Like they were native to this place where the tutorial took place... like whatever or whoever had placed them here knew that it was a tutorial area. Wait...

Jake had been under an assumption for a long time... one that he was beginning to doubt. Who has ever said that the system created the tutorials? What if a god did?

Clearly, gods could interfere with the tutorial. Heck, the Viper had placed a dungeon there. Who is to say that other gods or powerful entities weren't also influencing things. Who is to say a god didn't also create this outside area? Maybe even the rules? Or did a god work with the system to do all these things? Some kind of collaboration?

But most importantly, he thought, why the fuck am I sitting here thinking about stuff I can't, in any way, shape, or form, find out at the moment, but can just ask the Viper about next time we meet instead of being productive?

So with that, he returned to what is truly important. Trying not to Shadow Vault into trees.