

Hunter 471

Chapter 471 - Jungle Hunting

Each step bent space as Jake ran through the landscape. It had already been a day or so since he left Paradise, with nothing especially interesting happening so far. A few mediocre D-grade areas had been explored, but nothing worth hunting.

He checked his map and saw he was approaching a new area marked as a danger zone. This particular area was exactly the kind of environment Jake loved to hunt in. It was a vast swath of greenery with tall trees dominating the horizon and dense foliage covering the ground, making it impossible to see far. It was not a forest but something even more filled with nature mana: a jungle.

While some areas of the forest Haven was placed in the outskirts of could qualify as jungle-like, this place was on another level. Jake checked the intel from Renato and even double-checked with what Peter had given him as both had mentioned this place as it was both a danger zone and a very popular hunting spot.

Reading the intel, it seemed like a great spot. In the very outskirts, a few E-grades could be found, but just a bit in, D-grades began dominating. This was still only talking the outer ten percent as none of the intel mentioned what was further in, just that it was dangerous. Renato's information did note the risk of C-grades, so that was positive.

The opponents one could expect ranged from beasts, plants, and a few scarce mentions of elementals, primarily water elementals due to the high humidity. Nature elementals weren't a thing as far as Jake knew. Nature mana tended to just seep into living things attuned to the affinity instead of coalescing into elementals, creating monster plants or treants and stuff like that.

Jake felt satisfied after studying the notes and headed in. It didn't take him long to notice several beasts and creatures all around him through his sphere. All of them E-grades, hiding either in bushes, in trees,

or even below the ground. There was a high level of verticality to the jungle, with plants and trees reaching hundreds of meters into the air, even in the outskirts.

Needless to say, Jake did not care for these E-grades as he swiftly ran forward. He didn't cut a path but just dodged through the dense vegetation, taking this opportunity to practice his stealth a bit. He also pulled out the Prima fragment once more and didn't get any immediate response when he tried to search for the energy signature. Then again, the mana in this area was dense, making it difficult unless he got really close. His newly upgraded tracking skill also didn't work as well, it wasn't like he knew what kinds of tracks Primas left behind. Scanning every track for signs of the Prima signature sounded like a nice way to spend his two weeks before the event accomplishing jack shit.

About half an hour later, he finally encountered his first D-grade. It was a ferret-like creature that hid in the underbrush, and while Jake did scan it briefly, he did not engage. In the area ahead, he found dozens of these creatures hidden, making it clear this was their territory.

As he got further in, the space did begin to open up a bit. Not because there was less nature mana or plant growth, but because of what was happening there. Fights between D-grades didn't always leave the environment intact and often entire areas were torn apart.

Due to the high mana density, new plants would grow back within days, if not hours, but the sheer number of beasts meant entire caverns within the foliage were formed. Jake spotted a cat-like creature battling a large mantis-like monster as both rapidly dodged and weaved in between trees, only for a third opponent to interfere and kill them when they were weakened.

Jake's hopes were heightened as he finally felt something. A gaze upon him... an unfriendly one. Finally, a beast was able to see through his stealth and decided to make him the target. Acting like he hadn't noticed, Jake kept going waiting patiently for his foe to strike. He didn't need to wait long as the creature entered his sphere from above. He saw it was a snake-like monster, but it was made up of vines, bark, and plant parts rather than flesh, blood, and scales.

It stalked him from above and waited to strike, but Jake didn't give it a chance. He turned around mid-jump, pulled out his bow, and fired a barrage of explosive arcane arrows, tearing up the surrounding greenery.

The snake was startled but still continued its assault. The head didn't actually have a mouth but was shaped like a halberd of sorts, allowing it to sweep and stab. Jake dodged a bit away as he fired another arrow into the creature and continued bombarding it with arrows, not allowing it to ever get close before it died. It had only been level one-fifty, meaning it didn't even give experience.

He had barely slowed down during this time but kept pace as he traveled inward, and that first snake would prove to set the example of what was to come. Ambushes happened frequently, but it was nothing Jake couldn't easily handle. He did begin putting in a bit more effort and even used poison on his arrows when the levels grew to above one-sixty and especially when he started to get experience.

For the first time in quite a while, Jake began to have a feeling well up inside him. He had spent long periods doing events, going to the Order, traveling, and being in cities. He had been around others all the time. But now... now he was alone.

It was almost like his senses sharpened, and he stopped thinking about anything irrelevant. He felt more comfortable than he had for months. There was only himself and an environment filled with things wanting to make him their prey.

An environment he would show exactly who the real hunter was.

A small smile crept onto his lips as Jake dodged the attacks of two treants trying to seal his movements. Jake moved on the offensive as he bombarded the treants with explosive arrows and, with a beat of his

wings, sent a cloud of miasmic poison down towards them. They struggled for a while before Jake finished them and moved on but barely got a hundred meters before he was attacked again.

Few predators moved through this area, and those that did, these creatures knew about and did not attack. They didn't know Jake, making them all attack him if they felt like they were at a higher level than he was. This resulted in a path of destructive arcane mana being carved into the jungle as he traveled. Nature would fix it soon enough, but for now, only destruction was in his wake.

Two primary types of enemies dominated the jungle: beasts and Vinewood creatures where he currently was. Vinewood creatures were like the snake before. It was more often than not just a plant lifeform in the shape of a beast, given life due to the dense and potent nature mana, making them effectively nature elementals. The beasts were... well, the usual beasts one could find in jungles.

One type of enemy could bleed and die to Jake's poison, and the other could be destroyed by the power of arcane mana. Jake had no poison dedicated to plants like the fungicide he had made back in the day, but his blood did a banger job anyway. While he had learned how to make an inferior rarity poison during his studying just to shore up his foundation, the poison would be way worse than his blood, even against weak foes.

Weak foes who slowly grew stronger as the days passed, and Jake continued his hunt.

You have slain [Vinewood Viper – lvl 166] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

You have slain [Deathfang Sloth – lvl 169] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

You have slain [Vinewood Mongoose – lvl 175] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

You have slain [Spiketail Lizard Devourer – lvl 182] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

As his foes grew stronger, so grew the difficulties of the fights. In the section he had just entered, primarily the Vinewood creatures existed, with all beasts daring to roam there at a high level themselves. Vinewood creatures did not attack one another, meaning the chances of being ganged up on were high.

With the increased difficulty Jake faced also came levels. Every singular kill did not give much experience, but over the course of the next week, he had slain hundreds above his own level – not a single one of them yet able to put up an equal fight.

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 156 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

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'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 163 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 164 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

Jake felt himself grow in power and familiarity with the foes he faced. Even as he enjoyed himself in the euphoria of the hunt, he stayed calm enough to remember his primary goal for going hunting besides leveling.

A goal he met in the beginning of the eighth day as finally, his Prima fragment got a response. Jake's eyes lit up as he stalked towards the Prima. It quickly became clear what kind of foe he would face as he saw no regular beasts for nearly fifty kilometers of the jungle while running towards the energy signature. It was all Vinewood creatures dominating and basking in ever-increasingly dense nature mana.

Soon enough, he even began seeing traces of his prey. Torn up ground, dried blood of beasts that looked like they had been dragged, and even a few pristine bones with every single trace of blood and flesh already devoured. Jake wondered what he was dealing with, but as the energy signature of the Prima felt like it was right in front of him, so did his prey enter his Sphere of Perception.

Vines... wood... the usual stuff, but rather than an animal, this just looked like a large bush. It slowly crept across the area with small roots dragging it forward as its body wrapped around the trees and larger plants while simply devouring and assimilation smaller ones. Jake used Identify on the Prima right away.

[Oakwood Brambleshrub Prima - 191]

It was more than forty meters across and ten meters tall as the huge mass of shrubbery moved, it being more of a moving mini-jungle than an actual creature. Jake stalked it for a bit as he prepared to make his move. He would use his blood as his poison of choice and keep a safe distance due to its low mobility.

Jake placed his Mark on the Prima as he scouted out the immediate area to make sure no other powerful creatures were nearby. Jake had noticed that Primas tended to be surrounded by those of their own race before, so he was a bit careful. However, this one seemed to be a solitary one, meaning it was likely also on the stronger side of the spectrum.

After checking out the area and finding no other living things, Jake wondered how to get a good vantage point. Due to the dense foliage, being more than a hundred meters away would obstruct his arrows, and even if he could now curve his arrows, it didn't really work that well with Arcane Powershot. He would need a clean line of sight and-

Wait, why not just...?

Jake looked upwards and summoned his wings, and jumped as he quickly emerged from the dense jungle. As soon as he got above it, he grinned. Large trees and some plants still emerged, but the jungle itself was only really a few hundred meters tall due to its high density, and due to the jungle constantly regrowing, each plant was not as powerful as, say, the trees around Haven.

The creatures of the jungle were still well-protected down there due to having a "roof" over their heads, obstructing vision and functioning as a barrier to many types of attacks. Moreover, there was much cover inside the jungle if an opponent attacked from above.

That last point only really mattered for beings able to actually move and dodge. A category the Prima squarely did not fall into.

He flew up nearly two kilometers but didn't go any further to still stay below the faint clouds floating about and dodge the flocks of birds sometimes coming by. He would prefer not to get interrupted. As he was up there, he did notice some other predators clearly also using the jungle as their hunting ground. One of them was a bit close to him – a silver-colored owl with large eyes that stared at him for a moment.

[Silvernight Owl – lvl 188]

Jake stared back before the owl decided to fly off, showing that owls were indeed pretty smart birds. He shrugged as he pulled out his bow and focused on his Mark of the Avaricious Hunter below. Arcane Awakening activated in the destructive state, boosting all his offensive stats by 50% to give himself some extra firepower. With a mental command, he activated Pride of the Malefic Viper and began condensing dozens of explosive arcane bolts in the area all around him. They were not made with the intent of actually doing damage to the Prima but merely removing the upper barrier of greenery.

The Prima was still moving slowly below, oblivious to what was about to happen. Jake nocked a stable arcane arrow with some of his blood poured on it – his quiver already full of pre-prepared arrows. He began charging Arcane Powershot and, at the same time, launched his arcane bolts. He didn't do so with much power but more or less just let them all down towards the jungle as he charged his attack.

He held nothing back as he infused energy into Arcane Powershot with dense arcane power soon swirling around him. Nearby clouds distorted and were dragged in as Jake focused on the shot. He charged the attack for nearly fourteen seconds with his entire upper body searing in pain before finally releasing it to an explosion of pure power.

Half a second before he released the arrow, the arcane bolts reached the jungle, and an explosion that would put nearly all pre-system bombs to shame rocked the jungle. Each bolt sent out destructive arcane mana for hundreds of meters around itself, and with more than fifty of them hitting at once, a jungle area of several square kilometers suddenly found itself with a large part of the upper foliage destroyed.

The Prima below reacted as it was hit by remnant arcane energy, but none of it was strong enough to harm it. Jake had focused on destroying the jungle and not actually killing anything, after all.

The same thing could not be said about the next attack.

Parting the arcane energy, a single arrow descended along with a storm of destruction that tore a hole straight through the massive bush-like creature before impacting the ground below. Jake heard what sounded like an angry roar but had already released the follow-up as explosive arcane arrows rained down courtesy of Splitting Arrow.

Another carpet-bombing session was initiated as even larger sections of the jungle were destroyed with the Prima right in the middle. While it didn't feel like he did much damage due to its large size, his Mark of the Avaricious Hunter made him aware he indeed did, as the Arcane Charge was building fast.

Jake fired off a few more barrages as finally, the Prima seemed to have pin-pointed its attacker. Before he could shoot again, he had to dodge to the side to avoid tens of wooden spears shot at him. This was followed by hurled stone and boulders in massive numbers as the Prima's tendrils just tossed everything it could find in his direction, including entire damn logs.

Not that any of these had a chance to hit as Jake kept his distance and dodged as he released destructive arrows. The Prima tried to defend by intercepting his shots but found itself unable to as the arrows curved in unpredictable directions

Come on, pal... you need to have more than that, Jake thought as he dodged the many projectiles. Each of the spears would pierce deep, but they simply didn't have a chance to hit.

Below the destruction continued as the Prima defended itself while counterattacking as well as it could. Jake did notice how little damage he seemed to do and noticed it was constantly absorbing energy from the soil below. Lower parts of the jungle hundreds of meters away that had survived began wilting as the Prima absorbed energy to rejuvenate itself, but Jake quickly cracked down.

He took flight as he swiftly flew in a circular pattern around the Prima, spreading poison mist to kill the plants and make the creature unable to heal. Jake never stopped attacking either, but as he got closer to the ground, the Prima did find more ways of fighting back.

Vines shot up towards him as Jake dragged the fight out and just built up damage. He did get a few minor cuts as the bramble part of the Prima's name was shown. Each vine did not aim to merely wrap him up or stab him but was lined with sharp thorns that would rip anyone apart like a chainsaw while draining their blood.

Jake managed to build his advantage for several minutes before the Prima made its move, clearly aware it was losing badly.

His sense of danger reacted as Jake was forced to quickly flee upwards as more than a hundred tendrils emerged from the soil below. Jake released a blast of arcane mana to destroy some tendrils but suddenly realized how useless that was.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed another tendril rise in the distance. Then another, followed by ten more. A hundred more. Like the jungle itself was rising towards him, thousands of tendrils reached towards the sky and tried to catch Jake – and he had no delusions that being caught would be a good time.

As he flew upwards, the cloud of poison bathed the many tendrils chasing him. Some of them began withering but were rapidly replaced by others, forcing him to repeatedly release arcane explosions behind him.

Somehow the tendrils kept chasing even as he reached a kilometer high, but clearly, the Prima was running out of ones long enough. Jake took the chance and rapidly moved to the side to dodge away and knocked an arrow. Arcane Powershot charged as the tendrils came again, but Jake just tossed them a glance with Gaze of the Apex Hunter, making them eerily freeze mid-air. At the same time, his sense of time slowed due to Steady Aim as he focused intently.

The arrow he had knocked was larger than any of the others, as it looked more like a spear and was nearly entirely purple and pulsed with power. With the Prima infected with his poison, he had rapidly gained an understanding of it good enough to condense an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter.

Jake released the arrow down towards the defenseless Prima and saw it sink into the creature just as it became able to move again. It writhed in pain, and the many tendrils swayed in mid-air as they seemed to lose strength. With a mental command, Jake activated the Arcane Charge from Mark of the Avaricious Hunter that had been charged more than Jake had ever done before.

For a brief moment, a flash lit up the world.

The swaying tendrils all began to wither, and the Prima below slowly turned black as it fell apart and began turning to ash.

You have slain [Oakwood Brambleshrub Prima - 191] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 160 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

Jake stayed in the air as he gazed below. An area several square kilometers big had been utterly decimated and left bare with remnant arcane energy still lingering here and there. Without further ado, he flew down and quickly located the loot, which included the expected Prima fragment and an odd seed of some sort. He tossed the seed in his inventory for further inspection later, but for now, he had another matter to attend to.

Avaricious Arcane Hunter class skills available

Chapter 472 - Skills, Statuses, & A Stealthy Future

Finally, it was skill-selection time. It had been a good while since he had last selected a class skill. Shit, the last time he picked one was when he got Steady Focus of the Apex Hunter during the Treasure Hunt. It felt like ages ago. Since then, he had gone to the Order and mainly focused on alchemy, so his class had really been put on the backburner. Not that this time spent hadn't also benefitted his class. Through his profession, he had gotten a lot stronger, especially when it came to his magic and energy control.

Jake did not know what he wanted from this skill selection. He considered if he needed a good melee skill but still wasn't entirely certain on what Path he wanted to walk there. Not that what he wanted necessarily mattered anyway when it came to what the system offered... well, it did to some degree due to Records and all that, but for the most part, it was down to what he had done and experienced not what he wanted.

So, without further ado, he opened the menu and, as was customary, saw a disappointing first offer.

[Looping Arcane Bolt (Epic)] – The only thing better than one arcane bolt is two arcane bolts. Allows the hunter to summon a large arcane bolt that will passively drain mana to recharge itself and release arcane bolts every few seconds towards any designated targets. The large arcane bolt can be detonated

at any point, releasing destructive arcane mana. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Intelligence when using Looping Arcane Bolt Arcane Orb.

Arcane Bolt, but now self-firing or something? From how he understood it, he could summon a bolt that would then shoot more bolts, allowing Jake to set up remote towers to bombard people. He liked the idea... if it summoned a bow that shot arrows, that is.

True, this could have some practical applications here and there, such as the fight he just had with the Prima, but it wasn't like he needed it, and he viewed it more as a bit of direction for what he could do by himself without getting a skill.

As it was, this skill was just proof Jake had continually improved his mana control enough for the system to unlock this skill. Something the next skill also did.

Arcane Lance (Epic) – Just a bigger Arcane Bolt. What did you expect?

Yeah, that wasn't actually what the description said, but it was exactly what it was. A big Arcane Bolt that was now an Arcane Lance that took longer to charge but did a lot more damage. Jake could already do that and sometimes even did, and considering he had no interest in gaining the extra stat-scaling from having it as a skill, he moved on.

[Twin-Fang Whirlwind Strike (Epic)] – May your fangs embrace the wind as a whirlwind is born from your strikes. Allows the hunter to infuse both weapons with potent wind mana and perform a circular strike to create a whirlwind that cuts and rebuffs all foes around you. Twin-Fang Whirlwind Strike can be repeatedly performed to further empower the whirlwind and persist for a small period even after the skill is no longer performed. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility, Intelligence, and Strength when using Twin-Fang Whirlwind Strike.

Three epic skills in a row... but this one did not include anything related to arcane energy, something Jake more or less felt used to at this point. No, this was pure wind magic, a school of magic Jake hadn't really dabbled in at all outside of that one bow he got in the Tutorial, and that had just been an item. So the question was... how did he get it?

His first guess would be that his class just liked to offer some melee skills, and Jake had the affinity with his second guess being that a certain green murder bird was the cause. In any case, the skill itself looked interesting and clearly took some inspiration from Fang of Man. However, it didn't really click with him. It required him to be in melee, and when Jake fought in melee, it was usually against foes he overpowered or when he did so defensively. This skill did have some defensive applications, but it struck him more as a skill that affected a large area and needed some charge-up to work, which was not the kind of melee skill Jake wanted. He could already imagine himself beginning the spinning to use the attack only to get smacked away.

So, yeah. Jake was not keen on it as he moved on to a skill that was a lot more interesting.

[Arcane Stalker (Ancient)] – A true artisan of stealth, you skulk your foes as they remain none the wiser to your presence. You find it easier than ever to blend into the environment, making your presence, mana, and nearly all traces of your existence hidden as you move stealthily. You are hidden from nearly all forms of magical scans, and when standing still, your arcane mana will automatically create a barrier, making you appear one with the environment, even to the sense of touch. Adds a bonus to the effect of Agility, Perception, Willpower, and Intelligence while successfully remaining undetected. **WARNING:** This skill is unlocked by and will serve as an upgrade to your existing Arcane Stealth.

Jake had made some progress with stealth himself already. From a sucky inferior rarity skill to a rare one so far, so for the system to finally recognize it and offer him a skill was no surprise. The skill itself also clearly built upon what he had already done before. Currently, he could make himself invisible when standing still and actively focusing on using his arcane mana to hide, but this skill would make it all more automatic. It was without a doubt a good stealth skill... but...

He didn't know why, but he didn't like it. Logically he knew the skill was good, but something made him think picking it was a bad idea. Jake frowned as he closely read it a few more times but found nothing that indicated to him it would have any downsides compared to what he currently had. Yet the feeling remained.

For a moment, he considered asking Villy but ultimately decided not to. His gut feeling told him to not take it, and he would trust that even over the advice of a god. He did consider why he felt as he did, and he only had one real guess.

I got the other upgrades myself...

It was comparable to if he was offered an archery skill. Jake seriously couldn't see himself picking a skill during the selection that upgraded his archery proficiency skill. He did remember some conversation with Villy about wasting skills by choosing to upgrade one in the past, so perhaps this was also part of it. Picking a direct upgrade would also inadvertently result in the skill not being as familiar to you compared to a skill you upgraded yourself, hence making it less powerful in nearly all cases. Finally, maybe this would lead him down a Path of stealth Jake shouldn't walk.

Anyway, he didn't feel like picking it, so he wouldn't as he moved on to the final option. He saw the legendary rarity right away... and then the rest.

[Thousand Voices, Million Eyes, Single Mind (Legendary)] – Resist and perhaps even channel the whispers of the void as your soul finds serenity in madness - solace in the unknown.

Sometimes you can come across a skill you kind of understand why you get offered, but also nope the fuck away from. This was one such skill.

It didn't take a genius to figure out why Jake had been offered this. Even so, it did surprise him. It didn't make much sense to him that merely meeting a creature of the void would warrant unlocking a legendary skill. If that was so, wouldn't peak factions just have a god bring an entire army to gaze at one for a bit before leaving? Then again, would this skill fuck people up somehow? Or was it rare to get it offered? Did he gain the skill offered by not losing his mind?

Jake had many questions but only one answer: fuck no. He got a headache just remembering Oras, and the skill itself also had some shady-ass wording, making him believe it had a great chance of having... unforeseen effects. His guts also told him to stay the hell away from it.

To summarize, there were five skill options. Two related to arcane magic fitter for mages than Jake, one melee skill, one stealth skill that did seem great but made him apprehensive, and one with fuck-no-void-stuff. None of them were skills he wanted to pick up, which begged the question... what would he pick?

He decided to scroll up through the list and checked skills he had considered prior but skipped for better options. One that quickly came to mind was one he had skipped at level 140 in favor of upgrading his Hunter's Mark: Barrier of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter.

[Barrier of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Epic)] – Stability is a cornerstone of your arcane affinity, making barriers an obvious application of your arcane. Allows the Avaricious Arcane Hunter to summon a barrier of pure, stable arcane energy, blocking out all kinds of direct attacks that attempt to pass through – both physical and magical attacks alike. Mana or stamina will be consumed depending on the nature of the blocked attacks. All concepts not deployed by you will be significantly weakened within your barrier. Adds a small bonus to the effects of Wisdom and Endurance when using Arcane Barrier.

Currently, Jake did not have any real defensive skills. It also had the concept-suppression effect, which Jake found interesting. The thing that made him a bit reluctant was how much his own barrier magic had already progressed without any skills. Also... a pure magic skill like this just didn't feel like it "fit" with the rest of the skills for his class. All the ones he currently had, at least from the ones gained in D-grade,

were related to archery in some way, while this one would have no relation. Sure, that was only two skills so far, not counting the ones gained from the evolution itself, but even those he had from his earlier grades all fit a hunter “theme” more than an arcane barrier would.

Also... the big reason... Jake felt like he could do what the skill did himself with practice. His mana control was improving every day and had especially taken a jump after he went to the Order. As he got more familiar with his arcane mana, he would learn all these things soon enough, same as the many Arcane Bolt skills.

Due to that, Jake kept looking through the list. A few interested him, but he also noticed some had disappeared, such as the Basic Nature Affinity offered all the way back at level 30 and the mental defense skill from level 40.

As he scrolled through the list, one suddenly jumped into his eyes. A skill Jake had skipped over back at level 50 in exchange for Bestial Survival Instincts – a skill that instantly became Moment of the Primal Hunter.

Perhaps he had not thought much about this skill back then due to how curious he had been about what would happen if he picked Bestial Survival Instincts... but... wasn't this skill damn good? Like, really fucking good?

[Stealth Attack (Common)] – The strongest blow is the one not seen coming before it is too late. Increase the power of the first attack made on an otherwise unaware foe. Works with both ranged and melee attacks. Adds a bonus to the effect of Agility and Strength when using Stealth Attack equivalent to Arcane Stealth.

It was only a skill at common rarity. That alone was usually enough to make Jake skip it outright, but this one felt different. While it seemed like a super simple skill – stealth attacks do more damage – he now

knew far more than back then. While on paper it seemed simple... it truly was not. While it wasn't some fancy or showy skill, it had something even more important: conceptual power.

Like his Mark of the Avaricious Hunter, it did something theoretically possible to do without a skill, but would be so hard that Jake had no chance to. Anything that gave direct damage or directly increased something without any drawback was naturally useful, and this one was an all-around improvement to Jake's repertoire.

He could also often strike when unseen due to his high Perception and ability to locate his foes with Mark and his Sphere, making it immediately useful. There were only so many ways to make his Arcane Powershot more powerful, and this was one of them.

But equally as important, it could be upgraded. Jake's stealth skill had been shit when he got it. His archery skill had also been at inferior rarity yet was now epic. While he right now had no idea how to upgrade it easily... he had time.

Villy had told him a long time ago how valuable skill slots were, and having some kind of stealth attack was something Jake was certain he would one day want. To get it at common rarity meant he could mold it, and it would likely be a better skill for him at whatever rarity he upgraded it to, than one he just picked up at an already high rarity. That was no doubt one of the reasons why his Arcane Powershot was arguably still his most powerful offensive skill despite being only at epic rarity.

Having convinced himself, Jake picked up the common Stealth Attack skill. A bit of knowledge entered his head, but it was damn minimal and just made him aware that only the first attack would ever count, as it would count as if the foe was "aware" of him after that.

With it picked, Jake cracked his neck and took a deep breath. He checked his status for the first time in quite a while to see his progress so far.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (D) – lvl 164]

Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter – lvl 160]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 169]

Health Points (HP): 35682/46250

Mana Points (MP): 39888/72825

Stamina: 19369/33750

Stats

Strength: 3279

Agility: 6133

Endurance: 3375

Vitality: 4625

Toughness: 3358

Wisdom: 5826

Intelligence: 4703

Perception: 10243

Willpower: 4936

Free points: 0

Titles: [Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch], [Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer VII], [Dungeon Pioneer VI], [Legendary Prodigy], [Prodigious Slayer of the Mighty], [Kingslayer], [Nobility: Earl], [Progenitor of the 93rd Universe], [Prodigious Arcanist], [Perfect Evolution (D-grade)], [Premier Treasure Hunter], [Myth Originator]

Class Skills: [Stealth Attack (Common)], [Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra (Uncommon)], [Traditional Hunter's Tracking (Rare)], [Arcane Stealth (Rare)], [Enhanced Splitting Arrow (Rare)], [Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Epic)], [Arcane Powershot (Epic)], [Big Game Arcane Hunter (Epic)], [Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)], [Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)], [Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Epic)], [One Step Mile (Ancient)], [Fangs of Man (Ancient)], [Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Ancient)], [Moment of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Steady Focus of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Arcane Awakening (Legendary)]

Profession Skills: [Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Herbology (Common)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Alchemist's Purification (Common)], [Alchemical Flame (Uncommon)], [Craft Elixir (Uncommon)], [Toxicology (Uncommon)], [Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)], [Concoct Poison (Rare)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Epic)], [Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Ancient)], [Advanced Core Manipulation (Ancient)], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Wings of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Legendary)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Pride of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)]

Blessing: [True Blessing of the Malefic Viper (Blessing - True)]

Race Skills: [Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races (Unique)], [Legacy of Man (Unique)], [Identify (Common)], [Serene Soul Meditation (Epic)], [Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)]

Bloodline: [Bloodline of the Primal Hunter (Bloodline Ability - Unique)]

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As usual, it had expanded, not only in length, but naturally, numbers had also gone up. Jake liked it when numbers went up. He had gained a lot of profession levels since last and upgraded his necklace, so he had especially gained a lot more Intelligence, Wisdom, and Willpower. Skill-wise he had gained some upgrades here and there, such as his tracking skill and archery skill. Fundamental hunting skills, really.

On the topic of Free Points, since the last time he took a good look, Jake had invested 200 stats in Agility, 200 in Strength, and the rest in Perception, as he still had to put some points in it. Investing in Agility and Strength did not feel super good, but Jake kind of knew it was necessary at this point. Having Strength as his lowest stat wasn't that bad as it was still high compared to many other humans his level due to all his bonuses and Fangs of the Malefic Viper, but he still felt "weak" against pretty much every foe he faced. That was fine in most cases, as he could beat them with Agility and magic, but he still wanted some more Strength to not bottleneck himself too hard.

Closing his status, Jake flew up into the air again as he looked out over the jungle. He smiled a bit to himself as he continued this hunt.

This time with a focus on stealth.

More accurately, stealth attacks.

Chapter 473 - Covert Wills

Jacob sat in his office and stared at the item lying on the table in front of him. He picked it up and felt its metallic surface. Their smiths had already tested the metal and found it completely unrecognizable.

Even those who had Patrons said they were unable to identify the metal, meaning it either had to be new to the universe or made by the system specifically for this item.

[Key of the Exalted Prima (Unique)] – A key to the Seat of the Exalted Prima. Allows entry to the Seat of the Exalted Prima.

The key belonged to the Church, as most items of value did, and Jacob was the current safekeeper. He stared at it for a while as he considered... well, everything.

The upcoming event was all about different Paths if one had made different choices. Jacob had made many choices that he questioned himself about, all the way back to the day the Tutorial began. Shortly after entering the forest, Jake shot a boar that attracted a larger level 10 boar that had attacked them. While Jake had killed the beast, Joanna had come away crippled.

Back then, Jacob had admonished the man for his decision. He had blamed Jake, and Jacob believed that decision had been what initially had torn a wedge between him and the rest of their group. Then when Jake defended himself and killed three men... they all blamed him again.

He couldn't blame Jake for leaving the group and going off on his own when confronted by Richard. If he had stood up for Jake then, things would have been different, but Jacob's bad decisions didn't end there.

Jacob had been used by Richard, fooled by Caroline, and ultimately tricked by both to lead Jake into an ambush... he had stood by and done nothing worthwhile as all the people he felt responsible for had been killed one by one. He had been cowardly and stuck by his own rules of non-aggression... he had decided the fate of so many people.

That had “rewarded” him with the class of Augur. A fate Jacob was quite comfortable with. He liked who he was now for the most part, but he still couldn’t help but wonder: what if he had done differently?

What if he had pushed Caroline and maybe started an uprising against Richard? What if he had tried to keep Jake close? What if he had killed William when he had the chance?

He did know that even if he did end up killing William back then, it would only have led to everyone dying later on due to a beast tide when Jake eventually progressed far enough in his quest to defeat the King of the Forest. However, would that truly have killed them all if they had done all they could to progress and fortify their settlement?

So many doubts haunted him, and they had for a long time. He couldn’t even claim that he now only did what was best for the Holy Church. He made decisions not necessarily beneficial for the Church but for his own personal feelings. Jacob had warned Casper about the goals of the Church and that plans were being made to crack down on the Risen. Needless to say, then sharing such information was clearly not in line with the goals of his faction.

Jacob even had to do so during the World Congress, too, as it was only there the gods could not peek at his conversations. He was fully aware there was already much scrutiny on him from several internal factions due to a number of factors. His friendship with Casper was just one of them, but that he still stayed relatively close to Jake was even more of an issue to many. While the Order of the Malefic Viper was not an enemy of the Holy Church, they were definitely not allies either. They were more of a faction that the Holy Church ignored and left alone - an approach they had wanted Jacob to take with Jake too. Add to that the fact that the Holy Church was losing more and more influence on the planet and their ever-falling chances of becoming the World Leader... things were rough.

What if I had made different choices? Jacob repeatedly asked himself.

Chances are he would be dead. He was reasonably sure he would be dead, actually. That wasn't the most important thing, though. It was a question of if the planet would be in a better state if he had died. Without him, the Holy Church would still be there, but he knew they would be far smaller. He at least gave himself that much credit.

The work of the Church had also only become easier in recent times. The former King of the Forest seemed to have reined in the wild beasts quite well, and attacks on settlements had practically dropped to zero. The system event of Unusual Unions had also helped immensely with many beasts and monster factions now even working with human settlements. There was still conflict, and many humans did not want monsters in or too close to their cities. Attacks on settlements also still happened here and there, but such was unavoidable. In the same vein that humans could attack beasts in their habitats, so did humans have to accept the fear of being attacked in theirs.

Feeling the key in his hand, he considered using it. He knew he could. He found it a bit hypocritical that his job was to guide others to their ideal Path while he so often questioned his own... but perhaps that was part of it.

No... I have made my choices.

A future had been realized partly due to his choices. Jake had become a Progenitor, Casper an influential figure of the Risen, and Bertram still lived by his side. Even his own survival mattered as he knew things that would be beneficial due to his class. He knew that undercurrents were building and that the independent factions were preparing something. Something big.

Putting the key down on the table, he decided it would go to Maria, the strongest fighter in their city – possibly excluding Bertram - even if she was only a mercenary and not a member of the Church. It would benefit her the most. She had been part of the hunting teams for one anyway, and Jacob knew she wanted one. Bertram had already made it clear he had no desire to get a key himself.

It was probably a decision that would once more land scrutiny on him. Nothing would be said or done openly, but just small whispers in the corners questioning him. He could seek to silence it, but he saw no point. No, he would stop questioning himself as he reaffirmed himself. He closed his eyes and sighed.

I know my task.

To choose the best Path for Earth. The best Path for the most people.

Even if that Path did not include the Holy Church.

As a Malefic Dragonkin, Draskil had killed his first C-grade when at level 173 or 174. Needless to say, Jake wanted to beat that by killing one even earlier. While Jake wasn't entirely confident he could beat Draskil even if they were the same level, he had a large advantage when fighting higher-level foes due to his class and even his profession. Alchemy allowed him to often come out on top in drawn-out fights – something any bout with a C-grade was bound to become – and his entire class was about punching above his weight class.

With his new Stealth Attack, he had even more confidence. Not right away, necessarily, as he planned on spending the next few days practicing and trying to improve it. He checked the time for the event and saw he had nine days left till the system event with the Seat of the Exalted Prima began.

Nine days of hunting.

Thus, his journey as a stealth archer in practice began. Before when Jake hunted through the jungle, he would tear up a path and kill everything that attacked him, but now Jake went slow. He would slowly stalk through the greenery and always stayed hidden.

The only times he struck, he did so when not seen. His senses made him know if his foe was aware of him, allowing him to more easily land stealth attacks. Except he quickly ran into one issue.

Danger sense was not something necessarily unique to Jake. Honed warriors and nearly all beasts also had some form of danger sense, and even if it was far weaker than Jake's Bloodline-empowered ability, it was still there. This meant that the moment Jake released his attack and his arrow headed towards the beast, the beast would be aware, canceling out the effects of Stealth Attack.

That sucked. Big time. At least Vinewood creatures seemed to have no proper danger sense but allowed Jake to easily land sneaky attacks. He did notice that he could get stealth hits in melee for beasts, but only if he struck when they were right next to him. He managed to barely land a Stealth Attack on a pig-like beast that wandered right next to a Jake hidden with Arcane Stealth.

Also, magic attacks did not count as ranged attacks. Only physical blows did, which the scaling with Agility and Strength only should have been a hint to. Funnily enough, throwing a rock would trigger Stealth Attack, but a stable arcane bolt would not. Ignoring the absurdity of that, Jake quickly found more and more lacking aspects of the skill. Then again, what could he expect from a common rarity skill? He did not doubt it would have been way better back at level 50 and E-grade in general, but it was pretty damn hard to use in D-grade.

However... when it did hit. Jake did not know what he had expected when he had picked it up. Maybe a few percentages more damage? Five to ten percent seemed fair enough to him. Oh boy, had he been wrong.

Stealth Attack effectively increased damage by a third when it was triggered. Thirty-three fucking percent damage bonus from a common rarity skill. Sure, it was hard as hell to actually land a Stealth Attack, and it was limited to one a fight, but it was so much more powerful than he could have ever expected. He did regret not picking it up earlier in some ways, but then again, he had not really picked any skills he didn't like. A few had fallen to the roadside like Descending Dark Fang, but he was confident he could improve them with time. Shit, it even had fang in the name.

Now, thirty-three percent was great, but landing an Arcane Powershot with it triggering was borderline impossible. The energies it gave off just made it too easy to notice for anything with halfway decent senses, making it only applicable against foes such as elementals. And even if it did land, Arcane Powershot was partly magical, so yeah.

Needless to say, Jake would work on improving that. To do that, he first had to figure out what exactly did Stealth Attack do? Not what its effect was, but why there was an effect at all? Jake quickly bit onto the fact that he did not expend any extra energy at all, but that did not mean there wasn't anything extra added to his attacks.

There was... something. It was subtle. Jake would not quite call it energy, but more like all the energy already in the attack was affected subtly. The energy did not truly change but was somehow "primed" to work as a Stealth Attack. Jake reckoned this was done by the concept behind Stealth Attack.

These were the things Jake could swiftly discover himself, but it was only the first step. Even if he saw changes, he also needed to know what happened with these changes when actually used. How could this changed energy and concept suddenly disperse the moment a creature was aware it was being attacked?

Not just aware of the attack itself or its nature, but just that something was attacking it. Jake was lucky and found two foes fighting and confirmed that his Stealth Attack did work, meaning the foe just had to not be aware of the attack he launched.

The next day was spent experimenting even more, as he killed quite a few beasts and Vinewood creatures, but his hunting speed had definitely slowed down in comparison to the week prior. Not that his time was fruitless as he finally got a good idea of what to do with the Stealth Attack skill. A skill that truly was limited, making the entire common rarity tag make more and more sense.

So, Jake had several goals and avenues of improvement:

First of all: Magic. He needed his stealth skill to work with attacks of a magical nature. Right now, what was considered a magic attack or not was highly arbitrary. Arcane Powershot was only partly physical, but his explosive arrows were not at all; hence the explosion didn't benefit from Stealth Attack; only the small initial impact of the arrow did.

Secondly, he needed some kind of consistency against different foes. He needed it to trigger even if the opponent became aware of his attack, as quite frankly, the skill was just useless as-is against some enemies like beasts. There were two ways of doing this: obfuscation or a change of trigger requirement.

Changing the trigger requirement was simple enough in theory. Jake just had to do so that even if the enemy was aware of a blow coming, it had to know more of the attack or attacker than the current rules required. Either by requiring it to know that Jake was the attacker and maybe even locate him, or by doing so that Stealth Attack worked as long as Jake fired the attack while the foe was unaware.

Obfuscation was a bit more tricky. The goal here would be to hide Jake's attack until the moment it hit. Jake knew a thing or two about danger senses, as he had quite a potent version himself, but that didn't make his danger sense fundamentally different than others. For the danger sense to trigger, some part of you had to be able to sense it. In Jake's case, it was primarily with his Sphere picking it up or his even more overpowered intuition warning him. Most often, these two worked together along with all his other empowered senses, and that resulted in his overpowered danger sense. For beasts, it was much the same.

Perception-related abilities were not rare at all, and Perception as a stat allowed most creatures to sense things around them, especially mana. Everyone could sense mana in their environment, and Jake firing an arrow that disrupted energy within his foe's "Sphere of Perception" would make them aware of his attack, rendering Stealth Attack useless. So Jake would have to hide it somehow.

This did not deal with the intuition part. Many actual danger sense skills used intuition, even if it was considered far less reliable. The description of Bestial Survival Instincts back then had even said: "has a small chance to feel a distinct sense of danger from any attack," which was – as the name suggested – a common ability of beasts.

Naturally, an ideal solution would be to change both the trigger requirements of Stealth Attack and hide the attack for maximum effect. Now the issue was just figuring out how to do that, as well as allowing it to work with magical attacks.

One thing was certain: it had to do with the odd sensation of concept he got from his attacks. The invisible concept was something only he could see and feel. His first issue was figuring out how to actually engage with it. It was untouchable to energy, and no matter how Jake tried to somehow affect it, he failed.

Yet he did not give up but kept trying different approaches. He figured out more and more nuances of the skill, such as how the blow did not count for his poisons at all, but only the initial impact, and the one time he managed to land an Arcane Powershot from stealth on a Vinewood creature that seemed to be in meditation while hidden in a tree-canopy, he saw how the damage amplification was a lot less than it should be according to his "adding a third" assessment, confirming his prior theory that Arcane Powershot would be limited. This made Stealth Attack increase overall damage by way less than a third, not because the amplification did not scale, but because of how much "magic" was involved in Jake's archery by now, especially with poisons mixed in too.

Time passed as another day went by, with Jake using his new skill repeatedly. He did not consider much else than merely figuring out how to improve Stealth Attack. How to apply the concept to the magical aspects of his fighting style or how to make it more reliable. He used it on different foes, sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding, and he did get a sense of improvement and like his success chance increased.

His only method of improvement was to simply use the skill over and over again to observe what he did when the skill was used. One had to remember that the user was the cause of every skill; the originator. This meant Jake was the one who infused the concept into his physical blows, and as long as he could figure out how and why he did that – something the skill currently did without Jake consciously noticing – he would be able to control it.

The breakthrough came in an unexpected way. As Jake was hunting a boar-like beast while in deep focus, he sat hidden with Arcane Stealth as he nocked an explosive arcane arrow. He was so focused on drawing his bow and trying to observe the process as the Stealth Attack concept was applied that he didn't even notice himself mutter under his breath before it had already been done. He muttered his so-far unspoken hope towards the arrow.

“Be stealthy...”

Chapter 474 - Stealth Archer Training

Willpower.

Out of all the stats, it was the one Jake understood the least. Intelligence made him a bit faster at calculating stuff and probably helped with other mental things while making magic more potent. Strength made him stronger. Wisdom made it easier to remember things and increased his mana pool.

All of them made sense and had some form of scaling in combat. Perception was also a difficult stat to understand at times. It increased all his senses, even if he suppressed most of them the majority of the

time, as knocking yourself out from every bad smell seemed like a bad idea. But... Jake knew what it did, with it also improved his reaction speeds and such. Jake also noticed a very noticeable correlation between high Perception and increased energy control. However, another factor for energy control was Willpower.

Willpower as a whole was weird. Every single action someone performed included aspects of Willpower. Of the more tangible aspects, it also increased mana regeneration, but Jake would definitely say the primary benefit of Willpower was assisting in controlling energy. It was the primary stat together with Perception when it came to controlling pretty much anything. That was why when Jake used the domain part of Pride of the Malefic Viper, he could summon far more magic in his immediate area as his Willpower was “buffed” inside the domain, so to say.

This was a very overt and obvious application - the conscious use of Willpower as Jake actively tried to control something. However, when Jake was merely swinging his weapon or firing an arrow, he did not actively infuse Willpower into the process but just went through the motion. As these motions were willful, Willpower would naturally come into play and enhance the effects. It was subtle, but Willpower more or less made everything done more powerful, as long as the action was done intentionally.

Then there were Words of Power, the absolutely most direct use of pure Willpower there was. It was when you only used Willpower and a bit of energy mixed in to make something happen. You quite literally imposed your will upon the world and made your words law to make it obey. Be it by forcing something to move a bit or ordering an entire planet to explode, both things were possible depending on how much Willpower an individual had and their ability to apply it.

Words of Power were to speak your will to further amplify and focus it. It was incredibly standard, and the most common use of Words of Power was when speaking the name of a skill or an incantation related to one. Some skills even required one to speak to muster enough Willpower to make it possible. The Sword Saint was a good example of this, as many of his skills made use of Words of Power. This did not mean speaking the skill was a good idea every time. Jake, as an example, had no skills where it would help with anything, and Words of Power also had the downside of increasing the cast time of skills. Also... it would look stupid if Jake went around screaming “Arcane Arrow!” every time he shot one.

The one place where it made sense for Jake to use Words of Power was when he was practicing using his Willpower or ordering a pen to fly to his hand while working. This incident happened to fall into the first category, albeit accidentally, as Jake finally found the trigger for Stealth Attack.

One so simple it was stupid.

He just had to will for it to happen. To actively infuse his Willpower into an attack to make the stealth attack concept appear. He did this instinctually with physical attacks due to the common skill, but not with magic skills. Jake naturally tried and willed for his magical attacks to work with Stealth Attack, but it was not enough without him actively focusing on that aspect. It was not a matter of stats either, as influencing more energy naturally required more Willpower.

However, the concept was reinforced when he spoke – no, ordered – the explosive arcane arrow to work with the skill. Not just the small physical impact, but the entire arrow was thoroughly infused with his will and intent for it to be a Stealth Attack.

He saw it fly forth as the concept remained strong until it finally hit the unsuspecting Vinewood beasts that looked like a mix between a bear and a horse with long thin legs. The resulting explosion was more powerful than any explosive arcane arrow Jake had ever landed before without using Arcane Powershot or Arcane Awakening.

About a third more powerful.

The Vinewood Beast was enraged at being attacked, but Jake was not in the mood to play. Arcane Awakening activated at 30% as he engaged it and quickly finished the level 172 creature off before he retreated and once more returned to being a stealth archer.

He searched for his next foe and nocked another explosive arcane arrow. This time he did not speak but merely focused on the arrow, as there was no way he would make speaking a habit when trying to be stealthy. That would be utterly moronic and look very, very stupid.

And a little bit funny... but mostly stupid.

Jake focused on infusing his Willpower into it as he spoke and willed in his mind for it to work. He soon enough felt the same sensation as before. He released the string the moment he did, and as the arrow flew forth, a notification appeared.

[Stealth Attack (Common) -->

[Enhanced Stealth Attack (Uncommon)] – The strongest blow is the one not seen coming before it is too late. Increase the power of the first attack made on an otherwise unaware foe. Adds a bonus to the effects of Enhanced Stealth Attack dependent on the nature of the attack. This effect is further improved by the level of Arcane Stealth.

An explosion sounded out once more, with Stealth Attack working exactly as he intended. The word intended was crucial here. As with all skill upgrades, it had to come through conscious thought and not just happenstance and accident. Of course, there were some cases where it was arguable if something was truly intended, but the system did what the system did.

Jake smiled as he flew forward and finished off his prey before properly looking at the upgraded skill.

The upgrade seemed like the most straightforward kind there was, just adding an enhanced tag. All Jake had done was add magic, but from reading it, he now guessed it was all attacks, no matter what kind they were. It also changed the scaling of the skill dependent on the nature of the attack while still retaining the tie-in with Arcane Stealth.

Usually, people would be happy and lay off a bit when getting a skill upgrade, but Jake felt the exact opposite. He was already so engaged in upgrading and analyzing the skill that stopping now would be a complete waste of momentum. While he would test the new version and confirm his theories, he would also move on to the next task:

Make it more consistent. Now that Jake had added power to the skill, he needed it to actually work. More power didn't matter if it remained useless against beasts and enemies with even halfway decent senses and Perception. Using his newfound discoveries of the importance of controlling and infusing this "stealth concept," he began the next step.

A step that included the wanton slaughter of foes more than a dozen levels above himself as he enthusiastically tried to find a path to an upgrade.

The Vinewood creature rapidly moved on its four legs as vines and thorns spread out to attack the group, but several barriers sprung up to block the ranged blows. Most of the barriers broke, but the hunting group managed to hold on through collective effort.

Arrows, spells, thrown weapons, and even non-projectile ranged attacks rained down on the Vinewood lizard. Individually only a few of these attacks would deal noteworthy damage, but together they proved highly effective as the creature was forced to retreat, allowing the group leader to make his move.

Sterling pushed his palms together as magical scripts revolved around him. Space compacted as the Vinewood creature was suppressed by the spatial bindings, allowing the melee strikers to launch the final assault.

A man and a woman, each carrying a massive sword, attacked with their blades raging and burning with deep red flames as they smashed the creature. Fire damage was highly effective on Vinewood creatures, and the lizard struggled as nobody in their group let up before it was dead for good.

“Good job, everyone,” Sterling said as he nodded at his group.

Taking down a level 171 beast with their group consisting primarily of individuals between 120 and 130 was an achievement, even if he was 143 himself. They were twenty-two total in this party, quite a lot more than the customary five, but Sterling had always found the number five needlessly arbitrary. As long as you avoided dungeons, it was better to have more people.

He watched as the scavenger began taking all the useful parts of the Vinewood creature for their alchemists back in the city. His brother was the City Leader and had emphasized the importance of keeping their progress and power up. The United Cities Alliance had a lot of internal competition, and even if Sterling was highly valued due to being a space mage and was even a central figure in the largest hidden project of the United Cities Alliance, he could not slack off. In fact, he had to keep progressing to keep that position as their success would have a huge impact on deciding their planet’s fate

After they were done cleaning up and relaxed a bit, they moved on. Two archers functioned as scouts, and a few minutes later, they found their next foe. It was a large sloth-like beast at level 179 – a bit above what they usually went for – that was lazing around in a tree.

“Alright... prepare to strike,” Sterling said as everyone knew what to do. The archers had their arrows enchanted, the mages prepared spells, as the melee folk got into position.

However, just before he gave the order to engage, something else happened.

A pillar of powerful energy descended from the heavens as the entire tree exploded, with something impacting the sloth itself. It was smashed onto the ground as the ground shook from the impact. The beast managed to stand, but another pillar fell as the sloth nearly lost an arm trying to block.

Several more attacks fell as the beast tried to flee, but the attacks kept finding it no matter where it went. Sterling finally managed to see the attacks and saw... arrows? They bent around the trees and struck from unexpected angles from above, making the sloth utterly unable to escape. Moreover, he saw the sloth bleed far more than usual, and the repeated self-healing he would expect from a beast did not happen.

Sterling just stared as he made his group pull back. Only he and the two warriors remained as the sloth finally succumbed to its injuries. The moment it died, a figure descended. Black wings of death and a body burning with powerful energy akin to the arrows landed right before the sloth, his presence alone making Sterling fearful.

The space mage instantly knew who it was. Sterling froze and took a few steps back as the man turned towards them. Beastly yellow eyes stared him down as Sterling bowed and retreated fully, cold sweat running down his back. The warriors did not hesitate for a moment either and followed suit. As he ran, he failed to hold himself back from taking a peek and saw the man penetrate the body of the beast with his hand and pull out the bloody Beastcore. Barely audible, he felt like he heard the man speak to himself under his breath.

“Still not there yet...”

Jake had felt it that time. For an incredibly brief moment, less than a hundredth of a second, the stealth attack concept had persisted even after being discovered. It was such a short time, but it was there. Jake would not fault anyone for believing their senses had merely been off, but Jake wholeheartedly trusted he was on the right track.

He threw a quick glance at the retreating hunting party as they hastily ran. He didn't bother with them but did judge them a little as he found that hunting in a big crowd like that was highly inefficient. Five was the sweet spot for a reason, and having more than twenty was just overkill outside of wars. Okay, to Jake, the optimal number was one, but he did recognize some did better in parties. Still. Twenty was not a party but a god damn rave.

Turning his attention back to his failed Stealth Attack, he finally believed he was onto something. It had soon been a week since he upgraded the skill to uncommon rarity, and while that seemed like a long time, his growth had been meteoric when it came to improving the skill. He had even figured out how to time attacks to hit two Splitting Arrow shots within the same moment for both to benefit.

Yeah, that part was not that useful.

What Jake had also learned was that the stealth concept was very... fragile? Ephemeral was probably a better big boy word for it. Few potent concepts would just disappear like that, but this one clearly did not matter what he did. However, there was some progress, as he did discover that the Stealth Attack did linger for such a short amount of time that even Jake could not notice the concept disappeared when the beast became aware. That it was not instant meant that he had a path. He just needed it to linger longer.

Jake had tried many things to do this. He had infused more of the stealth concept and tried to make it more prevalent but found that useless. Many other methods had even been attempted, like trying to somehow "copy" his Arcane Stealth effect to make the arrow not look like an attack and meld into the environment, and while that seemed possible theoretically, it was not something Jake could figure out in any short amount of time. It would probably be easier to upgrade Arcane Stealth somehow when he thought more about it.

He kept trying out things, but during a brief round of Serene Soul Meditation, he remembered something. Arcane Barrier.

It had talked about suppressing concepts. Jake did not want to suppress a concept, but he did want to influence it, and clearly, his arcane affinity could. Concepts and affinities were heavily interlinked, after all. Jake's arcane affinity could also be called his arcane concept, and within that concept were primarily two parts. Destruction and stability.

And what did Jake's Stealth Attack need, if not a bit of stability?

With that idea in his head, he got to work. His recent kill was proof it was possible to extend the Stealth Attack for a fraction of a moment without losing any of the effects, so he would just need to do what he did best:

Continually smash his head into a wall until it worked.

It was a bit like mixing a concoction or an alchemical brew. Jake needed to find the right mix and achieve balance for him to avoid "washing away" the stealth concept. At the same time, he had to make sure the Stealth Attack got enough stability to do what he wanted. Now, mixing two affinities outright was not easy, but the Stealth Attack did already contain some stability within. It had to.

Stability as a concept was in no way unique to Jake's arcane affinity, and he had to truly separate it from his affinity before it worked. He needed to reinforce the stability of the Stealth Attack and not try to mix in anything more related to his arcane affinity. It did take some time to truly figure it out. He just had to really get the infusion of Willpower down. With every try, it got slightly better until finally...

Jake took aim at the owl that sat on a tree. He was once more flying above the jungle with the owl marked so he knew where he was aiming and had perfectly remembered its surroundings. He took aim as Arcane Powershot charged. The concept of Stealth Attack appeared automatically due to the skill as Jake mobilized his Willpower more to try to stabilize it.

The moment he felt it was good, he let go of the string. Before it even hit the target, he knew, and the following fight was just a slaughter as the owl lost a wing from the initial impact – an impact that was fully empowered by Stealth Attack despite the beast noticing the attack just before it hit

Another upgrade in the bag!

[Enhanced Stealth Attack (Uncommon)] -->

[Superior Stealth Attack (Rare)] – The strongest blow is the one not seen coming before it is too late. Increase the power of the first attack made on an otherwise unaware foe. Has a brief grace period between the foe being aware and the effect still triggering as long as the foe is still not conscious of the hunter's position or the nature of the attack. Adds a bonus to the effects of Superior Stealth Attack dependent on the nature of the attack. This effect is further improved by the level of Arcane Stealth.

Jake looked at the skill upgrade and smiled. Once more, it was viewed as a more or less straightforward upgrade, and he was totally fine with that.

In less than two weeks, he had managed to bring the rather useless skill from common to rare, now making it a powerful and reliable skill that suited him nicely.

A skill upgrading journey that had also resulted in quite a body count as he had found unwilling test subjects.

And a big body counts meant experience and levels.

Chapter 475 - Phantomshade Panther

Jake decided to find a nice tree and take a seat as he opened his notification window to go over the last few days of hunting. There were many kill notifications, all of them giving experience as naturally a stealth archer was always the one engaging, and why would Jake choose to engage lower-leveled foes?

As for levels... well, it was pretty good as his hunting speed kept picking up, and in his fervor to upgrade the skill through trial and error, he probably ended up hunting faster than before. Especially when he considered the ever-growing level of power of his prey.

Checking it out, he was at least satisfied.

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 161 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

...

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 164 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 165 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 166 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

Jake looked at the notification and saw his level. 166. Having gained four class levels and two race ones from that. This has to be enough, right?

He believed it was. Draskil had done it at 173.

That's right...

With a bit over a day left till the system event, it was time for this stealth archer to take down his biggest prey yet:

It was C-grade hunting time.

Now the issue was just finding one. No, not just finding one, but finding one suitable to hunt. One Jake was good against would be preferable. This meant it needed to be flesh and blood, probably a beast of some kind, and if it was not on the more durable side, that would also be nice. He wanted to avoid prey with healing powers if possible, as Jake knew that he would risk running himself dry. Fighting any C-grade would require Arcane Awakening to be active from start to end, putting him on a timer, so facing a foe able to turtle down and wait him out would suck.

The reason why It needed to be flesh and blood was naturally for his rare Hemotoxin Poison, his most potent toxin to date. He had made it with C-grade hunting in mind, so finding an elemental or something like that would be inadvisable.

His other requirement would be a good hunting ground, but honestly, the jungle was fine if not downright great for him. He had a lot of space to kite, and he had already tried and tested the effectiveness of striking from above to land Stealth Attacks with excellent results.

With all of that in mind, he set out on his hunt.

--

The Malefic Viper had naturally observed as always and nodded as he saw Jake's recent skill upgrades. Nothing was overly unexpected so far, not because what Jake was doing was normal, but because Vilastromoz had gotten used to it. Pointing out the fact that usually it could take months of deep meditating to identify and become familiar with the conceptual changes brought on by such a skill would be a waste of time. Jake's level of perception was truly disgusting, and the Viper was not just talking about the stat.

He had a policy of never giving Jake direct advice on picking skills or upgrading them. Doing so would only lead to adverse effects down the line. Perhaps it would help him upgrade it now, but the next upgrade would only get more challenging, and the god fully expected Jake to one day reach godhood on his own anyway. Trying to "help" would only risk hampering that.

Vilastromoz failed to hold back a small smile as he recalled his old days. A skill starting at low rarity was just that – a starting point. While getting one that was higher rarity was all fine and good - in most instances the preferable choice - there were also cases where it was not. Stealth Attack was a case

where picking it was clever. The Viper had never wanted to ask or question Jake about getting the skill, and he had to admit seeing Jake pick it was a pleasant surprise.

Back in his day, he remembered not picking up quite a few skills... one of them he had skipped for a long time had been called Scale Armor. Instinctually the Viper had passed it back in F-grade before he even had anything close to sapient thought. Back then, it had been useless as the Viper was small and an ambush predator. Chances are, if he was caught and hit, he would lose anyway, so running away was better, making more robust scales useless.

Naturally, it was skipped in E-grade and D-grade too. The useless inferior rarity skill was ignored, and the Viper had already gained other defensive means. The Malefic Viper had always been a magic-focused beast, so getting magical defenses just made sense. Who needed stronger scales with a powerful mana shield and a cloud of miasma warding off any foes daring to engage in melee?

It took all the way to C-grade. Late C-grade that is. His decision-making then had spawned from interacting with some humans who had theorized these low rarity skills could be worth it. As he had no other skill choices he truly wanted at the time, Vilastromoz took a gamble and picked up the weak skill. The day he got it, he was disappointed as it did nothing besides making his scales a bit tougher to physical attacks... but he recognized something in it.

A concept spawned by the system. Simplistic damage reduction. A flat damage reduction on every blow that is. Its effect was so weak right when he got it, but it got stronger and stronger as time progressed. He adapted the skill, made it his own, fused it with Dragon Scales when he reached B-grade and refined it more... until one day, it became a skill many alchemists and followers of him knew today:

Scales of the Malefic Viper.

It was quiet. Incredibly quiet. Far more so than in any other areas of the jungle. Rather than encountering beasts or Vinewood creatures every few minutes, he now barely saw any, and those he saw were all towards the peak of D-grade. Jake hunted a few, but they were not his target, and even the stronger ones didn't offer a good challenge.

None of these foes were beings born of struggle or created from extraordinary circumstances. They had just grown up in an environment with high mana density, making them grow powerful just by time passing and hunting each other. Nothing compared to genius-level beasts like Sylphie or the hydra Snappy had been back in the day. They were just regular beasts... and so were the vast majority of C-grades.

Jake was not looking for a powerful C-grade. All C-grades were already powerful to him, and he knew he didn't stand a chance against something like the Termite Hive King. No, he needed a lower-tier C-grade, and as he spent the next many hours searching, he thought he had found one.

He had seen several already. A massive treant that towered above the jungle and made all the greenery sway and wave in its wake. An owl that looked to be made out of metal and used light magic that Jake did consider as a target, but it had taken off before he got a chance to properly assess it. A third had been a Vinewood Elephant that was also utterly massive and looked to be made entirely out of bark. As he did not want to fight a being that was not of flesh and blood, he quickly moved on.

Until finally, he had found his current target that he had been tracking for nearly an hour.

The beast was no larger than a regular specimen of its species. Its entire body was black with sleek fine hair covering it. Four paws soundlessly hit the underbrush as it hunted peak D-grade beasts and creatures and consumed their cores or other natural treasures, with Jake covertly observing from a distance.

Identifying it, the name fit.

[Phantomshade Panther – lvl ???]

Jake had been keeping an eye on it to get an idea as to how powerful it was and what it was capable of, and he had to say... it was weaker than expected. It was undoubtedly a C-grade, but the fact that it hunted peak D-grades should already be evidence enough it was struggling to fight others of the same grade. Compared to the three other C-grades he saw, it was far behind. Still stronger than any of the peak D-grades, but still.

In an hour, he had seen it kill three opponents of the Vinewood variant. It seemed to use a mix of dark and space magic, coupled with incredibly high Agility to take down its foes. The Panther was a bit of a glass cannon, though, and he saw it take a few minor wounds here and there, and even if these did rapidly heal, the mere fact that these D-grades could hurt it was a testament to its relative weakness.

He did find it peculiar how its flesh, even beneath the hair, was black and how it bled entirely black blood. The way the wound healed also looked weird, but who was Jake to comment on what kind of physique made sense for a C-grade?

Checking the time, Jake had around eleven hours left till the system event. Smiling a bit, Jake knew it was enough time as he made all his preparations. He marked the Panther as he kept tracking it and waited as he took to the air. It had just engaged a beast to fight, and he would wait till the moment it stopped to relax after the kill – something it had done every other time.

It did not take long before the Panther had won, and Jake felt his Mark stop moving. He could not make an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter as he had yet to understand its physique, but he could still land quite the opening blow. He had prepared his arrows already with his rare Hemotoxin Poison and now pulled one out. He activated Arcane Awakening in the offensive state and began charging Arcane Powershot.

The Panther was still unaware as arcane wrath descended upon it. It reacted only a moment before impact as it rapidly dodged, but the arrow was too fast, and the beast was hit in its side, opening up a deep and nasty wound – Stealth Attack naturally fully triggering.

Jake followed up, but his next attacks were dodged as the Panther instantly locked in on him. He had just nocked an arrow as his danger sense exploded, making him stop what he was doing and step down just in time.

A claw emerged where he had just been as the Panther had teleported right up to him. Jake quickly stepped down again as the beast rushed him with anger in its eyes. Space distorted in its wake as it charged, bending everything between them as a dark streak cut across the sky.

Luckily Jake was far gone and managed to land a potshot before rapidly flying upwards to get some distance. He glanced back at it, and just before it charged, he turned and shot an arrow again as he used Gaze of the Apex Hunter, finding it worked even better than expected as the Panther froze for a moment. His arrow, already in the air, hit the Panther, infecting it with even more poison.

Come on, you can do better than that, Jake thought.

The Panther stared at him for a moment before it began to emit black smoke. The smoke absolutely obscured the form of the Panther as it charged once more. Jake smirked a bit as it entered his Sphere, and he easily side-stepped the beast as he pulled out Eternal Hunger and managed to stab the C-grade in the side before he stepped down, teleporting away once more.

He teleported, but the Panther seemed to have read him and followed a moment later. Jake blocked the paw and found his arms buckling as he was pushed back. Another swipe left a nasty cut on his arms as his bracer was torn apart, but before it could land the third blow, Jake used Gaze once more and, with a Descending Dark Arcane Fang, smashed the Panther down towards the ground.

Before it could stabilize, Jake fired a barrage of Splitting Arrows that exploded in a torrent of arcane energy, sending it tumbling down even further. Four black crescent waves were sent in return as a swipe tore up space itself, but Jake managed to dodge between two space tears as he fired an Arcane Powershot rapidly charged through the use of Steady Aim.

The beast tried to dodge, but Jake had predicted its movements as the Powershot slightly curved and smashed into the Panther's stomach, sending it barreling down towards the ground, creating a crater on impact.

His foe had taken great damage, but there was no way a C-grade would go down that easily... no matter how weak it was. And damn, this one was weak. The mere fact that Jake had time to properly consider how weak it was during the fight was proof of that. It reminded him a bit of his first "true" D-grade kill against the giant lightning bird.

It was disappointing.

However, he would not let his guard down as Jake kept up the assault. The Panther was already healing as its black flesh wiggled, but the Hemotoxin Poison clearly did work. Its speed was incredibly impressive, and it could make itself invisible and attack stealthily – skills Jake already knew about from observing its prior fights. All things Jake could easily deal with.

Finally, it did something new.

He faintly felt space around him be affected as the Panther did not move from down on the ground. Jake shot several arrows but found them all bent away from the Panther as it stared up at him. Looking back, he met its gaze, and the moment he did...

Everything went dark.

No, he was not knocked out, but all his senses were thrown for a loop. His eyesight disappeared, all sound was gone, all smells, even Sense of the Malefic Viper was entirely cut off. Dense black energy had invaded his very soul, and Jake rapidly began cleansing it, but it was not something he could get rid of instantly. Even so, Jake did not panic. He still felt the space around him bend through his Sphere, and he quickly adapted and made a plan. Acting as if his senses were all gone, Jake began flailing helplessly.

The Panther took the bait.

Jake felt the same charge attack as before. In an instant, the Panther appeared right in front of him and cut down with its paw to shred him into several pieces. The moment it committed to its attack, Jake stopped acting. He dove forward under the paw of the beast and got below the Panther as he stabbed Eternal Hunger upwards and penetrated the Panther's belly. He then firmly held on with one hand as he placed his other on the beast and activated Touch of the Malefic Viper.

His senses returned just in time to hear the Panther hiss in pain as it tried to get him off. Something made even more difficult by Jake pulling out strings of mana to wrap around the beast as it tried to stretch its body and bite Jake as he just kept pumping poison into the C-grade. Fang of the Malefic Viper was naturally fully active on Eternal Hunter as it pumped out venom into the beast from the inside, and Touch pumped it in from the outside.

Finally, the beast managed to muster enough energy. Jake swiftly disengaged as the Panther's body exploded with space magic, leaving hundreds of small scratches on Jake's body from the torn space. The Panther looked spent as it stared angrily at Jake.

Let's finish this.

Jake stepped down and teleported to dodge a blow as the Panther tried to attack. The Panther teleported away when it failed to land a blow, but Jake was ready and stepped down once more and managed to appear above the beast. With a blast of arcane mana, he sent it tumbling down, and an Arcane Powershot blasted it into the jungle below once more. Explosive Arcane Arrows then fell like rain as the jungle, along with the Panther, was torn apart.

Looking down, Jake felt disappointment as he activated Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter. The Panther that was already on its last legs flashed with arcane light before it finally succumbed as he got a notification. The beast rapidly began decomposing, and within a few seconds, its entire body turned to black smoke as Jake frowned.

He flew down and landed where he had killed the Panther but did not see any signs it had ever been there. No loot, no nothing. He got a feeling something was very off as he checked the notification.

You have destroyed [Phantomshade Panther Clone – lvl 204]

Wait, what!? Jake thought as his eyes opened wide.

Before he could properly grasp the situation, he suddenly felt more presences nearby. In the clearing created from the fight, Jake stood as four figures appeared. Four identical Panthers surrounded him on each side as Jake's frown changed into a serious expression as realization struck him.

He had only killed one of five clones.

Arcane Awakening fully activated a moment later as all four Panthers charged.

Chapter 476 - In The Jungle...

Jake launched himself into the air to avoid the charge of the four clones, and just in time, as the space he had just occupied imploded from the impact of four paw-swipes infused with potent space magic.

He pushed his wings to fly faster as he felt the approaching beasts. Twisting his body, Jake turned and shot off blasts of arcane mana as he also landed a Mark of the Avaricious Hunter on all four of them. Not for the damage necessarily, but as much to keep track of them.

Four forms flanked him during his ascent. A part of Jake had hoped they wouldn't bother chasing him, but clearly, they were out for blood. Two usual responses would appear in this kind of scenario. Fight or flight. Jake's survival instinct was by far his most potent one... and not a single doubt was in his mind at that moment.

Fight.

Blasting arcane energy to one side, he propelled himself into one of the Panthers and took it by surprise. In mid-air, he took hold of its pelt and tossed it towards another of the beasts as he began flying sideways, his wings leaving poison mist in his wake. Taking out his bow, he fired arrows directly ahead of

himself, away from the beasts. The arrows flew straight for a while but soon began bending as they did a one-eighty turn and flew back in Jake's direction as they also split into five each.

Jake flew between several arrows as the Panthers chasing him were hit by arcane explosions. They blocked it, but it bought him enough time to properly turn and shoot a well-placed Arcane Powershot into one of the clones.

It hit the beast, and right away, the poison entered its body. When it did, Jake quickly noticed a difference... these clones were stronger than the one he had destroyed earlier. Not by overly much, but probably around ten percent.

Clones... split power somehow?

Jake wasn't sure, but what he did know was that the Panthers were done playing around. Before, they had chased him rather cautiously, which indicated they did not have a proper measurement of Jake... which furthermore probably meant there had been no shared memory or memory transfer from the clone. All they knew was that he had killed one.

However, even so, it was clear that the clones could communicate, at least while in close proximity.

Space around Jake suddenly seemed to shrink as he didn't really move forward as he flew. Dark mana began collecting all around him as black bolts appeared in the warped space. None of which Jake had time to address as he had to rapidly dodge to the side as a Panther teleported in front of him, only to find another one trying to take advantage of the opening. He barely managed to dodge between the swipes of two beasts by twisting his body and creating a platform of mana to step off.

He tried to get away, but the dark bolts bombarded him, and as space constricted even more, he found it difficult to move as he wanted. In melee, the two panthers continued their assault as Jake was on the backfoot, not getting any chances to retaliate.

Need to get distance, Jake gritted his teeth as he tried to break out of the contained space one of the panthers had created. Both melee weapons had appeared at this point, and he managed to land a few minor wounds on the two beasts, but they also managed to hurt him as several claw marks marred his body.

In a gamble, Jake dove forwards between the two Panthers. He spun around as arcane edges expanded from both blades to try and scare the Panthers away. It worked on one of them, but the one he tried to scare off with Bloodfeast Dagger simply swept the edge away and attacked instead.

Jake ducked at the very last moment, turning his body to block with one of his wings. The Panther tore up the flesh on it and promptly bit down on the joint. The teeth sank into the flesh as pain ran through his body. The Panther bit down even more, ready to rip off the wing entirely. He knew the wing was a lost cause, so he decided to make use of it.

Stamina and mana both flushed the wing as Arcane Awakening was directed to overflow it with energy. In a flash, it began burning with pink-purple energy before promptly exploding in a blast that sent both Jake and the Panther flying away.

Blood sprayed all over the Panther and into its mouth, not to mention the damage caused by the explosion itself. Jake himself had lost a wing, and if that was all, he would be ecstatic at the outcome of the exchange, but sadly he was not fighting a single opponent.

The second Panther went in for his neck, and Jake barely blocked with an arm that he pushed into the feline's mouth to avoid the sharp front fangs. It still hurt like hell, but scales covered his arm just as he blocked to lessen the damage.

With his other arm, he managed to make a barrier of arcane mana to protect himself from dark bolts bombarding him. He did so long enough for the Panther currently biting down to begin shaking him violently, trying to rip off his arm entirely. He was tossed around, but he managed to not lose the arm as the Panther eventually let go due to the poisoned blood soaking its throat. It tossed him towards the jungle below, with several dark bolts bombarding him on the way down.

With a tattered arm and a lost wing, he fell as he blocked the bolts as best he could. On the positive side, he had gotten out of the compressed space, but on the negative side, he had taken a lot of damage. He had managed to also do some damage to the Panthers and had infected all but one with poison. However, the winner of this first exchange had clearly been the clones.

He took notice of how one of the clones stayed back, not engaging him at all. It had just done some space magic, with the one using dark magic being the one he injured earlier with Arcane Powershot.

Jake landed on the ground below, and before the Panthers could follow up, he sprinted into the dense jungle. Fighting them up in the air had been a terrible move as it quite frankly gave him too much space. He had no natural obstacles he could use to block and was just surrounded up there, while in the jungle, he had the advantage.

One had to remember... Jake was now a stealth archer as well as a hunter.

Using his Marks, he kept track as they all followed him. Jake would honestly accept the result if they chose to disengage, but he failed to hold back a faint smile when he saw them chase. His body was

hurting, and Arcane Awakening was still burning his energy and health away at a steady pace, putting him on a timer. That is why he didn't wait long before he went back on the offensive.

Taking a lot of ninety-degree turns, he managed to get them off his track for a moment. Enough for him to enter stealth once more as they lost track of his position. Jake had already noticed earlier how they needed a moment to locate him whenever he had teleported, proving they clearly didn't have a good tracking skill or particularly high perception. This was fixed by them fighting together and one being at a distance to observe, but such was not the case right now.

Sneaking around, the Panthers were tracking him and had split up a fair bit, with one of them still flying in the air far above – the uninjured one. It had not moved but stayed far up, nearly at the clouds. At that distance, not even an Arcane Powershot would reach before it could dodge.

That left three in the jungle, all spread out in a triangle pattern as they searched. Pulses of dark mana passed over him as his Arcane Stealth managed to keep him hidden as he stood still whenever such a pulse came.

Just as another pulse had passed, Jake found an opening. A Panther had found an unsuspecting D-grade trying to hide and had decided to rip it out of the ground and tear it apart. Jake took the chance and fired an Arcane Powershot from behind.

The Panther reacted too slowly as it was blasted in the back and was sent flying through several trees with an arrow now stuck in it. The moment he attacked, all of the Panthers became aware of him, and without hesitating, he retreated into the dense foliage again.

Just as he retreated, he found himself forced to lay flat on the ground as a ripple of space passed over him. Less than a second later, a black crescent wave passed, followed by several more as the Panthers tore up the area to find him. Jake just lay there, Arcane Stealth active as he blended in.

Clearly believing he had escaped, the Panthers assaulted another area, only for Jake to pop up again and land another Arcane Powershot on an unsuspecting Panther.

The best part about all this? Stealth Attack bloody worked every time they completely lost track of his position.

Once more, he tried to retreat, but clearly, the beasts were not interested in being made fools of three times in a row. All three charged him at once, ignoring their wounds and the poison running through their bodies.

Jake knew fighting them straight on was a losing battle, so he tried to dodge as he ran. Pride of the Malefic Viper activated for the first time as mana began condensing in his surroundings. Repeated arcane explosions sounded out in his wake, but the Panthers ignored them all to keep chase.

He tried to shake them off, but he was chased by one and flanked by two others. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a faint distortion in the air as Jake jumped just as a Panther appeared. He managed to get over the attack and condensed a platform of mana to stop his momentum just in time to dodge the second beast.

Flooding the platform with destructive mana, it exploded and launched Jake backward towards the chasing Panther. Taking it by surprise, Jake managed to land a cut with Eternal Hunger before fleeing once more. However, just as he thought he would get away, he suddenly spotted a problem.

Fuck.

In front of him, space was already distorting as it became clear he had once more been trapped within some kind of spatial seal. However, this one was far more of a barrier to keep him from escaping than the space seal prior.

With reluctance, Jake was forced to change direction, but that resulted in him not being as fast as he should have been. A Panther teleported, and Jake barely managed to block as two more appeared. The second one he dodged by the skin of his teeth while he was forced to simply take the hit from the last one as his back was ripped up. His cloak and armor, together with the passive shield of Arcane Awakening, managed to take much of the blow, but his equipment was shredded, with five deep gashes still left behind. Jake managed to capitalize on the situation to stab a Panther with Eternal Hunger as he froze another with Gaze. Using all his strength, he spun around and used the impaled beast as his shield so the Panther that tore up his back couldn't strike again.

He was forced to let go of his weapon as he jumped back and landed on the ground just as he teleported away. The clones chased him quickly as different spells flew all around him. Jake gritted his teeth as he repeatedly teleported in tandem with the Panthers, always a single step ahead.

Pulling out his bow, he began firing arrows in all directions. One right in front of him, one a bit to the side, one above, and so on. The arrows curved around to hit the Panthers, with most of them missing but a few landing as intended here and there. The Panthers adapted swiftly and grouped up to make a barrier, rendering his assault useless.

Eternal Hunger had already been ripped out of the one Panther's body and left behind somewhere on the ground. At least it was left behind as Jake suddenly felt its call. He didn't think but just wished for it as it appeared in his hand. It could do that?

Not bothering to think about it, Jake manipulated the shape of the blade slightly as he made it larger and firmly a two-handed weapon. He then dismissed it, ready to summon it again when it was time.

From behind, a dark pulse went through the jungle, followed by a wave of black smoke that seemed to drown out everything. Jake could barely see through it, and it even absorbed sound. However, even more importantly, Jake noticed the smoke infiltrate his body.

It was poison.

Dark poison.

This kind of trap would surely work on many types of foes. A black mist that blinded them and weakened their senses, as well as poison seeping into their bodies to amplify this effect further. A real nasty combo, actually.

Well, except for Jake, who failed to hold back a grin as all he felt was his mana regeneration spike. He did notice that the Panthers also absorbed some of the mist to counteract the Hemotoxin Poison and other toxins he had inflicted them with, but it was far from enough.

The Panthers waited a dozen or so seconds for Jake to lose his senses. Which he did. His vision was blurred with dark spots, his hearing muffled, and even his sense of touch was all off. To really sell it, Jake began firing arrows into the air, having already noticed that the odd spatial seal didn't affect his arcane arrows. It was likely just meant to seal living beings in, and not all energy as that would make the cost skyrocket.

Satisfied with the result, a beast charged Jake. He purposefully reacted just in time as he blocked with his bow, the legendary weapon more than durable enough. Jake was smashed back and into a tree as the same Panther followed up. Two more hung back, with one of them expelling the mist and the other seemingly trying to speed up its healing.

He took a few more blows that he barely blocked before he made the Panther smash him into a large tree. The idea appeared, and he instantly executed. As expected, the beast charged him, and just as it leaped, Jake used Gaze of the Apex Hunter, barely still able to see the Panther through the mist due to his insane Perception.

It flew through the air as Eternal Hunger appeared. Using the tree as a counterweight, the Panther smashed into the sword head-first, impaling itself entirely. Instantly, the other Panthers reacted, but Jake was too fast. Bloodfeast Dagger appeared, and he stabbed down on the skull of the beast rapidly dozens of times before finally breaking through. The moment he did so, the entire beast just turned to black smoke.

Two down... three to go.

Jake felt like he just had a major victory but then noticed how little the Panthers seemed to truly care. The one who had been healing still waited for the one pumping mist to stop as they realized it was useless. Instantly, the poison mist began dispersing, and he saw the two injured beasts stare at him as Jake's Eternal Hunger changed back to its regular shape again.

A two-second staredown later, Jake decided it was a good time to return to being a stealth archer as he stepped down and teleported back. He had just appeared as the two Panthers followed him, and instantly he noticed.

Faster.

A swipe hit him from the side, and as he blocked, he found himself sent flying away even more than before.

And stronger.

It was confirmed. For each clone he killed, the others got stronger. It was only a little... but it wasn't good. Far above still was the third Panther, clearly still not interested in joining, and Jake could only begin to imagine what would happen when it was down to the last one.

Kind of exciting, wasn't it?

Chapter 477 - The Mighty Jungle...

Clones... Jake knew a bit about them. Making a clone was something many, if not most, would learn to do eventually. In most cases, making a clone was to more or less cut off part of yourself to act autonomously. It could also be to just create a copy that shared all senses and that you still had to somewhat control, but these were often classified as puppets instead.

This varied further from illusion or mirages, which were entirely fake and often only existed for brief periods, while many clones could persist permanently. Illusions and mirages did not need to be intangible either but could often interact with the world around them to some extent. Naturally, they were usually far weaker than the main body, but they could help.

What the Phantomshade Panther did was a high-level cloning technique. Each clone could exist independently, and from the looks of it, the Panther used them for hunting on their own, indicating shared experience. It was pretty much just one beast split in five for improved hunting speed and to consume five times as many natural resources. A brilliant optimization, even if each copy was weaker.

Splitting in five did not necessarily mean splitting power five-way either. Each could easily retain half or more of the primary body's power from before the split. Considering how much stronger they had gotten after he killed the first and second one, Jake reckoned each had around seventy percent of the true body's strength... maybe closer to sixty. High-level clones did also mean they were far harder to form, and it likely took a long time to make just one for the Panther.

Either way, considering just killing one clone was a pain when there were five, it only got worse with three. It was limited how much synergy four or five beasts fighting together could reach even if they were the same creature simply due to the limitations of the jungle and to avoid hitting each other. It wasn't like one was a support Panther and the other a ranged attacker. In fact, their pure magic kind of sucked.

But... reduced to two fighting purely in melee, they no longer had to care as much. With the two of them now even more powerful in addition to this, Jake soon found himself pressured more than before. Their level of recklessness had also increased as they chose to sacrifice their own bodies to try and injure Jake.

Jake was continuously pushed back by two aggressive felines swiping and biting at him as space warped all around. He held Eternal Hunger and Bloodfeast Dagger tight, but his arms were hurting from blocking, and he got no indications of the Panthers stopping their assault or saw a path to escape.

He tried several times to disengage, but every time he did so, space around him contracted, and when he used One Step Mile, he teleported a far smaller distance than he wanted with the two cats still hot on his trail.

Worse yet was that even if he handled these two, there was still the one flying in the air above the jungle. A completely uninjured copy, and with the energy transfer from the clones, Jake understood why it did this. Wounds did not heal when a clone died, so if he had managed to damage all of them heavily and then killed them one by one, he would win far more easily. By saving one clone, the Panther would always have a spare to absorb everything and return to full power.

As for if it had a sixth one hidden somewhere, Jake was certain it didn't. He had spent enough time interacting with them to feel the subtle connection between them. It was faint, but it was clearly there, and he only sensed the three remaining ones. There also had to be some limitations to using clones and the energy transfers. If not, why would the Panther have even shown up with all its bodies and not kept one far away? Even with his senses, he could not rule out the connection was only there due to their proximity... but his intuition told him he was right.

This won't work, Jake still gritted his teeth as he was pushed back by a Panther. He dodged its next attack and managed to stab it before he was hit on his shoulder by the second one as he was knocked away. A nasty gash was left there, but Jake had accepted that to get a chance.

He and the beasts had exchanged many blows, and while he was winning the battle, he was losing the war.

When he landed, he instantly jumped as he resummoned his wings and flew upwards. The Panthers chased, and Jake barely dodged one as the other teleported right next to him. He chose to take the hit as he kicked it hard.

That backfired as the beast rapidly reacted and bit down on his foot the moment he kicked... and that is where the poor cat fucked up. Some things were not meant to be chewed. The saying that something was like chewing leather when it was too tough did not come out of nowhere, and when the Panther bit down, it encountered an impossible opponent.

Jake's old leather boots.

With incredible pressure, the Panther bit down, and Jake felt incredible pain as the bones in his foot broke, but at the same time, he heard something else break. One of the long fangs of the Panther had snapped in half when it failed to penetrate the leather, making it yelp in pain.

Without even a moment's hesitation, Jake swept up the broken fang with a string of mana and caught it in his hand. He kept flying upwards as the beast refused to let go, so he tossed the fang he had already made into a weapon with Fang of Man. He hit one of the Panther's eyes, finally making it let go as he managed to get some height. The second Panther was already hot on his heels when he made it out of the jungle to the open air above, where he headed straight for the uninjured Panther.

This was clearly an example where injuring or killing all opponents at once would be the most effective. Classical boss mechanics. The two other Panthers were already heavily injured and were infected by quite a lot of poison. Taking them down was not too difficult. The problem was the final one. If he killed those two, he would be left with one fully powered and uninjured Panther while he could be in a worse position.

So he wanted to at least get an edge now before he would have to face it. Maybe he could even goad the Panther into engaging him with the two remaining ones. Jake flew towards it with great speed and saw it just stood still in the air far above him, staring down.

Two Panthers flanked him as they teleported, but Jake himself began running vertically upwards, every step hurting like shit on the injured foot. He even managed to inject the two cats with even more poison and get some distance by activating both their Marks, making them flash with arcane energy as they roared in pain.

About halfway up, the Panthers suddenly stopped. Jake took two more steps as his danger sense suddenly spiked. Spiked intensely. Not realizing why, Jake took out his bow and drew an arrow as Steady Aim activated, slowing down his perception of time significantly. He did not do so necessarily with the intention of shooting an arrow... he just needed the time.

With everything slowed down, he perceived it. Space was contracted and was cut off all around him. A cylinder-shaped path had been formed between the Panther up in the air and the two chasing him, no more than five meters across. When within it, Jake didn't even notice it. Not even his Sphere picked it up as space didn't even distort more than what usually happened with continued teleportation.

He also realized that power was building up both behind and in front of him. Jake was, at this point, forced to release his arrow as his senses returned to normal. There was no more time. He understood what was about to happen at that very last moment, and his eyes opened wide as he roared.

Space magic colliding never led to good results. The backlash on the caster was also absolutely immense... which would matter if the casters suffering the backlash in this situation weren't clones. From below, small black tunnels of dark magic and space formed before each Panther. Ahead of him, the uninjured one prepared itself.

It all happened at once.

Something cracked.

The sky was torn as if a plane of glass had been cut down the middle. A black bullet-like form was the cause of the crack, and as reality shook, a second crack formed that shattered the horizon, caused by a second bullet. A cross-shaped rift in space tore the entire airspace above the jungle asunder for dozens of kilometers in all directions - a single winged human figure caught in the middle.

The remaining two Panthers were dead. Two clones were sacrificed to create a technique that could prove lethal or at least heavily damage many mid-tier C-grades. The remaining Panther stared down at the cracked space before it - the rift perfectly torn in a straight line. The only remnants of the human

having ever been there, a single arrow fired just before the collapse. One that flew harmlessly by the Panther.

However, as seconds passed, the beast clearly noticed something was wrong. There was no notification or sign of the human's death. The beast realized this a moment too late.

A tear in space was cut open as Jake suddenly appeared right in front of the Panther, space reforming right behind him. He stabbed forward and left a nasty cut on the beast's face as it recoiled and retreated, disbelief in its eyes. On the other hand, Jake just stared at it as blood bled from his eyes, and his entire body was filled with cracks, blood seeping out of them, with scattered broken scales spread throughout his skin. One of his arms was gone as several holes marred his chest, some of them even cutting straight through him so you could look through his body. His wings had naturally also been torn off.

As he stood there, he quickly used the ability of his necklace to summon a healing potion into his mouth and consumed it for extra effect. He also activated the Second Wind enchantment from his pants. His body was flooded with vital energy as he began healing, his mind still racing from what had just happened.

Scrolling back a few seconds, Jake had found himself in deep shit.

Space around him had suddenly become incredibly rigid. Then, without any warning, a Panther teleported up right next to him. It didn't even attack, but its entire body was burning with black flames as space distorted around it. The beast blew up the very next moment as Jake lost an arm, and everything around him began shattering and falling apart.

Then a second Panther appeared and did the same to his other side. He was caught between two collapsing spaces within a rigid space tunnel that also collapsed. Everything imploded and shattered down upon him as he felt like he was about to be torn apart... and then time had slowed down.

Moment of the Primal Hunter.

Reality seemed to freeze. Jake felt like he was in the most extreme maze of mirrors imaginable. Like his own remaining arm was several meters long. Like his body was not truly solid but merely made up of many small fragments with holes in between. Nothing made sense... but it didn't need to.

Jake just needed to survive. He did not need to understand, just trust his judgment and not hesitate.

So, he stepped down. Space seemed to warp once more as Jake forced the skill by pouring in all his energy. Stable arcane mana enveloped his body to keep himself whole as scales also appeared. Pride helped stabilize what space he could... enough for him to see it.

No matter the situation, reality was still there. If it was not, it would be the Void... something no C-grade could bring forth. And as long as there was reality, there was some space to travel through. His step landed as Jake's body unraveled. Holes in space - small vacuums - were unavoidable. It felt like he was riddled with bullets as holes formed all over, and yet none were lethal. His body swayed, moved, and dodged through a reality his mind could barely comprehend, but with everything slowed down and his survival instincts at the highest they had perhaps ever been, he managed to minimize the damage.

His Sphere of Perception fed information about the path, his danger sense made him angle and dodge the most dangerous vacuums, and his intuition made him aware this was the only way. The only path forward was not "out" of the spatial tunnel but through it – straight towards the Panther.

This path would normally be near-impossible to find... but Jake had a guide. A single arrow that had been fired. One soaked with poison that had made it out of the most tumultuous space and was ahead of the tunnel collapsing. It became his guiding light as he found his way out, and the moment before time resumed to normal, he pulled out Eternal Hunger – a weapon that not even the collapse of space could harm. He cut through the final barrier of space and entered stable space once more, right in front of the Panther.

This brings us back to the present. Jake stood in front of the beast with only one arm, and the blade pointed forward. His bloodshot eyes still bled, and he was a mess, but his gaze was firm. The Panther stared back in disbelief and took a few moments to collect itself, allowing Jake to take advantage of his potion and Second Wind.

The Panther got out of its stupor and, for the first time, looked at him with new eyes. Rather than the indifference and hint of disdain, he now only saw respect. Jake returned the gaze in kind.

He had believed the Panther a C-grade on the weaker side. An assessment that was clearly off. The C-grade frog he had met in the Mangrove River was nothing compared to the beast before him. He was confident beating it back then, even in an unfavorable environment.

Mutual respect was given. They both knew they faced another predator and that neither of them had any intentions to back down or retreat.

And showing respect, the Panther did not give its opponent any more time to regenerate as it attacked, Jake finally facing the beast at full power.

Chapter 478 - The Hunter Sleeps Tonight

Jake did not have time to consider anything but the battle in front of him, not even the notification he had gotten after he escaped the collapsing space tunnel. His body was marred with wounds, and the

only injury on the Panther was a single cut left with Eternal Hunger. A cut that had benefitted from Stealth Attack as he had been hidden in the folds of space.

A swipe came from the right as Jake managed to block. A follow-up from the left forced him back as the beast rapidly pushed its advantage. Lacking an arm made fighting incredibly difficult, especially considering the foe he faced.

Stronger. Faster. Every single spec of the Panther had been heightened. However, he was certain of one thing... it lacked energy. While the Panther had not fought in melee, it had used large-scale magic, especially with that final attack. Additionally, chances are it had portions of its energy reserved due to the clones, and even if it gained its stats back, that didn't mean it also gained mana, stamina, and health.

That is the reason why it didn't use any complex magical attacks right away, coupled with a potential adaption method. At least Jake guessed that was why as he was smashed downward by a swipe. His left arm was rapidly regenerating as he focused on his vital energy to make it happen. The holes covering his body would have to wait for later, and he managed to stop the bleeding by blocking off the wounds with the passive barrier of Arcane Awakening.

Jake fell down as the Panther charged him. A swipe sent crescent waves of dark space mana towards him, making everything vibrate. Jake stopped his fall as he stepped down on his one good leg, teleporting away. He found himself traveling further away than usual but didn't question it as he quite frankly didn't have the time.

The beast did not have any interest in letting him escape and teleported in pursuit. A pulse of dark mana was emitted, but Jake felt no sense of danger from it. The pulse somehow hit the fabric of space itself as several small cracks appeared out of nowhere in the middle of the airspace.

Tendrils of dark mana emerged and lashed at Jake, forcing him in specific directions. He knew the Panther planned this but was forced to comply. A spatial prison was slowly formed around him... yet he didn't feel like it was an issue. Jake stepped down and, with no fanfare, teleported straight past the spatial lock and out of it.

This was clearly not a part of the Panther's plan, and Jake took the chance to fire off a blast of mana to accelerate himself towards the ground. Picking up on what Jake intended, the Panther tried to stop him as it chased. Another pulse and more cracks in space appeared, sending tendrils out to stop him. Jake looked down and saw the ground half a kilometer away, tendrils blocking his path. Without hesitating, he stepped down and appeared below, once more passing any obstacles.

One Step Mile definitely upgraded, he thought as he jumped forward, dodging a blast of space mana that blasted a several-meter deep hole in the soil. Jake got below some trees and attempted to hide and give him more time. His arm was slowly regrowing, but he was no Eron and couldn't just instantly regenerate. He needed a few minutes and fighting while healing was a bad idea. Any half-arsed attack on the regenerating arm would set him back, just wasting the vital energy.

Jake sprinted as every step hurt like hell, but he could not slow down. A pulse passed, and just as it did, he stood completely still and used Arcane Stealth to hide. It worked, as he began running again, but then suddenly a figure entered his Sphere.

The Panther ran a bit off to the side of him and would luckily pass, so as long as he stayed sti-

A second Panther entered. Then a third. And a fourth. Dozens of Panthers appeared and scouted the jungle, and Jake was in disbelief... until he finally felt their energy signatures. It was weak. Each of them was barely tangible as they scoured the greenery for him.

Rather than clones, these were illusions or mirages. At first glance and even to his sphere, they appeared real, but they were effectively just energy constructs. But even if that was the case, Jake knew they weren't harmless... especially not with so many of them.

Even if they couldn't hurt him – which he was certain they could – their presence alone made hiding near-impossible. They scouted around, and while Jake was confident in his Arcane Stealth when standing still, he did not believe himself infallible.

Something that was proved correct as an illusion approached. It sniffed the ground and moved past him at first but stopped just as it did. It turned around and walked towards Jake, and lifted its paw to swipe at the stable barrier covering Jake with suspicion.

Jake did not give it a chance as he stabbed forward. Eternal Hunger penetrated the illusion, and instantly the construct turned to black smoke. As he "killed" the illusion, he felt the true body of the Panther above instantly lock in on him. It was prepared, and Jake's sense of danger exploded as he used One Step Mile.

He teleported only fifty or so meters as even with its upgrade, he was in a jungle filled with trees and other greenery. Fifty meters would usually be good enough, but in this case, it wasn't. The Panther had fully locked onto him, and Jake noticed a small mark left by the illusion just a moment before the beast struck.

Everything around him shimmered. Space itself seemed to contract as a tunnel was formed. The very next moment, a Panther was before him with its claw bathed in dense black energy. Jake tried to block but was sluggish from the odd movements of space. He had no time. The beast went straight for his neck to sever his head, but in the final moment, he leaned forward.

A paw smashed into his face as Jake felt bones in his neck crack, and he was only saved by the impact also knocking him back. His entire head would have been carved apart if not for the wooden mask on his face that allowed him to survive.

Jake smashed into a tree, but quickly landed as he teleported away again and fled. He didn't think but just went in the opposite direction of the Mark indicating where the Panther was and navigated with his sphere. Using his eyes was not an option, as even if the mask had blocked the impact, the eye holes were still there. Eye holes that had allowed the dark space energy to utterly annihilate both his eyes and much of the flesh surrounding them.

His Gaze of the Apex Hunter had been removed as an option, but luckily he only needed a bit more time. Flesh wriggled as most of his left arm had reformed by now. The Panther attacked once more, and Jake was forced to face it with his right side to protect the left, resulting in him getting knocked away with yet another gash.

Without the healing earlier, he would likely be dead by now, but he held on. His skin was flaying more than before due to Arcane Awakening having been active for so long. He was in an incredibly precarious situation as the beast kept up the constant assault until finally, he was ready.

Jake blocked a blow as the Panther tried to take advantage of his weak left side. Instead of meeting no resistance or making Jake dodge, the paw impaled itself on a dagger as a newly formed arm held it, the skin being covered with scales as they fought.

When it recoiled for a moment, Jake took the chance. He stepped down and appeared several hundred meters in the air above and, with a second step, teleported to the side as he spun in the air, taking out his bow. He managed to only get a single arrow off before several figures leaped out of the jungle towards him.

It was the remaining illusions summoned earlier.

Not wanting to give them any chance, Jake's empty eye-holes opened wide as Presence of the Malefic Viper intensified. An arcane barrier was formed that instantly exploded, destroying all the illusions. Something that proved a wise decision as all of the illusions also exploded upon destruction, functioning as Panther suicide bombers.

His primary target was still below. Jake did have the minor issue of no eyes, but he could still track it with Mark and his sphere and feel the poison ravaging its body. The Panther seemed to believe he was unable to find it as Jake felt dark magic move below, and his Sense and Mark both got obscured partly. While he could not see it, he imagined the beast had created a dark mist or something to cover itself. It appeared that it wanted to deal with some of the poison while charging up another deadly charge attack.

Sadly for the Panther, it made one mistake. While it had clearly analyzed his sphere and many of his abilities to some extent, it had failed to realize how bonkers his Perception stat truly was. The winner was clear in a battle where it tried to hide from his Mark that scaled with Perception.

Jake charged and shot an Arcane Powershot as he tore up the jungle below. The Panther was surprised and partly hit as it jumped away and teleported into the air. Jake felt some of his poison infect the beast and followed up. Curved arrows blanketed the air as he consecutively activated Splitting Arrow to try and catch out the cat.

It teleported away from most of them but was hit by a few exploding ones here and there as it seemed to have a difficult time differentiating between exploding arrows and the stable ones. The unpredictable curving didn't help either.

Teleporting back a few more times, Jake tried to keep a distance as he attacked. The Panther chased and teleported too, trying to lock him down, but his upgraded One Step Mile seemed to primarily be about breaking through such restrictions, letting him escape again and again.

Their battle quickly moved across the sky, wayward blows tearing up the jungle below. Jake even got a kill notification at one point as an Arcane Powershot missed and struck something else. Naturally, he had no time to check it as he pressed his momentary advantage.

The Panther knew it would lose a ranged battle, so it picked up the pace. Jake felt its body suddenly burn with energy as mana impacted his body. He suddenly felt like his sphere was full of stuff... mana. It brought him back to the first time in the Forgotten Sewers rat dungeon. He reacted a bit slow when his danger sense warned him, resulting in Jake getting blasted back by a space bolt of sorts.

Adapting quickly, Jake analyzed the domain unleashed by the Panther. Shortly, he saw a cat-like figure charge him from the side, and he reacted promptly. Believing the Panther did not expect him to adapt so quickly, Jake swiftly dodged under the claw and stabbed Eternal Hunger upwards, penetrating through the head of the Panther.

Which proceeded to explode in his face.

Jake was tossed back as his right arm was filled with wounds, and his chest burned with black spatial energy. Five more figures then appeared in his sphere as the beast was back to using exploding illusions. All of them were shrouded by the domain of black mana, making Jake unable to distinguish between them.

Five charged, and Jake sent out stable arcane bolts towards each after failing to summon a barrier like before. Four dodged while one was hit and exploded. The remaining ones closed in, and Jake tried to release more attacks, only getting one before the last three were upon him.

One of them is real, Jake thought. His intuition was clear. All three of them attacked from different directions, and it was a pure matter of chance... he would think usually. Because he also felt something else that conflicted with that thought. No matter which he chose, he felt like he would be wrong.

Jake gritted his teeth and stepped down to teleport away. A Panther managed to follow him, and Jake blocked as he was sent tumbling back by what had to be the real one. Another of the three illusions then came, but Jake once more blocked as that too was real. He realized this when he tracked not only Mark of the Avaricious Hunter but also his poison. It was moving.

It can swap between them, Jake instantly realized. Likely another benefit of the domain.

An incredibly annoying ability that put Jake on the backfoot as more wounds covered his already mangled body. The Panther was not doing that well itself, poison ravaging its body and the many blows Jake had landed during some of their scuffles doing work. Jake was certain he had been right about it lacking energy. It had low health points, stamina, and mana from the get-go. Contrary to Jake, it also had no potions to swiftly regenerate a bit.

Illusions closed in once again, but this time Jake was ready. He had gotten some distance and instantly drew his bow and nocked a special arrow. He had plenty of time to condense an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter by now, even if the stamina and mana consumption to summon it was intense.

Jake knew he had to hit as he drew his bow and charged Arcane Powershot. He had only one shot as his resources were dangerously low.

His perception of time slowed as three figures closed in, now with a cautious approach. The Panther knew this attack would be powerful, and Jake constantly felt it shift with the beast not just charging in but keeping its distance to dodge. One in three... no, lower. It would no-doubt be dodged in the final moment. So he would just have to stop that.

Gaze was out of commission, but he had one more method to lock down an opponent for a moment's time. His presence flared as it blanketed the sky. For a moment, he pushed back some of the domain, and Jake focused everything on the illusion the Panther was currently in. Pride of the Malefic Viper was on full display as Jake attacked the psyche of the beast. He had begun to feel its desperation as it repeatedly failed to kill him and capitalized on it. Jake made it feel the full brunt of his unshakeable confidence that he would win.

It hesitated for less than half a second.

His string was released as the arrow flew forward. The Panther reacted only a moment too late as the attack sank into its body and sent it blasting back. It had done good damage, but not enough. Rather than retreat or do anything else, the Panther unhesitantly used Jake's elation to strike.

It swapped places with a copy close to Jake and warped space as it charged, the other two illusions disappearing as the Panther dedicated all its energy to killing him. Jake was indeed taken by surprise and tried to block with his left arm. Bloodfeast Dagger was caught between two claws, and with a tug, it was ripped out of his hand and fell to the jungle below.

Striking again, Jake felt the claws sink into his newly-regenerated arm. It cut to the bone as he didn't wait to strike back. Eternal Hunger swept in from the right and cut the leg of the Panther before it could fully separate the arm from the rest of his body.

He swung again but found his blade blocked. He retreated a few steps in the air, trying to get more distance. The Panther once more struck, and Jake swung Eternal Hunger down. Rather than dodge, the Panther angled its head and did something unexpected. It caught his sword in its mouth and bit down tight, trapping it. It then yanked its head to disarm Jake.

Jake didn't hesitate. He simply let go of his blade and moved in closer. He jumped forward with both arms spread out and wrapped his arms around the neck of the Panther. Jake got to the top of the beast and held it tight in a neck hold as Touch of the Malefic Viper activated.

The Panther tossed his sword away as it roared. Jake refused to let go, and the Panther responded by sending itself flying downward while trying to get him off.

They both smashed into the ground, Jake taking most of the impact as the beast landed on top of him. Rather than let go, he wrapped his legs around the Panther's body and held it tight, poison pumping into the C-grade.

Its body began burning with dark mana as Jake's scales and passive barrier fought against it. The two wrestled on the ground as the energy invaded his body and ravaged him from within, but he refused to let go.

He was smashed into several trees as the beast roared and scrambled. The fur around his hands fell off, and the flesh began rotting. Yet no matter what the beast did, it only made Jake hold on tighter. It was a death grip that would either end when he ran out of health, or the beast did.

At least it would, but Jake had one more option. He used his head as he bit down on the neck of the Panther, pumping in his venom using his canines. At that moment, it would be difficult for an outside observer to tell who the real beast of the fight was.

Jake felt his own body losing strength as it began giving up. He knew he was soon out of time, but he had one final thing. He activated Mark of the Avaricious Hunter as the arcane charge triggered. The Panther roared in pain, and Jake let go with his hands and his mouth as the beast froze. He held up both hands as Eternal Hunger that had been tossed away earlier appeared, Jake sitting on top of the Panther holding it in both hands.

Roaring in tandem with the Panther, he stabbed down through the neck of the beast, impaling Eternal Hunger into the ground below. The beast struggled a bit as it finally fell limp to the ground, Jake collapsing on top of it as he got the notification.

Arcane Awakening finally deactivated as Jake's broken and battered body stopped burning with energy. An insane wave of weakness invaded his mind, and for a moment, he feared his body would give in, but the tenacity of his physique was not that easily overcome.

Jake managed to form a faint smile as he was still lying on top of the Panther. He didn't even have the energy to push himself off the corpse as he lay there covered in blood with a happy expression. He won.

Tired as fuck, Jake closed his eyes and took a well-deserved nap.

Chapter 479 - A Step Forward For The Universe

An annoying ringing sound reminiscent of his old alarm woke Jake up from his nap. With a start, he sat up only to groan in pain as his body still hurt like hell. He wondered what was going on as the alarm kept blaring in his head until he finally found the cause.

"Villy... are you cosplaying as an alarm clock?"

“I was going more for a phone alarm with the most annoying option selected, actually,” the god answered.

Jake was about to ask why the god was doing that, but he instantly realized the reason, and Villy also gladly reminded him.

“Let us just ignore the fact that you effectively just demoted your own Patron – a Primordial – to a damn alarm to remind you of your own damn scheduled system events,” Villy said in a half-joking, half-scolding way. “Not that I am surprised. In fact, I am beginning to see a pattern here. Do you just like hunting dangerous prey while under time pressure? Either way, you got ten minutes till it begins, so get going with all the stuff.”

“If it is worth anything, then you are the best alarm clock I have ever had,” Jake said with a smile as he stood up. He had been using the now rapidly decaying corpse of the Panther as a bed, and he was a little bit dirty. Not to mention how his armor was shredded and his body filled with holes that were still healing.

“It is not,” Villy said. “Now go on with what you have to do. We will talk more after the system event. If my guess is correct, this one will be like the others and not necessarily only concern Earth. Good luck with it all... and good fight, mate.”

Jake nodded in appreciation, a smile still on his lips. He hurt all over, but he felt elated. Killing a C-grade was not easy, and the Phantomshade Panther was not a weak C-grade either. Checking his notifications, he saw that while the beast had been C-grade, it was only barely. Also, the clone level had been right.

You have slain [Phantomshade Panther – lvl 204]—Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 165 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

...

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 169 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 168 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 169 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

Jake had gained five levels from that one fight. Killing a level 199 didn't even give him a full level anymore unless it was a particularly strong specimen, so seeing how much he got truly demonstrated the difference between D and C-grades.

Jake turned his attention to the beast in question and began using Alchemist's Purification to remove the last of the remnant poison lingering behind. Once done, he checked for loot and found a C-grade Beastcore attuned to dark and space affinities and something even more interesting.

It was a black fang that hummed with intense energy. Jake frowned as he looked at it but quickly realized what type of item it was.

[Partly Digested Phantomshade Fang (Unique)] – A Phantomshade Fang granted by the system to the newly integrated ninety-third universe. Contains a vast amount of energy and Records that will allow any compatible beast that consumes it to grow far faster and gain magical skills and abilities related to dark and space magic. This fang is already partly digested, having only a bit of the original energy left.

It was something like the Mystbone that Mystie had absorbed to quickly reach D-grade, but a far more potent version... perhaps one good enough to push a beast to C-grade. It had clearly helped and forged the Path of the Panther, that was for sure.

Jake picked it up and put it in his inventory along with the corpse of the fallen beast. The pelt was not worth much, but he still wanted to take it with him and not leave it rotting on the ground. A C-grade corpse had to have some innate value, and this one had even been strong.

After his looting, there was just one more thing. When he had escaped that spatial tunnel with Moment of the Primal Hunter active, Jake had managed to go above and beyond anything prior and had upgraded One Step Mile. With great excitement, he saw the notification.

[One Step Mile (Ancient)] – A single step is sometimes enough to cross vast distances. It is said that the very space between the user and their foes shrinks with every footfall. By drawing on the concept of space, this skill allows the user to cross far longer distances with every step than otherwise. Note that there must be a clear path between you and your target. Grants a noticeable bonus to the effectiveness of Endurance and Agility when using One Step Mile

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[One Step, Thousand Miles (Legendary)] – A single step is sometimes enough to cross vast distances. It is said that the very space between the user and their foes shrinks with every footfall. By drawing on the concept of space, this skill allows the user to cross far longer distances with every step than otherwise.

Note that there must be a path between you and your target. Grants a noticeable bonus to the effectiveness of Endurance and Agility when using One Step, Thousand Miles.

Jake had to have a few takes as he looked at the descriptions... a description where nothing had changed. Okay, saying nothing was not accurate. One fucking word was gone. It had gone from “there must be a clear path” to “there must be a path,” which was so damn minuscule it barely counted. Was that all his improved ability to pass through barriers and such boiled down to?

But... the rarity had upgraded along with the skill name. Jake wondered what was up with that as he quickly pinged the Viper, knowing the god was still watching.

“Hey... One Step Mile, or well, One Step, Thousand Miles as it is called now... what is up with that skill?” Jake asked.

“What do you mean?” the god gladly asked in return.

“It just upgraded, but nothing really changed?”

“Isn’t it better now? What did you expect to change?” Villy once more asked. It wasn’t even in a teasing tone but a very serious one.

“I am just used to skills kind of, you know, changing when upgrading. This one just got a bit better, and nothing else,” Jake shrugged, but he began to understand what the Viper meant. What would he expect to change?

"I believe I have mentioned this before, but the One Step-line of skills is far more powerful than you give it credit for. It is a skill known to pretty much anyone of power and influence, gained by far more individuals than you would expect. It is simple, elegant, and a core skill that has been around since... forever. It is a skill with a clear upgrade path all the way to a rank I have never heard of anyone reaching," Villy explained.

"So, it is a bit like your "Of the Malefic Viper" skills?" Jake asked.

"Yes and no. Those are Legacy skills bound to me and my Records. One Step is a skill that originated from the system itself, as far as I know. It is not bound to any individual or any Path; it merely is. The skill is one that you can keep upgrading and using all the way to the pinnacle, going from simply stepping a bit through space for a few meters and, with a single step, appearing anywhere in existence you so desire. However, fundamentally it will never change and always be about the simplest of actions and concepts – to take a step, moving you towards your destination."

Jake nodded along at the explanation as he began to appreciate the simple skill even more. Thinking about it, didn't it fit him quite nicely? It was simple and easy to use and understand, just the way he liked it.

"Thanks for the exposition on the deep lore of my movement skill," Jake thanked the Viper, only half-joking.

"No problem. Goodbye again. For real this time. You got like five seconds."

"Yep," Jake said, having already seen the timer, and as it expired, the quest Jake already had updated.

Quest Updated: The Call of the Exalted Prima

As the world progresses, the Prima Watcher of Earth has been observing. Soon the Seat of the Exalted Prima shall appear on Earth and invite in all those who have managed to form keys to allow their entry. Anyone entering the Seat of the Exalted Prima can participate in the Path of Myriad Choices event, as well as gain access to the other benefits offered within the Seat of the Exalted Prima.

However, beware, for the Seat holds dangers that the current warriors of Earth may not be ready to face yet. Should they unleash this danger and come out victorious, it shall reward the entire planet, while should you fail, it may fall to ruin.

Having obtained a key, you shall be allowed entrance into the Seat during its opening hours. May fortune be with you, and may your world come out stronger. The Seat of the Exalted Prima will remain open for one week.

Objective: Using the Key of the Exalted Prima, enter the Seat of the Exalted Prima that has appeared on Earth.

Jake took out the key from his inventory and used Identify on it once more. He had expected it and was proven correct as the description had updated.

[Key of the Exalted Prima (Unique)] – A key to the Seat of the Exalted Prima. Allows entry to the Seat of the Exalted Prima. Use the key to open a portal only a Prima Key Holder can use, leading to the Seat of the Exalted Prima when it is available.

One thing was sure... this event was different. Jake was not just teleported to it after accepting a system prompt but could choose to teleport there. Nothing said he had to go right away either. Oh, but he would.

Jake deposited a healing potion into his mouth, and looking like someone who had just survived a fight to the death with an incredibly powerful opponent, Jake used the key. A portal opened up in front of him, and feeling no sense of danger, he stepped through.

It was finally time to find out what all of that Prima stuff was all about.

Caleb stood in front of the two people who had managed to get keys along with himself. Nadia, the sniper, and Matteo, the second-in-command, had teamed up and hunted down seven Primas together, with Caleb naturally taking care of his own key.

“According to Umbra, this event has a high likelihood of allowing us to meet or even potentially pit us against individuals from elsewhere in our universe,” Caleb explained to them. “This quest is far from unique to our world, and other planets have also been tasked with hunting down Primas to gain keys. All of this is to say, do not engage with anyone not from the Court. While we may be viewed as at least a little influential on this planet, we should not ever underestimate what other monsters may lurk in a near-endless universe.”

The two of them nodded. They had this conversation before, but he believed it prudent to reiterate.

“As for the Myriad Paths event, simply do as you see fit. Though I would prefer if you don’t come out the other end ardent followers of the Holy Church after truly seeing the light,” Caleb joked, getting a chuckle out of Matteo.

He smiled at them and nodded as they all took out their keys, and he opened a portal.

“Let’s go then.”

Miranda had to admit things had gone a lot more smoothly than expected when it came to collecting keys and was honestly amazed at how many people from Haven would go. Herself and Arnold made sense as they had teamed up, but Sultan had also managed to get one. Neil and his party had only gotten a single fragment, but that had been put to good use... kind of.

Sultan had also gained three fragments and thus a key. Rather than hunt for them himself, he had simply bought one from Neil and his party along with fragments from two other independent parties. This meant that counting Jake and Sylphie, five people from Haven would go, matching if not exceeding many of the major factions.

They did not have any plans going in like the other factions as they were effectively five independent people who just lived out of Haven. Arnold and Sultan were very much their own men and not people Miranda could tell what to do in any capacity. Sylphie and Jake were... well, Sylphie and Jake.

Let us hope this event offers something valuable, she thought as she went through her own portal, Arnold and Sultan no-doubt also going through their own.

Carmen looked at the key and smiled a bit. She turned her head to her mother and gave her a nod. Things in Paradise had stabilized, and Carmen had spent the time since parting with Jake hunting in the surrounding area and making sure everything went smoothly back in the city. Her mother had taken over operations and the employees her family controlled before, all with the blessing of Renato, who gladly offered a helping hand.

Not that Carmen cared particularly much about the family business. She cared much more about the upcoming event.

“You ready to go?” Carmen asked the green bird currently lying flat on the bed.

“Ree!” Sylphie answered with Carmen naturally not understanding at all. Sylphie had been busy doing... something up in the air and had come back very happy, so Carmen assumed she had succeeded in whatever she was up to.

Carmen just smiled and summoned the portal.

“Take care,” her mother said. Carmen nodded in response and said her goodbyes as the warrior of Valhal and Sylphie went through the portal.

All over the planet – and even on other planets – individuals had collected keys and entered their respective portals. Rather than an event limited to a planet, it was one involving the entire universe. Future overlords of the world, leaders of the largest factions, and champions of their time would enter their own respective Seats of the Exalted Prima.

It was an event that would be the start of much conflict and lay the foundation for alliance to come. It was the first opportunity for factions to potentially meet up with members from other planets. For trade relations to be formed. Grudges be born. Friendships formed.

And fated enemies having their very first meeting.

Chapter 480 - Seat Of The Exalted Prima

Bright light entered his eyes as he stepped through the portal. Jake instantly felt several powerful auras all around him, recognizing most of them. They came through their own portals that rapidly appeared and disappeared all around him within what he found to be a large spherical room.

Metal plates covered the walls and floor, with nothing of note visible anywhere besides the people. That is until Jake noticed that the room was split in two by a large, fully transparent plane of glass. All of the humans were on one side, along with Sylphie and the Fallen King, but on the other side, Jake saw other beings appear. All of them were beasts or monsters of various forms, with there being no rhyme or reason to what appeared. One was a large elemental crackling with lightning, and another a rabbit-like creature only a bit larger than Sylphie.

Speaking of Sylphie. The little murder hawk flew over to him once she located him, and Jake quickly found Miranda and Arnold, who both stood together. Sultan also walked over as they all met up.

"Been a while," Jake said with a smile as they gathered and had some small-talk to quickly catch up. All around them, other factions also found each other. Jake did notice how a lot of people he would expect to be there were noticeably absent. Jacob was nowhere to be found, and neither was Eron. The Sword Saint and a few people from the Noboru clan were there, but one thing quickly became clear: this was no factional event.

No faction had more than a few people each. Casper and Priscilla were the only Risen, the Sword Saint was with three other people, his brother had come with two from the Court, and the King had appeared alone. Carmen and Sven were also the only people from Valhal. Most powerful people from independent factions had appeared alone, and the only faction with more than ten people was the Holy Church. They just had so many people it was possible. Overall, around one-fifty people had entered this event from the looks of it, meaning close to five hundred Primas had been killed.

"Lord Thayne," Sultan greeted Jake as he regarded him. "I take it you came straight from a battle?"

"Yeah," Jake just said, not wanting to elaborate further. Too many people around. "Good job getting keys, everyone. Anyone figured out more about this event?"

Nobody answered or didn't have time to as something finally happened. A fluctuation in space caught his attention, and Jake whipped around as a new figure appeared. A floating orb of metal had teleported into the room, getting the attention of everyone.

The orb looked like it was made out of polished aluminum and had no noticeable traits except for a glowing blue eye-like fixture. Jake felt nothing but a bit of energy coming out of it as he used Identify.

[Prima Watcher of Earth - ?]

It only had a single question mark as level. Jake did not think this was because its level was in the single digits, but quite the opposite. It was strong, yet Jake felt no danger. As he thought this, he suddenly got a quest notification.

Quest Completed: The Call of the Exalted Prima.

Reward Received: Key of the Exalted Prima has been upgraded and become Soulbound. One entry into the Path of Myriad Choices event granted.

He quickly skimmed it, something it looked like everyone did, considering they all stared blankly for a moment. A few kept their attention on the floating orb, clearly ready for a fight. Yet it just floated there for a solid ten seconds before addressing them.

"Welcome to the Seat of the Exalted Prima located within the Milky Way Galaxy. To both the Prima Slayers and surviving Primas. All Prima Slayers have been awarded a single entry into the system-tier Path of Myriad Choices event. Following will be some basic information pertaining to the Seat of the Exalted Prima and your stay.

"All violence is strictly forbidden while within the Seat of the Exalted Prima. Breaking this rule will lead to instant expulsion and a temporary ban from the Seat, along with the deactivation of your key. All Seats are managed by the Exalted Prima, and events can only be entered if the user has permission and meet the requirements. The Seat of the Exalted Prima will only remain open for one week in this initial trial phase."

The orb spoke in a very mechanical voice that was neither male nor female. Jake looked at the thing as he saw many frowns all around him. The orb attracted way more attention than the bloody and savage-looking Jake, so in some ways, that was lucky.

When it stopped speaking, Jake also got a new quest. Something he once more assumed everyone did.

Quest Received: Seat of the Exalted Prima

Entering the Seat of the Exalted Prima, you find yourself with opportunities before you. For collecting a key, you have been granted a semi-permanent key able to conjure a portal and enter the Seat. Additionally, an opportunity to enter the Path of Myriad Choices event has been granted. But hurry, for the Seat is not available to visitors forever.

Objective: Participate in the Path of Myriad Choices event. Time limit: Until the Seat closes.

The quest once more cemented that this entire thing was different than any event prior. It was clear that Jake could enter and leave this Seat of the Exalted Prima if he wanted to and return once more. The portals made by the key went both ways and only seemed to have a short cooldown time between uses. There was also the fact that the quests and general information so far were lacking. He got way more information from prior quests, and something like the Treasure Hunt had a whole slew of rules.

Meanwhile, this Seat of the Exalted Prima seemed not to be a system event but rather a place that simply housed one.

“Excuse me,” someone Jake did not recognize asked. The orb turned towards him with the glowing eye focusing on the poor dude, clearly intimidating the man a bit, but he still went through with his question:

“What kind of opportunities does this Seat of the Exalted Prima offer, and can we be given any more information regarding the Path of Myriad Choices event?”

It was a question many no-doubt wondered about, but no one had asked.

The orb more or less instantly answered with the same mechanical voice as before.

“The Seat of the Exalted Prima is a satellite station established with a direct connection to the Exalted Prima. All opportunities offered by the Seat will take place within simulations of reality performed by

the Exalted Prima. Opportunities vary depending on their nature, and a singular fulfilling answer cannot be given. The Path of Myriad Choices offered is a simulation of reality wherein a different Path resulting from a choice not made earlier in life is shown. More detail will follow upon engaging in the event. Additionally, for safety and privacy concerns, all outside communication is limited or entirely cut off both ways while within the Seat,” the orb answered.

Everyone listened, with Jake being a bit surprised. Simulation? A station? Looking around at the walls and the glass panel and the weird orb itself, he kind of understood. This was some kind of high-tech facility created by the system, or at least brought there by the system, right? At least that was his first guess.

“What is this Exalted Prima?” someone else asked.

“The Exalted Prima is the core directive consciousness of all Seats of the Exalted Prima spread throughout the universe,” the orb said without offering further details.

“If I may ask, what are those monsters doing here?” a third person also inquired. He referred to the many beasts behind the glass panel, all of which were acting relatively calmly. Weren’t they Primas? Jake asked himself before the orb answered.

“Two ways of entry to the Seat of the Exalted Prima were provided. One method was through the integration of a Prima Fragment by a monster found compatible with the core directives, and the other collecting three fragments and forming a key. Those creatures are Primas, and all Primas shall be offered a unique opportunity separate from those who obtained keys.”

Jake nodded along. It seemed like the Primas had effectively been given a quest to survive long enough with their fragments to enter this place. It was a trade-off, a classic case of risk and reward. On the one hand, they got a target on their backs, and on the other offered an opportunity.

Before anyone else could ask any more questions, the Watcher was clearly done as it spoke.

“Introduction has been completed, and the facility shall now open up. Once more, violence is not allowed within the Seat of the Exalted Prima. More information can be found within the facility where deemed a necessity.”

With those words, the orb disappeared. Jake barely felt the fluctuations of space as it teleported. He turned to the others around him. Most of them were taking in the information, with Miranda looking deep in thought. However, the one he took most notice of was Arnold, who had his tablet out while nodding.

“Did you discover anything?” Jake asked the man.

Arnold looked up after looking through a few more things and nodded. “We remain within the ninety-third universe but have still been cut off from the outside world. System-imposed, I would presume, even if the Watcher claims it is caused by the Exalted Prima. Indicating this Exalted Prima is a conjuration of the system.

“Are you sure?” Jake asked with a frown.

He could not feel Villy at all; that was true, but so had it been during all events. But all those events had taken place in a separate space that none could truly locate, not just somewhere in their universe.

“My conclusion is within a critically significant margin of error, making me certain, yes. I cannot say where we are, but I would assume, based on information provided, it is within the Milky Way Galaxy,” the scientist answered.

Jake nodded in response.

He began to have some idea what this entire place was more and more. If he was right, this whole Exalted Prima thing was bound to be significant not just for Earth but the entire ninety-third universe. Not just for one system event either, but for a long time to come. Perhaps this place would even hold significance for the multiverse as a whole.

A few moments passed as everyone discussed. A few began to get impatient as a segment of the wall began opening up, leading into an even larger area. On the other side of the glass panel, the Primas were led somewhere else too. Jake had spotted a few of them out the corner of his eye that got into conflict, and he noticed how the moment any one of them tried to attack another, they instantly just disappeared. He hoped for their sakes that they had the same rules as those with keys and weren't just vaporized.

People began walking towards the opening, and Jake followed with the others. Carmen threw him a glance from across the room, and he gave one back. Silently, all the humans and the two monsters – Sylphie and the Fallen King – exited the large dome-shaped room.

Jake had expected a portal leading into some other room where these simulations would happen or something in that vein but instead found himself in a large lounge that looked incredibly casual. However, more than anything, he stared at what truly lay before him – and above him.

The lounge had no roof. All Jake saw when he looked up was a sky full of stars, planets, and an endless world spreading out before him. Others also stopped and gawked at the expanse above. Jake stared for

several seconds before looking to the side and saw several similar hemispheres to the one they were currently inside in the distance. Looking behind him, he saw they had exited a small box with an opening in it, the entire thing no larger than a large elevator. Spatially expanded for sure.

Each of the hemispheres surrounding their own was at least a kilometer in diameter and all of equal size. The inside was filled with furniture and several screens that no one seemed to know how to control or what they were even for.

Nothing immediately caught Jake's attention as he got a feel for the place. It was clearly just a meeting area of sorts. Likely a place for those who came from Earth to meet up and enter through. Looking at another hemisphere, he saw what looked like a wire hanging from it. Their own also had a wire, he was sure. All of them did.

Jake walked forward with the others and went to the edge of the hemisphere, where it felt like he stood at a cliff leading down into the infinite vacuum of space. Only a thin barrier, barely a few millimeters thick, blocked him from being in space. Not that Jake feared such a thing. First of all, he felt relatively certain he could survive there, and secondly, that no one present could destroy that barrier. Or if anything could, for that matter.

"This is quite something," Sultan said as he stared out.

"Yeah," Jake agreed. Others had also joined them and looked out. Even after all the progress Jake and others had made, all their levels and all their power, there was a feeling of powerlessness in standing there. There were stars and planets in the distance so far away that Jake was certain he would die of age before even getting halfway to one if he decided to fly. It was such an impossibly large scope it was hard to imagine. Yet he knew that to gods, all of this was nothing. With a thought, anything within his field of view could be reduced to ashes. It was power out of this world. It was hard to picture Villy being that powerful, even if Jake knew he was.

Yet it was also exciting. To see such a vast world of possibilities. An infinite world. And this was just part of one universe... no, part of one small galaxy out of billions of planets. The multiverse was so vast and filled with things to explore that Jake couldn't help smiling. He caught himself and dispelled the thoughts.

You got a long way to go, Jake. You barely beat a damn cat just a few hours ago, he reminded himself.

Turning his head to the side, he also finally got a look at what these wires from the hemispheres connected to. It was a cylinder-shaped structure that floated with wires coming out of it. Jake saw nearly a thousand wires connecting hemispheres and the cylinder that he assumed was the actual Seat of the Exalted Prima. This entire setup was a massive structure in its own right.

He then saw some people go over to what looked like a metal disc with complicated scripts on it. Jake didn't recognize them and didn't have time to use Identify before the group disappeared. Guess I found the teleporter to the actual Seat.

Seeing no reason to wait, he began leading his group towards it. Tossing a final look at the endless expanse, he stepped onto the platform and was teleported into the true Seat of the Exalted Prima.