

# THE PRIMAL HUNTER

## Chapter 101: Mana 101

Jake awoke and felt well-rested and relieved. He had feared a nightmare when he closed his eyes, but instead, he got a pleasant dream. Like the last one, this one was also weirdly lucid throughout. Of course, this one didn't have some bastard god but was of his own making.

From the very beginning, some part of him knew it was a dream. Yet, he went through the motions as if he wasn't even in charge of his own body. He was just a ride-along, experiencing the memory as it had been. Everything up to the final conversation with his brother had been precisely the same.

The dream only served to cement his conviction to seek out his family after the tutorial. But to do so, he needed power. Or maybe that was just yet another excuse he made to himself to justify his obsession with slaying the King of the Forest.

Feeling out his body, he noticed that the soreness was mostly gone. He still felt a bit stiff. His stamina had regenerated to about 75%, with his health having regenerated a few hundred points too. Health didn't regenerate very fast by default, which is why he took out a healing potion and chugged it down.

It was good that he spent such a long time just hoarding all the potions he made while grinding levels. He was starting to get low, but the time remaining was also starting to get low.

## **[Tutorial Panel]**

**Duration: 5 days & 7:31:01**

He had slept for longer than he hoped. Exactly how long he wasn't sure, but it appeared to be on the other side of 10 hours. It was time he honestly didn't feel like he could afford to waste currently. Though, of course, it was arguable if he had truly wasted his time.

The experiment he had made was partly successful. He had managed to temporarily boost himself with stamina without blowing himself up like a popped balloon of blood.

However, it was only partly. The weakness after the incredibly long winddown time made it useless in combat outside of the most desperate of situations. It had gotten Jake out of a bind once, but it wasn't a stunt he had any intention of repeating any time soon.

Getting up from the hard ground, he stretched a bit to get some flexibility back. He felt his body crack here and there, and he instantly felt refreshed. The healing potion was surely also doing its work.

He didn't delay any longer as he walked up to the wooden door and entered the dungeon once more. He was ready to repeat it from the beginning once more but found that the wall that had been broken down was still broken, confirming to Jake that the dungeon didn't reset.

Clear signs of the chase from the many beasts were also present. Jake decided to walk towards where the boars had come from, to see what the hell they were doing back there.

What he found was a large lake of murky water. It exuded clear indications of strong mana within it, and walking up to it and using Identify only confirmed that it did.

***[Soilwater (Common)] - Water infused with strong earth-affinity mana, making it purer and hold certain magical properties. Can be used as an ingredient in many alchemical recipes or simply consumed in its raw form to restore mana for those possessing the earth-affinity.***

This water was a lot like the Lucenti Water he had found in the Lucenti Plains dungeon. The description was pretty much the same, except this one mentioned earth-affinity mana instead.

The last time he had come into contact with this type of water, it burned him like acid. But he still cautiously placing his hand into this Soilwater, mentally preparing himself for the stinging sensation. However, to his surprise, it didn't even sting. It felt somewhat normal, actually, aside from the unmistakable feeling of mana within it.

*I guess I do have some kind of earth-affinity?* he thought to himself as he took out an empty barrel from his storage. It would be stupid not to collect some of the wonderful water while he was here. He was in a rush, sure, but who knows when he would stumble across earth-affinity water again.

As he collected it, he got an idea. He assumed that the boars drank this water and ran to eat the rocks afterward. That it was their “pattern,” so to speak. But he would have to confirm it before he could turn his idea into action.

He finished up collecting water, and afterward, he jumped straight into the water. The lake wasn't very wide, perhaps only 50 meters in diameter, but it was quite deep. His Sphere of Perception extended effortlessly through the water as he dove downwards.

He felt something below. A feeling that only got stronger the further down he dove. The intensity of the earth-affinity mana increased the further down he got. Fifty meters down, he began to feel a bit of pressure, but he kept diving further and further down.

A hundred meters down, the pressure was starting to get to him, but he kept going. His constitution meant he did not need to really breathe, and his toughness made both the physical and energy pressure manageable.

120 meters

140 meters

160 meters.

Finally, his sphere picked up the bottom of the lake. His eyesight was nonexistent at this depth, with everything merely being colored brown.

His sphere did, however, pick up that the lake was deeper towards the center. Like a small crater formed the bottom of the lake.

Swimming towards the center, he soon found the epicenter of it all. And his sphere also picked up the source of the mana. No larger than a finger, a small shard was embedded in the soil, giving off incredibly strong fluctuations of earth mana. Focusing on it, he used Identify.

***[Crystallized Essence of Earth (Rare)] - A crystallized essence of earth. Can be used in a variety of rare earth-affinity alchemical creations. Passively transforms atmospheric mana into the earth affinity. Has become intrinsically linked to the mana of the lake through time.***

Yep, *that ought to do it*, he thought, as he dove closer. At this point, he was around 200 meters underwater, with the earth mana coupled with the natural pressure from being down there pressing unto him. He could still manage due to his physical stats, though, so he inspected the crystallized essence.

It truly did appear just like a small crystal. Rather unassuming if he didn't know any better. He didn't put it into his spatial storage as he began to think.

The idea he had was to poison the lake, making it toxic and weakening the boars. He didn't like the thought of doing it, as he felt it was a cheap way to fight, but he was in a rush. In fact, the thought hadn't even occurred to him during the Lucenti Plains dungeon. Not that he thought it would have actually worked with the Lucenti Water. Chances are, the deer would have also been able to sense it with their keen senses and high intellect. The boars... now they were another story.

The idea to poison it slowly died, however, as he dove further and further down. There was simply too much water.

He wasn't even sure he could get it up to a level where it was lethal or able to deal meaningful damage before the tutorial ended. But perhaps this essence presented an opportunity.

While he himself couldn't poison the water, that wasn't to say this essence couldn't. He could feel its connection to the rest of the lake and how every single strand of mana felt like it originated from it. Likely because it did. It also said that the mana in the lake was linked closely to it.

If he could corrupt the water source and not the water itself... perhaps that would make it possible to transform this entire lake into one big concoction of death. He wasn't sure if he could, but he wanted to try.

And his method of doing it would be through Touch of the Malefic Viper. The skill description also specified "being," making him unsure if objects also fit that description. He didn't know if water counted as partly living for some reason, or it was just because water appeared to be susceptible to absorb all kinds of mana by default.

He checked the skill to see if anything was stopping him.

***[Touch of the Malefic Viper (Rare)] - With a single touch, the Malefic Viper has slain countless foes. Attempt to inject poison into a being through physical contact. The***

***nature of the poison is determined by the user. The alchemist can only use toxic effects he has concocted or created prior. Some toxins cannot be used. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of Touch of the Malefic Viper based on intelligence and wisdom.***

It mentioned him only being able to inject poison he had prior concocted, but that wasn't entirely accurate. Besides the limitations - such as being unable to inject the Amalgamation he made to clear the Challenge Dungeon and whatever he made in the pond in the Lucenti Plains - he could create necrotic poison and hemotoxic poison with his Touch. But he could do one more type.

His Blood of the Malefic Viper created a poison that Jake honestly couldn't quite identify. It clearly held signs of necrotic poison, but it also just straight up corroded and corrupted everything else. The description of that skill said it bases the toxin's nature on his Records... so a mix of all poisons he had ever made or ingested?

What matters is that the toxin from Blood of the Malefic Viper counted for his Touch of the Malefic Viper. It was the type he pretty much always used with Touch of the Malefic Viper because it was the strongest type he had. At least it appeared to be effective against anything and everything.

So Jake wanted to try and corrupt the crystal essence with Touch. Perhaps trying to soak it in his blood would work too, but he doubted it could penetrate into it and corrupt it. Better to use the Touch.

But first, he would confirm that the beasts indeed did drink from this lake.

Swimming upwards, he went faster than when he went down. When he got close to the surface, his sphere picked up something at the edge of the lake, but he had too much

momentum and ended up emerging. What he saw quickly made him rethink his decision. The entire lake was surrounded by boars on all sides, including the big boss.

Jake was smack in the middle of it and froze the instant his head popped up. He could see the beasts drink the water, with not a single one of them even throwing a glance his way.

*Thank god for their shitty perception*, he thought, as he slowly ducked his head under again - no reason to tempt fate more than necessary.

He had noticed before that the boars had sucky eyesight. They didn't appear to feel mana either, plus they also sucked in the hearing department. What they did have was some weird sense related to the ground. If he had to guess, then he would say they could feel vibrations - a tremor sense.

As the water wasn't ground last time he checked, he assumed it would help hide him, so Jake was pretty safe in the water.

Diving down once more, he headed straight for the crystal. Being so deep in the dense mana, he didn't fear the boars detecting anything he did as he placed his hands on the crystal.

He tried moving it but found that it was stuck to the ground. He could likely cut it out along with the surrounding stone if he wanted to, but that wasn't necessary.

Activating Touch of the Malefic Viper, he instantly felt the resistance from the essence. Like a barrier blocking the toxic mana from entering. However, he quickly found that the barrier was weak, as a small extra push broke it down.

His mana entered the gem and... nothing. Well, not nothing. It was just that what he did barely had any effect. It was like trying to make an entire bathtub acidic by pouring in a few drops of acid. It was diluted and barely did anything.

He kept up the injection for a minute or so longer but felt like he didn't even make a dent. However, what did take a hit was his mana pool, which was rapidly drained from the continuous use of the skill.

Stopping what he was doing, he started rethinking his approach. He could feel the toxins within the essence, but he would need more... a lot more.

What did bode well was the mana in his immediate area. All of it now carried a faint tinge of poison. His theory that the essence was inherently linked to the Soilwater had proven right. This meant that if he managed to corrupt the essence, he could poison the entire lake.

It did also mean that if he could not corrupt the essence, then poisoning the water itself likely wouldn't do much.

*It appears like the water is filtered through the Essence somehow... he thought. It does help that the earth mana doesn't consume the mana, unlike the dark ma- wait.*

Jake froze as he followed that thought. Dark mana could consume other kinds of mana. But dark mana alone wouldn't help corrupt the essence; it would just be making it into a "Dark Crystalized Essence," or maybe a weird mix of earth and dark.

No, he needed the properties of the dark-affinity mana in his toxins instead. Make it take over and spread. His poison already did this to biological beings. Necrotic poison invaded and consumed the flesh of whatever it infected, while his hemotoxin made itself part of the bloodstream, thinning it and making his foe bleed more.

What he needed was a magical version of that, and the dark mana was just what he needed. The poison from Touch of the Malefic Viper being purely energy-based made it all a bit complicated. This isn't to say the regular poisons were nonmagical, just more belonging to the physical realm.

His poisons didn't appear to belong to any specific affinity either.

But that didn't mean every type wasn't aligned to one. If Jake had to guess, then Necrotic Poison appeared to belong to the death-affinity, with hemotoxin poison maybe being blood-affinity... if that is a thing. Maybe it was just water-affinity?

The point is, he wasn't sure if the two would just go together. Wouldn't merging dark mana into the toxic mana from his Touch only consume whatever toxins there was?

Yet despite all his doubts, he couldn't dismiss the idea, and the one thing that kept his belief going was a particular vision he saw what felt like ages ago.

Within the challenge dungeon, he had seen a vision of the Malefic Viper and his growth to power. He remembered one of the visions where the winged serpent flew over the populace, spewing out some dark green poison.

All who were hit started decaying and dying. But that wasn't all. Every single entity hit by the poison was consumed and died, but their bodies continued to release even more poison into the air even after death. What's more, the area where the poison was spread became covered in a blanket of darkness and death. It was a memory he would never forget seeing, and the cornerstone of his theory now.

If the Viper had used dark mana or not, he didn't know. But he had a feeling dark mana was one of the affinities the Viper himself leaned most towards.

Perhaps it was just a pipedream, but he chose to believe it was possible as he once more placed his hands on the crystalized essence. He didn't use the skill immediately but began changing some of his mana into the dark affinity.

He instantly felt that the mana wouldn't work with the skill. Touch of the Malefic Viper consumed normal, affinity-less mana, the mana he had by default. He already knew this, but he continued to make the dark mana, nevertheless.

It had to be compatible somehow - his Descending Fang had transformed into Descending Dark Fang, the same skill but now with dark mana. Perhaps it was just that one skill that carried high combatability, but he also fervently believed that Touch of the Malefic Viper did.

It was one of the skills he got upon obtaining his profession. The skill he got after receiving a blessing from the god himself. Everything within him told him it would work.

He began using the skill as usual but tried pushing a bit of dark mana in too. Failure.

He tried forcing it to work with purely dark mana. Failure.

He used it normally, to begin with, and then tried to inject in dark mana during the process. Failure.

He tried first injecting some dark mana without using Touch but found himself unable to. Failure.

He continued testing for what felt like hours, experiencing failure after failure.

Jake was many things, and being stubborn was definitely one of them.

## **Chapter 102: A thoughtful touch**

Affinities, mana, magic as a whole, actually, was still a new concept to Jake and everyone else going through the tutorials. Books in the Challenge Dungeon had all been very unspecific about how mana and magic worked and only described possible methods of using it.

Jake's most significant source of information had been the Viper himself, and even that had been broad and nonspecific. Jake had no concept of what he could do with his mana, nor what he couldn't do.

Alchemy had given him a headstart, and his early practice with mana had only boosted him further. He had started making the strings of mana, and he had learned to transform his mana's affinity quite quickly. The thought of him being unable to somehow use the dark affinity elements in the mana in his Touch of the Malefic Viper didn't even enter his mind.

If there was one thing the system had proven so far, it was that nothing was as simple and as rigid as it seemed before. Jake would just have to find the trick. Whatever made it all click into place.

Currently, that epiphany still eluded him. But the thought of quitting didn't occur to him for a single moment. He just kept going, as he cut out all else, immersed in the skill. In his world, there only existed the flow of mana and the Crystalized Essence.

In the weird state of meditation, he focused more than he had perhaps ever done before. He felt his control of energy improve and his focus only increasing. He didn't even take notice of the system notification.

But he did quickly begin to notice an issue. It was indeed with the skill Touch of the Malefic Viper, it allowed him to inject a poison he had made prior, and in his repertoire... not a single poison compatible with dark mana existed - not even the toxin from his Blood of the Malefic Viper.

Him trying to inject it together with dark mana was like mixing in dark mana in the middle of concocting. In other words, he was trying to introduce an incompatible ingredient, thus ruining the entire concoction every time he tried.

He instead needed a type of poison that was compatible, hopefully even based on dark mana. The descriptions of some of the items mentioned alchemical creations built around mana affinities, making it a logical conclusion that poisons based on the dark-affinity also existed.

Without any prior concoctions of it, his Touch couldn't manifest it... so he had to find a way to make it do it anyway.

What would a poison that is based on dark mana look like? It would be something that spread by itself, something aiming to consume every other source of energy it came into contact with. Hopefully, something akin to a virus that can infect different types of mana.

But that idea was nearly instantly dispelled. For such a poison to exist, it would be impossible to stop. It would be a poison of the highest order. One, if applied correctly, could wipe out worlds.

No, he needed only something similar. Something that could infect, but it didn't need to do so very well. It only needed to be able to spread to other types of mana, and it didn't need to be automatic either. It needing constant input and guidance to continue spreading would be fine too.

He needed it to be a poison... that simply was dark mana. Dark mana consumed other kinds of mana, but it couldn't consume "active" mana in any way. Passive dark mana would only deplete different passive types of mana and only do so to a certain extent. If not, the entire world would be covered by only dark mana, after all.

Of course, merely pumping dark mana into the Essence was an option. If Jake did it enough, then the essence would likely either break or turn into a dark essence of some kind. But that wouldn't help him with anything. Besides, he seriously doubted he had the mana pool to do it.

In conclusion, he needed toxic mana that spread like dark mana but wasn't dark mana. Toxic mana he could do, as that was kind of what Touch of the Malefic Viper was. Dark mana he also had. The combination was the issue.

In his mind, he began a concoction. He thought back to his experience with corrupting the moon in the Lucenti Plains, the many types of toxins he had concocted. He thought of the feeling of the poison from the end of the Challenge Dungeon ravaging through his system.

Every bit of poison he had experienced was still within him - in his Records. Palate of the Malefic Viper had at least partially absorbed it. And anything in his Records would be manifested through Blood of the Malefic Viper. And anything from Blood of the Malefic Viper could be injected with Touch of the Malefic Viper.

It was a constant cycle of skills working in synergy. Unsurprising, considering they all came from the same source - the Malefic Viper himself.

Jake's hands were glowing a black color as he had channeled dark mana into them long ago. It simply lingered as Jake was submerged in his meditation. Hours passed as the

mana within him moved in erratic patterns, the dark mana sometimes disappearing from his hands, only to reappear moments later.

Time passed, and suddenly the mana on his two hands starting changing color. At first, it was subtle, but soon a small speck of green became two, and then four. The color changed as his hands turned from the pure darkness of dark mana to the dark green of Touch of the Malefic Viper.

Jake opened his eyes, his mind clearer than ever as he put his hands upon the Crystallized Essence once more. He activated his Touch of the Malefic Viper, and what was injected was not the same poison as before.

The moment it entered the Essence, it reacted. It started eating into it, consuming it. The consumed mana became the same toxic mana that Jake infected, as it began infecting even more around it.

Within only minutes, the small infection had turned into a full-on pandemic for the earth mana. But Jake didn't stop. He couldn't stop, in fact.

If he stopped, so would the infection. It was only with his constant injection with Touch of the Malefic Viper that the poison kept spreading.

But that wasn't an issue - because the surrounding Soilwater was changing just as fast as the essence itself.

Jake could feel the toxicity all around him with his Sense of the Malefic Viper. He could feel it intensify every single second, and it was only speeding up.

Another ten minutes later, the entire Essence had changed color from the yellowish-brown to a yellowish black. Still of the earth affinity, but clearly now something more. It was corrupted. Or, upon Identification, contaminated according to the system.

***[Contaminated Soilwater (Common)] - Water infused with strong earth-affinity mana, now contaminated with potent toxins. Limited use as an ingredient in alchemical recipes. Will restore a minor amount of mana if ingested by those with the earth-affinity but will also poison the consumer.***

It was still Soilwater, and it didn't really appear to look any different. Without an ability to sense poison as he had, or identifying the water itself, he doubted anyone could tell the difference. It was perfect. Exactly how he had hoped for it to go.

Without the new method he had used, it would have been impossible. Every point of mana he had spent had led to thousands if not tens of thousands of mana worth of contamination.

He could feel it still slowly spreading throughout the rest of the pool. The essence was as corrupted as he could make it, and it would now do the rest of the work.

Jake was unaware of how much time had passed when he was in this state of meditation. He had been more focused than ever before during it. When he looked through his notifications, he quickly discovered why.

**\*Skill Upgraded\*: [Meditate (Common)] -->[Thoughtful Meditation (Uncommon)]**

***[Thoughtful Meditation (Uncommon)] - Enter a state of meditation, cutting off the outside world. While in meditation, regenerate stamina and mana significantly faster. While in meditation, perception is reduced immensely. Increases concentration and control of energies while in meditation at the cost of further limiting perception.***

He had received the upgrade when he immersed himself deeper in his meditation than he had done before. He had at other times meditated deeply, like when he was practicing dark mana in the sewers, but even then, he always kept connected to the outside world.

However, this time he had even cut off the information from the Sphere of Perception. And his random burst of concentration and focus had clearly been rewarded. Of course, this wasn't the only thing he had gotten.

His Touch of the Malefic Viper had also reacted to his improvements. He knew that he had evolved the skill when his mana started entering the crystal as he intended, and the notification only confirmed it.

**\*Skill Upgraded\*: [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Rare --> Epic)] - - With a single touch, the Malefic Viper has slain countless foes. Attempt to inject poison into a being through physical contact. The nature of the poison is determined by the user. The alchemist can only use toxic effects he has concocted or created prior. Can be used with all compatible types of mana affinities, further altering the effects. Some toxins cannot be used. Adds a small increase to the effectiveness of Touch of the Malefic Viper based on intelligence and wisdom.**

The name of the skill hadn't changed. That was a first for any skill he had ever upgraded. Then again, it was also the first skill directly related to the Malefic Viper, so maybe whatever he did hadn't warranted a name change.

Or maybe he had just unlocked something the skill was meant to do all along. He didn't know, but he did feel like the ease of the upgrade had been, well... too easy. It was like the skill would gladly do what he wanted; he just needed to give it that one extra little push to get it there.

Not that he wasn't going to take anything away from himself and his accomplishments. He had managed to upgrade the skill and synthesize a poison through the synergy of skills, his efforts, and ingenuity. Sure, likely many other factors also played a part, but he had to give himself credit where credit's due.

It did help quite a lot that the system appeared to agree that he had done something noteworthy. At least if the levels gained were to be believed.

***\*'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 52 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

...

***\*'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 55 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 59 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 60 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

It was quite insane. Four levels in his profession awarded for only a bit of work, a measly... 19 HOURS?

*What the fuck*, Jake thought fittingly, as he rechecked the tutorial panel. Maybe the new Thoughtful Meditation was a bit too good at making him focus on things...

The entire thing was still clearly a huge gain for him; he just felt a bit salty over not even noticing the time ticking by.

*Maybe this is what people call an epiphany?*

Jake wondered as he began swimming upwards. He didn't quite yet close his status menu, however. He had gotten a total of 30 free points from the combined 6 levels in his profession and race.

So far, he had just thrown most of it into perception and quite a bit into wisdom during his days in the challenge dungeon. He focused on the free points and willed up a chart showing the distribution.

## Status

### Free Point Distribution:

Strength: 57

Agility: 57

Endurance: 1

Vitality: 26

Toughness: 22

Wisdom: 100

Intelligence: 0

Perception: 362

Willpower: 0

Total Distributed: 625

Looking over the distribution, he actually thought it was an interesting telling of his journey. The one point in endurance in his early days to figure out how stats worked, his seemingly random points in vitality and toughness as he prepared to drink his 'cure' in the challenge dungeon.

The points in wisdom while he did alchemy, and the points in strength and agility just after he exited the dungeon as he severely lacked in those compared to his defensive stats back then.

Of course, his perception was the most significant outlier with an immense 362 points invested. It was perhaps a bit overdone, considering how little it helped him during normal combat. His sphere didn't really get much affected by it anymore, and his other bloodline-related abilities didn't improve as far as he could tell. But maybe that was where his thinking was off: As far as he could tell.

Perception likely helped in areas he didn't think about. Passive small things here and there. He didn't notice them, the same way he didn't usually see how stuff like his memory and ability to do calculations improved with his mental stats.

It just did, and he adapted to it nearly instantly, letting his altered state become his new normal. It was likely something natural for everyone with the system. Mulling over how one magically became stronger with every level was becoming quite commonplace after all.

That wasn't to say he didn't notice many of the benefits of perception. One of those was, of course, his reaction times. They were always strong and had only improved. His ability to predict and read his opponent improved.

What was starting to become an issue was his body's ability to react fast enough to what he wanted it to do. He didn't feel fast enough; he needed more speed. Agility would help every aspect of his fighting, both melee and ranged.

So he had decided to invest his free points into agility to increase his combat abilities. It was 30 points, and while he already had 539 agility, it would clearly be more beneficial to add 30 to that compared to his 1059 perception.

*The fact that I got trampled by an army of angry pigs because I wasn't fast enough didn't play any role in my decision whatsoever. Not at all, he rightfully denied.*

Putting in the points, he felt the warm flow of stats increasing as he began swimming just a little bit faster. He knew it took a bit for his body to adapt and make full use of the stats, but he still noticed it.

As he got further and further up, he noticed the amount of poison decrease. Not that it was an issue, as he could still feel it rising up from below. It would take a bit for all the Soilwater to be thoroughly contaminated.

Seeing the surface of the lake, he considered if it was safe to pop his head up. A thought swiftly followed by another.

*... Do I need to breathe?*

## Chapter 103: Pigs for slaughter

Jake had long gotten used to not really having to eat or drink anything. Whatever he chugged down here and there appeared to be enough to keep him going. He could barely remember the feeling of hunger or thirst anymore.

However, what he had kept doing was breathing. It just felt far too natural to do. All living beings he had seen did it. Yet, he had now been submerged underwater for nearly an entire day, and he hadn't even thought about having to breathe before mere moments ago.

Breathing still had to have some kind of benefit. Why else would anyone and everything do it? He doubted all the beasts had the same lingering instinct as he and other humans from before the system did.

*Well... not having to breathe is nice, I guess,* he thought as he decided to pop his head up above the surface of the lake.

As his head got above the water, he saw the sunlight hit the shimmering water of the lake, as he peeked towards the shores. He saw nothing.

It appeared the boars weren't having a drinking-session right now. Jake had kind of hoped for them to be there as the poison made its way to the upper echelons of the lake to observe its effect. He would have to wait a bit for that, though.

Jake decided to spend the time productively as he kept an eye on the entrance to the gorge. He had gotten many still lingering inspirations concerning the use of mana, and he decided to test out a bit of it now.

Earth mana had a weirdly solid feel to it, and it had inspired him to try if he could use it to enhance his own use of mana.

His first test was to place both his palms on the water's surface as he began channeling mana to them and tried to push them downwards. He felt himself getting lifted a little as his hands sunk into the water.

Despite the failure, he was elated as his theory had been proven immediately right. Placing his palms on the water once more, he continued as he tried lifting himself out of the water once more, using the water as support.

With zeal, he continued his practice for half an hour until he finally managed to stretch out his arms, lifting his entire upper body out of the water, with the only support being his hands on the water.

The next step was to extend the same concept to other parts of his body. It took him only another hour or so until he stood triumphant on top of the water. Finally, he had realized a long-held dream since childhood. Following in the footsteps of a certain orange-dressed ninja, he could now channel his energy to stand on water.

He tried taking a few steps back and forth and found great success. Even going into a light jog, he managed to keep himself from falling through. His next test was to take out his bow as he tried firing an arrow - great success once more as he pulled back the string.

Next, he tried the ultimate test. Taking an arrow this time, he began channeling Infused Powershot, and... he plopped straight down into the lake. He would have to work a bit more on that one.

An opportunity he didn't get quite yet as he heard the sound of trotters hitting the ground in the distance.

Stopping his antics, he pulled up his hood and activated the camouflage feature. He kept himself submerged with only the top of his head sticking out.

He had already established that the eyesight of the boars sucked. By blending in with the colors of the lake, he had a feeling that he could remain undetected, especially with the mana-rich water around him shrouding him further.

Being down in the water once more, he could also vividly feel the poison all around him. The entire lake had been well and truly contaminated as all the toxins had had time to rise to the surface. Now, for the most crucial part. Would the big piggies notice?

Watching them get closer, he remained unmoving as he crossed his fingers. Like the last time he saw them, they all spread out in a huge semi-circle as they surrounded the lake - something they had clearly done many times before.

Jake saw the first boar approach the water, the big boss Horde Leader. His heart pumped with a mix of anxiety and anticipation as he saw it lower its snout. It briefly froze before it began drinking, the snout moving up and down as it sniffed the water.

*Don't you fucking dare...* he thought as the damn thing hesitated. However, its neighbor boar didn't have the same caution as it just slumped its head into the water and began drinking.

The big boss looked over at its comrade and seemed to do what Jake interpreted as a shrug as it too began drinking.

None of the others hesitated either as they all began draining the lake. Jake reveled as he started feeling the poison enter them through his Sense of the Malefic Viper.

The beasts hadn't shown the slightest ability to sense mana so far, besides from earth mana. And even then, he wasn't sure if they could really 'feel' it or how exactly they manipulated it. All he knew was that the poison was currently entering their bodies, and they all seemed none the wiser.

Minutes passed as they all kept gulping down the Contaminated Soilwater. The Horde Leader appeared to be the sharpest of the bunch, but even it hadn't noticed anything yet, perhaps because it would take quite a bit more poison to affect it compared to the others.

Each of the boars had to have consumed tens if not hundreds of liters. It was honestly amazing how the lake didn't appear to shrink at all. Jake hadn't seen any signs of new water, so he wrote it off as dungeon-fuckery.

His stray thought was interrupted by one of the boars that had now stopped drinking. It backed away from the pool and... stumbled over and bumped into the boar beside it.

The one that got knocked only swayed a little, but it did raise its head and made an angry squeal at its companion. It, however, seemed to notice something was off as it had now stopped drinking too. It shook its head and took a few steps forward, falling into the lake.

This entire interaction caught the attention of all the other beasts, as they all abruptly stopped drinking. They all raised their heads and simultaneously noticed something was off.

They started all stumbling about as if drunk, hitting each other, with some of them falling into the lake.

Jake was a bit dumbfounded as he observed all this. The effects of the poison hadn't been what he expected... he had hoped for it to deal significant damage, maybe even slowly kill them. From what he could feel, they didn't appear to take any noticeable damage, however.

Instead, they were... blind?

A function of dark mana was to limit perception, and now it appeared these boars were infected by just that. Their already absolutely terrible perception hampered even more, directly to the point of absolute blindness.

Jake began swimming to the shore on the opposite side of where the boars had entered. There was a bit of an area now clear of beasts, one he quickly reached as he climbed up on shore. He did so carefully, as he kept watch of the pigs to see if they noticed him - something they clearly didn't.

Looking around, he saw the chaos he had caused. Several pigs were squealing and splashing around in the water, the others running around hitting each other in confusion, with the Horde Leader being unmoving, eyes closed.

He took out his bow and his quiver. He mentally smacked himself for not applying poison to his arrows, but then again, it would likely have been washed off down in the water.

Instead, he put a bit of his poisoned blood into the bottom of the quiver, making do with what he had and what he could apply most quickly. As he did so, he used Mark of the Ambitious Hunter on his first target.

Nocking the first arrow, he aimed at one of the boars smack in the middle of the mayhem. He channeled his Infused Powershot as he waited till he had a clear line of sight.

He released the arrow to the usual explosion of might. It didn't even take the arrow a few milliseconds to reach its target more than 150 meters away, easily breaking the sound barrier. Not that the expected sonic boom was heard. Another part of physics that was likely altered or broken by the system.

When the arrow met its target, it did exactly as Jake expected. It blew a substantial barrel-sized hole in the side of the boar, blasting it away. It smashed into several others, mainly on account of the different pieces of the beast flying all over the place.

Jake was prepared to dive into the lake after his shot, but the boars' response was... more chaos. Not a single one of them seemed to notice him at all but instead started panicking in a far more frenzied manner.

He could vaguely feel the amount of poison within each beast reducing by the second from where he stood. The problem for the creatures was that they had consumed too damn much of the water. Even if their body slowly cleansed it, Jake reckoned he would have hours before they were all back to normal.

All except for one boar that was currently curing itself far faster than the others. The Horde Leader. But even so, while it healed itself faster, it had also chucked down way more than any of the others. He had time.

Another arrow nocked, another Infused Powershot channeled, resulted in another dead boar. This repeated four more times before the boars finally seemed to catch on. Even with their reduced senses, the smell of blood had begun entering their snouts, making it clear that things were off.

Not that it helped them. In fact, it helped Jake more.

The earth rumbled as shards of stone began flying all around. Spikes of earth shot up, one of them even hitting the side of the Horde Leader, bringing it out of its state of concentration. It appeared to think it was under attack as it erected a dome of stone around it.

None of the other boars were smart enough to do that, though. They just attacked everything around them. And the only thing around them was their own allies.

Jake, at the same time, continued shooting. He had to make use of the time as efficiently as he could. Most boars died in a single shot through the heart or head, but some he had to shoot a few more times.

While the boars were durable, they were all currently in a weakened state. Their vital energies were entangled in a struggle against the poison in their bodies, weakening them all significantly. An unexpected blow from Jake's most powerful Infused Powershot proved fatal for them in that state.

The only boars he didn't bother with yet were the ones that had fallen into the lake. He counted fourteen in there right now, all struggling to get their bearings, some even being submerged. It didn't look like they knew how to swim very well. Jake was pretty sure normal non-earth bending boars knew how to swim.

If they had their bearings, they could likely just manipulate the earth to get them out. But delirious as they were, they could only act like a bunch of normal, non-swimmer boars tossed in a lake.

His quiver wasn't decreasing either despite the many arrows fired. He had long learned to conjure arrows while shooting through a small tether of mana attached to said quiver. It did drain mana, but his current limiter in combat endurance was, well... endurance, aka his stamina.

Luckily for him, his resources were pretty much topped off when he engaged in the fight. To be safe, he did consume a stamina potion the moment his stamina dipped a bit.

After firing his hundredth arrow, he had already killed more than 50 boars. He had felt the warm glow of levels more than a few times already. He didn't have time to distract himself, though, as he kept up his constant assault.

His arms and entire upper body were aching from the constant Infused Powershots, but at least his Windsoar Bow had yet to show any indications of being overloaded. If he had used his old bow, it would very likely already be broken by now due to the massive amounts of mana injected into it.

Soldiering through the pain, he managed to keep killing even if his speed dropped.

As he lifted his bow to fire the 205th Infused Powershot, his entire upper-arm started shaking as the skill fizzled out. His entire arm was in the state of both being numb and hurting at the same time. He tried to lift it, but while the mind was willing, the body found itself unable.

Looking out on the field, he saw only nine boars continuing to run around. Even now, they kept hitting the corpses of their fallen comrades and had all entered their enraged state. Something that actually appeared to help dispel the poison faster.

The dome hiding the Horde Leader still stood firm, and Jake could feel only remnants of the poison left in the big boss.

Any thoughts of somehow continuing his assault were stopped as he saw the dome begin cracking. Without hesitation, he jumped back into the churning lake.

The pigs that had fallen in earlier were still splashing about, though most of them had made it back to shore once more. Jake did all he could to avoid them as he dove downwards, using only his feet to propel himself as his arms rested.

He had glanced at his arm before he dove into the lake, and it didn't look good. It was covered in blood and was a mix of blue and red. To call what he had done overexertion would be the understatement of the century.

He had overexerted it and then kept going for another hundred shots. Even if only the first few were full-power shots, he had still used Infused Powershot after all.

Reaching the bottom of the lake once more, he made his way all the way over to the Crystallized Essence as it was found at the deepest point. The mana density around it was the strongest, making it the ideal place to recover.

He was betting on the Horde Leader not deciding to dive into the lake to investigate. More hoping, actually. If it did come, he was in for a tough and likely very awkward fight - a hunter with only his left hand versus a huge boar that couldn't swim.

Luckily it didn't come to that. Jake's Mark made him aware that the boar above he had placed it on had stopped moving. He felt movements in the water above, his intuition telling him that the boars were getting out of the water. Likely with the help of the Horde Leader.

Finally, he felt it leave and go into the gorge once more.

With a sigh of relief, Jake closed his eyes as he entered meditation. With the fighting done, he could finally take a look at the many notifications he had received due to the absolute slaughter that had happened above.

## Chapter 104: Limit Break

Submerging his consciousness in meditation, he didn't enter the heightened state of focus like he had done last time. There was virtually no change from any other time he had used the skill, despite the recent upgrade.

This was honestly a relief to Jake. In the back of his mind, he did briefly have a fear that his usual relaxing meditation would now always result in him suddenly being incredibly focused. And while focusing is good, it doesn't exactly help the mind relax. The whole 'losing time'-thing wasn't very attractive either.

Satisfied that his meditation hadn't accidentally been made worse, he began going over the long list of notifications. The system was nice as always with them, organizing them into different batches the moment the thought even occurred to him.

The first of which was of the many kills he had gotten. 124 in total, to be exact. Looking them over, it indeed was an impressive sight.

***\*You have slain [Steeltusk Boar - lvl 77] - Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 114000 TP earned\****

...

***\*You have slain [Steeltusk Boar - lvl 88] - Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 136000 TP earned\****

From most powerful to the weakest was 11 levels. A higher level difference between beasts than any of the other enemies he had encountered in dungeons. One had to consider that this one only had two types, though. One of them being the boss

It also explained why some had been harder to kill than others. 11 levels were nothing to be scoffed at.

Overall their levels were high. He found it quite insane to think that most of these Steeltusk Boars were higher than the Den Mother. Going by strength, the Badger Den's boss was still stronger by a lot compared to all of them, but the feeling of amazement remained.

Of course, the high levels of the enemies had also corresponded to earning a nice batch of levels, boosted further by Mark of the Ambitious Hunter.

***\*'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 66 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

...

***\*'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 71 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 61 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

...

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 63 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

*Feels like I am getting these windfalls more and more these days, he thought, thinking about how he only hours ago had also gotten a batch of levels in his profession.*

Six levels in his class just like that. Three in his race too, which meant a total of 39 free points. He was about to place them all into agility but decided against it at the very last moment.

He still had new class skills to consider, after all.

***\*Ambitious Hunter class skills available\****

Jake could feel his excitement as he opened the list of available skills. He was hoping for some really nice new things but was fast disappointed as he saw only two new entries - one of which was a common-rarity skill.

***[Waterwalking (Common)] - A much-coveted technique for all those who are less than stellar in the art of swimming. Cover your feet in a layer of mana, allowing you to walk and run on water. Mana usage is negligible.***

He didn't exactly know what he expected. Yeah, it was the ability to walk on water, something he himself had just discovered how to do.

Sure, the skill would likely allow him to far more easily maintain it, probably even be able to fight with it actively and use other skills. But he still felt like he could learn how to do all that without too much hassle. Heck, it had been hard to learn how to channel mana to conjure arrows while fighting, but he had figured that out.

Needless to say, he skipped the skill. He would rather pick something else he had been offered at an earlier level than that garbage.

As for the next skill... it was most certainly a lot more interesting.

***[Limit Break (Rare)] - Sometimes, one needs to go above and beyond. Break your limits, temporarily increasing the effect of all stats at the cost of increased stamina consumption. Increase by up to 10% for double stamina consumption. Increase by up to 20% for quadruple stamina consumption, with the hunter afterward entering a state of weakness based on Limit Break duration and magnitude. Increasing by more than 20% will lead to severe consequences.***

He had to read it over a few times, his smile only growing with every reread. It wasn't hard to determine that he had gotten this from his experimenting with increasing his stamina's internal flow - a method that had proven effective but highly flawed in nearly every aspect.

With a skill, however, it was different. It was controlled. Limit Break would allow him to do it 'right' and be boosted and corrected by the system itself. Were the effects of Limit Break something he could theoretically achieve himself? Possibly. But for once, he was more than happy to take the easy route.

It was just too good. 10% increase to the effect of all stats for only double stamina consumption was more than worth it. Jake could even go to 20% if he needed the extra boost. He believed that the feeling of weakness he had after his escape from the dungeon was the kind of weakness the skill talked about. Though hopefully to a far lesser degree if he didn't use the skill for long.

Another point of interest was the fact that it straight-up used percentages. It was extremely uncharacteristic of the system to throw out all the vagueness and just give Jake the numbers like that. The only other skill that used a number like that was Big Game Hunter, and even that was just to limit how far above his level the scaling would work.

It was a nice change of pace, and he hoped that more skills would do that in the future. A sentiment he very much doubted.

Doing a mental shrug, he reckoned not much more thought was required as he swiftly selected the skill.

He felt the knowledge enter his head, and he instantly knew how to use it. And use it he did. Activating the skill, he felt his internal energy speed up, and he felt his body become more powerful. He had only increased it by 10%, but it was truly noticeable.

It was like he had instantly gained a total of more than 450 stats, and the only cost was his stamina decreasing at a faster rate. He deactivated the skill and felt the energy cycle slow and return to normal as if nothing had ever happened.

There was no long time letting out excessive energy, no long windup or wind down for the skill. Both happened in moments, and it didn't leave Jake with a single ounce of weakness afterward. It honestly felt like a cheat of a skill.

Sadly he had to suspend his practice as his stamina was still far too low from the battle before. His arm and upper body were both starting to heal up, but he still couldn't really move around, so he reentered meditation.

Opening his eyes once more, he checked the time and noted that quite a few hours had passed. Checking the tutorial panel, he noted the time.

**[Tutorial Panel]**

**Duration: 4 days & 5:21:52**

*Only 4 days and a bit of change left... I hope I make it,* Jake thought, as he closed down the panel and instead opened his status page. At the same time, he also dumped all of his excess free points into endurance. Stamina had just gotten a whole lot more value.

**Status**

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (E) - lvl 63]

Class: [Ambitious Hunter - lvl 71]

Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper - lvl 55]

Health Points (HP): 5258/5800

Mana Points (MP): 5617/5650

Stamina: 4024/4620

### **Stats**

Strength: 429

Agility: 611

Endurance: 462

Vitality: 580

Toughness: 417

Wisdom: 565

Intelligence: 282

Perception: 1107

Willpower: 354

Free points: 0

**Titles:**

[Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch],[Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer IV], [Dungeon Pioneer IV], [Legendary Prodigy]

**Class Skills:** [Basic One-Handed Weapons (Inferior)], [Advanced Stealth (Common)], [Advanced Archery (Common)], [Hunter's Sight (Uncommon)], [Basic Twin Fang Style (Uncommon)], [Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra (Uncommon)], [Splitting Arrow (Uncommon)] [Big Game Hunter (Rare)], [Infused Powershot (Rare)], [Mark of the Ambitious Hunter (Rare)], [Descending Dark Fang (Rare)], [Limit Break (Rare)], [Moment of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)]

**Profession Skills:** [Herbology (Common)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Concoct Poison (Common)], [Alchemist's Purification (Common)], [Alchemical Flame (Common)], [Toxicology (Uncommon)], [Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Rare)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Rare)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Rare)], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Epic)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Epic)], [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)]

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

**Race Skills:**[Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races (Unique)], [Identify (Common)], [Thoughtful Meditation (Uncommon)], [Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)]

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

Looking it over, he thought of all the unexpected gains he had gotten during this dungeon dive - levels in his profession and two skill upgrades, as well as a big load of levels in his class.

His stats hadn't grown that much since last he checked, but with a few free points invested, his agility had gotten above 600. As an archer, he found it fitting for it to be his second-highest stat. Vitality and wisdom both were very closely behind, though.

Closing his status, he checked himself over and moved his right arm a bit. It was still a bit numb, but it appeared to function quite well. A health potion should be enough to fix it right up. Feeling done going over things, he swam upwards once more.

His last Mark of the Ambitious Hunter had run out less than an hour ago, and the boar inflicted with it had still been in the other area.

Jake had thought about precisely the range limit, the maximum duration, and how both of them were far higher than he had anticipated. The mark did run out faster on stronger foes, but even on the powerful boar, it had lasted more than six hours.

Considering that it was so far above his level, he found that quite respectable.

Reaching the surface once more, he now, for the first time, truly saw the carnage he had caused. Corpses strewn all over, blood pooling in every little crevice of rocks, and he even noticed a lot of the water around the shore of the lake carried a tinge of red.

The palette of the valley had changed to a far more colorful one for sure. Their comrades had left more than a hundred corpses behind, and it was a gruesome sight.

Many of the corpses were mutilated beyond recognition. Much of the mutilation hadn't been done by Jake, but by the rampaging boars flinging earth spells all over the place. Not to say that the hunter wasn't also responsible for a lot of the damage. The missing heads were nearly all him.

Jake had learned long ago that a corpse wasn't as resilient as the living thing. If he had to guess, he would say it was because it lost the effect of the inner energy running through its body and any passive skills, making it stronger.

Whatever the case, it meant that the damage done by the other boars to their now-dead comrades was far more severe.

A weird thought entered his head as he glanced over the scene. Why didn't he care? Why didn't the sight result in even the slightest feeling of disgust or apprehension?

Only two months ago, he had been an office worker, and the most blood he had ever seen outside of television and the internet was when his brother got a really bad nosebleed that one time. However, now he could stare out into a valley filled with mutilated corpses and not bat an eye.

The thing is, though, the sight had never bothered him. Even from his first kill, he didn't think much of it.

Jake shook the thought out of his head. It was good that he was desensitized to such things as it would only be a hindrance. He had better things to do and was on a timer. He just knew it was important to be aware of it. Being desensitized to killing mindless beasts was good, but he didn't want to be someone who could kill humans thoughtlessly.

After a brief glance at the countdown till the end of the tutorial to remind himself of his limited time, he decided that he had time for one last round of alchemy. His stamina was still a bit low anyway, and he did need to do a bit of alchemy anyway.

One reason was that for every stat increase, his potions got better. Every time his skills used in the crafting process improved, his potions got better. And it had been far too long since he last made a batch.

His issue now was also that he had already consumed all the good stamina and health potions he had left. The ones remaining were some he had crafted a long time ago, and the best of them only restored around 500 health or stamina. The stamina ones being the worst, as he was far better at making health potions.

On the mana potions front, he was still good. Mainly because he hadn't used as many of them, Mana had never really been what limited him while fighting, and with his new Limit Break, he doubted it would become an issue compared to stamina.

And as he was only able to drink one potion an hour, be it stamina, health, or mana, he would have to drink whatever was most needed, which tended to be health potions during fights and stamina to quickly get back in shape after finishing one.

Sitting down, he took out his mixing bowl, as well as the ingredients. He was happy that his necklace allowed the ingredients to remain fresh, as he hadn't exactly been as industrious as he should when collecting the herbs he came across.

He would begin with a batch of health potions as he added the water and started the brewing. It had been a while since he last crafted, and it didn't take more than a few moments for him to notice how much easier it was than usual.

The flow of mana was as smooth as it could be, and he felt his control reach a new apex. He transformed the mana into vital energy according to the formula and felt the benefits of making dark-affinity mana show themselves in that process, much like how it had helped him the other way around in the sewer dungeon.

It was a welcome reprieve to return to doing some alchemy. However, from an observer's viewpoint, the sight of a single individual sitting serenely in a valley of corpses would come off as less than idyllic.

40 minutes later, he finished his first batch of health potions. Filling 8 bottles, he began cleaning his bowl to prepare his stamina potions.

This would be his last round of crafting before facing down the rest of the tutorial. Needless to say, only the best would be good enough.

He had a vague feeling that he would need it.

## Chapter 105: Falling rocks

Packing up, Jake looked over his potions one last time. A few dozen health potions, twenty-two stamina potions, and a good nine bottles of Necrotic Poison. Every single one of the potions and poison the most potent iterations he had ever made.

If he had more time, he would have attempted common-rarity health potions, but that was a big *if*. He didn't have time. He had four days left to clear the rest of this dungeon, and very likely one more dungeon, the one with the King of the Forest in it. In other words, he was really in a rush.

He had likely actually saved time by his little trick with the Crystalized Essence. A welcome surprise for sure, but he would take anything he could get. With his new Limit Break, he had confidence in being able to do it in time. But not if he dallied around.

His arm and supply of stamina potions were both in peak condition also. It had taken him a few hours to do this alchemy, and he had drunk some potions in between to get back in top shape. In other words, he was back in business.

At first, he had thought himself smart and tried using Limit Break while doing alchemy to get that sweet 10% boost to all stats. But... after only a minute began to feel restless like his body was begging for him to move.

After only a few more minutes, he began to feel spasms coming on, and he had to get up and actually move about. In the end, Limit Break was based on speeding up the flow of stamina... and when he did that, he needed some kind of outlet. Sure, he could maybe just

pour a shitload more mana into the concoction or brew, but that would be kind of pointless as it would ruin the crafting process.

In conclusion... Limit Break didn't do anything for him when it came to alchemy.

Rushing forward, he started sprinting towards the gorge. He didn't fear the beasts charging the other way, as he was pretty sure he could now outrun them.

It didn't take him that long to run through it, and he found himself in the pillar-filled valley once more. Neither did it take him long to see his first prey.

The boars had once again proven their utter stupidity. Instead of staying together, they were all spread out in the valley. As if they had already forgotten the slaughter that happened only a few hours ago, they were just happily munching away at stone or even lying on the side relaxing.

Only the Horde Leader appeared a bit more aware, as it had erected walls of earth around itself. Jake called it more aware, but in reality, all it really did was block off its own sight of any of its mates while selfishly protecting itself.

Counting his targets, he saw only a total of 14 boars and the Horde Leader. His plan was pretty simple. Pick off the spread out boars one by one, and then finally take down the boss. Easy and simple.

In fact, it actually was simple. The scattered boars made it easy for Jake to take them out without attracting the others. At most, he would have to fight two at a time, which realistically would only be one considering the first would die or be incapacitated by his opening Infused Powershot.

The first boar went down unceremoniously as Jake attacked, and he even used his newly acquired skill.

Limit Breaking to 10%, he felt his stats increase, and his internal energy speed increased likewise. Not that it ultimately would have mattered as the oblivious boar had its head obliterated by an arrow.

The resulting explosion did grab the attention of three other beasts, who all ran towards their dead friend. Little did it matter as Jake had already taken off away from them, making his way towards another boar far away from the first.

Being far enough away, they didn't detect his light footsteps on the ground. To be extra safe, he had even coated his feet in a layer of mana like when he was walking on water. He didn't know if it helped or not, but he didn't see any loss in doing so.

Activating and deactivating his Limit Break was unbelievably easy. It took only a moment, and like a light switch, he could turn it on and off. It did take a bit of time to fully activate as the flow increased, but it was in the milliseconds.

He reckoned it was only for the 10% increase, but that in itself would be more than enough.

This continued as he dashed back and forth, picking off the beasts spread out as they were. He got to a boar, killed it swiftly, and then rushed to the other end of the valley where a new unsuspecting victim awaited.

The three gathered around the first boar he killed had even spread out once more after only a few minutes. Jake couldn't help but find their intelligence, or lack thereof, laughable.

Other beasts he had encountered in the dungeons tended to be smarter. Well, maybe the badgers were still pretty damn stupid in general, but the Alphas and the Den Mother had at least a semblance of intelligence and logic.

The smartest enemies he had encountered had to be the stags. While the two ratmen he had met had been rather smart, the Nest Watcher even capable of speech and using a weapon like a human, he still would place the Great White Stag above them.

It had deployed far more meticulously thought-out methods in its dungeon. It had baited Jake in with its attacks, used complicated magic, and made the entire damn dungeon into a huge ritualistic circle. And while Jake had broken the ritual, he didn't believe for a second it had been because he had outsmarted the stag.

Even the normal stags had been clever. They used tactics with the deer surrounding them, healing them from behind as they engaged in melee. It had made them by far the most annoying type of enemy to deal with.

These boars were at the entire other end of the spectrum. They were just straight-up dumb. Jake could attack them, and only a few minutes later, they would just go back to their daily business, having totally not made the connection between their headless friend and possible danger.

It was such an easily exploitable weakness; one Jake gladly took advantage of.

After only an hour, the final boar outside of the boss lay dead on the ground. Jake had gotten another level after the 6th beast, putting him at level 72. The four free points straight into endurance.

Sitting down once more, he entered meditation to get up to tip-top shape once more. Before doing so, he consumed a stamina potion to save time. He hadn't lost a single point of health during any of the 'fights'.

Three hours later, his eyes opened once more.

All three resources full, his bow ready, and his anticipation high. He felt the Horde Leader still hiding within its shell of stone. Jake didn't know how long it planned on staying within, and he had no intention of waiting to find out.

He looked around for a bit until he got an excellent idea. Running towards one of the pillars of stacked stones relatively close to the dome, he climbed it in a fluid motion. Getting to the top, he began weaving his threads of mana.

Making a web, he began spinning it around the topmost stones. Several times he made sure he wove the strings into a solid rope. Hundreds of rows later, and he was holding onto quite the solid one.

Jumping down from the pillar once more, he found himself standing at the bottom of it. Reaching into his spatial storage, he pulled out an item he hadn't looked at for a long time. The Greatsword of Nature that he had taken from the Aspiring Blade of Nature he had killed.

He knew he couldn't bind the blade to him due to incompatibility, but that didn't mean he couldn't make use of it. It was the closest thing he had to a pickaxe.

In an act that would undoubtedly have made the blade's former owner curse him, Jake began hacking away at the pillar. The stones were tough, far tougher than regular stone, but he could still get through it.

It was terrific in a kind of sad way how the boar still hadn't reacted to anything he was doing. The dome it was hiding within was only a mere 70 meters or so away from him, and it had to feel what he was doing. Yet it remained idle, allowing him to do as he pleased.

A good chopping later, and a lot of the bottom of the pillar was cleaved away. He had made a quite lovely alcove into the huge pillar if he said so himself. Moreover, he could feel the entire pillar being a bit... wobbly.

Smiling, he ran to the other side of the dome, directly away from the pillar, rope in tow. It didn't take a genius to figure out what he was planning on doing.

The pillar's top was still bound up tightly by his rope of mana, and the foundation of the pillar weakened. The entire pillar looked just about to fall over.

*It would indeed be a shame if someone were to say, I don't know, 'accidentally' collapse it on top of the big piggie,* he thought, his smile as big as the piggy he was about to turn into pork.

The plan was ready, and so was he. Nearly. He climbed up another pillar directly opposite of the one he had bound up and primed for collapse. It was never bad to have the high ground.

With the rope in hand, he looked down at the dome. Pulling on his rope of mana, the wobbly pillar already started ever so slowly tipping over.

Throwing the rope to the side, he took out his bow as he began channeling his Infused Powershot. Limit Breaking to 20% instantly, he felt his entire body filling up with energy as the air around him reverberated with power, and the stone beneath his feet cracking. His sight and arrow directly aimed at the dome below.

In what could only be described as catastrophic, the more than a hundred-meter tall pillar fell over. Thousands of tons fell upon the dome of stone that protected the Horde Leader - a dome that cracked like an eggshell when the pillar crashed into it.

**\*SQUEAL\***

Jake heard the scream from the beast, and at the same time, with Hunter's Sight activated, he found his opening. An opening between the cracked stone, allowing his arrow to pierce through unobstructed.

Letting go of the bowstring, the topmost stone of the pillar he stood on exploded into dust as the explosions of might was directed down into it. As for the arrow, it flew straight through that tiny opening just as he intended.

A second explosion sounded out below as the arrow hit the Horde Leader. Not even a second had passed since the pillar collapsed upon it. The damage was disastrous for the boar.

But a boss does not fall so easily. Jake felt it through the stones below him before he saw it. The shaking.

The entire valley quaked as the Horde Leader made its move. The pillar he was standing on began toppling over, and it was far from the only one. The earthquake extended through the entire valley as nearly every single pillar began cracking and falling over.

Yet the Horde Leader was far from done.

All the rocks that covered its body were pushed away as it turned to dust. And finally, Jake could see the boss itself clearly.

Its entire back was covered in wounds, and from how it didn't put any weight on one of its legs, he guessed it was broken. The impact from the pillar had clearly not been kind to it.

More damaging was the massive hole in its stomach. It looked like a cannonball had smashed into it - a crater formed upon its body from the impact. Jake recognized a wound like that easily. Even with his more durable arrows from upgrading it to uncommon-rarity, it was clear that they were still far from infallible.

The arrow had disintegrated upon impact on its robust hide. Just like Jake's common-rarity arrows had. A testament to how powerful the boar's innate defense was and how powerful the arrow from his fully charged, full power Infused Powershot was.

Despite the lethal-looking wound, the beast looked far from downed. Its eyes red, and the single tusk that extended from its mouth was now glowing with energy.

Jake had to jump off the falling pillar, letting gravity do its work as it brought him to the ground. He scrambled to jump to somewhere without collapsing pillars as he attempted not to get smashed to pieces.

He wasn't particularly confident coming out unscathed if he were to be squashed beneath a hundred-ton boulder, even with enhanced stats.

Yet even while falling, he had time to release another two arrows. The boar's limited perception once again hurt it, as both arrows penetrated straight into the wound left by

the Infused Powershot. The damage from the arrows alone was pretty low, but the same could not be said by what they were coated in.

The most potent Necrotic Poison that he had crafted that very day burned into its flesh, corroding it. The first arrow hadn't had time to properly inflict the poison as it broke apart, but these two arrows embedded themselves in its flesh, spreading it quickly.

Landing on the ground, Jake felt it instantly. Two red eyes were turning his way, locking onto him and burning with rage.

Mana swirled around the beast as Jake felt it make its move. Falling rocks all around the boar stopped in midair. Tens of boulders were suspended for a few moments before they once again began descending - this time directly towards Jake.

Like a meteor shower, they barreled towards him. Cursing, Jake was forced to leap backward as he tried to avoid the attack. Stone after stone impacting the ground where he had been only moments ago, creating craters and sending even more rocks flying through the air.

Taking shelter behind a huge boulder, he thought himself safe, as he felt the earth beneath him churn, as his danger sense warned him of the impending attack.

Shadow Vaulting to the side instantly, countless spikes of earth shot up where he had just stood. Landing on the ground after his vault, he was forced to repeat the same action as more spikes emerged.

Knowing that the boar used vibrating to locate him, he decided to go for a bit of distraction. Strands of mana flew out of him, picking up rocks within his sphere. He could easily lift his own bodyweight with mana alone, something he was putting to full use.

Lifting the rocks off the ground with his mana, he simply tossed them upwards. Not by much, but it was enough.

When the first rock hit the ground, it was swiftly impaled by spears of earth. The same for the second one and the third. The fourth was, however, spared as the boar seemed to pick up on the trickery. Or maybe it just couldn't keep up.

Jake kept using that tactic as he got into a position that would allow him to counterattack. He couldn't see the boar due to the endless amounts of dust being kicked up, but his mark made him fully aware of the still unmoving beast.

Throwing a few more rocks, he landed and stood unmoving as he began channeling another Infused Powershot. As the mana built up, the ground beneath him quaked from the power he was building up - a miscalculation on Jake's part.

He felt his danger sense warn him as he was forced to release the arrow. However, it was too late as several earth spears struck him on his lower body.

Blood was drawn as they managed to penetrate his pants. The ones that hit his feet didn't manage to even leave a mark on the boots, but that didn't mean they failed to do damage as the impact alone hurt like hell.

The arrow he had fired flew true, striking the boar, creating yet another significantly smaller wound. His aim had been slightly altered, landing just above one of its legs, making it buckle down from the arrow now sticking out of it.

Jake was also down on one knee as he lifted his gaze up from his injured legs. With a snort from the boars' snout, the air separating them cleared as a gust of wind came out.

For the first time, the two made eye-contact, neither showing the slightest inclination of surrender.

## Chapter 106: Horde Leader

Jake looked directly into the eyes of the Horde Leader. They both paused for a moment as they considered each other. On one side, a small human down on one knee with a bow in his hand, and on the other, a boar the size of a huge truck.

Yet the boar was the one to avert its gaze first. Jake felt the weakness in its eyes. Exhaustion in its look. He quickly noticed that its wounds weren't healing as he would have expected them to begin to. The poison in its body was also barely being suppressed. It was clearly far more injured than he first thought.

The reason quickly struck him - the contaminated Soilwater. While the Horde Leader had purged it all from its system, it had clearly been done at a cost.

Outwardly it didn't appear to have any injuries, but its vital energies were severely diminished. It also explained why all the other boars had gone down so quickly and why it had tried to keep itself hidden in its dome. It was still recuperating all its lost health points when Jake attacked. A process Jake knew to be slow without the use of potions or other means to speed it up.

But the boar didn't have any potions. It could only rely on its own body to heal. And now, in the middle of its recovery, it had a damn pillar of rocks collapse on it, and several arrows were delivering devastating blows and even more powerful poison.

Despite it all, however, it didn't want to back down. It had averted its gaze, recognizing its inferior position. But down for the count? Far from it.

Mana churned once more as a vortex of stone and soil surrounded the beast.

Jake knew it was preparing for something, but he was more than happy to take the slight reprieve offered and downed a health potion. The second the liquid entered him, he felt the warm energy spread throughout his body, and his injured lower body swiftly heal.

While the amount of health restored by the potion wasn't much, he had to drink it. His movement would be hindered with his legs and feet injured, and standing still didn't strike him as the smartest of tactics. Especially not when he saw what the boar was doing.

The vortex it had conjured was to gather one giant boulder above it. As if a black hole had appeared, more and more stones were sucked into it, adding to the massive mass. The earth compressed to a ridiculous degree.

What the sphere of highly condensed rock was to be used for Jake didn't know, and he had no interest in finding out.

He once more resumed his assault of arrows as he fired upon the boss. For the first time in the fight, he used Splitting Arrow as he didn't need accuracy, but just pure damage.

And damage it did. The boar seemed completely unfazed as it only lowered its head and let the arrows hit it. Those hitting its skull simply left a small red mark as they fell to the side, while those hitting softer areas managed to penetrate a few centimeters only.

But a few centimeters was all he needed for the poison to be administered.

After firing his sixth shot, the vortex's sphere stopped as the boar's preparation appeared to be complete. A huge, completely round orb hung above them. A ball of highly condensed earth nearly 30 meters in diameter hung there, like a small meteor waiting to descend.

Jake peeked at it as he fired another arrow. What was the damn thing planning? To throw a super-boulder at him or what? Its action appeared utterly nonsensical. The boars were stupid for sure, but the Horde Leader had shown at least a modicum of intelligence. There had to be more to it. Even with the sphere's huge size, he could easily evade it with a good Shadow Vault.

Another arrow fired later he got his answer. The entire sphere seemed to be crunched together with little warning as it shrunk to a mere 5 meters across. The whole ball turned

crystalline, and then the attack came. A small shard fired out from the sphere, heading straight for Jake. Its speed faster than any attack he had ever faced before.

He managed to barely lean to the side as he saw the shard penetrate the earth in his Sphere of Perception. And penetrate it did. It went nearly 8 meters down into the earth before it was stopped. Meaning that if the shard hit him, it would pierce straight through his flesh and bones.

That one shard was only the beginning. Soon it fired another, and then another. Each one was no larger than a finger. Each one was avoidable as long as Jake was careful. That is, in the beginning.

He dodged to the side as the fifth shard came, tried to take out his bow, but was interrupted as the next came faster than the last. A pattern that only got more intense.

The sphere hanging above was not a meteor. It was a goddamn machinegun. And not the slower, perhaps manageable ones. It was a freaking minigun.

Sprinting, he was fired upon by the barrage of shards from a sphere that didn't appear to shrink in the least from the constant attacks. He dodged and weaved and tried to hide behind the terrain, but everything was just riddled apart in moments.

*This can't continue*, he thought, as he barely managed to avoid getting his head blown off, leaving a long gash on his chin. Without his Sphere of Perception and danger sense, he would already be dead.

If it went to all hell, he still had his Moment of the Primal Hunter to rely on. But he wanted to avoid using it if at all possible. It was his emergency skill, his last resort.

Limit Break had been active at a 20% boost for the entire fight. A fight that had in actuality only lasted less than two minutes from his first attack to now. He wasn't feeling any of the strain yet, but that didn't mean he wanted to make the fight longer than necessary.

He brainstormed internally as he failed to dodge a single shard that managed to hit him in the arm. It pierced straight through his forearm, cutting through the bone like it was nothing. The pain was immense, but all it did was to make him focus more.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Horde Leader with the sphere floating above it. And an idea in his mind appeared. He needed to take cover behind something. Or maybe... beneath something.

Swiftly changing direction, he charged towards the huge boar. He was in the direct line of fire from the shards, but he had expected it.

Using Shadow Vault, he phased straight through the barrage. His health, mana, and stamina all draining for every shard that pierced through his shadowy form, but it was well worth it.

He became tangible right on the side of the boar. He didn't hesitate a moment to take out his Venomfang as he plunged it into the side of the beast, more accurately, into the already existing wound he had made with his second Infused Powershot earlier.

With him so close to the boar, it could not continue its attack without accidentally hitting itself. A fact that clearly enraged the beast.

Two of its legs were severely damaged, making it hard for the Horde Leader to move appropriately. That didn't mean it was incapable of moving, however.

Twisting around, Jake saw the single shining tusk heading towards him. His danger sense screamed at him as he ducked down just as it swiped above him - a decision that proved to be very wise.

Out of the tusk came a wave of yellowish energy that cut through the air and impacted the valley's side off in the distance, creating a vast scar on the mountainside. It was a strike that would have, without a doubt, bisected the small human.

The considerable motion of the boar didn't bode well for its already weakened legs, however. It tripped as it tried to support itself, it falling down unto its stomach.

With the opening, Jake stabbed the boar in the side several times, every hit delivering the natural toxins from his Venomfang, thus further damaging the boss's already weak vital energy. He hadn't hesitated to pour some of his own blood from his damaged forearm on the beast either.

It tried to struggle once more and even managed to shoot out a few shards from the sphere above, but all of them missed. It was clearly on its last legs, as it tried time and

time again to land a blow. It manipulated the earth to try and pin him down, a futile effort he easily avoided.

The sphere above still hung like a dark omen preparing to riddle his frail human body if he ever moved out of melee range.

And that sphere would be the death of at least one of them.

By now, the boar had realized that it had lost. Even if it miraculously managed to kill Jake, it would still succumb to its wounds and poison. It was dead either way. And in a last act of defiance, it decided that if it had to die, it wouldn't die alone.

With a final sad squeal, the sphere above started shining with energy before it exploded.

Jake felt it happen even before it did. And he was prepared. Instead of running, he used Badger Jump to jump to the side as the explosion came, his purpose being to be hit by as few shards as possible.

Once more, he used Shadow Vault as he was hit, and he felt his resources all being drained at a dangerous rate. But luckily, the attack came all at once, as the explosion was far from targeted towards anything. It expunged the shards in all directions, even straight up into the air.

And, of course, straight down as the shards pierced into the body of their own caster. In the end, the Horde Leader fell to its own attack.

*\*You have slain [Horde Leader - lvl 99] - Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 158000 TP earned\**

*\*'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 73 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\**

*\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 64 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\**

*\*'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 74 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\**

Jake barely noticed the notifications as he became tangible and collapsed on the ground. That final attack had been scary as hell. He had lost nearly 2000 health and as much mana and stamina just from the drain associated with phasing through the shards.

Not that it mattered much anymore. The now hole-riddled terrain around Jake and the enormous bloody corpse in front was all that mattered. He had won.

Looking at the next dungeon panel, however, he was first a bit surprised.

***Objective: Defeat the Horde Leader (Completed)***

***Bonus reward for clearing the dungeon solo.***

***Dungeon shutting down in: 07:59:41***

Eight entire hours were given before the shutdown. Jake was used to one hour in these dungeons, but now it had suddenly given him eight. Why it was so... he had no idea.

What he did know was that he needed to get his damn loot.

Winding down from his Limit Break, a strong sense of weakness overtook his body in only a few moments.

It was far from as bad as it had been outside the dungeon when he manually expelled the excess stamina. Back then, he couldn't even move. Now, however, he just felt like his stats had been reduced instead. If he had to make an estimation, he would say he was down to about 60% of his usual strength.

Walking towards the dead Horde Leader was his first course of action, as he observed its battered corpse.

The first thing he had taken notice of was the tusk of the boar. It was still shining with energy even now. Approaching the corpse, he tried identifying it but came up with

nothing. However, when he touched it, it rapidly shrunk into a small tusk that fit in his hands, no longer than a meter. And this one he could identify.

***[Tusk of the Horde Leader (Epic)] - The one remaining tusk of the once-mighty Horde Leader. Having lost one of its tusks against the King of the Forest, it was banished to the dungeon with its horde. It poured all of its might and potential into its remaining tusk, leaving powerful magic upon it. With the power and pure hatred of the Horde Leader infused within, it has been crafted with one purpose. To strike down the King of the Forest.***

Like with the Bead of the Nest Watcher, this Horde Leader had also prepared a tool to strike back at the King of the Forest.

It was quite apparent that the King wasn't the most popular character. Jake also highly suspected that whatever fuckery the Great White Stag was up to, it likely had something to do with counterattacking against the oppressor that had put it there.

Of course, Jake had ruined that and even ruined the item it was making, he was pretty sure. Not that he couldn't still use the now corrupted Mooncore Shard if necessary. It was quite the volatile item, and he could only imagine the destruction it could deploy if he messed up the thing's internal balance.

Putting the tusk into his inventory, he looked at the corpse of the beast a bit more to see if it had any other items of note. Finding nothing with both his sphere and eyes, he decided to just head towards the exit where he expected the rest of the rewards to be.

But before doing so, he needed to get back in top condition, which meant a quick round of meditation while popping potions every hour.

It took him only a bit over three hours to have both his health, stamina, and mana all filled up. The sense of weakness from Limit Break had also gone away only half an hour or so into meditation, showing that the backlash of the 20% wasn't actually that bad. Going above the 20%, though... yeah, that would likely not go over as smoothly.

Being back in business, he began his sprint towards the exit of the dungeon. He still had more than four hours to go but saw no reason to waste more time than necessary. He had potions, his gear was fully repaired from the nearly universal Self-Repair enchant, and his body was ready.

Soon he found himself at the entrance to the dungeon. And on the small platform were two, very, VERY welcome things: two lockboxes, one small and one big. Giddy as always, he made his way towards the sweet loot.

He hoped for something good, as this would likely be his last upgrade to his equipment before the final battle. Also, he kind of just liked nice new things.

## **Chapter 107: Next target: King of the Forest**

Everyone likes loot. It is the reason why people bother to defeat the same bosses and maps over and over again in videogames, just for the slight chance of getting an item with insignificantly bigger numbers on it to flex on your friends.

Jake, of course, was no different. With the items now no longer merely being pixels on a screen but tangible tools allowing him to become stronger, it turned that entire sentiment up to eleven.

But it also made the disappointment worse when he got something he didn't want . And the first item, a shield, was one such disappointment.

***[Bulwark of the Horde Leader (Rare)] - A shield made from the rock infused with the Records of the Horde Leader. The Horde Leader's Bulwark is highly resistant to all physical attacks while only offering medium resistance to magical ones. Allows the user to channel mana into the shield, increasing its size and resistance accordingly. Enchantments: Self-Repair.***

***Requirements: lvl 60+ in any humanoid race.***

Yeah, sure, he didn't have a decent shield, but he didn't plan on using a shield either. Any attack he would be forced to block would likely be better blocked by his Scales of the Malefic Viper anyway. Not that he planned on tanking many hits. He preferred not to get hit at all.

Trying it out, he injected mana into it and felt it bind to him. He already kind of knew he had some kind of earth-affinity as the Soilwater didn't hurt him, but it was good to have it reaffirmed. After trying out the shield's ability a bit by making it grow in size and shrink it back down, he got a bit bored.

He put the shield in his inventory as he turned to the second, smaller lockbox. The small box was no larger than his hand, making Jake predict jewelry of some kind. What he found instead, however, was a small bottle with red liquid within.

It looked a bit like a health potion, actually, but his Sense of the Malefic Viper informed him that it was so much more. His Identify further confirmed it.

***[Stonescale Heart Elixir (Epic)] - An elixir created from the heart of a Stonescale Quillbeast, along with a myriad of other rare ingredients. Allows any who drink this elixir to receive some of the innate power of the Stonescale Quillbeast. Consuming this elixir will permanently strengthen the hunter's toughness and vitality: +25 Toughness, +20 Vitality upon consumption.***

***Requirements: E-rank or higher.***

He had to do a double-take as he read it over once more. *Jackpot*, he thought, as he picked up the small bottle to get a closer look. He had only ever come across one other item that permanently granted stats, and that was the Argentum Vitae Mushrooms in the Challenge Dungeon. The main ingredient he had used to pass said dungeon.

And now he had found another such item. But this time, it was not ingredients but a completed elixir.

Jake had read up on elixirs already. Elixirs are consumables that alchemists can make, that permanently increase the stats of the drinker. It was noted as very difficult to make, often requiring rare, expensive, and hard to find ingredients.

On top of that, one had to at a minimum be D-rank to make them. Something he could learn to make after his next evolution if he met all requirements to do so. But all of that was for later. For now, it was drinking time!

Opening the bottle, he got a quick whiff of it before he downed it. The taste was quite interesting. Weirdly sweet for something made from the heart of a beast.

A few seconds after he drank it, he felt the warm flow exit his stomach and enter the rest of his body.

***You have assimilated intense energy of toughness and vitality.***

***+25 Toughness***

***+20 Vitality***

Slowly the feeling subsided as the system message appeared. He didn't feel much different from before, but his stats had indeed increased upon checking the status menu. Vitality and toughness were two stats that were hard to really 'feel', compared to perception or strength.

Evaluating the dungeon he had just cleared, he found it may be the best one so far. While he had only gotten the tusk and the elixir as useful loot, the elixir was terrific. An elixir

was even better than gear as it even worked with his percentage amplifiers on stats. *Gotta ask Villy about the cap for increasing stats from elixirs. There has to be one.*

The largest gain from the dungeon was the many levels, of course, gaining four in his profession and nine in his class. Quite a bit for how fast he had managed to get through it. He wasn't going to complain about his Touch of the Malefic Viper and Meditation skill upgrading either.

He had nothing more to do now than hunt down the final boss. A task he had around three and a half days to do.

**[Tutorial Panel]**

**Duration: 3 days & 14:51:02**

Checking his other system messages, he saw his two dungeons titles had upgrades once more, granting him the expected increase of +4 all stats combined. Both were at rank five now, giving him a nice +15 and +5 all stats, respectively.

The last one was an update to the tutorial quest.

**Tutorial Quest: The Beast Lords**

The forest murmurs with rumors of a King ruling the forest from the shadows. The four Beast Lords each guard their dungeon as their King commanded, waiting for a suitable challenger to appear. With the death of his lords, the King is sure to be forced into the light. But be warned, the Lords will not meet their end that easily.

Two lords have now fallen. The King has taken notice but has yet to make a move. Continue with the quest, and you shall inevitably meet.

With the Nest Watcher's death, your presence is now beginning to become truly worthy of notice. The King of the Forest will not sit idle as you attempt to dismantle the careful balance his domain has attained. With only a single Beast Lord left standing, your quest is soon complete, and the King shall come.

The Horde Leader has fallen, and his horde disposed of. All the Beast Lords now lay slain before you, with only one last challenge remaining. The King awaits.

**Objective: Defeat the Beast Lords.**

**Current progress: 4/4**

**Quest Completed!**

Reading the final entry, he smiled, satisfied with his accomplishments. He had managed to singlehandedly clear the four dungeons containing all the Beast Lords and defeated all of them. A thought of how he didn't get any rewards did cross his mind, but then again, he

had obtained plenty of things from the dungeons themselves. He felt ready to face down the final challenge.

Walking to the dungeon exit, he placed his hand on it as he exited the dungeon. His vision temporarily turned black. And then he felt it. Before his vision even returned and his body was entirely transported, he felt it. An aura more potent than any he had ever felt before.

His vision returned, and he saw the source of the aura. On the barren ground inside the hollow mountain stood a figure unlike any he had seen before.

Standing nearly three meters tall, the creature resembled more a tree than a person - two thin arms that looked like branches and legs that ended in ivory claws. The hands, too, were more beastly, as they were made of the same ivory material as well. Bone.

The chest was as graceful as the rest of the creature, with a thick cover of bark-like material covering it. Its face was... nothing. Like a wooden mask with only eyes showing, it had no expression of any kind - merely a flat surface of wood with two holes in it.

On top of the head was no hair but a web of entangled thorns, in a shape that very much resembled a crown. He didn't need his Identify to know what it was.

**[King of the Forest - lvl ???]**

Jake looked at the King, unsure of what to do until a voice broke the silence.

*“As such, the hunter comes before me. His hunt complete, his valor earned.”*

The voice echoed in his mind and not his ears, sounding like it came from everywhere and yet nowhere.

*“I commend you. You have gone beyond anything I expected. But alas, the journey ends here. I do not seek your death, but simply your surrender. Let this farce end, and may we meet once more in the true world beyond this place.”*

Just as the words sounded out, the system reacted.

**You have been granted the Tutorial Quest: To Choose One’s End.**

**Before you stands the King of the Forest, the undisputed lord of these woods. The tutorial’s end is nigh, and it is now up to you to choose its end.**

**Option 1: Choose to leave the tutorial now and retain all current Tutorial Points as well as any other rewards earned. Gain a one-time bonus of 50.000.000 Tutorial Points, as well as any other rewards associated with the conclusion of the tutorial.**

**Option 2: Fight to the end. Kill the King of the Forest or risk dying in the process. Gain a one-time 300.000.000 Tutorial Points as well as any other rewards associated with the completion of the tutorial if you succeed in your hunt.**

**Note that the tutorial ends at the conclusion of either chosen option.**

The choice offered in the quest was simple. Take the victory Jake had already earned and end the tutorial there and then. Or fight to the death.

A choice that should be easy for the Ambitious Hunter, and yet he hesitated for a moment. His heart and will told him to fight, but his mind told him to run. His intuition very clear that the King of the Forest was a being above him.

D-rank. If the three question marks in the Identify message was not enough.

He knew that the gap between ranks was high. The power a beast would grow from 24 to 25 was immense. The next gap... even higher it appeared - an entirely different level.

Yet, he didn't want to give up. His fire within was burning for the challenge that the creature represented. His bloodline humming with fervor. He wanted to fight - a stupid decision for sure from any logical standpoint. But even in stupidity, he could be a bit smart about it.

“Before I make my decision, would you honor me by receiving one of my blows?” he asked, playing courteous. “It would be a waste not at least to be made aware of the massive gulf that separates us.”

*“Oh? Thou wishes to observe the majesty of this King?”* it answered, echoing in his head. *“An honor for thee. By my magnanimousness, it shall be granted. Bring forth your strongest attempt.”*

Jake smiled at the damn monster that stood before him while still acting like he was in awe. Internally, however, he sneered at the arrogance of the self-proclaimed King. Sure, he was powerful, but he was also confident to the level of ridiculousness.

If Jake was confident in one thing, it was his striking power. Infused Powershot had proven nearly unstoppable against all his foes and could end the lives of beasts’ tens of levels above him in a single shot. He had every reason to believe that the King, in all his recklessness, would also be in for quite the surprise.

There was a good 40 meters between them. The dark shining lights that marked the King’s eyes stared at him as he took out his bow. It showed no reaction as he took out an arrow from his quiver, poisoned it, nocked it, and began channeling his attack.

Jake focused his entire body as he activated all he had. Limit Breaking to 20%; his power surged as the mana around him intensified. The air itself shook as his feet sank into the ground, the hard stones around him quaking and cracking.

Power built up for more than ten seconds, as Jake poured every single vestige of power in he could. His arms and shoulders strained, his veins nearly popping and his body screaming in protest.

A new crescendo had been reached once more. All the levels and fights Jake had gone through, all his experience with the skill lead to this moment. His most powerful attack yet.

Letting go of the arrow, the explosion of mana was unlike any other. The jagged spikes of rock in his vicinity broke off the ground as the pressure shot them away, the stone beneath him now little more than a crater of gravel.

The arrow itself flew true as it headed straight for the King of the Forest. Power shimmering around it as it parted the air, helped by the power inherent in his Windsoar Bow. Everything distorted in its path, as it created a vacuum - the very ground beneath it cracking in its wake, making a gorge in the environment between him and the King.

It passed the 40 meters in less than the blink of an eye. With the power to mortally wound or even outright kill a dungeon boss far above his own level.

The King of the Forest raised one of the hands of bone, just as the arrow was released. A feeble looking attempt to block the far mightier looking arrow that tore up everything in its path.

It hit the small barrier as an explosion sounded out, releasing all the energy pent up in the attack. It kicked up dust around the King, sending stone and soil flying everywhere. Jake knew the attack hadn't killed the King as he didn't get any notification, but it should at least have-

*“Admirably futile attempt.”*

The dust parted with the words, as the King was revealed once more. Like a bubble had spread out from the creature, the dust simply evaporated, clearing the air.

Not a single sign of damage visible... no, there was something. A small scratch on the previously entirely white ivory claw that was its hands.

Jake felt dumbstruck. He had put everything into that attack. Every ounce of power, everything he had. A half-assed attempt blocked his most potent attack. He had known there was a gap, but... this was just too fucking much.

The King of the Forest once more sounded out in his mind. The tone different, the formal speech gone. The disdain was dripping with every word.

*“Is this how you managed to win against all those stupid beasts that dared call themselves lords? I truly do admire for one so weak as you to manage to actually touch my body,”* the King said. *“One chance was what I gave you. Sadly... you wasted it.”*

Taking a step towards Jake, with the hunter backing off a step. A very bad feeling brewing in his stomach, his intuition and danger sense telling him to get the fuck out of there. The King continued to speak as he casually strolled forward.

*“Did you believe me to be a fool like them? To be ignorant? To sit in my little home, humbly awaiting the valiant archer to come and attack me? It appears you are not that much*

*smarter than those mongrels,” it said, backing Jake into a corner. “I was to give you a chance to surrender. I have done so. And now, dear little hunter...*

Jake knew he had fucked up.

*“Now, you suffer.”*

## **Chapter 108: King**

The King of the Forest lifted its ivory hand and pointed one of its sharp claw-like fingers at him. Jake’s sense of danger exploded as he dodged to the side. Where he had stood only a moment earlier exploded as if a colossal hammer had just struck. The blast didn’t hit him directly but was still enough to blast him away as he was pelted with rock and dust.

He barely managed to stabilize himself, as the King suddenly was within his sphere - right in front of him. He tried dodging backward, but it was too late. In a movement faster than he could in any way dodge, the creature lifted its finger once more and simply poked his shoulder. Imbedding its claw to its root.

Jake felt the pain as it entered him and then exited out his back as he tumbled backward. The King simply looked down at him, blood pouring out of the hole in the human’s shoulder.

*“Where did all the fight go?”*

The creature appeared to slide forward as it lifted its foot, kicking the hunter as he was already lying down. Jake flew tens of meters away, hitting the volcano's inner wall more than sixty meters away.

*“Show me. Show me the power of the one who has dared to come before me.”*

Jake didn't respond as he was still reeling from the kick. His ribs hurt like hell after only one half-arsed attack, and his health had dropped by far more than he found reasonable. But he didn't give up; he refused to.

He quickly jumped up as he activated Badger Jump to get some height. He took out his bow and an arrow as he fired a Splitting Arrow towards the figure below in an attempt t-

*“Weak.”*

The arrows were blasted away midair, as Jake too was hit by a wave of force sending him into the wall once more, this time far harder than before. Coughing out a mouthful of blood, he tried to put the bow back in his inventory but failed as it flew away from him, straight into the claws of the King.

Lifting the bow and observing it for a bit with the emotionless glowing eyes, the King tossed the bow up into the air.

*“An archer without his bow.”*

The creature then lifted its palm and fired a wave of force at the weapon. It was blasted off out of the hole at the top of the volcano-like mountain, to who-knows-where.

*“How shameful.”*

The hunter who had just lost his bow had at this point just fallen down unto the hard stone once more, as he tried to stand up. His entire body was aching from the blast, and he felt like he had just been hit by a truck.

It was looking bad. Really bad.

The King of the Forest lifted its hand once more in Jake’s direction, as the human felt like a hand grabbed him. Unable to resist, he was pulled towards the creature - right into its open claw that closed around his neck.

Jake had both his eyes open wide as his danger sense kept telling him to just fucking run. Something it had done from the very first attack.

Claws closed around his neck, and he felt them slightly penetrate his skin. He stared directly into the two wisps of lights that were in its eyes as it regarded the human. Even without a face, Jake could easily feel the disdain, arrogance, and... playfulness in its eyes.

*“I could kill you here and now. But the ‘fight’ is not over yet, now is it? But you appear to have lost your weapon, little archer... “*

It lifted its palm and pointed it towards the side of the volcano. Power gathered for but a moment before a blast was released, shearing off the entire side of the mountain. A blast that would have ripped Jake apart if it had ever hit him... making it clear exactly how unserious the King was.

*“..here, let me help you go find it.”*

With that, it tossed Jake into the air just like it had done with the bow. And just like his weapon, it blasted him with a wave of force, sending him flying.

This time, he managed to use the Scales of the Malefic Viper just before the blast hit him, lessening the damage significantly as he also crossed his arms to block. He was still sent flying, though, as he found himself hundreds of meters up in the air above the tutorial zone’s inner area.

However, he didn’t have time to enjoy the view as gravity swiftly took charge, forcing him downwards once more. He fell towards one of the valleys as he braced himself for impact. Luckily, terminal velocity was still in effect, and his highly enhanced body made the fall damage only hurt like hell.

Hitting the ground, he created a small crater. The scales still covering parts of his body helped reduce the pain and damage to almost nothing. It was nothing to feel happy about,

however. His health was down to less than half, and to make it even worse, when he tried to block the blow earlier, he felt the bones in both his arms crack.

He quickly took out a health potion and drank it as he restored quite a lot of the lost HP. His wounds also visibly healed, and he felt his full range of movement return. Now the question was what to do.

Relying on Advanced Stealth, he tried to hide as he fled from where he had landed. A direct confrontation with that monster that was the King of the Forest was out of the question. He needed a plan if he wanted even a sliver of a chance. But it was really, *REALLY* looking bad.

His bow was gone, and even if he had it, he was unsure of how much damage his Infused Powershot could do even if he managed to land one undetected. Maybe he could make something with his alchemy...

He needed to find somewhere and hide. If worst came to worst, then the tutorial panel still showed the countdown for the end of the tutorial. He only needed to survive for a few days, and he would get out. The timer was still there, so if he could only make it till then...

As he was running, his thoughts were suddenly interrupted as he got a powerful premonition of danger. He quickly hid behind a tree as he tried to make himself as small as possible. Advanced Stealth was working overtime to keep him hidden.

He saw the creature descend from above, its bony feet digging into the soft soil in his sphere. It was still twenty meters away from him, as Jake did all he could not to be found.

It started walking forward, as its voice sounded out in his mind once more.

*“I know you are here. Why hide from the inevitable? Have you finally given up all hope? Seen the futility in your actions?”* Jake heard its voice echo out, as he felt the childish playfulness and contempt.

*“Or are you just yet another beast fearing the predator that hunts it. A defenseless prey waiting to be devoured by the strong.”*

Jake closed his eyes as he heard the voice. The King was able to speak in his mind despite being unaware of where he was. At least he believed it to be like that.

Jake was pissed at the King’s words but wasn’t stupid enough to let himself be provoked like that... but it did give him an idea. Suppressing his nervousness and fear, he opened his eyes once more as he stepped out from behind the tree. It was time for him to make a move... to grasp some kind of momentum.

*“Oh, the little one appears.”*

Jake didn’t answer but simply charged. He thought he saw what he could only interpret as a smirk in the eyes of the creature, but he didn’t mind. In fact, he welcomed it. If it wanted him dead, he would die... the fact that his Moment of the Primal Hunter hadn’t triggered yet was proof of that.

Taking out a weapon, it wasn't his usual shortsword or dagger, but merely a regular dagger. One, he swung down towards the King of the Forest.

He was met with a barrier that stopped the dagger less than a centimeter from the creature's chest.

*"What are you hoping to accomplish with this?"* it taunted him as Jake once more ignored it.

He let go of the dagger that was stuck in the barrier, and the King simply flicked it to the side. However, Jake wasn't done as he took out yet another weapon and attacked, this time a random axe from when he did a sweep of items in the valleys.

It crashed down and met the invisible barrier again, with the King of the Forest, this time just sending Jake tumbling back with a shockwave. In the process, he lost the axe's grip, after which the King caught it out of the air with his telekinesis and flicked it away into the shrubbery.

Jake once more got up, as he summoned yet another weapon to attack – a random sword this time. The same thing repeated, with Jake being tossed away and the weapon disposed of. He could feel the enjoyment in the eyes of his foe, as he clearly had a lot of fun by playing around with Jake.

Yet he kept attacking. Greatsword, axe, dagger, Jake used every single weapon except for his Venomfang and the rare items he had. All of which were now thrown all over the tutorial like discarded garbage. Yet he continued.

He threw a bottle of poison at the King, his face full of fear. He heard the creature's chuckle in his mind as it merely allowed it to hit its barrier, the bottle shattering, and the liquid harmlessly slid down said barrier.

He threw a few more bottles, his look of fear and despair increasing with every bottle. Finally, he took out one of the more notable items he had gotten during his sweep.

***[Seed of Entangling Roots (Uncommon)] - A seed filled with the dense power of life and nature. Infuse mana and throw it to the ground for roots to sprout and entangle your chosen foe. The seed is consumed upon use.***

This one, too, was thrown and once more met with disdain. It hit the ground just in front of the King of the Forest as tens of roots swiftly sprouted forth. They entangled up the creature entirely, hiding its willow form.

*"What a fun toy."*

A circular sphere of distorted air flew out from the King's body, the roots shredded in the process, not a single root left unbroken. Yet it had confirmed something to the hunter.

Jake's look of despair deepened further as he started shaking. He took out several more items and threw them at the King. Chairs, books, bottles, pieces of armor, just random things from his spatial storage. As he did, the King started laughing loudly.

*"How pathetic."*

Jake's only response was to throw another bottle, followed by a piece of wood, a metal gauntlet, and then finally a particular small item mixing in between the junk.

The King of the Forest was enjoying himself immensely as he kept laughing. The items hit his barrier, as he swatted away the larger ones. He didn't notice, or perhaps didn't care, about the small black marble that shattered when it hit the barrier, and then...

...darkness descended.

A twister of pure dark mana sprung forth from the marble, all of it drilling its way into the body of the King. Jake could feel the resentment and bloodlust in the air, and for the first time, he heard something not pompous out of the creature.

*"WHAT IS THIS?"*

Jake had completely dispelled his faux look of despair and fear as he chuckled internally. *Hope you enjoy the final gift of the Nest Watcher.* Of course, the small bead had been the item the third Beast Lord had handed him.

***[Dark Bead of the Nest Watcher (Epic)] – A bead made of condensed dark mana. The last hope of the Nest Watcher to get revenge on the King of the Forest. Can be thrown at foes to inflict them with a powerful Curse of Darkness upon shattering. The curse will severely limit perception and drain energy until dispelled. All of the resentment of the nest will be unleashed if used on the King of the Forest.***

The otherwise impenetrable barrier that defended the King was now being corroded by dark mana, as more and more of it made its way into his body. Despite Jake being so close, all of it completely ignored him, focusing solely on the King.

But Jake was far from done. Summoning yet another item from his spatial storage, he charged towards the creature that was flailing around, screaming. Without a doubt, one the King would have recognized as the tusk of the Horde Leader.

While the King couldn't react appropriately, he could still respond. His arm raised as he aimed a palm towards the hunter charging at him, releasing a blast of energy.

The attack was heavily telegraphed, allowing Jake to dodge to the side before it even came. A sagacious decision as this blast wasn't one of the casual ones the King had fired earlier.

Soil and rocks were torn up from the ground as the wave was fired out. It flew for around twenty meters before encountering its first tree, which resulted in an explosion of splinters. The wave continued unabated as it created a long path of destruction across the tutorial zone's entire inner area.

The King didn't have time to fire another attack as Jake reached it. He tried to dodge but failed as Jake pushed the tusk forward. It met a hastily erected barrier, one it pierced straight through, the feeble means of defense cracking like a broken mirror.

Jake had aimed for where he hoped the heart would be, but instead, hit what he assumed was its stomach. The bark covering the creatures' body offered little resistance as the tusk penetrated straight through and out the King's back. He wanted to quickly pull it out and attack again, but the King was done playing.

*"ENOUGH!"*

Jake opened his eyes wide as his danger sense exploded with warnings. He hastily covered the entire front of his body in scales as a shockwave hit him.

As if a bomb had exploded, he was launched back hundreds of meters, all the way to the other end of the valley, where he was only stopped by being embedded in a wall of rock. Again.

The destruction wrought by the wrath of the King was readily apparent. A vast crater had appeared; hundreds of trees now lay prone all over the valley, snapped in two by the blast.

He looked around for the King and soon saw him once more. Floating in the middle of the crater a few meters off the ground. The King didn't look very happy.

The eyes that only moments earlier were shining with bright light were far dimmer now. The curses of the Nest Watcher and Horde Leader was now burning and chewing at him from within. The aura the King gave off was weaker for sure.

Its body was clearly damaged. Black spots covered the bark-like skin, but the most significant wound was, of course, the one left by the tusk. A huge hole that Jake could look straight through marked the middle of his body, and from it dripped... blood.

*So the damn thing can bleed*, he thought, as he sneered, oddly proud of himself for doing any damage to the damn monster. Of course, he would do far more than just make it bleed.

The King was floating there as the creature levitated a bloody tusk up beside him. The dark wisps of light that were its eyes appeared to regard it for a moment before it lifted it up further, and with yet another blast of force, fired it far off in the distance. The tusk had lost its golden luster, and now golden veins instead extended from the wound inflicted upon the King. They pulsed with power as they appeared to work together with the dark mana to weaken the mighty creature.

The voice of the King, now clearly far angrier, echoed in his mind once more.

*“Detestable whelp. You and every one of those pathetic beasts. Even now, they dare strike at me. I tire of this game. I planned for you to live a bit longer, to learn what it truly means to stand before a king. No longer. This farce is done. And now...”*

Several fallen trees were lifted up in the air, as their trunks were sheared off into giant, tens of meters long spears.

*“...now you die.”*

## Chapter 109: Eclipse

*Yeah... this could go better*, Jake thought, as he barely managed to roll out of the way as a giant tree-spear was shot towards him.

He managed to dodge it with Shadow Vault, but more were coming. And not just trees. Several large boulders were also thrown after him, along with pretty much anything within hundreds of meters of the King.

Dodging and weaving in between the attacks, he managed not to get hit by a single one. A slight positive, but ultimately, he was only buying time - time that wasn't to his advantage.

The King of the Forest was clearly multitasking as he worked on clearing away the curse from the Nest Watcher and the energy from the Horde Leader as he attacked. Jake, on the other hand, was slowly running out of his resources. He had gotten back quite a bit of health from the potion, but both his stamina and mana were draining.

Limit Break had been active at 20% from the very first Infused Powershot. In reality, it had only been minutes, but he was already starting to feel it taking its toll. Deactivating the boost wasn't an option as he would enter a state of weakness - a shortcut to a quick death for sure.

His remaining tools were limited. He only had two weapons left - an old common-rarity bow and his Venomfang dagger. The bow could handle at most one Infused Powershot before breaking, with the blade obviously his most reliable weapon.

His last tool was the Corrupted Mooncore Shard. A plan for that was beginning to form in his mind as he observed the floating King.

Despite everything looking so bleak, Jake wasn't distraught in the least. He was shaking, not with fear, but excitement. At any moment, with the slightest mistake, he could die. Yet, he didn't feel it was impossible. He felt like it was a long shot. A very long shot, one he would gladly take.

He was quite confident in his aim, after all. This was what he lived and would gladly die for. Not that he planned on seeing his path end quite yet.

Jake knew he couldn't give the King too much time to heal the wounds caused by the Tusk and marble. He was currently circling as he dodged, slowly getting closer to the King floating above the crater he had created earlier.

He did also notice one other thing. The aim of the King was outright terrible. The only reason why he had to focus so much on dodging was the type of projectile used. The huge trees and boulders were just that: huge.

If it had been smaller spears and not freaking trees, he wouldn't even have to dodge. The aim of the King was obviously compromised from the curse that inflicted him. This was likely also the reason why he didn't shoot those ridiculously overpowered blasts of force.

Jake made use of that by running in more unpredictable patterns. Huge clouds of dust were kicked up with every attack, and Jake was more than happy to hide within them and use them as cover as he got closer.

At the same time, he took one of the arrows out of his quiver and held it in his hand. As he was avoiding being squashed, he began channeling dark mana into it.

By the time he was halfway there, the King was out of things to throw at him. So he began throwing words instead.

*“What do you hope to accomplish? Do you believe you can win? Truly just an unwise beast.”*

Jake ignored it as he snickered. *Keep talking, you childish arrogant fuck.*

The King didn't do anything as Jake got closer, allowing the hunter to get out his one remaining bow as he nocked the arrow infused with dark mana. With a rapidly charged Infused Powershot, he fired it upwards at the floating creature. The bow breaking and turning into splinters in the process.

The King of the Forest managed to raise his hand and block the arrow with his ivory claws. The arrow harmlessly hit his body but then exploded in a cloud of dark mana. Dark mana that didn't hurt the King at all. What it did do was to obscure his already severely weakened senses.

The moment the arrow exploded, Jake jumped upwards using Badger Jump. However, he wasn't done yet, as he also used Shadow Vault to get even higher.

He put both hands behind him from up there as he released two blasts of mana from his gloves, propelling him downwards once more, sending him descending down towards the King.

Simultaneously, the King flew upwards to escape the cloud of dark mana that Jake had made. Still unaware, he flew straight up into the rapidly descending Jake, who had already taken out his Venomfang.

With both hands on the handle, he smashed the knife down. Descending Dark Fang with its full power on display.

He failed to penetrate the King's hard skull, the crown of thorns blocking some of the blow, but he did succeed in bringing the creature down with him. Like two meteors, they smashed into the crater below, creating two smaller holes within.

Jake quickly got up once more, his scales absorbing much of the damage from the accelerated fall. Flipping his dagger to a backhanded grip, he charged the King and swung for the side of the creature's head.

The King had been brought down by the blast but hadn't fallen. The pressure from the impact had, however, forced him down on one knee. The illustrious King of the Forest made to kneel before a human far weaker than himself.

Still shaken, the King didn't react as a dagger smashed into his face. It hit the mask and didn't even leave a mark, making Jake swiftly switch target. Next, the King felt a stab his chest, and then a second and a third – directly into the wound left by the Tusk earlier.

None of them managed to do much, but they did worsen the wound. Besides, all Jake needed was to inflict his poison. At the same time, he was holding a small fingernail-sized object in his other hand - Touch of the Malefic Viper infusing it with toxic energy.

The King finally managed to get his bearings. And he was furious. His entire body started burning with intense energy. His hand shot up, far faster than Jake could in any way react to, the ivory claw glowing with golden light. The claws aimed directly at the hunter right in front of him.

Jake saw the blurred movement as his sense of danger exploded. He barely managed to register the claw flying towards his chest, as if it aimed to rip his body into several pieces. Just as it was about to touch his chest, it slowed down. Everything slowed down.

**Moment of the Primal Hunter**

The hunter quickly ducked under the hand that was suspended in the air as it slowly moved upwards, the golden light it gave off amplified by the slowdown. Even more ridiculous was that the claw was still visibly moving, albeit very slowly.

Jake barely registered this as he made his move. He opened his hand as he pushed forth the small shard in his hand, the one he had been infusing - The Corrupted Mooncore Shard.

***[Corrupted Mooncore Shard (Epic)] - The shard of a Mooncore, corrupted by an immense amount of toxicity. It is unstable by nature and will not last more than a few months in its current state. Contains highly concentrated volatile energy as the energies clash within. The mana of the moon and the foreign mana in a constant cycle of mutual destruction.***

The description he remembered from before had led him to this gamble. Within it, the energies were in equilibrium. But no more. Touch of the Malefic Viper had broken the balance, and now it was but a ticking time bomb.

As he pushed it towards the King, he gave it a final injection with Touch of the Malefic Viper on full display. He felt it crack as it lost contact with the hand pushing it forward. Making its way into the hole left by the Tusk of the Horde Leader.

Many more small cracks slowly spread across the shard as it very slowly floated forward.

At the same time, Jake summoned the Bulwark of the Horde Leader and began channeling mana into it. Something he barely managed as time resumed.

An explosion sounded out, but not from the shard. A golden cone-shaped blast was released from the claw as five deep scars were cut across the tutorial's entire inner zone, leveling the mountain where Lucenti Plains had once been as well as everything in the way.

From the King's perspective, all he saw was his golden claw about to reap of the life of the human in front of him, as suddenly the figure disappeared. A movement faster than the King could ever imagine the weak human being capable of, his position had suddenly shifted to standing slightly to the right of the claw, now holding a shield in front of him.

The King of the Forest was about to attack again as he felt it. A familiar kind of mana that he hoped to never encounter again. A weird sort of mystical light element that the hateful Great White Stag had used.

As a D-rank entity, he had cared little for the Beast Lords. They were all weak and beneath him - all except for the stag. It was the kind of being that dealt in the realm of mysticism - in types of magic far more complicated than any the King ever dabbled in himself.

Able to perform feats far above his own. Able to use the power of concepts he couldn't comprehend. Of all the Beast Lords, the Great White Stag was the only one he had ever felt a tinge of fear towards. And now he felt that mana again. But it was different. Corrupted.

These were the only thoughts he had time to make before a second explosion sounded out before the first even had time to stop echoing out. Yet it wasn't a big bang or a great fireball. It was... subtle.

For but a moment, light died. The world turned monochrome, and the artificial sun above was covered by a fractured moon, as the sky darkened. Like night had descended, the eclipsed sun was utterly suppressed.

Countless stars all floated around the black rotting moon. A moon that was shattered and broken leaking out copious amounts of dark green energy. It had lost all its splendor and now carried only the feeling of corruption and decay – an omen of death incarnate.

And then the explosion came. A storm of light and darkness consuming each other as well as the world around it. Like the moon itself had exploded on the ground, a spherical explosion was released. The sphere expanded tens of meters each second and grew in concert with the massive shockwave it released.

The two living beings in the midst of it all, taking the brunt of it.

The first, a hunter, was pushed back by a wave of force produced. Covered behind a shield of rock, every single part of his body coated in dark green scales. He flew back nearly a kilometer until he found himself embedded in a wall for the umpteenth time that day. More bones were broken than not, more organs ruptured than whole.

The second, a creature crowned King of the Forest. A being caught in the epicenter, as the source of the explosion originated from the hole within his very own body.

Like a chemical reaction, the fallout from the two energies mixing was more than just the sum of their parts. It was the meeting of two opposing concepts, two fundamental laws of

the universe seeking to destroy one another. And the moment that cycle of destruction broke down, and all that energy was what hit the King of the Forest.

Jake was observing it all as the energy didn't subside for several seconds, even after he was knocked away. His entire body was broken and bloody, and he could only see the happenings with his one remaining eye. The other one had been scorched out of his skull from the explosion as a wayward ray of light hit him.

The shield he had used to protect himself was utterly broken and had already crumbled to dust after being infected with the chaotic mana. A rare shield from the final dungeon boss, broken. Without it, Jake didn't doubt for a moment that he would be dead. Despite his dissatisfaction with getting it... it had saved his life.

He also knew that the Scales of the Malefic Viper appeared to be the bane of both types of energy released. The dark toxic mana was fundamentally aligned to himself as he was its source, while the light mana was particularly weak against his scales. It had allowed him to survive, even if the explosion itself had left him utterly broken.

Looking inward, he could feel his bones being cracked. Yet he still stood as he didn't dare to deactivate his Limit Break quite yet. His stamina was at a healthier level than he actually anticipated, and he soon found the source. The very environment he now found himself in nurtured him through Palate of the Malefic Viper. The explosion had left something akin to radioactive fallout.

On the other hand, both his mana and health were critically low, though mana was regenerating fast. He had poured all his mana into the shard and then the shield. He had been trying to both do as much damage as possible and then survive it afterward. His health was low due to him, of course, taking a lot of damage.

As Jake got done checking his own condition, the darkness dispersed as the artificial sun's light was allowed to shine down once more. Albeit far more muted than before.

The valley that had already turned into a crater was now even worse off. Long marks of the golden claw were still visible, though vastly overshadowed by the massive hole left by the Mooncore Shard.

Everything was colored in dark green veins that appeared to pulse with toxic energy. It wasn't only in the valley; this could be seen everywhere. Even the mountains off in the distance were now even more broken and covered in dark energy.

Jake, with unsteady steps, walked towards the epicenter of the explosion. He couldn't relax yet. Despite the huge explosion with the King of the Forest in the center, he had yet to receive any notifications. But he refused to believe that the creature had come out of it unscathed.

Getting closer, he finally saw the King. Lying face-up on the black ground. Unmoving. The bark covering his body was as black and rotten as the ground around him, with blood leaking through the cracked natural armor. The left arm was nowhere to be found, only a stump at the shoulder.

The dark mana from the curse, now mixed with the toxic dark mana of the Mooncore, still lingered on the body. Dark smoke came out of every crack in the armor along with the blood - the golden veins left by the power from the Tusk now pulsed with dark green energy.

Jake was amazed the body was even that whole. An explosion he had only been hit by slightly had quite literally exploded within the body of the one lying in front of him - the blast from the Mooncore more potent than anything he could have ever imagined.

Taking out his dagger, he kept walking towards the fallen King, his body slowly being nurtured by the contaminated environment around him. The mask-like face of the King was now the only thing completely undamaged by the explosion. The two holes that marked the eyes empty. Jake didn't hesitate as he brought down the dagger towards the heart of the creature.

Just as the dagger was about to hit, a faint light flickered forth in the holes of the mask, and an ivory claw, now covered in dark veins, flew up and blocked. His danger sense warned him as he endured a blast of force, sending Jake flying back.

Landing on his feet, Jake slid back a bit and tried to stabilize himself as he looked at the now rising figure that was the King of the Forest. Black smoke emanating from the broken body.

The fight wasn't over yet.

## Chapter 110: Fall

*Pain.*

That was the first feeling that the King thought of as he awoke. He had temporarily lost consciousness from the accursed shard explosion that was the Great White Stag's final gift. His entire body was hurting. The Nest Watcher's curse and the detestable energy of the Horde Leader were still present even now... no, even more potent now, as they had mixed with the dark powers in the explosion. They had somehow been corrupted by whatever had corrupted the Mooncore to begin with.

The first thing he saw upon regaining vision was the human attempting to land a blow. *Preposterous*. He raised his hand and planned on blowing the arm of the human off, but what came out was only a slight wave of force that forced his attacker back.

*Why?* Why was he so weak? Was he truly that damaged? He attempted to stand up but found himself stumbling. Struggling. He was hurt. Truly hurt. The blow to his stomach had only been a mild annoyance. It would take time to heal, but it didn't impede him much.

This, however, was different. The King tried supporting himself with his left arm but found nothing. It was gone. He then remembered that he had tried to rip the shard out before it exploded... losing the arm in the process.

This was unacceptable. For a human, a weak human, to do this much damage.

Finally managing to get up, he lay his hazy gaze upon the human who was still standing. The King's vision was lowered significantly, and everything appeared to be covered in a layer of fog. No doubt a demerit caused by the dark mana.

The King didn't have time to stabilize himself before the man charged. Slower than before for sure, but the King was also far slower. The creature felt like his limbs were several times heavier, and every movement required excessive exertion.

The human brought down his dagger as he tried to stab the King, but he managed to block it with his ivory claw. He struggled to counterattack, having only one arm as he attempted a kick, one the human easily avoided. Using his other hand the hunter landed a punch on the King's chest, hurting his own fist as much as the King.

At least it appeared so until the King felt the intrusion of harmful foreign energy from where the blow landed. Poison. The damned human had inflicted even more toxins upon contact, injecting only a sliver of poison, but even that was enough to be an issue for the already struggling creature. To make it even worse, the energy agitated what was already ailing him.

However, the hunter wasn't the only one who managed to land attacks. Right after he punched, he was forced to back away a bit, as the King released yet another blast of force, hitting him in the shoulder, blasting him backward. He felt his shoulder dislocate from the blow but swiftly popped it back in place. The pain was barely registering.

The King observed the human and felt disbelief. The hunter in front of him was not despairing. He was not even showing any signs of exhaustion or exasperation. Instead, he grinned through the pain as his broken limb was restored. Smiled, despite his imminent demise.

Before this day, the King could count the number of times he had experienced actual pain on one hand. He had been born in a small world and had increased in power from the environment alone. Born at D-grade, he was superior to all other beings and swiftly suppressed them all.

He was an existence that believed this forest to be beneath him. He had lived in this forest for less than a decade when the quest from the system came. To battle with the other Beast Lords of the forest to claim the title of King, and ultimately have the opportunity to escape the world he found himself in.

An opportunity he happily accepted as he subdued the other Lords. With the help of the system he imprisoned them in dungeons and took his rightful place as King of the Forest. He killed all the other enlightened ones in the world, none of them even close to E-grade beforehand. The stage was prepared, and this entire tutorial was just a farce he had to be done with.

Never had he taken the entire tutorial scenario very seriously. After becoming King, he also got a follow-up quest that made it clear that he didn't have to. After the tutorial's conclusion, the entire area he was in would cease to exist, and he would be able to leave. Leave to the new universe that was just integrated into the system.

He hadn't known exactly what that meant; all he knew was that it was an opportunity to leave. A chance to explore an entirely new world and grow. The ability to conquer new land and not just be the King of this small forest.

In his eyes, and based on the system's quests, the survivors were never meant to encounter the King. He had sat on his throne and knew that he just had to wait. But it all changed when the first Beast Lord fell. The stupid badger that he had never cared for, but it was nevertheless worthy of note. For it was already unexpected for them to manage to kill a single lord. Unexpected but not impossible.

It was slain by a single human and not a group. The King could not observe the fight and only knew the results, but it was enough to pique his interest. Only slightly, though, as he quickly turned away once more.

Then, not long after, something he never expected happened. The hateful Great White Stag died. The King knew little of the dungeons' interior, but he always had the feeling that the Stag was scheming against him.

He knew they had the option to challenge his rule. To reach D-grade and dethrone him. A threat he hadn't taken seriously from any of the Beast Lords besides the Great White Stag. So when he saw that it had died, he saw it more as a blessing than anything else. In all honesty, his impression of the human improved greatly from just that. He would have had to kill the Stag in the new universe if not.

Then the Nest Watcher died, which was relatively inconsequential. A dirty being from a dirty race. Though it appeared he had managed to show a bit of his worth through the small marble of dark cursed mana he had been struck with - a miscalculation.

Then finally, the Horde Leader died. A giant boar too dumb for its own good. Nevertheless, it was strong. It had even managed to give the King a wound, one it had paid with its tusk to inflict. After the pig died, it had been time to meet the human. His quest updated, and he found himself forced to allow the human the chance of surrender. To leave for the world beyond. Even now, he had the option to allow for the human's survival for greater rewards.

The King had chosen to act as majestic as he knew how to during this brief period. He had learned that these humans, especially this one, had a great talent for growth, so he wanted not to make an unnecessary enemy. Maybe the human could even become a worthwhile servant?

Luckily the human was arrogant. He believed himself able to fight, A belief the King would crush with everything he had. He would make the human despair before he died, or at least crush his spirit so that he would never dare stand before the King again. For no other reason than his own vanity.

Yet it had all gone awry. The weak human had indeed been weak. Defenseless. His most potent attack blocked easily, all his effort thwarted as he was beaten down again and again. Until he counterattacked, and the King, for the first time, felt a feeling he never had before: Fear.

For the first time, he was experiencing real pain, genuine fear of death. His first time learning that death in the tutorial was even an option for him. That it wasn't just a pipedream, an illusion dangled in front of the survivors to give them hope. It was a possible reality. A reality that was becoming closer and closer to being truly real.

The King clashed with the human again, as he once more lost out in the exchange. His arm heavy, his movements slow, and his natural armor already shattered and broken. Rotten. Even his magic, the thing he had always relied on to win, failed him.

With his telekinetic powers, he had ripped the tusk from the mouth of the Horde Leader, squashed every other existence. But now, it was only a whisper of its usual might. With the curse, his wounds, the energies, and everything else weakening him, the King could barely display a mere tenth of his actual power.

Raising his claw, it had a faint glow of gold as he attempted to strike the human once more - a strike that was faster and stronger than the ones before. But the human still managed to barely dodge it, getting only a few scratches on his arms from the remnant energies.

At the same time, the King took more and more damage. A scratch from a dagger here, a punch or kick there, and a bit of poison from Touch of the Malefic Viper invading him at times. It was a desperate struggle from both parties as they both slugged it out.

Jake only took a single attack for every ten or twenty he landed. The disparity was apparent to any, even the fighters. The King, even in his extremely weakened state, was still faster and stronger than Jake. He should win out, but he didn't. The difference was in skill and experience.

The King had been born with a golden spoon. Superior from birth, he had never been pushed. Learning to fight had never been required of him, as a wave of his hand could kill most foes. Even the Horde Leader struck unconscious by a single full-power blast, with a golden claw more than enough to slay ten of it with a single swipe. His innate skills, talents, and powerful body had been enough... till now.

He could lose. And losing would mean death. *Impossible*, the King thought. Who was he? He was the King of the Forest, the mightiest existence in this world. He had never lost; he had never feared and now was certainly not the time to begin doing so. Determination the creature had never felt before built up inside him.

For the first time, he reflected upon his own existence. He realized how much he was actually still lacking. Despite being so much weaker, how the human in front of him had shown him his own limitations. The King was not stupid. Far from it. He had simply grown ignorant and childish, full of hubris from too many years of never being challenged. He had never had to grow up.

He respected the human in front of him. A weird feeling he had only perhaps ever felt for the Stag. He respected yet hated the human for all the damage and harm he had caused him. But now it was time to end it.

A blast of force slightly more substantial than the ones before pushed Jake backward, creating space between them once more. When the hunter lowered his arms that he had used to block, he saw the King's glowing eyes looking back at him as his voice sounded out.

*“You have reduced me to this state... shown me that I have grown complacent. I thank you, human. I did not wish to do this... but you forced me to. That in itself is an achievement you should be proud of. Now fall.”*

He said as he resigned himself to end the fight.

A cracking sound was heard as the mask covering the King's face that had otherwise been unblemished now fractured. Jake hesitated for a moment to see what was happening and decided to wait cautiously at a distance. His intuition and sense of danger both warning him that the development was dangerous.

More cracks covered the mask, and the King stood up straight once more, his dignity restored. His crown of thorns started giving off a strong sense of power and majesty, aiming to suppress Jake. And then the mask fell.

Jake didn't know what he expected to see beneath. But what he saw undoubtedly would never be that. For he saw nothing. It wasn't darkness; it was just...nothingness - something his mind couldn't comprehend.

Then the headache struck. Like a sledgehammer hitting Jake's skull, he felt vertigo as everything became blurry and his head hurt like never before. Even his ever-reliant Sphere of Perception was disturbed as the information he got became warped and twisted.

He felt puke enter his mouth as black spots began obstructing his vision. He closed his eyes, but it didn't help. He had already been hit by whatever was released upon the mask shattering - a type of magic he had never encountered before. But if the more knowledgeable were there, they would instantly recognize one of the most dangerous and sought-after varieties - soul magic.

Jake tried to stabilize himself, and he felt himself slowly improve. His willpower and determination were slowly shrugging off the feeling, as he instinctually had already backed off several meters. He could beat it; he told himself as he grit his teeth hard enough for blood to flow out.

The King of the Forest simply observed the struggling human. For him to reveal his true face was something he had never hoped to have to do. It took a heavy toll on his own soul and was something he would not recover from without a long period of recovery. But it was necessary.

If he would win without, he didn't know, and that uncertainty was too big of a risk. But with it, he was supreme.

As the Malefic Viper had explained, the soul has many layers. Most of them untouched by magic usually, but some types could directly affect it. Of course, Soul magic was one of those with its ability to affect the outermost layer directly.

Senses could be disturbed, illusions brought to life through them, and much short-term mental damage inflicted. The layer would regenerate naturally, but to influence it made one hold much sway over another. And if the layer were broken entirely... so would the connection to the outside world, as consciousness would be lost.

This was exactly what the King of the Forest was currently doing, as the constant aura of his true visage burned into Jake's soul. He had already decided to leave the human alive. To simply rob him of consciousness till the tutorial ended - a final recognition of his efforts. He could push his magic further and slay the human for good... but he wouldn't.

He felt the human's attempt to stabilize himself. An attempt he swiftly crushed as he released a wave of mental energy far more powerful than the passive exertion that he gave off without the mask. Before, it was simply a passive aura, but now he actually used the skill.

***“Shatter.”***

The invisible wave didn't do anything to the terrain as it passed through. Like a sphere, it released outwards, covering hundreds of meters a second. Shortly, the wave covered the tutorial zone's entire inner area, and every living creature that had survived the fallout of their fight now fell dead.

Yet it didn't stop there.

When it encountered the barrier warding off the inner zone, it passed straight through and out into the outer area. It washed through the entire tutorial, everything dying in its path, falling to the ground, dead, their souls shattered. Their souls were just too weak to take the assault that was only meant to immobilize the human.

And that human, who stood before the King, was hit the hardest. The moment it hit Jake, it hit him hard. Like a broken mirror, his already drained mind gave out as his soul's outer layer shattered to nothingness. He didn't even have time to register as everything turned black, and he fell backward unconscious.

With only two living beings alive in the entire tutorial, the Malefic Viper's divination had been realized.