

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 21: An impactful choice

The next hallway was quite a bit longer than the previous one and suspiciously lacking in mushrooms. This meant that the narrow passage was covered entirely in darkness. Not that it mattered much to Jake with his sphere.

As he walked, he remembered that he had his skills back. He took out the dagger he had gotten during the second challenge room and identified it.

[Dagger of Bloodletting (Common)] – A dagger created by an ancient long-dead cult, made for sacrificial purposes. Enchantments: Any cuts made with this blade bleed more, for longer, and are harder to heal.

The enchant explained why it bled so damn much when he cut himself. He put the dagger away as he proceeded down the hallway.

After walking for a couple of minutes, he turned a corner and saw a light source in the distance. But this was not the blue light he had gotten used to, but ‘normal’ light—the orange/whitish kind. Well, technically, light is a combination of all colors on the color spectrum. What matters is that it was light with colors outside of blue.

He sped up his walk and exited the hallway to find himself in a new room.

It was not what he expected. It looked like an old library or perhaps an office. There were bookshelves all along the walls, filled with old leather-bound books. A chair and a desk with a few writing utensils were positioned in the middle of the room.

There was also an old wooden door at the wall directly across from where he entered. As hadn't seen any system messages yet, he walked up to one of the bookshelves and tried to take out a book but was met with an invisible barrier of some sort.

He tried with a couple of the other bookshelves with the same result. He also attempted to move some paper and the small cup filled with pencils and pens on the desk. Both of which he couldn't touch either due to the same kind of barrier. Finding nothing else of interest, he went through the only door in the room.

He was met with a small, relatively normal-looking hallway with five doors in it, two on each side of the corridor, and one at the end. The first door he opened led into a room that had a bed in it. The rest of the room was absolute barebones, with only a small wooden table and chair as well as a dresser and a closet. He was unable to open the dresser and closet, met with yet another invisible barrier.

Leaving the room, he closed the door after him and opened the next one. This one could only be described as a medieval bathroom, that for some reason, had a modern shower and toilet placed in it. He walked into the room and tried flushing the toilet, which surprisingly worked. So, an ancient forgotten temple in a dungeon with running water. Got it.

The third room he entered was at the end of the hall, and what he found himself in wasn't exactly what you could call a 'room'. It was more like a hellscape in the form of a cave. Mushrooms. Everywhere. Not just the blue, glowing kind, but also other less evil-looking ones.

The cave was not closed off either and had another exit beside the wooden door. Jake walked out of the aforementioned exit and found himself in a small walled-off garden. Flowers were growing everywhere, weird-looking grass and bushes aplenty, many of which he had seen before outside in the tutorial forest. There was even a small pond with different aquatic plants.

He called the garden walled-off, but the wall that did so seemed to extend up into eternity. Hanging above the garden was a miniature version of the artificial sun he had seen outside in the forest, emitting both warmth and light. He was briefly confused, as Jake recalled it being late in the evening when he entered the challenge dungeon, and according to the timer counting down, only a couple of hours had passed since then.

Shaking his head at the weird garden, he went back through the cave and into the fourth room. This one was like an old laboratory. Not the modern kind, but the 1600's mad scientist kind. It looked like a dream come true for an insane chemist.

There were mortars and pestles, alembics, and a slew of other tools and materials. In the room were also open barrels with what seemed like water. Off to the side were closed cabinets that couldn't be opened either due to a barrier.

As he made his way out of the room towards the next, he wondered what exactly the system wanted him to do. No challenge had been represented, and no way forward had made itself known. This place seemed more like a living quarter than any kind of testing facility. *Maybe the challenge is to find the challenge?*

Opening the fifth door, he found himself within another hall like the ones he had done the challenges earlier. In the middle of the room was a pedestal. He moved to it and found a hand-imprint on top of it. He looked at his hand and quickly connected the dots.

He put his hand on the imprint, and instantly his danger-sense flared as a black spike shot up, penetrating through it before he could react. He yelled out in pain and stumbled backward, as the room started rumbling.

A new platform had begun rising in front of the pedestal. Jake, however, barely registered this as he looked at the hole in his hand and saw small, subtle black lines spread through the veins in his hand. He suppressed his panic, rushing towards the newly risen platform. It didn't take a genius to figure out he had gotten poisoned.

On it was a book. The book was massive, far more massive than any book Jake had ever seen before. On the cover was the depiction of a small snake. The very same snake he had seen on the symbols and mural. He tried opening the book, as the system finally did something.

Dungeon Challenge: Become an Alchemist of the Malefic Viper and cure yourself of the poison running through your veins before it flares up and kills you. The poison will remain dormant for 30 days, not affecting the challenger in any way during the period.

Rejecting the profession will result in the challenger being fully restored and returned to the tutorial area. All rewards will be retained, and all items returned.

Cured yourself of poison 0/1

Time remaining: 30 Days.

Become an Alchemist of the Malefic Viper?

Y/N

He was taken aback by the message. A profession? The N/A on his status page had annoyed him for a long time, but he didn't expect to get one offered this way. It was the first option to obtain a profession he had seen since being introduced to the system, and he doubted it was an ordinary one. Alchemy though? Not something he had any experience in at all outside of games.

He was rather good at the modern equivalent, chemistry, back in school, but he had never done it at any higher level. He also severely doubted that knowledge of chemical compounds would have a lot of use with magic being a thing and all.

The time limit was 30 days also. Looking at his just-impaled hand, it was rather obvious where the poison came from. The wound had already scabbed over due to his high vitality, and he didn't feel any different.

Jake also had the option of just quitting now and going back to the forest. It was the safe option for sure. He would be healed, walking away with a new dagger and a bonus to

willpower. Oh, and a bunch of shitty blue mushrooms, along with ten slightly nicer silver mushrooms.

It wasn't even like he had spent a lot of time getting everything.

But he was nothing if not someone who welcomed a challenge. He wanted a profession, and if this profession had any connection to that heaven-shattering dragon, it had to be powerful. Fantasy books and games had long conditioned him to unquestionably believe dragons to be apex creatures after all.

Without further hesitation, he accepted the challenge.

****You have obtained the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper profession****

And with that message, everything went dark momentarily. Jake's head felt like it was split open as information surged into his mind, far more so than when he'd gotten his archer class.

It was only for a few seconds, but it felt like hours before it finally stopped, leaving him with a massive headache and a considerable amount of system messages. He took a few more seconds to gather his thoughts; the headache also fading away. When he felt better, he finally opened up the description of his new profession.

Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – The Alchemist of the Malefic Viper can combine natural treasures of the world, and make potions, pills, transmute one material to

another, with a slew of other mystical means to be discovered. This rare type of alchemist specializes in the concoction of poisons. From a craft classically bringing restoration and improvement, the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper brings pain, deterioration, and death. Stat bonuses per level: +2 Vit +2 Wis +1 Will +1 Tough +2 Free Points.

The description of an alchemist was a lot like he had imagined. He had assumed the ability to make potions based on his experience playing certain online games during university. Transmutation was also a very classical trope of alchemists. *Perhaps I'll even make the Philosopher's Stone one day*, he joked to himself.

But this is where the familiarities ended; the latter part of the description a bit different. This variant of the alchemist profession focused on poison. The entire description was ominous, but then again, it was clearly modeled or at least heavily inspired by a snake. To be more accurate, a small mushroom-eating snake, he assumed it to be the Malefic Viper.

The profession also provided more stat bonuses than his archer class, giving two more stats per level overall. None directly impacting combat, however, and he was slightly sad to see no bonus to perception. But what's done is done, he had accepted it, and there was no going back.

He knew that the decision to pick the profession wasn't a minor one. Likely as significant as his class choice. If not more so as this one was clearly not some basic profession handed out left and right. Finally... Jake had to admit that the thought of doing alchemy was kind of cool.

With that, he moved on to the next part: Skills. With a quick skim, he saw that he had gained five and started going through them one by one.

****Gained skill*: [Herbology (Common)] – Grants knowledge of herbs found throughout the multiverse The most numerous source of natural treasures comes in the form of herbs found throughout existence. The knowledge of plants and their effects is, therefore, essential to any alchemist. An alchemist must know what he works with in order to create his products after all. Grants the ability to recognize herbs at a glance, and correctly Identify their properties***

A relatively self-explanatory skill, and one of the reasons for the sudden influx of information he got upon receiving the profession. He now knew of a lot of different plants he previously had no idea existed. The thought was scary that the system could directly implant knowledge in one's head.

The way the knowledge worked was weird. It was not immediate knowledge, like how he knew how to use his bow from previous training. It was the kind of knowledge that felt like it gradually appeared if he thought of something relevant to the skill. Like if he thought of needing a plant that had healing properties, a considerable number of potential herbs suddenly came to mind.

Shaking his head at the frankly disturbing phenomenon, he moved on.

****Gained skill*: [Brew Potion (Common)] – Potion-brewing is the bread and butter of most alchemists. A potion can be the savior in a time of need, or that extra boost to defeat your opponent. Allows for the brewing of potions with common-rarity and below. Must have suitable materials and equipment in order to create potions. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of created potions based on wisdom.***

****Gained skill*: [Concoct Poison (Common)] – While most focus on the aspect of giving life through their craft, others prefer to take it away. Allows for the concoction of common-rarity poisons and below. Must have suitable materials and equipment in order to create poisons. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of created poisons based on wisdom.***

These two skills were incredibly similar in design, but very different when it came to the results. It also didn't come with a lot of implanted knowledge. He had some new understandings of how to use the tools he found in the laboratory earlier, but they in no way felt familiar. It was more like he had watched a tutorial video online, introducing him to the very basics of making potions and poisons.

Thinking back on his talks with Casper, who had gotten the Basic Archery skill without any previous experience ever using a bow, he had told Jake about something similar. He knew how to hold a bow and fire an arrow, but nothing further than that. Despite him and Jake both having the same skill, and at the same rarity, Jake was vastly superior in his ability to use it.

He got an upgrade in rarity for the skill after recalling his training, but the rank-up did not come with any knowledge.

The only difference between skills seemed to be the rarity. With no skill levels existing, Jake had a theory that skills' effectiveness was purely up to the wielder of said skills. Perhaps some kind of line existed where skills would get a rarity upgrade based on how good you were, but he doubted it would be that simple. Take the archery skill as an example.

Jake was a somewhat experienced archer. Theoretically, his knowledge of how to wield a bow was close to the level of an athlete. Maybe even higher as he had put a lot of time into looking things up himself as he didn't have a trainer to do such things for him. And yet he only had archery at common-rarity. Something else must be required to upgrade to higher ranks. Maybe it just took time, or perhaps some qualitative threshold had to be reached.

In other words, a skill granted basic instinctual proficiency in using it, but anything more than that would have to be learned. And if you wanted the skill to get better, you would have to work on improving it. That is at least what Jake believed, based on the evidence so far.

Having no way to either confirm or disprove his hypothesis, he moved on to the last two skills.

****Gained skill*: [Toxicology (Uncommon)] – The knowledge of all that is toxic. Be able to recognize poisonous substances at a glance and correctly identify their properties. To concoct the deadliest toxins, one must know what to mix after all.***

This one was exactly the same as the Herbology skill, just with toxic materials and uncommon instead of common-rarity. It was not limited to herbs, however. As an example, if he thought about the water that nearly killed him earlier, he now knew that said water was some kind of toxic liquid with necrotic properties. He didn't know the details of the water, just the basics of what it was.

Moving on to the last skill, he was pleasantly surprised to see the Rare rarity tag.

****Gained skill*: [Malefic Viper's Poison (Rare)] – The Malefic Viper stalks its prey and needs only to strike once as venom devours its prey. Increases the potency of all crafted poisons. Grants the ability to craft a poison with a rarity above that of your Concoct Poison skill if certain conditions are met. The poison may at most be upgraded to the rarity of the Malefic Viper's Poison skill (Common --> Rare). Allows poison not to lose efficiency for a short amount of time after being applied to a weapon.***

This skill was the namesake of the entire profession he assumed. More potent poisons and a chance to craft poisons with a higher rarity both seemed okay, though he had nothing to compare it to. The last effect was especially interesting to him, however.

This skill opened the possibility to use his profession more actively in combat. What's more dangerous than an arrow to the face? A poisoned arrow to the face.

He had one more notification remaining, which was another pleasant surprise.

****Skill Upgraded*: [Identify (Inferior --> Common)] - Identification skill, known by all but the smallest of children of the myriad races. The skill allows you to attempt to identify any object or creature you are focusing on.***

The only difference in the skills description was the 'basic' being removed, so it now just called it an 'identification skill'. Not much to see there, really. But Jake was still kind of excited to see what he could now Identify. Perhaps he could even identify other humans?

He guessed the upgrade either had something to do with having both a profession and a class or maybe it was due to the two skills, Herbology and Toxicology, giving him more knowledge. Looking back, both of those skills included a sentence about being able to identify herbs and toxins.

Closing all his windows, he looked down at his hand that was still healing. After scanning the room once more, finding nothing of interest, he turned around and headed straight for the garden-area to test his new skills.

Chapter 22: Alchemy!

Jake entered the cave, looking around at all the different fungi and moss, deciding to Identify the infamous blue mushrooms first. When he did it before, he just got back a message saying [Mushroom], so he kind of expected more. Which it expectedly did.

[Bluebright Mushroom (Common)] – A poisonous blue mushroom that emits blue light. While it is not poisonous to touch, the juices found within are highly toxic. Often used for lighting due to it only requiring mana to sustain itself.

Knowing the name of the blue menace did not alleviate his distaste for the evil fungus. It was good to see that they were only poisonous if squeezed or eaten, though. His next target was another type of mushroom, this one rather plain-looking.

[Flytrap Mushroom (Inferior)] – A carnivorous and poisonous mushroom that eats insects to accelerate its growth.

This one was a lower rarity, but still poisonous. Jake looked a bit more around, finding quite a few different kinds of mushrooms, nearly all of them inferior-rarity.

Shifting his focus to the green moss growing everywhere on the walls, he used Identify once more.

[Green Moss (inferior)] – A widespread kind of moss, found in places with little or no sunlight and adequate mana saturation. A typical ingredient in potions and poisons alike.

So, jack-of-all-trades moss. Jake then noticed that a patch of moss was darker than the rest, so he also Identified that.

[Aged Green Moss (Common)] - A widespread kind of moss, found in places with little or no sunlight and adequate mana saturation. A typical ingredient in potions and poisons alike. This moss has been thoroughly soaked in mana over time.

Common-rarity moss. Did this mean that age was a factor when it comes to the rarity of plants?

Finding nothing more of particular interest in the cave, he exited to the garden. The first thing he did here was to identify the grass. Once more, noticing some off-colored patches spread throughout.

[Evergreen Grass (Inferior)] – A widespread herb found throughout the multiverse in any place with adequate nature-affinity mana. While the grass only offers minor restorative effects, it is a great catalyst when mixed with other herbs.

[Aged Evergreen Grass (Common)] A widespread herb found throughout the multiverse in any place with adequate nature-affinity mana. While the grass only offers minor restorative effects, it is a great catalyst when mixed with other herbs. This grass has aged and absorbed more mana than most Evergreen Grass.

It was the same concept as the moss in the cave. Recalling some of the knowledge given by the system, he knew that the moss was often used when concocting poisons, while the grass was used when making potions.

Many flowers were also spread throughout the garden, the most abundant kind being four lavender types: a blue one, a red one, and a green one. In between the small patches of these flowers were rainbow-colored lavenders, all of which looked very fantasy-like. Once more, Jake identified all the plants.

[Blue Lavender (Inferior)] – A very abundant herb found nearly everywhere with any kind of mana. Mana is stored in the small flowers growing on the stalk, with the stem itself containing the useful juices. Known as the main ingredient of mana potions.

[Red Lavender (Inferior)] – A very abundant herb found nearly everywhere with any kind of mana. Mana is stored in the small flowers growing on the stalk, with the stem itself containing the useful juices. Known as the main ingredient of health potions.

[Green Lavender (Inferior)] – A very abundant herb found nearly everywhere with any kind of mana. Mana is stored in the small flowers growing on the stalk, with the stem itself containing the useful juices. Known as the main ingredient of stamina potions.

[Rainbow Lavender (Common)] - A relatively abundant herb found nearly everywhere with any kind of mana, usually surrounded by its lesser variants. Mana is stored in the small flowers growing on the stalk, with the stem itself containing the useful juices. Known as the main ingredient of rejuvenation potions.

These flowers straight-up informed him that they were the main ingredients in potions. And he had a very, *very*, strong feeling that he would come to craft a lot of potions.

More flowers were present in the garden, some of them not even returning anything when he identified them and others being only inferior-rarity. Lastly, he went to the small pond and surprisingly successfully identified the water.

[Purified Water] – Pure water, free of any kind of contamination. Great for mixing potions and poisons alike.

And with that, he had everything he needed to start making stuff. At least he assumed he had. The only way to find out was to test it out. What could possibly go wrong, mixing a bunch of unknown substances in an old temple left by a cult worshipping a possibly-long-dead snake?

Jake began picking up plants, but only the inferior-rarity ones, as he assumed they would be the easiest to experiment with. Opening his satchel to put in some of the lavender flowers, he spotted the 10 silver mushrooms he had picked up during his very first challenge in this dungeon.

He had to admit that he had kind of forgotten those. Without any expectations, he decided to identify one of them and was taken aback by the result.

[Argentum Vitae Mushroom (Rare)] – A silver mushroom only grown in places with extremely high mana density. The mushroom has a solid exterior, that if broken, reveals the actual mushroom within. This type of mushroom's juices usually are highly poisonous, but this mushroom has evolved to bring life instead. +1 vitality upon consumption.

He took a deep breath after reading the description. These were 10 free points to vitality, 11 factoring in his Bloodline Patriarch title giving a 10% bonus.

He was just about to eat one when he stopped himself. These mushrooms were still raw. What if he could get more than a single vitality per mushroom.

There was also that whole thing with a poison in his body that would flare up and kill him in a month. He would not find it unfitting for these mushrooms to somehow be needed not to die. Thus he decided to leave them be for now and instead continued collecting more ingredients.

Leaving the garden through the cave, he also collected a stack of mushrooms, heading straight for the laboratory.

He went through the lab once more, this time being able to open the cabinets and interact with all the equipment. The cabinets were all filled with small glass bottles, and the water in the barrels was the same pure water found in the small pond.

Jake had initially planned on starting to make something right away but quickly hit his first roadblock. He had no idea how to. He had been given some incredibly basic knowledge, but nothing that would allow him actually to make something. In fact, the few fragments of knowledge he did have only served to inform him that he didn't know enough.

Each plant had requirements for how to handle them properly - each potion or poison their own recipe. None of this was given to him for free, which led him to the other room covered in barriers before.

In the library/office he had first arrived in, he could now touch all of the many bookshelves. Oh, and on a side note, the door that he had initially entered through was gone, so going back to the prior challenge rooms wasn't an option.

Not that he had any intentions of leaving. Walking up to one of the bookshelves, he took a random book out, and the first thing he noticed was that it was clearly written in English.

Which was quite impressive considering that he was multilingual, and yet it had chosen English. *What if I wanted it to be... oh now it is.* Before his eyes, the entire text had now changed language. He couldn't help but try it again and found it to switch back and forth with only a thought.

Jake found it quite humorous to experiment with, but sadly he couldn't play around forever. So he began actually to read what was written.

The first book seemed to be some kind of history book, detailing the history of alchemy. While it was interesting and very enlightening, it wasn't what he was looking for. He quickly discarded it and started reading the covers of some of the different books. Going from top to bottom on the bookshelf. He quickly located the first one he wanted - a book detailing the creation of inferior-rarity health potions.

After looking a bit more, he ended up having six books stacked on the desk. **Alchemy for Novices: Volume 1. Alchemy for Novices: Volume 2. An Introduction to Potions: The**

Health Potion. He also had books of the same series for mana and stamina potions and the last book, **Poisons: The Elementary.**

The three potions books were pretty short and had a plethora of pictures and diagrams of different herbs, most of them recognizable to him. The Alchemy for Novices were massive tomes and contained many diagrams and step-by-step guides too, but most of it was just a buttload of text.

The most comprehensive book was the one on poisons, and the one he had decided to save for last.

Checking the timer, he had spent around a few hours since he had gotten his profession. Having no time to waste, he started reading the first volume on novice alchemy.

The first thing he noticed was how fast it went. He was already an experienced reader, having finished university and being used to reading a lot. But this was at an entirely different level. It took him only an hour to go through the first hundred pages. And that's with the pens and papers placed on the desk being used avidly in making bookmarks and taking down notes.

The whole thing brought Jake back to his university days. The only thing he really lacked was some hot tea and some good music.

The content of the book was exactly as the cover said. It introduced alchemy. It had small parts on transmutation and pill-making, and even some details reminding Jake of more modern chemical theories. Still, the main content was detailing the process of making potions using herbs.

It went into how to process the herbs, the tools often used when doing so, what type of water was suitable for different kinds of potions, how to properly store and prepare the herbs, etc. The knowledge on concocting poisons was somewhat limited, and pretty much only focused on how to avoid introducing poison into your creations.

After another couple of hours of reading later, he wanted to give it a shot. Was he ready? Probably not, but he felt like at least trying. Jake got up and stretched before walking towards the laboratory. He had left his satchel back in the lab, as he saw no reason to carry it around.

He had learned a lot from his reading, one of those things being how stupid it was just to pluck a bunch of herbs and throw them together in a big bundle in the satchel. At least he had not been dumb enough to also throw moss and fungi in.

After a bit of salvaging, most of the herbs were still useful. Jake had brought along with him some of the books and his notes. Without further ado, he started meticulously following them on how to create potions.

Grinding the grass into a paste, mixing it with water, injecting mana into a small enchanted burner to boil the purified water. Rather than university, where it had been all reading and numbers, this felt more like chemistry. Far more practical.

Potions for health and mana were not made one by one. Not the lower-rarity ones at least. You usually made batches that could vary quite a bit based on how well you did. The mix could quickly become too weak or too strong, resulting in adverse effects, the system recognizing them as failed creations.

Mana also played a massive role in alchemy. The bowl where you mix the batch in required mana to be injected into, thus entering through it. The same held true for the mortar and pestle, the pestle itself being enchanted to accept mana being channeled through it.

All the equipment used to craft was enchanted with practical things. Self-Repair was found on practically everything, and Jake had already found out from his cloak and bracers that Self-Repair also came with a self-cleaning functionality.

His first batch was an attempt to make mana potions, the least complex of the three types. It turned into a not quite blue mixture that smelled terribly. Luckily the lab also came with a sink that had a faucet, and all that one would expect. Sadly, the water coming out was not classified as purified, so he had to keep getting water from the pond.

A lot of information was found within the different books; most interestingly was a section on stats. It even helped explain the effects of them, more so than Jake had been able to deduce himself so far. It has to be mentioned that the information was heavily limited, almost like the system had censored some things.

As for stats that were good for alchemy, wisdom was mentioned as the overall most important. It increases total mana and the ability to retain knowledge of recipes and such. The fact that both poisons and potions' effectiveness was increased by wisdom also played a considerable part without a doubt. The second-most important was willpower as it increased mana regeneration, something that was new knowledge to Jake.

Willpower also helped with focusing while doing alchemy, though the book mentioned that no amount of stats could make up for the lack of personal perseverance. It clearly

looked like the book should have more info than that, but a considerable part had been cut out.

While this was a mystery for sure, there was one that irked him even more. Why did his profession increase vitality by 2 and toughness by 1 too? However, that was a mystery quickly solved as he briefly skimmed the small section on stats in the book on poisons.

Concocting poisons, compared to nearly every other aspect of alchemy, was no safe practice. The fumes alone could kill most, and just being close to poison daily came with many dangers. On top of that, those dabbling in poison also sometimes used their own bodies to test their newest concoctions, the occasional alchemist even going so far as to cultivate toxins within their own body.

Therefore, the book said that one should not dabble in poison before one had sufficient vitality and serviceable toughness. The book also mentioned that most alchemy professions did not increase vitality or toughness, so investing free points in those stats was recommended if one wished to pursue concocting poisons as a specialty - a recommendation Jake could quite easily ignore as he got plenty.

After emptying the mixing bowl and cleaning it, he tried mixing another batch of mana potions. He used the entire blue lavender flower, grounding up the stalk and flower, mixing it with the evergreen grass.

Going through the motions once more, it ended in another failure. Injecting mana was not as simple as just channeling it like it was with the quiver; instead, one had to do it carefully. The injection part was where the difference between a skilled alchemist and a novice was found.

He had to somehow control the mana he injected into it. Guide the entire process with his mana. Luckily it didn't require much to make the most basic mana potions, but it was still a challenge. The books had detailed how to do it, but a lot of it was still touch-and-go.

After making another four failed batches, he still had sufficient mana but was out of ingredients. After another roundtrip to the garden, he had enough for another crafting-session.

He continued trying, making batch after batch, as he wrote down notes on why he failed and what to improve. Slowly he felt the improvements. His last attempt turned out to closely resemble a mana potion but wasn't quite there yet. By that point, he had been at it for nearly 12 hours and was exhausted both mentally and physically. His stamina was still high, but he could barely focus.

Going to the room with the bed, he quickly took a look in the closet and dresser, finding clothes in both. They looked rather simple, but it was good to have something to change into. His old clothes beneath his cloak were well and truly battered by now, and if he had to be honest, smelled a bit.

But quite frankly, Jake was too tired to further think of it as he collapsed on the bed and fell asleep.

Waking up, he felt wholly rejuvenated but panicked slightly as he checked the timer. He let out a sigh of relief as he had only slept for a bit over five hours. His stamina was topped off, while his mana was at 70% - more than enough for another good round of alchemy.

Feeling refreshed and sharp, he went to the laboratory once more after a quick shower and clothes change. He briefly skimmed over his notes and got to work. The part where he had to prepare the ingredients he had down to a T. His timing of adding ingredients to the mix was also adequate.

No, the final hurdle was the mana-injection. It wouldn't be an understatement to say that it was 90% of the process. One had plenty of leeway making mana potions when it came to temperature control, so once everything was in the mix and one had to combine ingredients into an actual potion, it was just pure mana control.

And now, with a clear head, Jake felt sharper than ever. He knew what to do and how to do it. He just had to execute. The mana poured gently into the mixture as he controlled it with the help of the intricate runes inscribed on the mixing bowl. One had very much to go by feel, and this time Jake felt like all was as it should be.

A short while later, a refreshing smell permeated the laboratory as he turned off the fire. A beautiful blue mixture in his bowl. He knew he had succeeded and the system message shortly after only confirmed it as he smiled to himself.

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

****'DING!' Profession: [Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 1 - Stat points allocated, +2 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (G)] has reached level 5 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

Chapter 23: Progression

Feeling the warm glow run through his body from the level-ups was as comfortable as ever. He was equally as pleased to see that profession-experience also helped with his race level.

Looking at his stats, he noticed that he now had 6 unspent free points. Jake still felt very unsure of how to distribute them best. Was there some way to make an optimal build? Ultimately, he decided this wasn't the time to try and meta-game the system. You know, with his life on the line and all that.

So, having decided not to hoard the points any longer, he threw them in the stat best for alchemy according to all the books: Wisdom. He felt the warm glow once more before opening his status menu to confirm the changes.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (G) – lvl 5]

Class: [Archer – lvl 9]

Profession: [Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 1]

Health Points (HP): 380/380

Mana Points (MP): 192/240

Stamina: 235/250

Stats

Strength: 28

Agility: 31

Endurance: 25

Vitality: 38

Toughness: 16

Wisdom: 24

Intelligence: 16

Perception: 44

Willpower: 25

Free points: 0

Not much had changed with his stats besides wisdom getting a considerable bump upwards from the levels and free points. Nodding to himself, he closed the menu once more and turned his attention to the mixing bowl in front of him.

Looking at the completed batch of mana potions, he felt very satisfied with himself. Walking to the cabinet, he took out a handful of bottles and began putting the concoction into them. The bottles were perfectly sized to get the full benefit one could from each potion.

Jake had wondered what would happen if one drank an additional potion during the cooldown period. He and his colleagues had some theories, most of them determining it would end badly if one drank more than two within an hour.

But now he knew what would happen. And it was a big shocker. If one consumed two potions within an hour, the second could cause horrific consequences, such as being slightly less thirsty or having one less potion to drink.

Jokes aside, one could pour down mana potions for days without suffering any adverse consequences. It was basically just water. Of course, this raised countless more questions as to where the excess energy would go.

It was honestly frustrating how none of the books even bothered to talk about it. They were all just like: “So yeah, the second one doesn’t work because that’s how it is.”

Aka, system-fuckery is how potions work. The batch he had just made could be consumed as is, but would only have the effect of the single potion, so one was more or less forced to bottle it up. It also wouldn’t register as an actual item before being in a bottle or another similar type of container.

Moving on back to the present, Jake ended up with a total of only three bottles, something that, according to the books, was considered quite terrible. Not that Jake cared much, he was just proud of his accomplishment.

Using Identify on the potion, it only echoed how terrible they were.

[Mana Potion (Inferior)] - Restores 87 mana when consumed.

He remembered Caroline telling him that the mana potions that the system had given them upon entering the tutorial had given her at least 130 mana when she used one. He would have to thank Jacob for being terrible enough at combat the next time they met.

The fact that Jake could see the exact amount restored was also something new. He was unsure if it was due to Identify going up in rank or one of all the new profession skills. Or perhaps it was the presence of the profession itself.

Jake put the potions on one of the other tables in the laboratory with a smile. He planned on drinking them later, but he still had enough mana not to make full use of them. Having proven himself able to make something, he started mixing a second batch after cleaning up a bit.

However, his festive mood quickly died down as he failed the next two batches. Still, it was rapidly alleviated when the third batch of mana potions succeeded - another three potions, with exactly the same properties.

Seeing his mana had gotten a little low, he drank one of the potions he had made and felt his mana fill up to nearly full once more. He planned on drinking a potion every hour with the internal cooldown to keep working, with the only limit being his mental energy.

The mixing continued. A day and over a dozen mana potions consumed later, he finally started to get exhausted once more, and his last two batches had failed due to him not being able to focus.

It was hard work, but the results spoke for themselves:

****'DING!' Profession: [Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 2 - Stat points allocated, +2 free points****

****'DING!' Profession: [Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 3 - Stat points allocated, +2 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (G)] has reached level 6 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

****'DING!' Profession: [Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 4 - Stat points allocated, +2 free points****

The levels were impressive, but it was, without a doubt, slower than leveling his class. He had spent more than 24 hours on the challenge already, and yet he was only level 4 in the profession. Compared to outside, where he in less time than that reached level 9. If he had been more efficient and gone solo earlier, he would, without a doubt, be well into the double-digits by now.

Looking at the dungeon challenge window, he noted the time.

Time remaining: 28 Days – 22:53:11

Walking back to the bed once more, he brought the book on health potions along for a quick read before taking another nap. He had decided to try and make them the next day, as the mana potion's experience had started going down and also because he had enough of them to keep himself going for awhile.

Health Potions were, according to the Alchemy for Novices book, the second easiest type of potion to make, just after the mana one. The process was very similar, with only slight variations. The pattern and method of injecting mana into the mixture was the most significant difference, and quite a lot harder than with mana potions.

Mana potions were quite natural to make. You did not need to change the properties of the mana injected; you just had to purify and inject it. With health potions, you had to change the nature of the mana. Ultimately, the potion was still a kind of condensed energy close to mana, and Jake had no proper understanding of how exactly it all worked, so he just left that up to the system.

He also wanted to start making poisons soon, but he felt it would be slightly more challenging than the three basic resource-restoration potions. The books agreeing with his intuition. From what he had briefly read, concocting poisons had many of the same methods as potions, so there was a lot of overlap, though, so it wasn't like his practice on potions was wasted.

In the end, concocting poisons was also primarily about injecting mana properly and controlling the crafting process.

After reading the book on health potions, Jake put it on the floor as there was no bedtable. Seconds after closing his eyes, he fell asleep. Dreaming of potions and alchemy, genuinely looking forward to waking up and continuing.

Jacob, Caroline, Bertram, Casper, Ahmed, and Theodore were all walking with a group of Richard's men as they were out hunting once more. The team they went with was the usual except for Caroline, who could join them as Richard was taking a rest back at camp.

Richard had reached level 12 earlier that day and had gotten a new ability at level 10 that allowed him to bash with his shield and send out a shockwave, knocking down anyone in its path. With it and his increased stats, he had hunted many beasts over level 10, and they had even relocated their base once to get further into the forest and find stronger enemies to hunt.

The only one from their original group at level 10 was Caroline, who often went with Richard and his so-called 'elite squad'. Caroline had at level 10 learned a ranged version of her heal, much to the delight of everyone.

The entire camp had also expanded significantly. When they had joined, Richard's group was 26 people excluding them. Well, 20 people with the six that Jake had killed. After joining, they shot up to 29, and after recruiting some more, the group was now a bit over 50. Richard still in charge, of course.

They had only gotten one more healer, but he was only level 6, and Caroline had shown herself to be competent, so Richard kept her around in his squad. The passive regeneration aura alone was enough to keep a healer around initially. In combat, they often contributed little to nothing as their healing was touch-based, but with her now being able to heal from a distance, her worth shot up significantly.

Jacob was the leader of this small group that usually had to go without a healer. He was level 8, and the only one in their squad who was level 9, besides Caroline, was Casper. Dennis and Lina were both in another team. Jacob knew that this was due to Richard not wanting their group to all be together even if you considered Joanna, who was stuck back in the camp.

Speaking of Joanna, she had brought with her a pleasant surprise. She had started fixing up cloaks and robes for people and conjuring arrows for the archers after joining, trying to make herself useful. A couple of hours ago, just before they left the camp, Joanna had unlocked a profession.

This was the first instance of anyone obtaining a profession that they knew of. Joanna had been into stitching and sewing before the tutorial, which had likely helped her unlock it, to begin with. This was only a theory, though.

According to Joanna, the profession didn't give many stats per level, hers only offering 1 wisdom, 1 willpower, 1 agility, and 1 free point per level.

To see that the stat gains were so low compared to the time investment, Richard's interest significantly waned. That is right until Joanna got to level 1 in the profession, and as she was also level 3 in her class, she leveled her race too. This instantly reignited his interest. Every single race-level gave +1 to all stats and an extra free point, making them even more valuable than both class and profession.

His interest was further amplified after he experienced that leveling only got harder and harder, and level 10 seemed to be one of those difficulty-jumps. Hunting with a team also hurt his experience gain, but as he was more powerful in a group due to his class's nature, he had to be in one.

Making their way back to base, Jacob thought about what Jake was up to. It had been close to two days since he left, and they had neither seen nor heard anything from him. He and Richard had a tacit understanding never to mention him, but Jacob still wondered.

He was not afraid for Jake's well-being, more so curious as to what level he had reached by now. Okay, he was a bit worried, but the guy could clearly handle himself. At least he hoped he could, as Jacob had encountered some nasty things.

After a final fight with a small group of badgers, one of them being above level 10, they finally made it back. Talking of the badgers, those things turned out to get a lot more dangerous when they reached the double-digits. Not only because of their size but because of the venom their claws now secreted.

If Caroline had not been in the group, they would not even have tried fighting it. Another group had lost two people to one of the beasts, as they got severely poisoned from just a few minor scratches. The potions they drank only functioned to extend the suffering as they died. The importance of a healer was once again evident.

Back in camp, Jacob went straight to Richard, reporting how their little hunt went.

“Jacob, welcome back. Any difficulties?” the huge man said.

His shield was leaning on a stone next to him. It was not the one a heavy warrior started with, but a far larger tower-shield. He had gotten it earlier that day and was, according to Caroline, an uncommon-rarity item.

“No, nothing special. It’s getting harder and harder to find enough beasts to hunt, and those we do tend to be on the weaker side. Should we consider moving further into the forest?” Jacob asked as he took a seat on a stone across from Richard.

It was frustrating trying to level up at any decent pace. Whenever the group moved, Richard would have the light warriors and archers with stealth scout the area, and he would monopolize any strong beasts with his own squad.

“I guess we should. Double digits are getting scarce. Did you find any items or tokens while out?” Richard inquired.

Another one of Richard’s rules. All items had to be given to him, so they could be given out to those who could make the best use of them. Which is to say, every item was monopolized by Richard and his buddies. Richard had known of items already the day they joined, and it did make Jacob a bit sour that they might have missed some as they made their initial trek in the forest.

He didn’t doubt that many just kept them to themselves. It was risky as Jacob didn’t want to learn the consequences of being found out, but he understood why some did it anyway. Jacob didn’t hide them, though. He was playing the long game.

“Yes, Casper found a single common-rarity upgrade token,” he said, giving it to Richard. “I think the number of boxes in the area are also getting scarce.”

“Casper is the archer, right?” Richard asked, to which Jacob nodded. “he is getting close to level 10 already, right? Tell him to keep up the good work; a spot in the elite team may just open up. We’re also getting some new members soon, so it may be necessary to have him help lead them.”

“I’ll be sure to tell him,” Jacob answered, hiding his contempt. Yet another one of Richard’s tactics. If a squad besides his own had anyone who stood out, he would try to separate them. He was not open about it and often backed his choices with sound logic, but Jacob had been in management long enough to recognize nefarious leadership like that.

Richard was actively trying to limit cohesion. He allowed enough for them to get used to each other and to be able to work together, but anything more than that he wanted to avoid. Jacob and his colleagues’ position was quite unusual as they had all known each other before the tutorial. Richard and his gang of people being the only other group like theirs.

Most groups of ten that had entered the tutorial were strangers. Random crowds of people being thrown together. As the system had taken people close to each other physically as it transported them, at least to some extent, it did mean that many had ended up entering with at least one or two people they knew, though.

But Richard broke those small groups up whenever he could. He had a million excuses as to why it was for the best, but people mostly just did as he said out of fear. Not necessarily fear of being attacked, but also fear of being tossed out of the camp.

While the way stuff was run was far from ideal, it was far safer than likely anywhere else. One had to remember that not everyone was fit for combat or willing to risk their own lives. Many that joined simply huddled up in the camp. At least Joanna had now opened a path for them to progress without any need to face beasts.

As Jacob walked back to his colleagues, a young man wearing a robe, one that had clearly been upgraded with a token, walked by. The wand at his hip, another either upgraded or looted item. It instantly gave away his identity as a caster. The man, who was barely even a man at all, was in his late teens and wore a big stupid smile on his face.

His name was William, and he had joined after Jacob and his group. Richard knew little of this young man, only that he was clearly competent and had reached above level 10 before he even joined them. He was not with any group when he joined but had come alone.

His story was that strong monsters had ambushed them shortly after entering the tutorial, and he got away as the only survivor. Yeah, no one was buying that, but as they couldn't prove him wrong, they just rolled with it. The predominant theory was that he had run away.

Most surprising, however, was the young man still insisting on hunting alone even after joining. Richard initially wanted him in the elite squad but was declined. He had considered merely 'removing' the man permanently but had decided against it.

He could not do it openly after all, as it would be bad for morale, and Richard still had a shadow in his heart left behind by when Jake had killed his right-hand man and five others. The only survivor, a mess, who had still not left the camp since he returned. So, sending a group covertly after the caster was a risk. One he was not willing to take.

Instead, he went with the principle of keeping your potential enemies close.

“I heard you talk to that guy. I also think we should move further in. Nothing gives any experience points around here anymore,” William said, sighing as he continued. “I’m afraid that boredom will end up killing me before any of those roided-out animals do.”

“I hear you; I plan on moving when the last group returns,” Richard answered, a bit annoyed at the teenager’s flippant attitude to the whole tutorial.

“Great!” The caster answered with a smile. “Oh, by the way, I need more mana potions. Got any?”.

“Go ask some of the others,” Richard answered, trying, but failing, to hide his annoyance. William had already taken nearly all of their spare mana potions, and Richard only had the ones he purposefully kept hidden away. He wanted to save some for the healers in case of an emergency.

“Oh, okay,” William answered as he turned around, happily walking towards the campfire where people were doing various tasks. Some were stitching, others trying to make something out of the leather, and there was even a guy trying to draw with some charcoal from the fire - all of them attempting to unlock professions.

As William walked away from Richard, he thought to himself how great this place was. He was finally free, his mind unshackled. Purified from all that suppressed him in the old world.

He had returned to perfection.

Chapter 24: Palate of the Malefic Viper

Jake focused as he felt the mana flow through his body and into the reddish mixture in the bowl before him. He felt that this would be the one. After nearly twenty failed tries, this had to be the one.

For nearly a full day, he had been attempting to make health potions. He had been very positive initially, believing that it would be a cakewalk considering his experience with the mana potions. But oh boy, was he wrong.

Much of the process had become far more straightforward than his first attempt to make a potion. But the mana injection still stumped him. He had to do it in a way that would bring forth the natural healing properties in the red lavender and successfully combine it with the Evergreen Grass.

It was changing the mana's properties by filtering it through the bowl and into the herbs. Normal mana was relatively easy to control, but it became more problematic when Jake had to transform it. The herbs and moss served as catalysts for his mana, binding itself to them.

The ultimate purpose was to make the liquid in the batch resemble the energy that is health points. Also known as vital energy. The herbs themselves already contained a lot of this energy, but he had to bring it out and make it into an actual potion.

To be perfectly honest, Jake still wasn't entirely sure how the whole thing worked; he just went by what the books said and what felt right during the moment. He had long learned that a lot the crafting was 'feeling' what to do more than just following some step-by-step

guide. As long as your underlying methodology was serviceable, chances are you wouldn't go all wrong. At least with inferior-rarity potions.

Luckily, this time, he didn't fail. With a final push, the liquid gave off an invigorating smell, and he barely managed to contain his excitement as the system messages appeared.

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

****'DING!' Profession: [Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 5 - Stat points allocated, +2 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (G)] has reached level 7 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

He did a mini-cheer as he bottled the health potions. He only ended up making three from the whole batch, but a success is a success. One of the primary reasons why the number of potions varied was the purified water evaporating during the brewing.

According to the books, in a perfect scenario, nearly none of the water would disappear. This would, in turn, lead to more of the energy contained in the herbs not being wasted. Jake was currently wasting a lot of precious energy, mainly because he quite honestly still sucked.

But then again, he had only been an alchemist for less than two days. He could not be expected to be a potion master instantly. On a side note, his free points were once again just thrown into wisdom.

Apropos of becoming a master of alchemy. Having reached level 5 in his profession, another message appeared along with the level-up. One he had been looking forward to.

****Alchemist of the Malefic Viper profession skills available****

Jake didn't hesitate to open the menu. The first thing he noticed was that there were far fewer skills to choose from compared to his archer class. But that wasn't really a bad thing. All of those skills had been 'filler' so-to-say. Useless passive weapon skills mainly, all of which he had no interest in at all, and every one of them was inferior-rarity. The alchemy profession didn't have a single one of those. Instead, it had given him only six options. He started going through them one by one.

[Pill Consolidation (Inferior)] – The path of alchemy is diverse and methods aplenty, potion brewing but one of the major paths, another being pill consolidation. Pills come in many forms, but most have the purpose of empowering the one who consumes it, both temporarily and permanently. Must have suitable materials and equipment in order to create pills. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of produced pills based on wisdom.

Reading through the entire thing, Jake had to scratch his chin a bit. Pill consolidation did seem useful; however, Jake had no interest in it at all right now. He already had a hard enough time making potions, and he still had poisons to concoct on his timetable. On top of that, he was still somewhat unclear as to the differences between pills and potions. The description did offer a bit of a hint, mentioning permanent benefits. But it also compared the two 'paths' as similar.

While the promise of permanent buffs was tempting, unless those permanent benefits included not dying in less than a month, he wasn't that interested. So, learning about the wonders of alchemical pills was something for later, if ever. For now, he moved on to check the next skills.

[Geology (Inferior)] – Grants knowledge of minerals and other similar natural treasures found throughout the multiverse. These natural treasures can be combined with other materials to amplify or bring forth strong magical effects. An alchemist must be able to distinguish the magical rock from the mundane gravel after all.

[Metallurgy (Inferior)] – Grants knowledge of metallic materials and substances found throughout the multiverse. Many types of rare and powerful metals are found throughout the multiverse and can be combined with other material to amplify or bring forth powerful magical effects, not limited only to alchemical products.

Jake decided to group these together as they were somewhat similar. They were like his Herbology and Toxicology skills, only for stones and metals. Or well, geology does include things that can't strictly be defined as stones, but quite frankly, he didn't really care. He had always found geologists a weird bunch, and there was no way he was going to spend his days looking for, or studying, rocks.

Thus, he moved on swiftly.

[Sense Herb (Common)] – Gives a passive ability to detect herbs and a rough feeling of their properties. An alchemist must be able to find the materials to craft his products after all. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of Sense Herb based on perception.

[Sense Poison (Uncommon)] – Gives a passive ability to detect poisonous substances and their toxicity level. An alchemist must be able to find the materials to craft his products after all. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of Sense Poison based on perception.

These two skills were, in his honest opinion, quite necessary. It would be splendid out in the forest or anywhere else really, as finding herbs and toxic materials he could craft from likely wasn't just found lying about. Or maybe they were, he just wouldn't know without a skill to help him find them. Or he would be forced to scour through the underbrush constantly. But while he considered them essential, finding materials was not exactly a challenge in his current situation.

He would need them for sure. But the last skill made it absolutely clear he wouldn't pick any of them.

[Palate of the Malefic Viper (Rare)] – The Malefic Viper has honed its venom by devouring myriad toxins found throughout the multiverse. In the same vein, the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper can consume toxins to learn their effects and properties. Grants the alchemist immunity or resistance to most low-level poisons. Through consumption, may your power grow, through gluttony may your Records expand.

Okayyy... was his first thought after reading it. Most of the descriptions were rather direct, but this one was quite a bit more flavorful, especially in the last part.

Based on the name, this one was clearly associated with his variant of alchemist. Thinking about the effects of the skill, the prospect of eating the blue mushrooms came as both pleasing and horrifying at the same time. He did hate the damn things, so the thought of eating the bastards was nice, but on the other hand... they were blue magic mushrooms.

Shaking his head, he picked the skill. Surprisingly, he felt nothing despite getting another rare-rank skill. He had to open his status screen and check to make sure that he, in fact, did have the skill.

Confirming that he did, he walked to the cave and looked at the mushrooms. He decided to go for the Flyeater one. He picked it due to it being inferior-rarity. He assumed that even if his skills didn't work like he believed, it wouldn't kill him.

[Flytrap Mushroom (Inferior)] – A carnivorous and poisonous mushroom that eats insects to accelerate its growth.

Picking the fungus up, he inspected it closely. To call it appetizing would be a straight-up lie. Not that Jake was the best judge, he hated mushrooms even before the tutorial. According to him, the mere thought of people willingly adding them to salads was one of life's greatest mysteries.

He had never used them for... 'recreational' purposes either, even though he did know some who did during his university days. And yes, he had been offered plenty, despite him barely ever participating in social gatherings. One guy even knocked on his door at 4 am, randomly offering him a bag. Though he was pretty sure the guy was looking for Andrew, his roommate at the time.

Oh well, no better time to do mushrooms than when stuck in a dungeon with less than a month to live, Jake thought as he threw his first Flyeater Mushroom into his mouth.

The first thing that hit him was the taste. Or more accurately, lack of taste. It was a bit chewy, but it didn't have much flavor to it, honestly. He had half-expected it to taste like chicken. The juices coming out of the shroom made sizzling sounds as it came into contact with his spit. It did not hurt or was uncomfortable in any way; it was more akin to drinking carbonated drinks.

However, Jake did not have time to think much of it as a weird feeling of realization struck him. Akin to if one had been struggling with a math problem for hours, and then suddenly, something clicked, and the solution came to you.

He now knew a lot, not about the mushroom per se, but the poison it possessed. It felt familiar to him now. But he also knew that the knowledge was not complete. A single mushroom was not enough to truly familiarize himself with its properties, far from it. And as such, his feasting began.

The cave was big. Very big. Same with the garden. Jake knew there was no way for him to use all of the ingredients found here in 30 days, even if he was several times faster at doing alchemy.

But now he was starting to get a bit worried as he chomped down Flyeater after Flyeater. He had to be honest with himself; the taste was kind of growing on him. Or maybe it was just the feeling of quite literally eating himself to knowledge and understanding that he found so intoxicating.

After eating way too many, he finally stopped. First of all, because his stomach was starting to hurt from being overstuffed. Secondly, the diminishing return had kicked in hard. The first couple of mushrooms gave the most, but the later ones barely helped.

By now, he felt amazingly familiar with the little buggers. While he had no intention to confirm it currently, he felt like this familiarity would be incredibly helpful when concocting poisons later.

Feeling stuffed, he decided to go back to the laboratory. He felt a bit tired earlier from trying to make health potions, but now he felt strangely invigorated. Looking at this stamina, he noticed that it had actually gone up over his feeding frenzy. It was only a measly two points, but it had gone up. More surprising, however, was his mana. It had been topped up, him having restored more than 100 points.

The Palate of the Malefic Viper skill said nothing about restoring resources from eating mushrooms. And with his newfound intimate understanding of the shrooms, he knew nothing in the shrooms had the effect of restoring anything.

But thinking about it further, it did kind of make sense. While not containing a lot of it, the mushrooms most certainly did hold some mana. And him consuming them with the skill must mean that he directly devoured the mana within.

Feeling renewed, he began attempting to make his second successful health potion. He wanted to try making poisons soon, considering it was kind of the focus of his profession and all. But he decided against doing so before he got a chance to eat some moss... something he was most certainly not looking forward to.

He did try to eat some lavender too. They tasted like shit and didn't give him any knowledge. So the skill did indeed only work on toxins.

After cleaning the mixing bowl, he poured water into it, before adding some Evergreen Grass. The flowers only came in later after the grass was correctly saturated with mana.

That part of the process went relatively easy, far more so than before, and he quickly got to the point where he put in the red lavender.

This was the part that often stumped him. You had to inject mana into the herbs rather quickly, or it would ruin the mixture. But too fast, or done wrong, else the batch would also go bad. But once again, the ease of the process surprised him.

A couple of minutes later, he stood with another successful batch, even resulting in four bottles. Without hesitation, he got started on another round and was once more met with success, only resulting in three potions this time. But it did confirm it wasn't a fluke.

Two or so hours later, and a good number of potions, he was once more greeted with another level.

****'DING!' Profession: [Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 6 - Stat points allocated, +2 free points****

As always, he put the free points into wisdom. At this point, his wisdom had become his second-highest stat, only behind vitality.

He brought up his stat page, feeling rather pleased. He thought about how nice it would be to see his skills on the menu, which it surprisingly just... did.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (G) – lvl 7]

Class: [Archer – lvl 9]

Profession: [Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 6]

Health Points (HP): 510/510

Mana Points (MP): 324/480

Stamina: 247/270

Stats

Strength: 30

Agility: 33

Endurance: 27

Vitality: 51

Toughness: 23

Wisdom: 48

Intelligence: 18

Perception: 46

Willpower: 32

Free points: 0

Titles: [Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch]

Class Skills: [Basic One-Handed Weapon (Inferior)], [Basic Stealth (Inferior)], [Advanced Archery (Common)], [Archer's Eye (Common)]

Profession Skills: [Herbology (Common)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Concoct Poison (Common)], [Toxicology (Uncommon)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Rare)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Rare)]

Race Skills: [Identify (Common)], [Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races (Unique)]

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

He had gotten a lot more skills since he entered the tutorial, and it was oddly satisfying to see his growth laid out before him like that. He was still doubtful if just dumping everything into wisdom was the correct decision. Perhaps it was in this dungeon, but assuming he survived the challenge, he would barely have grown in his strength, agility, and perception.

But then again, it was still early days. Poisons were bound to increase Jake's offensive prowess significantly.

As he was pondering on the future, he felt a rumbling in his stomach. A rumbling that quickly got worse. This was the moment where Jake learned why this dungeon had a toilet.

Turns out that eating a bit of over a hundred mushrooms and having that be your only diet for two days isn't the healthiest of diets. What followed was Jake spending the better part of an hour stuck on the toilet, contemplating his prior mushroom-eating madness. He hoped the moss would be gentler on his bowels.

After the less than pleasant experience, he also learned why the bathroom came with a shower. Because he sure as hell needed one.

Before the tutorial, he was the kind of person that took a shower pretty much every day. If he went to the gym or had done a lot of archery, it often resulted in two that day. During holidays he could get a bit lazy about it, but he doubted he had ever been dirtier than these past few days.

The positive part of his toilet-tour, however, was his stomach feeling way less stuffed. He was not quite ready to eat the moss, but he was getting there. The mental exhaustion was also starting to get to him. His need for sleep had been significantly reduced, but he still had to rest occasionally.

With that in mind, he grabbed the book **Poisons: The Elementary**, and went to bed. When he woke up again, he would make some more potions, eat some moss, and finally get started on concocting poisons.

Chapter 25: Enjoying life

Jake had never been a huge fan of salads. He could do cucumbers, tomatoes, and a bit of lettuce in a burger here and there, but the mere thought of living off salads was horrifying to him. One should understand why he didn't find his current meal the most pleasant with that in mind.

He was currently sitting in the library, with a bowl in front of him filled with water and moss. He had tried to eat the moss, but it was honestly disgusting. Not the taste, it was fine, but the texture and the aftertaste of dirt.

Instead, he plucked it, rinsed it with water, and used the cleaned mixing bowl to eat from. It was a rather disgusting looking soup. He didn't even have a spoon, so he had to use his hands to eat out of it.

However, the torturous meal was made acceptable by the feeling of knowledge and improvement from eating it. It was the same as with the Flyeater Mushrooms, though he made sure to control himself and not overeat.

After his wonderful meal, it was back to making potions. He had started alternating between health and mana potions to break the monotony. Not that it mattered much. He was also considering if he should give making stamina potions a shot, but according to the books, it was quite a lot harder than both health and mana. And not by a little either.

Stamina potions were essentially a mix of health and mana from a methodological standpoint. Quite honestly, the book's explanations were quite terrible, and Jake had no desire to attempt it currently.

One good thing about his improved wisdom was that he no longer needed to take notes. By now, he could easily remember everything. It was kind of weird and a bit scary when he thought about it more in-depth. He had not felt anything immediately, even when gaining a lot of wisdom at once, but it changed him without a doubt.

He already knew that the system could directly implant knowledge, and it could obviously also improve memory. Jake had always had a relatively good memory, but now he could verbatim recall the page-numbers of where everything stood in his alchemy books.

And if the system could implant both knowledge and make his memory that much better, what was to say it couldn't change something more fundamental. His intelligence stat had also been improved quite a lot, but he hadn't felt anything directly from that. Something that he was still unsure if that was assuring or concerning.

What was to say that his improved mental stats had not made some fundamental changes to who he was already. Would even be aware if it happened?

For some reason, he found his bloodline far less scary, even though it clearly was the thing introduced by the system that had affected him the most. But he was aware of it doing so. He had let his bloodline affect him; he had allowed his improved instincts to take charge during times of danger. In essence, he felt like his bloodline wasn't changing him, but merely bringing forth who he was in a more primal and instinctual form.

But ultimately, did such existential worries even matter in the grand scheme of things? If he had been changed, he would have no way of knowing. He remembered Descartes saying: "Cogito, ergo sum; I think, therefore I am," and he was undoubtedly thinking far too much, so he most certainly existed in his own mind. Also, damn the extra wisdom making him remember random quotes.

Nevermind that tangent, back to potions. Jake had needed to refill the barrels of purified water a few times already, but after his meal, he had to do so yet again. It was kind of insane that he could carry an entire barrel filled with water. It was with some difficulty, but it still clearly showed that his strength had reached superhuman levels. Especially considering the difficulty mainly stemmed from how unwieldy the barrels were.

After filling the barrels and cleaning the bowl after his mossy meal, he jumped right back into it - an entire day of mixing ahead of him.

William walked through the forest, alone as always. Richard had gotten a bit annoying the last few days, but it was not time yet. The man still had time to grow. William also still needed him, or more accurately, what his camp could offer.

The teenager smiled as he saw a group of big molerats. He knew these things had some annoying sound attack that hurt like shit, but they were pretty weak defensively.

He took out his wand, an item he had found within the first couple of hours after he got here. He had been with a group of nine others, just like everyone else apparently had.

He had no idea who any of them were. But then again, he didn't really know that many people before the tutorial either. His parents and his psychiatrist mainly. Oh, and the workers in the center, but they were all massive assholes.

Though let's be fair, pretty much everyone was a waste of space. Everyone was either obnoxious, pretentious, or just plain old annoying. So, William had always preferred activities where no one bothered him.

Looking at the molerats, he knew that he had to wait for an opportune time to strike. And strike hard he would. Admiring the wand that made this all possible once more, he only got happier.

[Exceptional Wand of Ferroras (Uncommon)] – A wand crafted by followers of Ferroras, God of Iron. The wand is made of a special kind of iron, only found in mana-rich areas. Grants the ability: [Metal Manipulation (Uncommon)].

Requirements: Level 5 in any class or race. Metal-affinity.

This wand had been his bread and butter since he got here, due to the skill attached. He discovered a box when he was bathing in a lake after seeing something glitter at the bottom. Diving down, he had found this wand. He was a bit sad that he could not use it right away, though. He needed a few levels, first using the terrible mana bolts. When he finally reached level 5, he could use the wand and see the ability.

[Metal Manipulation (Uncommon)] – Allows for control of metallic objects by spending mana. This skill falls under elemental manipulation, a prevalent brand of magic throughout the multiverse. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Metal Manipulation based on intelligence.

In concert with the many daggers he carried in his robe, this skill allowed him to dominate pretty much everything he met. His only weakness was his lack of healing outside of health potions, which was why he even bothered with Richard and his group. Oh, and his high mana consumption in combat, but he was sure that would get better with time.

His thought process was interrupted as he spotted his chance to strike. The molerats had jumped a group of badgers, allowing William to also make his move.

Focusing, he lifted the wand as seven daggers flew out of his robe, towards the closest rat. Their speed and power were far more potent than if he had simply thrown them. The daggers hit the rat in its head, cutting it to pieces.

Before any of the other rats could register that had happened, the daggers spread out, hitting the three others in their throats before they could do their screech.

The rats made gurgling sounds as they charged towards him. Raising his wand, he cast a spell towards the ground as a metal board appeared before him, blocking the rat's charge and obscuring their vision. At the same time, he lifted himself off the ground as he shot backward.

After killing a medium warrior, he had started wearing the chestpiece he had looted off the man. Hidden beneath his robe. While it was expensive as hell to lift his whole body off the ground, it gave him excellent mobility. As he dodged around, blocking off the rats with the metal barrier, and having the daggers penetrate the rats over and over, he felt quite wonderful.

As his mana was starting to get dangerously low, the last molerat fell to the ground, never to move again. Checking his notifications, he was delighted to get another level.

****You have slain [Molerat Screecher – lvl 14] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 1500 TP earned****

****You have slain [Molerat Screecher – lvl 16] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 2000 TP earned****

****You have slain [Molerat Screecher – lvl 16] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 2000 TP earned****

****You have slain [Molerat Screecher – lvl 15] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 1750 TP earned****

****'DING!' Class: [Caster] has reached level 17 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

Finding high-level beasts was still somewhat tricky, in his opinion. He had killed a good 20+ beasts above level 14 to get from level 16 to 17. Richard kept refusing to go further into the forest, which made William really wish for some kind of healing skill at level 20.

At level 5, he had gotten [Basic Stealth(Inferior)], at 10 [Conjure Iron Wall (Common)], and at 15 [Metallic Sight (Uncommon)]. The Iron wall was the skill he had used in the battle before, and the metallic sight was the passive skill that made his entire style possible. It allowed William to 'see' through the metal he was manipulating, allowing his flying daggers to act as really shitty, yet still useable, eyes.

The only annoying thing was that he had to 'attune' the metal he was manipulating. In other words, he had to fill any metal he wanted to control up with mana, linking it to him. This was done super easily with random unranked metal but was pretty much impossible for enchanted stuff. Well, he could still do it, but the mana consumption was insane and not worth it.

It was not that it made the skill terrible in any way; it just sucked that he couldn't make a warrior cut his own head off with his sword. Oh, or make an archer's arrows do a 180 hitting themselves. However, the saddest was his inability to lift a medium or heavy warrior up and smash them down again, or maybe use them as living wrecking balls.

The skill was also quite mentally taxing. When he first got it at level 5, he could only control two daggers at once, and lifting even a set of armor was challenging. By now, he could do seven daggers comfortably but could push it to 8 in a pinch, though it would hurt his versatility in using his iron wall and his own movements.

The skill was amazingly good in open combat, but he felt it worked even better at stealthily killing. Having picked up Basic Stealth being a lucky coincidence.

The group of 10 he arrived with was filled with the usual pieces of shit - pretentious idiots who kept talking about bullshit. None of them understood that things have changed. No, they were merely background-characters - unimportant fodder for the true players in this new world.

This new reality was clearly a game made real. William had enjoyed games and books his entire life. He understood the genre. One had to embrace the system, game it where possible, but otherwise, follow its rules and abuse them for the maximum potential. It was all about min-maxing.

And yet those bloody fools kept talking about working together, staying safe, finding other humans, and finding somewhere to hunker down for the entire tutorial. Didn't they understand this was a golden opportunity? This tutorial was the easy starting area that would give one a kickstart before entering the real game.

William was not a delusional idiot who believed this world to be fake. It was obviously real. Real, and yet still a game. Which was why he had decided to think of it as an ultra-realistic virtual reality MMORPG with permadeath. So far, he had never been proven wrong in that assumption.

His initial group of ten quickly outlived their usefulness as the only useful person, a healer, ended up dying due to their own stupidity. A light warrior had also died, so William gracefully offered to carry his daggers if anyone needed them later. The first fight after he reached level 5, one of the other casters suspiciously died, stabbed in the back of the neck by a dagger.

But dear William had been standing right beside the archer leading their group, so it couldn't possibly have been him. With the seed of discord planted, he managed to easily split the group. A little word here and there about how the third caster had asked for one of the daggers he had been carrying earlier, and then afterward finding it in said caster's satchel had only sealed the deal.

It was like screwing with stupid NPC's in an otherwise well-made game. It took him only a couple of hours to kill all of them; no one suspecting the small and scared teenager. Well, except the archer at the end, who in his very last moments seemed to finally see through him. Not surprising, considering they were the last two alive.

The idiot yelled a couple of vulgar obscenities before he too died.

Looking back, that first day had, without a doubt, been the best in William's 19 years of life. Everyone had always treated him like shit his entire life, no one ever *getting* him. The worst part was that some of them even thought something was *wrong* with him.

Oh, how he had wished he could just get rid of that stupid teacher who kept pestering him in school. But he knew he couldn't. At least not without getting caught. The rules of society had held him back for so long, limited him in so many ways.

But here? No police, no law enforcement, no shrinks or therapists, no drugs being pumped into your system day in and day out to try and make you 'normal'. The system had fixed all the harm the drugs were doing, restored his body and soul, freeing him.

Entering that tutorial had felt like waking up from a long hazy dream. But now William was awake, and he was aware. He understood his new reality far more so than he ever had the old one.

Currently, he was quite a bit of distance away from Richard's camp. He still needed them for now, as they had a healer and all, and some of the professions that people had started acquiring turned out to be very useful, allowing him to get his clothes fixed and cleaned.

After walking a bit, having recovered a good portion of his mana, he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Crouching down, he snuck closer, raising one of his daggers with metal manipulation using it to see what was going on. Three silhouettes were at a small pond, two in the water, and one person standing guard it seemed.

The Metallic Sight skill was not good enough to see any details. But it looked like no one was looking William's way. Looking from behind a tree, he saw two females who were not

wearing anything in the water, with a third woman standing outside the water in a full heavy warrior outfit.

Looking around further, he spotted a robe and a cloak folded at the edge of the water - one caster robe and one archer cloak.

No healer, huh, he thought disappointed. He didn't recognize any of them, and a quick look around with his metallic sight and a dagger spotted no one else in the area.

Oh well, no reason to keep them around, he thought. The system did say that the final reward from the tutorial was based on the number of survivors. He had read that as the fewer survivors, the better. Also, humans were so much easier to kill than beasts, honestly. Because they had one fatal weakness...

As he was preparing to strike, the heavy warrior, for some reason, turned around and looked straight at him.

"Who are you!" The woman yelled in an annoyingly loud tone.

William knew he was spotted, so he didn't try to hide. No, he could do far better than that. "I am so sorry, miss! I got lost after my team got attacked, and I thought I heard someone," he said with a deliberate shyness in his voice. This 'shy vulnerable kid'-act worked well with older females. And worked it did.

The warrior's gaze visibly softened as she saw the young man before her - a handsome shy young man who looked incredibly scared. "Oh, I see," she said in a calming tone, as William spotted the two naked women now getting dressed, both looking very flustered. He estimated them to be around his own age and likely related to the warrior based on their looks. Their Mother? Aunt? It didn't matter.

He started walking towards them cautiously, bit by bit, as the woman spoke again. Making sure to shiver slightly with every step. It took a long time to get that one down.

"Do you know where your team went? What attacked you?" the warrior asked as she got a little closer.

William acted scared at her coming towards him and backing away with big steps, staying in character.

"It's okay, we're not going to do anything," she said, as she stopped going closer.

"O...Okay" William stammered as he stopped backing off. The woman kept walking closer to him until she got to the spot where he had backed off from.

From below the leaves, four daggers flew up, startling the woman. All of them found purchase in the gaps of her armor before she even had a chance to react. A fifth dagger simultaneously flew out of William's robe, hitting the woman in the face, killing her instantly.

The two other women were still only halfway dressed, as more daggers flew for them, and they only managed to give out brief screams as the daggers struck them. They tried to defend, but neither of them had their weapons ready. It didn't take long for both of them to fall to the ground, their half-naked bodies covered in cuts.

After making sure they were all dead, William checked his notifications, disappointed. The warrior had been only level 10, with the two younger ones at 9.

"What a waste of time," he muttered to himself as he looted their remaining potions and the archer's dagger.

"Oh well, better luck next time," he said, smiling at the three mutilated corpses, as he turned for the trek back to Richard's camp. His mana was beginning to get a bit low, so he would have to take a break. Sadly the caster didn't have any mana potions left.

He could not help but whistle a happy little tune as he walked. True, it didn't reward much to kill the three of them, but it was kind of fun. Oh, how he loved this new wonderful world.

Chapter 26: More skills!

Lying on the bed, Jake was proud of his progress for the day. He had mixed so many potions that he eventually had to just dump the mixtures in the sink. It was so incredibly wasteful, but he just didn't have anywhere else to put it.

While there were undoubtedly many bottles, it was far from unlimited. He was re-using the bottles after he drank the mana potions but said potion consumption had fallen to nearly nothing after Jake had gotten his Palate of the Malefic Viper.

It wasn't that he was entirely out of bottles; in fact, he had many left. He just knew that the potions he currently made wouldn't be things he wanted to save. He also didn't know where to store them. Pretty much every surface in the lab was filled with potions.

During the day, he had also eaten two new kinds of mushrooms too. One called **[Reddot Stool]**, a small white mushroom with red spots on it, with the other identified as a **[Brunnerius Aqua Mushroom]**, a brown mushroom found growing from small puddles in the damp cave. Both were naturally inferior-rarity.

Overall his day had resulted in quite the progress.

****'DING!' Profession: [Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 7 - Stat points allocated, +2 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (G)] has reached level 8 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

****'DING!' Profession: [Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 8 - Stat points allocated, +2 free points****

****'DING!' Profession: [Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 9 - Stat points allocated, +2 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (G)] has reached level 9 - Stat points allocated, +1 free points****

The only significant difference was that he had decided to save the free points. The wisdom seemed to barely add anything to his mental capabilities at this point, and he was unsure if any other stat would help him in any way at the moment. He had considered willpower and endurance, hoping that it would allow him to stay awake longer and reduce the mental exhaustion.

But for now, he would save them. He was very close to level 10 in his alchemy class, at which point he would likely unlock another skill or some other benefit. So, he had decided to wait for the last level.

He had finished the book on elementary poisons, the two basic alchemy books, and had decided that he was ready to give concocting poisons a try the next day. He had eaten the shrooms and moss he needed as ingredients, and he had even found a book describing recipes.

Said recipes mentioned the Reddot Stool and Brunneius Aqua Mushroom, which was why he had decided to munch on those.

After getting up from his bed, he headed straight for the cave to collect a good batch of mushrooms and moss. And with that, he got to work. In retrospect, Jake wasn't sure it could even be considered work considering how easily it went.

Concocting poisons and brewing potions shared a lot of similarities. The mana injection and mixing were essentially the same, with only a few minor differences here and there. The most significant difference was the requirement to squash any elements of vitality within the ingredients while simultaneously amplifying the damaging properties.

When making health potions, the direct opposite of poison, you had to simply bring forth the already existing vital energies found within the herbs. That same vitality was found to a lesser degree in poisonous plants. They were living entities, too, after all.

This vitality would lower the effect of the poison, and sometimes even wholly ruin the concoctions. This made Jake consider the silver mushrooms he had that gave vitality when consumed. In one of the books, such cases were described, where the poison and vitality reacted together, empowering one another. This could then go in either direction, either becoming extremely toxic or overflowing with vitality.

Due to such ingredients' overpowering nature, new alchemists were generally recommended to stay the hell away from attempting to use them not to waste such precious natural treasures. Reading it did give him an idea for later, but that idea was for way later.

Currently, Jake was not mixing ingredients that were hard to use. He was mixing the Reddot Stool and Brunneius Aqua Mushroom and the green moss in the mixing bowl. Both components floating in the purified water.

Purified water was used for pretty much every kind of liquid poisons. It was wholly uncontaminated and was nothing more than filler. All it did was to dilute the mixture a bit, but that was about it.

The mixing itself went easy, as he had the methods described in the books memorized, and when he got to the more challenging parts of the mana-injection, he was almost dumbfounded by how easy it was.

By now, making mana potions was incredibly easy for him, and he barely had to focus when brewing them. But the ease and familiarity he currently felt were incomparable. It felt like he had worked with the ingredients thousands of times before. The moss and mushrooms felt like an extension of his own body, quickly absorbing his mana, doing what he wanted when he wanted.

The entire thing only took minutes before he was greeted by a collection of very welcome system messages.

****You have successfully crafted [Weak Hemotoxic Poison (Inferior)] – A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned****

****'DING!' Profession: [Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 10 - Stat points allocated, +2 free point****

He had not expected to get a level-up so fast again. Not that he was going to complain about it. Inspecting his new creation, he was thrilled with the result.

[Weak Hemotoxic Poison (Inferior)]

– Increases bleeding on inflicted entities and makes any injuries harder to heal. The poison must be introduced directly into the bloodstream to have any effect.

According to the books, the poison was a weak type of poison that disrupts the inflicted's usual bodily balance, thinning the blood, and increasing blood loss. It also, like the dagger he had, made healing the target harder. Overall it was not a very powerful type of poison. Still, considering his current strategy in battle where a lot of it revolved around kiting and slowly bleeding the opponent out, he didn't doubt its effectiveness.

He stored the poison in a rectangular bottle with a big bottleneck. While there were far less of this type of bottle than the regular potion bottles, there was still a cabinet containing a few hundred. This kind of bottle was designed to dip arrows, needles, and daggers into, to soak the weapon in the poison. Something he believed would become very relevant when he got out of this challenge dungeon.

The level also came with the expected notice of new skills.

****Alchemist of the Malefic Viper profession skills available****

He had five skills available. Looking at the five skills, he used the same approach as last time he got offered skills and went through them one by one.

[Transmute (Inferior)] – Transmutation is an ancient art used by alchemists since the beginning of time. Allows for the alchemist to attempt to transmute types of metal into ones of greater value. Must have suitable materials. Transmute does not require any additional tools or equipment, but the skill's effect can be amplified using certain catalysts. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of Transmute based on wisdom.

This one was, without a doubt, nice. But totally not in Jake's lane at all currently. He was all about potions and poisons. It could prove useful down the line, but for now, it was not for him. Making gold from iron did seem awesome in the real world, but he doubted he the skill would have any use in curing him of the poison in his system. Also, who would even care about gold if people could go around making it? Basic economics, yo.

Thus, he swiftly moved on.

[Graft Plant (Common)] – Sometimes, two plants are greater than the sum of their parts, and the perfect plant may be created, not found. Grants the ability to graft plants. Plants must be compatible. Must have suitable ingredients and equipment to facilitate the grafting of plants. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of Graft Plant based on wisdom.

This one did seem very cool also, and he had read about the art of grafting plants in several of the alchemy books. Most plants could be found naturally in the world; what had surprised Jake, however, was that the system had not created the majority of them. Many plants found were initially created by alchemists grafting something into existence more suitable for their needs.

The system had over time then integrated these plants into ecosystems, naturally growing them around the multiverse. The author of the book was unsure about how the system did so, but its involvement was inarguable, as plants even seemed to spread to other universes.

This had inevitably led to many not knowing which plants were system-made and which ones were grafted by alchemists. Jake did not know how old the multiverse was. He knew that his universe, according to modern physics, was 13.4 billion years or so. He also remembered that the system said that his universe was the 93rd to be introduced to the system. The other universes being older was a fair bet in opinion.

But despite the exciting thoughts of time and grafting, Jake quite frankly had no use for it currently. It was described as a rather advanced type of alchemy in all the books, and something novices should avoid. The main reason for grafting, a lack of suitable ingredients, wasn't an issue with him having his own garden and cave, both still nearly full despite his use over the last days. So unless he wanted to become a master-grafter, he wasn't going for it.

So, with that in mind, he moved on to the next skill.

[Alchemist's Purification (Common)] – Attempt to purify any alchemical ingredient. Purification can help remove unwanted properties from a component, making the finished mixture purer. Must have suitable ingredients. Must have suitable materials. Purification does not require any additional tools or equipment, but the skill's effect can be amplified using certain catalysts. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of Alchemist's Purification based on wisdom.

Another handy skill. Jake assumed this was what had been done to the water he used in his alchemy, considering the name Purified Water. If grafting allowed you to create your desired plants, this one allowed you to attempt to transform the ones you already had into something more useful.

Jake had no idea what effect the skill would have on his current ingredients, however. He did not need to purify any water as there was plenty of it, and thus far, he hadn't run into any issues with unforeseen properties within the plants he used. He seriously doubted he could cleanse the vital energy out of a living thing.

Once more referring to the books, this skill was mentioned extensively as one essential to all alchemists. A lot of herbs found throughout the multiverse were borderline useless. That, or they were highly specific for only obscure recipes. Thus, purifying some of these ingredients could allow them to be used in more types of creations.

This one was most definitely a contender, but he was still unsure of its usefulness currently. He knew that he would have to pick it up at one point, but as the six skills offered at level 5 were still on his list, he could just get it later.

The next two skills were very similar, much like the Sense Herb and Sense Poison skills.

[Germinate Herb (Common)] – Germinate a herb, allowing it to grow faster and increase its quality. Germinate Herb enables the alchemist not to wait the many years usually required for the necessary herb to mature. Germinate herb does not require any additional tools or equipment, but the skill's effect can be amplified using certain catalysts. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of Germinate Herb based on wisdom.

[Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)] – Cultivate the desired toxic ingredient, allowing it to amplify its deadly toxins. On poisonous plants, this skill will also enable said plants to grow faster and increase their quality. Cultivate Toxin does not require any additional tools or equipment, but the skill's effect can be amplified using certain catalysts. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of Cultivate Toxin based on wisdom.

These were also quite amazing and frequently mentioned skills in pretty much all the books he had read on alchemy - both essential skills of an alchemist who dreams of owning their own garden. The skills were especially interesting with their usefulness in leveling the profession.

Not all alchemists had the privilege of a fully stocked garden in a challenge dungeon when they first started out doing alchemy. Many started simply by tending gardens of senior alchemists. This was also how many achieved their profession to begin with. Some books even had the assumption that the reader had started out that way.

Of these, Germinate Herb was, without a doubt, the most mentioned. The use of potions throughout the multiverse was considered standard practice, and someone needed to grow the ingredients used. Jake also knew that many alchemists started with the Germinate Herb skill from the beginning.

Professions came in many forms and variants. One of the books on how to properly care for ingredients and tend the garden mentioned more than ten different types of the alchemist profession that could be unlocked from cultivating different sorts of herbs.

However, the most usual way of obtaining a profession was not through effort or hard work, but through being taught by someone already possessing said profession. But many senior alchemists still had their apprentices try and learn the craft themselves in the hope of them unlocking a more powerful variant from the beginning, or perhaps just one more specialized.

Jake's Alchemist of the Malefic Viper was one such variant. It was both more powerful and specialized in poisons compared to more traditional alchemists.

More powerful variants often offered better skills of higher rarity and gave more stats per level. The downside was that, while they could often learn pretty much all types of skills commonly available, it would usually be at a lower starting rarity and/or at higher levels.

This was also shown by Transmute, for example, being inferior-rarity, and the same with the Geology, Pill Consolidation, and Metallurgy skills at level 5.

Overall, however, there was a strong consensus that variant classes were just straight-up better. The stats alone made them far more valuable all on their own.

One aspect he still did not quite understand was the constant mention of something called Records. He had seen the same word used in his [Bloodline Patriarch] title and even in the bloodline description itself. More powerful variant classes, especially named ones like his, came with inherited Records. While he had yet to see any explanation of what exactly is meant by Records, from what he could deduce, having many Records was a good thing. Or maybe high-quality Records?

This made him wonder if Records was a hidden achievement system or something - another mystery he had to solve when he eventually got out of the dungeon.

Back to the skills, he didn't hesitate before picking the Cultivate Toxin skill.

****Gained Skill*: [Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)] – Cultivate the desired toxic ingredient, allowing it to amplify its deadly toxins. On poisonous plants, this skill will also enable said plants to grow faster and increase their quality. Cultivate Toxin does not require any additional tools or equipment, but the skill's effect can be amplified using certain catalysts. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of Cultivate Toxin based on wisdom.***

He felt the slightly disorientating experience of having knowledge downloaded directly into his mind. The reason why he had chosen this skill was to himself quite obvious.

First of all, this was the only skill at uncommon-rarity. Secondly, it perfectly goes with the whole poison-themed profession. It was also perhaps the only skill Jake could immediately make use of during the challenge. He could use it to gain experience and spice up his day while trying and making more potent poison from his ingredients.

Happy with his new skill, he prepared himself to get working once more. He still had a lot of work ahead of him.

Chapter 27: Evolution

Jake got to work right away after waking up, concocting poisons like never before. The process kept getting easier and easier. After a couple of hours and a lot of poison later, he was a bit surprised by the lack of a level-up. It seemed like the experience gain had slowed down after reaching double digits.

However, one negative aspect of his increased speed was shown as his mana pool emptied. His pool was a lot higher by now, and he had honestly doubted that he would've been able to empty it with his daily poison eating and regular mana potions.

Speaking of mana potions, it was about time he made some more. He still had a lot left, but their quality had a lot to be desired. His skills had increased significantly over the last couple of days, having learned a lot from both health potions, and of course, the poison. All of that was ignoring his increased stats.

Jake, with his increased mana usage and capacity, had tried to replenish it by eating his ancient rival. The blue mushrooms shone brightly in the cave, oblivious to the man walking towards them to devour as many as his stomach could handle.

Which turned out to be only one mushroom. Those damn blue bastards were full of mana, regenerating plenty of mana but also making him quite ill. His health points began ticking downwards as he, for the first time, was actually poisoned. Luckily it wasn't more than he could handle, and it did come with benefits.

Jake learned a lot about the mushrooms from that single one. Turns out, the poison in them was incredibly potent and had necrotic properties. This was obviously not a surprise to Jake, as necrosis was one of the most horrific things he knew of, quite literally rotting the flesh on a still-living being. For the mushrooms to have such an evil property was only natural.

He also had to reluctantly admit that the cursed shrooms tasted damn good, though. Not that he was going to eat any more just yet.

After a brief ingredient-collection-run to the garden, he got to work once more, making mana potions. After making a few batches, he got right back to making poison. A couple of concoctions later, he finally got a level.

****'DING!' Profession: [Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 11 - Stat points allocated, +2 free points****

As he saw the message, he instantly noticed the lack of a race level, but before he could ponder it further, the system appeared once more.

****Race Evolution Requirements Met****

Your body and soul have been accustomed to the energies found in the multiverse, allowing you to truly become a being of the new world. Evolution is a natural step for all multiverse entities, with nature and benefits associated with evolution dependant on all Records.

Begin Evolution now?

Y/N

WARNING: Postponing evolution may have adverse effects, and no further race-experience can be earned before the evolution is completed.

Well, that sure answered why his race didn't level up. But thinking back, it made sense considering what else he had seen so far in the tutorial. All beasts at level 10 and above got significantly stronger, so the same thing happening to humans was not out of the question.

But he was unwilling to spend a lot of time deliberating the system's evolutionary process after seeing the last line. He still took minor precautions, leaving the laboratory, going to the bedroom, and sitting down on the bed.

Taking a deep breath, he agreed to the system-prompt.

The second he accepted, his vision went black.

When he came to once more, he was in a black void surrounded by small bright dots. Inspecting them further, he noticed they were stars. Jake was suspended in what seemed like the middle of space as he felt his body slowly change.

Thinking back, this was possibly what happened to him when he first entered the tutorial. The only difference was that he now was far more aware of his surroundings.

The seconds ticked by as he simply looked around and relaxed. His body felt numb, but he could still sense something changing within him. As he floated there, he also started to get a weird feeling. He felt something. He could not put his finger on what it was, but something was clearly present all around him in the blackness.

As he focused on the feeling, it only became more apparent. The feeling was oddly similar to the one he had when he examined the alchemical ingredients during his potion brewing. More specifically, the kind of energy he felt when making mana potions.

Suddenly it clicked for him. This was mana he could feel. Mana was an ever-present aspect of the multiverse. Before, he only knew it was there due to reading about its presence, but now he could finally feel it.

He had wondered if he was for some reason inept at it, as nearly all the books he had read had references to feeling mana and examining mana density as if it was something everyone could just do. It turns out; he needed to evolve.

The changes in his body had started slowing down by now. Jake had his eyes closed, testing his newly acquired ability to sense mana when he suddenly felt something more. Within him, a change was occurring that wasn't purely the race evolution.

A vortex at his heart formed as it absorbed energy. Jake could feel the mana move and enter his body, but not where it disappeared to. It just entered a space somewhere around his heart. He felt like his heartbeat sped up, but physically it didn't. It was an inexplicable experience.

Then it all just stopped, and Jake's vision shifted as he found himself back on the bed in the dungeon once more. Not that he knew if his physical body had ever left the room, to begin with, or if it had all been some kind of out of body experience.

Jake did not feel any different, though. The only significant change was that he now could distinctly feel the mana in the air. It felt far less dense than up in the space-like area, but it was still easily discernable. But his body felt the same. Looking at the system prompt, it indeed did confirm the evolution, though.

****Race Successfully Evolved****

Human (F) - A newly initiated human having taken the first step up the evolutionary ladder. Your body has now become attuned to the energy of the new world. The human race is known as one of the most balanced and numerous races of the multiverse, being

able to walk many different roads on their path to power. Stat bonuses per level: +1 to all stats, +5 free points

****'DING!' Race: [Human (F)] has reached level 10 - Stat points allocated, +5 free point****

The level-up bonus changes were minor, earning him just 4 more free points per level. He had gotten those four extra points with the level, though, meaning he now had 17 free points still not allocated. So that was kind of nice.

He had not gotten any skills from the evolution, but he did get one unforeseen benefit as he read the next message.

****Bloodline Ability Evolved****

The evolution has stirred your bloodline, allowing it to evolve along with you.

****Bloodline Ability Upgraded*: [Bloodline of the Primal Hunter (Bloodline Ability - Unique)] – Dormant power lies in the very essence of your being. A unique, innate ability awakened in the bloodline of the newly initiated human, Jake Thayne. Enhances innate instincts. Enhances the ability to perceive your surroundings. Enhances perception of danger. +10% to perception.***

Not much of the description had changed, and focusing on his sphere did not show anything either. But then again, a big part of his bloodline ability was either passive or only made itself known during a crisis. No, what had instead changed was the flat stat bonus to perception. While an increase from 5 to 10% did not seem like a lot initially, it could get massive down the line.

Even more importantly, it indicated his bloodline ability's possibility of growth. If it was 10% now with him only being F-rank, what was to stop it from getting far higher later on. It also quickly answered the question of where that extra vortex of mana came from. He was sure that was his bloodline evolving.

With that in mind, Jake decided to simply dump all of his 17 free points into perception. While it may not be the smartest choice in the short run, he believed it was the best on a long-term basis. It may also be the euphoric feeling in his body he felt after the evolution that messed with his head.

After he had put the points in, perception instantly became his highest stat. Due to the immediate stat increase, he felt slight vertigo as all his senses improved, and he felt his sphere of perception grow both in range and quality.

It lasted for less than a second before everything was back to normal except for his improved senses. He opened his status window, happy with all the improvements.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (F) – lvl 10]

Class: [Archer – lvl 9]

Profession: [Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 11]

Health Points (HP): 660/660

Mana Points (MP): 610/610

Stamina: 300/300

Stats

Strength: 33

Agility: 36

Endurance: 30

Vitality: 66

Toughness: 31

Wisdom: 61

Intelligence: 21

Perception: 70

Willpower: 40

Free points: 0

Titles: [Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch]

Class Skills: [Basic One-Handed Weapon (Inferior)], [Basic Stealth (Inferior)], [Advanced Archery (Common)], [Archer's Eye (Common)]

Profession Skills: [Herbology (Common)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Concoct Poison (Common)], [Toxicology (Uncommon)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Rare)], [Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Rare)]

Race Skills: [Identify (Common)], [Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races (Unique)]

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

Remarkable growth across the line. The only thing Jake felt bad about was intelligence being his lowest stat by quite a bit. Not because he needed the stat for any of his skills, but more due to its sentiment. Well, at least he was a wise guy full of vitality with exceptional eyesight.

Jake had to admit that the whole evolution felt a bit underwhelming outside of his bloodline evolving. He imagined those without a bloodline ability would find themselves quite disappointed by it. Or maybe he had missed something? Some hidden new power, or perhaps his evolution had gone wrong somehow?

The ability to sense mana was great. Yet that was mentioned as something one was meant to have from the beginning.

The thought kept nagging him. Luckily for him, he had a library with a wide assortment of books. While all of the books were on alchemy, many were also about random topics only tangentially related to the profession.

After going through the books for a good while, he found a couple of ones with potential. They were mainly about professions and leveling, but they did have parts on evolutions.

As he started reading, the word Records kept coming up more and more. One apparently needed to have 'sufficient Records' to evolve one's race. The same went with upgrading one's class and profession.

However, what confused Jake was that it kept mentioning the first evolution for class, profession, and race were all at level 25. This was clearly not the case for him, though. He also found some interesting notes on how even the level 25 evolutions were unique, but it didn't elaborate.

He kept reading the books on the issue, and it was only after several books where he stumbled upon a side-note in a chapter about the connection between mana sensitivity and race rank:

"... while evolutions and their associated level-requirements have never known any credible cases of deviation, there is a rumor among some scholars that some races found in newly integrated universes have more evolutionary stages. F-stage is widely known as the lowest possible stage, but these new races start at a stage below even that if these rumors are to be believed.

It must be noted that none of these cases have ever been officially validated. However, it is hypothesized this has to do with the absence of mana in the newly integrated universe. According to the hypothesis, this stage may act as an adaption period, allowing the new races to get used to mana. The origin of this train of thought is not known, but notable figures of the multiverse have commented on it.

This hypothesis truly gained traction when it was confirmed to be accurate by Reverend Izzshaldin of the 91st universe, one rumored to herself to be a new initiate. Many believe it to be accurate with endorsement from such a figure, despite the lack of any verifiable evidence. While a god's words are not to be doubted, it cannot be taken as the complete truth either. Especially considering the lack of comment from other prominent divines. For alas, only the divines may know the whole truth.

Once more, it must be emphasized this has never been confirmed. Many also question the possibility of a universe absent of mana ever existing. Even the most extreme cases of mana-starved areas have some remnants of mana remaining, and complete absence has only been observed in very severe cases. For an entire universe to be without it is therefore highly improbable, and honestly asinine to propose.

In conclusion, this rumor is likely to be just that: A rumor. An unfounded idea based on faulty logic and lack of understanding of mana. Mana is as essential to existence as the natural laws and the system itself, making it an insult to one's intelligence to propose a world without it."

As Jake finished the segment, he was quite amused. This researcher must have felt like scientists from Earth did when they heard someone propose that the Earth is flat. It was quite understandable that the book's researcher came off as a bit pissed for even having to address the claim.

It also explained the lack of mention in all the other books. If it only happened to the first generation of those integrated, there couldn't be many cases. Jake had a suspicion that

immortality, or at least something close to immortality, was possible with a high enough level. However, he still had doubts about how many still lived from when the last universe was integrated. Heck, the book mentioned gods and divines, and if a god wasn't even immortal, it had to be a pretty sucky god.

With such a small sample size, it was apparent that it was considered a waste of time to address, according to most authors. Perhaps that would change now, with an entirely new universe being integrated into the multiverse. Then again, there had to be other integrations before.

Not that any grandiose thoughts of changing the mainstream evolutionary theories existed in Jake's head. For now, he had to deal with the small problems in life. Such as not dying from poisoning.

He sat up on the bed and put the books to the side. He had wasted enough time reading for today. It was alchemy time!

Chapter 28: Base building

Jake knew that he had some long days of alchemy before him. Looking at the dungeon challenge window, he exited the bedroom to the laboratory.

Time remaining: 26 Days – 6:21:57

He had only spent a bit over three and a half days in this dungeon. He had, in his mind, plenty of time to find a cure, but not enough time to slack off. With his evolution out of the way and being completely refreshed from the process, he had no excuse not to get to it.

He had days of hard work ahead of him. No way he was going to die here. A plan was already beginning to form in his mind on how to pass the challenge. One he could only snicker at for its sheer stupidity. But sadly, the plan did not include him leaving early. He knew there was an entire tutorial going on outside, but that could wait. Jake couldn't help but think of his colleagues still outside and decided to check the tutorial panel.

Tutorial Panel

Duration: 58 days & 11:22:58

Total Survivors Remaining: 754/1200

A bit more than a third had died by now. Jake dearly hoped that his colleagues were not among them. While he held no love for Richard, the guy seemed competent enough, and he knew that if Jacob was good at anything, it was to get in the good graces of others. He believed their chances were good unless something very unpredictable happened.

Shaking his head, he threw the thought away. It was a waste of time to worry about others when he was already battling death. He would seek them out when he got out of there. For now, there was nothing he could do to help them in any way. The best way to help them was to help himself.

Determined, he cleaned the bowl, got the ingredients, and jumped right back into making more poisons and potions. He had a long grind ahead of him.

Jacob dragged his fingers across his chin, feeling the stubble that had now grown into a full-on beard. He hadn't had a beard for years now, always going with the clean-cut style. Not that he thought there was anything wrong with having a beard. He avoided one mainly for professional reasons as, while the company dress-code did not directly prohibit beards, it strongly discouraged them. It was a silly rule, but the company directors were quite conservative and believed beards to be unprofessional for some reason.

Not that any of that mattered anymore. The world was fucked. Jacob did feel rather sour in having spent so many years climbing the corporate ladder for it to all turn out to be a massive waste of time. That time would have been better spent going to self-defense classes. Fencing or archery or pretty much any sports teaching you just minor combat skills would be more useful.

He had never been a fighter. At least not in the literal sense. He had never been in a fight his entire life outside of maybe minor scuffles as a child. Instead, he focused on studying, excelling in academics, graduated top of his class in university, and became the youngest department chief the company had ever seen.

But now, in this tutorial, he was low on the ladder. As it turns out, Richard owned a private security firm before the initiation and had come here with many of his employees. Of anyone Jacob had met so far in the tutorial, Richard excelled the most.

He was also the first one Jacob knew of that had evolved and then afterward even the first to also evolve his class. Jacob himself was only level 19 in his class still, but he had evolved his race. The entire race evolution thing was... perplexing.

When someone evolved, they would disappear for a few seconds before appearing again in the same place. The effects of evolution were also interesting. After evolving, one could vaguely feel something in the air. Some kind of energy. It didn't take long to conclude that this new energy was mana. Not that anyone knew what to do with this new mana sense.

By now, they had been in this damn place for only a bit over two weeks. Even in the beginning, Jacob was well aware of his own lack of combat prowess, but it had only become more apparent. He wasn't the lowest level among his peers, but far from the top.

Out of the original 10, they were 7, maybe only 6, left as he had neither heard nor seen anything of Jake since he left their group.

Theodore had been the first among them to die. They had been fighting some more of those cursed badgers when he got unlucky and nearly tripped, allowing one of the beasts to bite into his neck. He had not died instantly, but they had run out of health potions. With no healer in sight... he bled out on their way back.

Caroline, the premier healer in the entirety of Richards group, was not with them at the time. In fact, they only had four healers in their entire camp, despite having already surpassed a hundred people. The highest leveled healer was Caroline, having upgraded her class a day or two ago.

According to all those who had, leveling got a lot slower once more after that. The first 10 levels were relatively easy, then it got a bit more difficult between 10 and 25, and then even harder once more after that. Jacob had no idea what level Richard had reached, just that he was very likely still the strongest member of their camp.

The two other former colleagues that had died were Dennis and Lina. Jacob still remembered the two vibrant youths when they parted. Both stronger than him at the time. Yet they died. And not by beasts either.

Another huge camp had emerged, with nearly the same amount of survivors as them. Negotiations had been going well for a while, and there were even plans of merging the two. Then Lina and Dennis's group got ambushed by the other camp.

Afterward, everything just went to shit for a while. Someone from Richard's camp must have taken the initiative on their own to strike back, as a group from the other camp also got wiped out, and from the state of the battlefield, it was clear that weapons had been used.

This enraged the other faction as they had adamantly claimed they had nothing to do with the first attack. Fights broke out daily after that.

Looking at the tutorial panel, it was depressing to see the number of total survivors falling by the day.

Tutorial Panel

Duration: 49 days & 14:45:06

Total Survivors Remaining: 599/1200

The number of survivors dying had slowed down for a while after the first four or five days, but it still flared up on days where larger groups from the two camps encounter each other. On the worst day, 21 people were killed split between their two factions, and that was even excluding random deaths to beasts. Naturally, there were also other unaffiliated parties out there.

Both factions had, however, done a lot to attract survivors. Smoke-signals, casters shooting spells into the air, and many more things had been done. It had worked for the most part and was likely why their two factions were in such proximity. They had attracted one another.

Jacob was currently standing at one of the many fires spread around their camp. They had reached rather far inwards at this point, and finding beasts below level 10 was borderline impossible at this point. Most in the immediate area were around level 20, but only a short walk away, and one would run into plenty above level 25.

The reason for the growth was not only due to the change in geography. It was across the line that the beasts grew in level. Jacob doubted there even existed any beasts below level 10 in the entire forest at this point. While this was generally considered a positive aspect for those seeking to grow stronger, it was a clear negative for those merely wishing for survival.

Beasts once more grew immensely in strength at 25. It was manageable as they also had people with classes above level 25, but for lower leveled groups like his own, those beasts were formidable. Many of them had magical abilities or just incredibly powerful bodies.

The crafters, which they had come to call the ones focusing on professions, would not stand a chance if they faced any such beasts, despite many of them having decent levels.

Talking of professions, Joanna, who had been the first ever to get one, was still the highest leveled crafter. While she was still a bit away from her profession upgrading at 25, she had gotten her race evolution at 10.

While many were disappointed at the evolution's effects, Joanna's case had been far from disappointing. Her leg had regrown. The wooden leg had simply been whisked away, and a newly formed leg had appeared.

She was far from the only individual with lasting damage or handicaps in their camp, and her case had given them all newfound hope, and given all those with professions vigor like never before. Even Richard had been very pleased and gone to congratulate her and offered for her to be the crafters' official leader.

Joanna rejected it at first, but she had eventually caved with the urging on from the other crafters around her. It had only been two days ago, but she held quite the political power within the entire camp by now, as professions' value had started to show. She had thrown most of her new responsibilities to Jacob, which he gladly took upon himself to be useful.

As a group, they had learned a lot about the usefulness of professions, with Jacob mainly in charge of gathering information on what people were now capable of. No one could make potions or anything like that, but some had gotten a cooking profession. The food cooked by them allowed wounds to heal faster, and many could even help the body fight off potential infections or poison. Other than that, the food tended to provide additional bonuses, like increased mana and stamina regeneration, the best of it even giving a temporary bonus to the endurance stat.

The most noteworthy crafter of them all wasn't Joanna, though. It was one of the people who had joined their camp later on. He was a large man who had worked as a foreman in a steelworks before the tutorial along with being a heavy warrior, who had even chosen a hammer as his starting weapon. As it turned out, the man even did smithing in his free time and had selected a hammer as it felt more natural in his hand.

With all those factors coming together, it was no surprise that the man had gotten the smithing profession. But more so than that, he was also a talented warrior. He had been the second person to evolve his race after Richard, and if Jacob's predictions were correct, he was currently the highest leveled when it came to race in their entire camp, despite not having upgraded his class yet. However, he was likely still above level 20 in his class. Even with professions taking longer to level, Jacob deemed him still to be around level 14 or 15 in that, if not even higher.

Jacob didn't know the man's name; he just went by The Smith. Without a doubt, he had proved himself invaluable as time went on, and many of their weapons started to require repair. Many upgrade tokens had been found, giving the equipment self-repair, but it only accounted for less than a fourth of their weapons and armor.

A smith could also temporarily improve weapons and armor, and according to The Smith, he could also permanently increase their performance if he had the right materials. He did all of the work for free due to the experience he gained from doing so, which made Jacob consider the impact a leveling system would have had on the labor market pre-system.

Throwing the thought away, he started walking over to his cabin. The cabin was constructed by another one of the newly discovered professions, one going by the name of 'builder'. As the name implied, they could build houses and even possessed landscaping skills a bit reminiscent of earth-magic.

Speaking of magic, Ahmed had managed to upgrade his class a few days ago. He had chosen to be a caster attuned to frost magic. After his evolution, he packed quite the punch, throwing out sharp shards of ice. On a side-note, his new abilities were also quite useful for cooling down drinks and preserving food.

Of the six survivors in their group, only Jacob and Joanna had not gained a class upgrade. Bertram, who had been at Jacob's side through everything so far, had gotten to 25 earlier that same day and a class focusing on defense. Casper had also gone through his class evolution.

Casper never got comfortable with the bow and instead ended up getting the trapping skill at level 5. He still used his bow, but now mainly to lure his enemies into traps.

The reason why Casper had leveled up before himself was due to the conflict with the other faction. Night-raids had started happening four days ago, and Richard had increased the number of people on watch significantly. A job that was mainly given to the archers due to their high perception and Archer's Eye skill.

What Casper had done was to set up a lot of traps around their camp, and yesterday that had borne fruit. He had single-handedly killed four attackers above level 20 and captured two others.

Neither Jacob nor Casper liked the thought of killing others. One could understand why the archer had been shocked when he was awoken in the middle of the night to system messages telling him he'd killed people. The coming class evolution gone through while he was filled with negative emotions.

Jacob himself had yet to take someone's life. Something he hoped wouldn't change before this hellhole of a tutorial was over.

After checking in with some of the builders, he arrived back at his cabin. He opened the wooden door and was greeted by Caroline, who must have just returned from another excursion with Richard and his squad.

"Hey, how was the trip?" Jacob asked as he went over and sat on the bed beside her.

Caroline, leaning on his shoulder, answered. "The same as always. Did anything happen today? Is Casper doing better?"

"Yeah, he is holding up. We all are, I guess," he said, after hearing the concern in her voice.

"It's going to be fine, Jacob. We're going to be fine," she consoled him as she snuggled closer to him.

Feeling her intent, he wrapped his hand around her shoulder as they both fell back on the bed, cuddling.

Another significant change was their relationship. Jacob had known that Caroline liked him as more than just a colleague for a long time. As her superior, though, he had chosen to try and ignore it, as fraternizing never was a good look. He also didn't want to subject her to his family politics.

But here, no one cared. So, when Caroline made her move, he had no reason to reject her. Jacob had never even considered her before due to their professional relationship. He had to admit that she was attractive, with the evolution at 10 only making her more beautiful. It may just be the suspension bridge effect, but he didn't really care at this point.

Caroline being the 'breadwinner' in the relationship hurt his vanity a bit, but he could see the humor in how their roles had completely switched compared to how it would be before the system.

You could say a lot of bad about Richard, but he treated the ones he deemed important well. With Caroline at the very top of his list, she was naturally treated extremely well. The fact that they had their own cabin for just the two of them was clear evidence of this.

Her status had trickled down to Jacob also being treated better, despite his lacking abilities in combat. Jacob was not a deadweight, however. When a camp grows to the triple digits, some amount of management becomes necessary.

One could say many things about Jacob, but if he was good at anything, it was management. This led to him being in charge of constructing the camp, making shifts, and keeping track of all their members. He was a bit disappointed he had not gotten a manager profession. He had been offered a skill related to management, though, despite being a tailor, which was a bit interesting.

Their camp had grown, not just in people, but also in complexity. With individuals able to construct buildings quickly, cooks, smiths, etc., the need for a more permanent solution became necessary. A wall had been under construction for a few days now, traps laid out mainly by Casper and one other archer who had to upgrade his class, and several other plans were underway.

As he pondered, he looked at Caroline. She looked back at him, staring into his eyes. He smiled as he leaned in and gave her a peck on her forehead.

“Yeah, we’ll be alright.”

Chapter 29: It's just logical

He ran through the woods, feeling the wind whisk by as he made his desperate escape. This entire situation was so fucked up. He had gone out hunting with his regular crew like any other day the last two weeks. While that guy Richard and his camp had been causing trouble for them, it didn’t normally disrupt his particular party’s daily routine.

Their leader, some ex-military guy named Hayden, had told them to avoid hunting in the area in between their two factions. An order everyone gladly followed as no one wanted to risk fighting other humans. While fighting beasts was dangerous, other humans were just a whole different kind of danger.

Yet they had still been attacked. And not by a group, but a single person. No, a goddamn monster. He had appeared out of nowhere, not said a word, and just started killing. Daggers were flying everywhere, and what seemed like a giant freaking sawblade that cut their heavy warrior in two: shield and all.

It was mayhem with blood and body parts flying everywhere. Luckily, he had been scouting ahead, being an archer and all. With zero hesitation, he had taken off after he saw half their group die. Yet it was for naught.

A dagger hit his leg as he stumbled, followed by another, and then another. His legs got utterly destroyed as he screamed out and tried to crawl away.

“Damn, you’re fast.”

He heard a casual voice behind him as he turned to stare at the monster that had been chasing him - a young man with blonde hair and blue eyes staring back.

“Dude, come on, you didn’t have to bolt off like that. Do you know how much mana I wasted? Ah, forget it, just give me some good info, and I promise to let you go,” the teenager said as he walked closer, a big sinister smile on his face. The archer’s eyes, however, glued to the small red bottle in his hand. A health potion.

The archer finally saw just the tiniest glimmer of hope as he bit through the pain from his mutilated legs. He started explaining everything he thought could be of the slightest interest. Even seemingly unnecessary side notes and comments. It was a torrent of information as the archer just hoped that the monster would decide to spare him.

After a while, as he kept desperately throwing out words, the teenager finally raised his hand, motioning for him to stop.

“Well, I guess there was some useful stuff in all that senseless yapping,” the blonde teenager said as he shrugged.

“I told you everything, please just ask me about anything. I promise I will tell you whatever you want,” the archer pleaded, hoping to prove himself useful enough.

“Oh, it is quite alright. I think I got everything worthwhile.”

The archer breathed out a sigh of relief as the slaughterer started to walk away from him. But just as he got his hopes up, another dagger flew out from underneath the teenager’s cloak and hit the archer straight in the chest, penetrating all the way to the handle.

The archer coughed up blood as he stammered: “Y... ou...”

“Oh yeah, I lied. Sorry mate, pretty gullible to believe I was gonna leave perfectly fine experience and tutorial points alone.”

The archer only heard the first part before he passed away.

The teenager, William, walked away from the corpse without looking back. Leaving the dagger in the man’s chest. He wanted them to know the killer was human, after all.

William was slightly disappointed in the levels of this group. Only a few of them had their class evolutions, which led to a rather dull fight. More importantly, it also meant less experience and tutorial points.

Not that he had expected much, just more than that. At least the tutorial points were worth his time. Not that he knew what they could be used for yet. He just liked to see the number go up. He especially liked to compare how many points he had to those killed - an objective measurement of how superior he was to all of them.

For William, who was already level 32 in his class, killing a bunch of humans barely gave any experience. Still, it gave more tutorial points than killing several beasts at, or above, his own level. After level 10, one had to kill around 10 or so beast at your own level, while above level 25, you had to kill even more. Coupled with beasts over level 25 getting a lot stronger, it only made human-hunting even more worth it. The notifications did say he got extra experience from killing anything above his race level, but it honestly felt negligible.

William did admit that humans were far more dangerous in a straight fight, but they were also far more easily exploited. Their intelligence was both their greatest weakness and strength simultaneously.

What he had done held the same concept as how he got rid of his first group.

Richard and his flock had met another faction of roughly similar power and numbers. Around half of the remaining survivors were in those two camps combined, and more joined by the day, which was perfect for William.

Finding humans was perhaps the only thing harder than killing them. The forest was big, the beasts plentiful, and humans customarily grouped together. Having two figurative beacons attracting more humans made it significantly easier to keep track of them.

The merging talk was not ideal, so William decided to throw a small spanner in the works by wiping out one of Richard's squads, staging the battlefield beautifully to replicate what a big fight between two groups would look like.

He had then once more spread a few small rumors that the other faction had been behind it, putting on his naïve teenager act, easily convincing some of the middle-aged women working as crafters.

Of course, Richard had been skeptical, and talks had not broken down immediately, so William wiped out a group from the other faction too. That sure as hell sparked the flames.

Now there was a full-on war with daily casualties. While groups out hunting often avoided each other, they still got into fights if they did meet, and a few choice words were thrown.

Richard's plan to split up existing groups and spread them out, coupled with the system's selection method for entering the tutorial, ended up meaning that many had lost friends or family to the war. William didn't even have to incite violence anymore; it happened all naturally.

Which also meant that he could kill others as much as he wanted. As long as no survivors remained in the party, everyone simply assumed the other camp to be behind it.

William couldn't kill the more prominent groups in the double digits, but most were only five to six people, making them easy pickings.

He was still officially a member of Richard's faction, and he had even taken credit for a few kills, of course acting all shaken up and disturbed by having been forced to kill others.

The concept of acting all messed up just for killing someone was the natural reaction after all. Something William hadn't been particularly good at the first time he killed, but he was nothing if not a fast learner. Now he saw himself as an experienced mourner after many hours of practicing.

Not that William didn't still find the whole thing stupid. Especially here in the tutorial. Some people took days getting over having killed someone. He remembered one of the archers who were good at traps had acted like the world was ending just because his damn traps had done their job. What the fuck did he expect them to do?

William knew that he had to act illogical to fit in with others, though. As the saying goes, when in Rome do as the Romans do, and when among idiots, act like an idiot. Richard at least took killing people rather calmly, but then again, from what William knew, the man had prior experience killing people. Speaking of Richard, he couldn't help but lick his lips.

Without a doubt, the man was the one with the highest level and tutorial points besides himself. It would be glorious when he finally got to him. When it was finally time to cash in. For now, however, the man still had work to do, acting as an excellent little shepherd gathering more prey for him. He would have to bide his time.

It wasn't like he had confidence in just straight-up killing the man, especially not if he was with his entire squad. Everyone in that squad had their class upgrades, and William knew precisely how much of a boost that gave you.

William had evolved his class to become a [Metal Savant], which was a massive boost to pretty much everything. His existing skills got stronger, his control improved massively, and he even gained a few new skills. It also granted him the metal manipulation, meaning he didn't even need the wand anymore.

He could now even conjure a steel-like metal out of mana, which he mainly practiced by conjuring daggers. Which meant he didn't have to carry around a bunch of them all the time. Though he still always had a couple on him, as manipulating existing ones was less mana-intensive than making them.

Conjured metal also disappeared after a while, making it harder to stage fights. On top of that, it also took a lot of time to make just a single dagger, so he had to conjure what he needed before the fight. Of course, this was outside of other skills creating metallic objects such as the shield he could make.

Though it helped that one of the skills his evolution had provided allowed him to absorb metal. He could then conjure said absorbed metal, the mana cost dependent on the quality and quantity of what he made, with the skill also able to re-absorb conjured metal, regaining some of the mana.

The third powerful new skill he had gotten was one that summoned a massive spinning disc of metal that he could send flying in a straight line. This was the one he had used to kill the heavy warrior earlier, and the thing packed a massive punch.

His only real weakness was that he still lacked reliable defensive methods. While he could conjure a shield and manipulate his movements by wearing metal armor, he would have loved to be able to turn his skin steel or something. Stealth attacks were a particular concern.

Not that he had experienced being stealth-attacked yet. The funny thing was that he could often just walk straight up to people and attack them. The idiots gullible right until their deaths.

After a good 30 minutes, he finally made it back to camp, which by now was more a full-on base. Cabins were popping up every day, a wall of stakes slowly being built, and campfires everywhere. William had been assigned one of the cabins, which he shared with a bunch of the crafters.

William couldn't care less for all the silly politics going on in camp. The members deemed important got stuff first, and William had never gotten anything, which was to say he was not considered important. Just like he wanted it.

Well, he was a bit important. Richard was a sharp man, after all. He knew the teenager was not weak in any way. William seriously doubted the warrior knew much about him, just that he was one of the few people able to hunt alone.

He had even been invited several times to important meetings. He liked going to those and just listen in. Throwing in either a neutral or naïve comment here and there.

Even when Richard so clearly probed him to reveal more about himself, he never made his real opinions known. William did answer all his inquiries but kept up the persona he had so carefully crafted. He deemed it too suspicious not to answer at all.

William had, for many years, gone about pretty much everything wrong. He had thought one simply had to be themselves. But he now knew that you had to be what people expected of you. What they hope for you to be. If they have a positive impression, enforce that impression, and if they have a negative one, try to disprove that assumption.

That was precisely what he'd done. He also knew he couldn't be too dull, or it would get suspicious. He had to be shy and yet competent enough to not be ignored entirely. Attempting to be too ordinary ends up being abnormal.

He had a lot of time back in the center to figure all this out. That was until he was thrown to another center where they thought the best thing was to try and fuck him up with drugs. They just had to 'rehabilitate' him a bit and throw him back into society.

Though that never came to pass as the tutorial happened.

He was still mad at himself for getting thrown in the first center, to begin with. One mistake and everything had crumbled.

Shaking his head, he smiled to himself. None of that mattered anymore. No centers, no drugs, just him and an endless universe. In this new world, his abnormality was synonymous with strength - his 'defects' an ideal.

While thinking of the beautiful future ahead of him, he dozed off as he took a quick nap. Even with all the levels and evolution, one still had to sleep a bit once in a while. Only a couple of hours every couple of days, but you had to. It was not exactly physical tiredness,

but the exhaustion of the mind. This need for sleep was reduced by every level and was significantly reduced in one go from the evolution.

Sleeping for only a couple of hours did more or less fully restore mana and stamina, though. So, it was not entirely a waste of time, as mana and stamina potions were very rare at this point, with only a few remaining, all hoarded by Richard and his elite. Even William only had a few hidden, as walking around with dozens would quickly become a bit too suspicious.

Waking up, he instantly felt fully refreshed as he jumped out of bed, ready for more hunting. It was still in the middle of the day, so none of his cabinmates had come by the cabin while he slept.

Exiting the cabin, he got his routine started. First, he went to talk to the crafters, chatting them up and making friends, and all that other social stuff. He had to keep up appearances. Also, it was beneficial when it came to getting his needs expedited.

He finished it off with a quick trip over to The Smith, by far the most interesting camp member, besides maybe Richard.

He was also the most useful besides the healers. William made no secret that he had a skill to manipulate metal, so he made it a habit to ask The Smith to improve his daggers. He had even convinced the man to help modify the armor he had, making it lighter and more suitable for him. Apparently, from what he could gather, the man had a son around Williams age.

Another weird, but nevertheless useful, sentiment humans had. William wasn't exactly sure why familial relationships had such an effect on people. He only knew that it did and

that humans often got illogical and, therefore, easily manipulated when it came to family matters. He had learned that the hard way.

Not that William didn't see some logic in it. He understood why his parents had helped him and propped him up. They needed a caretaker and an income for when they became unable to get one themselves. Which only made their actions all the more perplexing.

Getting his daggers back, he thanked The Smith, who once again tried to convince him to pick up smithing. It wasn't that William didn't want to, but he would rather level his class for now. Once his class level got higher, he would switch to leveling a profession to boost his race levels.

Making his goodbyes, he once more ventured into the forest to hunt some more. He had gotten some useful information off the naïve archer earlier and decided to act on it. The main objective was still to hunt beasts and gain levels, but finding a small group of other survivors would sure be a welcome addition to his total number of tutorial points.

Three hours later, he was fighting a giant buffalo-thing, naturally winning. It didn't seem to possess any special magical powers despite it being above level 25. It was just big and could take one hell of a beating. Besides that, though, it was easy to fight. This had ultimately led to the buffalo being every survivor's preferred prey as less risk was associated with the hunt.

This mighty beast was mutilated by William's spinning metal disc of death. Like a saw blade, it penetrated into the beast, spinning as blood flew everywhere. The mana consumption was insane, but it only took a few seconds before the buffalo was cut in half at its mid-section.

Continuing its flight, the disc penetrated slightly into a tree, as William stopped the spinning. A few seconds later, the disc started smoking and soon disappeared into nothingness. Into pure mana that reintegrated with the atmosphere.

William was still a bit baffled by the trees' strength, as he was utterly incapable of cutting them in two, only able to penetrate the bark. Though it was only some trees, others could be cut down easily like regular pre-system trees.

His critical thoughts on trees were sadly interrupted as he heard the sound of people talking. The noise of his fight had apparently been loud enough to attract others.

Smiling, he levitated himself up to a tree by lifting himself up by his metallic armor as he hid among some leaves, eagerly awaiting the survivors coming to investigate.

He could only lick his lips as he saw five people. None of them were from Richard's group as he did not recognize them, though he had to admit he didn't quite know everyone.

As the survivors saw the beast that had been cut in half, they all stopped dead in their tracks. Before anyone could open their mouth, a giant spinning disc of metal flew out from one of the trees, cutting into their caster.

What followed was a mad scramble to get their bearings, which was ultimately in vain as daggers started flying at them from every direction, followed by yet another two discs of metal. The archer only managed to get off a couple of arrows before he too fell, all of which easily blocked by a wall of metal protecting the tree's crown the attacker hid in.

William, pleased with the worthwhile ambush, jumped down from the tree as he looted the corpses. All had been 25 or above, and all had plenty of points. As he looted, he thought about how it still wasn't really worth killing humans for the experience. He really hoped tutorial points were valuable.

William didn't hate humans. He just didn't really understand them most of the time. He did hate how they often acted. Their illogical approach to nearly everything. How they made asinine decisions that a million studies could tell them was stupid.

If the tutorial didn't encourage him to kill them, he likely wouldn't even have bothered with it. He would just have been a good little boy and made use of them for free healing and crafting. But the system rewarded him for killing them, so he would kill them. The system wanted there to be the fewest amount of survivors possible.

William could do that. He would make sure the number was as low as it could be. The teenager was also nothing if not ambitious. His final goal of how many he wanted to survive reflected that.

It wasn't personal; it was only business - pure logic to further himself and his strength. So he had concluded the optimal number of survivors to be:

Chapter 30: Preparations for evolution

Jake coughed as another batch turned utterly black, and the horrendous stench of the tar-like residue invaded his nostrils. Yet this one wasn't even that bad, as this was just one of many attempts at making his very first common-rarity poison, and his first tries had gone far worse. He hadn't managed to craft anything the last two days, though he had gotten a level at one point. It turned out that you didn't need to successfully craft something to get a bit of experience.

He had eaten and acquired knowledge about the common-rarity moss and the blue mushrooms. The poison he was trying to make was relatively simple, requiring only those two ingredients along with some water. Yet it was still far more complicated than anything he had made of inferior-rarity by far.

After his evolution, he had gotten better at controlling his mana. A skill that only became more and more important the further one went with alchemy.

Doing alchemy was a bit like being a surgeon doing an organ transplant mixed with a chemist trying to mix up a bunch of acids, hoping it doesn't all explode in his face. Mana being the only real tool to help you accomplish this. The mixing bowl merely served as a medium to channel your mana into. On it was engraved thousands of minuscule runes that Jake didn't understand at all, he just knew it allowed him to shape and control his mana.

With mana, one had to extract the ingredients' valuable parts, integrate it into the mixture, and create a balance of sorts. Jake found it hard to explain as a lot of it came down to feel. There wasn't really any comparable action back on earth, except maybe some super-complicated puzzle games.

Another issue except the increased difficulty was mana consumption. Jake's plan of dumping his free points into perception became unrealistic as his crafting abilities improved. As he got better, his mana expenditure increased immensely, and even with the many levels in his profession, adding a lot of wisdom, he still started having issues.

The common-rarity poison and its mana requirements were even more insane. More than a thousand mana was spent every attempt. This meant that without a full pool of mana, Jake had no way even to attempt it.

The reason why he was so set on making a poison of common-rarity was because of all the reading he had done on Records and evolution of classes, races, and professions. Difficult achievements or performing above what is expected of your current level resulted in more experience, but it also strengthened your Records.

Having lacking Records had many negative consequences. High Records, first of all, resulted in better evolutions of your class, profession, and even race. Having insufficient Records could even result in one being unable to evolve or level at all.

In fact, lack of experience was often not the roadblock for most powerhouses in the multiverse. It was a lack of Records. One could technically level nearly indefinitely by only taking extremely low risks or even get carried by others. For example, if one hunted beasts with protectors removing the hunt's danger, while you would still earn experience aplenty, no Records of value would be gained.

The same concept was naturally found with professions. Jake could technically keep churning out the easy inferior-rarity potions and poisons all day, just raking in the experience and levels with little to no challenge. This, however, would give him no Records of value.

Jake had no idea about his Records. Newly initiated universes were not exactly anything that was covered in any of the books. It talked a lot about relying on your inherited Records for the first evolutions. Higher evolved beings would pass down a portion of their Records, giving their children easy progress at the beginning, removing any roadblocks.

Something he seriously doubted he had. Everyone was G-rank after all, a rank lower than any that even existed in the multiverse. There was, of course, a chance that actions before the initiation had allowed some amount of Records to be acquired, but he doubted it was anything meaningful.

He did have some things going for him, though. Challenge Dungeons were not something exclusive to the tutorial, but something found throughout the multiverse. The same thing was true for regular dungeons. Clearing these would often help to gain Records and was the go-to for many races and factions.

Another thing was his bloodline. According to what he read, bloodline abilities were weird, and there was no consensus about how they came about or why some have them, and others don't. It was, however, well-documented that bloodlines did influence a person's Records. This wasn't surprising, as according to what he read literally *everything* affected one's Records.

Bloodlines were also interesting for their genetic aspect as they were directly inheritable. The only element to appear on status screens, at least. Usual things such as personality traits, talents, and other genetic details like eye color, height worked a lot like before the system. It also stated that the more powerful the parent, the more powerful the child would naturally grow to be. He interpreted that as S-rank dragons not having F-rank babies, which kind of made sense.

All of the reading about genetics and bloodlines naturally led to Jake wondering how the hell he had a bloodline ability. It was known that bloodlines could be obtained through some extremely, almost impossibly, rare system-created events, but other than that, it was entirely random. A child of a layman could be born with a bloodline out of nowhere.

It was not like bloodline abilities were rare, though. They varied immensely and came in many types. Most bloodlines were even completely useless and sometimes even damaging. One example of a useless one was a bloodline merely giving a weird hair color. The negative ones also varied widely. Some led to early deaths, like ones causing cancer-like growths simply killing the holder, while others were mere annoyances, such as passively giving off a terrible stench.

After having read all that, Jake was delighted with his bloodline. At least it didn't seem to hold any inherently bad qualities. In fact, it seemed like an excellent bloodline. As to how good, he had no idea. The book's examples were only bad, useless, or classified as giving only insignificant benefits. Those holding strong bloodlines often didn't share the details of their abilities, which was rather logical, as openly advertising your strengths, and possible weaknesses did seem like a bad idea.

Despite his bloodline, Jake was still a bit worried about the whole Records thing. The importance of them was so apparent in all the books talking of levels and evolution. The uncertainty of potentially lacking in this paramount aspect of the system led Jake to try and go above and beyond and create a common-rarity poison before his first profession upgrade. One thing he was one hundred percent sure on was that his performance now would influence that upgrade immensely.

Even if it didn't pay off right away, at least it also helped him train his concocting skills far more than just spamming out weak poisons. He still had to survive this dungeon after all.

Taking a look at the dungeon window, he noted that nearly half his time in the dungeon was over.

Time remaining: 15 Days – 6:21:57

In this time, he had made significant progress. His profession had gotten to level 22, and he was getting very close to crafting the common-rarity poison. He just needed the last part down. By then, the evolution of his profession would be imminent.

Regarding evolution, it would likely be very uninteresting. A variant profession like Jake's was something called a legacy-profession and had a rather set-in-stone progression the first couple of evolutions. It didn't mean he couldn't be offered other types of professions or even alchemist-variants, but it did mean he would lose some things if he did. Alchemist of the Malefic Viper was a legacy-line passed down in the Cult of the Malefic Viper to their young alchemists.

From what he had gathered, the cult was an ancient religion of sorts following the snake turned dragon he had seen on the mural after the second challenge. They mainly specialized in alchemy, more accurately, poisons.

The books he read were naturally also left by them. This whole place was like a section of one of their academies or temples, ripped straight out by the system and tucked into its own little dungeon.

Jake had first thought that the system had created everything found in the dungeon, but he no longer did. Most of the books had authors, there were scribbles and drawings in many of them, and handwritten notes found nearly everywhere. Which led him to believe that the place was either taken from somewhere or perhaps simply copied. Naturally, he had no way to know.

However, he did know that today would be the day he succeeded in making the poison. He was in the zone, and all he needed was for his mana to regenerate fully. He had already used a mana potion and was currently eating some blue mushrooms.

The Bluebright Mushrooms were the main ingredient of his chosen poison, after all. They were also very dense with mana, helping his recovery speed a lot.

An hour or so later, he was back to full. The bowl was cleaned, the ingredients ready. He had even used the Alchemist's Purification he had chosen at level 20. He was unsure if it had any beneficial effects, but he did it anyway.

Looking at the skill, he at least saw nothing negative in using it.

[Alchemist's Purification (Common)] – Attempt to purify any alchemical ingredient. Purification can help remove unwanted properties from a component, making the finished mixture purer. Must have suitable ingredients. Must have suitable materials. Purification does not require any additional tools or equipment, but the skill's effect can be amplified using certain catalysts. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of Alchemist's Purification based on wisdom.

No book mentioned any negative side-effects either when it came to using it on the moss or mushrooms. Over the last two weeks, Jake had read a lot of books. He must have gone through more than thirty so far, and there were still hundreds left.

Talking of skills he had gotten, at level 15, he picked up Sense Poison as no new attractive options had come up. He was also slightly afraid of losing access to it after his profession evolved, so he decided to take no chances.

[Sense Poison (Uncommon)] – Gives a passive ability to detect poisonous substances and their toxicity level. An alchemist must be able to find the materials to craft his products after all. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of Sense Poison based on perception.

Even now, Jake could feel the poisons in the garden despite being in the laboratory. The skill didn't precisely pinpoint the direction unless he got really close to it. When he was close to it, though, he could feel exactly where it was. When that close, he could even get a general feel for their toxicity level.

This had become useful even in the dungeon. Not all plants had the same strength by default despite both being identified as the same item, which meant the skill allowed Jake to pick out more suitable ingredients. As an example, mixing too potent moss with a less potent mushroom would lead to an inevitable disaster when mixing. In the same vein, the mushroom couldn't overpower the toxicity in the moss too much.

Using this skill to pick out the ingredients for his first common-rarity poison was naturally done. It had taken some trial and error to get it down, but he was sure he had the best ingredients picked for this attempt.

The process of the mix was like it had been with the lower rarity creations. Purified water filled the bowl as the moss was put in. Mana was injected through the engravings on it, as the mana entered the moss and started extracting the valuable fluids found within, giving the water a green tinge.

When around half of the juices were out, he added a third of the Bluebright Mushrooms. The process of extracting started once more, as Jake focused as hard as he possibly could. He had done this exact process many times before, but he was still nervous.

Next, he added the mushrooms one by one as he slowly extracted their fluids. It was entirely possible to add all the ingredients at once, but it was easier, albeit far slower, to add them one by one. Jake did not feel like taking any risks, preferring to increase his chances of success slightly at the cost of time.

Reaching the final stages, he took a deep breath. This was where he had failed the last four times. At the very end, one had to bring it all together and finalize the concoction. This was often described as the most challenging step, and therefore often the point of failure.

Infusing the final bit of mana and focusing on bringing it together, he felt his entire body tense up. With every fiber of his being, he focused on controlling the mana.

Even his Sphere of Perception zeroing in on the small bowl before him. Slowly the content of the bowl started to take on a dark-blue hue, giving off a faint shimmer of the familiar blue light.

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

*****DING!’ Profession: [Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 23 - Stat points allocated, +2 free points****

*****DING!’ Race: [Human (F)] has reached level 16 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

****'DING!' Profession: [Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 24 - Stat points allocated, +2 free points****

Jake cheered out loud as the messages came in, and he smelt the aroma permeating the laboratory. It smelled like rotten beef. He didn't care, though, as he quickly started putting the concoction in one of his poison bottles.

Putting it all in, he used Identify on the bottle with the demeanor of a child opening Christmas presents.

[Necrotic Poison (Common)] – A poison with necrotic properties, infecting and killing off biological material in the affected area. Wounds caused by necrotic poison are extremely difficult to heal. The poison takes effect upon any contact with any biological material.

Alright, so the entire thing was a bit ominous and evil-sounding, but he was happy he had made it. The two profession-levels were also more than welcome. Even more importantly, he had crafted a common-rarity potion before his first profession upgrade.

He decided to split the free stats between perception and wisdom, as he had done for the most part during the last many levels. It wasn't a 50-50 split, but relatively close.

Opening his status window, he was once more reminded of his progress.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (F) – lvl 16]

Class: [Archer – lvl 9]

Profession: [Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 24]

Health Points (HP): 1010/1010

Mana Points (MP): 248/1250

Stamina: 287/360

Stats

Strength: 39

Agility: 42

Endurance: 36

Vitality: 101

Toughness: 50

Wisdom: 125

Intelligence: 27

Perception: 103

Willpower: 59

Free points: 0

Titles: [Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch]

Class Skills: [Basic One-Handed Weapon (Inferior)], [Basic Stealth (Inferior)], [Advanced Archery (Common)], [Archer's Eye (Common)]

Profession Skills: [Herbology (Common)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Concoct Poison (Common)], [Alchemist's Purification (Common)], [Toxicology (Uncommon)], [Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)], [Sense Poison (Uncommon)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Rare)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Rare)]

Race Skills: [Identify (Common)], [Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races (Unique)]

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

His combat-related stats were starting to lag behind by quite a lot. Only perception was at a pretty good level. Of course, this would likely rapidly change the second he got out of the dungeon. He had quite a backlog of poison and potions for him to use whenever he got out and said supply was only growing by the day. He couldn't carry much of it with his satchel, but he could take quite a bit.

Exiting the laboratory, he decided to take a break from making poisons. His mana was too low, and he was mentally strained despite his delight at the successful concoction. Instead, he went to cultivate some poison in the garden. He still had plenty of ingredients remaining, but he had already started making preparations to cure himself of the poison and leave.

He had some chosen plants that he had picked out with Poison Sense as they were the most potent. Using Cultivate Toxin, he was slowly improving them and making them grow while also increasing their toxicity.

He had decided to go with the concept of fighting poison with poison. He had come across some recipes with potential, but he was still far from settled on one. He was still searching for one that could incorporate the silver mushrooms.

Many plans had been made, and if everything went to shit, he had some recipes he would just give a shot, but for now, Jake would use all the time he had remaining. Seeing the dungeon challenge day timer tick from 15 to 14. Half the time was over - half to go.

Leaving the garden, he chugged a mana potion and headed for the laboratory once more. He wanted to get a bit more work done before heading to bed. Looming death was on the horizon, but right now, only the imminent profession evolution was on his mind.