

Hunter 71

Chapter 71: Dream

Smiling in satisfaction, Jake got out two empty bottles. Usually, a batch such as this would quickly fill four or five bottles, but the first creation's output wasn't exactly good. He had taken a long time doing the crafting and had thus evaporated a lot of the concoction. But it was kind of expected, so Jake didn't think that much of it. It was a success, and that was the most crucial part.

Bottling it up, he identified the poison.

[Hemotoxic Poison (Common)] – Greatly increases bleeding on infected entities and makes any injuries harder to heal. The poison must be introduced directly into the bloodstream to have any effect.

It was literally the same description of the inferior-rarity version, save for it adding "greatly" at the beginning. But Jake could feel that it was quite a lot more powerful. The energy it gave off was palpable, as one should expect after expending more than 2500 mana during the concoction.

Not because the crafting process required that much typically, but because, once more, Jake had done it super slowly and inefficiently. Something that would surely improve as he got more practice.

By now, his armor that could be restored by their enchants had been repaired. His mana was low, and his stamina also wasn't full. He had even lost a few health points due to the toxic fumes released during the crafting process - a hazard of the trade.

Cleaning everything up, he gave one look at the Den Mother as it still sat unmovingly.

Soon, he thought as he smiled to himself.

Entering meditation, time passed as he slowly restored his resources. During meditation, all senses except for touch were cut off completely. He could still feel his and the energy moving within his body, but nothing outside of it. With his normal senses, that is. His Sphere of Perception was as always unaffected, and he had made it a habit to try and train it during meditation.

In the beginning, he could only see material things through it, but after the first evolution at level 10, he had started to also faintly feel the mana in the air.

It was only a slight nudge in the wind. When Jake focused, it was as if he could 'see' a faint mist covering everything. As he practiced using his mana, and as his alchemy improved with his mana control, so did his ability to sense it.

At all times, he could feel it around him. He could pull on it and attempt to bend it. He had tried a myriad of things, but so far, the only one he had ever really succeeded in was to weave his strings. It was one of the first-ever accomplishments he had with mana, and it had stayed that way. But his limitation was that these strings had to be attached to his body. Something that shouldn't be necessary... in theory.

So he spent his meditation trying to do just that. Manipulate mana without touching it directly. His largest obstacle was to have the mana not simply scatter. If he made a string connected to his body, the moment he made it dislodge from himself, it would just get swept up. It was like it had no substance, so it just integrated back into the atmospheric mana.

As he meditated, the hours ticked by, and soon he started to feel a different kind of tired. His stamina was restoring, but he still felt more and more tired. No, exhausted had to be the word. An exhaustion one feels after being up for far too long, and the body finally putting its foot down.

Thinking about it... he had been awake for a long time. He didn't need as much sleep as before; that much was obvious... but didn't he need ANY sleep?

Meditation and stamina potions had kept him going for a long time. Likely too long. The problem was though... he didn't want to sleep.

Doing alchemy, practicing mana control, fighting, all of these were something to do. These things kept Jake's mind active. Occupied. It kept stray thoughts and worries away.

But if he slept, the floodgates would open. The last time he slept, he dreamt. Dreams that to him were nightmares. He saw his family, his friends, the ones in his life he cared about. The dreams only served as reminders of what he may have lost and what he didn't even know if he still had.

It has to be remembered that upon entering the tutorial, Jake's lowest stat was willpower. He had never been the strong-willed type. He was the type to focus on one thing and then become utterly devastated for a long time if it didn't work out.

When he had his accident that stopped him from doing archery, he was depressed for a long time. He never picked up any new hobbies but just wallowed in despair. It was only because he was set on the path of going to university by his parents that he recovered. He had a new goal. But he still never got seriously into any new hobbies again.

The same happened with his first relationship. After that, he had never dared to pursue a new one. The experience had scarred him, and he now hid away from it. And now he was doing the exact same thing.

He knew something bad had happened outside of the inner area, but he didn't want to go check. He didn't want to confront whatever it was. He preferred just to hide away and do his own thing. Fighting to the death was simple. He knew how to do it because the result of the fight relied on him in the end.

But if his family still lived... if his friends were in the only now dozens of people outside who still lived... he didn't know. It was not up to him.

He wanted to avoid anything outside of the one-mind track he was currently on, to put it in other words. He had learned throughout his life to do that wonderfully so. To focus excessively on one goal at a time and complete his set goal with excellent efficiency. It was why he was good at his job and why he was good at archery, to begin with.

Now, however, the distraction of sleep was upon him. He had managed to avoid dreams during the challenge dungeon somehow. He had slept then, but he had managed to dream of alchemy. To dream of his task. Something he feared he wouldn't this time.

Retreating even further, Jake entered into the tunnel connecting the two caves. Fighting the beast was foolish in his current state. He felt sluggish. Slow. He had to sleep, despite his desire not to do so.

Summoning the bed, he just threw himself on his stomach as his eyelids got heavier. The moment his body hit the sheets, his eyes closed, and the embrace of sleep enveloped him.

As his mind started resting, so did the chains he had shackled down his thoughts with. And once more, memories spiraled forth from his subconscious. A dream that instantly felt... wrong.

The dream this time was a memory. One that was depicting a period of Jake's life that was the darkest.

He was at the time living with a roommate while he went to university. They were friends from before and had signed up for university at the same time. To save money, they had decided to get a place together and share the rent.

It was only a small flat, but it was their flat. Everything was honestly fantastic. Despite a few hurdles at the beginning about who did the dishes and finally deciding to just get a dishwasher, their relationship only grew closer. Jake trusted his roommate with everything and believed that his friend trusted him back.

At the time, Jake had even managed to land a girlfriend. She was in the same faculty, and they had meshed well together. Neither of them were the overly social types, so they found happiness by meeting up and watching a movie, enjoying their solitude together.

Jake had two people he had let come close at university. Andrew, or just Andy, and Madeline. He was together with her for a little over two years, and things were also going great there. To sum it up, he had a close friend, a girlfriend, and things were just... great. At least Jake interpreted it that way... because he didn't want to deal with it being otherwise.

It all went wrong on one fateful day. Jake had been visiting his parents for the holidays and planned to stay with them for a few more days between Christmas and new year. But his mom convinced him to go back and spend some of the break together with his peers. Her thoughts had come from the right place, but the result was disastrous.

Jake had thought his roommate was out; he had said that he would be at his parent's until the next day. His girlfriend had said the same.

That day he got off the train and took a bus to their flat. He stopped by a small convenience store on the way to get some milk and other essentials on the way. He wanted to have it stocked up for when Andy returned. To be a good roommate.

With two bags, he waddled up the stairs like a duck. A big goofy smile on his face as he had bought things to surprise the two people he cared the most about from his university life. His plans for a nice dinner the next day were set, and he was excited.

Putting one bag down as he reached the door, he took out his key and unlocked it. It was evening by now, and the sun was already down. He had expected the apartment to be dark but found the light was already turned on at the entrance. Weird, he thought as he entered. Andy must have forgotten to turn it off when he left.

But that thought was soon expelled when he heard some muffled sounds. Someone was there, after all. Had Andy come back before time also?

He didn't think much of it as he went and put the groceries away. He was halfway when he noticed something off out of the corner of his eye. A blouse was on the couch. The one he had given Madeline for her birthday last spring. Not the best gift, but hey, she always complained about being cold.

This should probably have made him suspicious that something was wrong, but he once more chose not to think about it too much as he finished emptying the bags. She must have come by or something after he left and accidentally forgotten it or something.

After that, he went to take off his shoes to not dirty the place more than necessary. As he went to take them off, he noticed two pairs already being there. Andy's... and Madeline's. What?

A feeling started building in his stomach... a bad one. His mind was telling him shit was wrong. VERY wrong. But he kept pressing it down, as he kept making excuses. There had to be a logical explanation. Yeah, they had just both come back earlier than expected and decided to hang out a bit. Totally normal.

Jake, however, still couldn't kill the feeling. Looking at the door to Andrew's room, he decided not to postpone. The muffled sound continued as he slowly got closer. Putting his ear to the door, he was dreading what he would hear.

Luckily, what he heard was not what he had feared - a movie. He admonished himself for his stupidity and paranoia with a sigh of relief, as he no longer hesitated and opened the door with a smile. A smile that quickly faded.

Two people were lying huddled together on the bed. One black-haired man with a beard, and a red-haired woman. Both butt-naked. And both turning their head to Jake as he stood there looking like an idiot in the doorway.

Thoughts spun through his head as he observed them. No one spoke, as the silence was finally broken by Jake turning around and closing the door again.

He went and got his coat and shoes on once more and left the apartment without a word. He got on the bus once more and back on the train.

The entire journey, his face didn't change. The thoughts kept spinning. How could he be so stupid? Ignored all the signs for so long? He would lie to himself if he didn't hold any suspicions before. But he had trusted them.

Arriving at his hometown, he got off the train and back on another bus. His phone had several missed calls from both Madeline and Andy, but he ignored all of them. When he made it to his parent's place, his mother was, of course, surprised to see him after only a few hours. She didn't even get to ask anything before Jake broke down crying on the kitchen floor.

He missed the first month of that semester.

When he returned, he already had a new place. His dad had arranged movers to do everything for him. He acted as if nothing happened as he ignored both Madeline and Andrew.

Before the break-up, Jake was a middling student. Afterward, he soared to the top of nearly all his courses. Jake ignored anything and everything as he dived into his studies. He thought nothing of friends or love. That part of him was cut off from that point on, and it would take many years before a faint spark would reemerge.

Or that was what had happened. But dreams had a way of not being entirely accurate. Jake found himself back to after he had just discovered the two of them together.

As Jake closed the bedroom door in the dream, he went to get on his shoes and coat as he had back then. But instead of a jacket and shoes, he took on his gear - boots, cloak, bracers, rings, and necklace, along with his dagger and sword, and of course, his trusty bow.

He left the apartment like last, but this time he found 'Andy' in the hallway.

"Just going to leave like that?" he asked. He was still naked as if he had just teleported here from the bed. Yet on his face hung a smile Jake couldn't recognize. It felt... wrong.

"Yeah," Jake answered, as he tried to walk past him, his face blank.

"Like you left Jacob and the others?" Andy asked.

"Yep."

"Like you left the entire fucking world behind to go play hunter?"

"Exactly," Jake answered as he turned back to regard Andy. By now, he was entirely lucid - the illusion of the dream broken. He was still dreaming... but he was aware. And he could feel it. The dunking of his heart, as the blood ran through his system. His bloodline and instinct both flaring up. His sphere was observing everything.

He felt the intent of the 'Andy' before him. Manipulation, something he would have fallen for so many times before when he disregarded his instincts.

“Not that it matters, Jacob will betray you like everyone else. Oh wait, he already has, hasn’t he?” the fake person before him said, still smiling creepily.

Jake shook his head. He felt what the being before him wanted him to do, and it pissed him off. He felt the thought of killing Jacob appear for a split second, but the way it occurred was too... unnatural. Whatever the thing in front of him tried clearly hadn’t worked, but he didn’t let it show. Why he wanted him to go back for Jacob wasn’t relevant because this stupidity unfolding before him only made him reaffirm what he wanted: Power.

A being like the Malefic Viper could disappear for countless years, yet none would dare touch the core of his Order. Not because of respect, decency, or morals. But because of fear. A fear that the backlash would be far more than they could ever handle. A fear that untold power would descend upon them. A power that Jake desired more than anything.

He was no longer the man who would break down on his mother’s kitchen floor at a betrayal. He was the man who would make the situation right.

If he had the power he held now back then, what would he have done? Spread tales of their affair to ruin their reputations? Getting them expelled somehow? Tattled to their parents? Beaten one or both of them up? Or worse, killed them?

He didn’t know, and quite frankly, it didn’t matter. What mattered was that he could. He had the power to do so. Or he would have the power to do so. Besides, if he had that power... would they have dared to betray him, to begin with?

The next moment, Jake disappeared from within the dream. From beginning to end, he had never shown the slightest reaction to anything that was said.

With a sigh, 'Andy' looked to the side as the entire apartment side of the apartment-complex turned to dust.

"I am surprised you didn't interfere," he spoke out loud.

"Well, why would I?" a voice echoed out within the dreamscape. "I am pretty sure you just made him mad."

Two green eyes opened in the sky of the dream as everything started slowly disintegrating.

"Oh and..." the voice echoed out as killing intent descended on the entire dreamscape. "Don't ever pull that shit again."

With that, the entire dream turned to nothing, leaving only the fake 'Andy' in the void. His eternal smile still on his lips as a spark of interest entered his eyes.

"Truly peculiar..." he spoke before his karmic projection disappeared.