

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 121: You know, I'm something of a sage myself

After a long and *very* fruitful conversation, he was finally reminded by the old alchemist that he still had notifications pending. One notification to be more accurate. This one due to unlocking another available skill upon reaching level 60 in his profession.

Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper profession skills available

Jake was honestly quite excited. The last few skills gained from his profession had all been excellent, the most recent being Scales of the Malefic Viper. It was surprisingly long ago he got it, all the way back before he even fought the Great White Stag.

Now he had finally managed to unlock another. With great vigor, he jumped in, and with fervor, saw the first skill.

[Offering (Common)] – Offer an item to your chosen god, allowing them to better hear your pleas for a short period.

And it was shit. Seriously? For all his trials and tribulation, he got a shitty prayer skill? He was pretty sure the Viper could already hear whenever he did something akin to a prayer, so why the hell would he need a skill for it? The rarity alone was enough to put him off - the description was the bare minimum, telling nothing of value.

He knew that only five new skills were added at a maximum every time he unlocked the possibility of getting a new skill. Perhaps he had spent a bit too much time around gods recently. He could only imagine that it had pushed out better and more useable skills.

Moving on with great speed, he got to the next one, which was at least a rare skill.

[Ritualism of the Malefic Viper (Rare)] - To do a ritual is to pay tribute. To give your life for the Malefic One, an honor. Grants the Alchemist knowledge of different rituals pertaining to the Malefic Viper. The ritual's effect is based on the nature of the ritual performed and the materials used during the ritual. Stat bonuses are applied according to the nature of the ritual performed.

... Had the system finally gotten a sense of humor and begun joking with him? The talk of ritual sacrifices was a joke. A joke. Yet Jake was a bit suspicious at the mere existence of the skill. Maybe it was just something all gods had?

Yeah, he assumed all gods would have fanatical followers that went overboard. It was the damn Viper's fault for speaking about sacrifices and such, to begin with. A horrible joke turned into a horrible skill that Jake, of course, had no intention of taking at all.

Everything about it was just ominous. No way he was actually going to return to earth and begin some insane cult with human sacrifices to a god named Villy, with whom he

drinks beers with on weekends. As he said during the talk of sacrificial rituals earlier: fuck that.

Moving on down the list, the next one was epic-rarity, and... well, this one was good. Real *good*.

[Methodology of Duskleaf (Epic)] – Taught by a god who stands at the pinnacle of alchemy, you have begun to understand his methodology. Grants the alchemist a fragment of the knowledge of the god Duskleaf, increases your understanding of alchemy and mana, as well as overall control-techniques during all concoctions or brewings. Allows the Alchemist to make creations he does not have the associated crafting skill for. (does not receive stat effectiveness bonuses without associated skill).

“Hey Duskleaf, guess what?” he said to the god who looked to be daydreaming. Probably about alchemy.

“Hm?”

“I got a skill from you. Methodology of Duskleaf. It’s even Epic and has quite the descri-“

“I forbid you from taking it!” Duskleaf exclaimed loudly, the air slightly trembling at his voice. “No way! Choose something else! Anything but that!”

“I don’t know; it looks pretty good...” Jake teased. However, there was quite a bit of truth in what he said. The skill was good. Really good. It seemed like a skill that would just improve nearly everything during a concoction and brewing, and it would even allow him to make things he didn’t have the crafting skill for, such as flasks.

He had been told that he could anyway; it was just harder. In fact, anyone could still do anything. Jake, if he so wished, could pick up a hammer and make a sword. Of course, the sword would suck, but the system would recognize his creation if it met the bare minimum requirements. He would also not receive any of the bonuses associated with having a profession linked to crafting swords, nor any experience of any kind.

This skill would allow him to make flasks far easier without the associated crafting skill as it would allow him to get the system-assistance and instinctive knowledge. He would very likely still want the actual crafting skill at some point, but it was a good temporary solution. Besides, Jake knew he wouldn’t have enough skill and time soon to get all the crafting skills.

Transmutation, pill-making, flasks, powder, elixirs, and so on were just a few of the things he could learn to craft as an alchemist. And those were just the ones he already knew about. He knew there was far more out there. He wasn’t sure when he would ever get the skill selections for the skills at the current pace.

Currently, he only got a skill every 10 levels. It was every 5 levels before the first class evolution, so he had a strong suspicion it would be even less than every 10 levels after his next evolution. And on top of that, his biggest issue was that he often just had better skills - this very skill-picking-session being one such situation.

“... therefore you should refrain from picking it as it would have implications that-“

“Fine, I won’t. Sheesh,” Jake said as he exited his inner thoughts, noticing that Duskleaf had kept talking throughout his entire inner monologue.

“Too bad, you just missed the perfect chance to get your first faithful,” the Malefic Viper laughed in the background.

Jake just shook his head as he moved on to the fourth skill available. Another one of epic-rarity and this one also related to the Malefic Viper. Though perhaps not precisely what he was looking for.

[Dark Beacon of the Malefic Viper (Epic)] – As the holder of a True Blessing of the Malefic Viper, you’re his champion among the mortals. Allows the Alchemist to channel the aura of the Malefic Viper to more easily subdue others. Allows the Alchemist to guide others towards the path of the Malefic Viper. Forcefully or otherwise. Skill effect is based on wisdom and willpower. The larger disparity between your power and your targets, the larger the effect.

Is the system set on my becoming a cult leader or what? Jake thought to himself after reading the description. Also, what the hell did the skill even have to do with alchemy, to begin with? Maybe related to teaching others alchemy? It would take some serious mental gymnastics for it to make sense. Then again, it wasn’t like the prior skills were necessarily alchemy-related.

The only slightly positive thing that he could see was its possible combat applications, like an AOE aura to suppress weaker enemies or crowds. But thinking on it further, didn’t his new Gaze of the Apex Hunter do something similar to that? Just by sight instead of a constant aura.

Also, the wording on it was just too creepy. Talking about subduing others, forcing them into following the Malefic Viper and such. It was giving off clear ‘nope’-vibes all around. Jake did not, in any way, shape, or form, have the desire to become any kind of leader. Despite him having a ‘Lord’ title now.

He considered asking the Viper about the skill but ultimately decided not to. He hadn’t asked or shown any interest in the skills Jake had been offered. It was Jake’s choice to make, be they suboptimal or not. Though in many cases, the outright best skill was just clear from the beginning. It turns out this time was no different, with the final skill being a clear standout.

[Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – To hold just a fragment of the wisdom of a Primordial is more than most ever achieve. Much less to be personally taught that knowledge directly by the god himself. Allows the Alchemist to peek into a fragment of the Malefic Viper’s Records to seek his knowledge. Grants the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper far better understanding of mana and of most affinities. Allows the Alchemist to make creations he does not have the associated crafting skill for (does not receive stat effectiveness bonuses without associated skill). Passively provides 1 Wisdom per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your search for knowledge be as inexhaustible as the Malefic One.

Once again, a long-ass description. A tendency Jake was beginning to see with the ancient-rarity skills granted by the Malefic Viper. Like with the Scales, Palate, and Blood, this one provided wisdom. The pattern was clear, and Jake was also beginning to suspect that some of his other skills would be similar when upgraded to ancient.

But to focus on the actual skill in question... there was a lot to say, and yet not that much. It was awesome. Wisdom was an excellent stat when it came to alchemy, and the skill overall appeared to in many ways to just be a better version of the Methodology of Duskleaf skill. There were some minor differences, but the crafting without associated skills-part was there. It actually made him feel a bit sad for Duskleaf, but on the other hand, he *had been* forbidden from taking his skill.

Duskleaf's skill provided a bonus while doing alchemy to mana control, while this one just granted a better understanding of mana and affinities without directly having to do with the alchemy. He was also interested in the 'peer into a fragment to see Records of the Malefic Viper' part. If he had to guess, then that fragment would be the drop of blood he now carried within him.

In the end, there was no contest as to which skill he would choose. The 63 bonus wisdom alone made the Sagacity of the Malefic Viper just too tempting to pass up. He found it interesting that he would now effectively get 4 more stats per level in his profession than otherwise stated with the skill. He had quite honestly lucked out hardcore when it came to stumbling across that challenge dungeon.

Or maybe it was the subtle guiding hand of the system, fate, destiny, or whatever else mumbo-jumbo people believed in post-system. He didn't care about things he couldn't influence or control, so he just decided to be grateful for what he had gotten.

He didn't even consult the two gods before he picked the skill. Something he should maybe have done as they were both surprised when he knelt down to the floor holding his head. He had gotten many skills over the brief period he had been in the system, but this one was by far the worst when it came to knowledge imprinted in his mind.

It felt like hours as he was assaulted by a constant stream of information downloaded directly into him. There was so much he quite frankly couldn't contain it all. The entire process took nearly an hour before the influx and pain subsided.

My fucking head, he cursed as he tried to go through whatever knowledge was just forced upon him. To his absolute bewilderment, he found barely anything. It was just a few

wisps of knowledge about mana control and the nature of different affinities, most of which he already knew through prior testing or educated guesses.

Instead, it appeared that the knowledge was somehow locked away. Locked away within him. More accurately, inside that drop of blood he had absorbed. *It seems that absorbing that drop of blood is the only reason I could get that overpowered skill to begin with.*

It also made the description make more sense - the thing about peeking into a fragment of his knowledge. Just picking it up didn't give him the full view but was more akin to downloading Wikipedia. Just because it was downloaded didn't mean he wouldn't actually have to study and understand it.

"That was a doozy," Jake muttered, inadvisably opening up himself to question from the two gods.

"Got a nice skill, I reckon?" the Viper asked.

"Sagacity of the Malefic Viper. I would explain what it does, but I guess you already know," Jake answered.

"Well, as the skill says, I am something of a sage myself. Surprised you unlocked that skill so early, though. The first one to get it for many eras, and I think the first one ever to get it at E-grade. I think you'll come to learn it is quite the skill."

“Glad to see that I can even surprise a sage with my humble actions,” he said, before turning to Duskleaf, a faux look of grief on his face. “I am so sorry I didn’t pick your skill. I promise to get one with your name in it next time if possible.”

“Just... don’t,” Duskleaf said, heaving a sigh of relief when he realized it was just a joke.

After talking a bit with the two, Jake decided to finally look at his status menu. However, before doing so, he dumped all his points into perception to truly see how far he had come.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (E) – lvl 73]

Class: [Ambitious Hunter – lvl 83]

Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 63]

Health Points (HP): 10030/10030

Mana Points (MP): 11350/11350

Stamina: 8024/8030

Stats

Strength: 629

Agility: 877

Endurance: 803

Vitality: 1003

Toughness: 650

Wisdom: 908

Intelligence: 442

Perception: 1689

Willpower: 550

Free points: 0

Titles:[Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch],[Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer V], [Dungeon Pioneer V], [Legendary Prodigy],[Prodigious Slayer of the Mighty], [Kingslayer], [Nobility: Lord], [Progenitor of the 93rd Universe]

Class Skills:[Basic One-Handed Weapons (Inferior)], [Advanced Stealth (Common)], [Advanced Archery (Common)], [Basic Twin Fang Style (Uncommon)], [Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra (Uncommon)], [Splitting Arrow (Uncommon)], [Hunter's Tracking (Uncommon)], [Big Game Hunter (Rare)], [Infused Powershot (Rare)], [Mark of the Ambitious Hunter (Rare)], [Descending Dark Fang (Rare)], [Limit Break (Rare)], [One Step Mile (Ancient)], [Moment of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex 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)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Rare)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Epic)], [Scales of

the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Sagacity 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 over his entire status menu, his progress was impressive. He had gotten so many titles and levels since last. Thinking back, he hadn't actually gone through his status since back before he fought the Horde Leader. After that, he had killed that boss, killed the King of the Forest, and now even gotten way stronger from his, to quote: 'cool-ass time-warped training session in alchemy.'

He was stronger than ever before by quite a lot. He hadn't had the chance to fight anything and test himself, but perhaps he could win against the King if it was the current him.

"Hey, if I fought the King of the Forest now, do you think I cou-"

"Fuck no."

“Absolutely not.”

The two gods answered simultaneously.

“Are yo-“

“Yeah, you would get your head ripped off in a moment. Seriously Jake, I still don’t think you understand the disparity. That was a true-blue D-grade unique lifeform. If he hadn’t been so far up his own ass, he would have killed you instantly. Perhaps if you had your current strength, all it would change is that he wouldn’t have bothered to play around but just killed you outright.”

“In other words, I just got extremely lucky?” Jake asked, a bit disappointed.

“Partly. You were offered a situation to exploit and the tools to possibly exploit it. If you had been any weaker, you would have failed; if you had been less deceitful and smart about it, you would have died. Don’t take anything away from your own victory. Besides, the King wasn’t a normal D-grade being. Far from it. So don’t belittle yourself.

"The tutorials are made to be theoretically beatable. They are balanced based on who attends them. The system naturally knew how much divine interference there would be, so it upped the overall difficulty. In fact, I reckon your tutorial was among the hardest of your universe and certainly the hardest for Earth. You beating it is fucking monstrous, so keep it up, you goddamn freak."

“Thanks, I guess. Anyway, what’s the plan now? More alchemy?” he asked, ready to try and practice his new skills.

“We got only a few hours before it is time for you to get whisked back to Earth, and that is counting the time-warping,” the Viper said. “I think it’s time we sit down and have a talk about what’s to come.”

Chapter 122: Homecoming

Sitting down around the table, the Viper finally brought out the owed bottle of booze. Duskleaf didn’t appear particularly interested but nevertheless joined them with a glass.

“I promised to answer a few questions, so here we are. Just know that there are things I cannot or will not tell you. Some because the system isn’t a fan, and some because the knowledge will do you more harm than good,” the Viper said, opening the conversation.

“I guess first of all... how the hell do you even know things? Things about Earth and such. I at first thought it was just a god-thing, but Duskleaf looks like a big question mark whenever you make a reference or a joke?” Jake asked. It wasn’t really valuable information, just something that had been irking him.

“Didn’t see that question being the first. See, I don’t know everything!” the scaled god joked before continuing. “There are a lot of skills out there. As you no doubt know, the system can give you access to knowledge and Records and I happen to have a skill that

allows me to know things. Think of it as me having access to a limited form of Google or Wikipedia that provides me with widely known information.”

“That sounds overpowered as fuck. How to get it?” Jake asked, gaping slightly. Holy shit he wanted that skill.

“Yeah, good luck getting it before being well into godhood. And it isn’t actually as good as it sounds and has many limits. But yeah, it is called Partial Omniscience. Quite a few other gods have similar skills, but I doubt anyone has one better than mine. I got it a couple of eras ago, so it is a bit of a new addition. The amount of useless info it provides is staggeringly stupid,” the Viper joked.

“Doesn’t it take its toll to have that much crammed into your head?” Jake asked with genuine concern. A mere fragment of knowledge had brought him to his knees; he could only imagine the weight from all of it.

“Jake, I have more in wisdom than your entire planet collectively. I am good,” the Malefic Viper answered dismissively. “But we both know that my awesomeness isn’t what matters right now.”

“True,” Jake said, before leaning back in the chair a bit. “What can I expect when I return to Earth?”

“When the system comes, it changes a lot of things. Life planets, such as your Earth, is one such thing. As you can likely already guess, your planet was actually quite small and fragile before the system with what its inhabitants can and will be able to do in the future. It has thus been terraformed to be more fitting for the new world,” the Viper answered.

“What exactly does that mean?”

“First of all, size. It is a lot bigger than before. A lot of it will still feel familiar, but a lot will be different. The general layout of the planet remains; it is all just... bigger. Oceans are deeper, landmasses expand further, mountains now extend toward the sky, taller than ever, forests become endless metropolises of trees that extend into the horizon,” the god began.

“Secondly, the creatures that lived there will have changed. While the enlightened races – aka humans – spend their time in a tutorial, the animals that remained lived through this baptism. Now joined by others made by the system, they have changed. Don’t underestimate them.”

“D-grades?” Jake asked, concerned.

“From the original inhabitants? Yes. Many. The energy to terraform the planet has also gone into these animals, allowing them to grow far more than usual. But I doubt you will be able to find any, and they will be few and far between. Grouped around natural treasures or special areas. I would be more concerned about the third thing. Tell me, what do you think would have happened to the King of the Forest if you hadn’t killed him?” he asked.

“Don’t tell me...”

“Yeah, he would have joined you back on Earth. And he is far from the only one. Many creatures have been placed in tutorials, and now they will come to Earth. The same would have been true for the four Beast Lords you killed. Of course, now they are dead, which will leave a gap. One for you to exploit,” the Viper smiled mischievously.

“Hold your horses; what do you mean they would have come to Earth? Doesn’t that mean a bunch of extremely powerful, possibly sapient beings with their own agendas will come to Earth? What the hell?” Jake asked, slightly panicking.

“It isn’t that bad. These D-grades won’t be able to walk about as they please but instead be placed in certain areas. Remember the bubble from the tutorial with the inner area? That bubble would have been what moved. Only the original inhabitants can enter, while someone like the King of the Forest can’t leave. Of course, after a while, the bubble will disperse, and they will be free to roam about,” the Viper clarified, dispelling much of Jake’s concern.

He went back to the last part of what the god said before with a sigh of relief. “So, what am I meant to exploit?”

Smiling, the god explained. “A gap has been made with the death of the King of the Forest. More accurately, his forest has been left behind. It will, without a doubt, be close to where you will be upon returning to Earth. Find it and establish yourself there. Locate the Pylon of Civilization. Ought to give you quite the head-start and a nice base of operation. Trust me on this... it will prove very fruitful down the line.”

“Not sure I am interested in settling down and getting a base. My current plan is to search for my parents along with my brother and his wife,” Jake answered.

“I got the feeling that you were like me when it comes to leadership, so just find someone to dump it on while reaping all the rewards from being in charge on paper. As for the family situation...,” the Viper sighed. “I have some bad news on that front.”

Jake felt a creeping sensation as he hesitated to ask. “What?”

With a look more serious than before, not carrying a hint of joking around. “Don’t even think about it.”

Everything in his head stopped turning for a moment as he just sat there in silence, letting the word ring out in the room. It took him a while for the words to sink in. *Why?* was the only thing he could ask himself.

Didn’t they make it? His father, Robert, had always been a resourceful man, his mother kind yet strong-willed. Caleb and Maja too... why?

“Is... is there a way to bring them back?” Jake asked, trying to grasp unto hope.

“I am sorry. I have tried, more than anyone else, to try and bring someone back to life... if it is possible, I still don’t know how. If there were a body and certain items and skills, it had been done only for those who died just moments earlier. If the Truesoul is gone, however... it isn’t possible,” the Viper answered. “Not like it matters currently... they still live.”

“What the hell!?” Jake said, a bit angry. “Then why the hell should I not go look for them?”

He was the kind of person who planned and followed that plan as far as he could go. One who set himself a goal to accomplish. He would do everything to succeed and would struggle until he won. He had done so when he set his goal as killing the King.

“Because it’s a waste of time. Do you know where your family is? How far away they are? Are you even certain you are strong enough to help them? And have you considered the consequences of focusing on finding them over your own progress?”

“I had kind of hoped for you to give me a clue as to a general direction...” Jake said.

“I won’t do that. The system wouldn’t have given that information either. It is naïve to think that you can find a handful of people in a short time on a planet that has changed so significantly with your limited power. It’s far more important for you to get stronger. Also... for once, believe a bit in them. Maybe they can take care of themselves, and your babying will only do more harm than good?”

Jake thought a bit, and as much as he hated it, he didn’t really feel like he could dispute any of the points. But at the same time... he felt a bit regretful. He had chosen Hunter’s Tracking to better find them. One Step Mile to hopefully travel faster to them. Was that all for naught?

“Then what the hell am I supposed to do?” he asked as he stared at the ceiling.

“Grow stronger. Make it fuel to move forward faster because you want to find and protect them. The path ahead of you is long; you will meet other people you want to protect too, no doubt,” the Viper said, consolingly.

“Besides... no matter what, at least you have two buddies here who will more than likely stick around through it all,” he finished with a light smile while motioning to himself and the silent Duskleaf.

Jake looked at the two of them while contemplating his future. He had not come to terms with it, but... he had to recognize that he was going to Earth alone. It's just that he still felt a bit... lonely.

His colleagues and friends were now either dead or had a relationship with him that he was far from comfortable with. Jacob had somehow survived, but he was incredibly unsure precisely what their meeting would be like. Casper was apparently an undead, so that was a whole *thing* he wasn't sure how to handle. Jake himself felt regret towards not helping either of them, while Jacob likely also harbored resentment towards Jake.

He never really had any friends outside of work and his family. They had all been pushed away through time, or he had distanced himself after his less than positive experience during university. The only other ones he had were friends online... and those relationships were even more ambiguous.

Perhaps he should just follow the advice of Villy. Find a base and plop himself down there and do alchemy or something. Get his head straight. But what then?

Would he become a leader of humanity and lead them in the new world? Yeah, fat chance of that happening. Would he become a hermit living alone in the woods? That didn't appear tempting either. For the first time in a long time, Jake was unsure of what to do.

He didn't have a plan. Not a long-term one anyway.

"I guess whatever comes, comes," he muttered to himself. "How long till I leave?"

"Around an hour in here. Minutes outside where time moves normally," the Viper answered.

"Let's head out then," Jake said, getting up.

Without arguing, the Viper complied as he began opening the door. Jake felt time slowly return to normal as the world returned to what it was before he entered. Except he now felt a bit more hollow inside. Hollow, but still determined.

They kept talking outside for a bit about other things he could expect back on Earth until he was reminded it was very soon time.

"I guess we will see each other later," he said, addressing the two gods. "And thanks for everything."

“No problem, that’s what friends are for, right? It would get monotonous if you thanked me every time I helped you. Just take care of yourself. Don’t die on me quite yet,” The Viper said, smiling.

“Stay safe,” Duskleaf added, opening his mouth for the first time in quite a while. “And remember not to slack off on your alchemy practice.”

“I don’t plan on dying any time soon. If ever. And don’t worry, I won’t slack. Gonna blow you away the next time we meet.”

With those words, they just stood there a while, taking in the atmosphere. It was likely the last time the three would meet in quite a while.

Jake had grown stronger once more. Titles, skills, and levels. After his last battle with the King, he had grown to entirely new levels. He was ready to unleash himself on the unsuspecting planet that is Earth.

Jacob stood beside his old friend and bodyguard as they prepared to return. The brief time spent in the temple had felt like far longer than it actually was. Well, for Bertram, it had been far longer. He had spent most of his time in a time chamber with the Grand Master after all.

While neither of them had grown overly-much in levels, both had grown in their own way. Bertram had skill-upgrades, his swordsmanship now a rare skill in itself. When he entered the chamber, he was a competent fighter by Earth’s standards. Now he was capable even by the standards of the multiverse, for an E-grade at least. He felt confident.

Jacob had instead spent his time learning. Due to his class, even this minor act had gained him two levels. Neither had done anything for their professions. Bertram because he didn't have the time, and Jacob because he already knew which profession to get in the future... and it wasn't quite time yet to get it.

A lot had been explained to them of what they would come to meet upon their return. And now the Grand Master, with his daughter by his side, gave them a final speech.

"Remember that safety is your number one concern. Avoid the danger zones to begin with while you build up your conclave of followers. Follow the Holy One's word, and you are sure to succeed in your path to enlighten your planet, but that doesn't mean you won't have to be vigilant.

"You need to be especially wary of followers of other gods. Enemy gods of the Holy Church may have blessed individuals who will target you due to your position and purpose. We cannot offer you any material assistance for the foreseeable future, so you will sadly be on your own.

"But even more so than those who wish to kill you, you must be wary of deceivers. Those who wish to use you or mislead you. Liars and the ones you thought of as friends. Do not trust easily those your skills cannot read properly," the bearded man said in his usual serious tone, finishing by turning to the guardian besides Jacob. "Bertram, your job is to protect the Augur. Your life and his are one and the same. Do not disappoint us."

Bertram only nodded, returning the seriousness of his temporary teacher. Jacob was deep in thought at the man's words as he was also still fine-tuning his plan upon returning to Earth. There were many things to address, and he needed to make sure he did things right the first time.

His resolve to spread the word of the Holy Church was genuine. His conviction true. He just needed to convince others. Religion had always been a tricky subject, one where more often than not, you were simply born into one.

With the system, it was very different. Gods no longer intangible things, no longer only representations of an ideology. They were now that and so much more. They were actual beings with the true power to influence the world.

“Has there been word on my inquiry related to the result of the tutorial I was part of?”

“Yes.”

A voice echoed out in the hall, startling everyone. The voice was overpowering yet gentle. A figure of light manifested before them, and upon seeing the visage of who had come, they all kneeled. The Grand Master had a mixed look of shock and pure reverence. *The Mother...*

Kneeling, none of them dared look up as the figure spoke. Even Jacob kneeled out of respect. “Your friend won. Defeated the destined King and became a Progenitor. Do not fight him, my son, but do not ally with him either. Avoid your friend for now. May you forever bask in the holy light, my children.”

With those words, the figure dispersed as fast as it came. Inera, Jacob, and Bertram all looked confused at words like ‘destined king’ and ‘progenitor.’ Only the Grand Master

understood those terms. But he was too beside himself to explain as he was still awestruck by what had just happened.

He barely managed to break out of the spell and throw out a brief half-coherent explanation before the two young humans were gone, taken by the system back to whence they came.

Casper stood surrounded by floating runes as he finished up his final preparations. His skin was white as ash, and his body didn't give off the faintest hint of life-energy, yet he appeared more lively than he had ever done since the tutorial went to shit.

All the runes around him spun around as they slowly came together and formed a single magic circle. Taking out a stake from his spatial storage, he moved the circle towards it as they embedded themselves on the weapon. Another trap prepared.

Exiting the tower, he gave a final nod towards the mighty Archlich that had served as his teacher for the last few weeks. He had progressed more than he thought possible, and he felt genuinely grateful.

The Archlich bowed back in recognition not of Casper but of the one who had granted him a blessing. That blessing was more than enough for Casper to be named the leader of the Undead forces that would return to Earth, but he had refused adamantly. But that didn't mean he wasn't respected or feared by the others.

The meeting in the courtyard below was also just about concluded when Casper made his entrance. They all stopped and stared at him for a while before turning back to their leader - a woman named Priscilla who had once been human like himself.

[Risen Human – lvl 58]

She gave him a sweet smile before returning her attention to the crowd.

Casper just sneered a bit, and it wasn't helped by the locket around his neck heating up slightly due to the annoyance of the ghost within. *I told you, Lyra, I don't care about her...*

With a sigh, he closed his eyes as he just waited for the end of the tutorial.

63 days and a bit over 22 hours ago, all humans disappeared from Earth. Now it was time for those who remained to come home.

Chapter im1: Intermission 1 - Carmen

For her, it had just been another typical and tiring day. She had to get up early, clean her room, and make it all nice and tidy before heading off for breakfast. After that, she would have to do a bit of studying before a nice workout in the yard. Then it was work time, a bit of recreational time in the evening, before her early bedtime.

It was a constant routine that she had done now for nearly two years. It wasn't that bad, and she got used to it. Of course, it was a bit of a downer that it was involuntary. Prison as a violent offender wasn't exactly the beacon of freedom after all.

Now, what exactly had the little harmless her done to land herself here on a five-year sentence? In a word, revenge, two words, justified revenge. Arguing the second point hadn't helped her much, however, as apparently that just meant the act had been premeditated.

Oh well, do the crime, do time. She had accepted it, and to be fair, the prison wasn't that bad, actually. She was lucky she lived in a country with a somewhat lax prison system focused on reformation over punishment. Which isn't to say she altogether avoided violence in there. But fucking someone up to the point where even the prison guards didn't recognize them apparently had done enough for others just to leave her alone. Though it didn't look perfect on her record.

Her story started 25 years ago when she was born. A bit cliché, but what can you do? After that, she grew up in what could only be described as a high-class family. One, she sadly didn't fit in with. Despite being a girl, she didn't precisely follow the expected customs of looking pretty and becoming a good wife but had interests that her aunt described as "unrefined and unsightly." *Stuck up bitch.*

Luckily her parents were the right sort. Her mother had married into the family, and her dad had always been a bit of an outcast himself. One that didn't get better when he allowed his wife to give her a Spanish name over a more Italian one. Carmen.

Carmen had grown up with that horrible extended family - one that would chastise her at every turn. "Why don't you wear a nice dress?" "Oh goodness, boxing? Wouldn't Ballet be more fitting for you?" and the worst one of them all. "Why can't you be more like Beatrice?"

She hadn't ever been the smartest or the prettiest girl. She wasn't delusional and knew this. In fact, she had that fact hammered into her skull constantly growing up because of her aunt's beautiful, smart, and just all-around perfect daughter. In other words, her cousin.

Her dad had never liked his own sister, and Carmen could see why. She was indeed the stereotypical entitled parent who believed their little angel to be perfect in everything. And annoyingly enough, Beatrice was just too damn close to perfect.

Her cousin had the highest grades, worked as a child model, and even had an acting gig when she was 8. She only grew up to be smarter and more beautiful than any of them imagined and finally managed to get into one of the best universities overseas.

Though Carmen did have to admit that it may just have been her own bias. When you are told something constantly, you begin to believe it. And she honestly did believe her cousin to be better than her, ending up in her suffering from a severe lack of self-esteem growing up. Every single family gathering was comparing her to her cousin, always with her losing out.

Despite it all, Carmen had tried to be her cousin's friend. Who wouldn't want to be the friend of miss-perfect? And for the most part, her cousin appeared to accept her as her little follower. That was how her childhood went. Carmen had always been the second fiddle. That was until she turned 18 and was introduced to an entirely new world: boxing.

It turns out that while Carmen was a dunce with a book, she was really good at hitting people. Impressively so. She began to build up her own self-confidence and began to finally find herself. She got new friends, a boyfriend and finally, she was her own person. Something she came to learn her cousin didn't like.

Carmen began not to give a shit about how her cousin got into the best university, or that she had gotten that new job as a model, or how many goddamn Facebook friends or Instagram followers she had.

But stupidly enough, she hadn't completely cut off that part of her family. To her parents, the family still mattered a lot, and she cared about her parents. So she stayed cordial and took the battering from all their relatives who disapproved of her life choices.

Honestly, her entire family was toxic as fuck. She even found out her grandmother had paid off her first boyfriend to leave her because he didn't "fit." Fuck her and fuck that guy.

Through those years, Carmen got better and better at boxing. Her coach was even confident that she could go pro if she kept up her practice. In the ring Carmen was happy. Until her cousin took that from her.

It was a simple favor. "Come help clean my car.". Thinking back, it was actually more an order than a request. But stupidly, she had gone to help her hopeless cousin. She had helped clean it with her cousin standing to the side on her phone. This day, however, Carmen had decided to stand up for herself.

She called out the bullshit and told her lazy cousin to get off her ass and help clean her own damn car. After a bit of bickering, her cousin had agreed, and for the first time, Carmen believed she had gotten one over her 'perfect' cousin.

That is just until she was in the car cleaning, with one of her hands in the gap of the open door. Without any warning, the door slammed, her hand caught in it. The sound of bone

being crushed was loud enough for the entire neighborhood to hear - the blood making all the cleaning a waste of time.

Her dear cousin had slammed the door on her hand, with full force. It was a memory Carmen would never forget. Not because of the pain and distress but because of what she saw. Looking up as she was screaming in pain, she vividly saw her cousin looking back at her, smiling. Her hand holding the door closed on her hand.

After that, Carmen didn't remember much, just that she was taken to the hospital and told that her hand had taken irreparable damage. Nerves were crushed, bone splintered. She would never be able to make a damn fist again in her life without significant pain, and she would likely be on pain medication for the rest of her life.

This would then be the part where charges were pressed for assault against her cousin, who so clearly maliciously attacked her and did grievous damage. The part where the police arrested her, and she got justice. The part that, of course, never fucking happened.

She cried crocodile tears, and it was all deemed a sad accident. So the situation was left with her poor cousin seen as the victim because she had such a hard time with the guilt. The police had asked Carmen if she wanted to press charges, and she sure as hell did.

All this had resulted in was her entire extended family shunning her and her parents for trying to 'ruin her cousin's life over a small accident'. How could the perfect cousin have even the slightest blemish on her records? Her aunt and uncle some-fucking-how ended up getting the charges just thrown out, and everyone moved on. Everyone except Carmen. She tried; she really did. Yet that fucking smile just stayed on her mind.

For more than a year, she didn't see her cousin. In this period, Carmen's life had just gone down the shitter. She was told she would never box again, to no one's surprise. Even a year later, she couldn't even properly type on a keyboard without constant pain. Her life was fucked permanently because of her petty cousin.

She had tried getting a job waitressing but couldn't hold plates with one of her hands. It turns out that when you are semi-disabled, everything is just harder. The government was a hard-ass with actually giving out disability; employers prefer employees with two fully functional hands.

All of it came to a crash fourteen months after the 'accident.' Carmen was at the time unemployed, drinking a bit too much, and back living with her parents. That day they got an invitation to a wedding - her cousin's.

Carmen didn't want to go. Of course, she didn't. But she was made to go anyway. The wedding was to be perfect, the entire family of both the bride and groom there. As her father had recently gotten promoted to a high position, she knew the only reason they were invited was to brag about how great their family was.

As the wedding had to be perfect, they had to do rehearsals - all of which they wanted Carmen to attend. They had to be sure she looked 'representable' for the big day after all. She went, got forced into a dress for the first time in years, and overall just wanted to get it all over with.

The first rehearsal she had gone to went smoothly as far as she knew. Yet afterward, she was dragged aside by her aunt, the perfect cousin's mother. Turns out her mangled hand wasn't pretty enough, and she would have to wear gloves. She should also stop looking so down but smile more because that is easy when you spent most of your time contemplating suicide or murder.

Carmen could only grit her teeth and hold her emotions in. This continued as she was pulled aside and admonished over and over again. Told what to say if asked, told what to wear if seen, what to do if prompted, and finally to be nice and leave early.

It all was just building up inside her. She wanted it over with until the final straw broke the camel's back.

Her cousin pulled her into an adjacent room, just the two of them. She said words Carmen would never forget.

"It is your own fault you had to be a bitch and get punished. Ladies shouldn't need to use their hands anyway, so stop being depressed or whatever."

These were the first words her cousin had spoken to her in fourteen months. No asking for forgiveness, not even a damn apology. She just made that same fucking smile.

So Carmen showed her that she could still make a fist – even if it hurt.

She showed her that she could still punch someone – her strength not any lower than before.

She showed her that she could still beat the living shit out of someone – that she was still not to be fucked with.

She showed her that she hadn't forgiven her – and that she would eventually always get her revenge.

It didn't continue for long before the screams caught the attention of the others. They rushed into the room, dragged Carmen off her cousin, and held her down when the soon-to-be-wed girl was taken to the hospital.

Carmen would never forget how her cousin looked when she saw her in the courtroom. Her face was unrecognizable. Carmen hadn't gone easy on her but let out all her frustrations.

In the end, her perfect cousin had been made not-so-perfect. Her beauty ruined forever. During the... 'altercation,' Beatrice had several bones broken that ended up requiring reconstructive surgery. She lost an eye, most of her teeth, and from what Carmen had heard, she still suffered from problems with her memory even half a year later.

During the trial, Carmen hadn't even tried to defend herself. She was, without a doubt, a nightmare to her attorney. But unlike her cousin, she didn't lie. She said exactly why she did what she did and exited the courtroom after getting her sentence by giving her entire extended family a fat finger.

Her next two years were, of course, spent in prison. Until one evening, it happened. The system arrived and changed her fate.

Now, two months later, the tutorial was about to come to an end. It had been quite a journey.

On that day, they were all whisked away, granted powers, and then put back in the exact same prison again. Except it wasn't. It was larger, the layout different, and now filled with zombie-like creatures. The prison guards had been transported to one end, with the prisoners in the other. It was set up as a war between the two with zombies in between.

It turns out that violent prisoners welcomed a chance to get back at the guards - especially the creepier guards who, as men, had chosen to work at a woman's prison for their own perverted tastes. It was a chance for revenge that they were more than happy to receive.

On the side of the prisoners, a being appeared. A woman in a haggard dress who didn't fit in, but she was powerful. She was there to lead them in the revolt, and her goal was to kill a similar figure on the guards' side. Simultaneously, the zombies were innumerable and had tens of variants and even a few leader-types.

Carmen didn't give a flying fuck about the whole revolt-scenario. On the very first day, she dove into some of the narrow hallways and began picking off zombies one by one. She had chosen Heavy Warrior but quickly found that she didn't like swinging around a weapon. Her fists were back, after all, so she threw the stupid axe she had picked to the side.

She began killing the zombies day in and day out. She got further and further in, killed stronger and stronger enemies, and just had a swell time. She entered something called a dungeon with zombie-beasts of some kind and a big wolf at the end. She killed all of those, too, although it had been pretty hard, and she did get half her body bitten off at one point. Thank fuck for self-healing.

In the end, she cleared three of those dungeons total. Met some weird woman who called herself a god, who she bluntly told to fuck right off as her arrogant demeanor reminded her way too much of her stuck-up aunt. Then she met a second one, a bloke who was actually quite lovely and ended up giving her a blessing or something. Good shit, as it increased her strength even further.

Now, on the final day, in the final hour, she stood in the hall where it all began. The prison guards' scenario versus prisoners had ended in slaughter to the surprise of absolutely no one. The two powerful characters who had wanted to kill each other both died in the battle, taking each other out, leaving only a few human survivors.

She herself knew that those two entities weren't the real final bosses but that it was some other monster her quest hinted at after she killed the wolf in the dungeon.

The prison guards won the scenario. The only remaining survivors on the guard side were the warden and a dozen or so of his crew of creepy fuckers. Of the prisoners, she saw nine of them - some of the prettier ones lay naked on the ground, defiled and dead. All of them clearly evolved at level 25 in their race.

The warden had taunted her of how he had won. How he was going to become a lord in the new world.

"Oh, Carmen, you were always a tough one to deal with. But I promise you that if you are obedient and become my woman, I won-"

That day she found out that her fists crushed skulls far more efficiently now.

She then found herself in a white room once more with the little dude who told her stuff. She was praised, which was nice, and given access to a store. She had earned quite a few points, gotten barely 600 million after all the math, netting her a title and quite a lot of points to spend. She even got points from some Lord title she didn't notice before? But the juicy one was what she got from her performance.

[Rising Star of the 93rd Universe] - As the curtains fall, some stand ahead of others. You have shown yourself to be a promising new initiate of your universe. But beware, for the road is long, and even the talented can fall due to a single misstep. +10 all stats, +5% all stats.

That one felt good. She quickly bought some skills as she didn't really need equipment and prepared to return to Earth.

She had a... reunion with her dear family to attend.

Chapter im2: Intermission 2 - Noboru Miyamoto

Laying on his bed, the old man opened his eyes ever so slightly. An action that clearly required a lot of energy from him, as he closed them once more soon after. He was still alive, but he knew that he would soon join his wife.

The passage of time had no mercy as it continued its march. His wrinkles were only getting deeper, and his old bones weaker by the day. It had been months since he had left his bed, and any action was hard now. But such is death.

Throughout his life, he had never believed that he would one day die in a bed. He had lived an exciting life and had few regrets if any at all.

Opening his eyes once more, he stared at the flowers at his bedside. A slight smile creeping to his lips as he remembered his wonderful great-grandchild that had come with them earlier that day... or was it yesterday? He didn't remember. His memory wasn't what it used to be.

107 years. That is how long the man had lived. Two world wars, one where he fought for his country until the two bombs fell. A war where they had been on the wrong side of history. Yet he didn't regret fighting, for he had done so for honor back then. It was what his family expected, even if he had been an already aging man back then.

Afterward, he rose to be the head of the family, sired five great children, and grew the company several times. He had built upon a legacy of centuries, and standing on the shoulders of giants, he had earned his place. The next generation was ready, and his name would be remembered.

He was Noboru Miyamoto, head of the Noboru family, chairman of the Noboru Group, as well as so many other titles he had been given throughout the years. He had done as his ancestors hoped, and he had excelled. He had done all for his family and had very few vanities for himself. He did have one, however.

On the wall hung an old Japanese sword. One inherited in the family all the way back to when Shoguns still ruled the land. Their family had once been known as honorable warriors, and while his family had now mostly shied away from the arts of combat, he had chosen to honor that tradition.

He had reached the highest honors in kendo, won national championships, and in his youth hailed as one of the greatest geniuses ever. His father hadn't approved for a long time as he preferred for his son to learn valuable business skills instead, but due to his excellent results, he still brought honor to his family, so it was allowed.

Now it was only his vanity. Not that he had been able to pick up a sword for more than a year. But before that, he practiced every chance he got. He hadn't been in the professional sphere for more than half a century, but before a few years ago, he hadn't missed a single day of training. It was his own personal way of meditating.

Miyamoto was a proud man. He was proud of all he had done, all he had accomplished. He blinked or believed he did so, but he must have fallen asleep for a moment. Before him, he saw his family. All of them.

Tens of people had gathered in the room - the doctor standing at his side. Most of the women with tears in their eyes, while the men stoically held back their grief. Tears would flow only when alone. Miyamoto heard the doctor say some things, and despite him not quite hearing what he said, he knew what it was. His time had come.

Smiling, he tried to lift his feeble hand but failed as he had no strength left. But it was okay. Looking them in the eyes, especially his grandson, a middle-aged man of strong stature especially. His successor. They all understood his sentiment.

I leave it all to you.

Closing his eyes for what should have been the last time, he heard a loud ‘ding.’ A sound that appeared not to be a sound, but instead, it rang out within his very mind. And then it all turned white.

The old man found himself standing in a completely white room. Standing. On his two legs that hadn’t been able to carry his weight for nearly a year, and not without a cane for a decade. Yet now he stood steadily. His body was no longer numb from medicine. He was alive.

Is this the realm of reincarnation? he asked himself. An answer that was soon found as he saw a weird humanoid creature that began explaining his circumstances. Explaining the multiverse, levels, and all kinds of concepts Miyamoto could most easily compare to those concepts in the phone-games he saw his great-grandchildren play around with.

And that was how Noboru Miyamoto entered the system on the day he should have died. That day was more than two months ago, as the tutorial was now very soon over.

In the pouring rain stood a single man wearing a dark-blue robe as he swung his sword, clashing with another before him - a man not of flesh and bone, but stone and soil. Yet he moved like a man and swung his halberd with agility and great finesse.

But the warrior in blue moved with even more grace as he dodged, his footwork impeccable, and every swing of his sword carrying deadly intent. The rain appeared to move as he did, dancing with his steps, marveling at his skill and demeanor.

The warrior of stone was stronger, faster, but the one in blue was more skilled. It was an even fight, with skills being exchanged left and right.

Around them stood many other fighters, now only staring at the duel. On one side, men of stone, on the other, humans. A commander of the Terracotta Army facing off against a new initiate to the system.

The fight had been going on for only a few minutes, and they both knew there were only mere minutes left of the tutorial as a whole. Yet neither showed any impatience as they fought, both knowing that a single misstep would mean defeat and death.

On the humans' side stood a gathering of people in similar robes to the warrior in blue. They all had nervous looks on their faces yet didn't dare to step forward. Their patriarch had chosen this duel, and they would respect it.

Clashing with their weapons, both warriors fell back as the timer now reached only a minute. Both looked at each other, the eyes of stone meeting the eyes of the human across from it. Their next clash would be the last, and the one to determine the victor. Neither willing to let the battle end as a tie.

The Terracotta commander got down in a stance as energy swirled around him, and the air crackled. As if a tempest kicked up around him, power swirled chaotically. On the other side, the warrior in blue bent his knees as he prepared his blade, his face serene.

Miyamoto, the warrior in blue, smiled slightly to himself as he prepared his attack. The rain upon his skin, soothing his soul as he saw his opponent grow stronger with every passing moment. A direct clash would be unwise, but his honor didn't allow him to dodge.

His face was still wrinkled and old, his limbs thin and his hair white. He looked like a man with one foot in the grave, but his demeanor and straight back told otherwise. He was filled with life and power, more than ever before despite his decrepit appearance.

Looking at the rain, he felt inspired once more, far from the first time during these last few months. He had always believed the world to be more than what was, for things to exist that man was never meant to touch upon. But after the system, he was no longer a man, and those laws were now his to reach towards.

Pouring his enlightenment into his blade and his actions, he sprung forth, his opponent doing the same. He didn't move according to a plan but simply followed the way of the rain.

They clashed, but no explosion or shockwave was felt as the observers expected. Instead, it all just silently ended as the blade slid through the air, calm as the light drizzle around them. It didn't stop when it hit the halberd but kept cutting as it passed through the Commander like he too was only made of water.

The Commander fell now in two, the warrior in blue smiling and sheathed his sword as he looked towards the sky. His last sight was the rain as he heard the kill's notifications.

You have slain [Terracotta Army Commander – lvl 99] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 1.000.000 TP earned

As the fourth and strongest Army Commander fell, only the General remained. He stood on the other side and nodded in recognition towards the warrior in blue. As a D-grade, he would be able to end the warrior instantly if he stepped in. But it was not time. He would prefer to face the warrior back on the planet known as Earth.

The tutorial ended, as Miyamoto found himself in the white room once more.

After all the calculations, he had ended up with barely 1 billion points, a big contributor to that being his Legendary Prodigy title. A title the old man found a bit... unfitting with his age. But perhaps due to his many titles or his solo-killing of the strongest Commander, he was awarded a title.

[True Standout of the 93rd Universe] - As the curtains fall, some prove themselves True Standouts. You have shown yourself to be a very promising new initiate of your universe. But beware, for the road is long, and even the talented can fall due to a single misstep.
+15 all stats, +10% all stats.

With that, the tutorial ended, and he and his family would return to Earth. Reunite with the clan, and work to reunite their country. Establish themselves as the most powerful faction of the new world.

With their patriarch - the Sword Saint - at the helm, they would prove themselves supreme.

Chapter im3: Intermission 3 - Eron

Life is beautiful.

To see the life of others flourish, perhaps even more so. To see the hope and happiness that new life brings into the world and how that spark of life would only grow with the years.

At the same time, the deterioration of life is perhaps the most tragic thing. To see age slowly neuter that spark, or to see sickness or injury slowly sap away at its splendor.

Eron had always loved life. Not as a broad thing, but just the mere existence of it. From an early age, it had intrigued him. He remembered rushing home from school every single day, not to play or be with friends, but to sit and stare at a bird nest he could see from his second-floor window.

Eggs had been laid in it - five of them. The child loved seeing them grow day after day, and he loved seeing their parents' attentiveness as they took care of them, making sure that the small sparks of life wouldn't be extinguished.

When they were born, their spark only grew. Eron observed the birds every single day until one day they were no longer there. He went crying to his parents and was told by his father that someday the bird has to leave its nest and that it was now its own bird. Its own independent spark of life traveling around. That it was time for it to form its own family soon and spread the wonderful gift of life.

He had even seen his own spark. It was beautiful, like all the others. He remembered staring at it in the mirror for hours before his mother came to get him.

Through growing up, he continued being fascinated with life. He would help animals he found to reignite their fading sparks, or he would look sadly on as the neighbor's dog began to have its spark fade. Even as a child, he began to understand that some sparks could never reignite. They had simply burnt out, and it was their time. The dog died shortly after of old age.

In his teenage years, he was always a bit of an isolated child. He was perhaps always a bit of an oddball, as he just liked to watch more than participate. But that all began to change one day when he went to the bookstore with his father and found a book on physiology and medicine.

He was fascinated, to say the least. The prospects of being someone whose sole existence was to preserve life and keep the spark healthy... it became his dream. A dream he would pursue to great success.

After that, he began studying to reach his goal. With the singlemindedness he had used to observe the birds, he dove into the books. He managed to get to the top of his class and enter a prestigious university. There he once more managed to prove excellent.

It was joked about that Eron could see if a person was sick just by looking at them. Which Eron never found particularly funny. Because he could. A fact he had learned very early on in his life, and he knew only he could see those small sparks. A secret he had come to hide. It was his gift, one he would not waste.

Graduating, he had become a fully-fledged doctor. A title he swiftly advanced to as he was named head surgeon. With his talent and persistence, he could, without a doubt, have advanced further, but he chose not to. His creed was to save and preserve life, and further advancements would mean having to waste time in meetings and administration - something he adamantly refused to do.

He had become addicted to the feeling of nurturing those sparks. To have a patient enter with only a small flicker remaining, only for him to make it flare to life once more. He never needed the advanced instruments of others to see the patients' condition. The spark was enough.

Losing a patient, on the other hand, was the worst feeling. To desperately try and nurture the spark, only for it to lose its glow anyway. He knew once the spark completely disappeared, there was no way back - no resuscitation possible, no hope for life to return. This was the saddest feeling he could imagine, and the first few deaths took their toll.

He also purposefully avoided some places. The ward with the terminal patients he took a long road to avoid. The same was true for care centers and homes for the elderly. He hated seeing their sparks.

They were weak. A type of weakness Eron knew he couldn't fix. It was the type that meant death was imminent. That caused the spark to die slowly.

Perhaps even worse was knowing when it would die. Eron's experiences had taught him that. Like with the dog, he could tell. And who wants to know that they were going to die within the week?

Why was he cursed with the knowledge that the older woman he saw in the grocery store had only a few weeks left? Or that his very own father's cancer wasn't as benign as they all hoped? He knew he couldn't share any of it. Who would believe him? And if they did, would they blame him for the deaths?

Eron thought of this 'gift' of his many times. What it was, or why he had it. When he was younger, he wondered if he was the protagonist of some hero's tale? Did perhaps everyone have powers they chose to hide? Or was there something wrong with him?

He finally got his answer when the system came.

A bloodline. A word Eron would not have used to describe it, but a concept he quickly comprehended. He indeed was special. He had a blessing few had, one now officially recognized by the system in this new world.

The bloodline ability was simple. It allowed Eron to 'see' vital energy. To understand it. And soon, as he came to learn, to far more easily control it. When the choice of class was presented, he didn't hesitate a second to pick healer.

A chance to help nurture more sparks was too good to pass up. And the thought of instead extinguishing those sparks disgusted him on a fundamental level.

After that, he found himself thrown into a new world. A city of some kind, but the architecture was not like anything he had seen before. It was vaguely human, but everything was just... bigger. Doors were all roughly twice as big, and the same went for windows and houses in general. The streets were broader than most 2-lane highways.

There was a distinct lack of any auxiliary items, though. No furniture was found, just huge hollow houses and empty streets.

With him was a vast array of other humans. Many he recognized from the hospital, patients, and employees both. Most surprising, however, was the man he found himself right next to. The man he was just about to operate on - a man a single step away from death moments before. Now fully healed.

It was done through means above his wildest imaginations. What is more, everyone's sparks were shining brighter than ever before. It was wonderful.

They all knew this area was meant to be a tutorial. But what it was supposed to test, nobody knew. First, they all grouped up, a crowd of around 40 people, and went to one of the nearby houses to gather their thoughts. The tutorial called it 'survival' but provided little more information than that.

After exchanging greetings and introductions, they began to think of basic necessities. None of them had anything but the clothes on their backs, a satchel of potions, and their starting equipment.

All was well... until nightfall.

Creatures came. Out of the dark corners of every street, of every abandoned building. Small things with sharp claws and maws full of teeth.

The people responded as one would expect - panic, confusion, and finally cohesion born of a will to survive. They fought and, in the end, won against the monsters. But they lost eight people.... eight lights snuffed out forever. A heart-wrenching moment for all of them, perhaps, but Eron felt it even more so.

Eron hated himself for that first night. He had been weak. He had been cowardly. He could have healed more, done more... he could have saved them. But he froze as he saw the creatures. Because they also carried sparks of life within them. Some which burned more brightly, and some less so. Who was he to be the arbiter of their death?

It was a wake-up call for all of them. Eron began immersing himself in his new powers of healing as he healed the injured after the fight. Despite what one may believe of a hospital, few had chosen to be a healer. Most had gone with one of the warrior options, a few with archer, and a lot with the caster. Of their group of 40, they only had 2 healers. One of which died in the attack, leaving him as the only one. But he did notice that they lacked a lot of hospital employees too... had they been brought to another tutorial? Were the number of healers low on purpose?

When he practiced the healing spells, he found that they were... inefficient. It didn't nurture the spark as well as it should. Whenever he healed someone, he could see the energy that was called mana transform as it got channeled through his skill. Converted into the vital energy that made up the sparks.

Practicing with the skill, he quickly improved drastically. He learned to subtly control the vital energy as he healed people. It was wonderful for him to see his touch directly restoring the sparks.

That day he got quite a few levels, and his skill even upgraded two times, becoming a rare skill. He even got a new rare skill upon reaching level 5. It was all fascinating.

The days ticked by, and a routine was formed. The days were quiet for the most part, with only other humans really offering issues. They discovered that food did exist, but it was a bit hard to come by. Water was even worse, as only a single pond was found, and it was often guarded by strong lizards covered in spikes.

At night the dark creatures would appear and attack them. And every night, they got stronger. Luckily, or perhaps by design, so did the survivors. They fought them off time and time again, and soon it was barely an issue for their group to defeat them.

That is until the tenth day. This time was different, as a larger bulky version of the creatures appeared. It was larger and stronger than all those prior. That night they lost four more before the creature fell. It was also the day Eron began to form a new idea.

Something... happened whenever someone's spark was snuffed out. For a few moments after their death, it was still there, like the smoke remaining after a matchstick is extinguished. And like that smoke, perhaps a new flame could reignite the spark.

A few days later, another person died. Their group had expanded at this point, as the danger posed by the larger creatures had made the humans realize they had to band together. This naturally also meant that the amount of attacking creatures increased. The one who died this time was a young woman who had yet to even reach level 10.

Eron had already discovered at this point that he could heal people without them being alive. He could still heal their physical body. It was actually quite simple, as all he had to

do was guide the vital energies through their bodies while also applying his extensive medical knowledge and knowledge of human anatomy.

To do this had become a common practice after he had first done it. On the one hand, it offered those who cared about the victim a complete corpse and the chance for a proper burial. From a more pragmatic standpoint, it allowed Eron to level more, making further healing more effective.

This also, in turn, offered him a chance to experiment with his newfound idea. An idea that failed again and again. No matter what he did, he couldn't quite reignite the spark. A final step eluded him time and time again. It was frustrating, but the constant pressure from the nightly attacks and other human conflicts didn't offer him much peace to ponder on it.

Days went by quickly with this, until the 20th day. This time the difficulty spiked once more. The creatures were more numerous, yet again, a new type emerged - this one a spiked dark creature that could even use magic. Its level also marked a new threshold. 25.

That day more than twenty people died. Eron had reached level 24 during the battle and was on the verge of advancing himself. He hadn't bothered much with his profession, which he had unlocked during the slight downtime he had, so his race-level was still low.

With the many new corpses, Eron began their restoration and his secret experiment. One that failed time after time, until finally, he discovered the issue on the 17th corpse. What his healing lacked wasn't the power of vitality. It was a direction - intent.

He needed not just to revive the 'life' of someone, but their spirit too. He tried this on the 17th, and for but a brief moment, he managed to bring him back, but soon after, the spark just snuffed out again. Like whatever was meant to keep the spark alit was gone.

New intent was needed. A new 'guide' if you may. Eron saw no other alternative than his own vital energy to do this. For the first time, he didn't only pour mana into the healing spell, but his very own life force as well. This time the spark was reignited without burning out. At the very same moment, he reached level 25 and got a class evolution.

On the 20th day was the day he was reborn. He met a god and successfully resurrected a person.

On the final day of the tutorial, he stood in the middle of the large road, not far from where he had first appeared. A white robe covered his body as he gazed at the many people following him. Men and women who all stood by him - eyes glazed over.

His resurrection was a success... of the body. It turns out the soul is a bit harder to return than that. In the end, only the body lived. Its stats intact, sometimes perhaps even a single skill still functioning. But all intelligence and personality were gone - they were but living corpses. Their souls lost.

But to Eron, that was okay. Because their sparks now burned more brightly than ever before. All in the same beautiful color as the one he saw in the mirror all those years ago.

Chapter 123: The Blue Marble

The sun hung above as it shone upon the serene lake. The sky was blue, inviting everyone to bask in the warmth outside and enjoy the weather. Everything appeared utterly ordinary at first glance. Until it wasn't.

The surface of the lake erupted as a giant maw emerged. In the mouth of the enormous fish was a several meters long insect that had been invisibly surfing along the surface of the water only moments earlier.

The fish looked like a giant bass. Its teeth were far more prolonged and sharper than expected, and the sheen from their sharpness only amplified by the glittering droplets of water. Despite its size and jaw-strength, it failed to shut its maw tight.

Four powerful legs of what had been a small water strider before the system held it open. At the same time it opened its tiny mouth and let out a blast of water straight down into the mouth of the beast that had tried to eat it. In a turn of events where the hunter became the hunted, the fish was bisected into two pieces by a water cutter.

Blood flew everywhere as the beast died from the powerful attack, unable even to comprehend its demise. The victory of the strider was short-lived, however.

From above dove the figure of a giant bird, and before the strider could reconnect with the water and make its escape, it was caught in two powerful talons that crushed its feeble head.

The giant hawk beat its wings as it flew off with its dead prey still clenched below it. The serene lake that was now filled with blood reflected in its eyes - the sun above uncaring.

Earth had become a battlefield. A battlefield the humans would now rejoin. Rejoin, and once more, strive to be at the top of the food chain.

What had once been a great city was now but a shell of its former self. The massive monoliths of glass that had marked the prowess of human engineering now lay shattered on the ground. The structures toppled to the ground or ripped apart from the inside out.

Nature had not been kind to human civilization. It had reclaimed most of what had formerly been taken from it by urban development. Grass now grew in the streets, moss covered the buildings that still stood, and one could even see trees that had grown to full size in mere weeks.

This day there was a significant change. Scattered around the city, humans appeared. All at once, the city that had been populated by nearly a million people was now inhabited once more.

Of the million people, around 800.000 – 900.000 returned - a phenomenon that was not just in this city, but the entire world. The survival rate of tutorials coming at 86% would surprise most, some for how low it was and some for how high.

Inside what had once been the lobby of a big office building, a cluster of humans appeared. The many-storied juggernaut was now reduced to only its ground floor. Among those who appeared stood a man with long blonde hair in a white robe, together with a stoic armored man by his side.

Jacob looked around to get a feeling for his surroundings. He instantly noticed many familiar faces in the crowd. Familiar, yet foreign. Only a bit over two months had passed, but he could see the changes on everyone's faces.

His Lighthouse of the Holy Mother allowed him to soak in the emotions of all those around him. He felt mainly trepidation mixed in with a bit of relief. It was no surprise that many were happy the nightmare that was a tutorial was over.

The emotions were many and varied. But one stood out more than any of the others. Stood out in that Jacob couldn't feel anything at all.

Solitarily stood a figure covered in the brown cloak given to archers. Beneath it, one could see the black leather armor and beneath him two shoddy-looking boots. Jacob couldn't even look at his face as a mask now covered it. Yet, he didn't fail to recognize his old employee. Jake.

Soon the silence was broken as people began talking. Some were simply looking for comfort, others asking about their loved ones. Not everyone had entered the tutorial with those closest to them, far from it. A few even saw Jacob and turned to him for direction. And direction he would give them.

"Everyone, please calm down!" he yelled out, amplified by one of two remnant skills from his time as a warrior: Amplify Voice. A weak common-rarity skill, but it was more than enough to have the focus of the room switch to him. He even felt two powerful eyes from behind a mask pierce into him. He shuddered slightly inwardly but appeared unfazed outwardly.

“Jacob, is that you?” someone asked. Looking at him, Jacob saw it was Mike. Joanna’s husband.

“It is good to see you made it, Mike. I- “

“Were you in the tutorial with my wife? What about everyone else in the elevator with us back then?” Mike quickly interrupted frantically. The anxiousness clear on his face.

“I am sorry. Our tutorial was... a mess,” Jacob answered, loud enough for everyone around to hear. The focus now solely on him. “We had bad actors. They moved to conquer or simply kill everyone. In the end, they succeeded. Even I lost my life and only managed to save myself and Bertram with the help of a benevolent god. By the time I died, only two others remained.”

“Joanna... is...” Mike stammered out as tears began gathering in his eyes.

“I truly am sorry. It was a true nightmare,” Jacob tried to console him. “But I managed to help her in the end. She died with only the regret that she couldn’t rejoin you and her children here on Earth. Just know that she truly is in a better place now... not in a figurative way either. In the future, I swear you will be able to speak with her again.”

“Who or what killed her?” Mike asked, not caring much about the last part of what Jacob said.

“Her death was caused by a maniac called William. He sought to slaughter everyone for his own gains,” he answered, glancing at Jake. “An endeavor he failed. I reckon you ended him, Jake?”

Everyone turned their gazes to the masked figure; many only truly noticing him now. Even with everyone wearing widely differing outfits of questionable taste, Jake still stood out. His mask was making him more than a little conspicuous.

Jake looked up at Jacob. He tried to search his eyes for any emotions... but found that his gaze was the same as before the tutorial. If with a bit more wariness. He was relieved that he didn't appear to blame him for what happened. “Yeah, but another god interfered and ended up saving him in the end.”

“So he still lives...” Jacob muttered. Turning his gaze away from Jake, he redirected his attention away from the archer as he spoke once more. “Everyone, please listen to me when I say we aren't safe even here. Earth has changed and is, in many ways, even more dangerous than the tutorials. We must stick together if we wish to make it.”

“What the fuck are you on about?” someone yelled at the back. Someone who didn't know Jacob before the tutorials.

Jacob wasn't offended but answered honestly. “While we struggled in the tutorials, all that was not human struggled on Earth. To underestimate any being after the system is foolish. Additionally, the trials of the tutorials are not over. We will...”

Jacob went on to explain much of what Jake had been told about by the Viper earlier. A few details differed, but nothing of consequence. At the same time, the archer was still

considering his own plans. He felt a few uncomfortable gazes on him, no doubt trying to feel him out. Mike being one of them.

Slowly Jacob began to win people over. His class and skills were surely not hurting his cause either. It affected everyone in the broken-down lobby except for Jake.

Their willingness to follow him was naturally only strengthened from the harsh circumstances. Many felt lost and without purpose. They were afraid of the future, not sure what to do. For someone to stand up and give them direction was exactly what many needed.

Winning over a few, the group-thinking quickly took over. In the end, everyone simply followed when Jacob began leading them out of the broken building and onto the street. Jake had decided to stick around a bit at the back alone, as he had gotten a prompt upon his return, making him aware he wasn't *that pressed for time*. Soon, he was joined by Mike.

"Why are you wearing that stupid mask?" he asked first thing. He had wanted to ask about his wife. Wanted to learn more about her killer. But instead, he threw a quick jab at the young man's appearance. He found it disrespectful and stupid for him to hide beneath a mask.

The question annoyed Jake more than it should have. That mask was the proof of his victory over the King of the Forest. Evidence of him beating the tutorial. Instead of giving a proper answer, he snapped back at him.

"Why are you so pathetically weak?"

Jake had done a quick round of Identify while half-listening to Jacob's speech. Trying to get a feeling for the average levels. And it was... disappointing. Incredibly so.

While the levels varied, the average was only around 14 or 15. Everyone had reached level 10, but many had only just done so. Jake could barely comprehend how that was even possible. Jacob had naturally been the second-highest person except for himself. A fact that clearly gave him a lot of credibility for those able to Identify him.

"What the fuck did you just say to me?" Mike said, puffing up. He was a tall man, more than half a head taller than Jake. His muscles were far more prominent than Jake's. But he was truly weak - only level 16. Jake wasn't even sure if he had upgraded his class yet.

"I said you're weak. Your equipment is shit; your level is shit. What the fuck did you expect to accomplish after lazing about in the tutorial for two months?" Jake snapped back. He was annoyed. Not just at Mike but everyone.

What the fuck had they been doing? He understood that not everyone is fit for fighting, but what about professions? And even if they weren't fighters, they should at least learn to protect themselves.

His comment had clearly gotten the attention of more than just Mike as many turned towards him. Their gazes were less than gentle as he felt several people try and Identify him. Useless attempts as there was no way a bunch of F and the rare E-grade humans could pierce through the Shroud of the Primordial.

“What the fuck do you know, you little whelp?” Mike yelled, his face red. “I went to hell and back, you cocksucker. Watch your goddamn mouth, or I’ll shut it for you.”

“You are free to try,” Jake said, staring into the eyes of the man.

Mike felt a shiver run down his spine as he saw those eyes. But instead of listening to his instincts, he exacerbated the situation. His own fear made him only angrier - his sorrow of his learning the death of his wife redirected into anger at Jake.

So he threw a punch.

It never landed.

Jake caught it easily. Its speed pathetic in his eyes. The strength behind it was negligible. He caught it and pressed down on the fist in his hand. He felt it squash like a rotten apple as Mike screamed out in pain.

If their conflict didn’t have everyone’s attention before, they sure had all eyes on them now. Jacob had been watching it from the beginning without interfering. A decision he now regretted as the situation had resulted in blood being spilled.

Several yells sounded out as people reacted. Some drew their weapons; others prepared themselves to cast magic. In a split-second, the situation had turned from just an interesting squabble to a possible fight.

“Please, everyone!” Jacob yelled out, all his skills on full display as he tried to calm the agitated crowd. It had some effect as everyone just seemed to have frozen. The only ones still moving being Mike, who held his bloody hand, and Jake, who stood indifferently staring down at the now kneeling man.

“This is a waste of time,” Jake said after a bit. Taking out a healing potion from his spatial storage, he put it down on the floor in front of Mike as he turned to leave. He just wanted to get out of the situation he had found himself in.

“Jake, can I have just two seconds of your time?” Jacob quickly asked as he read the archer’s intent to leave.

He really didn’t want to, but Jake nevertheless agreed. “Fine.”

Walking towards Jacob, people just moved out of the way. Jake could feel the looks of fear in the eyes of his former colleagues. The wariness and unwillingness to engage him. Many of the eyes belonging to people who had looked down on him or felt utterly indifferent towards him only a few months ago. In a way, it was oddly satisfying.

Jacob took Jake a bit away from the others to talk. It likely didn’t help as everyone had amplified hearing with increased stats, making it more of a gesture more than anything else. Nevertheless, Jake appreciated having more space around them.

“You have grown strong,” was the first thing he said, a slight smile on his lips. He didn’t appear to care much for the still crying man in the background who had yet to drink the potion.

In actuality, Jacob was just happy Jake hadn’t killed Mike. He had been afraid of that happening. His skills for reading people didn’t work on Jake, and the last time he saw him, he had led him into an ambush. Both men had feared the other blamed them for all the shit that had happened.

“Yeah,” Jake simply said.

“You are leaving, right?” Jacob asked.

“Yeah... I don’t really fit here,” Jake sighed. A statement Jacob couldn’t really dispute.

“Just... take care, man. That tutorial was a shithole and... I’m sorry about everything I did. I am happy to hear that you managed to beat it in the end. We all need to create our own place in this new world - our new homes. I don’t know what your plans are, but I hope you find what you are looking for,” Jacob said, smiling at his friend. “I fucked up in the tutorial big-time... I nearly got you killed because of how much of an idiot I was... I hope that you forgive me, but I understand if you won’t. Just know that I will always consider you a friend, even if you don’t consider me one.”

Jacob knew the Holy Mother and Grand Master had both made it pretty clear that he should be cautious and distance himself from Jake, but that didn’t mean Jacob was going to. Jake was his friend, and not even the mightiest god could change that. Their friendship was between him and Jake, and no one else.

“I...” Jake began but wasn’t sure what to say. Jacob really hadn’t changed much at all despite everything. He had always had a hard time with words, so instead, he decided just to act. “Here, take these. Healers are still a rarity, I assume, so these should come in handy.”

He took out nearly a hundred healing, stamina, and mana potions. Most of them being his older creations, but a few newer ones were also mixed in. Jake didn’t need them, and it felt good to offload them. His only regret was losing the bottles as those could be reused. But such a complaint was too petty even to consider.

While Jake felt it was just a nice gesture, it was something entirely else for Jacob and those with sharper eyes who observed them. They saw Jake hand him a huge satchel filled with potions. They all remembered those bottles and the miraculous benefits they carried. All remember how they had saved their lives.

And now Jake gifted them so many. Nobody knew where he got them from and frankly didn’t care. Jacob and Bertram were the only ones who knew that Jake had likely created them himself. Both of them had become privy to information not many others had, including knowledge of different professions. Alchemy naturally being one of them.

“I am sure these will come in handy,” Jacob replied as he took the satchel. He also couldn’t ignore the fact that Jake had summoned it all out of thin air, meaning he either had a pocket storage skill or perhaps even a spatial storage item. *He is truly different from the rest of us*, he thought.

“Here, take this in return,” Jacob said, as he handed Jake a small book. “I spent the last few weeks reading... I took down some notes that I hope may come in handy. It isn’t much, but I truly don’t have anything else of value to offer.”

“Thanks,” Jake said, depositing the small book in his spatial storage. “I’m off.”

Jake began walking towards the exit as a roar shook the building. Everyone looked around, terrified, until the source became apparent.

With a crash, one of the walls in the far back end was smashed through. Jake looked back and saw a huge lizard the size of a minivan. He didn’t feel any sense of danger from it, and a quick identification only confirmed its weakness.

[Rockeater Saurolisk – lvl 51]

Of course, the reactions from the others in the room were vastly different. The only other person who could Identify its level was Jacob, meaning all people saw was two question marks. The type of enemy that in tutorials always meant casualties. But none of them died this day.

The lizard looked the room over, ignoring all the weak humans completely until its eyes finally landed on the only one with a level high enough to make him worth hunting – Jacob. Before the beast even did anything, it froze in place. Its eyes widened with fear as it found itself unable to move. A gaze had locked onto it – that of an Apex Predator, or more accurately, an Apex Hunter.

Less than a second later, its head exploded as an arrow pierced through the room. The poor lizard was dead before it could even recognize how much it had fucked up by barging

into that particular building and that the human it couldn't even recognize the strength of was indeed far above its own.

"Stupid lizard," Jake muttered as he walked out of the building. Everyone was just staring after him as he disappeared from sight.

Jacob, finding himself left to pick up the pieces of the situation that just happened, made the gawking populace focus on himself once more.

"We must leave this place. Find somewhere safe. Or at least safer. Find others to make a group big and strong enough to defend ourselves. Then- "

"Why did you let that guy go? Shouldn't he just protect us?" someone yelled out.

Jacob looked at the person, trying to hide his genuine annoyance. "His path is not ours, and none of you have any right to judge him. He has his own challenges and issues to deal with. Rather than just *expecting* someone to, you should instead think about how you can make someone *want* to protect you. We have nothing to offer someone on his level. Not yet, at least.

"Now, let us set out. Set out and create our new haven in this new world."

A bit away from the office building, a single man stood, having retreated the moment he appeared and before anyone had even noticed him. He stood on top of the building, as he looked down at them all exiting the old lobby, and he saw the lizard get killed instantly.

He smiled as he noticed the one who did it. Jake had been the first to teach him anything about combat in this new world and was a friend long before the tutorial.

Casper saw the masked figure that was walking off, turn his eyes towards him. They locked eyes, one with hollow black eyes and the other a piercing yellow gaze.

They didn't need any words as the two men nodded at each other. Jake, smiling beneath his mask and Casper chuckling a bit to himself. Both hated social interactions, and everything that needed to be said was communicated through that nod.

Casper looked towards the horizon as he set off, the emblem he had been given already making him aware of the closest meeting spot.

Take care, mate, and let's meet again.

Chapter 124: One Step Mile

The once-great city that Jake had called home for the last few years was nearly unrecognizable. The grand buildings were broken and in tatters, the streets dominated by the reclamation of mother nature.

Jake simply walked down the street at an average pace. Not asphalt but grass and weeds beneath his feet. On the way, he saw several other groups of humans. Some tried to approach him, some observed him warily, while some hid and believed their gazes undetected.

For those who tried to talk, a quick glance was usually enough for them to leave him be. Their inability to identify him without a doubt also playing a role in their decision to avoid him, which was exactly what Jake wanted right now. To be alone.

He was actually quite overwhelmed by the number of people he saw. One often forgets precisely how many people lived in big cities. In the end, it got so bad that Jake had to get off the streets. A quick leap using Badger Jump took him up to the roof of a still-standing four-story apartment building. That also earned him quite a few glances.

Jake needed time to think. His mind was a mess, only exacerbated by getting into a conflict first thing upon returning to Earth. He couldn't even blame Mike. He, too, hurt just as much as Jake, and lashing out was to be expected. They were both assholes. Himself appropriately more so as he had hurt the man for no good reason.

Looking towards the pretty blue sky, he thought of his next steps. What he usually did whenever he felt overwhelmed by something was to drown himself in work or studying. An approach he decided to replicate once again.

He wanted to find somewhere to settle down for a while. To do alchemy and practice and familiarize himself with all his upgraded and new skills. Without any clear direction, he, in the end, settled on just following the advice of the Malefic Viper. To find the territory that the King of the Forest was supposed to occupy.

Glancing about, he located the tallest building still standing. It even still had the radio tower on top.

A quick climb later, mainly consisting of him just penetrating stone with his fingers while climbing, he found himself on top of the tower. From there, he had quite the vantage point and could see the city in all of its decrepit glory.

But more importantly, he could see beyond it. And what he saw wasn't what he expected. The city itself was as he remembered it, save for the destruction, but what lay beyond certainly wasn't.

On one side, he saw a giant lake. Or maybe even an entire ocean. It had to be noted that there wasn't even a beach within a hundred miles before. Besides the lake, on all other sides, there were now only vast plains. Looking about, he could actually see where the roads just suddenly cut off. It was like someone had just plopped down landmasses all around.

Only one side looked somewhat normal. Jake could see the highway still continue outwards, and he could see it all looking relatively normal. There were quite a few things that stumped him, though.

He didn't see a single car anywhere. The radio tower he was on didn't have any of the electronic components either. He still saw plenty of bicycles scattered about but no cars, scooters, busses, or anything like that.

Another thing he noticed was the vast distance he could see - his insanely high perception, coupled with the lack of air pollution, giving him quite the view. However, there was one more thing contributing... the curvature of the Earth. Or more accurately, the lack thereof.

Oh, it was still there. Somewhere. But from where Jake was, it was barely noticeable, if at all. He had to guess that he was a bit more than a hundred meters up currently. And he could easily see hundreds up to perhaps a thousand kilometers away.

In the distance, he even saw a huge mountain range. One that certainly hadn't been there before. It all did begin to get a bit blurry at that distance, but the fact that he could see them was crazy enough.

Of course, he was looking for something rather specific...

Quest: Claim the Pylon of Civilization

As the rightful owner, you may be the first to claim your Pylon of Civilization. As long as this quest is active, no one else can claim it.

Objective: Claim Pylon of Civilization

Duration: 71:02:21

Remembering his original objective, he kept scouting around until he saw it - a huge forest. Naturally, due to the trees, he couldn't grasp its size, but it appeared huge at first glance. It was around fifty kilometers outside of the city or so, across a vast flat plain. His quest also gave him the vague feeling that the Pylon was that way.

Having a target, he jumped down from the building once more. He didn't bother with the frightened glances as he landed on the ground and began sprinting forward. Right now, he just wanted out of the city and away from civilization.

If the Viper was right, then that Pylon should be worth claiming. The Viper had said that the Nobility: Lord title allowed him to take control of it. Jake didn't have the faintest interest in creating a city, but chances are there would be some kind of reward associated with taking control of it anyway.

It didn't take him more than ten minutes to reach the outskirts of the city. On the journey, he was only attacked once. By humans even. A stupid accident where a bunch of arguing idiots got scared and threw a couple of spells at him.

He just ignored them as they missed, but his sheer speed was clearly enough to deter them and make them run away. The conflict he saw also wasn't just a one-off.

Many different groups found themselves in conflict. None of which Jake gave a shit about as he ran by. It wasn't his job to be a mediator. Life would no longer be safe, and laws didn't really matter anymore. No way he was going to begin playing judge, jury, and executioner towards random people. Oh, but there were three men ganging up on a woman and two kids, so he 'accidentally' loosed a Splitting Arrow, blowing off a few legs.

Getting to the plains, he finally felt free. Enemies had been scarce within the city. If you ignored all the humans, that is. Only a few roamed about, most of them weak. On these plains, however, he saw far more action. The first thing he encountered was a group of... cows. Yep, cows.

Identifying some, he discovered that they were all only F-grade.

[Bovine Stomper – lvl 19]

Jake smiled a bit to himself. He didn't even notice it himself as he found the silliness of cows being the first true challengers he would meet upon his return to Earth. He didn't count the stupid lizard.

Not that he had any intention of fighting the things. It would be pointless. None of them would give him any experience worth noting, and from his kill on the lizard, he also saw no replacement for tutorial points. Kills just gave experience, and that was it.

Evading the beasts, he finally came to the open ground - just a vast flat area in front of him with the rare creature here and there. It was the perfect opportunity to try something he had wanted to do ever since getting his tutorial rewards.

Focusing on the skill, he took a step forward. It was like his vision zoomed in, the ground between where he wanted his foot to land and where he was shrunk. The moment his foot landed, so had he moved the distance.

In a single step, he had traveled more than fifty meters. Not quite the distance promised by the name One Step Mile, but to Jake, it was more than enough for now. It was just straight-up teleportation. In an instant, he had just warped space itself to travel forward.

It was the kind of thing that he found inconceivable despite just doing it himself. He didn't understand how the skill worked at all behind the scenes. He could feel mana and stamina's flow for most of his other skills to at least get some grasp on what it did.

It felt like he just took a standard step with One Step Mile, and space itself warped for him. He knew this had to be him somehow manipulating or perhaps being assisted by the concept of space. A type of force or phenomenon he was far from understanding.

It was like how he could bend time with Moment of the Primal Hunter or directly attack the soul with Gaze of the Apex Hunter. He knew how to do it, but not *how* he did it. In other words, system-stuff. Despite him not currently getting shit, he was nevertheless confident. He had time - time to understand it all.

Looking at his consumption of resources, he was even more pleasantly surprised. It had only taken a trivial amount of stamina to use. Not a single point of mana either. Of course, he needed more tests and experiments. Something the fifty or so kilometers to the forest was just perfect for.

His travel went rather uneventfully except for the events he caused himself. He had engaged a few beasts to try the skill out in combat. Which was an excellent thing as it was hard as hell to use. Currently, he had to really focus to use it, which was fine and all when just traveling, but not so much when fighting.

The important part, however, was that it did work in combat. If a bit iffy to use.

One thing was that he actually had to take steps in order for it to activate. Raise his leg, focus on where to go, and then put said foot down again. Which, again, was totally not an issue when running or walking, but a bit problematic when fighting.

The first problem with that being actually having to be on the ground as Jake often jumped and dodged a lot, resulting in him being airborne a lot of the time. The second problem was that he had to make the stepping motion, which he couldn't do while crouching. The third being the fact that the step had to be forward and not backward. In other words, he couldn't backpedal with it.

The last problem he solved rather quickly, though. The skill required him to 'see' where he was going. And, well, as he could 'see' 360 degrees around himself with his sphere, he could use that as a guide. Admittedly, it did look quite funny when he effectively moonwalked through space.

To sum it up, the skill was fantastic but hard to use at maximum efficiency. It would take a long time to practice to use it well in combat, but once more, Jake had time. It would be a good distraction while not doing alchemy, at least.

In the end, it only took him a few hours to travel through the plains. Far slower than if he just ran normally, but the practice was worthwhile. It also helped him get a better understanding of the power of enemies on Earth currently.

To his surprise, the stupid lizard was actually quite strong compared to everything else he saw. Most weren't even level 25 yet, and those that were often led their flock of fellow beasts. He had kind of expected them all to be a lot stronger. It was like he had returned to the outer zone of the tutorial once more.

But thinking on it a bit more, it did make sense in some ways. The other humans he met were all pathetically weak. Only Jacob and Bertram were worth mentioning. He only saw a handful of other people in the city that had reached level 25 in their race.

It was just him being an outlier. Perhaps it was a good idea to lay low for a while. Besides, he still had one comfort. *A bit weird to think of it as a comfort*, he confessed internally. He had feared for a second that he couldn't get any proper challenges. But then he remembered.

The other inner zones, or danger zones. Areas led by D-grades and which had many late-stage E-grades within - locked areas that were just ripe for the taking. Fish in a barrel waiting for him to grow in power and strike. Of course, he didn't have infinite time... but unless the system planned for all humans on Earth to be wiped out, he should have some time.

And according to the Viper, other places would exist, too, with many D-grades. Jake couldn't help but imagine what could be found in the deepest oceans, the furthest into the forests or the highest mountains.

Shaking his head, he looked into the forest he stood in front of. The trees were tall, and many of them even the same type as had been in the tutorial. Stepping into the forest, he felt like he had returned to the tutorial once more. He even instinctually kept an eye out for hidden lockboxes.

It was nice. Jake heard the chirping of birds and saw them soon after. They were low level, only in the single digits. They looked normal, just like before the system. Which made sense as they hadn't had any evolutions yet.

Of course, he recognized they could still likely kill an average pre-system human. The size wasn't the determining factor for how powerful something is, after all. Just take himself compared to the stupid lizard. It was bigger and stronger looking, and yet it died to a single normal arrow in the head.

The birds ignored him as he walked beneath them. Perhaps sensing his power or maybe just not interested in fighting. It would explain their low levels. Either way, he was able to walk without any interruptions.

Most beasts got out of his way, seemingly afraid of him as the raptors had been during the tutorial. There were some stupid animals that attacked him anyway, such as a small swarm of wasps that were barely level 10 and some overly ambitious fire-spewing squirrel-thing called a Maki. The wasps died by just looking at them hard with Gaze of the Apex Hunter while the level 10 squirrel died to a solid kick.

After walking for an hour, he had to say that the forest was indeed huge. Far more extensive than the plains he was on before. Yet, he wasn't afraid of being unable to locate his target. He could already feel it.

The mana in the air got denser the further he got in. But not just denser, it started to become less passive. As if something was influencing it. Every once in a while, he felt the mana change again - not a change of affinity, but more like it became another person's or beast's mana for a few moments. But only a very minor, almost unnoticeable part of it. Without the Sagacity of the Malefic Viper skill, he doubted he would even be able to feel it.

Another hour later, and he was close. The level of beasts he encountered was also growing. Before, there were barely any above level 25. Now he was lucky, or perhaps unlucky, to see one below 30. Whatever drew him there clearly also attracted the beasts.

Finally, his sphere picked up an open area ahead. A few seconds later, his vision caught up as he saw what was going on.

Floating in the middle of the small clearing was a transparent crystal. It was about the size of a human being and emanated a powerful aura of mana. Around it lay hundreds of dead beasts, all of varying species. Only one remained alive.

[Savage Mole Lord – lvl 61]

Thought it was a bear. It was huge and bulky, with long sharp claws. More noticeable, it had Lord in its name. Feeling its aura, Jake also recognized this was the thing that kept influencing the crystal that he assumed was a Pylon of Civilization. It tried to control it but kept failing, likely because the system had ‘reserved’ it for Jake already.

At the same time as Jake saw it, it too saw him. But to his surprise, it didn’t attack him. It just stared at him with its tiny eyes. The moment they made eye-contact, it even stumbled back slightly. It was afraid.

But Jake didn’t have any intention of letting it go. It was another Lord that had tried to claim what he felt was rightfully his. He didn’t know if what it did to the Pylon would negatively affect him either. So he moved.

Using One Step Mile, he appeared right before it. Now it no longer hesitated as it attacked him. It was the strongest being he had seen on Earth so far. By quite a margin. It was both fast and strong for its level. Sadly it had met a being that had thrived even more than itself in this new world.

Its claws were stopped dead by a small sword. At the same time, a dagger plunged into its chest, releasing deadly toxins. It tried to fight back, but quickly it was stabbed again until it was smashed to the ground by a blast of pure mana - a final dagger-strike digging its way through its skull, ending its life.

Jake dismissed his weapons as he let the mole's corpse join all the others already lying there. He ignored them all for now as he went to the crystal. He felt its mana as it appeared to beckon him.

Placing his hand on it, he was met with a message.

Congratulations on discovering a Pylon of Civilization! Lord title requirements met. Do you wish to claim this Pylon?

Without thinking about it further, he accepted - a decision he would both rejoice and curse at in the future.

Chapter 125: Pylon of Civilization



You have claimed a Pylon of Civilization.

By controlling the Pylon, you have claimed ownership over the surrounding area. Your aura seeps into the area itself, marking it as your own. While within your own domain, all mana regeneration is significantly increased. Protect it; expand it, reclaim the planet that was once yours. May you lead your domain and your world through the new age it has entered.

Bonuses for all citizens within your domain:

Increases all experience earned while within the domain by a minor amount for all non-combat related activities.

Congratulations! For being the first human to claim a Pylon of Civilization, your nobility title has been upgraded to: [Nobility: Earl]. May you lead your world to glory.

Jake read the messages and very quickly understood why the Viper had wanted him to claim it. He felt his mana drain into the crystal as if it was a

piece of equipment. He instantly felt a connection with it. At the same time, the Pylon began giving out a slightly different aura.

It was like when the mole tried to claim it. Only it wasn't allowed to do it properly. It was rightfully Jake's, and he was happy he had gotten here rather quickly as it would suck to lose out on rewards because of his own tardiness. While he still had 72 hours to claim it before other creatures could, there was a chance someone else could claim a Pylon elsewhere before him.

Looking at the rewards he gained for being first, he nodded in satisfaction. While he couldn't exactly feel the increased mana regeneration as his mana pool was pretty much full, it would, without a doubt, be nice while grinding alchemy.

The experience gain was even better. As with most other system-related things, it didn't give Jake an indicator for how much it increased it. Only the word 'minor.' For all he knew, it could be 10% or 0,00001%. Though either way, it was a welcome bonus. That it only worked on non-combat related activities didn't bother him either. Unless it counted alchemy as combat-related. *It shouldn't, right?*

One part he didn't like was the whole 'ruler of your domain' vibe. All he wanted was a nice place to settle down for a while. He still had no intentions whatsoever to found some great city. Also... this was a goddamn forest.

Looking on further, he saw that his Nobility title had indeed been updated.

Titled earned: [Nobility: Earl].

[Nobility: Earl] – A Lord that was the first to claim a Pylon of Civilization on Earth, becoming an Earl. Allows you to control a Pylon of Civilization. Grants access to certain events and opportunities exclusive to nobles. Opens many new paths to power.

It was another thing he didn't really care that much for currently. Though, in some ways, it was pretty cool to call himself an Earl. It was also an interesting observation that it adopted the British nobility system. Or maybe it was just the translation.

However, he was relatively sure that he had skipped a few nobility ranks by being the first to make a city – hopefully, something that would prove an advantage in due time. The part about granting access to certain events and

opportunities was also noteworthy. But once more, time would prove if these things were beneficial or not.

The last part about new paths was something he had seen many other times already. Never had he seen it be so immediate, however, as he looked at his next message.

****Profession Change Available****

Principal City Lord of Earth – The very first human to found a city on Earth. Now on a path to create a haven for the survivors in the new world. A home to defend. City Lord is a profession focused on managing and guiding a city to glory. Grants skills related to management, economics, leadership, and control, as well as paths to protect your new dominion. However, be warned that should the city fall, you will not escape unscathed. Stat bonuses per level: +18 free points.

WARNING: Skills pertaining to the Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper profession may be lost or changed upon becoming a Principal City Lord of Earth

How about no, Jake thought. Everything about it just made him nope right the fuck out. Sometimes the system really misfired, offering stuff he would never for the life of him even consider.

He was also pretty damn sure this wasn't something the Malefic Viper had advertised.

Chances are that if he somehow suffered a mental episode and changed profession, he would lose all skills with 'of the Malefic Viper' in them, as well as generally everything to do with alchemy. Which is to say every goddamn skill he had gained so far.

Four ancient skills, one epic, and many rare skills and below would be lost. So unless this new profession threw Jake a stack of legendary or whatever was above legendary skills, it would be a massive downgrade.

Even the stats were lower, if actually pretty good. It was a bit interesting that it just gave free points. And it even gave quite a lot of free points. He could totally see why someone focused on combat would take this profession to keep increasing their more combat-related stats.

Currently, Jake was a bit spread wide with his stats. He was surprisingly durable for being an archer, and his high wisdom was also out of the ordinary. Nevertheless, he always found uses for the stats. Perception had been a bit of a downer for a long time, but his new Gaze of the Apex Hunter had changed that drastically.

So, yeah. Jake gave a polite 'no thanks' to the system for the wonderful opportunity to change profession and closed down all his system menus.

And then he just stood there for a while.

...

This was as far as he had planned for now. He had gained control of the area and could feel the mana slowly spread out from the Pylon. Looking around, he didn't see much of interest or a nice place to settle down. Besides, the stench of blood and the many corpses made the entire clearing quite unsanitary.

Looking at the crystal that was even larger than himself, he thought for a bit before he wrapped his arms around it. It resisted at first, completely immovable, but with a bit of mana injected, it was just deactivated.

The mana in the area stopped spreading as Pylon stopped working. He could feel through his connection with it that he had turned it off. With it no longer spreading his mana, he also felt the atmospheric mana return to normal.

As for the crystal itself, it was actually relatively light. Scratch that, it just straight up didn't weigh anything. It was like lifting a balloon. It wasn't just his stats either; the thing just didn't actually have any weight at all.

Yet he knew that only he could move it. And that, when activated, it was borderline immovable.

His next goal was to find a nice place to settle down and chill with his new cauldrons. Despite the Pylon not weighing anything, it was still quite unhandy, but with it not weighing anything, he could just wrap a few strings of mana around it and move it around with that. He did try and fail to put it into his spatial storage.

Walking through the forest, the several meters tall Pylon floated leisurely behind him. Not a single beast got in his way but instead scurried out the way

whenever they saw him, which was quite nice, actually, as he didn't feel like fighting with a crystal Pylon in tow and all.

He didn't know exactly what he was looking for. It was like when he was out shopping for an apartment. He always had that kind of 'I'll know it when I see it' mentality, despite him being fully aware that he still did have quite a few base requirements.

For the apartment, he wanted thick walls and good noise-isolation. He liked bright rooms and good natural lighting, and of course, having good internet available was also a must.

Now, however, his requirements were a bit different. First of all, he wanted a source of water. Not because he really needed to drink much anymore, but because of alchemy. He could purify water and use it to craft things, so of course, he wanted to do that.

A cave within a short distance would also be preferable. Of the ingredients Jake used, mushrooms and moss were at the top of the list. He didn't know if some had already appeared on Earth, but if not, he would have to grow them. Space for a small garden would also be nice.

If he had to be honest, he didn't feel like he was that picky - water, cave, and open space. It shouldn't be that hard.

Yet, he ended up wandering around for quite a few hours, with his version of 'wandering' being slightly faster than a car on a country road. But in the end, he found it.

It was in a valley. Very noticeable from a long distance, but the geography was nearly perfect. Within the valley was a vast pond, tens of meters across, caused by a waterfall falling down from the cliffs above. The valley had only a single real entrance, which was really lovely too. Of course, you could just enter it from the cliffs above, but it still felt like it provided some cover.

The best part of it all, however, was the caves. Yes, caves, with an 's.' Two of them, with their entrances less than a kilometer apart. Jake hadn't explored either much, but they both went downwards, and he couldn't see any end in sight. Maybe they even connected.

It also got even better when he entered one - his Sense of the Malefic Viper on full display. He got several responses from within, which meant that there had to be useful alchemical ingredients within.

He couldn't be happier as he found a place to plop the crystal down. He did think of placing it in one of the caves, or maybe even living in a cave, but decided against it. He wanted to keep the crystal close, and he would prefer to live under the sun than in a cave. Besides, the valley was still filled with trees, offering some cover.

Ultimately, he didn't want to leave the Pylon out in the open. He didn't know if others could steal it or mess with it somehow. He wasn't afraid of the thing breaking as it appeared damn near unbreakable, but he was worried that someone could wrest control of it away.

Taking out his Omnitool, the fifth item he bought as a tutorial reward, he used it for the first time. In its basic form, it was just a small ball of liquid... something, but when he injected mana and willed a shovel, it transformed into one. A big one. The head of the thing larger than a snowplow.

With it in hand, he began digging a large hole. His powerful stats on full display as he performed feats that would put large excavators to shame. It

didn't take him long to make a five-meter deep hole, just wide enough for the crystal to enter.

Lowering it down, he saw that there was still a bit over two meters up to ground level, which should be good enough.

Through his string of mana, he willed the Pylon to activate once more. So it did, as it hummed to life and began hovering slightly off the ground inside the hole. Far from enough to lift it out, however. *Perfect.*

He tried once more to move the Pylon, pulling on and pushing it, but he couldn't even move it an inch. Once more, perfect. He had been afraid that maybe water would corrode the ground and make it flow away or something, but that didn't appear to be a danger at all.

Filling up the hole once more, he nodded in satisfaction. While it wasn't the best attempt at hiding it, it sure as hell was better than just leaving it out in the open. He also planned on generally settling down where it was buried, making it even easier to protect it.

Of course, now he had another problem... what to do?

He could build shelter... but it felt like a waste of time. Under the canopy of the trees, he found enough cover. Not like the cold or warmth bothered him either.

First things first, though, he thought as he quickly took off his now filthy clothes. Putting them in his spatial storage, he walked to the shore of the pond, stark-naked. With a deep breath, he took a step forward as he dropped straight down into the water.

The pond was four or five meters deep in most places. For the first time in a long time, Jake enjoyed just drifting about in the water without any time pressure on him. There was no tutorial timer, no limited time within a time-dilated chamber. No immediate goal he had to chase as fast as possible.

A few hours passed like that. Jake was just floating there and enjoying the sensation. He saw a few small eels in his sphere but didn't bother them, and they didn't bother him either.

Jake knew he needed direction. A new goal. If not, he would just drift into the abyss that was his own mind or just laze about indefinitely. His overall goal was still to grow stronger. To see exactly how far he could go in this new

system. See all that it had to offer him. To one day even leave Earth and explore the rest of the multiverse.

To one day stand at the pinnacle. To see sights unimaginable, experience different cultures, and meet countless new foes and friends. To fight a goddamn dragon.

So he began to formulate a plan. His first goal was complete now that he had a base of operations. It was an optimal place to practice his alchemy - more experience, higher mana regeneration, and many possible sources of ingredients nearby.

His Alchemist of the Malefic Viper was currently at level 63, and his Ambitious Hunter at 83. His first goal would be to at least narrow that gap considerably. At least get the level 70 skill in alchemy.

He knew that he would have to go out and forage for ingredients and other things of value, so a few class levels were inevitable. From what the Viper said, Jake also knew that simply practicing skills in a class would grant small amounts of experience, which he also planned to do, as his Advanced Archery was more than due for an upgrade. He had felt he was close even before fighting the Great White Stag, and it was high time to get it done.

He got out of the pond with a somewhat vague plan and began putting on some clothes after giving them a good wash. Once more, he had forgotten to take off the mask, finding it a bit eerie how he didn't even notice that he had it on normally. Almost as weird as how the hell it stuck to his head without anything visibly fastening it.

After getting fully dressed, he sat down, legs crossed, and took out his Altmar Cauldron of Supreme Simplicity. He still had a lot of ingredients left from the challenge dungeon. They wouldn't last that long if he went hard grinding, but they would last a while.

Placing his hands on the cauldron, he activated his Alchemical Flame as he filled the cauldron with water. He immersed himself in the complicated methodologies, runes, and patterns required for just making a few simple common-rarity mana potions with a slight smile.

He would never forget the Trial of Myriad Poisons. More accurately, the barrel he was in during it - the intricacy of those runes, the overwhelming complexity of all that was behind making such a concoction. He didn't understand jack shit. It was proof of how much he had yet to learn.

And learn he would.

With those thoughts, he began his first brewing in quite a while.

Chapter 126: The Times They Are A-Changin'

Time marched onward unforgivingly. Soon two weeks had passed since the conclusion of the tutorial.

Earth was in chaos as the newly returned humans scrambled to find a foothold. Factions quickly formed, though they were more just collections of people who happened to be in the same area when they returned.

Many had thought the nightmare over upon exiting the tutorial, naively believing that humanity could return to some semblance of normalcy. Sadly for them, reality proved the exact opposite. Earth was far more dangerous than nearly all the tutorials.

In Jake's tutorial, the beasts hadn't ever really attacked people in the outer zone. They were incredibly passive and could easily be avoided most of the time. It was only in the beginning that people really died to the environment and not their fellow humans.

Upon their return, they found Earth to be far less friendly. Beasts and monsters roamed about without any restrictions. An area filled with weak single-digit monsters could easily be invaded by one several times everything else's level.

The only solace was that higher-leveled beasts and monsters tended to not bother with lower-leveled things. Like the lizard that had attacked Jake and his coworkers, it had only cared about the ones with a level at least a bit close to its own.

It wasn't as if the human threat was gone either. With the collapse of social order nearly everywhere, some unsavory individuals chose to take advantage. The powerful became tyrants and were as monstrous as the actual monsters stalking about.

Yet, one place was tranquil. Not a single beast was nearby, not a single drop of blood anywhere. There was only a beautiful waterfall landing in a serene pond. On the shore sat a young man with a cauldron, a transparent fire beneath it, and a strong smell in the air.

For the vast majority of humanity, the last two weeks had, without a doubt, been a constant stream of hectic moments of people trying to survive. For Jake, however, it had been the most relaxing time since before the tutorial.

Without any real external pressure, he had managed to achieve a lot. Many of the things he had put off during the tutorial due to time constraints he now had time to do. The first of which was to practice potion-making.

He had only been able to make inferior-rarity potions of all three types for a long time now but had held off on improving and making common-rarity ones.

Now, however, he had time. In only two weeks, he had broken through and made common-rarity potions of the health and mana type while getting very close with the

stamina ones. Looking at the two new brews he had made, they indeed were a lot more potent than before.

[Mana Potion (Common)] – Restores 4347 mana when consumed.

[Health Potion (Common)] – Restores 2824 health when consumed.

First of all, the amount of resources they restored was, of course, higher. In fact, the separator between inferior and common-rarity was twofold. First of all, there was a qualitative improvement in the crafting process.

Common-rarity was harder and required far more skill to make. Of course, better ingredients were also required, something Jake had more than plenty of. He had never used the common versions of the Lavender Flowers that were used in his recipes. Aka, he had a lot of them still sitting around in his spatial storage.

Besides the change in the crafting process, the second requirement was the required amount of resources restored. Common-rarity potions restored a minimum of 2500 in either health, stamina, or mana. Even if Jake made a potion with the improved crafting method that restored less, it would just turn out to be inferior.

Interestingly enough, this didn't mean that inferior potions couldn't restore more than 2500 resources. In fact, Jake's best inferior-rarity mana potion to date had restored 2600 mana. Of course, it remained inferior due to the 'lesser' crafting method, and he was beginning to feel the cap approaching with that one.

As for the requirement for potions to be uncommon-rarity, he didn't even know yet. He remembered that inferior potions needed to restore a minimum of 25 resources. From 25 to 2500 was a 100-fold increase, so if that pattern continued, uncommon-rarity would have to restore 250.000 points. Yeah, he wasn't sure about that one.

What mattered was that he was improving. His very first common-rarity mana potion was made on the first day and restored 2600 mana. The health potion came on the sixth day, it restoring 2541 for the first craft. Both of those numbers had now clearly increased even more, especially for the mana potions.

Not that he actually needed it. He had plenty of potions to spare as he didn't even have to use one that often.

His Mask of the Fallen King carried the insane properties of giving him 25% more maximum mana, and at the same time, increasing his mana regeneration. The Pylon of Civilization only increased that regeneration even more within his own domain.

Lastly, his Palate of the Malefic Viper now made all potions restore even more resources after it had been upgraded to ancient-rarity. The increase was only around 10-20%, but everything added up in the long run.

Of course, he also meditated once in a while to ponder on different things, which only helped him keep his mana usage at an easily manageable level. All in all, everything was going swimmingly.

Now, on the day that marked two weeks since humanity's return, he was working on making his first common-rarity stamina potion for the first time. The hardest type to make for him by quite a bit.

But it did go a lot easier than he had first feared - his experience with internal energy through his Limit Break ability as well as just general practice doing wonders.

Finally, he also couldn't discredit the massive benefits from his cauldron. It just made everything far, *far* easier than with the mixing bowl he used before. Overall, he used less mana as there wasn't much resistance, and he could way better 'feel' the mana during the crafting process.

Coupled with his increased mana control from Sagacity of the Malefic Viper helping further. Which ultimately resulted in his success that day.

****You have successfully crafted [Stamina Potion (Common)] – A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned****

****'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 69 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 76 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

Seeing his profession level up, he only had one response to the level he had reached. *Nice.*

The stamina potions looked just like its inferior version. But Identify made the difference between the two very clear.

[Stamina Potion (Common)] – Restores 2511 stamina when consumed

With all his stats from his many titles and levels, he still only had 8200 stamina. That meant that with Palate of the Malefic Viper's bonus counted in, a single stamina potion could restore a bit more than a third of his total stamina pool.

Smiling to himself, he bottled the potions, packed everything up, and threw it in his spatial storage. It was time for the next item on his agenda.

Walking to the edge of the pond, he didn't stop as his foot touched the water. An invisible shimmer of mana covered his feet as he walked on water. Walking to the middle of the pond, he sat down in meditation, still on the surface of the water.

Next, he conjured tens of tendrils of mana. Each of them reaching six or so meters to the bottom of the lake, where many large stones lay. Ones he had either found or placed there previously.

His improvements showed once more as he didn't even need to wrap the tendrils around the rocks. Merely touching them was enough for his mana to exert its influence. It even drained less mana than forcefully lifting it by wrapping his strings of mana around the stone.

Out of the water rose four stones, each one easily weighing more than his own bodyweight. Small beads of sweat appeared on his face after a few minutes as he shuffled the stones around. After nearly 10 minutes, he dropped one of the stones, and in the chaos, lost control of his mana.

All of the stones fell into the pond once more, scaring the small eels that observed the weird human above. Simultaneously, he failed to control the mana keeping him on top of the water, resulting in him following the rocks.

It wasn't the first time that happened either. Jake's routine was pretty much set every single day. Speaking of days, they were still a thing.

One would think that with Earth growing to a substantially larger size, the day-night cycle would be affected. Those who thought that would be wrong, as the system clearly didn't care about making sense in that department.

There was also still only one sun and one moon. Neither appeared larger or smaller, which probably meant that both had actually gotten bigger. Not that he could confirm it, as he wasn't actually sure exactly how big either were before the system.

He had found a lot of enjoyment in the new sky, though. Without light pollution and with his incredibly high perception, his eyes may as well have been telescopes. He could see way further and even spot details on the moon... though he was pretty sure he saw movements one time. That had to be nothing... right?

Anyway, the cosmos was truly a beautiful thing. Jake did kind of expect to see some wondrous supernatural sights. A space octopus, maybe. So far, he had only found disappointment. Space octopuses had to be a thing. Maybe there was one on the moon?

This was how Jake spent his days since the tutorial ended. Alchemy, mana practice, and stargazing. So far, he had only slept a single time. A dreamless night thankfully.

He had successfully managed to distract himself with work. He got a level in alchemy nearly every second day, which was pretty good according to his own standards. His class hadn't experienced any progress, though, as he hadn't even taken out his bow since leaving the city.

He did find time to walk around with One Step Mile and practice that a bit. His current dream was to somehow manage to use it while on the water. Currently, he hadn't been able to as his feet couldn't quite find purchase on the surface, but he firmly believed it possible.

It was surprising that not a single beast had stumbled upon him yet. He hadn't even seen any check him out. The birds were still around, and he saw a few other animals, such as the eels. But none of them were above level 10, most of them still being lvl 0. He had no clue how that was even possible.

Two weeks may feel like a long time without any human contact, but one had to remember that Jake was pretty skilled at being antisocial. He was a bit lonely, and he knew that his solitude couldn't continue in perpetuity.

One day humans would stumble upon his little valley. A day that came sooner than he expected.

Jacob walked on the pavement that had once been a highway. Bertram on his right and a tall woman, carrying a bow, on his left.

The past two weeks had been far more eventful for him than Jake. This first period was his greatest opportunity to establish himself in this new world. One he happily jumped at.

Behind him was not just his former colleagues but thousands of people. Jacob had gone from building to building to recruit, and in the end, rounded up a massive following.

At first, he was met with skepticism. But his skills that bordered on mental manipulation, as well as his high level, allowed things to proceed way more smoothly than he had first feared. As his group of followers grew, it only became easier to convince others.

Bertram was also a huge asset in recruiting people. While Jacob wasn't a fighter, the same couldn't be said about his old bodyguard. He became E-grade in the tutorial, and his class and levels had only grown further since then.

His skills were awe-inspiring. Training from the Grand Master, his powerful special class, and his own talent all coming together. This meant that when the group was attacked by a large rodent-like creature at level 54, he had managed to slay it quite easily alone.

When he fought, his blade and entire body was enveloped in light. He moved swiftly, every swing of his sword shearing his foe with beams of light. His defensive abilities were even more impressive as the rodent failed to pierce the shining armor that enveloped his body - its claws were even breaking upon hitting his shield.

A powerful man was enough to inspire many in this turbulent age.

Of the groups they encountered, the strongest was led by the woman now walking on his left. Standing at a height only slightly lower than Bertram with bursting muscles on her forearms, she looked more than a little intimidating.

The bow she carried was, without a doubt, not just for show. They had seen her use it several times, firing off powerful arrows that exploded in flames whenever they hit a foe. Between her and Bertram, Jacob didn't know who would win, and ultimately it didn't matter. For she was one of his people.

Maria was her name. With a class at level 61 and profession at 24, she was the second-highest overall level in the group, just behind Jacob. Jacob, who himself had already gained several levels. His class had reached level 66, having grown nearly a whole level a day. With the levels from training with the Holy Church, he had gained 16 levels since he 'died.'

Once more, he had, of course, gained a powerful skill. One at ancient-rarity even.

[Augur's Wings of Liberation (Ancient)] - Blessed be those touched by the feathers of the Augur. Allows the Augur of Hope to summon wings of light that periodically drop feathers. Anyone who absorbs a feather restores a small amount of mana and stamina and receives a temporary increase to the maximum value of both. May your wings bring liberation to all. Adds a medium bonus to the Augur's Wings of Liberation's effect based on wisdom and willpower.

From the description, it didn't appear overly powerful, and one might even doubt its rating. But when put on display, it all became much clearer.

Giant wings of light would spread out behind him. Each of them more than ten meters long as they extend behind him. Tens of feathers falling every second. After a few minutes, the feathers would dissolve, but it was more than enough for people to pick them up and absorb them.

This skill did wonders in keeping the group healthy and moving. On top of that, there was also one other aspect to the skill, one not mentioned in the description.

The sheer intimidation factor of them - to see a human spring forth giant radiant wings was enough for many to fall in line or look at him with reverence. Maria wasn't one of those people, as she had chosen to follow him just because she didn't have any interest in leadership herself. Jacob was pretty sure that she had her own agenda by staying with him... likely related to the god that had blessed her.

With her choice to follow him, so did the ones who followed her prior. With so many in tow, their next objective was to find somewhere and establish themselves.

But not before recruiting more. As Jacob saw the city in the distance, they didn't feel happiness or anticipation as they had expected, but instead, all got a terrible feeling. For what they saw was only mere outskirts -the rest of the city, covered by a giant barrier that a select few recognized as the ones marking the Inner zones in their tutorials.

Jacob gazed at it but knew it wasn't time yet. They would train, and they would wait... because others were also coming.

The Augur wasn't the only follower the Holy Church had recruited during the tutorials... far from it.

Chapter 127: Monsters

As he ran through the forest, telling the others to try and keep up, Hank truly regretted convincing them all to go camping that week. But how could he possibly have known that something as world-shattering as the initiation to some goddamn multiverse could happen?

The only lucky thing was that at least they had all entered the same tutorial. They had entered the tutorial with nine people - Hank, his wife, his two kids, his sister, and her husband and kids, and a long-time mutual friend of theirs.

Out of the tutorial walked only four. Hank, the family friend Miranda, and his two kids. Not that they liked being called kids anymore, his boy Mark being 19 and his daughter Louise at 22.

In the tutorial, they had stuck together initially but had ended up split up due to circumstances out of their own control. They were forced into these trials in groups of five. Due to their class choices, Hank and his wife had chosen to split up, his wife joining his sister and her family.

None of them returned from the first trial.

Now it was just those four. Thrown back to Earth into the middle of a forest that had clearly been altered significantly from before. They had been only a few hundred meters from the road upon the initiation, but now no such road was to be found anywhere. Instead, they found themselves walking through a seemingly endless forest for a bit over two weeks.

They managed to fight off the beasts, most of them not being above level 24. Hank, his trusty axe in hand, easily able to handle them. His son, Mark, a healer who was able to fix any immediate issues. It had gone well at first, with the four of them surviving without losing anyone - until today.

A beast had appeared. One that Hank, even with his race at level 31, couldn't identify.

[Oakwood Tiger – lvl ??]

He became unequivocally sure that any beast he couldn't identify was far above his ability to handle from the tutorial. He was powerless against the tiger that was a weird mix of wood and flesh. Yet it hadn't simply killed them.

They met the tiger nearly three hours ago. They tried to run at first, hoping it would ignore them like most other high-level beasts, but this one was out for blood. It cut them off with incredible speed and attacked them, showing that it clearly was also strong. Hank felt like his arms were about to be torn off from every casual swipe of its barbed wooden claws.

Yet whenever Hank thought he would die, the beast simply switched target and attacked someone else. It only did small wounds, clearly enjoying itself... it was just playing with them.

Hank was furious, but no matter what he did, it proved useless. In the end, their only course of action was just to run.

Louise was also an evolved caster, but her spells did even less to the beast than his own axe. Miranda wasn't a fighter at all, having focused on her profession instead of class during the tutorial.

He wasn't entirely clear on her profession, but it was some kind of social type. It did, however, give her some insight into mana and an intuition skill. A skill that had guided their direction of fleeing for the past few hours. Needless to say, Hank was beginning to doubt it.

They ran desperately, encountering several weaker beasts on the way, resulting in even more injuries. Mark was already dangerously low on mana, and Hank could barely keep his legs moving with his nearly depleted stamina.

But suddenly, something changed. The tiger appeared to be unsettled by something. Unsettled enough that it decided to stop playing around and finish off its prey.

The wooden bark covering its body spit out sharp vines as it went to finish off Hank. Somehow the man managed to avoid having his throat ripped out as he ducked and blocked with his axe. Despite his efforts, he was still sent to the ground, a large gash on the side of his face where it had nicked him.

Far from done, the beast jumped at him once more. He scrambled and once more narrowly blocked, but this time he wasn't lucky enough to only receive a gash. His entire right arm was torn to shreds as his axe, and the claw both smashed into it, sending him flying through the air into a nearby tree.

Hank heard his son yell out and his daughter firing spells on the beast. His vision was waning but still clear enough to see a bolt of electricity hit the creature from the side. It did little more than inflict a small burn mark, yet it was enough to piss off the beast and make it switch target.

Miranda also tried to help, but her attacks didn't even register for the beast. His son was standing beside his sister, right in the crosshair of the charging tiger. Hank's eyes turned red as he saw his only remaining family members about to be torn apart.

His wife had died without him even having a body to bury. His friends in the tutorial suffered the same fate. The final promise he made to his wife before parting for the last time was to protect their children, and he would be damned if he didn't do everything he could.

He had learned a bit about controlling stamina through his skills. Enough to slightly increase his striking power. Today he went further as he channeled all he could into his one good arm. Instantly he felt it fill with power unlike ever before. Everything poured into a throwing skill that was also his only rare skill.

Throwing the axe, the pent-up stamina in his arm was too much as his entire arm erupted into a cloud of bloody mist. The pain was unimaginable, but he remained clearheaded enough to see the axe fly true and strike the tiger midst its charge.

The axe hit the beast straight in its midsection, embedding itself deeply. The impact also made the tiger stumble, missing its charge as it tumbled to the ground and slid into a tree.

Hank had at first felt relief, but it quickly turned to despair as the tiger turned its eyes to him. Two vines sprung from its back, pulled out the axe, and threw it on the ground - a small trickle of blood dripping from the wound.

Halfway between Hank and his children, the tiger began a new charge, this time to finish off the man who had wounded it. Hank knew it would barely matter either way. His eyes were heavy, and his entire body numb and cold. Blood pooled beneath him from the shoulder where an arm had once been attached.

His only hope was that his sacrifice was enough to buy the others a bit of time to escape. He could see the tiger was anxious for some reason in a rush. He hoped it would leave after finishing him. A naïve hope perhaps, but it was all he had to grasp unto.

Two vines sharpened at their ends flew towards him from the tiger - one for his head, the other his heart. Unable to move, he closed his eyes.

Yet the blow never came.

Opening his eyes once more, he saw the vine less than a meter from his face. Frozen in mid-air, slightly shaking. He saw the tiger trembling for some reason as its eyes focused on something off to the side. Hank followed its gaze and saw a figure slowly walking towards them.

With each step, it was as if the figure traveled several meters. A mask covered the face of the new arrival, but the build made him identifiably male. He didn't appear to carry any weapons... it was clear he didn't need one.

Two glowing eyes pierced through the mask, focusing on the tiger. Hank felt a cold shiver run down his spine when he saw them. It reminded him of the same eyes that tiger had glared at him with just as it was about to kill him - only much more intense.

Just as the person was only a few meters away, whatever froze the tiger stopped. The vines nearly at Hank's eye retracted, but instead of switching target to the new arrival, they merged back into the tiger. And with that, the beast that had chased them for hours turned tail and ran.

It didn't get far, however. With a movement that defied the laws of physics, the person cut off the tiger. It stopped abruptly and tried to get around him but was instead met with a bone-white dagger that looked like a fang. Hank was a bit surprised as he hadn't seen where the weapon came from, but the beast was even more so as the dagger swung down, aiming for its skull.

The vines sprung up once more, trying to block, but like when Hank tried to block in vain earlier, the beast's struggles were also in vain. The vines were simply pushed down, unable to pierce the armor of its soon-to-be killer.

Seconds later, the tiger that the group of four had believed to be their death instead met its own demise. Completely dominated by whomever or whatever the masked individual was.

Hank wasn't sure if he should be relieved or afraid. The tiger may be dead, but what about this new arrival? Was he human? Some kind of creature brought by the system. Whatever the case, he was far more powerful than the tiger, making all thoughts of escape disperse...

As he was in thought, the person disappeared once more, only to appear right in front of Hank. The middle-aged man tried to shy back in fright, but he could not move with his injuries. Had he come to finish him off or?

Thinking the worst, he was instead presented with a bottle containing a very familiar red liquid - a healing potion.

"Drink," the figure said in a distinctly male voice. One that sounded significantly younger than Hank would have suspected.

Sadly for Hank, he was unable even to lift his remaining arm. It had been badly mangled by the tiger earlier, while his second arm was entirely missing. He looked up at the piercing yellow eyes. They resembled a beast more than a human, making Hank believe even more than whatever he was dealing with wasn't a fellow man.

A few seconds of awkwardness followed as the bottle was presented to the man who couldn't move to accept it. The masked man just standing there with an extended arm. Luckily the situation was saved as Miranda rushed over.

“Let me,” she said as she swiped the potion from the young man’s hand. Hank could still barely open his mouth, allowing the woman to pour the liquid down his throat. Instantly he felt a rush of vital energy enter his body. It was like when his son healed him but far, far more intense.

He felt his stump where his arm had once been starting to itch and wriggle as a new arm slowly began growing out. His mangled arm began healing nearly instantly as even the gash on his face disappeared. He had consumed a healing potion before, but never one this powerful.

In only seconds he went from on the brink of death to relatively healthy. The only problem remaining was the arm that would take a while to regenerate, but even that shouldn’t even take an hour from the still overflowing vital energy in his body. He checked his status and, to his surprise, saw that his health pool of around 1800 was entirely full. He even felt some of the remnant energy slowly fizzle out within his body, dispersing as it could not restore any more health.

“Thank you,” he mumbled, his mouth now able to move correctly. His stamina was still dangerously low, and he was exhausted, but he couldn’t quite relax yet. He had to figure out the situation he and his family now found themselves in.

By now, Hank’s kids had made their way over and were now hiding behind their father, who had managed to stand up. Mark was especially interested as his skills allowed him insight into the potion’s power.

“Yes, thanks for the help, mister...?” Miranda asked their masked savior, injecting herself into the conversation.

“... not sure that matters,” the masked man answered after looking like he was stuck in thought for a bit. “What matters is who you all are and why you are here.”

Miranda, who had by now taken the lead for their group, answered. “I apologize, my name is Miranda; this is Hank and his two children, Mark and Louise. We were chased by that beast and made it here on accident while trying to survive. I am sorry if we intruded where we weren’t allowed.”

Hank could see the sweat drip down her neck as she tried to defend them. Even in the tutorial, she was the one who handled discussions and negotiations with other survivors. He was more than happy to let her do that again.

“Oh... okay,” the masked man answered, not looking like he intended to say anything more.

“If I may... how powerful was that monster?” Miranda asked. A question the entire family was interested in.

“Just 59, but it had quite high toughness for one of its level,” he answered, his voice indicating that he liked that kind of conversation way more.

Miranda, Hank, and the two others were taken back by the high level of the beast. But even more so at it being described as ‘just’ 59. All of them had tried to identify the masked man, and they had all failed, getting just a single question mark in return

All of it only added to their already existing assumption that the one in front of them wasn't human. And if the masked man was, they couldn't explain how that was possible. They had seen strong individuals before; they even knew a woman in their tutorial who was incredibly strong. But not to the level of being able to disregard a beast at level 59. Not even close.

Yet he appeared human apart from the eyes. His entire body was covered in armor, but everything was humanoid. Miranda tried to probe to figure out if he was indeed human.

"I see... we must again thank you for saving our lives. That was the most powerful beast any of us have ever seen, even counting the tutorial. I am sure you must have encountered stronger ones during yours."

"Yeah, but not out in the open at least. Ones around that level and above tended to be holed up in dungeons," their masked savior answered, willing to say quite a few more words than before.

"Did you encounter many like it in your tutorial?" she kept probing, wanting to make sure if he had experienced a tutorial.

"When I went looking for them, yeah."

"Must have been tough to reach their level. As humans, we weren't exactly positioned at the top of the food chain," Miranda continued, this time looking for confirmation of the man's humanity.

“Doesn’t mean we couldn’t claim the top anyway,” he answered, clearly affirming that he was human like the rest of them.

Silence hung in the air for a while before Miranda finally asked. “Would it be possible for us to stay here for a while? At least to get back in fighting condition.”

All of them tensed up as they awaited the answer of the man in front of them.

“...Fine, just don’t disturb me when I work or practice.”

And that was how Jake's 'city' got its first four citizens.

Chapter im41: Intermission 4 - Matteo (1/2)

3 years before the Initiation began

Matteo got out of the shower after his workout and got something quick to eat. It was just another Sunday night like any other where he had to get up early and get ready for work. But today was a special day as today was the day he would claim his big promotion.

He looked out at the penthouse that he had lived in for the last two months, feeling it was all a bit hollow. His only real possession in the entire apartment was a piano, which he had inherited from his grandfather.

After he put on his suit, he packed his briefcase with all the necessities he would need for the day's work and rode the elevator down to the ground floor. His employer had insisted many times for him to get a driver, but Matteo had refused time and time again. He preferred to do things himself.

Riding the car that was worth more than the average yearly income of several households, he soon found himself in the industrial zone where the boss had set up their current base of operations. A furniture manufacturer that was more than suitable.

"M," the doorman said with a small greeting. "Boss is inside."

Matteo just nodded and entered the building, crossing the floor and the running machinery, and into the back room. There, he found his boss and a few other members sitting around a table while watching tennis on the television.

"Why do they moan when they hit the ball?"

"It is all about controlling your breathing, and if it happens to annoy your opponent, it's just a bonus," Matteo answered upon entering.

“Ah, my boy, just in time! I heard the last job was finished ahead of schedule. Great work as always,” said one of the older members.

“You didn’t disappoint,” said a rough voice as he entered from a side room.

The others instantly turned off the tv and bowed towards the boss.

“Yeah,” Matteo confirmed, nodding to the boss.

“Let’s move,” the boss said as he motioned for the others to follow. Matteo following along without question. It wasn’t time yet, and everything was planned.

“Matteo, you drive.”

As expected.

They got into the armored car and set course for the docks. They had to meet their client there for the handover. Matteo was a natural inclusion in such... volatile situations. Usually, nothing went wrong, but the boss had caught on something was up and wanted him present.

He had been a part of the business and family since he was a kid, and the boss trusted him unconditionally.

In an old warehouse at the docks, dozens of men were already present as they opened up unmarked containers and took out the boxes, stacking them in the corner. A few of the containers were left closed, as they didn't want issues with the merchandise before the buyers arrived. They had just checked that it was in good condition.

The armored car rode in through the opened gates as it closed behind them. Five men got out, with Matteo the first to do so and the boss next.

"Bronco! Good to see you, old friend!" yelled the seller at the five arriving men.

"Dakila," the boss replied with a nod. "No issues with this shipment?"

"A few rowdy ones, but they just need to be trained a bit better, and I am sure they will turn into big earners. As for the other goods? No issues there."

The business had recently expanded quite a bit into the entertainment industry and needed some 'employees' for that, so they came to this man. He was already their supplier for many other tools of their trade and offered to provide.

Sadly, the last time a container of merchandise was damaged during transport, and they had to dump the entire cargo container into the ocean, inventory included.

48 young women and girls, thrown overboard and drowned due to one person in the container having tuberculosis.

Matteo wasn't the most morally upstanding person, but that had left a sour taste in his mouth. Even worse so when his boss accepted Dakila's reimbursement and went ahead with another delivery.

So, today would be the day where he took over. Guns and drugs were enough anyway; there was no reason to expand into human trafficking besides the boss's greed.

The negotiations continued as expected as they stood there. Matteo had already given the signal during the ride, and soon he felt his smartwatch buzz with the return signal. 30 seconds.

Walking up to the boss, he asked to inspect the guns. He naturally got the go-ahead as none of them were loaded by default, but that wasn't why he needed to go over there. He leaned over the table as if looking at the guns as he got the second buzz.

"Boss?"

"Yeah, wha-"

Before he could speak, he had a round hole in his forehead as blood and brain matter splattered everywhere.

The other side reacted as expected, and Matteo vaulted over the table just in time as several gunshots went past him. The flashbang he had dropped at his feet blew up, blinding all of them who had turned towards him, and at that moment, two cars smashed the gate in.

A dozen men got out, guns blazing, as they began lighting up the entire warehouse. Dakila's men managed to return fire, but Matteo's initial move had left many of them blinded and confused.

Matteo himself stayed behind the table as he prepared himself for the next stage.

The gunfire soon died down as he heard his 'partner' call him out.

Their main competitor. A man who Matteo had made a deal with, to further his own means.

Smiling slightly at what would come next, he looked at the handgun in his hand and counted his bullets. It should be enough.

He yelled out as he stood up, seeing five guns already trained at him. His smile only broadened. Perhaps he had bitten off a bit more than he could chew.

Yet he moved. The first gunshot took a life before they reacted properly, the second shot took another as they pulled their triggers, and a third shot killed another man before their return fire came.

Matteo had already ducked once more as he remembered their positions. He threw another grenade over the table as he felt it be riddled with bullets, glad that Dakila had always insisted on having these large steel tables.

And then he heard it - screams from within the containers.

The men brought by the competitor, on edge, weren't as clearheaded or experienced as Matteo himself, so they didn't notice. They didn't think. They just fired. It took a full second before their leader yelled for them to stop, but it was too late.

Matteo saw red as he got up again.

He fired his gun, taking down four more before he was out of bullets. He drew his knife and stabbed the first one in the throat, and the second went down with a quick stab to the chest. Matteo felt a few bullets hit him from behind, most blocked by his vest, but one took him in the leg.

Taking a gurgling soldier as a hostage, he used him as a shield and even used his own gun to return fire.

The police arrived ten minutes later, finding dozens of corpses within the warehouse and two containers with a few more corpses and several women who were crying and screaming for help.

The day of the Integration of the 93rd universe

A man in black walked through the foyer as he took the elevator up. Weirdly enough, walking in the blind angles of all the cameras and keeping his head low.

Four minutes later, he exited the building, one briefcase lighter.

Fifteen minutes after that, the building's top floor went up in flames, a supposedly famous mafia-boss among them.

It was just another killing in a long string of organized crime, all committed by an assailant identified simply as M.

Matteo sat in another penthouse that he didn't feel like was his own, his only possession still the old piano. He mentally checked off another mark as he prepared to begin his preparations for the next target. That is when the Initiation came.

He found himself in the room. He had asked for a gun but found that he could at most get a profession that could lead him to make guns himself later on. Useless. So Matteo picked light warrior as it suited him somewhat as he was more than confident in his knifework.

After that, he went to a grand hall of sorts, surrounded by thousands of other humans.

He had to specify humans, as he soon realized there were beings in this tutorial that weren't humans. They called themselves servants to the Mistress of Shadows, the sponsor who ran the tutorial - a god known as Umbra.

Most of the servants looked elven, but some were creatures of pure shadows. Dark elementals that were there to guide the new initiates.

In the grand hall at the beginning, they were met with an explanation from the Organizer.

“Welcome, Forerunners of the 93rd Universe.

“Welcome, to the tutorial where you will be given the opportunity to rise to power and discover your own path. The first choice of which will come right after this. There are two other halls like this, each with its own purpose.

“The hall we are in currently is called the Hall of Blades and is for those who wish to walk the path of combat. The hall to the right is the Hall of Creation, and to the left is the Hall of Guides. Creation for those who wish to craft and focus on their professions, and the last is for those who wish to guide others.

“I would advise you all not solely to focus on one path. If you already possess a profession, get a class, and get a profession within a reasonable time if you have a class. Do not fret if you feel like you have chosen wrong; just be aware of the path you wish to walk when you reach the first evolution at 25.

“This tutorial is sponsored and organized by the Dark Mistress, and if you perform well, you may even qualify to receive her favor.”

After that, the Organizer began explaining more general info before sending them all on their way to different halls and such. There was plenty of panic and people doubting the entire situation, but the appearance of dark elementals and elves was enough to convince most this wasn't some trick.

Besides, it soon appeared that many of the types who had been brought there were not simple. Most of them hardened criminals, killers, soldiers, or assassins like himself. There was also more regular folk that Matteo assumed to be there to make up for numbers. In total, he saw they were 9000 initiates in the tutorial.

Of them, he surprisingly enough counted more than a hundred children who were all taken aside to be given some special elixir of some kind. Many of the ones who went to the Hall of Guides were those intending to help care for them.

Some others didn't look very fit for combat either - old people, people who were clearly civilians, pregnant women, the ones who appeared more mentally unstable. These people tended to go towards to Hall of Creation or the Hall of Guides.

Matteo looked up at the high ceiling in contemplation. This wasn't the first time he had been tossed into an entirely different world. When he was nine, he saw a rival gang member kill his brother. That also happened to be the first time he took a life himself.

With resolve, he began his journey to power.

The days quickly began passing as everyone fell into a groove. Matteo practiced a bit but spent most of his first week within the Shadow Trials. The Shadow Trials was where combat took place, a type of dimension that they were told was a dungeon.

In there, there were floors with progressively more formidable enemies. Every 10th level had a 'boss,' and if they managed to beat all 50 floors, they could fight the final boss. But it was made pretty clear from the beginning that this final boss was more or less impossible to reach, much less beat.

Matteo entered the Trial for the first time less than an hour after the whole introduction-sequence. He alone entered the Trials and exited hours later with more than ten levels. This continued as he hunted down creatures one after another, honing his craft.

He also discovered why they had all been taken here, what they all had in common. Every individual in the tutorial had an affinity for dark mana, and most of the training and material provided played into this fact. An assassin like Matteo had already gained several skills related to dark mana.

When Matteo evolved his class, he was still relatively low on the level ladder. The reason for this was simple; he had yet to pick a profession. He had earned a private chamber due to his high performance, and that was where the servant came to discuss his lack of profession with him.

“A profession is highly advised, due to the levels in race an-”

“Piano.”

So, he got a piano and a profession that very day - a simple profession called 'Novice Musician' that offered only four stats total and didn't appear extraordinary in any way. But it gave race levels, and Matteo enjoyed it. It was his type of meditation before actually gaining the meditation skill.

His leveling speed kept being insane, only increasing further as he also got levels in his profession. A month in, they had their first evaluations - the leaderboard for the top 10 with Matteo solidly winning.

Leaderboard: Shadow Trials

1st: M – 19th floor

2nd: NBS – 17th floor

3rd: HJ – 17th floor

4th: GAS - 16th floor

5th: KIL - 16th floor

6th: PJH - 16th floor

7th: V - 16th floor

8th: YH - 16th floor

9th: CT - 15th floor

10th: KL - 15th floor

The first boss on floor 10 was only level 25, but it progressed fast after that, with the average enemy on the 19th floor around level 50. Every person in the top 10 did the trials solo as they only got harder if you entered with more people. You also had to share points from the kills, making it even less attractive.

After the evaluation, Matteo was offered even more power. A blessing from a subordinate god of Umbra, increasing his agility by 5% and giving him access to even better skills. He also officially joined the Court of Shadows and became a follower. Though, that wasn't the term they used. They called them members instead of followers as the entire structure of the Court was more akin to a business than a religion.

Matteo didn't know if others had also been offered a blessing, and frankly, he didn't care. He just kept pushing forward.

Chapter im42: Intermission 4 - Matteo (2/2)

Around the 1-month mark, Matteo got a weapon he had been waiting for.

"It's ready?" he asked as he went up to KL, one of the other rankers.

"Of course, the materials you provided were more than enough. I should have a second one ready by the end of tomorrow. Remember, you owe me one," KL said, as he handed him the handgun.

[Dark Handgun of Umbra (Uncommon)] – A gun made by a talented gunsmith from the 93rd universe during the tutorial. Can fire [Dark Bullet (Uncommon)] when infused with dark mana. Does more damage when striking from the shadows.

Requirements: lvl 25+ in any humanoid race

KL was the best gunsmith in the tutorial and had even gained a lesser blessing from one of Umbra's subordinate gods, granting him a skill to infuse his creations with the god's Records. The gun was frankly better than he had expected and was exactly what he needed.

The next day he indeed got his second gun.

After that, he only sped up his progress. His killing speed got faster as he also picked up skills related to his new weapons. The god that had blessed him even had skills related to guns, making it all the better.

He kept climbing the floors, fighting day after day. His only reprieve was when he meditated or practiced the piano. Through his profession, he had gained a few skills that helped him in combat too. Through sound, he could warp the perception of his foes and manipulate sound to muffle himself or even create supersonic attacks to throw his enemy off.

Never once did he drop below first place in the rankings. He knew there were other training grounds too, but this one was the most important. He even knew there were optional dungeons to do, and while Matteo had done one of them, he didn't believe it was worth the +1 in all stats title to do it. While the dungeons did have combat, they were more focused on traps or different kinds of trials.

As the days progressed and they approached the tutorial's end, the Organizer and servants had already recruited the most influential tutorial attendees.

It was apparent to him that this tutorial was partly to prepare them for the new world and partly for the Court of Shadows to recruit members. Many in the Hall of Guides members had gained priest-like classes and prepared to recruit even more members upon their return to Earth.

The Hall of Creation was prone to create tools of the trade for the fighters. Nearly everything revolved around dark mana, which was fine as everyone possessed it. It also explained why many of them carried classes revolving around assassination with great damage, stealth, and mobility over durability.

They were an army that would return to Earth and begin to establish their dominance. Without a doubt, one of many groups nurtured by a religious faction. The Court of Shadows made no secret of this but made them very aware of who they would contend with.

Matteo planned on standing at the helm of that group and proving his worth.

He had failed to become the 'boss' in the old world, but he could do it now. Sure, he wouldn't be the highest-ranking member of the Court, but he found it more acceptable to have unparalleled power be the dividing line.

This is why he showed up to the final ranking battles with assurance and conviction to win and claim the leader's title. All who had any interest in becoming the leader got a quest, and deciding who was to be the leader would be done through a tournament. It was the final day of the tutorial, and nearly every single attendee was there.

Looking at the top 10, he noted down those who were participating.

Leaderboard: Shadow Trials

1st: M – 39th floor

2nd: NBS – 37th floor

3rd: HJ – 36th floor

4th: CT – 35th floor

6th: UA – 32nd floor

9th: KM – 32nd floor

KL, the gunsmith that had now claimed the 7th spot, didn't participate, while the 5th place person didn't either. Matteo only saw the tournament as having one other real contender. The woman NBS.

Nadia was her name. A ruthless woman that Matteo knew of even before the system. A corporate spy and sometimes assassin who specialized in social hacking and information gathering. She was also a mean lass with a rifle with more than her share of kills.

Which was precisely the kind of magic she had now. A large black rifle infused with shadow-energy. She had gained the rifle itself as a reward for passing one of the many Challenge Dungeons and acquired the legacy of a dead veteran of the Court of Shadows. Rumors had it the rifle was ancient-rarity if not legendary.

Matteo had wanted it, but as with everything bound to a Legacy, it was Soulbound. A shame. His own equipment was also decent, with mainly uncommon and rare gear, but a powerful rifle would be welcome. Well, it wasn't all bad as they were essentially teammates, and it wasn't like she was squandering it.

The battle took place in an arena that looked like an old worn-down city in some post-apocalypse Earth. It was the semi-final but was by many viewed as the actual final. The arena itself didn't particularly favor any of the fighters, and even if it did, who were they to complain? The truly strong could come out on top, even in an unfavorable situation.

They dropped into the arena, and the 30-minute timer began. Both immediately faded into the shadows as they began hunting each other: one, trying to snipe Matteo, with Matteo trying to remain undetected and bring down Nadia.

Weaving through the ruined cityscape, Matteo blended in with the environment. Within the shade, he became practically invisible, his movements gave off the faintest of sounds, and even his mana, heat, and other detectable signature were hidden.

At the same time, Nadia had found a position on the 34th floor of a decrepit building. The rooftop was suicide as she would be too easily detected, and there wasn't enough shade to keep her hidden. The battle took place at dusk, with only sparse rays of sunlight lighting up the city.

Nadia activated a skill called Eyes of the Specter, an upgraded version of her Archer's Eye that she got upon her class evolution. Walls and other physical obstacles quickly faded away in her sight as the city lay bare before her.

Her left eye, the only one she had used the skill with, began bleeding a few seconds after using it. Her toughness simply wasn't high enough to sustain the skill for an extended period, but it had been enough.

Like a silent wind, a beam of dark mana tore across the battlefield. Matteo felt it coming with his danger sense skill as he barely managed to avoid having his head blown off and losing the match. He still got a nasty wound on his shoulder, but it was nothing he couldn't deal with.

More importantly, he now had her position. His bait had worked.

Sprinting faster than before, dark mana swirled around him as he sped up. Getting to the building, he didn't stop, but began running up the side of it. He dodged another four shots on the way up. Just as he thought he had her, the entire side of the building was suddenly imploded into something akin to a black hole.

Grenades. Shit.

He was forced off the building by the unexpected attack, but instead of dropping to the ground, he shot out a tether and swung around the building, rolling into one of the lower floors. Pointed his guns upwards as he released a blast of dark mana up towards Nadia's position.

She returned fire, but it quickly became apparent that she was outgunned. Matteo slowly made his way up to her as she tried to retreat slowly. She threw grenades, used different skills, but it was all in vain.

With a final Shadow Vault, Matteo crossed the distance and landed a cut on her chest with his knife. Her body dissolved into shadows as four copies ran away in different directions. Sadly for her, he had a perception skill of his own to counter these kinds of techniques.

He quickly chased down the real version, where they were thrown into a melee. Well, he wanted to be in melee while Nadia wanted to create some distance.

She released a blast of mana and threw some knives, but Matteo deflected them as he went in for the kill. A few moments later, she fell dead to the floor as the world around them dissolved.

"M moves on to the final where he will face CT. The match will begin in 5 minutes."

The Organizer nodded at him with approval as Matteo looked over at a frowning Nadia.

[Human - lvl 51]

"Good fight, you're strong; it will be a pleasure working with you in the future," Matteo said to the woman.

"... just be sure to win the final," Nadia said with disappointment in her voice.

The matches in the tournament were done through some kind of magical simulation. They technically were fighting themselves, but it was some kind of projection of their souls and not their actual physical bodies. It still tired you out mentally, but it didn't drain any resources or cause any bodily harm.

While the Court of Shadows was considered a rather ruthless organization, it would just be utter stupidity to kill off most of their new talents. Death was a very real thing in the tutorial as he saw that 1400 people had died in their tutorial so far - the vast majority of them within the Trial of Shadows.

Matteo nodded at Nadia with a reaffirming smile. He understood that she wasn't content with losing and that she at least wanted to have lost to the champion. They were all prideful people. Or at least he assumed them to be. Because the person he would face in the final was a bit... uncharacteristic compared to the other top rankers.

CT was a relatively mild-mannered young man. He looked to be in his mid-twenties and didn't have any significantly distinguishable features. However, what made him stand out was how he fought and behaved during the tutorial.

Firstly, he had chosen the Hall of Guides and not the Hall of Blades like every other ranker participating in the tournament. The other rankers in the top 10 who had chosen not to participate mainly focused on other things than combat.

CT appeared to have an affinity for children as he had taken responsibility for them as he helped both them and their parents. In fact, Matteo saw him as a very valuable and caring person. He believed he would be a great help in the new world.

Secondly, his fighting method was not like the others. Most rankers used magical versions of pre-system weapons. Guns, rifles, knives, things they were familiar with, to begin with. They were all fighters before the system, after all. CT wasn't, it appeared. He was a caster who used some kind of lightning magic mixed with dark mana, of course.

Third, the man had spent a lot of time on the dungeons Matteo himself avoided. He still climbed the floors in the Trial of Shadows, but he did so far less than the other rankers.

Looking over at the man, he saw him surrounded by children who cheered for him as they prepared to watch the match.

[Human – lvl 49]

He was a few levels below Nadia and quite a few levels below himself. Matteo had reached level 55 himself, out-leveling everyone else by quite a margin. In fact, many had believed this entire tournament to be unnecessary with Matteo so far ahead.

The seeding of the tournament had also been off. Matteo defeated the 2nd, 3rd, and 6th place on the rankings on his way to the final, with CT only beating the 9th place. The match had been rather one-sided, which was expected with the level difference and noticeable power difference based on how many floors they could each do. CT had just shot a few lightning bolts, and the other side had surrendered.

But Matteo would not underestimate him. He was an outsider who had risen to power with conviction, surrounded by murderers, assassins, and hardened warriors. He had managed to help and be a gathering point for the less combat-orientated survivors - the children and women who needed someone to lean on. He had never seen the man flustered himself.

Their arena would be a lot more straightforward. It would be a giant colosseum with pillars placed around the battlefield. Matteo wasn't very familiar with the other's fighting style, but he had been a ranged fighter so far. His spells were fast and deadly, but his attack speed was low, and he hadn't shown any potent mobility skills yet.

The finals began with the Organizer's proclamation:

"This battle will determine the nominal leader of the Court of Shadows on Earth; in other words, the Judge. Of course, there will be support, but it will be limited due to the restrictions in place. Let the fight begin, and may you forever walk in the shadows."

They both touched their respective orbs as their projections appeared in the arena, a hundred or so meters between them. The two men stared at each other for a bit before Matteo spoke.

"Give up."

His words were straightforward. Matteo didn't see the other man winning in any way. CT was out-leveled and frankly outclassed, and there was nothing he had shown that cou-

"I was about to say the same," CT answered in a calm voice while still having his hands in his pockets before asking. "We each have our reasons for this fight. What is yours?"

Matteo stared at the man for a bit. What did he want? Well, of course, that answer was simple.

"I want power, same as everyone else. Only strength can bring influence in this world, and I will lead the Court to that. I will lead us to be a true standout force on Earth, to make our members respected, and to make even a whisper of our name be met with shivers."

"Maybe you are more fit to be the leader," the other man said with a sigh. "I just want to protect those I care about."

"Do you need to be the leader to do that? Protection of significant others will, of course, be prioritized whenever possible," Matteo said. He would have just fought usually, but he knew that CT held a lot of influence with the less combat-oriented members of the Court. It was best to stay on the best of terms with him.

"I guess I don't really need to be the leader..." CT said as he looked up with a smirk. "But at the same time, I would prefer to be in a situation where I can guarantee it. Besides, it's only fitting for the strongest to be in charge, isn't that one of the creeds of Umbra?"

"I see," Matteo said, understanding as he smiled back. "Then may the best man win."

He didn't hesitate as he attacked, planning to end it quickly.

CT kept smiling as he made his move too. Four orbs of black lightning condensed in mid-air as they began floating around him, crackling with energy. At the same time, he looked towards Matteo, the orb releasing a bolt.

Matteo easily side-stepped the attack as he scoffed a bit internally. The attack held power, but the opponent was inexperienced in fighting other humans. The lightning caster kept throwing bolts from the orbs making Matteo slow down but ultimately failed to land a single one.

Predictable.

Matteo Shadow Vaulted closer as the four orbs circled CT, protecting him. When he got within 50 meters, he pulled out his two guns and returned fire. Dark bullets flew through the air as they encountered a dark barrier of mana protecting the caster. It appeared to slightly crack with every shot, but it was quickly repaired again.

Fine, Matteo thought as he pointed his gun towards the caster and used one of his skills designed for this exact scenario.

Disruptive Bullet (Uncommon)

The bullet flew forth and tore straight through the barrier of mana, but CT still managed to lean to the side and avoid it. He appeared to have quite the reaction-time for a caster.

Another barrage of bullets put the caster on the defensive as he just kept using the orbs and the barrier. Sometimes two orbs moved together to create a whip of lightning, while at other times, all four came together to create magical circles in the air that released different kinds of lightning magic.

Matteo was fine with just learning what the man was capable of... but he was disappointed. The power behind the magic was indeed great, but alas... it wasn't enough.

Dark Infusion (Rare)

He activated his boosting skill, which increased his agility, strength, and intelligence by 20%, and he charged. Dark mana swirling around him, partly obscuring his figure.

Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra (Uncommon)

With another vault, he came within ten meters. A single bolt of lightning hit Matteo, but he was more than capable of taking the blow as long as it allowed him to close in. His two daggers had now replaced the guns as he dove in.

The first slash tore the barrier apart as the next approached the man's neck, stopping just before he slit it.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Matteo asked with a bit of anger in his voice.

He wasn't blind and had obviously noticed... from start to end, CT hadn't moved a single step. He hadn't even taken his damn hands out of his pocket. He had just summoned those four orbs and stood there. That had been enough to win against the 9th place ranker, but Matteo just found it insulting.

"I should ask you the same," CT answered with a chuckle.

"Get serious," Matteo insisted.

"M... I am serious," he said as he leaned forward into the dagger... electrocuting Matteo as he felt the crackling dark lightning around the dagger as it simply phased into the caster.

What?

He quickly pulled back as he saw CT finally take a hand out of his pocket. He raised it towards the air as he opened his palm.

The sky above the arena darkened as dark clouds appeared out of nowhere. What appeared like a thousand bolts of lightning struck down onto the lifted hand just as the caster summoned a black metal staff out of thin air.

Matteo stood wide-eyed at the display of power but soon noticed the clouds above had already calmed down after shooting lightning into his staff and now only hung there threateningly.

"I sought power to protect my family,... my wife, my unborn child... my brother, and my parents. I will find them after this, and I want the Court to help me protect them. Besides, I found out... I am quite good at this," CT said as he pointed the staff towards M.

Dark Lightning Bolt (Uncommon)

Matteo barely managed to dodge as the side of the colosseum wall behind him was blown up from the blast. He knew he had to get serious as he closed in once more, hoping to finish off the man.

Based on how the dagger faded into him before and how he had avoided the disruptive bullet, he reckoned mana-based attacks would work as he coated his weapon in dark mana.

Shadow vaulting forward, he slashed down with the dagger, but CT blocked it, much to the surprise of Matteo.

It felt like his dagger was drawn to the metal staff as electricity wormed its way up the veins in his arm. He felt superior in both skills and strength, yet he kept encountering the staff every time he swung. It was a frustrating experience.

CT kept his casual smile, but his eyes were clearly focused as he fought the tutorial's top ranker. But...

He had yet to take a single step. One hand was still in its pocket.

Matteo's eyes sharpened as he pushed in further, his attacks getting more aggressive. The dark lightning coursing through his body from the staff was annoying but manageable. Still, he knew he couldn't keep up the status quo.

With one hand, he stabbed down with the blade while he twirled the other around to a backhanded grasp. Dark mana began swirling around both weapons as his entire body sped up.

Dark Tempest Strike (Rare)

A small tornado made up of black daggers appeared around him and began tearing into CT's mana barrier, and it quickly began cracking.

But Matteo wasn't done yet.

Domain of Shadows (Epic)

A suppressive field appeared around him that bathed the entire area in shadows. The mana barrier was whittled down in seconds, and for the first time, CT's eyes shot open as he took the other hand out of his pocket to grab the staff with both.

He blocked most of the blows but ended up getting kicked by Matteo and flew back and smashed into the wall, coughing up a mouthful of blood. He was, without a doubt, far less durable than Matteo himself or any other melee fighter.

Matteo was already charging towards the man, who got up quickly and swung his staff, releasing a storm of lightning, forcing the charging assassin to leap back.

"Damn, you're good," CT said with a chuckle as he spat out a mouthful of blood before looking up with the same smirk as before.

“Finally going to get serious?” Matteo asked, the domain of shadows dominating the surroundings.

CT laughed a bit as he breathed in. “My turn.”

The four orbs revolving around him all this time turned far darker than before and began crackling with ever-increasing dark lightning. Without any warning, three of the orbs entered his body while the last one entered his staff.

An aura spread throughout the arena as Matteo felt his domain be suppressed, as CT spoke three simple words.

“Ascension of Tenlucis.”

Above, the dark clouds churned with life once more. CT’s body burned with dark lightning as the entire projection seemed to shake, and the onlookers outside observed with terror.

Even the Organizer was shocked beyond anything an S-grade entity like her should ever be.

Tenlucis, a powerful god that died during the third era... said to have only left very scarce legacies that he gave to select powerful friends. He was an arrogant god who had slain hundreds of gods with his dark lightning and had been one of the Court of Shadows’ leaders.

The god's powers were domineering and powerful towards both the opponent and the user. It was said that the Legacy would drive the user insane unless they had the mental resilience to suppress it... but to cultivate that innate resistance was borderline impossible unless done since birth. Even then, it wasn't something you could just do. Yet this E-grade mortal appeared unaffected by it...

They had already confirmed that he didn't possess a bloodline upon first entering the tutorial... so how?

Why would the Dark Mistress make such a decision? To give such power...

Inside the arena, CT began his counterattack. His entire body was filled with untold power, as he released massive blasts of lightning one after another. Charging towards Matteo, the former top-assassin could barely defend as he got smashed in the side with the staff.

Matteo tried to close some distance as it was obvious the power-up skill CT had used was temporary. It indeed was... but CT still had enough time to finish the fight. Matteo didn't even have time to raise his daggers to form a proper defense before the next strike arrived.

Thundershadow Vault of Tenlucis (Ancient)

CT turned into dark lightning as he soared through the body of Matteo, frying him from the inside. He appeared behind him as he swung his staff, smashing it into Matteo's head.

The blow cracked his skull, and with a follow-up blow coming milliseconds later, shattered it completely, ending the battle.

Before he even fell to the ground completely dead, CT's power-up skill ended as he also fell to his knees, utterly spent.

"The winner of the battle is CT!" the Organizer said, still a bit confused about the entire situation... but she still had a job to do.

"As the winner, he has received the Lord title, will be named Judge of the first Court in the 93rd universe, and together you shall claim a Pylon of Civilization to establish our foothold upon your return to Earth."

All the other fighters looked at CT with awe as he let go of the orb that had projected his soul into the arena. The man just smiled as he let out a tired sigh, walking over to the man he had just fought.

"Thanks for the match, mate, it makes me feel a lot better to know there are great people like you around me when we return. Because damn, you're good," he said as he raised his hand to shake the man's hand.

Matteo looked at the man that had just beaten him and just smiled. It had been a long time since he lost to someone... and it wasn't all bad. "It will be my pleasure; you won because you were stronger today. Just don't start slacking now, or I will depose you," he said as he raised his hand to take CT's hand.

"Of course, but for now, you will take the second-in-command spot," CT said with a laugh. Everyone around them, including the Organizer, looked on with approval. It didn't appear like internal strife would be an issue... at least not immediately.

"For now," the second-in-command said. "Name's Matteo, by the way. No last name, I never had one."

"Pleasure to meet you, Matteo," CT said, introducing himself. "I'm Caleb Thayne."

Chapter 128: Living with the consequences

That day had been like any other to Jake. Alchemy, meditation, skill testing, and mana practice. Everything was tranquil until he suddenly got a weird feeling. One he quickly identified as coming from the mana in the air itself.

Something had entered the area permeated with traces of his mana by the Pylon of Civilization. In the back of his mind, he had a vague feeling of the direction of the intruder. Or Intruders. He felt several responses, but he was unsure of how many or how powerful they were.

He hesitated a few moments before he stopped his mana practice and decided to go towards the disturbance. Whatever it was, he would have to deal with it eventually. Besides, his danger sense and intuition didn't ring out in warning even as he used One Step Mile towards the intruders.

There he found four humans under attack. One middle-aged man, two were teenagers or in their early twenties, and a woman around thirty. Their attacker, a tiger that actually reminded him of the King of the Forest, quite a bit. The bark-like skin was very similar, at least.

Of course... it was no King.

He didn't really think much as he just went and killed the tiger to save the humans. It was like one would naturally call out if they saw someone start attacking another person on the street. While many would perhaps just stand by, Jake was the type who would interfere and then deal with the consequences afterward.

In this case, the consequence was that the group survived, forcing him into an unwanted social encounter. It wasn't that bad, though, if a little awkward. He did learn that they were a family of three together with a family friend.

Jake hadn't been able to say no when they asked if they could stay. All of them were relatively weak, the man only a level 31 human. He didn't appear to have a powerful class or profession, judging from how he nearly died to a level 59 beast.

He had been level 43 when he killed the Alpha Venomfang Badger, a mini-boss type beast at level 71. The tiger did have some impressive abilities, but in the end, it was nothing compared to that badger. It would have been ripped apart with a single swipe.

Jake was pretty sure that he could have killed the Oakwood Tiger at level 31, though it would have been a tough fight. However, he did know that sending the four of them back into the forest in their current states would be no different from killing them.

None of the family appeared very interesting initially, besides maybe the boy since he was a healer. But he found out that the woman, Miranda, did have something interesting. He didn't know exactly what she did, but she clearly had some kind of negotiation or communication skill. He couldn't pinpoint what it did, but he was very sure that her words were infused with a skill.

Jake didn't wait for them as he made his way back to his makeshift camp. It was little more than a blanket on the ground beside the pond.

He wasn't afraid of them being attacked on the way. First of all, he could vaguely feel their positions when he focused on it, and secondly, no beasts appeared to want to enter the area.

Sitting down once more, he was lost in thought for a while. His daily routine had been completely interrupted, and he wasn't quite sure what to do now. It felt weird just to start doing alchemy with the four of them also there.

On the other hand, he couldn't just stop progressing out of social anxiety. He was only a single level away from getting his next Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper skill. On top of that, after reaching level 70, he could look for something new to do. Oh, it would be cool to go explore around the area a bit... those caves looked cool, and he wanted to go look for some herbs or something.

As he sat there thinking, the group of four arrived in the valley. They saw the beautiful waterfall and pond, with Jake sitting at the shore staring into the water. He looked like he was deep in thought, and the group thought that he was perhaps meditating on the wonders of the universe.

Miranda and Hank found a tree where they could settle down beneath. All of them were still on guard but had slowly begun relaxing now. To their surprise, they hadn't encountered a single beast on the way here - not even a weak one lurking in one of the trees or the underbrush.

The whole place just seemed so idyllic. Peaceful. There were no sounds of beasts fighting in the distance, only the chirping of birds and the churnings of the waterfall.

Miranda looked on as she saw the masked man summon something out of thin air. At first sight, she thought it was an old metal pot, but on second look recognized it as a cauldron of some sort. Like the sort a witch would use in old movies, just a lot smaller and with a lid.

She saw him summon a barrel and from it added water to the cauldron. The barrel disappeared as quickly as it appeared before, and the one behind it all placed both hands on the cauldron. The air shimmered as if an invisible flame was lit beneath it. Soon after, plants and flowers appeared only to be added to the mixture. Finally, he placed the lid on it as he just seemed to sit there for a while.

Minutes passed as he sat entirely unmoving. Miranda had a skill that allowed her to sense mana easier, and with it could see that something was happening within the cauldron. Something far too complex for her to have any chance to understand.

Then finally, the lid came off, and she saw him bottle up a green liquid from within the cauldron. It took her a while, but she soon recognized them as stamina potions. *Can he make them?* she asked herself.

It would explain how he had gotten such a powerful healing potion to give Hank. It was surprising as she had never seen someone make potions before. She even had suspicions they were special items only for the tutorial.

Was it a profession or class? From the man's strength, he had to be a very high level in his class, she reckoned. But the creation of potions appeared more to be profession-related. Was he perhaps skilled in both?

She didn't know, and at this point, she was quite frankly too afraid to ask- they were already intruding as it were, and she feared that asking him could lead to him forcing them out. Or worse. Just get rid of them permanently.

They had seen their share of human-on-human conflict, and people were far faster jumping straight to violence than before the system. The strong often acted like tyrants or superiors towards everyone around them. Forced them to do their bidding. So far, she found the disinterest of their masked savior to be far more preferable.

Hank was sitting with his eyes closed, leaning up against a tree. His arm was slowly growing out, looking quite grotesque if she had to say so herself. As he had reached level 25 in his race, he had gained the meditation skill, which he naturally used to speed up his recovery.

Louise and Mark hadn't evolved like her and Hank yet, meaning neither of them had the skill. A shame as the low mana recovery without it was one of the big reasons why their progress had been so slow in the forest, as Mark more often than not found himself without mana.

Miranda herself wasn't handy in a fight at all, so she wasn't sure she could say she hadn't been the most significant burden of the group. Her class was only at a measly level 18, though her profession was at a respectable level 41. Sadly though, her profession didn't have many usages in combat.

It was a weird profession if she had to say so herself. Before the system, she had worked as a manager and had gotten a profession very closely related to that. It gave her skills related to communication, planning, and even some that gave her the ability to more effortlessly sense atmospheric mana.

In their tutorial, they had called her profession a 'social type.' One that didn't include any tangible crafting skill like builders, smiths, tailors, etc. But her profession did help those other ones. She got experience simply by guiding people and making sure what was needed during the tutorial was produced.

She could delegate work and get experience just from that. It even helped the ones doing the actual work as her skills passively helped them also if they worked following her instructions. It was a win-win situation.

It was far from the only social profession either. The tutorial had been relatively peaceful most of the time, only forcing people into these insane 'trials' once every week, each trial taking a day. Trials they entered in teams of five.

These trials included some kind of combat and many opportunities for those less suited for combat. Miranda distinctly remembered one filled with wooden puppets that she could guide to fortify their position, lay down traps and put up barriers. Granted, Louise and Hank did most of the killing, but she felt like she had helped quite a lot.

Ultimately this meant that professions were a big focus in their tutorial, and as they were, many support-type social professions also emerged. Miranda herself was perhaps the most prominent of all in her local group in her faction. Though there was quite a lot of different factions and groups, so she couldn't exactly call herself spectacular.

Their faction alone had around a hundred thousand people assigned by the system. Seven more factions were also around, each of them with around the same number. She called them factions because they were clearly set up to oppose each other.

Each team got shared rewards. But every trial would have a team from each faction. This naturally led to many conflicts as some teams came in to slaughter every other team besides their own. The cursed system even rewarding them extra tutorial points for it by giving them half the points of those they killed.

This meant that often entire teams were wiped out at a time. And those that weren't wiped out had it even harder as they were either forced to find a new team or continue on their lonesome. Skipping the trial was never an option.

After leaving the tutorial, she had found little use for her profession, however. It relied on others to level, and there being only four of them was far from enough. The only useful skills she had was her ability to sense mana and her intuition skill. It was what she had used to find this place.

This area was... different. Like a massive beacon on the horizon, it lit up, making everyone aware that this place was unique. However, only Miranda could feel it, so it appeared that having a skill to sense mana or an intuition skill was required to truly feel it. Moreover, she felt like this place was calling to her. Enticing her to come.

The intuition skill she didn't quite comprehend yet. It did as advertised and sometimes allowed her to get a 'feel' for something. A notion that a particular course of action would be correct, or maybe give her an aching feeling in the back of her mind when something was off.

On that note, the skill had done fuck all in front of the masked man. It was not a surprise as it hadn't done much during fights either, but usually, it at least did *something*... but towards him, it was utterly silent. It could sometimes help her prepare for fights by giving her an idea of what to do, but it didn't do much of anything when it came to actual combat.

She knew that her profession was influential, though. It also fit her very well and played to her already existing non-system-related skills. Like nearly every other human, she was trying to find her place in this changing world.

Sitting for a while, she just kept observing the masked individual as he worked. Sometimes he would craft potions that she recognized as health, mana, or stamina potions. Other times he made liquids she had never seen before.

Other times the flames fizzled out beneath the cauldron, and she heard him curse beneath his breath as he dumped the liquid in a barrel he had placed on the side. Then he began again.

She had observed many craftsmen and women during the tutorial. Led many of them. Guided them to improve their methods. But what she saw right now was truly above her paygrade. She knew it was incredibly complicated and that it required concentration at a high level.

Small aspects were also highly optimized. The masked man deposited all the pot's ingredients through some kind of telekinesis, all in a seamless motion. Items required simply appeared out of thin air. His methods were highly optimized, but there was one aspect she respected more than any other.

He didn't take a single break. Miranda sat there staring at him intensely for hours, nearly in a trance as he just kept working. Most workers would take a slight breather after concentrating intensely after every craft. It was human nature to never give 100% while working. At least not in her experience.

But he truly gave 100% at every moment. Even when he complained to himself, his hands and telekinetic ability didn't stop. He just kept going, like some kind of machine. It was admirable, to say the least, in Miranda's eyes. *He must have been a good employee before the system.*

Hank and his children had all managed to settle down for now. His arms were now regrown and as good as new. It was almost surreal how effective the potion had been. Louise and Mark had both found a spot where they now both leaned against a tree, fast asleep. The last two weeks had taken their toll on the two. Hank was also resting his eyes, despite trying to keep himself awake.

They had found a spot hidden behind some trees, out of sight from the masked man. Only Miranda remained, enraptured by what she was seeing. The crafting itself didn't interest her that much, but the skill and perseverance involved sure did.

After another hour, he stopped after a successful craft. After bottling the potions, he got up and stood staring at the pond for a while. Miranda was slightly disappointed that he was done working, but soon her disappointment turned to astonishment.

He walked out onto the water. Walking on it. Then he sat down in the middle of the pond and sat in a meditative pose. Seconds later, several big stones floated up from beneath the surface.

Her eyes twinkled as she saw this. She couldn't help but move a bit closer to see better. Her mana sense was clearly identifying that the masked man was somehow manipulating those stones with mana. But just as she had gotten slighter closer, the rocks suddenly fell, and the man fell into the water alongside them.

She didn't even have time to register what happened before a figure loomed over her. Dripping with water and two yellowish eyes staring down at her. She felt a shiver run down her spine as she quickly tried to come up with an explanation for her peeking.

"Could you stop staring..." Miranda heard a weirdly meek voice say, her mind completely blank.

Chapter 129: Points of view

For hours he had tried to ignore her while working. Hours he had endured that piercing stare. It was far more unsettling than some dungeon boss staring him down. Jake felt like his every action was judged and evaluated. He had endured it... but it was just too much.

He hated whenever people did that. It was why open-concept offices were the spawn of the devil himself. Who the hell could concentrate with someone staring at them covertly, or worse, sitting in plain fucking view staring...

What the hell, woman, was all he could think. He had managed to do alchemy as most of it was routine by now, but even then, he had failed far more than before. His mana practice was just damn impossible; it even took him a few seconds to coat his feet in mana to walk on water.

So he prepared himself to confront the woman. To make her quit whatever she was doing. To give her a piece of his mind about how the hell she had been raised not to know staring at people was rude. So with full gusto, he appeared before her, ready to lay into her.

“Could you stop staring?”

Mission successfully failed. Jake felt that he had just made the situation 100 times worse. Worse yet, the woman just *kept staring* up at him, like a deer caught in the headlights - like a child caught doing something wrong.

“I... I didn’t mean to...” Miranda stammered, trying to explain herself.

Jake, at this point, was too embarrassed to think clearly either. The entire thing was just too damn awkward. But who the hell told her to stare at him for literal *hours*?

Miranda was the first to collect herself as she managed to string together a sentence: “I just wanted to see your crafting... it was very inspiring.”

Having a point of conversation to jump into, Jake also calmed himself. *Be professional*, he told himself as he answered.

“If you have any questions, just ask instead of silently staring. It is counterproductive for both of us.”

What Jake didn't know at this moment was the floodgate he had just opened. Miranda's eyes brightened as she began her barrage of questions.

“Can you tell me the profession used to make potions? It's a profession, right? And what is that telekinetic skill? Is that part of your class or profession? Water walking? Also, the pot-like thing, is that specific to making potions? What does it do? And where did you get the ingredients? Oh and...”

Miranda had spent the last few hours wondering all these things and so much more. She couldn't understand how she, out of a crowd of thousands, hadn't seen a single profession that could create potions like the masked man's. All his skills were just too out of the ordinary.

Jake took a deep breath as he motioned for her just to follow him. *Might as well just sate her curiosity*. Going to the edge of the pond, she nervously yet enthusiastically followed. Taking out two chairs from his spatial storage, he couldn't help but think about how this was the first time he had needed to summon two pieces of furniture. How he had never had anyone to sit with outside of gods. Maybe it would be nice to have a conversation with someone that wasn't himself...

Of course, him not just summoning ingredients but freaking chairs only made Miranda all the more interested. Sitting down in the chair, she couldn't help herself feeling it out, just to make sure it was actually a real physical object.

Looking out over the pond, Jake felt himself relax a bit. It was weird how nerve-wracking he found it to engage with another human compared to fighting monsters.

"One question at a time," he said, still staring out on the water.

"How do you make potions?" Miranda asked, just rehashing the questions she rapid-fired earlier.

"Alchemist profession. Allows me to make potions along with a bunch of other things."

"How did you get such a profession?" she asked, frowning. She knew what an alchemist was before the system, but only surface-level - something about pursuing immortality and turning lead to gold.

"Do you know what challenge dungeons are? Or just dungeons in general?"

"No to both. What are they?"

“Separate spaces that you enter through portals. In my tutorial, most of the powerful enemies were found within those. Also, while I can’t speak for every type of dungeon, you receive rewards upon completing the dungeon,” Jake explained.

The thought of not sharing information didn’t occur to him. While there were many things he wouldn’t share, this kind of knowledge would only help others strive. Besides, everyone would learn it in time as it was considered common knowledge that even young children knew in the rest of the multiverse.

“Fascinating... I take it you have completed some of these dungeons?”

“Yeah, a few. To answer your earlier question, my profession was gained through a challenge dungeon, with it being both a requirement and a part of the reward for doing it.”

“If it was given through such unique circumstances, I can understand why I haven’t encountered one before,” she nodded. “But how did you come across these dungeons? Were they part of the trials or in the city zone?”

“Huh?” Jake exclaimed, confused as he turned to her. “What do you mean?”

“The weekly trials... wait, were there different kinds of tutorials?”

After that, they compared notes a bit. Jake had heard from his colleagues earlier about the different tutorials and even recognized a few things she said. It appears that Mike had

been in the same tutorial as these four. Granted, it was only guesswork based on his eavesdropping while he spoke to Jacob.

Miranda heard for the first time that different types of tutorials existed. When she heard Jake talk about how Jake's had been a forest filled with beasts, she was more than a little surprised. Hers had been known as a 'creation' type tutorial, while Jake's had been a survival type.

Both of them discovered a lot of exciting things. Jake learned a lot about different classes and professions, and he hadn't even heard of the so-called 'social' professions before. There were of course, also many more creation-types.

He learned that Hank was an evolved builder profession. Mark was a builder, and Louise had some kind of artist profession. Out of everyone, she was clearly the one least focused on hers, and she had apparently gotten it through drawing a lot.

Miranda learned a lot of common knowledge. She learned about standard terms such as the different grades and, of course of dungeons and skills. He didn't share anything to do with gods or bloodlines, however.

"The world has really changed. I can't believe I worked in a manufacturing plant just a few months ago. Now I am sitting in the middle of a forest with a masked stranger," she laughed after a bit.

Jake nodded along until the last part. The damn mask. Once more, he had forgotten that he even had it on. It was just too damn sneaky. Who the hell designed a mask you couldn't see or even feel wearing? He hadn't taken it off for two weeks, not even when in the water.

“Ah, sorry, I totally forgot about the mask,” he said as he made it invisible. Oh, it was still there, just unable to be seen by anyone. Even the Viper had confirmed that while he knew it was still there, he couldn’t actually ‘see’ it. System-stuff right there.

Miranda had been looking at him all this time and was startled as the mask suddenly was just gone. Equally surprising was the face beneath it.

Jake, seeing her weird look, couldn’t help but ask a bit self-consciously, “...What is it?”

“You just look way more... normal – more normal than I expected, at least. The eyes made me expect something quite a bit different,” Miranda answered, chuckling. Jake really did look far too normal for a masked savior that could teleport and summon things from thin air.

“Oh... I see.” Of course, Jake had noticed that his eyes had changed quite a bit after he got Gaze of the Apex Hunter. Not that he had anything against it. Even if it looked a bit weird at first sight, the power of the skill was more than worth it. Even a level 59 tiger had been entirely frozen for a few seconds just from a glance.

“Is it a skill?” she asked.

“Yep, and quite a good one. How about that mind-affecting aura of yours? A profession-related one?”

Taken aback, she quickly apologized. "I'm sorry, I don't even notice when I'm using it! It says that it only makes me appear more trustworthy, and I am so sorry if-"

"It's fine, doesn't work anyway," he interrupted, laughing it off. "Takes a lot more than that to affect me. It's actually good practice when it comes to sensing and adapting to it. By all means, keep it active."

Relieved, Miranda let out a breath. She was afraid that all the goodwill she had built-up had disappeared. But, for some reason, she was also relieved to hear that her skills didn't work.

"By the way, I don't have any subtle mind-affecting skills, if you wondered," Jake clarified. He couldn't help but wonder if people would have to explain stuff like that in the future... or how such skills would affect human interactions.

"Good to know; I was afraid I was unable to detect it if there was. I bought a skill to defend myself against mental attacks for my tutorial points," Miranda explained, slightly relieved once more. "Did your tutorial have those points too?"

"It did. That appears to be one shared commonality. Besides the high death rates."

"Yes... I am unsure of the six other factions, but out of a hundred thousand on our side, I think we lost nearly ten thousand. You mentioned that your tutorial had twelve hundred; how many people made it out?"

“Only one,” Jake said, Miranda instantly exclaiming:

“WHAT? Only a hundred? How can tha-“

“No. One. As in me.”

Miranda sat there staring at him for a few seconds, while Jake tried to save the situation by further clarifying:

“Ah, but four others also made it in the end. They did all die, though...”

“What the heck happened? How is that even possible? Were those beasts that powerful?” she asked dumbfounded.

“No... while the beasts did kill quite a few in the first days, humans killed humans. I am not entirely sure about everything that happened. However, some psychopath ended up killing everyone but himself and me towards the end,” Jake sighed, still remembering the terrible - yet slightly satisfying - memory of pummeling William into a paste.

“Who would do that... what happened to that person?”

“I killed him,” Jake explained casually.

“I... I am sorry, that must have been terrible. Having to kill another person...” Miranda said, looking horrified and sorrowful at the same time.

Jake, trying to ease her feelings, explained: “It was fine; it’s not like he was the first.”

An attempt that sure as hell didn’t work. Jake had forgotten that it was still only three months since the system arrived. While humans adapted quickly, it wasn’t that quick. The act of killing other humans was still a concept many found hard to grasp.

On the other hand, Jake had begun to accept it as just another reality of the multiverse. While he wouldn’t go out of his way to kill humans, he, surprisingly even to himself, wasn't very averse to it. An enemy was an enemy, after all. He knew he had been affected a bit by talking with the Viper, whose main advice to solving problems tended to be: “Just kill everyone?”

Seeing Jake practically admit to multiple murders like it was no big deal made Miranda shirk back a little. Something he naturally noticed.

“What’s wrong?” he asked with genuine confusion.

“I... I am sorry if...” Miranda apologized yet again for reasons Jake still didn’t understand.

“I don’t get it,” he said, scratching his head.

“Why would you...?” she muttered under her breath until she collected herself and raised her head to look Jake in the eyes.

“What are you planning on doing with us?” she asked, having reached a conclusion wildly different from reality.

She had deduced that the only reason why Jake would just confess to it was that he wasn’t planning on letting them go. She couldn’t comprehend any other reason why someone would admit to such an incriminating act. Something that, in her eyes, was absolutely immoral.

If he had responded with deep emotions from taking another human life, she would have reacted differently. But he talked of it like it was just a minor matter. She even had suspicions that he was the psycho that he claimed murdered his entire tutorial.

What she didn’t understand was why he would lure her in like that? To have such a long pleasant conversation just to show his fangs. Was it some kind of demented entertainment for him?

“Okay, what’s happening here? I don’t plan on doing anything with you? What?” Jake exclaimed, now wholly dumbfounded. She looked at him like she had prepared herself to die or something.

Miranda found this response not what she expected either. He seemed genuinely confused. Either he was the most talented actor she had ever seen, or he was honest...

Either way, she steeled herself and just asked.

“Why did you kill others?”

“What? Because they were enemies and attacked me. Is that what you were so caught up in? Seriously?” Jake said with exasperation.

“So it was all in self-defense?” Miranda asked, with a bit of hope that the man in front of her wasn’t a mass-murdering monster. Though the casualness still bothered her.

“Well, yeah. Though I guess, the last one was more out of rage. But really, what’s up with you?”

“Can’t you see what is wrong with killing others?” Miranda practically yelled, her fear slowly being replaced with anger.

“If they are my enemies, no. It’s not like I get any kicks out of it. I merely realize that this new world isn’t one where killing can be as black and white as before. Things have changed. Doesn’t mean I like it, just that I acknowledge it,” Jake tried to explain.

He had this conversation with the Viper during one of their very first meetings. He recognized where Miranda was coming from. But he now also realized that it was too naïve.

“So you’re just going to kill anyone you deem an enemy?” she asked, getting more than a little upset at the notion.

“If I deem it necessary, then yeah, I will,” Jake answered calmly.

“And when is it necessary?”

“When I decide it is.”

Jake felt like he was sitting on the other side of the discussion he had not even that long ago. He knew the next arguments. He had the same debate after all. In the end, it all boiled down to a differing fundamental view on the value of life.

He had realized that putting life on a pedestal and walking the path he was currently on was both impossible and hypocritical. He was a hunter. A hunter’s purpose is to hunt down and kill their prey. He had already killed thousands of creatures during the tutorial.

Some of them were approaching, if not already at, the intelligence-level of humans. Some likely even above, such as the Great White Stag.

“Will yo-“

“I will do what I think is best. The world is different now. Tell me, how many enemies did you kill during the tutorial?” Jake interrupted.

“That is different. They attacked us, and we had to defend ourselves. Besides, while it doesn’t make it okay, they weren’t intelligent beings who-“ Miranda tried to say before Jake interrupted her again with an argument he shamelessly stole from the Viper himself.

“So it is okay to kill children as they aren’t as smart as adults?” he asked, of course knowing full well how preposterous the statement was.

“Of course not, it isn’t-” she answered, getting cut off once more before she could continue.

“Oh, but it is the same. The system has changed every living being on a base level. A simple animal can evolve to a level of intelligence above that of a human. They can even learn to take humanoid forms, speak, love, and live a life no different from you and me. To kill any living being is to take away that potential,” Jake explained, continuing.

“A young child is no more intelligent than an animal, but we know they will grow up to become like you and me. What we kill is their potential... and now killing any living being in the world is taking away that potential. Heck, we can even expand it to plants as even they can evolve,” Jake said. He knew there were flaws in the arguments, but it got the point across.

“Tell me, do you find it justified that I killed that tiger chasing you?”

“If you hadn’t, we would be dead,” she answered, still taking in what he said before his question.

“What if it had been a human? Would you still find it acceptable that I killed them?”

“I don’t know...” she said, thinking.

“To me, that question is easy. It was someone I decided to kill when I saw the situation and made a split-second decision. That decision saved you and the three others. I would have done the same if it was a human. I have my own thoughts, but more importantly, I have my own guts and intuition. And I trust those more than any law or interpretation of morality,” he said, before getting up.

Miranda looked after him as he got up, as he turned and said.

“I am going out for a bit. This place is safe so just rest up. Take care. I’ll be back.”

With those words, he walked off with each step crossing tens of meters, with Miranda staring after him, still lost in thought.

Chapter 130: Going down

That was pretty cool if I say so myself, Jake thought walking away from the valley, trying to look as cool as he possibly could. It had nothing to do with how he had no idea where the hell to take the conversation after his whole ‘murder is fine’ speech.

Besides, maybe it was time to go for a bit of a walk. Jake hadn’t left that small valley for the better part of two weeks before today. While some immortal god may scoff at him for thinking of that as a long time, he did feel like it was.

He just needed a bit of a push to get him out of there.

Talking with Miranda had been very enlightening in many different ways. He had learned a lot about other people’s thoughts on the system and even learned quite a lot about other classes, professions, and other tidbits. He was also coming to understand that his tutorial was very much an outlier.

The Viper had told him that, but it helped to have a human reiterate and put it into perspective. Just the sheer amount of god-fuckery and interference that had been going on. Grand designs of fate and all that bullshit.

While in Miranda's case, she hadn't spoken of gods a single time, and Jake hadn't felt like bringing it up either. Perhaps she didn't even know they existed. It was a very teaching moment. He had heard that other tutorials were very closely related to a god... but clearly, hers wasn't.

Having a tutorial like Jake's hadn't exactly turned out well from an outside perspective. Only having one real survivor, with four others only living due to weird items or skills bringing them back from the dead... or made them able to 'live' on as undead. Again, this was a testament to how different his tutorial had been, as people were actually revived during it.

It did allow those who made it out to be well ahead of the curve.

Miranda had been in a far more normal tutorial. None of the thousands of people she interacted with had a level close to him, Jacob, Casper, or even Bertram from what she said. Anyone that reached level 25 in their race level before the tutorial ended was seen as a pinnacle elite.

Even just having a class or profession at level 25 put you into the 'elite' tier. Hank had been one of the stronger ones in her tutorial. Not the strongest, but strong enough that no one messed with them. Likewise, Miranda was one of the most recognized 'professionals' as they called those who focused on professions.

Those who focused on classes were talked of as fighters and those with professions as professionals. Why they hadn't settled on 'classers,' he didn't know, but the word 'fighters' was pretty descriptive of their focus and purpose, so it was fine... though he did like classers more.

If you focused on both, there didn't really appear to be a name. Besides, nearly everyone ended up being more in one lane than the other. Even someone like Hank, who had both an evolved class and profession, was considered a fighter with both being very close in level.

It was all fascinating. It was a part of the tutorial Jake never got to experience. Granted, others hadn't experienced dungeons and fighting D-grade unique lifeforms, so maybe he wasn't the one who missed out on the action.

While thinking, he soon found himself in front of one of the two cave entrances in the valley. It was his target, after all.

Last time he only briefly went in and looked around, finding nothing of particular interest in the first part of it. The only thing interesting was that he had no idea exactly how far it went. Or how deep it was.

Walking in, he could tell that it was indeed leading slightly downward. He also detected the small differences in the atmospheric mana - Sagacity of the Malefic Viper allowing him to tell the difference far easier than before.

Countless concepts were always in the mana around him. Except for unique places like the Forgotten Sewers dungeon, it was like this everywhere. The forest outside was also like this, with the mana mainly having what he assumed to be nature-affinity mana.

In here, however, he quickly began to feel a difference. The humidity in the air increased, and with it, water-affinity mana. The intensity of earth-mana increased too, with even tiny fragments of the dark-affinity, though nowhere near enough to begin devouring the other affinities.

Of course, many more were present that he couldn't detect. One of them reminded him a lot of vital energy, making him guess it was some kind of life-affinity. One that was also abundant outside.

Continuing onwards, he focused on his Sense of the Malefic Viper. Closing his eyes, relying solely on the sphere to guide him, he took in all the information.

He felt the mana in the air, the moss, the mushrooms. It was a nearly forgotten skill for the longest time, where he only relied on the passive sense. Now, however, he was actively focusing on it.

His perception had grown to monstrous levels since the last time he really focused on the skill. His knowledge of mana had grown even more than that. Which resulted in a system message barely a few seconds into using the skill.

***Skill Upgraded*: [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Rare --> Epic)] – The Malefic Viper sought out many natural treasures on its path to power; it is only natural to learn to sense them. Having walked further on your path as an Alchemist of the Malefic Viper, your senses for poisons and herbs only sharpen. Gives a passive ability to detect herbs and poisons in different forms and a strong feeling of their properties and affinities. Allows you to far better sense the poison you have inflicted. Allows the Alchemist to far more easily detect affinities in the environment and detect areas optimal for cultivating herbs. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Sense of the Malefic Viper based on Perception**

The message was in many ways unsurprising. Jake had expected it, but not this soon. Comparing mental notes of the version before it, he noticed that the main difference was that it now also included sensing mana and mana affinities more easily

He couldn't help but compare it to Sagacity of the Malefic Viper and even Palate of the Malefic Viper. The overlap was truly beginning to show in his mind. Palate gave him instinctive knowledge of herbs and toxins, Sagacity allowing him knowledge of mana affinities and ingredients, and Sense to detect them with.

Progress in any one of the skills would affect the others. And as Jake grew, so did the power of other skills. Blood of the Malefic Viper and Touch of the Malefic Viper were affected by all the poisons he had consumed. Even Scales, which was a bit of an outlier, did allow him to obtain and handle the poisonous substances more easily.

A theory had already formed in his head a long time ago. All of his skills with 'of the Malefic Viper' were part of a set. It was once a complete whole. Either by design or through natural means, it was now split up into many different skills, all giving a part of that whole.

And if he was right, then it meant that getting Sense of the Malefic Viper to ancient rating would net him another stat bonus per level in his profession. Perception most likely. Something he very much desired.

At the same time, he guessed that Touch of the Malefic Viper would end up giving intelligence. It was the only directly offensive skill the profession granted him thus far, making it seem very likely. Which meant he still had three other skills to discover. If he was correct, that is.

One that gave willpower he could easily see. His blessing already awarded that along with his profession itself, clearly marking it as a stat significantly associated with the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper profession. As for strength and agility, however... he wasn't sure precisely if those even existed.

Either way, it was useless to ponder on. He firmly believed himself to be correct, which was one of the main reasons he was rushing to 70. Only one more level to go.

As Jake focused on the skill and basked in its upgraded glory, he sensed far more things and even noticed minuscule, almost ethereal, fragments floating in the air all around him. Too small and insignificant for even his sphere to have detected them before. But with the skill, he became aware of them.

He wondered what they were. He even tried using Identify on them but failed. So instead, he just followed one of the small things. Very slowly, it floated through the air and landed on the moist ground, only to sink into it. It went down a few centimeters before becoming dormant.

Frowning, he tried to find another fragment to focus on. This time he instead tried to trace its source. It didn't take him long to find out what exactly was the cause. Small mushrooms on the ground occasionally released one of the small fragments, and it was only due to the ground being littered with them that so many small things were in the air.

They were spores. Microscopic spores were how these mushrooms propagated and spread. Walking up to some of them, Jake saw two different kinds. Both no larger than half of his pinky finger, they were genuinely tiny.

Both mushrooms were pure white, with different colored spots on them - one with yellow spots and one with blue ones. Identifying them, their names were as they looked.

[Yellow-spotted Mushroom (Inferior)] - A poisonous mushroom of the earth-affinity. Causes stiffness and mild paralysis. Not fully grown yet and will have a weak effect if used as an alchemical ingredient.

[Blue-spotted Mushroom (Inferior)] - A mushroom of the water-affinity. Safe to consume, but its liquids can be highly poisonous and cause blood-thinning. Not fully grown yet and will have a weak effect if used as an alchemical ingredient.

Baby mushrooms, he thought with a slight smirk. He considered picking some of them to eat for his Palate skill but decided against it. Instead, he would give them time to grow big and strong. Then he would come back and eat them. How kind he was.

Getting up, he moved further into the cave. By now, he was around sixty or so meters in. Looking back, he could still see the entrance, but it was slightly obscured by the ground of the cave, as well as a part of the wall. Meaning that the cave was indeed leading down but also curving slightly.

So far, he hadn't encountered any living things besides small bugs that were all identified as lvl 0. In other words, they weren't able to level or hadn't done what was required for them to do so. In nearly every way, they were just ordinary animals. If slightly stronger from the mana.

Which made sense, as he was still within the area of his Pylon of Civilization. The pond it was buried next to was only a few kilometers away, making the area the Pylon covered pretty big. Exactly how big he didn't know, but the group of four he saved were all nearly 5 kilometers away from the Pylon itself, making him guess that was around the maximum range.

Yet, he was actually beginning to feel its effects wane after walking only for a few more minutes. Now around 300 meters into the cave, the entrance was entirely gone from sight, and darkness dominated. Not that it bothered him, as his vision was clear as day. The only difference was the slightly increased dark-affinity mana in the air, but he had adapted to that long ago.

This was also the time he spotted the first actual monster. Though not a very impressive one.

[Flyeater – lvl 8]

It was some kind of plant. And while it was large for a plant, it was relatively small compared to beasts Jake saw, perhaps no bigger than one of his arms. It was entirely green and looked like a regular flytrap, just larger.

Pretty sure flytraps don't grow in caverns, though, he thought. It did remind him of another kind of herb he had. Mentally checking out his spatial storage, he found the pile of mushrooms he was thinking about and took one out.

[Flytrap Mushroom (Inferior)] – A carnivorous poisonous mushroom eating insects in order to accelerate its growth. Possesses a strong life affinity and has strong acidic qualities.

The name was even slightly similar. But why was this just a normal herb, and the Flyeater instead a monster with levels?

He knew plants could somehow evolve into sapient creatures, but it was another thing to see it right in front of him. The Flyeater was squirming forward, with small vines dragging it around. It looked unbelievably slow and clumsy.

Entering sneak mode, he got closer to observe it better. As he did so, his sphere picked up something he hadn't expected. More Flyeaters. Not on the surface, however. Tens of them had dug only a few centimeters under the ground and now lay in wait.

Their posture made them look like buried bear traps, ready to clamp. Jake doubted they could do him any harm even if they bit him but decided to avoid them anyway. None of them were above level 10, making them actually seem kind of cute.

Not wanting to disturb them, he snuck by as he made his way further into the depths. He hadn't exactly planned on how far he wanted to go, but at least to where he couldn't feel the Pylon at all. Currently, it was so faint that it was barely noticeable, but it was still there.

The only monsters that dared enter the domain were those Flyeaters, it appeared, as he didn't encounter anything new for the next few hundred meters, except for more Flyeaters. No flies, though, making him wonder if their name truly represented their dietary preferences.

He had to be at least 800 meters in and likely 50 or 60 meters down by now. Maybe even further. He had found quite the assortment of interesting herbs on his way, but pretty much all of them were not fully grown yet. They hadn't had more than a bit over two months to grow after all.

At 1 kilometer or so, the influence of the Pylon was totally gone. At least Jake couldn't sense it at all. The cave was just long and narrow, no more than four or five meters across the entire way, with no other opening anywhere.

From the mark where the Pylons influence disappeared, he began seeing creatures here or there, but none that had even reached level 25. He would consider this entire trip a waste of time except for the herbs. Yet he kept going, and after reaching around the two kilometers mark, his disappointment was only growing.

This is why he found what he saw next pleasantly surprising. The entire cavern opened up before him after he entered a small entrance.

He hadn't entered any portal or anything, yet it felt like entering another world entirely. The entire cavern had to be more than a hundred meters tall, meaning that he genuinely had gone far deeper underground than he first anticipated.

The other end of the cavern wasn't even visible. Instead, Jake saw hundreds of different wild and alien plants everywhere. Some more recognizable, like giant mushrooms the size of trees, all the way to these weird bark-covered, almost metallic, tubes. It indeed was like entering another world.

And then he saw movement. An insectoid monster crawled on top of one of the mushrooms nearly right in front of him. Long blades instead of forearms, both gleaming from the light of the glowing moss above. It was a giant human-sized mantis.

[Mantis Scyther – lvl 42]

Jake chuckled to himself as he saw its level, even more so when it charged towards him. *Maybe this trip will be fun after all.*