

# THE PRIMAL HUNTER

## Chapter 171: Perhaps Too Easy

Phillip frowned as he yelled to the snipers to take down one of the bulls leading the charge. He used a skill of his to mark it, making everyone under his leadership instinctually aware of which one he was talking about - an instrumental skill for this kind of fighting style.

Four loud bangs sounded out as the bull was hit, two bullets hitting its head, one its body, and one its leg. It immediately stumbled and fell, getting trampled by its comrades. Those that trampled it also ended up falling with the sudden obstacle in their way, creating a domino-effect of cows tumbling over each other.

The one saving grace of this entire shitshow was that the beasts in the daily attacks were stupid and didn't have any proper fighting tactics. They would just charge until they got killed, only the Herd Leaders showing even a modicum of tactical prowess.

Yet even their tactic didn't go beyond having the weaker beasts make a ramp with their corpses. Phillip could already imagine tens of ways they could do it better, but he was just thankful for their stupidity.

When the Herd Leader enraged the bovines, he ordered their group's mages to push back the beasts. The wall itself seemed to come alive as the outer layer got pushed out. A grating sound was heard as the massive pile of corpses were slowly being pushed back,

and Phillip saw earth mages all sweating buckets as they exhausted their entire mana pools to pull off that one trick.

But the trick worked, as they had now effectively created a second layer of walls. A practical method of constructing fortified cities or castles in medieval times revived to face huge magic cows.

Of course... this plan didn't come without cost. The fort's wall had lost around a third of its thickness to create the second wall. This wasn't the first time Phillip had done this, though, and they would get to reconstructing the wall as soon as the fighting was over.

He couldn't help but look up back towards Miranda but found her gone. Just as he was about to question someone, he looked up and saw her floating a few hundred meters above the fort. She and her assistant appeared to be floating while the masked man stood in the air. He felt his eyes momentarily meet his, and Phillip shuddered.

*Is he truly human?*

Miranda had assured him this city owner was human... but Phillip still felt some doubt deep in his mind. His eyes were that of a beast, his entire body and face covered, and his power far above anyone Phillip had ever seen. He even had a D-grade monster willingly following him around...

Phillip felt like he had done all he could to adapt to this new world. He had entered a tutorial with around five thousand others. It was a survival-type, and he had quickly taken charge and ensured as many people survived as possible.

He had entered with a few of his fellow veterans who had helped assist him. He had recruited people, negotiated with other minor factions, and eventually managed to ensure that nine out of ten survived. He had gotten rewarded for this and was even recognized with the Lord title. Putting it all together... he had already guessed what this masked 'owner' owned.

A Pylon of Civilization.

Phillip had planned on claiming one himself after he got the title and had even used one of his five purchases to buy information on Pylons, as well as the location of the one closest to him. He had gained plenty of information, but the only thing he had gained concerning the location was a vague "go north."

But... what he had learned did raise some questions. Many questions, in fact. The first was related to claiming a Pylon... as one had to slay the D-grade tied to it.

He hadn't disclosed to Miranda that he knew these things, so when she told him that the owner had claimed the area weeks ago, he was shocked. Had he killed it shortly after exiting the tutorial? Or maybe... during the tutorial?

It seemed impossible... but if all her claims were correct, he had indeed done so.

Phillip did have the theory that the D-grade beast following him around was the actual owner of the Pylon... but that also didn't really hold water. Why would it then leave its area and follow the human willingly?

Some details about the Pylon were off, though. Miranda said that no beast ever entered the area, but Pylons didn't have that effect. It could be a lie, or maybe this mysterious owner had done something. It could also be due to the D-grade beast if it were acting as some kind of deterrent.

Either way... he saw not many other options than to join her, and hopefully, he could get some influence that way. It was quite an issue that she apparently didn't know much about the owner, leaving him indeed an enigma.

But seeing him standing on fucking air, glaring bored down at a horde of beasts... who was he to question his methods? Clearly, it was working for him.

"Firebombs, release!" he yelled as he returned his full attention to the battlefield.

Several giant fireballs were fired from catapults behind him. They wanted to make a more mortar-like version of those, but they hadn't gotten it working with the casters quite yet.

The giant fireballs fell on the approaching bulls, injuring all of them but not killing any.

Phillip frowned as he noticed many of the men and women already wet with sweat, their hands slightly trembling as they kept shooting. Their mana was about to run out, and looking at his own tank, he was also beginning to run low.

Parts of him wanted to ask that man Neil for help, but his pride didn't allow it. Not if it wasn't strictly necessary. He felt like he had already suffered too many losses today... he refused to fail here. He saw that the Herd Leader had also begun moving.

So he pulled out the big guns – literally so. He took out what looked like a missile launcher as he knelt and began channeling his strongest attack: the epic-rarity skill he had bought for nearly all his tutorial points.

Jake saw the man began to channel some hefty magic as he saw the shape of what looked like a rocket appear in his hands. It reminded him a lot of his own Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter but was instead a rocket. Rocket of the Ambitious Hunter... *yeah, it just doesn't sound as good.*

He had to admit that big magic rockets were cool. He just hoped that the power it packed was equally as cool. Phillip took nearly two minutes to create the missile while his second-in-command, a man that had silently always just been by his side, took charge.

Once the missile was prepared, he placed it inside the launcher he had brought out. Jake was pretty sure it was actually just some kind of tube with magical propelling. *Just a worse way of firing it than a bow*, he scoffed. The only advantage was that the entire process was purely magical, meaning you didn't really need any physical stats worth mentioning.

Jake felt that you needed those stats anyway, though. Sure, as humans, they gained some to all stats at every level-up, meaning everyone had a bit of everything. The issue Jake saw with being too focused on mental stats was... what the hell was your plan when a person used One Step Mile right in front of you and attacked with a good old stab?

Mana barrier? That consumed mana, far more than Jake would spend in stamina by dodging. Teleporting away yourself? It could work, but once more, way more resource-heavy than just leaning to the side.

The only real mages Jake had fought of somewhat high power were Abby and the King of the Forest. Abby was weak defensively, and that was even while using space magic, a type of magic offering excellent physical defenses.

As for the King of Forest... Jake was unsure if that monster could even be called a mage. His physical defenses and stats were utterly insane, surviving having a mini-nuke of dark and light mana blow up from *within his* damn body.

The point was... Jake felt like everyone needed a bit of everything to truly excel. His encounter with the Cloud Elemental had taught him that focusing purely on physical combat wasn't the way either, as he felt utterly useless in front of the incorporeal elemental.

Well, if one went far enough on any path, those shortcomings would disappear. Jake's current Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter was in the realm of physical combat, but one just had to ask the Storm Elemental if it wasn't effective. He also reckoned that just progressing far enough in anything would make you eventually iron out most weaknesses.

Of course, it could be argued all this only really matters when fighting alone. When fighting in a large group or just a small party, you can make up for others' weaknesses.

Neil and his party were an excellent example of this. Christen was tough and could handle most hits and intercept enemies. But she couldn't protect herself against everything or heal herself, so Silas helped her in that department from behind.

Both Silas and Christen had bad to non-existent damage, which is where Levi and, to some extent, Eleanor came in to provide the firepower while themselves being defended. Eleanor was also serving as the scout, and Levi served as the one to take down high-damage, low-defense attackers.

Neil served as the core, supporting every facet while not standing out in any particular area besides allowing the entire group's movement. He could teleport others or himself and even had several offensive options. Neil was a bit harder to place, but it clearly worked for them. Jake could see them being hell for any dungeon boss to battle.

The fighting style of those in the fort also facilitated focusing more on one aspect of fighting at a time. Jake was pretty sure that nearly all the gunmen had invested all their free points into intelligence and wisdom to increase their damage output and how many shots they could fire.

Jake couldn't precisely say their approach was wrong... he just felt like it wasn't sustainable in the long run. At some point, the walls would no longer provide an effective defense. The soldiers would have to team up with an army of builders and trappers to hunt anywhere and set up fortified positions even before reaching that point.

He frowned a bit the more he thought about it. This entire scenario of the fort being attacked by progressively stronger beasts all the time just seemed... implausible. That it happened only about once a day, even more so. They hadn't tried having two groups attack within a short while, always having time to refortify before the next wave.

It felt... designed.

Jake was momentarily distracted from his train of thoughts as Phillip finally released his attack. He hoisted up the launcher and fired his missile straight towards the Herd Leader. The beast reacted too slowly as it appeared to command a few of the bulls running with it to block the attack.

The red-eyed beasts jumped in front of the rocket, but Jake saw the man who'd fired it wave his hands as the rocket suddenly flew upwards over the bulls before heading straight down for the Herd Leader.

*Okay, I can't do that with my Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter... yet.*

A loud explosion sounded out as the Herd Leader was struck on its back. Blood and gore flew everywhere as a large part of the beast was blown off, and even some of the bulls around it were blasted away.

The explosion was... impressive. It appeared to be made out of pure mana mixed with a shitload of fire-affinity mana. Thinking about it, the man had also used explosive bullets earlier, so it made sense that he had some kind of fire-affinity.

After the dust settled, the form of the gravely injured Herd Leader was revealed. A large part of its body was blown apart, and portions of its hide were still burning with crimson flames. Yet, it didn't appear to be down for the count at all. The flesh where it was injured wriggled as it was regenerating in real-time.



Jake saw a few injured bulls around it fall to the ground, dead, as he understood what it was doing. *What a vicious cow, consuming its herd to strengthen itself.*

Phillip, at this point, was looking like a mess. He was sweating as clearly the attack had taken a lot out of him. He wasn't like Jake, with a very robust body that could handle utilizing so much power. He didn't make any more attacks himself but switched to exclusively yelling out orders.

The heavily injured Herd Leader was slowly healing as it continued trodding forward. Phillip had already ordered the soldiers to attack it, and it was pelted by sniper bullets, grenades, and a plethora of spells. All kinds of attacks slowly killing it and the many other beasts.

Roughhide was a good descriptor for them as they were tough... but that was really all they had. Their rough hides appeared very resistant to many of the attacks, but the bullets looked to be nearly unblocked.

From start to end... this entire 'battle' was just a one-sided slaughter. The human side's only real issue was running low on resources and having things to repair, rebuild, and perform maintenance on after the battle.

Jake couldn't help but frown as he got a closer look at the Herd Leader that was now already on its last legs. Its eyes looked... hollow. Like there weren't any thoughts or even proper instincts behind them. *Something is off.*

No one else appeared to notice, but the Herd Leader was acting weird to Jake. It just didn't move as he would expect a beast to do, and everything that had happened so far... just didn't make any sense.

Why would it direct its herd just to charge as it did and make a ramp?

Not because making a ramp was a bad idea... in fact, it appeared to be a *too* good idea for the cow to come up with - especially when compared to its plan of just charging headfirst into the wall of the fort. Towards the end, it didn't even look like it was trying to dodge... actually... was it even trying to win?

But if his thoughts were correct... why do this? Why practically throw away your lives and sacrifice yourselves to level a group of humans holed up in a fort? What could the reason possibly be? It reminded Jake of people 'feeding' in videogames... *wait*.

Was someone... feeding the fort? Not food, but levels and crafting materials?

The more he thought about it, the more plausible it seemed. Phillip had said that these attacks had been going on for weeks, progressively getting stronger, yet they hadn't lost anyone but were just slowly growing in levels and power instead.

Of course, this led to another question. Why?

But perhaps even more importantly... who or what was behind this?

## Chapter 172: A Monster To Hunt

Neil frowned as he listened to the cheers of the many soldiers. The fort's inhabitants in the courtyard below didn't join in but instead began getting to work like it was just an everyday occurrence. They gathered their tools and went to fix the walls, with Neil overhearing how they talked about the fight being a bit shorter today than usual.

He and his comrades hadn't had to interfere at all... in fact, the soldiers won the fight just before they would have to. The timing of the fight ending was so... perfect. *What is going on here?*

Jake stared into the horizon, towards where the herd had come from. He squinted his eyes, seeing nothing but more hills for hundreds of kilometers. It was sloping slightly downward, making him unable to see as far as he would like.

Something had designed this... he was sure of it. It was too perfect, too convenient.

He gave a signal to Mystie as she began bringing down Lillian and Miranda. Jake himself lowered the mana output on his feet as he also started slowly falling towards the ground.

Jake saw Neil and his party walk over towards their landing position, already talking to a tired-looking Phillip.

"I just feel like this whole ordeal is off; beasts usually don't act like this," he said, his companions nodding along. They all felt like things seemed off.

“While I understand that you find the situation suspect, is the situation truly that off? Beasts and monsters all acted unnaturally during the tutorials, and it shouldn’t be that surprising that they act unnaturally out here in the real world too.”

“It was like that because the tutorials were designed to be that way,” Jake butted in, landing right in front of Neil and Phillip.

They both gave him a confused look, Phillip’s gaze being more confused than Neil’s.

“What do you mean by that?” Neil asked, being the first to open his mouth.

“The system designed the tutorials with input from other powerful beings - some tutorials experiencing more input and customization from these entities than others. But they were, in the end, tutorials. Everything was made easier for us in many ways by hampering the enemies we were to face... but this is the real world. If what we face still acts like there is some grand design behind their actions, chances are it is because there is a designer behind them,” Jake explained, dropping knowledge he had learned from Duskleaf and Villy. In retrospect, it was quite the bomb... but Jake hadn't really considered if he should share it.

The two men just stood there staring at him; confused after Jake shared something so massive like it was just common knowledge - both equally critical of his words as they wondered how he knew such things. Assuming they were true, that is.

Jake saw their gazes and honestly didn't feel like explaining how he was actually good friends with a god, and he had heard this while drinking vodka with him. "Anyway, it means there is someone or something behind this. That is what's important right now."

"...Alright, let's say your theory is correct; why would anyone or anything send these bovines here to be slaughtered?" Phillip asked, clearly *really* wanting to ask about the tutorial-business but holding himself back.

"I don't know... but I plan to find out if I'm right," Jake said, turning to Neil. "Take care of the business here with Miranda. I'll head out and search for what might be the cause of this."

He didn't bother to say anything more as he summoned his two phantasmal wings, much to the fright of Phillip and the other soldiers. A few of them even moved their hands towards their weapons, assuming another enemy had appeared.

Jake didn't give them time to do anything or adequately process what happened before he, with a great flap, soared into the air. Mystie didn't bother hiding any longer either, dispelling her invisibility and following Jake. Once again, earning a scared yelp from a few terrified humans.

Miranda turned to Phillip, making a faux apology: "I apologize, the owner is a bit... eccentric, but if he believes there is something off about this entire scenario, then it would only be wise to believe him."

"Well, he already left to investigate, so I am not sure what to say," Phillip sighed with defeat, asking both Miranda and Neil. "What was that business about powerful beings and

designed tutorials? The system made the tutorials, and they were managed by that humanoid being in the introduction area, weren't they?"

"I thought it was designed by the system too... but in retrospect, it does make sense," Neil began. "The tutorial we entered was managed by someone calling himself the Disciple of Kallox, with Kallox being a now-dead space mage that had left his Legacy behind in the tutorial. The entire tutorial was essentially just a tool to find potential inheritors of this Legacy."

"I thought it was just the setting... you know, the story spun up by the system," Levi frowned. "Did this Kallox actually exist for real? Did you actually accept some inheritance from a dead geezer?"

"Levi, if we assume Kallox was a real person... show some respect," Neil said, throwing him a look. Getting a slightly apologetic "sorry" back from Levi, who backed off.

"Interesting..." Phillip said as he listened to them. "Our tutorial was just an overgrown abandoned city with the only objective being to survive. We didn't meet any living beings that weren't monsters trying to eat us at all."

"Not us either... but there were huge message boards with writing on them informing us of different things at different times, so someone was clearly watching. I assumed it was just the system doing it... but it may as well have been creatures from other universes," Miranda reflected out loud.

"Most of the survivors here came from the same tutorial as me... but I think we should have done some more information gathering about exactly what type of tutorial everyone

experienced. There could be a lot of valuable information to be found through that,” Phillip said.

“All the more reason why you should join the owner’s city, a place that will most certainly become a beacon of hope in this new world,” Miquel spoke up, making himself known once more. He hadn’t been useless throughout the fighting but had actually gone around and talked with the other camp survivors, trying to learn more about the fort.

He found that there was borderline no resistance to leaving... in fact, most wanted out of there. They had been confined to this fort ever since leaving their tutorials and traveling here. But at the same time, they were afraid of leaving because of the potential danger of the surrounding area.

“Indeed it is,” Miranda smiled. “Now then, should we continue our discussion behind closed doors once more to find a way for all of you to leave this place?”

Phillip gave her a nod and a smile as they left for the keep, Phillip throwing out a few last-minute orders to get the wall repaired.

Miranda kept her smile as she looked at the many eyes on her, their gazes showing signs of hope as they had heard what she’d just said. Everything was really going just as they had hoped, and in some ways, expected.

*Nothing as of yet.*

Jake flew with Mystie towards the direction where the Herd Leader had led its herd from. The path was straightforward to follow, as unsurprisingly, a horde of giant cows left quite the trail.

He also felt a part of him activate as he flew across the landscape. Some instinctual knowledge he so far hadn't had any use for, namely: Hunter's Tracking. Granted, it didn't really help much as the trail was obvious, but it still gave him some insights.

Some of the tracks were older than the herd of the day before. Most of them were, in fact. The further he got away, the more trails he found, as clearly the bovines had been led down this specific path towards the fort.

Phillip had mentioned they came from the same general area every day... *how the hell didn't he question it as being weird as fuck? Did he really think that the system is still helping humanity out?*

To Jake... that notion didn't make much sense. But he did have more knowledge than others. He knew that apparently, things like the Mystbone or the giant crystal tree on the cloud existed - natural treasures that allowed beasts to progress their levels far faster and reach D-grade before any human could.

In some ways... it could be said that the system favored the lucky beasts that encountered these treasures more than the humans who got their tutorials. Sure, the tutorials had helped humanity plenty... but it hadn't allowed them to suddenly gain a hundred levels and grow to an airliner-sized Roc.

If Jake had to take a guess... then the source of this entire scenario was one such beast. He knew that some beasts could show extraordinary intelligence, such as Hawkie or Mystie.



It wasn't a given that becoming D-grade would make a monster intelligent, though. The Roc was pretty dumb, and the Storm Elemental was just... well, an overgrown Cloud Elemental.

He kept flying forward for many kilometers, Mystie easily keeping up. If Jake had used One Step Mile, he could likely outpace the bird, but flying was better for this kind of scouting. With a trail so apparent, it made sense to track it from above, allowing him to see anything that stuck out.

Such as when he noticed that the trail was actually a collection of many different paths. He saw more minor signs of bovines slowly joining the herd as they made their way towards the fort, likely called there by the Herd Leader or whatever was behind this situation.

It would make sense if the Herd Leaders could collect the bovines, with their name heavily implying an ability to lead the herd.

About three hundred kilometers from the fort, the terrain finally began to change away from the neverending plains and resemble... farmland.

Jake looked ahead and saw what looked like buildings off in the distance and motioned for Mystie to follow him. He saw that the more extensive trail was leading on forward, but a small path was pointing towards the farm he was heading towards.

*I guess this answers some questions about what happened to farm animals after the system came,* he thought, when he arrived, flying over the large estate and inspected the state of things.

The barns and the countless pens for cattle were ripped apart, and it looked like a tornado had gone through. Magic had washed over the world, and the cattle had suddenly gained strength and levels beyond anything before. Maybe they had stayed put for a while, but when hunger and boredom set in, they must have broken loose and entered the wider world.

When he thought about it, the plains outside were filled with bovines when he made his way towards the Pylon on the first day after returning to Earth. Maybe they were out feeding or had escaped from a farm like this...

Landing at one of the barns, he entered it and began looking around the area more closely. He didn't see any blood stains or signs of fighting, so it appeared the bovines remained non-aggressive towards each other even while breaking out.

But... there was clear aggression shown towards the facility itself. It was needlessly broken, as the escaped cattle appeared to have gone out of their way to break things. It was a miracle the building was even standing.

After he was done looking around, he went to the central house... and he didn't even need to get close before a faint scent entered his nose. One he had experienced many times before. Blood, or more accurately, human blood.

It was at the estate's main house and where the owner of the farm must have lived. Jake saw a few bloodstains on the door hanging limply from its broken hinges, and the upper part of the doorframe shaved off, making the door entrance look more like just a hole in the wall.

He saw what looked like hooves at the entrance, and he knelt down to inspect them further. Something felt... off about them. His tracking skill was active, but he didn't need it to notice the huge glaring issue.

Only two hoofprints.

*Bipedal cow? A minotaur?* he thought as he frowned and entered the house, telling Mystie to stay outside.

The inside was... even worse. Everything was ripped apart as whatever beast entered tore through it. Yet, some signs of habitation remained. An old fireplace looked like it had been used within the last few weeks, and he even saw a few signs of cooking being done.

People had clearly been living here even after the tutorials ended. Likely been deposited back to their farm by the system and taken refuge in the house. Jake could see that with the system displacing everything, the farm was relatively secluded with no neighbor within sight, making the inhabitants believe it was the wisest move to stay.

And it likely was dependant on their levels. The many bovines' levels weren't high, but he could see an unsuspecting family be trampled by a horde of the damn things easily. On the other hand, the bovines likely wouldn't come to the house en-masse, making it comparatively safer.

Not that the house had turned out to be safe in the end...

Jake saw the tracks of the bipedal bovine continue into the house, leaving dents in the floorboards. It was too heavy for the structure, and if the atmospheric mana hadn't made the wood more durable, it would have gone through the floor without a doubt.

He also saw a few more bloodstains leading into the living room – the room was also giving off the most pungent scent of blood.

Jake carefully made his way into the living room, and even if his sphere had already made him aware of what he would find long ago, the sight was still less than pleasant.

Five people were in the room - a man, a woman, and three children. At least... that was what Jake estimated. It was... a bit hard to tell.

Only a single corpse was even halfway complete – that of the man.

He had been strung up by poles of metal clearly taken from the pens of the barn outside. His arms and legs impaled through as he stood rooted to the floor. He looked like he had struggled before bleeding out... his struggle, clearly caused not only by his own will to survive, but what happened to the four others.

The corpse of a woman had been ripped apart into several pieces and strewn across the floor. Meathooks hung from the ceiling, with limbs too small to be that of adults. Jake didn't see any heads... but he estimated there must have been three children.

Jake felt... repulsed.

He understood hunting and killing. He had come to realize this as a normal part of life, and he didn't view the act of killing other sapient beings the same as before. But this wasn't just killing. It was just cruelty. They hadn't been killed with any other purpose than to bring them all more suffering in their final moments.

This had all happened at least a week ago, likely even longer. For that long, the family hung there, disgraced and forgotten by all but the culprit behind it.

Closing his eyes, he even suppressed his sphere as he collected himself. He left the house and walked outside. He already had enough information... he had remembered the tracks, and in its slaughter, the creature had stayed there for a period... leaving plenty of traces of its presence for Jake and his Hunter's Tracking to pick up. It had taken its time.

Jake turned to the house as he held out his hand, conjuring a transparent flame. He willed it forward as it took hold of the house, and with his control, he set the entire building ablaze with an all-consuming flame. He stayed there to make sure it all burned down for the next half an hour as he reflected inwardly about his next steps.

Mystie sat at his side, glaring at the fire, confused about what he was doing, but sensing his mood, it didn't say or do anything. It just waited and let the silence only be broken by the crackling embers remaining where the house had once stood.

He gazed at the ashes, not a single trace of the corpses remaining. Jake let his sphere spread once more as he carefully observed everything... and turned towards the direction the hooves had left.

“Mystie... please head back. This may take longer than I first thought. I know you want to get home to Hawkie and the egg, but I can’t come back with you quite yet, and this may be a lot to ask, but please go and defend the fort in case something happens,” he said, smiling at the bird apologetically, before finishing.

“I have a monster to hunt.”

## Chapter 173: Mental Magic

Jake walked slowly towards his chosen prey’s direction as Mystie looked to be in internal conflict, so he decided to make it a bit easier for the bird. “It’s D-grade... clearly intelligent. I have no way to determine its exact power without meeting it, so it will be dangerous. This isn’t your fight, so I won’t drag you into it. Just go back and take care of things.”

Mystie looked at him with a bit of concern, and he understood its doubts. To pursue an enemy of unknown strength wasn’t the safest or wisest course of action, and the two hawks had placed many expectations on him.

“Relax, I’ll be able to escape even if things go south. In fact, I’m pretty sure I’m faster by myself than with you or Hawkie,” he said with a smile, assuring the bird.

Jake saw it fly off as he turned towards the trail with the hoofprints, his smile gone.

D-grade... he was sure of it. With the combination of his Sense of the Malefic Viper, Hunter's Tracking, high perception, and natural talents, he could sense the presence left behind by the monster that had stayed in the house to torture the family.

Not just sense it, but truly feel it. And Jake felt the aura of a D-grade monster, which only made him all the more determined to hunt it down.

Based on the family not leaving, he assumed they had all been on the weaker side, and yet a D-grade had gone out of its way to kill and torture them. With a power disparity like that... it was just pure cruelty. Clearly, the monster that did it hated them... but it had sowed karma through its actions. And Jake was more than happy to be the reaper.

With One Step Mile on full display, he followed the tracks away from the farmhouse. He crossed the vast fields in only a few minutes, each step crossing nearly 100 meters. It was far faster than his flying speed, and he quickly came to his next destination.

It was in the middle of a field, with countless tracks of bovines present. It looked like hundreds if not thousands of the bovines had been gathered for a period before they all headed off in another direction – directly towards the fort.

The D-grade had stopped there too but hadn't followed the herd. He felt its presence soaked into the area, indicating it must have been there a while, likely using plenty of skills and mana. With its presence so obvious, it didn't take him long to find the direction it had left in.

Jake followed the trails for the next few hours and traveled from destination to destination with great speed. He came to several more old farm estates, all of them looking a lot like the first. Many of them were utterly broken, and he found even more corpses of humans around or inside them.

His mood soured for every new farmstead, but it also served to reaffirm his decision to track down the monster. He wanted to kill it... but also to know why. He knew some creatures were just assholes, liking to play with their victims. Humans being principal case-studies of this. But even so... Jake still wanted to know why.

He felt the trail get more and more fresh as he moved forward. By now, he was hundreds of kilometers from the fort at least, showing exactly how much Earth had been expanded. He seriously doubted the farmers lived a hundred kilometers from their neighbors before, after all.

Besides the farmhouses, he also saw the trails left by herds of bovines, but oddly enough, none of the beasts themselves. *Have they all been gathered up by Herd Leaders?*

The number of bovines there had to be in the tens of thousands based on how many pens there were in the barns, yet no more than a single Herd Leader with a following of less than a thousand cows attacked the fort every time. If they all attacked at once... the fort would have been run over long ago.

He frowned as he kept up the chase, soon finding a small farmhouse that looked like it couldn't contain more than a few dozen cattle at most. The trail was still incredibly fresh, and he could smell the scent of human blood from far away.



But he also felt something else...

Jake quickly rushed into the small house and was immediately taken aback when he saw the interior.

Two corpses were lying on the ground, their bodies still emanating heat, proving they had died not long ago. Yet they weren't the most noteworthy thing; it was the person still standing there. A young girl, looking no older than ten or eleven, stood there with a sword in her hand, just staring down at the two corpses.

Jake wanted to say something but saw the eyes of the girl. They were entirely blank, and if he didn't know better, he would guess she was sleepwalking. In fact... it reminded him a lot of the eyes of the Herd Leader he had seen before.

"Hey," Jake said anyway, trying to get her attention. He got no response as she stood there, utterly unresponsive. She didn't even react when Jake took the weapon or brought her out of the farmhouse.

He really didn't know what to do. Mystie had already been sent back, and Jake couldn't see himself just leaving the girl there alone. But at the same time, he didn't want to give up on his hunt. *I'll have to return her to somewhere safe.*

Jake stood there, thinking if he should just rush back to the fort with her and return here again... but was that really the best thing to do? She was under some serious mental

manipulation right now, and who knows if they could dispel it... or what dispelling it could cause.

He didn't know much about mental magic, so he could only guess. And even if he disregarded the mental magic... what if she remembered? The bloody sword and two corpses were leaving little up to the imagination as to what had happened.

*I can't leave her here... hopefully, someone back at the fort can help.*

Jake picked up the bloody girl, who didn't even react to being picked up. He took her in a princess carry as he took his first step back towards the fort, nearly seventy meters crossed.

*Less range than before, and increased resource consumption... but nothing I can't handle,* he thought as he evaluated the effects carrying the girl had on his One Step Mile.

He picked up his pace as he crossed the plains at an unprecedented speed. He didn't have to watch for any tracks, and he used the Pylon as a compass of sorts to remember the direction of the fort. Even if it wasn't 100% accurate, the plains were flat and open enough that he couldn't miss the giant fortified settlement.

His pace was that of a light jog, but as every footfall took him further than should be possible, he didn't take long to return. It took him less than 8 minutes to go from the small farmhouse till he saw the fort, and another minute before he appeared on the wall, scaring the living shit out of the soldier standing there.

They pointed their weapons towards him on instinct, but Jake froze them all with a quick glance.

"Do you have anyone with skills related to mental magic?" he asked the frozen soldier.  
"And maybe a psychiatrist or someone good with kids..."

The soldier just kept staring at him, but another one below who had heard him ran off towards the central keep, Jake not bothering to stay there either. Glancing up, he saw Mystie sit on top of the central keep, not even caring about staying invisible. It gave him a look, but he shook his head and motioned to the girl. The bird seemed to understand and closed its eyes again. Jake was just thankful Mystie had chosen to stay at the fort... it made him feel a bit better about leaving his 'employees' there.

He met Phillip, Miranda, and Lillian outside of the keep as they rushed out to see what was happening. They saw Jake carrying what looked like an unconscious young girl and looked at him with perplexed expressions.

"I found her while on the trail of the instigator of the attacks. She is under a mental skill of some sort; got any healers who can help with that? A psychiatrist or someone with experience with regular mental issues may also be a good idea..."

Jake briefly explained what he had found as the two stood there listening to his explanation with shock. Phillip deeply frowned when he mentioned that the perpetrator was likely some kind of D-grade monster who enjoyed torturing humans, while Miranda looked with pity at the girl.

"Here, let me," Lillian said as she walked out from behind Miranda to take the girl from Jake. He gladly obliged and handed the still unresponsive girl to her.

With her handed off... Jake turned right around again, as he said. "I'm off again."

"Be careful," Miranda said with a worried expression.

Jake smiled a bit below his mask as he took a step forward, appearing on the fort's wall and another to appear on the plains below.

*It's whatever fucker did this that should be careful.*

Silas sat with the girl inside the keep, using the room where they had just had a meeting. Everyone else was also there, including a man who used to work as a psychologist at a high school, which was the closest they could get to a mental health professional with experience working with children.

As a healer, Silas had many different kinds of skills, and some of them even dealt with dispelling foreign mana from others. He had gotten especially good at that, having to deal with Donald's curses.

While mental magic was quite different from that... some of the same concepts applied.

He placed his hands on her head and closed his eyes as he focused on the skill. He felt his mana sink into the girl and begin searching for any foreign influences. It didn't take long before he found the source.

Silas pushed towards it to try and dispel it, but the second he made contact with it, he felt a rush of mental energy strike back at him like a sledgehammer.

"ARGH!" he yelled as he let the girl go and fell off the chair - blood flowing from his nose.

"What the hell happened?" Neil asked in fright, but Silas was more concerned about the girl. He didn't hesitate to place his hands on her again and inspect the energy, fearing it would harm the girl more.

The energy within the girl had locked itself completely down as it seeped deep into her soul. He felt an almost taunting intent from the mana as he was forced to let go again.

"I... I can't dispel it... and even if I could, I am unsure how to do it without harming or even killing her..." Silas said with regret as he shook his head and looked at the poor girl. Drool was coming out of her mouth as she stood there.

"Is there nothing we can do?" Lillian asked, her face still stoic but her voice concerned.

"I can't... but I remember Donald's curses all stopped working the moment he died... so if the caster dies..." Silas hesitantly said, quite a bit unsure.

"Let us have faith in the owner then," Miranda said.

Four minutes and forty-seven seconds.

That is how long it took him to return to the small farmstead where he had found the girl. It was quite a lot faster when he didn't carry the small girl along. He had remembered the path back, as it was more or less in a straight path.

Drinking a stamina potion to replenish himself, he began sniffing out the trail of the monster.

Based on the girl... the monster was bound to have some mental skills. It was predictable considering the Herd Leaders, but he was still a bit worried now.

A part of Jake had assumed the skill only worked on other bovines. Perhaps it was some kind of Herd Overlord that could control Herd Leaders to do its bidding... he hadn't expected it just to have mental magic in general.

From the girl, it even appeared quite powerful. Jake knew that mental energy affected some of the soul's outer layers, so he had considered if his Gaze of the Apex Hunter could have somehow dispelled it... but it was too much of a risk. Besides, even if it worked, all he would get out of it was a young girl confronted with what she had done – or if she didn't remember it – questions about her parents.

He didn't have any mental defense skills, and while he did have a decent amount in willpower, it was still his second-lowest stat, only ahead of intelligence. It should, in theory, be a bad matchup for him.

But even with his lingering worries, he didn't even once reconsider chasing down the monster. In some ways, it just made him all the more excited. It was a different kind of opponent, one he was more than happy to kill.

Picking up on the monster's trail once more, he began following it a bit slower this time. Based on the clues from his Hunter's Tracking, the fact that the girl was still alive, and the two corpses in the farmhouse still were warm, he assumed it was close.

Soon, he spotted another large farmstead in the distance, directly in the direction of the trail. It was larger than any of the other estates he had seen, and he could almost feel the presence of the many creatures there.

He even saw a few bovines in the plains around the large farm, slowly meandering about. Jake was well outside their detection radius, and he noted how they were all just normal bovines around level 25.

Summoning his wings, Jake took to the air as he flew high up into the air to get an aerial view. He flew towards the farm as he scouted it out from above.

And what he saw was an army. Tens of thousands of bovines gathered in the estate or around it, dozens of Herd Leaders and bulls. The strongest Herd Leaders were above level 90, with some of the bulls getting as high as 75.

If that wasn't enough... he felt the presence he had been tracking inside the large barn. The barn was the largest he had seen so far and looked like it could house thousands of cattle at a time. Before the system, this had, without a doubt, been a massive operation, but now it had been taken over by the creatures it once kept as livestock.

Jake didn't hesitate as he flew down towards the barn. He wasn't interested in any of the beasts, except maybe a few of the Herd Leaders. No, he was heading straight for whatever monster had managed to subdue them.

## Chapter 174: Minotaur Mindchief

Jake landed on top of the barn as he looked through a broken rooftop window. He saw even more bovines inside, but they weren't the first thing he noticed. It was the huge creature standing on top of an elevated platform, looking straight back at him.

"So, you are the one who's been tracking me?" it asked in a rough voice.

Jake saw no reason to hide as he leaped through the window and landed just inside – standing in mid-air.



He saw a hulking Minotaur standing on what looked like a small stage, wearing simple garbs and wielding a staff. It was a bit over three meters tall, with curling bronze horns extending from its head. It looked quite familiar to the creature he had imagined, and his Identify made him aware that this was very likely the creature he had been tracking.

**[Minotaur Mindchief – lvl ???]**

"That would be me," Jake answered as he stared down at the monster. He could feel its presence and get an estimate of it as he considered if he could fight it... *stronger than the Thunder Roc and Storm Elemental... but differently.*

But his intuition and danger sense didn't scream at him or warn him like when he faced truly powerful enemies... yet he still had some reservations.

"Did you enjoy my work? It was... liberating to do," the Minotaur said as it smiled up at him. "I sincerely hope you can appreciate it. It is rare to find one who walks the same path."

Jake looked confused down at the monster but decided to play along. He felt like there was some kind of misunderstanding, and if he could exploit that, he was more than willing to.

"It wasn't exactly my style," he answered.

"To crush the humans is something one should take pleasure in, is it not? Those accursed monkeys are now but prey to us," the Minotaur chuckled as he motioned towards the back of the room.

Jake had already noticed them before, but looking at the cages at the back wall closer still made him frown.

There had to be at least a hundred people stashed into small cages, lined up neatly. All of them stood, sat, or were on the ground, their eyes totally blank as they just stared into empty space - all under the mental influence of the Mindchief.

"A bit crude and unnecessary," Jake answered, a bit of contempt leaking into his voice.

"Hah, one of efficiency I see," the Minotaur chuckled, not at all offended. "But what other reason but pleasure is there to slay these monkeys? They are inferior now, remnants of the past to be crushed and forgotten."

Jake frowned a bit again as he finally put two and two together. *It thinks I am a monster, one that kills weaker humans as it does.*

It... honestly shouldn't be that surprising. While Jake did look humanoid, the only actual body part visible was two beastly eyes. The two wings on his back were surely not helping him look human either. He couldn't even be Identified, making it even less obvious what race he was.

As to why it believed he hunted humans... well, because he had plenty of human blood on him. The girl he carried earlier hadn't exactly been clean, and he had also come into contact with plenty of blood as he chased down the monster in front of him.

*I can use this, but...*

"Awfully talkative," Jake said, wondering quite a bit about that part. While it didn't exactly fall into the trope of the evil villain explaining his plans, it was pretty damn close.

"Ah, I apologize. It is not often one encounters other sapients, much less ones able to speak. Even fewer again, those that do not attack at first sight," the Minotaur said, shaking its head. "It can be isolating to be the only one of your kind smarter than a stupid animal."

The Minotaur looked around at all the bulls inside the barn with pity. They were all just standing there, sometimes bumping into their neighbor or looking at the ground for signs of food. They didn't act differently from normal bulls, and the normal cows outside conducted themselves rather cow-like too. Without a Herd Leader, Jake guessed these creatures would be mostly harmless.

As a very antisocial person, Jake couldn't really relate to the constant need some people felt for companionship many had, but he could understand it. People were just built differently, and while he could do fine alone for a while, even he got sometimes wanted companionship.

Bovines were also social animals. So... had the poor genocidal Minotaur really just gotten lonely?

"Why are you keeping humans in cages?" he asked the Minotaur. If the overgrown cow wanted to kill them, he could kind of understand it, but why keep them alive?

"I am glad you asked," the Minotaur said, and Jake was already regretting his question as the monster began monologuing.

"This place was used for auctions before the initiation. Auctions of what you may ask?" the monster began, as the Minotaur's mood suddenly turned murderous as he roared. "MY KIND! SOLD AS ITEMS TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER! TO BE SLAUGHTERED OR FORCED INTO PERPETUATING THE PURGATORY THAT WAS OUR EXISTENCE."

He breathed in calmly as he tried to relax. "After I awakened, I finally understood - and I remembered - every second of every day. I was forced to breed; my life and the life of my kind treated as if we weren't even alive. Born with our only fates being to bring more offspring and then be slaughtered and devoured."

The Minotaur smiled as he motioned towards the cages. "So is this not fitting? The roles reversed, with the humans now the cattle and we the lords of their lives and deaths. The humans are weak now... while we are strong. Now is the time to strike fear into their hearts and claim our place at the top!"

Jake looked at the insane Minotaur for a while. Okay, yeah, he kinda got its need to kill a few humans and farmers based on how the farming industry tended to treat cattle, but on the other hand... Jake didn't really care.

He had never been one to bear grudges, and even if he did, the worst he would do was to kill. He didn't need to humiliate or torture. This Minotaur was clearly different, as it seemingly wanted to crush the entire human race... an ambitious goal for sure, if shortsighted.

"What's up with the human settlement in the plains then? Plenty of them there to go kill, but instead, you have sent your kin there to die," Jake asked, genuinely interested to know the answer to that one.

"Well... did the monkeys not feed us and fatten us up before slaughter?" the monster smiled. "I need them to be big and strong before it is time to reap the benefits and put them down."

"By killing your kin?"

"They are the failed ones. Those who reach their limits and can no longer progress... their fates are to wait for death anyway, better for them to help the next generation. A herd too large can be detrimental, and it is only right to weed it out for the entire group to grow stronger."

The Minotaur looked out towards the many Herd Leaders outside as he spoke with sadness.

"For my kin to ascend as I have has proven... difficult. I am merely helping one of them do so. Let the human settlement become the feast that shall be the birth of another D-grade. The first of many to come."

Now, it finally turned towards him.

"Now tell me... why come here? I welcome you to join my herd, even if you are not of my kin."

"And why would I do that?" Jake asked.

"I see that you have yet to cross the crevice... is it not an honor to serve those more powerful? I sense your power, but that final step is not easy. I would be more than happy to have a sapient companion join me."

Jake looked down at the monster. It was hard to compare the creature that created the gruesome scenes in the farmhouses and the polite cowman that stood in front of him. He had yet to show even a single sign of aggression, and while he wasn't sure how it would react if he rejected, its offer at least seemed sincere. Heck, it hadn't even tried any weird mind magic as far as he could tell, despite that being its specialty.

It could even recognize that Jake was still in E-grade, and all logic dictated that the Minotaur was stronger than him. Jake felt like at least giving the creature a proper answer... knowing what was to follow.

"I am a hunter; my path is too far removed from yours. You find pleasure in taking revenge on those weaker than yourself... without going into moral classics and arguing how you are becoming that which you hated; I am just going to make it easy for you. I am a human," he said.

Was it the smartest thing to do? No. Would it be way smarter to get in a good sneak attack? For sure. But Jake had decided to show the monster the basic fucking decency that it hadn't shown anything else. Besides... he didn't feel any fear.

"Huh?" the Minotaur Mindchief said, looking up at him with a confused expression. "Impossible... humans are weak, feeble creatures. You carry the presence of a predator and a monster - not that of a hairless monkey."

"See, that's the thing about us humans... we are a race with quite a high level of variance. Some humans are weak; some are strong. Some are cruel; some are kind. To blame the entire human race is just stupid; quite a few humans in the old world were even fighting for your kind," Jake said, as he made a light smile and made his mask invisible. "Veganism was on the rise, ya know?"

The Minotaur just kept staring at him in confusion before its facial expression changed. From the rather kind-looking smile and welcoming demeanor, its eyes got a red sheen as its entire face contorted into one of rage.

It didn't even speak before Jake felt it. A stream of energy came towards him, and Jake swiftly dispelled the mana on his feet, and with a flap of his wings, soared up through the window he had entered through.

*You created a path revolving around hunting down weaker prey... pursuing revenge against them. A limited path with no future, far too confined. You don't need more power to do what you wanted... satisfied to stay in this small area. It was a path with only one ending... stagnation and death.*

Flying upwards, he stopped only a hundred meters up as he began channeling Infused Powershot. He had marked the monster with Mark of the Ambitious Hunter before he flew up and knew exactly where it wa-

A figure suddenly appeared in his sphere from behind – the Minotaur. His Mark told him it still stood unmoving inside the building below... but he trusted his sphere more than any skill.

Jake dodged to the side as a staff swiped down, as he turned and saw... nothing. With his eyes, that is. He dodged another swipe from the staff as he fired a blast of mana from his gloves towards the invisible monster.

It flew back a bit, as suddenly it was revealed. At the same time, Jake's Mark also snapshotted to the figure in front of him... making him aware it indeed was the same creature. *Mental magic of some kind?*

*"Why struggle when the fight is already over?"* a voice echoed in his mind.

Jake felt the pain moments after, as he felt his insides boil and several holes opened up all over his body, spewing out blood like geysers, and Jake remembered how the staff that penetrated his body several ti-



He ducked under the staff and grabbed hold of the monster's arm, using Touch of the Malefic Viper. It quickly wrested his hand away, but Jake was already upon it with a dagger coated in dark mana. It managed to dodge and move back, but the blade extended at the end, leaving a gash on the Minotaur's chest.

"How?" it spoke, this time not using any shitty mental shit. It stood in the air, not unlike how Jake air-walked, though it did seem quite a bit more skillful at it than him. He assumed it had a skill to do it, primarily to make himself feel better.

"Instincts."

Jake flew forward to keep the creature within his sphere. It disappeared from sight again but soon appeared at his left side and swung its staff. Jake ignored it as it passed straight through him, and he instead ducked under a swipe from the right.

He closed his eyes as he ignored what his other senses told him and only relied on his sphere. He suddenly felt like his leg cramped up, followed by intense pain, but he knew it wasn't real. The pain was as real as it could get, but it didn't come with any actual damage – it was all in his head.

The Minotaur was fast... but not compared to the other D-grades he had encountered. What made it dangerous was its insane mental magic that even Jake couldn't even correctly detect, and it did have some ridiculous strength. Sadly for the Minotaur... it could fool his mind, but not his body.

His dagger stabbed into its leg, and this time it was coated in his own blood too. The monster screamed in pain – his intuition telling him it was not fake in the least. For a

moment, he felt the creature slip up as its hold over him disappeared, and his phantom pains disappeared.

But it was enough time for him to land his eyes on the creature. It froze up as Jake charged it, stabbing his dagger into its chest just as it became able to move again. His blade penetrated quite a bit before the Minotaur exploded with mana, sending Jake flying back hundreds of meters before he was able to stop himself.

He had blocked with his arms, and they were both now burned, his armor not doing that well either. It wasn't an illusion, as his sphere and intuition confirmed the damage.

Not that it mattered. Jake just looked at the heaving beast in the distance with pity.

The Minotaur Mindchief was a lot stronger than himself, and the strength behind every swing was enough to crush him. But he was also slow, and his moves obvious, proving he clearly hadn't fought many other powerful foes before.

When you could just make your opponent unaware he was even being hit, you didn't need to be fast or even good at fighting; you just needed enough raw power to crush someone into a paste.

"Is this the power you hoped to challenge an entire race with?" Jake asked the monster, shaking his head.

"I don't know how you avoid it... but your mind is utterly undefended... no, it does affect you; you just ignore it," the Minotaur said, frowning. "Instincts, you say... but isn't it instinct to not hurt your kin?"

Jake looked confused for a moment before his eyes opened wide. A massive wave of almost tangible energy washed over him as he felt the entire world around him shift. He felt his head hurt as he looked at the Minotaur.

"What were we doing?" he asked his old pal in confusion. He remembered that they were chilling just before this, talking about going out how to deal with a nearby hive of enemies, but now he suddenly found himself fighting. It didn't make sense; it was... what?

"Having a duel," his pal said. "I won, so-"

"No, you didn't," Jake said, shaking his head as things snapped into place and looked up at the damn monster with deadly intent as the energy within his head was swiftly dispelled. "Alright, fuck you."

"Worth a shot," the Minotaur said, taunting him as it smiled, seemingly having gotten an idea.

*Fuck this mental magic bullshit; what the fuck is this?*

Jake began closing off his mind as he tried to stop thinking about anything and just move. He had just begun when the Minotaur turned to him and said with a smile – clearly having gotten an idea it believed clever.

"I believe it's time for the auction to begin!"

## Chapter 175: A Journey of the Mind

Jake saw the creature disappear, but instead of attacking, the monster appeared inside the barn below. He wondered what the hell the Minotaur was up to.

His Sense of the Malefic Viper made him aware that his poisons were being quickly eliminated, hinting at the creature having quite a lot of vitality. Not so much toughness based on how easily his dagger penetrated his skin.

He didn't follow right away but stayed up there, inspecting the remnant energies still in his head. Mental magic was some real mind-fuckery, as it basically implanted fake ideas, concepts, or signals. It made him see things that weren't real while masking what was.

But... it didn't work on his sphere or instincts at all. He also could now feel how the energy implanted on his body was slowly being fought off passively, meaning whatever influence the Minotaur used on him was temporary no matter what. This also boded well for the girl he saw, as the energy affecting her should dissipate naturally with time.

The more complex or foreign any manipulation was also made it less effective. Jake felt pissed at the memory of briefly seeing the monster as an ally, even if he swiftly dispelled that idea. It was just too contradictory, and he quickly broke that spell... but he could imagine some fucked up things a real mind mage could make people do if they were significantly stronger than their opponent.

*How do I know someone hasn't already infected me? I have met gods... could they have done something that I have no way of feeling?*

The thought occurred... and was just as quickly dispelled. It may be hubris or absolute arrogance, but Jake believed that not even the Malefic Viper or any other god in existence could truly fool his instincts. They could fuck up his mind... but they couldn't fuck up his bloodline.

*Hell, the only real mental interference I should be scared of in the long run is what is caused by my bloodline... if that can even be called interference. Not that I can change anything about it, but try and be aware.*

Jake shook his head as he tried to expel all the distracting thoughts as he kept inspecting the foreign mental energy. It truly moved unobstructed through him, encountering only the natural resistance caused by what he assumed was his willpower stat.

While he could deal with the mental interference pretty well... it was still annoying. The damn monster could make his archery borderline useless, and for some reason, as he needed it to remain in his sphere, he didn't even detect the energy that invaded him during the fight. Likely because it also implanted the idea that the energy wasn't something worth noting... so *annoying*.

He would get Pride of the Malefic Viper shortly, so that should help. It wasn't going to help him today... but he didn't see himself losing. Sure, the Minotaur was actually the strongest opponent besides the King he had ever met, and without his bloodline, his head would have been smashed in before he even noticed the attack coming.

But he had his bloodline, and the Minotaur's power just sucked against him. It was like the opposite of a Cloud Elemental. *Like the path of this stupid monster... his strengths are shortsighted too. Would the mental magic even work on an elemental, or what if he encountered a creature with great mental defenses? Or a human who fights using instincts? Well... lose, I guess.*

He had to admit that the monster's strength was... immense. He gazed about and saw a few craters below, with even a few bovines that had died from wayward attacks. It was just the remnant shockwave left by the staff's wide swings, but it was enough to crush nearly anything.

If the Minotaur Mindchief had fought the Thunder Roc, he would have won easily. He was also pretty sure it could handle something like Mystie easily too. In fact, he was happy Mystie hadn't come along but stayed at the fort. He was pretty sure the Mindchief could dominate the mind of the hawk for at least a period, making the battle into a two versus one. And even if he couldn't, he sure as hell could make the bird disorientated enough for him to kill it as Jake was relatively sure Mystie wasn't the most resilient to physical attacks.

Without tarrying any longer, he summoned a bolt of mana and fired it down towards the barn. The roof blew up, leaving a gaping hole as he was able to see inside.

"Took you long enough," he heard a voice say, the friendly tone of the Minotaur back, but with an insidious undertone.

When the dust cleared, Jake saw the interior of the barn. The Minotaur was back on the stage, but he was no longer alone. He was now surrounded by humans who all stood blank-eyed, staring into thin air.

Jake flew down and landed in the middle of the barn, the Minotaur just within the range of his sphere. He also did it to confirm if the humans were actually real or just mental illusions. They were. The bovines in the barn had gone outside, leaving just Jake, the Minotaur, and the human captives behind.

"I must admit, I underestimated you. You are a champion sent by your race to end my ambitions, fighting for the survival of their species. You are without a doubt the pinnacle of their talents... trained to battle me, but in your arrogance, you forgot... I am a King, not a soldier," the Minotaur laughed as suddenly all the humans drew their weapons.

"But I will give you a chance!" the monster said as he waved his hand and summoned a string of rune-like text in the air. Jake saw it and noticed that he somehow understood what he said. It was a... contract.



"This is an auction, after all. So tell me... what would you give to free your fellow man?" the monster spoke as he laughed. "Serve me, and I promise safety for these hairless monkeys and those you wish to keep alive. I am a generous King... I shall allow a sanctuary to keep your race alive and for you to lead them!"

Jake had to admit it sounded like a terrific deal. At least he thought so for a fraction of a second before Jake dispelled the mental energy in his head, at which point it sounded like hot garbage, spewed out by an arrogant asshole who couldn't even keep his own beliefs consistent.

He looked up at the creature as he shook his head. "You are utterly pathetic... and certainly no King. You can only bully those weaker than yourself, taking pleasure in torturing them, while you run away like a scared child before anyone who can challenge you. You can't even stick to your chosen path. Stop embarrassing yourself and at least die with a shred of honor and dignity."

The Minotaur looked at the masked human, confused for a few moments before his face turned to one of rage. "I AM THE ONE IN CHARGE HERE!"

He opened his eyes wide, sending a command to his thralls, as suddenly ten of the around hundred hairless monkeys turned and attacked the person next to them. A single swipe of a sword and ten heads fell to the ground. He had even made sure to include a few of their young. It tended to irk the humans most when he did that.

A suffering - or preferably broken - mind was far easier to intrude and manipulate. Even if the Minotaur couldn't make the human kneel willingly, he could shatter his psyche through killing his kin, whittling down his resolve until finally, he relented. He had done it before... and it was pure ecstasy every time.

"See the result of your actions! Now kneel or-"

He was interrupted by a loud sigh as the human that claimed himself to be a hunter just shook his head again. "I told you... humans are all different."

The Minotaur looked the human in the eye and saw only... indifference and a small spark of rage. Not a single trace of despair or regret. *This human does not care for its kin? But it led me outside to avoid killing them?*

He had skimmed that thought in their fight earlier. To understand the basic intent of an opponent or read surface thoughts was a fundamental aspect of mental magic. For some reason, he couldn't quite read the human's thoughts in combat, but he could most certainly read his intent. He had avoided fighting in the barn to avoid killing his fellow man... so why not bat an eye when they died now?

*Very well. If this human does not break from this... I shall crush him with everything I have. He shall be my thrall... willingly or not.*

Because while the Minotaur Mindchief was weak in many aspects, he stood at the pinnacle of mental magic for a monster on his level.

Jake looked with disappointment at the oversized cow. He saw the humans die with a single command, and he felt only his anger grow. It kept perpetuating the needless killing... it didn't do so with a goal. It wasn't even a hunt. He didn't mourn those who died... he only pitied them. In some ways... they died the moment the Minotaur Mindchief claimed them.

He took a step forward as he appeared right in front of the Minotaur. The monster blocked his blow as if he already knew Jake was attacking. Because it did. But he didn't know where next he would strike... because Jake didn't think about it; he just let his body move where it wanted.

The dagger flew forward, and the Minotaur was cut on his chest once more, the old wounds far from having healed. Jake felt the mental energy invade his mind, worming its way inside. It was looking for something... an opening?

*I will have to kill it quickly.*

He kept attacking, the creature slowly backing off. The humans around him also all charged at him, but none of them could get close as they all froze up. It was a bit tiring, but he would have to keep them frozen with Gaze of the Apex Hunter for at least a bit.

Jake pushed forward, ducking under another wild swing. He placed his hand on the stomach of the Minotaur, releasing a blast of mana that sent it flying back through the back wall of the barn. Yet, the stream of mental energy kept pouring into him. The Minotaur wasn't doing anything other than reading his movements and whatever the fuck the monster was currently trying.

The wounds on the monster accumulated as the poison seeped deeper into the Minotaur's body, but Jake felt a sense of crisis grow as he began to feel weird. Jake stepped back, teleporting with One Step Mile as he drew his bow and began charging an Infused Powershot.

Human and Minotaur stood just staring at each other, less than ten meters between them. Neither moved as both seemed satisfied with channeling their skills.

After a dozen seconds, Jake released the arrow, and the Minotaur just raised his staff to try and block. He blocked the blow, but the arrow exploded, sending the Minotaur flying back. Jake pelted him with even more arrows and soon a dozen were sticking out of his chest.

The wounds began festering as the Necrotic Poison did its damage, and the Minotaur had visibly weakened. Yet, even as the Minotaur's power waned, Jake felt his sense of crisis only grow. He tried to do as much damage to try and kill the Minotaur, as his sense of danger practically exploded with warning.

The Minotaur looked up at him and smiled. "Behold, the true power of the Mindchief!"

Jake felt a stream of energy unlike anything before smash into his head as five words echoed in his head.

## **"Wayward Journey of Echoing Reminiscence."**

Back at the fort, Silas was sitting in a side room with the psychologist. The girl was still unresponsive like before, but they didn't want to risk anything. Silas wanted to stay close if he could help with anything, and the psychologist just seemed happy to finally feel useful as he apparently wasn't the best at fighting.

The girl began screaming out of nowhere, Silas hurrying to her with a startled expression as he tried to calm her down. He placed his hands on her head and felt the mental energy that was there before was disappearing at a rapid rate.

It didn't appear like it it was dissipating... but returning. The one who had caused it clearly couldn't keep all these effects active any longer. It had to go all out.

*The owner...* he worried, but he didn't have time as the two men in the room tried to calm the child.

The Minotaur Mindchief felt the confluence of mental energy as the bridge was established, and their minds became one. Together, he and the human would walk a journey. In the realm of the mind – or more accurately the soul - time meant nothing as two figures appeared. One of them was the human in a suppressed state and a silent observer, and the other the Minotaur Mindchief.

He walked forward as he saw the memories one by one – the goal simple. The Minotaur Mindchief believed that every sapient being had a weakness in their mind. A reversed scale that could be exploited to dominate them.

It was hard to hold back a smile as he imagined the human as his thrall. So powerful, and not even D-grade yet. The hunter was the champion put forth by his race, their hope of defeating him. He would turn their cultivated weapon against them and have him be the harbinger of their genocide.

The memories were unnoteworthy, to begin with. The Mindchief needed a trauma, something hidden deeper. He tried to go back, to see what happened when the human was but a child. He had learned that is where most traumas were to be found.

Yet, he was stumped early. The early memories were... *what?*

Never before had he seen such a... fractured memory - the moments of reminiscence nothing but selected scenes. There were some things, such as the betrayal of a friend or minor scuffles, but nothing the Mindchief found worth exploiting. No memory worth flaring to life to crush the human.

Had another mind mage sealed memories? No, he saw no signs of tampering. Even if the memories were repressed, he should be able to find them, but they appeared just to be... gone. Gone, or sealed somewhere that even a Legendary skill of the highest order couldn't help him find.

But as he went forward... suddenly everything returned to normal. It was only the first years that were so fractured, but everything became usual after that. Did something happen during that time that broke his mind to the level of memories disappearing? Or did someone or something truly seal them away?

He did notice that the human became more... muted. The fragments in the start displayed a human of action, a wild child with neverending energy and disposition of a creature standing at the apex of his species. For some reason, however, that seemed to just... disappear.

The next many years were more tedious, as the human was hard to recognize. It was hard to compare the muted human he saw with the hunter that had nearly ended his life.



The Minotaur was... confused. The memories began to feel faded. Not in that they were hard to see, but everything had a gray aura. The emotions tied to the memories had an underlying sense of apathy and boredom.

*Ah... I found it.*

The thing to exploit.

The human was far weaker then. From those early years to only a few months back - besides a few sparks here and there - there was not much. No, it would need to find the trigger that made the color return and the world be attractive to the human again.

It didn't take long. In fact, it was the very same day that marked his own ascension that the human found his meaning once more.

But it wasn't right away. The palette changed as the human called Jake entered the vast forest, the world brightening ever so slightly. No, the return came after the sun had set.

At a moment of life and death, the world was flooded with light, as the Minotaur Mindchief felt the human experience what could only be called absolute euphoria. Truly, he had found his meaning once more... and the Minotaur smiled. For he had found the weakness.

If what had awakened inside him that day had brought him meaning... the Mindchief would just have to take that away.

So he dove deeper; he needed to know the exact cause. He tried to move ahead, but some dark spots appeared. The human had entered a dungeon, but that place was full of unnatural voids. Ones the Mindchief had seen before, as it was memories related to things above his station. It was likely the system's way of protecting him that he couldn't see those things.

*No... I need to go back to that night*

.

He needed to truly discover what the human had experienced. It wasn't as straightforward as just reading his mind; he had to truly find it. Dive deeper

and discover the actual source. Discover it, and crush it into smithereens, using that opening to shatter his mind.

And as he dove deeper, he found that the source was... inside the human?

*A sudden moment of enlightenment, an idea appearing or a concept understood... finally.*

It was typical.

Like the piece of a puzzle, it was all about finding that one piece to complete the entire picture. Without the piece, the human would feel incomplete. It could be so many things dependent on the person. Sometimes they found their soulmate or even a specific item that they placed all their raw emotions into.

That day he had found his light, and today the Mindchief would take that away again. Seal whatever enlightenment or concept deep inside the corners of his mind. Make his world gray again, and his mind open to dominance as he suffered from suddenly losing a large part of himself. It would take the Mindchief months if not years to fully recover from the Wayward Journey of

Echoing Reminiscence, and he would lose all other thralls... but it was worth it. Rather than a hundred pawns, he would have someone who could just flip the chessboard.

So he dove deeper into the deepest parts of the human. It was deeper than the Mindchief had ever gone before, and he felt his skill and own mind be pushed to their limit. Yet whenever he found a wall, he overcame it as he dove deeper. When he overcame the first, he was proud, but at the tenth... he understood.

The human was inviting him inside. Whatever he was looking for wanted to be found, welcoming him to challenge it and attempt to seal it. Truly a foolish human, to dare meet him in a battle in the mental realm found within the soul.

A final mental step later, the Mindchief appeared at the memory.

With expectation, he gazed upon it and saw... a man. The human himself? The one he had sealed that floated behind him in an ethereal shape? No, it was slightly different; it was him and yet not him. A part of him that he had lost and now regained or-

The human turned as the Minotaur Mindchief gazed into his eyes. The human behind him was now gone, merged with the figure before him.

He smiled as the Mindchief screamed.

The man moved – an impossible act. It was meant to be but a memory, a fragment of oneself, nothing but an echo. Yet it noticed the Mindchief, as he couldn't stop screaming. A part of himself that he had suppressed after ascending was screaming at him from the bottom of his soul. It was those instincts inherent to every animal on the planet. That faint primal feeling it would get when confronted with a predator, making the Minotaur Mindchief utterly aware:

He was prey.

Outside in the real world, Jake opened his eyes as he gazed upon the Mindchief that slowly tipped over and fell to the ground, his eyes wide with fright.

***\*You have slain [Minotaur Mindchief – lvl 114] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level.***

***\*'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 96 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 97 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 85 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 98 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

Jake just shook his head as he went over and looked down on the corpse, contempt in his eyes.

"A fool and a coward to the end."

## **Chapter 176: From the Myst They Came...**

Jake couldn't help but be disappointed in the Minotaur. He had felt it invade his mind as he struggled to fight off the energy. He couldn't move, and he just stood there, less than fifteen meters separating him and the monster.

His sphere made him aware of the outside world, but nothing more. Yet inwardly, he also felt... something.

Half an hour passed like that, the two having a battle of the mind. Well, it was more Jake in a bit of a haze, slowly fighting off the mental energy and the damn Minotaur trying to find a weakness to exploit.

It was all just a shame. Jake believed he could have actually had a good fight with the D-rank. He was faster, but it was stronger and had its mental magic to at least throw him off here and there. And while its body wasn't that resilient, its vitality was high for sure.

The wounds caused by him earlier were mostly healed on the dead body of the Mindchief, just through the passive consumption of health points to heal it. Jake was also pretty damn sure the monster wasn't anywhere close to out of mana or other magic tricks. He doubted the fight would have ended within the next hour even if they just slugged it out... and Jake had been looking forward to it.

Yet it died. Not because of running out of health... it had just given up. Jake had allowed it in, not bothered to resist its mental exploration of his memories. He didn't know where it was looking, at least not to begin with, but he soon got the feeling the Minotaur was seeking towards a deep part of his soul. One the Minotaur could usually never approach. But Jake allowed him closer... and as soon as the Mindchief caught a glimpse of what it had been looking for, it *chose* to end itself.

*A fucking coward.*

It was just a bull that had gotten lucky and found some item that allowed it to evolve quickly. Jake didn't think all beasts would gain memories from before they evolved, but clearly, the Minotaur had. Perhaps due to its skills. Not that it mattered anymore.

Jake walked forward to check out the corpse of the monster, and the first thing he noticed was the staff.

**[Pillar of Encumbrance (Rare)] – A metal rod made of a type of metal with the natural ability to change weight based on the intensity of the mana infused within. Incredibly durable.**

**Requirements: N/A**

Jake looked at it and was honestly a bit surprised. It wasn't even a weapon... it was just a rod of metal that could get heavier if infused with mana. It didn't even have any requirements. The weapon did fit the Minotaur fantastically, though, and Jake also happily picked it up.

The monster hadn't had any other equipment, leaving only its body behind.

That is also when Jake heard the yelling behind him, and he suddenly remembered that the large barn behind him had been filled with mind-controlled humans.



Jake deposited the Minotaur's corpse and the Pillar of Encumbrance before he quickly made his way into the barn to see what was going on.

He entered it and instantly felt dozens of eyes land on him. All the people held prisoners by the Mindchief were now clearheaded and out of whatever hypnosis kept them passive. The appearance of a masked figure walking into the barn quickly got their attention, their wariness clear.

None of them spoke but just looked hesitantly at him. From the looks of it, they had broken out of mind control a bit ago and had time to try and get a basic understanding of their situation. And Jake was more than happy to clarify what had happened further.

"The Minotaur is dead," Jake said, summoning its corpse. Now, that got their attention.

"Did you kill it?" a person in the front asked - one wearing a familiar uniform.

"I did. Are you from that fort led by a guy named Phillip?" Jake asked, tossing the Minotaur back in his storage immediately.

"Yes! Do you also come from there? I didn't see you before, are you?"

"Where are all the bovines?" Jake asked, cutting the young guy off.

Maybe it was a bit late... but Jake clearly remembered the area outside the barn filled with bulls and quite a few Herd Leaders...

“I saw some run off towards there,” a voice cut in, pointing out the large gate and into the distance. Directly towards the fort. “The beasts left a good while ago just as we all began waking up...”

*Well, ain't this just great,* Jake thought, quickly having put together what had happened.

Perhaps it was a failsafe or an ingrained command, but it appeared like the Minotaur Mindchief had ordered every single bovine to charge towards the fort. A real asshole-move, entirely in line with its personality. Even if it lost to Jake, it would still at least succeed in wiping out the settlement.

Jake shook his head and turned to the people still in the barn. He was pretty sure they were all there, likely too scared or confused to leave. “Wait here. I will have a group sent to escort you back towards the fort within the day... after I go fix things there.”

He didn't bother explaining more as he left, using One Step Mile to quickly head back to the fort. By now, it had to have been 45 minutes since the bovines left. Which meant that, by his estimate, they had likely already arrived there.

Not that Jake was anxious. Neil and his party were there, and they could surely buy some time even against the Herd Leaders that were closing in on the level-cap for E-grade.

Oh yeah, and Mystie was also chilling there.

"GET READY! MAGES PUSH THE WALL!" Phillip yelled as he looked out into the horizon, cold sweat running down his back.

"We will need your help, or we will all die," he said, turning to Miranda's group, Neil just nodding in agreement.

"How many?" the space mage asked, and after Phillip listened to one of the snipers on a walkie-talkie, gravely answered:

"More than fifty Herd Leaders counted and based on their sizes, some of them appear to be above level 90. They are followed by an army of Roughhide Bovines and Bulls. I... we should maybe evacuate."

"In other words, way too fucking many?" Christen butted in, getting a nod from Phillip, not even bothered to argue against it.

He turned to Miranda and sternly asked. "Is this the doing of this owner? Did he go and provoke them into attacking us?"

"First of all," Miranda said, "why the hell would he do that? Secondly, if there was an army on standby not far away, ready to charge here within an hour of him leaving, don't you think they planned on attacking all along? At worst, he just made them push up their attack plan slightly."

Phillip just looked at her before shaking his head. "Doesn't matter, we need to evacuate as soon as po-"

He was interrupted by an eruption of light, stemming not from the approaching herd but within the fort. More accurately, from the top of the central keep.

Spectral blue feathers began raining down from above as a giant blue hawk lifted itself slightly off the keep, floating in mid-air. It had a wingspan of nearly ten meters, and what looked like blue mist floated all around it, taking on different shapes.

It was the D-grade brought by the masked owner.

**[Mystsong Hawk - ???]**

Mana hummed to life as the mist began condensing and forming magic circles in the air. All the humans within the fort found themselves suppressed; even the powerful ones like Neil and his party felt the pressure. It was magic with power above anything they could handle...

The many circles of magic floating above began overlapping, and soon they formed a huge perfect circle. Blue light began being emitted from the center of the large circle, soon covering its entire center. A few more seconds passed, and the shining blue plane floating above began slowly pouring out even more mist.

It looked like a shining blue vertical lake had suddenly appeared in the air, one with a diameter of more than 20 meters, making it look more than a little intimidating.

Just as the ones below began wondering what the D-grade was up to, the surface of the metaphorical lake rippled as something came out of it. It looked like some kind of giant cat, but before anyone could get a good look at it, the second creature exited. And then a third, and a fourth, before soon dozens of animals were floating in the air above.

All of them were blue, with mist emanating from their bodies. They looked semi-transparent, and when Phillip identified one, he was shocked.

**[Mystbeast - ??]**

Phillip was level 59, so a beast below D-grade he couldn't identify had to be at least level 89... and he couldn't identify a single one of the blue beasts. But that in itself wasn't as shocking as the fact they could even be identified. Were they summons of some kind? Or were they teleported there from elsewhere? He didn't know, and he doubted the giant blue bird would share.

After the portal summoned more than 30 Mystbeasts, it stopped spitting out more. No two of the summoned beasts were identical but varied widely - from cat-like beasts to birds and even one that looked like a mix between an elephant and a rhino.

With a simple wave of its wing, the Mystsong Hawk ordered the summons to move. The mist swirled around each beast as they ran on a trail of mist forming beneath their every footfall.

Phillip could only watch in astonishment as they stormed towards the approaching herd. The Mystsong Hawk was already churning up its next move.

"Looks like we can avoid an evacuation," Eleanor said with a small smile.

"Did you know the D-grade stayed behind?" Phillip asked Miranda, who had been looking relatively relaxed even after the Mystsong Bird unleashed its power.

"Of course, did you think the owner would leave the fort defenseless in his absence?" she answered confidently while inwardly thinking the exact opposite. *How the hell could I know, he didn't say anything, and the damn bird is hiding in invisibility the whole time.*

But that didn't mean she wouldn't take advantage of the situation nevertheless. Heck, while the owner had gone off-script more times than she liked... boy had it worked out well. He managed to display his own power, the power of his companion, and at the same time create goodwill towards all the inhabitants of the fort. If he was to be seen as a protector of the city... proving exactly how capable he was at protecting them by wiping out an army of beasts was a good start to build a reputation.

So with anticipation, she watched the battle that was about to unfold.

Neil also looked out over the walls as he turned to his party. "Wanna join in? Quite a few of those Herd Leaders should be well worth hunting down."

"Sure thing," Christen said. "As long as those weird mist-creatures don't attack us too."

"Let's hope they don't. Begin to prepare; we'll go the second Silas gets here," Neil finished as he began to take out some weird stones and crystals from the Orb of Kallox and began placing them down as a magic circle on the ground.

Once he was done, he gave each of his party members a small crystal.

"Emergency teleports," Neil explained to Miranda and Phillip.

Miranda just nodded with understanding, while Phillip looked very interested. He didn't know exactly what the party of five was capable of, but teleportation certainly did sound impressive.

Ten or so seconds later, the first clash of Mystbeasts and the herd of bovines happened, and... it wasn't a fight. The sharp claws of a cat-like Mystbeast ripped three Roughhide Bovines, all only around level 30, apart with a simple swipe.

The giant elephant-like beast trampled them easily, as it soon began wrestling with a Herd Leader around its own level – coming out on top.

Neil and the others soon joined in, leaping over the wall only a few seconds after Silas arrived. They all landed on a floating disc as Neil brought them closer, Levi already beginning to buff himself up. Eleanor didn't wait either but had already fired a Powershot before they landed. She stayed up on the floating platform floating ten meters above as her party leaped down.

Christen took the front as they headed straight for one of the largest Herd Leaders. They needed to challenge themselves to keep progressing, and a beast near the peak of E-tier was a fitting opponent.

Levi jumped in, cleaving long scars of fire on the ground with every swing, sending bovine-parts flying. None of them hit Christen as she pushed forward, knocking away overgrown cows with her buckler or just straight-up killing them with her blade.

Neil summoned two discs of space mana that he controlled like two circular razor blades. It was basically just taking a space-barrier and tilting it, turning it into a powerful weapon. Of course, they could be broken, such as how Jake had done it, but they were pretty helpful when unblocked.

Eleanor released a barrage of arrows, using a skill similar to Splitting Arrow, but instead of making one, it made hundreds. The difference was that most of her arrows weren't actually real but were illusions making only a few do actual damage. But it helped cause chaos and allowed Levi to close in.



They quickly got close enough to fight the Herd Leader and began their assault with the five of them. They worked together, covering each others' weaknesses, and landed blow after blow on the beast. Neil fired space bolts that each hit like a sledgehammer with intense kinetic energy, Silas healing or putting up the occasional barrier or buffing someone.

It took them a few minutes, but they soon had the Herd Leader on the backfoot. It was impressive that a group of humans nearly 40 levels below the beast could make the fight so one-sided. Granted, the Herd Leader wasn't the strongest of E-grades as they were more suited to buffing up and leading their groups compared to solo-combat, but it was impressive nevertheless.

Yet... in the same period it took them to nearly beat one, the group of Mystbeasts had already killed over a dozen Herd Leaders and slaughtered over a thousand normal bovines. All of this without the Mystsong Bird directly getting involved besides its summons.

And when it got involved...

Jake made his way over the hill, and the fort finally came into sight. He saw the massive herd in the midst of being slaughtered by a group of blue beasts that gave off Mystie's aura, making him instantly aware they were connected to the hawk.

He looked from afar and saw that Mystie had summoned some kind of phantasmal form around itself as it still floated above the fort. He saw the magic circles around it as they all came together and formed a single small circle.

Mana exploded out of it as it fired off a single beam of energy that arced out and hit one of the many bovines. A second beam came out a moment later, and then it fired a third and a fourth until it fired over a dozen every second. Like a machinegun firing off homing lasers, it launched out attack after attack for the next ten seconds before the magic circle dispersed.

The entire battlefield was now filled with headless corpses of bovines – only around 50 beasts left standing, the majority of them Herd Leaders. The giant magic attack had slain thousands of Bovines in a single move.

Jake chuckled to himself as he took out his bow and decided to join in on the fun... the Herd Leaders alive were all around or above his own level... so why not?

Though he would have to hurry because the remaining ones were already set upon by the Mystbeasts.

And Neil and his party were still working on taking down their one Herd Leader - Mystie nice enough to not interfere in their fight.

## Chapter 177: To Pursue Perfection

Phillip stood with his soldiers on the wall, all just staring out onto the absolute massacre unfolding before their eyes. The giant blue Mystbeasts ripping apart the few surviving bovines after that insane magic spell unleashed by the Mystsong Bird killed most of the weaker beasts.

At first, they had all been impressed by Neil and his party as they engaged the Herd Leader... but it was just hard to compare it to what the D-rank had done. It was an unfair comparison. To begin with... the chances are the party could only handle two or a maximum of three of the Mystbeasts if they all worked together. And it was very doubtful they could kill them. Meanwhile, the Mystsong Hawk could summon ten times that number while also still posing a threat itself.

Just as they were all thinking nothing more would happen, something tore through the battlefield, blowing a massive hole into one of the Herd Leaders. The wound left behind soon started rotting, and it didn't even have time to move before its head also exploded.

More attacks came, and a few sharp-eyed observers noticed that it was arrows. Yet nobody could see where they came from, at least none who were on the wall.

"A single figure spotted approximately 7-7,5 kilometers to the east," Phillip heard through his walkie-talkie from one of the snipers on the tower. They, too, were also just watching... knowing they couldn't really contribute much.

Phillip had a good idea who the shooter was, and he could only sigh in resignation but also felt a bit of confidence... *at least we would be protected.*

"Ms. Wells... when do you think we can begin the migration?" he asked. They weren't totally done with their negotiations yet... but at this rate, everyone was going to follow them back anyway...

Jake entered the fort after he and all the Mystbeasts got done cleaning up the battlefield. Neil and his party also took down the big Herd Leader they had been battling with. Jake saw it was level 99, and while it wasn't as strong as the Horde Leader had been – not by a

long shot – it was still a decent opponent for the party. He also saw that three of them had gained a level, so that was nice.

When Mystie saw Jake enter, it dispelled that blue giant myst-form it had been using and flew down and began floating beside him. It had already dispelled the giant portal, which subsequently also made the Mystbeasts disappear.

With this battle, if you could even call it that, Jake had gotten a good understanding of Mystie's power... and it indeed wasn't that well-fit for straight-up fights with an opponent of equal level. While she had diverse means, her primary power lay in the complexity and diversity of spells, not raw strength.

Against a horde of enemies, she was likely the best beast he had seen. Taking down an army of bovines wasn't easily done, even by Jake. He would begin to get tired, and wounds would accumulate, as while the Herd Leaders weren't that strong individually, there were still a lot of them.

Yet her powers made her quite ill-fitting against something like the Thunder Roc or even Jake himself. Sure, it would have some effective attack methods, but he doubted most would be that effective if he used his scales and bombarded the hawk from afar.

As for how Mystie would fare against the Minotaur Mindchief... honestly, it was hard to say. It depended on if Mystie could resist its mental magic and rely on ranged attacks. Another factor was also if the summons were immune. Even then... it likely would not win.

If the Minotaur got close and landed any blows, Mystie would be in for a bad time. *Anyway, Mystie is kinda awesome in her own right; I should have her teach me some magic.*

"Sir," Miranda said, walking up to Jake and his hawk friend. "Phillip has agreed to migrate to the forest, but we won't take everyone right away. As we slowly expand, we will bring them there while still maintaining a small outpost at this fort."

She explained a bit more about their plans, Jake just listening and nodding along. It all sounded good, and he didn't really have any objections or interjections. The first group that would go included Phillip himself, mainly to check out the forest. He would return again to the fort within the same day, so chances are the fort would be safe.

The only thing Jake had to say was to of course inform Miranda about the people left back in the barn, and it was decided that Neil and his party would go with a few of Phillip's men to escort them back.

With the Minotaur dead and the threat of the daily attacks gone, life in the fort should be a lot easier. It didn't mean it was entirely safe, though. Beasts and monsters would still attack to claim the bountiful experience from the many humans residing within, but it likely wouldn't be in large coordinated attacks like before.

Jake could feel Mystie happy that they were finally going back. They hadn't been gone for that long, but he understood the mother-birds anxiety. He was looking forward to seeing Hawkie and the egg too.

The first group left for the forest less than an hour later, Jake and Mystie at the lead, acting as escorts. Miquel had stayed back at the fort, as he had apparently become very

interested in crafting more modern weaponry. It was fine, as Jake had kind of forgotten about the guy, so he only noticed the dude hadn't come along halfway back.

Needless to say, getting back to the 'city' took a lot longer than when they left. Mystie and Jake couldn't fly everyone, and many of them wouldn't like to be airlifted either. They also brought many things, and Jake didn't have the faintest interest in putting it into his inventory to help them. That would require so much damn planning for him to remember what belonged to who and sorting stuff, and a lot of annoying stuff solved by people just carrying their own shit.

Jake only spoke a bit with Miranda on the way, and they agreed to a meeting once they were back and had gotten everyone settled. Well, an after-meeting to be more accurate. Miranda would have a meeting with Hank, Phillip, Lillian, and many others to figure out how to get everyone housing and all of that other administrative stuff that was her job. Afterward, she would give Jake a quick breakdown. Damn, it was nice being the boss.

When they had traveled a good while, Mystie couldn't wait anymore and took off. Jake could only chuckle a bit to himself as he stayed with the group. While they had traveled damn fast for a caravan, it was still incredibly slow for Jake and the D-grade hawk's standards.

Not long after, they made it back. Only a few hundred people had come along for the first trip, and it was mainly to try and help build stuff for the next batch. Not that Jake was that invested, as he left right after returning after a quick 'see ya later' to Miranda.

He used One Step Mile to get to his house faster and walked past the 'no entry' sign into the valley. With a deep breath, he took in the atmosphere as he saw the waterfall and pond, as well as the small idyllic lodge. The big nest with two hawks sitting in was also a bit hard to miss.

"Hey Hawkie, anything interesting happened while we were gone?" he asked as he casually strolled towards the nest.

Jake got a small screech of annoyance. Likely because they took so long to return. "Yeah yeah, happy to see you too."

He jumped up to the nest and squatted down, looking at the egg. It hadn't changed much since last, but Jake could feel the faint presence it gave off had increased. "It will hatch soon..." he said, both birds agreeing.

*I guess that's part of the reason why Mystie wanted to hurry back... she was afraid the egg would hatch without her being there,* he thought, feeling a bit bad about making the bird leave with him. Luckily, it hadn't happened, so no harm was done.

And there wasn't any danger of Jake asking them to leave again anytime soon. Mainly because of the notifications he had gone through on his way back.

He had unexpectantly gained yet another level from the cleanup of the Herd Leaders, making him reach level 99, the cap of E-grade.

***\*'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 99 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 86 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

Jake had initially been considering pushing straight to 100 and getting his class evolution as he had done at E-grade. The class and profession evolution back then had just been a straightforward power boost, and it didn't take much considering if he wanted to rush it or not.

But... it appeared that D-grade was a bit different, as the second he reached level 99 in his class, he got a quest.

#### **Quest: The Perfect Evolution**

**As you approach the pinnacle of your grade, evolution is imminent. As you prepare to step out of the lower tiers, you must choose: pursue perfection or immediate power. A human may choose to evolve their class or profession immediately once fulfilling the basic requirements or wait to make a perfect evolution. Evolving a class or profession to level 100 before evolving to D-grade will result in a portion of the stat gains being deferred.**

**The choice is yours.**

**Objective: Reach level 99 in both your profession and class before evolving to D-grade.**



**Reward: [The Perfect Evolution (D)]**

**Upon failure, you will still obtain the [Evolution (D)] title.**

Jake wondered if the quest was something everyone got or if it was something unique to new initiates. From the looks of it, the titles were something everyone would get, and the quest was just a PSA of sorts. But he did have some questions still... and luckily, he had a one-way-line to a walking encyclopedia.

After saying his goodbyes to Mystie and Hawkie, he walked through the barrier and into his lodge. He walked through the building and out the back door to the porch, where he placed a wooden chair. It was new, and not one he had stolen from any dungeons, but one of the many pieces of furniture from the fort that was now superfluous.

Sitting down and leaning back, he closed his eyes as he spoke. "Oh mighty Villy, big-boss snake, I have inquiries for thee. What's up with the D-grade evolution, and will I be fucked if I don't get the Perfect Evolution title? Also, how would I even level my race? Hope you are doing well. Love, best-buddy Jake."

He could vaguely feel his message go out and be delivered to the Viper. He even saw a bit of his mana disappear, much to his surprise. Wait, had he just sent a legit prayer? Like, recognized by the system as a prayer?

*Meh, who cares.* All Jake knew was that the Viper heard him.

A few seconds later, he felt something touch upon his mind - a familiar presence. It felt just like during the tutorial-store-rewards-thing, but even more substantial than then. With the presence came the amused voice of the Malefic Viper, echoing in his head.

*"Alright, divine message coming through. That title honestly isn't that big of a deal, and you won't really lose anything worth mentioning by just evolving your class right away. Many people do it, even elites, but it would be foolish of you not to get it when you aren't in a rush. You won't lose much if you don't, but ya know, everything counts. Any experience you gain that would get you class levels before now get you race levels. Seriously, this is basic shit; why not just look it up in a book? Oh, and when you reach D-grade and evolve your professions, I have a surprise for you. Have fun grinding till then! Love, bestest-buddy Vilastromoz."*

Jake chuckled a bit as he felt the presence disappear. "Thanks, mate."

*Well, I guess that settles it - next goal: max out Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper.*

He would have done it even without the Viper telling him it was smart... he kind of liked completing quests.

The next hour or so was spent actually organizing his lodge. He took out all the bookshelves and placed them in the large central room, practically turning the living room into a library. He would need some more furniture soon, as what he had swiped from the dungeon wasn't enough. The bed was also quite bad, and everything was what he would classify as 'mundane.' Aka, it didn't have any magical properties.

The same couldn't be said about the lodge itself. It was only at a low level, but it did have some basic enchants that made it more robust and some basic helpful things, such as regulating humidity and temperature inside.

After sorting stuff, he went outside to talk to the birds. Well, just him talking and them saying bird-sounds, with Jake mostly just there to observe the magic circle laid down by Mystie and the egg in the nest. It wasn't a circle to nurture the egg anymore, but just one to defend the nest.

Jake was pretty sure the egg didn't need any more nurturing. Just protection and time to hatch.

He considered starting a crafting session but decided against it. Miranda would come by in not that long to go over what the other people of the city agreed on and for him to give input, so he wasn't sure he would have time to really get in the zone. Every brew or concoction also took a bit, and it would be rude to make her wait. She was already working hard, no need for him to waste her time more than necessary.

Instead, he sat down on the steps of the lodge, a book in hand - one of the many books about fungi and - more accurately - how to kill the damn things. By now, Jake was plenty aware that the Indigo Fungus wasn't an easy opponent, even for one in D-grade.

If he planned on grinding alchemy anyway... finding a way to kill that was an obvious goal. It would allow him to explore a new area of alchemy he hadn't tried before, and at the same time, level up the profession so he could get that Perfect Evolution.

Making more potions was also an option, and he would still do so, but he would need more ingredients for that soon. He was beginning to run out and at the moment only felt

comfortable crafting for himself. He could perhaps have some of his new citizens scavenge for him... but the issue is that he didn't really want inferior-rarity ingredients anymore.

It would help the city if he supplied potions, but it would also make him stagnate. There was no challenge in making inferior-rarity potions anymore, and he wanted to avoid it as much as possible. *Could I teach someone?* he suddenly considered.

Possibly... but all of that would have to wait. That would be far too time-consuming currently. Besides, Jake had just felt a presence approaching.

Jake looked up from his book and saw Miranda enter the valley. She had a big smile on her lips and was carrying a large platter as well as a wine bottle and two glasses.

## Chapter 178: Names

"I do feel a bit bad for the man, but you should have seen the expression of defeat on his face when the Mystsong Hawk made its move," Miranda laughed as she swirled her wine.

"D-grades do tend to get a bit more flashy," Jake agreed, chuckling along. "But I tend to find that scale and power don't always correspond. The Thunder Roc could make giant lightning attacks, but they barely hurt. Well, hurt a little, but one would think a massive thundercloud did more damage."

"Are all D-grades you met birds? Oh wait, you mentioned a mushroom," she said, grabbing one of the small finger foods from the platter on the table.

Jake also took one of the small skewers with grilled meat on, quite pleased with the food too. Food didn't have any right to taste this good, but damn, was it heavenly. Or maybe his tastebuds were just starved from not eating properly for so long. Who knows, and who cares? The food was fantastic.

What's more, he could even feel it help regenerate his stamina and health as he ate it. Miranda had mentioned it was made by someone with a cooking profession, so that did make sense. Jake even considered hunting some beasts to give to the cook... but apparently, they had plenty already. It did help that they had just murdered a few thousand giant cows.

"I also killed this huge Storm Elemental," Jake answered. "Most recently was something called a Minotaur Mindchief, the source of all the bovines attacking the fort."

Miranda looked surprised as she muttered, "You did say you dealt with the source... I should have guessed it was a D-grade..."

"You would have known by the time Phillip's men got the survivors left in the barn," Jake said. He had mentioned that a few people were stranded there before they left, and he had sent a few people there to check things out - Neil and his party going with them for protection.

"I guess," she said, sighing. "I hope that little girl will be okay..."

"Staying at the fort, for now, seems like it would be best... I don't think it will help to make her run around all the time. After she has had time to get a bit of stability, she can come here. Hopefully, we can get someone with magic or skills to help her... if that's even possible," Jake said, also sighing.

It was hard being confronted with an issue you could do nothing about. The Minotaur Mindchief had scarred many people, and he was sure the majority of the survivors from the barn would also have issues. The Minotaur had been sapient but was also the most monstrous monster Jake had yet to encounter. Without a doubt... it too had been broken.

"Children, in general, have it hard... but their ability to adapt is also admirable," Miranda said with a melancholic smile. "I am not even sure what we can do for them... what kind of schooling would they need? I heard that they tend to get their classes and professions around puberty, but does that mean children will have to be set in their future that young?"

"Yeah... I don't think I even knew what I wanted to be before my third year of uni..." Jake said, shaking his head. "But I don't think the first class or professions matters *that* much, yet I do agree those who know what they want and stick with one path will likely have the advantage."

"Well, I am sure we will figure it out," Miranda said, trying to lighten the mood. "We are all learning still, and with time I am sure we can make something great. It isn't like you or I have to figure it out anyway; I am sure someone out there can come out with way better ideas than us."

The two of them had been talking about things for the last hour or so. Miranda had brought a platter from the chef who had also made food for the meeting between the city leaders and a bottle of wine from before the system.

Initially, it was just to quickly go over what they had discussed during the meeting, but it turned out to be just Jake and Miranda eating and drinking while talking about random things. Nothing of importance – at least not to Jake – was discussed at the meeting, but he liked to be informed anyway.

Miranda had decided on a council-like leadership structure. She would be the head of the council and have the final decision, with Jake, of course, having the final-final decision. Actually, rather than a council, it was more accurate to say that she had some advisers or people she delegated work and responsibilities to. With the city expanding by a few thousand, they would need to have a more official structure.

With Jake not caring much about other things, there naturally wasn't a reason to discuss it. Except it turned into Jake telling a bit of what he had been up to and Miranda talking about how the systems she had gained access to as a City Lord worked.

Jake was especially interested in the questing system. It sounded cool. Miranda could create quests for the city's citizens, including rewards and penalties and all of the things a quest usually had. She would have to provide the rewards and give out the penalties upon failure, but the quests served as contracts of sorts. Well, the contract could be nullified if both parties agreed not to deal out the punishment or give the reward, in which case it could be ignored - a bit like when Miranda had initiated the process to take over the Pylon.

This quest system would initially be used as a way of organizing labor more than anything else. Give out quests to help with building the city, gather materials, or whatever else. It was quite the versatile system, and Miranda even said they could construct items or buildings to help manage things so she wouldn't have to give out quests and administer everything herself. People with administration or manager-like professions could use these items or buildings to then help level themselves.

It was pleasant just to sit down and talk to someone like a normal person. Sure, he spoke to the two hawks a bit here and there but having someone who could answer was a big plus.

Thinking about it... Miranda and possibly Lillian were the only humans he felt like he could really talk to. Sure, there were some things to consider, like relative power dynamics with him being their boss and everything, coupled with him being far stronger, but that didn't really bother Jake much. He was best buddies with a god with the power to make their planet go 'poof,' and the god in question also happened to be the god that had blessed him. Now that was the mother of all skewed power dynamics.

If it bothered Miranda, she was good at hiding it. She seemed equally excited about talking about the city-system and its many features as Jake did talking about the many hunts he was on.

He had talked about his adventures to the cloud continent, his friendship with Hawkie and Mystie, and besides a small comment on how the names sucked, she had just silently listened with a relaxed smile.

They also laughed a bit when she said she had just gained a level by drinking wine and eating tasty food.

"Well, doesn't it make sense to be like a politician when you are literally a City Lord? Just relaxing and doing nothing with the power just rolling in," Jake joked. She just laughed along, adding:



"You know, maybe lying and deceiving the public gives more experience than being good at my job. I can already see myself jumping a few levels from receiving a massive bribe," Miranda laughed before turning a bit more serious. "But one thing was brought up at the meeting."

"What is it?" Jake asked, mirroring her shift in attitude.

"A name," she said. "It may seem minor, but just referring to it as 'the city' or 'the forest' is a bit tedious. The empty slot on my interface is also a sore sight. Which also brings me to another thing..."

She steeled herself as she took a deep breath, her face slightly red as she asked. "I... don't believe I ever got your name... of course, if you meant to keep it a secret, I understand and won't ask aga-"

"Jake Thayne," he answered, shaking his head. "We seriously never exchanged names? I thought we did..."

"Well, we did now," Miranda said with a big smile on her face. "I mean no offense... but Jake is also a remarkably normal name for one so abnormal as you."

"I guess, never really thought about it," Jake shrugged.

"With that out of the way... we need a name for the city too. Your acceptance is required for the name to stick with the system, so I thought I should ask you for ideas first. But

after hearing about Hawkie and Mystie, I am beginning to reconsider... we are not naming it Townie,” Miranda said, barely able to hold back a laugh. Jake didn’t find it *that* funny, but he had to agree that Townie was terrible...

”The council did have a few suggestions,” she finally added on.

”Aight, let’s hear it,” Jake said, leaning back with his glass of wine and a large skewer with grilled beef on it.

Miranda took out a few papers, each with a list on it that had way too many entries.

”Did you all just brainstorm and wrote down everything?” he couldn’t help but ask.

”Even better, we invited everyone to come with ideas. Let’s begin!” Miranda said, way more excited than she should be.

”Alright, I am just gonna spitball some, and you give me your thoughts,” she began as an agonizing session of names began.

”Newland propositioned from one of the newer citizens.”

”Pretty sure the forest isn’t new.”

"Newfoundland."

"That is the same thing..."

"New Hope."

"Alright, remove anything with the word 'new' in it; it's just too corny and boring," Jake finally said, after he saw she clearly had way more.

Which she indeed did, as she put away two entire pages of name ideas... all with an even worse naming sense than Jake. At least according to himself.

"Alright then. Oh, this next one is from Mark. He propositioned naming it Sanctuary."

"I think the kid has played too many action RPGs. Even if he hasn't, the name makes us sound like some kind of religious hideaway," Jake immediately shot it down.

"Mark actually had quite a few ideas," Miranda said, turning the page so Jake could see it.

"Man, he played way too many games... and I am pretty sure those are all copyrighted," Jake said, after only briefly scanning the list. "Also, no to all of them."

"Seeing as you don't like the religious imagery, I take it Genesis, Miracle, and the Blessed Forest is out of the question?" Miranda asked a bit teasingly, knowing full well those all sucked.

"I am going to name it Jakeville if this keeps up..." he said, teasing her back.

"A part of me believes you would actually dare do that," she chuckled, "and while it would be absolutely hilarious, I doubt it will be wise in the long run."

After that, they just put the papers down on the table and began going over them, crossing out names they both didn't like. A lot of them were just the same names as pre-system cities, Jake not liking any of them. Miranda didn't either.

They both felt like it would ground people too much in the world before the system. They had to realize things had changed and that they weren't going to rebuild what was: they would create something entirely new - a place for everyone to strive and be safe in this new world.

They did their editing with a hard hand until they were left with only three.

"Greenwood sounds fine, but..." Miranda began before her voice slowly died off, with Jake just staring down at them. None of them felt right...

"The purpose of this place is to give people a place to live in safety, but also one to improve themselves..." Jake muttered before turning to Miranda. "How about we just call it Haven?"

"Haven..." she muttered. "It's simple and easy to remember... the name carries meaning... I think it fits," she said, nodding. "I also think it goes well with the environment... we are in a forest, after all. The name helps communicate that."

"Well, I like it at least," Jake said, shrugging.

"I like it too," Miranda smiled, as she did some good old system-magic, and a few seconds later, Jake got a notification.

**Do you want to name your city: Haven?**

**Y/N**

Jake instantly agreed as the prompt disappeared... and that was that. There was no great fanfare or anything like that - just Miranda confirming that her city management menu now said that the city was named Haven. Apparently, it had also been updated to display his name as the owner. But she said it had begun doing that just after she learned his name, so the two weren't really related.

"Cheers, and may Haven have a bright future ahead of it," she said, raising her wineglass.

"Cheers."

The two kept talking for a bit, mainly joking about some of the sillier names before she headed off. She still had work to do, and so did Jake. On her way out, she gave a small bow towards the nest with two birds eyeing her menacingly until she was out of sight.

Jake stood outside, seeing her off too. When she was gone, he turned around and sat down at the table. There was still a bit of wine remaining, so he emptied it into his glass. Sitting there, he swirled the liquid as he opened his status menu for the first time in quite a while.

### **Status**

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (E) – lvl 86]

Class: [Ambitious Hunter – lvl 99]

Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 73]

Health Points (HP): 11290/11290

Mana Points (MP): 13421/13450

Stamina: 9171/9400

### **Stats**

Strength: 695

Agility: 1118

Endurance: 940

Vitality: 1129

Toughness: 731

Wisdom: 1076

Intelligence: 559

Perception: 2125

Willpower: 667

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: Earl], [Progenitor of the 93rd Universe]

**Class Skills:** [Basic One-Handed Weapons (Inferior)], [Advanced Stealth (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)], [Archery of Vast Horizons (Rare)] [Descending Dark Fang (Rare)], [Limit Break (Rare)], [Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Epic)], [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 (Epic)], [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)], [Wings 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)]

While it hadn't gotten that much longer since last he checked, he had gained quite a few stats. He had kept just throwing all his free points into perception, not really caring if it was the optimal thing or not to do at this point. It felt right to do it, so he did it.

Well, it did help that his regular archery now also benefitted from perception. In fact, he was beginning to get quite a few skills using the stat. And in the coming days, there would be many more stat points coming.

After emptying the glass, he walked out into the veranda and sat legs crossed in front of the pond. A cauldron appeared between his legs a few seconds after as he took a deep breath.

It was time to grind some alchemy.

## Chapter 179: Baby Hawk

The wheel of time spun as the days passed one by one.

Beasts fought, humans struggled to survive and expand their settlements, and a good deal of them battled to claim the many Pylons still scattered across the planet. Every Pylon was far apart, often separated by thousands if not tens of thousands of kilometers.

Jacob had taken fourteen days walking with his entourage to the Pylon second-closest to where he had arrived back on Earth. Granted, he hadn't rushed, but it was still a vast distance.

Day nine of Jake entering his alchemy-frenzy, he was interrupted as he got a notification that wasn't about a successful craft or a new level gained.

**Announcement to all Nobles: 10 Pylons of Civilization have now been claimed. Once 100 Pylons are claimed, the World Congress will automatically form.**

Jake stared at it for a few seconds before shrugging and turning back to his cauldron. Miranda unsurprisingly came in later that day. They talked a bit, but as it was more of a

forewarning than anything else, they didn't take any particular actions besides discussing it a bit.

Everyone with any nobility title had seen the message, Phillip and Miquel included, as well as one other person Jake didn't know.

Phillip already knew about Pylons and apparently knew they had one, but to the other two, it was news. They knew nothing more about Pylons than that their lord title allowed them to control one.

Miranda shared the fact that they had a Pylon with all of them, making it official, and with Jake's approval, they also stopped being all secretive about it. Of course, no one knew where the actual Pylon was, though it wasn't far-fetched that many suspected it was in Jake's valley.

To everyone's big surprise, no one wanted to try and scout out the valley even if they suspected he kept some good stuff there. Maybe it had something to do with the overly protective D-grade Mystsong Hawk sitting in a nest inside. It had already placed quite a few defensive and detection spells around the place.

The egg still looked like it could hatch any day, and he was looking forward to it.

Jake had just gotten done with a round of crafting some inferior-rarity poison that he was practicing with. Neither of them were very useful, but they were still new creations and a stepping stone on his path to slaying a certain giant mushroom.

***[Weak Herbicide (inferior)] – A weak poison created to kill plant life and similar lifeforms. Breaks apart the physical body and membranes that hold the plant together, making it wither.***

***[Weak Fungicide (Inferior)] – A weak poison created to kill fungi and similar lifeforms. This type of poison is made to spread through any physical connection of the fungi, quickly infecting large parts of it. Deals low damage but is hard to cleanse.***

Both of them kind of sucked compared to just splashing a shitload of blood on stuff, but they did help him learn quite a lot. He wanted to make a potent poison, or fungicide, to kill the damn mushroom lurking below, and for that, he needed to start from the bottom.

A poison that worked against plants and fungi was fundamentally different from regular human or beast-killing poison. Plants and fungi were rarely ever vitality-based lifeforms but instead lived off a type of life-affinity mana. So poison, such as Necrotic Poison and - in an even more extreme case - the Hemotoxin had barely any effect. They still did a bit of damage just because they were infused with harmful mana, but the result was absolutely minuscule.

The method behind crafting was a lot different from other types of poison he had made so far, and it was an exciting challenge to throw himself headfirst into.

It was eighteen days since he began his grinding, and he was already working on making his first common-rarity mushroom-killing poison. His speed was without a doubt impressive, and he had also gained another level that day, bringing him to 78.

***\*'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 78 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

It wasn't even a level every three days, and while that did seem slow compared to his prior speed, it was actually quite fast. At least Miranda said so after comparing him to many others. Well, Miranda leveled super fast, but hers had also slowed down a lot, and she had begun focusing a bit on her class also.

On that eighteenth day, he felt a shift from the area outside his lodge. He barely had time to notice it before he heard the cries of Hawkie and Mystie, as they both made half-panicked sounds, jumping around their nest.

Jake tossed the book he was reading to the side and rushed outside, already fully aware of what was happening. He faintly felt another aura had begun appearing and was growing in presence by the second.

The egg was finally hatching.

Running up to the nest, he joined the birds at the nest, acting just as anxious and panicked as them. He couldn't help but wonder if he was supposed to do anything as he saw a small crack appear on the egg. Mystie, the majestic D-grade hawk that seemed to always be in control, was a mess at that moment, jumping back and forth.

In an attempt to calm down, he closely inspected what was happening within the egg with his sphere, where he saw a small figure with fluffy down slowly poke itself out of the egg from the inside. It ate the shell as it hatched, consuming the many potent energies within it.

All three of them were anxious but still waited patiently for the little one. It struggled to break out and eat the shell from within, slowly pecking at it. Jake had to admit... it looked a bit creepy, but damn, was it a cute little bugger.

Soon, it made a mighty peck and finally got its head out of the shell.

”Chirp! Chirp!”

It instantly began making – what in Jake’s eyes – was the cutest chirps as all three of them moved closer to watch the little thing. It looked back at them with its big beady eyes as it just continued making its small chirping noises as it struggled to break free.

Jake nearly wanted to help it, but seeing as its parents didn’t, he wouldn’t interfere either. He did, however, use Identify on it to see what kind of bird it was. He had kind of expected it to be called Galemyst Hawk or maybe Mystgale Hawk – mainly because he lacked imagination. But its race was a bit different than he expected.

**[Sylphian Eyas – lvl 0]**

Jake remembered that eyas was the name for a baby hawk, so he reckoned it would evolve as it grew to become a Sylphian Hawk. As for Sylphian, he assumed it had something to do with Sylphs, which he recalled were spirits of wind or something. *I’ll ask Villy at some point*, Jake thought. No reason to bother the god with random questions all the time. He didn’t want to be *that*

friend who keeps pestering others with constant inane questions when bored.

If it was a powerful variant, could it naturally grow to D-grade, and how long would that take? How wou-

“Chirp!”

*Screw all that*, Jake thought, as he just extended his finger towards the bird.

It looked up at him for a brief moment before its small beak tried to close around it. It failed miserably and just began pecking at his hand harmlessly. He couldn't help but chuckle as the small bird gave up and returned to eating its shell.

The human and parent birds just patiently watched the little thing eat the rest of its shell. When it was done, it finally got up on its two thin legs and took a few small steps forward, promptly falling on its butt.

“Burp!”

It let out a burping sound as it tried to stand up again. The Mystsong Hawk walked a bit closer and helped it stand by gently nudging with its beak. The baby hawk managed to stand up proudly again, walked a single step more this time before falling down headfirst.

Hawkie caught it mid-fall with its talons, the small bird trying to stabilize itself. This time it didn't walk around but just stood there, looking around at the three of them. It blinked with its big eyes as if it wanted to memorize all of them.

Ever since coming to the nest, Jake had been a bit worried. He feared that he was intruding on something. He wasn't really related to the bird besides helping a bit with that magic ritual to strengthen it and being friends with Hawkie.

But Hawkie and Mystie had both looked happy, almost elated when Jake was showing so much interest. He felt them warmly look on when the small hawklet tried to bite his finger. So clearly, they approved. Which begged the question... was he the godfather or something to that extent?

Jake couldn't help but remember Caleb and Maja when he thought about that... she had to have given birth by now... which made him an uncle. He knew his family lived because Villy told him, but he also *felt like* they still lived. It was just a faint intuition when he thought of them. He was looking forward to their eventual reunion.

While he could technically just up and leave now, using One Step Mile into the horizon... he knew that wouldn't be a wise choice. For now, it was best to focus on his own strength and make it so that when he met his family again, he could actually help protect them.

Hawkie nudged him from the side at this time, pulling Jake out of his thoughts. He saw that the bird looked at him confused and also saw Mystie staring with confusion.

"Sorry, I just recalled some memories," he said, smiling at the two, as he extended his finger towards the small bird again. "It has nothing to do with you, mini-Hawkie."



Mystie gave him an annoyed screech, practically punching Jake with its wing.

“Oh, a mini-Mystie?” he said, chuckling. “So you’re a little girl, eh...”

Mystie still looked at him disapprovingly – likely due to the bad nickname – but didn’t correct him.

Around fifteen minutes had passed since the little chick was all the way out its shell, and it was already waltzing around the nest quite comfortably. It was quite a contrast to pre-system newborn birds that were borderline immobile for quite the period after birth.

He couldn’t help but use Identify on it again and was a bit surprised.

**[Sylphian Eyas – lvl 1]**

Jake knew beasts could grow in level with other ways than combat already, but it was the speed that surprised him. Hawkie had also gained a level while protecting the nest and doing nothing else, proving it even worked at higher levels, but clearly, it was far slower for him. Hawkie had gained levels way, way faster while hunting up in the sky with him before.

But this little birdie was super fast! Not just in levels, it was even jumping around in the nest now. It looked full of energy as it leaped nearly ten centimeters with every jump. It looked like it was becoming comfortable with not being in an egg quite fast. Even if it did fall flat on its face a few times, quickly getting back up with an angry squeak.

Jake got nothing productive done for the rest of that day. He had his first prolonged period of just pure relaxation. It wasn't done to regenerate resources or to work on mana manipulation. He was just relaxing with the two newly baked parent-birds and the little chick.

Only a few hours after hatching, it left its nest, and it began exploring the valley, Jake and its parents in tow. They went to the pond where it angrily chirped at the water but ran away scared when one of the low-level eels within swam up towards the surface.

It fought a valiant battle with the stairs up to Jake's lodge, trying to jump each step but failing with its tiny body. Jake couldn't help but place his foot down and make an extra small step for the bird to use. It happily used that as it made its way into his lodge, where it ran around just looking at things, randomly pecking the wall or floor at times.

Hawkie took off and returned with some small pieces of meat that it chewed up and fed to the small bird throughout the day. Jake found this very unsanitary and was already preparing to find an alchemy recipe to feed it instead. That, or just make some kind of soup in his very expensive cauldron.

The day ended up with Jake sitting on his lodge's steps, the two hawks at his side. The small chick had gotten tired and had found a mobile nest: Jake's hair. This is why he hadn't moved at all for the last hour but just sat there completely still, trying not to wake up the chick.

Today had been... good. It was relaxing, and Jake felt like his head was clearer than usual.

Feeling the small bird on top of his head and the two happy parents to his side filled him with warmth. It was just nice. He was looking forward to the small bird growing up and becoming a big hawk, just like its parents. And he would do what he could to help it achieve that.

He very carefully got up, keeping his head as still as possible. He could easily control his body perfectly, and he was pretty sure he could walk with a mountain of books on his head if he needed to, making all those stereotypical British etiquette teachers proud. Or allow any baby birds on his head to remain undisturbed.

Jake walked to the bookshelves as he used mana to pull out book after book to look for one to help with making some kind of nutrient for the bird. The way he did it, however, was quite a bit more advanced than usual.

With the practice of flying people around and air walking, as well as reflecting further on Mystie's mana-control, Jake had improved even more. The strings he extended were entirely invisible, and he didn't need them to do anything but touch an object for him to manipulate it in its entirety.

That meant he could stand perfectly still as books floated all around him, opening and flipping through pages, done purely with mana manipulation. If he gained another skill selection at this time, he was quite sure he could get a better version of telekinesis than what he saw before.

He couldn't stop focusing on constantly improving his ability to manipulate mana, as he still had a few objectives to get done before reaching level 99 in his profession. He needed

to make poison and kill the mushroom below, and hopefully, he could do it entirely by using his alchemy skills.

Jake also needed to improve his Touch of the Malefic Viper and Sense of the Malefic Viper to ancient-rarity. He wanted all nine of the stat-giving skills before reaching D-grade to see if that would lead to anything. Even if it didn't, the benefits of upgrading the skills would make it worth it.

Pride of the Malefic Viper and Fangs of the Malefic Viper would be gained simply through leveling up, so he just needed those two upgraded... the issue was that he wasn't sure how to.

Sense of the Malefic Viper would likely be the easiest, as he felt like it synergized so well with Sagacity and his extremely high perception. The upgrade to epic-rarity had been exceedingly easy, and while he doubted he could do it that easily again, he had a feeling it wouldn't be *that hard*.

As for Touch of the Malefic Viper... Jake had no idea where even to start. The upgrade to epic-rarity came when he semi-fused the skill with affinities and allowed him to have the effect of the poison mimick an affinity... but that upgrade was gained through an epiphany of sorts.

It was quite a few things to get done, and he was su-

“Chirp! Chirp!”

His train of thought was interrupted as the little hawk on his head woke up and greeted the world with its small chirps.

Jake just smiled as he extended a finger up and rubbed the soft down of the little bugger. *But before all that... let's find a delicious recipe for Sylphie.*

## Chapter 180: Fists of Fury

She dodged the attack as she vaulted backward, a few strands of her long hair still caught by the sharp claws of the beast. With her back bent like she was trying to win the world championship of limbo, her stance was a bit awkward as another claw descended towards her body.

In an impossible move, her entire body swayed to the side as if she didn't have any bones. Simultaneously, she pushed off the ground with her hand and landed a solid kick on the huge three-meter tall bear-like beast in front of her.

The beast barely reacted to the attack, but it allowed her to create some distance between them. She was breathing heavily, with several wounds already covering her entire body. All of them were healing at a near-visible rate, but she was still far from in optimal condition.

Her opponent was a bear-like creature that, in retrospect, actually looked more like a werebear. In actuality, though, it was a sloth.

### **[Slothful Warden – lvl ???]**

It was the final boss of her tutorial, a being she had failed even to reach back then... but now, more than two months later, she would face it and win.

This wasn't the first time Carmen fought the beast... but it would be the last.

She charged again, not giving the beast time to relax. She knew it would recover as fast as herself, so hit-and-run tactics wouldn't work. The beast had two modes – slow-mode and fast-mode.

It moved incredibly slowly in slow-mode, but its defenses were ridiculous, and it healed its wounds incredibly fast. It was far more vulnerable in fast-mode and didn't recover at all, but it made the beast super fast, as the name suggested. This knowledge had taken her losing several limbs to learn.

The beast moved again, staying in fast-mode. She dodged back, not daring to try and fight it straight-up but instead looking for an opening. She leaned and weaved away from the claws until she finally saw her chance. She landed a right hook on the beast's face, making it stumble a bit back.

While her hit was far weaker than the D-grade's, she had managed to hit the chin and rattle the brain a little. With it disorientated, she moved in quickly and managed to land ten or so more blows before it used a skill to get her off.

Its long hair suddenly grew in length as the long strands, like tendrils, tried to catch her. She jumped back with all her strength, barely avoiding them. Her fists were both encompassed in an orange glow that was already spreading throughout her body, healing her wounds.

With every hit, she stole life-energy from the opponent, healing herself. At the same time, the lower her health, the stronger she got. She was a berserker, but without the berserking part. Her mind was calm as she swiftly moved forward again, seeing the Slothful Warden about to enter its slow-mode. *Won't help you this time.*

She wouldn't allow it to regenerate.

Her fists came down like hail, every one of them leaving a small imprint of energy behind. It tried to defend but was far slower than before. Carmen's attack didn't do any noticeable damage, but they did send energy into the beast's body with one purpose – stopping its healing.

Forced to move fast again, it exited its slow-mode and returned to fast-mode, and they returned to their slugfest. Carmen, calculatingly dodging every hit of the beast while it swung with increasing desperation.

After nearly half an hour, it was time to enter the second phase. Carmen had gotten here before and had almost lost her life... but now she would be ready.

The beast exploded with power as its hair grew, and it began glowing red. It grew another meter in size, power overflowing from its body.

Carmen took this time to make her own preparations as she prepared for the battle's final stage.

Pressing both her fists against the ground, she spoke, **"Sacred Battleground."**

An aura spread throughout the area, and for a split-second, an echo of battles prior swept across the land. Animals were fighting and hunting before the system, and even echoes of a war that had happened in bygone eras, perhaps all the way back in the stone age.

The visions disappeared as quickly as they came, but the ground remained hallowed. It was now a blessed battlefield where Carmen would bring down her foe.

She felt the power of the land flow into her as she activated her boosting skill.

**"Ruination Drive."**

Carmen's entire body felt like it was burning as orange energy swirled out from every pore on her skin. She didn't hesitate as she moved, facing the D-grade in a final battle where only one of them would walk out alive.



Her fist landed on the beast, but at the same time, it also attacked. Her entire right arm was ripped off with a swipe, but the moment her fist connected, it pushed in a flood of the orange energy while at the same time dragging out the beast's health points.

The severed arm regenerated in less than a second as she dodged a blow from the Slothful Warden and landed a kick. Spikes of hair flew out, and she blocked with her newly regenerated arm, barely avoiding getting her head impaled.

Gritting her teeth, she grabbed hold of the hair and dragged the beast in closer. Its arms were longer than hers, making it an advantage to get in closer. It did mean the hair would impale her now and then... but that is what her regeneration was for.

The giant sloth began using a few more skills here and there, but she had encountered them all before. The corrosive breath that leveled an area hundreds of meters in front of it in a cone was avoided as the attack was rather telegraphed, and the crescent beams it released from its claws were easy to dodge when you avoided or deflected its swings anyway.

Her body was ripped apart repeatedly, but she inflicted a heavy blow on the sloth for every limb she lost. Her regeneration was pushed to eleven, her power only growing as her massive health pool slowly depleted. If she fought outside her Sacred Battlefield or without her boosting skill, she would be dead already.

Carmen knew this entire fight was very tight. It was walking on a tightrope from start to finish, with no guarantee of victory even if she didn't fuck up. She could have fought with others or tried to level more... but she wanted to win alone and do so before capping her class.

When the beast looked to be on the verge of death, it made its final stand as energy poured out of it like never before. Carmen had kind of expected this... so she was ready.

She summoned six items while in mid-air, retreating from the beast - a sword, a spear, a set of claws, two skulls of beasts, and finally, a mirror. Her aura spiked as she spoke.

### **“Echoes of War.”**

Figures condensed around each item as golden ghostly apparitions were conjured. This was what she had prepared for the last two weeks by fighting powerful foes. Combining her class and profession with the Sacred Battlefield, she summoned echoes of those she had slain.

The Slothful Warden saw these figures and didn't hesitate to attack. The spearman fell nearly instantly, while the one with the sword managed to at least block a single attack before also dispersing. The two wolves summoned from the skulls managed to sink their teeth into one of the sloth's arms, while the panther summoned from the set of claws cut a nasty gash across its side.

Carmen also charged with no regard for her own safety. Both hands behind her as she ran, building up all the momentum she could. The summoned apparitions were also beginning to disperse as they couldn't remain active for more than a few seconds, the items that summoned them crumbling to dust along with the ghosts.

Her right fist was burning with all her energy as she swung a right hook straight for the head of the beast in a reckless attack. The Slothful Warden saw her reckless attack as it brought its claw forward, ready to rip off her head.

The claw came down as she swung her fist forward. The claw hit first due to the sloth's long arms, but the second it made contact with her hair, it didn't hit the human but instead sunk into a mirror that had suddenly appeared.

Instead of finishing the human, its blow was reflected back on itself as blood flew everywhere from its own claw, ripping its other arm off. The mirror also shattered to pieces, its power only enough to block a single blow. It was the regalia from slaying a peak E-grade boss monster, a ghost that was bound to the mirror itself.

With its attack reflected and the sloth heavily damaged, it couldn't react properly when Carmen swung her fist forward. It impacted the sloth's head, the facial bones and skull shattering to the fist that held everything the woman could muster. An explosion of power sounded out in the area as everything in a 10-meter radius was leveled from the blast.

All that remained was Carmen standing alone in the crater, her Ruinous Drive deactivated, her right arm gone, and her entire body covered in blood. Before her lay the headless corpse of the Slothful Warden, the final boss of what had once been her tutorial.

***\*You have slain [Slothful Warden – lvl 108] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\****

***\*'DING!' Class: [Savage Pugilist] has reached level 98 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 79 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Class: [Savage Pugilist] has reached level 99 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

“Hehe...” she chuckled as she saw the messages before she began full-on laughing. “Fuck, I am awesome.”

She kicked the Slothful Warden as she gave it the finger. “Fuck you, and fuck everything you ever stood for!”

Carmen, for the first time in so long, felt truly free. It felt like she only now had truly broken free of the prison she was in before the system, as not a single remnant of it now remained. Her entire body was hurting, but she felt elation like never before.

She took out a recovery potion from her spatial storage, quickly chugging it down. It would help with the after-effects of the boosting skill while also helping her recover her resources faster. It was only inferior-rarity, but it was damn impressive anyway.

Being able to at least move a little, she got on with the next area of business. She went up to the corpse of the beast as she knelt down and placed her hand on it.

“I tribute this victory to Valhal.”

The corpse instantly began turning to golden dust, leaving only a single set of long claws behind. She instantly put them in her storage and noted she had gained another level.

***\*'DING!' Profession: [Apprentice Valkyrie of Gudrun] has reached level 61 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 80 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

Honestly, that profession was a scam. All Carmen had to do was tribute kills she made to Valhal, and she would gain levels in it. Okay, she also had to prepare the items dropped to summon echoes and do some other rituals and stuff, but it was way easier to level than those professions that felt more like full-time jobs of just creating shit.

No way she would have the patience for that.

This is also why she had already found someone else to deal with the damn Pylon she had just gotten a quest about. No way she was going to waste her time on playing city-builder or whatever.

She had more stuff to punch and more levels to gain. She briefly looked at the other new quest she had gained about the Perfect Evolution title and shrugged. She could wait with evolving if it meant becoming more awesome.

It wasn't like she was going to stop fighting... she needed more tributes anyway.

Miranda entered the valley to give her weekly report to Jake. It had become routine that she would come by with some good food, and they would talk over any new happenings of the city. Nothing seemed unusual at first, but she did notice one thing... the two hawks were not at the nest.

One of them being gone was pretty normal, but not both of them. While the birds hadn't allowed Miranda to see it, Jake had mentioned they were caring for an egg. But no such egg was to be found.

She hesitated a bit as she went through the ever-active barrier and knocked on the door. It opened a second or so later, her mana sense skill telling her it was done with pure mana manipulation. *He is getting a lot better every time I come by...*

"I have brought this new dish; it reminds me a bit of kebab, bu-"

Miranda had barely entered and begun presenting today's meal when she saw Jake sitting in a chair with a book, and she was instantly dumbfounded. Not by the man himself as he looked the same as usual with a mask covering his face and everything.

No, what took her aback was the small fluffy white ball of down sitting on his head. It looked to be sleeping or at least half-asleep and didn't bother with her at all. She couldn't help but identify it out of pure curiosity.

[Sylphian Eyas – lvl 3]

“Kebab? That sounds great,” Jake answered as he made his mask invisible and looked up with a smile.

“Is that...?”

“Yeah, this is Sylphie, Mystie’s and Hawkie’s kid. I am babysitting today as they both went out to hunt for a bit,” Jake answered nonchalantly.

“I... well, at least that is a real name...” Miranda muttered as she walked over and placed the food on the dining table.

“Hatched a few days ago. She is usually an energetic little bugger, but I managed to tire her out,” Jake chuckled as he brought a finger up and tickled the bird a bit. The small hawk happily nuzzled up to the finger without even opening its eyes.

*So damn cute*, Miranda thought as she took out the plates and cutlery and placed them on the table.

Jake got up from his small reading corner and went over to the table and helped her. He levitated the two plates and cutlery, placing them on each side of the table.

“We had the second restaurant open today; the food is from there. Well, it is more of a grill than anything,” Miranda said. “Two new caravans arrived this week, a few hundred people in each, so we are always behind in housing. Hank and Louise are raking in levels faster than ever, with all the new construction projects.”

The two of them sat down at the table as Miranda continued explaining as they ate.

“The four with merchant professions from the fort have done well with trying to facilitate normalizing using Credits. A few people who recently got their profession-upgrade have also become merchants or gained professions related to economics, helping with the cause.

“While most don’t care much about Credits or really have any to use, it is still the best we have. Producing our own currency would just be silly.”

“With the system as a guarantor of the Credits, it makes it a far superior currency. The multiverse as a whole also uses Credits, so us doing anything else would indeed be moronic,” Jake concurred.

“Exactly, so we have begun some initiatives to normalize using the credits. The restaurants accept it, and most crafters do, too, though it is hard to estimate how valuable something is or isn’t. We don’t really have any frames of reference besides what things cost in the Tutorial Store... and most of those things aren’t something we can make anyway.



“With that in mind, we began making some official quests to donate equipment and give wages to those working with the construction projects. It has helped a lot, but...”

“You lack funds,” Jake said as he ate the food, clearly enjoying it quite a lot.

“Yep, we are pretty much broke, but I talked with Phillip, and he had nearly 800.000 left over after the tutorial store, and we can borrow that for now, and it should get us through at least the first month, and by then we should have some taxation system set up or some other income-source,” Miranda explained.

The thought of asking the owner for any money didn’t occur to her. While he was the official leader of Haven, his job was only protection, not funding. This was her hurdle to overcome.

“I could let you borrow so-“ Jake began but was instantly cut off.

“Only if it becomes absolutely necessary,” she answered promptly. She had expected the offer, but she didn’t want it. “Instead... think about if there is anything the city may be able to do for you. Make a few requests and reward Credits for that.”

“That... is actually a good idea. I will consider doing that,” Jake answered, looking like he was questioning why the heck he hadn’t thought of that before.

The rest of the night was spent just talking over a few other key points. She ended up staying a few hours longer than usual, mainly due to the baby hawk waking up. It was just

too damn cute to leave alone, and they played with it throughout the night, making her only leave at dawn.

She exited the valley as she cracked her neck a bit. She had a paper in hand with a request from Jake and a bright smile on her lips from interacting with the baby hawk. Despite having another full day of work ahead of her, she was content. Things were looking good for Haven.

Her mood was ruined a bit when she entered her office and saw a huge stack of papers with requests and inquiries... *Oh well, another 72-hour shift ahead, it seems.*