

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 31: Professional evolution

Jake awoke once more after only an hour of sleep. Resources refilled, he stretched and did some light shadow-boxing to get the blood flowing. The concept of tiredness and physical exhaustion being such a rarity was still not something he was used to.

His race's evolution reduced this need further, as it also did much to limit mental exhaustion. He still burned himself out nearly daily, but then again, he was always working. He either read about alchemy, did alchemy, prepared for alchemy, or thought out how to better do alchemy. His only distractions were small research trips on other topics such as general knowledge of the system and looking for more information on bloodlines.

The plan for today was to get another level and evolve his profession. He dearly hoped that his preparations were sufficient and that his potential upgrades would be worth it. As long as one met the required Records needed

to evolve, one would have options available, but the quality of said options could vary wildly.

For now, it was time for some more alchemy. Jake had no interest in attempting to make another concoction of Necrotic Poison, as he quite honestly didn't have confidence in producing it efficiently quite yet.

Instead, he just started churning out some of the inferior-rarity poisons, mixed in with a batch of potions here and there.

The mixing itself went easy enough, the progress he had made in his endeavor to craft the Necrotic Poison showing. He hadn't made any lower rarity poison for the last few days as Jake focused exclusively on completing his goal, but also because he feared it would level him to 25 before he managed to succeed.

The hours slowly went by as he mixed, and with little fanfare or excitement, he got the awaited notification.

****Profession Evolution Requirements Met****

Through struggle and perseverance, you have learned the craft of alchemy. Your path has been isolated, a lonesome journey to reach your level. Your actions have shown unparalleled raw talent and ability in the art of concocting poisons, yet also true skills when brewing potions.

Begin Evolution now?

Y/N

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

The message was a bit interesting, pointing out details of how he had operated during the dungeon. A *bit* sad to have his isolation pointed out like that, but he had always been the introverted type, so it wasn't that bad in all honesty. The last part of it, save for the obligatory warning, was especially interesting as it directly pertained to him performing well, which he very much

hoped would result in something good. Also, who doesn't like positive reinforcement now and then?

Accepting the evolution, nothing happened for a few seconds before new notifications appeared.

****5 Possible Evolutions Available****

He cracked a smile as he saw that message. 5 was the maximum number of available evolutions the system would ever show according to the books, and no one complained about more options. He also knew that these options would also only be the best ones he could get. The system having likely already filtered out lesser versions.

He decided to do the same as he did with new skills and go through them one by one.

Experienced Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – An Experienced Alchemist of the Malefic Viper has learned the basics of Alchemy. Allows one to combine the 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

production of poisons, contrary to the craft of potions. Your path has been ordinary so far, slowly building experience to one day reach greater heights. Have no fear, for the path to power is no sprint but a marathon. Stat bonuses per level: +4 Vit, +3 Wis +2 Will +2 Tough, +3 Free Points.

This option seemed to be the linear evolution of his Alchemist of the Malefic Viper profession. The stats were the same, only better, awarding 14 stats instead of 8 every level. According to the books, an option like this was the most normal by far, hence, what the vast majority ended up with. It was relatively easy to unlock, and the Records earned through simply leveling the profession often being enough. In other words, if you unlocked the ability to evolve, an option like this would be available.

But in the end, he hoped for something better. Moving on to the next one, it got a bit more interesting... but not really.

Gardener of the Malefic Viper – The Gardener of the Malefic Viper has learned the art of alchemy yet prefers to find themselves tending to the gardens. The Gardener of the Malefic Viper possesses greatly improved abilities when cultivating poisons and growing herbs, helping the whole garden flourish in prosperity. While it is not the gardener's preferred path, he can still use his precious ingredients to create deadly poisons and even restorative potions if needed. Stat bonuses per level: +3 Wis, +3 Vit, +3 Tough, +3 Free Points.

He quickly eliminated this option as he would prefer the prior one. The stats provided were only 12 total, so stat-wise, it was worse too. It did still demonstrate some of the other paths available to him. This one was another very commonly found evolutions to the profession he theorized.

Of course, it focused on the tending of plants, mainly poisonous ones, just like the flavor text said. While Jake recognized the value of the Cultivate Toxin skill and the importance of the gardening-profession, it wasn't really his cup of tea.

Moving on to the next, Jake got a bit dumbfounded.

Toxic Chef – Toxic Chef seeks not to find the deadliest poison but the one best supplementing his menu. Allows one to create dishes with toxic ingredients, providing a wide variety of benefits. This type of cook combines toxic materials not to create weapons but food. While the cook can still create regular foods, they prefer to use unusual ingredients of a toxic nature in their creation. Stat bonuses per level: +3 Vit, +3 Tough +2 Will +1 Wis, +1 Free Points. WARNING: Skills pertaining to Alchemist of the Malefic Viper may be lost or changed upon becoming a Toxic Chef.

Yeah, not going to happen, but what the hell? Jake thought as he finished reading it all. Just because he had been eating and even ‘cooking’ poisonous mushrooms and moss as his sole source of food for the last two-plus weeks, the damn system had decided he was qualified to be a goddamn chef.

The stats did reflect his poor cooking skills with how little the profession gave. 10 total stats, only two more than his Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. It also didn’t seem to be a variant class of any kind, but just a regular insane poison chef profession.

Picking it would also be a complete divergence of his original profession, and as the warning mentioned, would lead him to lose skills. Unless he suffered from severe mental damage or was *really* into cooking, it would be pure stupidity to pick it. Swiftly, he moved on, still a bit grumpy by even having been given the option.

Hermit Alchemist – The Hermit Alchemist is no stranger to alchemy yet has never interacted with his peers. This alchemist prefers to work in solitude and abhors interruptions, progressing their craft always on their lonesome. Allows one to combine the natural treasures of the world, and make potions, pills, transmute one material to another, with a slew of other mystical means to be discovered. Through this isolated training of your craft, you have learned to focus on your work over

everything else. Your continued path shall thus not be defined by the will of others, but the path you discover on your own. Stat bonuses per level: +5 Will, +5 Wis, +3 Int, +5 Free Points. WARNING: Skills pertaining to Alchemist of the Malefic Viper may be lost or changed upon becoming a Hermit Alchemist.

Now we were getting somewhere. The fact that it awarded 18 stats per level was higher than everything else before it by a mile. This was another kind of variant Jake had seen mentioned in one of the books, and while relatively well-known, often had demanding requirements. It required a particular mind-set and personality trait to be present in the person having it, making it impossible to gain for most.

It also often resulted in penalties to experience gain if around people for too long, and many of the crafting skills often required one to craft alone, making all joint crafting projects impossible or heavily penalized. Hermit classes also often had a massive negative experience multiplier when hunting in parties, though that shouldn't matter much considering it was a profession. Hermits were, in essence, very strong, but with a lot of trade-offs.

There was also the fact that it was no direct evolution in the line of the Malefic Viper. Which meant that Jake would lose or have some of his skills changed. And while he hated a lot about eating mushrooms to gain knowledge, he recognized how powerful it was. The Palate skill was just busted.

The prospects of the profession did most certainly appeal to him, though. He always preferred to work alone, and he doubted any of the negative side-effects would really affect him much. Ultimately, it didn't matter much, as he saw the last option.

Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – A Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper has come far from when first concocting his first poison. You have displayed speed and skills at the pinnacle. Allows the alchemist to combine the 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 production of poisons, contrary to the craft of potions. Your proven talent as an artisan of death stands above all peers, signaling the coming of another harbinger of decay following in the footsteps of the Malefic Viper. Only his chosen may walk this path. Stat bonuses per level: +4 Vit, +4 Wis, +3 Will +2 Tough +2 Int, +5 Free Points.

He couldn't hold himself back from cracking a big smile as he read the entire description. It was at a massive 20 stats per level, far above any of the other options. On top of that, it was a relatively straightforward upgrade to his profession, staying in the same lane.

If he had to point out anything negative, it was the ominous tone of the entire thing.

He firmly believed that he got this option from managing to craft the common-rarity poison before his evolution. Getting a return on your hard work was always satisfying. He wasn't quite sure about the whole prodigy thing, but recognition was kind of cool.

He hadn't seen this type of upgrade mentioned in any of the books, but then again, the more powerful it is, the rarer. In fact, Jake had a suspicion that most who got this profession just claimed to be an Experienced Alchemist of the Malefic Viper or another more common variant instead. He assumed other 'steps' between Experienced and Prodigious existed depending on how good the system judged one to be.

With this clearly being the best option in his mind, he picked it. Hermit Alchemist did seem kind of up his alley, but he didn't want to lose any of his current skills.

As he confirmed his choice, he prepared himself for an influx of information, but instead, he felt his vision shift. The surroundings started to blend together as if he was entering some Picasso painting, and everything went murky and indiscernible. Even his Sphere of Perception got thrown all off, telling him that everything was moving all at once.

Everything finally started to calm down, and the first thing he noticed was how dark it suddenly was. Due to his vastly improved perception, he could still see a bit, though. And what he saw was just a vast plane of nothingness. He stood on what seemed like black rocks, and kneeling down to feel it, he found its texture smooth like polished granite.

Another thing he quickly noticed was the light mist or fog in his surroundings. Oddly enough, the mist stopped a few millimeters from his skin, and when he breathed in, he felt nothing different.

Just as he was starting to wonder why the system had brought him here, he felt something. Turning to the side, he knew something was observing him. Before he could try to identify what it was, a man appeared before him.

Though calling him a man was a hard sell. Extremely fine black scales with a slight dark-green tinge lined his entire body. At first glance, it looked like skin, but it clearly wasn't. He didn't seem to wear anything except a tattered black

robe. Yet the very first thing Jake noticed was the eyes. They shone with dim green light, a pair of piercing vertical slits reminiscent of a snake gazing back at him, only slightly obstructed by his unkempt long black hair.

“Now, what do we have here?” the scaled man said with a raspy voice.

Jake didn’t know who or what this being was, but he felt not the slightest tinge of threat or fear. That didn’t mean his instincts were silent, though. Every fiber of his being told him that whatever this being was... it wasn’t something he could even consider fighting.

By the method the figure had appeared before him; Jake had no doubt that the scaled man was unimaginably stronger than himself. The only reason why he kept his cool was how silent his danger sense was. In fact, he had never felt safer in his life than this very moment.

“Your guess is as good as mine. One moment I was evolving my profession; the next, I appeared here,” Jake answered as he tried to identify the man.

[?]

“Oh... that is... interesting,” the man said, as his eyes shone an even brighter color as he observed Jake. “Ah, I see...”

He nodded as he looked at Jake, seemingly not interested in sharing his thoughts.

“So...” Jake started, prompting the scaled man to explain.

“Just the system doing what it does,” he answered with a shrug. “It transported you here, right?”

“It did,” Jake answered, seeing no reason to hide anything. Moreso, he suspected that the being in front of him already knew.

“And you have obtained a profession related to the Malefic Viper?”

Jake nodded once more.

“Well, I am the Malefic Viper; nice to meet you and all that crap,” he said, waving dismissively.

“Now fuck off.”

Chapter 32: A very weird encounter

The scaled man’s words momentarily dumbfounded Jake. No, if he was to be believed, the Malefic Viper’s words.

Unsure what to say, Jake just stared back at the man. After what felt like an eternity, the scaled man’s face turned to one of confusion as he observed Jake closely with apparent puzzlement.

“I told you to fuck off,” he said as he scratched the back of his head. “You must know who I am, right? So do as I say and leave me alone.”

“Well, yeah, I heard you. But I thought the Malefic Viper was a snake turned dragon?” Jake asked, a bit confused by the entire situation.

“Oh, that?” The man laughed as an explosion of green mist burst out of him, with Jake standing completely unaffected.

The scaled man was still there, but behind him was a giant projection nearly identical to the dragon he had seen on the mural. “See? It *is* me. Can you leave now?”

“Yeah, I see it,” Jake answered, still utterly lost as to what the hell was happening. Why had the system brought him to meet the namesake of his profession? “Gotta be honest, I have no clue why I am here or how to leave again. ”

Dispelling the projection, the Malefic Viper continued to look confused back at him. “Seriously, you’re a member of the order, right?”

“No, I don’t think so, at least?” Jake answered truthfully. Would he be considered a member of the order, considering that everything he knew came

from what seemed like an old sanctuary? He hadn't formally signed up for anything. Also, wasn't it a cult?

"Then how in the hell did you acquire my legacy? And why did it bring- wait."

As if suddenly enlightened, the Malefic Viper chuckled a bit to himself.

"You are a newly integrated human to the system, right? In one of those tutorials," he asked, an amused smile on his face.

"Yeah, I got the profession through a challenge dungeon," Jake answered, confused as to the apparent mood-swing the other man was showing. What was so amusing about him more or less appropriating a legacy?

Laughing even louder, he put his hand on Jake's shoulder, though his hand didn't actually make any physical contact. It appeared that touching one another was stopped by the system somehow.

“You have no idea, kid. This brings back some memories. Oh man, I can’t believe you actually got through all that bullshit,” he said, trying to pat Jakes's shoulder again in vain.

“I don’t get it,” Jake said, his confusion growing by the second. Had he unintentionally gotten himself involved with some unstable ancient being?

“No, I assume you wouldn’t. It would be damn weird if ya did. But it is funny, so I’m gonna tell you.”

“Okay?” He actually kind of wanted to just leave now...

“Back in my younger days, I was very much into all of these events made by the system. You know what Records are?”

“Partly.”

“Eh, just look up Akashic Records or something. Pretty much all pre-system cultures had some myth related to it. Just know that having sufficient Records

is quite crucial for everyone. Mortals and gods alike. Which brings me to the next part.

“Newly integrated universes aren’t just for the newly integrated races themselves. Many beings throughout the multiverse can obtain countless benefits from it. Most notably, a huge amount of Records can be earned. One such way of earning more Records is by investing in the tutorials and getting rewards from the system. It’s essentially just glorified gambling making such investments,” The scaled man began, as Jake was finally starting to understand why he was so happy.

“Well, you being here means that I very likely already earned back that investment. Geez, you must have done well for you to come here.”

“Yeah, I...” Jake wanted to explain what had happened in the dungeon, but the Malefic Viper raised his hand to interrupt.

“Don’t bother. I quite frankly don’t give a fuck. Besides, the system tends not to like oversharing. It’s a bit overprotective when it comes to new universes after some gods accidentally ruined a lesser universe back in the 5th era,” he said as he plopped down on the ground sitting with his legs crossed. “Totally wasn’t me, by the way.”

Jake was about to ask some questions but was once more interrupted.

“No, I am not going to answer anything. Again, the system wouldn't like that either. Shit, you being alive should be proof enough. Never heard of anything below S-rank able to survive in this part of my realm,” as the Viper finished those words, with a movement Jake couldn't even see, an explosion sounded out, throwing up dust and broken stone everywhere.

With a whisk of the Malefic Viper's hand, the dust dispersed, and Jake found himself standing on a small floating platform of stone, utterly untouched by even a single speck of dust. Around him, nothing remained as far as his eyes could see. Everything had simply been disintegrated into nothingness.

“See? Overprotective. Could collapse the entire damn realm on you without leaving a scratch. Ya can't even kill yourself if you wanted to right now.”

With another wave of his hand, the whole place was restored back to exactly how it was before he shattered it, leaving it as if nothing had ever happened.

“Back to the story. You see, long ago, I made a certain challenge dungeon during a time where we gods had quite a bit more free rein on designing them. I am both incredibly proud and a bit embarrassed about how I made it, but at the time, it was super amusing,” the Viper said with a cheeky smile.

“Honestly, I more or less made it as a joke. The requirements were bullshit made up on the spot to make the challenger feel special, going like: “oh my god, I barely fit these, this must be destiny!”. And then, just after entering the first room, I would have them get impaled by a poisoned spike.”

“That does sound very familiar,” Jake nodded. He had found the design of the first part of the dungeon a bit suspect. Though he was embarrassed to admit, he didn’t really catch onto how suspicious the requirements were. Thinking back, it was a bit weird.

“It was a bit funny, right? The only sad part is that you don’t actually die in a challenge dungeon. At least not normally. Quite proud of myself for gaming the system on the last part of the challenge where ya have to cure yourself. Took quite a few workarounds to make that work and have the lethality stick,” he laughed, clearly proud.

“So, challenge dungeons aren’t normally lethal, but you somehow found a way to make it so, and now you’re bragging to the person who is suffering the consequences?” Jake asked pointedly.

“Yep.”

“Well, aren’t you a massive dick,” Jake said but couldn’t help snickering a bit himself.

“Guilty as charged. How was the part forcing you to feed me stuff not to die while on a timer? Forced to study my history, only to be rewarded with a mural of me being awesome?”

“Very narcissistic.”

“I take that as a compliment,” the Viper said with a huge smile. “You are surprisingly un-angry.”

“Wouldn’t it be a bit boring if you couldn’t even die from the challenge?” Jake asked. “Makes it all a bit more exciting.”

The scaled man looked at him a bit to discern if Jake was serious. He was. “That’s some fucked up logic right there. I like it!”

“Anyway, why am I here?” Jake finally asked. Funnily enough, he didn’t really feel like leaving anymore. As weird as it may sound, he found talking to the snake-god in front of him relatively easy. It was... relaxing. Maybe because he hadn't spoken to anyone for a few days or because his conversation partner wasn't human. Or maybe they just vibed.

“Now, that’s an excellent question,” he answered, nodding his head slowly. After several moments where the Malefic Viper looked like he was deep in thought, he finally turned to Jake, looking him straight in the eyes. “No idea. Well, some idea, but it's more fun if you figure it out yourself.”

Jake was once more floored by the flippant attitude of the Malefic Viper. How the hell did the revered and worshipped dragon he had seen challenge the heavens themselves and ascend, turn into... this.

“Can you at least tell me where exactly we are?” Jake answered, hoping to get at least something tangible out of the eccentric snake turned dragon.

“Oh, that’s an easy one; we’re in my realm!” he shouted loudly as he spread out his hands in a comical way. Noticing Jake still staring at him, confused, he elaborated. “That means it is kind of my world. I made it. Don’t worry about it; it is a god-thing. So, what do you think? My realm is pretty darn awesome, right?”

Looking around at the flat, desolate surroundings in all directions, he wasn’t particularly amazed.

“It sure is something,” he answered, dodging to answer. “You mentioned something about being a god?”

Jake had run into the mention of gods in some of the books he had read, but nothing concrete. It would make sense for the Malefic Viper to be considered a god, having a cult and all. He just wasn’t sure exactly what it meant by ‘god’.

“Totally am. Just keep doing stuff, gain levels, evolutions, all that jazz, and you’ll get there eventually. It’s hard work, but it’s worth it just for the immortality alone,” the Viper said, as he kept a jovial smile on his lips.

Jake just nodded along, pondering what the hell was wrong with the so-called god in front of him.

“My turn to ask something!” The Malefic snake said as he continued, “how come you’re so casual despite how fucked up this entire situation is?”

Momentarily taken aback, Jake did wonder how he was so calm. His willpower stat had most certainly increased a lot. But more importantly, he hadn’t felt anything negative from his instincts since he came here, not a single shred of danger at any point, not even at the Viper’s show of power.

“I guess my willpower stat has grown a lot,” Jake answered truthfully.

“Yeah, that isn’t how willpower works, mate. You don’t suddenly become a bastion of calmness from a stat,” the Viper explained, as he turned uncharacteristically serious. “Stats may change some parts of you, but your mind remains untouched. You become able to think faster, process everything

far more efficiently, and remember every single detail, but changes to who you are fundamentally will never happen. It has never happened. Many beings of unimaginable power, having a willpower stat at an incredible height, have fallen to the plagues of the mind.”

Jake turned solemn at the Malefic Viper's words as he detected a faint trace of sadness in his words.

“Willpower will allow you to endure the endlessness of immortality, it will help you resist attacks on your mind, and it can help you keep calm in situations of great danger. However, for those to be possible, you have to possess the ability to do those things to begin with. Some never learn to endure... and time doesn't heal all wounds.”

The Viper's look was very downtrodden at this moment as he stared out into the vast desolate wasteland that was his realm. Turning back to Jake, he continued once more.

“The path to power is a long and lonesome one, but you will meet many along the way. Friends, comrades, subordinates, and superiors, an endless web of karmic threads will be left in your wake. But the march of time is ruthless, the need for constant progress endless. Those friends will be left behind; your

comrades abandoned as they fail to keep up, your subordinates lost, superiors surpassed. Families... taken from you.”

The last few words were barely audible. Jake wasn't quite sure what exactly to say or do.

“Sorry, I'm rambling again. Haven't spoken a word to anyone for a very, very long time,” the Viper apologized.

Jake looked back at him for a few seconds, unsure of what to say or do. If he should even do anything. As the silence continued, however, he collected his thoughts and spoke honestly.

“You sound like you've gone through some shit. I am not going to stand here and pretend to understand what someone like you struggles with, but I am pretty sure doing nothing isn't the solution,” Jake said.

“And what makes you think I haven't tried to do *everything* already?” he asked back, a formless aura spreading out from him.

Jake felt like he suddenly stood before an incarnation of death and destruction. Yet he didn't back down. He pushed back, his bloodline fully awoken, refusing to be inferior. The aura failed to affect him as he stood unmoving.

"Just sounds like a challenge you haven't been able to beat yet. And if it isn't that kind of issue..." Jake said, as he continued, his voice a bit softer. "Then, sometimes, moving on can be the best."

The Malefic Viper looked back at Jake, clearly a bit surprised at how he still stood unaffected.

"When you lose everything, what is there to do but try to regain it?" he asked pointedly.

"If what you've done so far hasn't worked, then shift up your strategy or the rules of the games, but... sometimes victory is found by just walking away." Jake began as he sighed. "I didn't know them... but I have never met anyone who doesn't want their loved ones to be happy, even after their own end. Maybe your victory is found not through fixing what you can't, but by creating something new. It doesn't have to be better... just good enough."

Jake didn't exactly know where his words came from. In some ways, he tried to channel his inner Jacob, and in others borrowing from something his father had once told him. When he got injured and had to give up going pro with his archery, he was broken... but those words had helped him find a new goal.

The Viper just stared back at Jake for what felt like an eternity. He finally chuckled a bit as he smiled - his first genuine smile for a long time.

"Look at you going full-on philosopher on my ass," he said as his chuckle turned to a laugh. "Oh man, this shit is absurd. A mortal comforting a god, what has the world come to."

Thinking about it, Jake had to agree. He was a bit embarrassed to admit that he had kind of forgot the scaled man in front of him was a god for a second. In his defense, he didn't exactly act like one.

What followed was a sight rarely seen. A mortal and a god were sitting on the ground, just chatting. The Viper was throwing out advice on minor things, with Jake just telling random anecdotes from his own world. Perhaps even Jake,

with his ordinarily introverted personality, had missed talking to anyone during his isolation. The Viper having missed conversations was even more evident.

Jake had no idea how long they talked, but he thoroughly enjoyed their time together. He heard stories about the multiverse, about how the Viper had met a fellow god and fallen in love. It was never spoken, but Jake knew that it was she he had talked about earlier, as he always had a glint of sadness in his eyes whenever he mentioned her.

Just two lonely people, caring neither for status nor power.

It was no secret that Jake came away with the most knowledge. The Viper knew far more than Jake on pretty much every subject. Yet he held back on giving direct advice on anything related to the system. He did provide a bit of general knowledge, but nothing major. According to the Viper, there was more value in Jake discovering those secrets by himself.

After a few hours, the Malefic Viper finally got up, as he motioned for Jake to do the same.

“It seems like it is your time to return soon,” the Malefic Viper said, as Jake got on his feet.

“We still haven’t found out why I came here,” Jake added. They had managed to somehow not talk about that.

“Oh yeah, that. When I made the dungeon back in the day, I didn’t have anyone else around with permission to approve the better evolutions, so the responsibility naturally fell to me. One could call it a happy little accident that you came here,” the Viper laughed.

“Ah! Now I remember! The description did say something about being chosen,” Jake said as he finally got it. “Does that mean I passed the job interview?”

“You got lucky young man,” The Viper joked back before turning a bit more serious once again. “I won’t give you anything concrete, but I can give you a tip. Focus on the mana. You can feel it all around you. Feel it more. The earlier you do so, the better. It will help you in more ways than you can imagine.”

Extending his hand towards him, the Viper motioned for a handshake.

Without hesitating, Jake took his hand, knowing physical contact couldn't be made. Yet to his surprise, his hand met with scaly textures. Before he could question anything, he felt a warm flow encompass his body as he shook the hand.

"Something for your journey. A small string of karma if you may," the Malefic Viper said as he let go of Jake's hand.

Feeling his vision blur and spin once more, Jake knew that his time here was over. The last thing he saw was the green eyes staring back at him as he heard the Viper speak one last time.

"And thank you once more, Jake. Cya later!"

With those words, he disappeared, and the Malefic Viper was alone once more.

The scaled man didn't take off back to the decrepit old cave. He couldn't even remember the last time he spoke with anyone. Met anyone, to be honest.

Looking at his hand, he still felt the aura of his little visitor. Compared to him, it was so small, so insignificant. And yet it felt strong. Limited, but powerful still. Deep within the Records, he felt a power that even gave him pause.

"What a powerful bloodline..." he whispered to himself. It wasn't just powerful; it was intimidating. Even the Record's mere remnants carried the charms of something that refused to back away from his probing gaze. It was primal, like a wild beast, one refusing to surrender to even *him*.

Many might see this foolhardiness as a weakness, but the Viper felt only strength. One would never achieve true power from avoiding danger. It may lead to a short life, but without said determination, one would never reach the pinnacle either.

Smiling, he thought that he might just have made a good investment. It didn't come cheap, as he still felt a faint trace of weakness, unlike anything he had felt in countless eons. Despite so, he felt no regret. More than just an investment in a powerful initiate, he may have made something even more valuable.

The smile quickly disappeared, however, as he thought back to their conversation. The calmness and straightforwardness of a mortal had truly impressed him. But the fact that he was so genuinely straightforward also meant that the words carried more weight. Being spoken to directly was not something he had ever been used to.

Taking a step, he appeared in a valley. This valley, compared to everything else surrounding it, was not desolate but brimming with life everywhere. Small animals ran in the shrubbery, birds chirped, and a calm wind blew throughout.

In the center of this valley, two obelisks stood. One of them had countless runes with unimaginable power, covering every speck of its surface, each rune holding more information than a mortal mind could comprehend in a lifetime.

The other obelisk only had a single rune even though they were the same size. This solitary rune did not exude any power but was only a single word:

Hope

The Malefic Viper stood there for a while before moving forward and putting a hand on each of them.

“Perhaps I have wallowed enough. You always told me to smile and never doubt myself,” he spoke while gently caressing the runes on the filled obelisk while only having his palm rest on the lone rune on the other.

“Perhaps it’s time for the Malefic Viper to make his return.”

Chapter 33: True Blessing of the Malefic Viper

As his vision started to return, the only feeling in his body that remained was a constant searing pain in his hand, extending up his arm and into his entire body. It didn’t feel malicious, just far more powerful than Jake’s body was capable of handling.

The moment his feet hit the ground, he also collapsed down on his knees, heaving for air while clutching his chest. The pain gradually faded away and was instead replaced by a strong feeling of power. It was unlike any level-ups he had felt before, and certainly far more than when he evolved his race.

He basked in the feeling for a while before everything finally calmed down. Raising his hand, he could feel that he got gotten stronger. The Viper had done something. Given him something.

Opening his status screen, he was met with a slew of messages, but the first one alone gave him great pause.

****Blessing received*: [True Blessing of the Malefic Viper (Blessing - True)] – An alchemist recognized by the Malefic Viper himself. Few throughout the ages have found themselves blessed by the Primordial, despite their desire to be so. Through your direct karmic connection, the wisdom and willpower of the Malefic Viper empower you. +10% Willpower, +10% Wisdom. Grants access to many new paths. Only one blessing can be held at a time.***

Jake was confused as he read it, before finally actually getting a bit annoyed. “Could have at least asked first,” he muttered to himself.

Renounce the Malefic Viper as Patron? All faith-based skills, titles, and Blessing will be lost.

“What? No, no, no, it’s fine. Jeez,” Jake quickly said as the prompt disappeared. While he was a bit annoyed, it wasn’t like he wanted to throw away free stats like that.

Wisdom had been his highest stat before his evolution and would likely remain to be for quite a while, so getting 10% extra was already giving him bonus stats in the double digits. Willpower was also a great stat to increase.

Jake had believed that willpower was what allowed him to stay so calm and controlled throughout the tutorial, but he would have to reconsider that.

However, reading the description, he was confused, as the blessing described him not as a god but a Primordial. Perhaps they were the same thing? Though he doubted it was just semantics, as he added something else to hit the books on. Nevertheless, the willpower bonus was nice, and if nothing else increased his mana regeneration, which was always welcome. Besides that, he didn't really see much use for it currently.

Moving on down the list, he noted how he had apparently unlocked his profession upgrade after he got the blessing.

****Congratulation, you have successfully evolved your profession****

Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – A Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper has come far from when first concocting his first poison. You have displayed speed and skills at the pinnacle. Allows the alchemist to combine the 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 production of poisons, contrary to the craft of potions. Your proven talent as an artisan of death stands above all peers, signaling the coming of another harbinger of decay following in the footsteps of the Malefic Viper. Only his chosen may walk this path. Stat bonuses per level: +4 Vit, +4 Wis, +3 Will +2 Tough +2 Int, +5 Free Points.

****'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 25 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (F)] has reached level 17 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

Not anything was out of expectations there, besides perhaps the massive influx of stats from the profession and race leveling up.

With the profession evolution, he had naturally also gotten some skills. But contrary to when he got the profession, the upgrade only gave two new skills.

****Gained skill*: [Alchemical Flame (Common)] – The flame of an alchemist is one of the most critical aspects of the crafting process. The flame itself is affinity-less and not polluted by the impurities of burning a catalyst. The path to refining one's alchemical flame is a long and arduous one for all alchemists seeking the pinnacle. Allows the alchemist to create a small alchemical flame, emitting heat. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of Alchemical Flame based on wisdom***

****Gained skill*: [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Rare)] – With a single touch, the Malefic Viper has slain countless foes. Attempt to inject poison into a being through physical contact. The nature of the poison is determined by the user. The alchemist can only use toxic effects he has concocted or created prior. Some toxins cannot be used. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of Touch of the Malefic Viper based on intelligence and wisdom.***

According to the books, the first one was a fundamental skill that all alchemists got at level 25. The next one, however, was more interesting. This could easily be construed as

the first combat-related skill he had acquired from his profession. A rarity, but not an impossibility if the excellent books were to be believed.

It wasn't immediately useful, still being stuck in a dungeon and all, but he could see it being a valuable skill outside. It was also great to make use of his high wisdom and growing intelligence stats.

As he moved on down the list, the last two notification were... *What the hell*

****Gained Title*: [Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing] – Obtain the True Blessing of a Primordial. Many have claimed divinity in the vast multiverse, numerous pantheons rule, but the Primordials are few. Even fewer still, those truly blessed by a Primordial. May you bring glory to your Patron. Grants the skill: [Shroud of the Primordial]. +5 all stats, +10% all stats.***

That title was just straight-up ridiculous and explained where the feeling of power he felt came from. 10% to all stats was just insane. Even now, it gave him so much, and he couldn't imagine its value down the line as his stats grew.

Then again, he was unsure as to how common percentage-multipliers were for stats. He currently had four already, after all. one from his Bloodline Patriarch title, one from his bloodline ability itself, and two from the blessing and title he had just gotten. Which meant that he had technically only obtained them from two sources – the blessing and his bloodline.

Though he was sure, there had to be more out there.

Moving on to the last skill, the surprises only continued.

****Gained skill*: [Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)] – A shroud surrounds your very being, your Records masked, your status inaccessible. Scryers weep at the thought of tracking a single of your steps, as you remain an enigma to their sight. Using Identify on you, but a futile effort. The karmic threads in your wake, an endless web impossible to unravel. One does not merely peek behind the Shroud of the Primordial. Hides your Records and Status from all but the most powerful of prying eyes. Hiding ability increases based on willpower.***

He had little clue what most of the skill did, but it seemed to hold some kind of obscuration effect on people trying to use magic to locate him, and it could block people using Identify on him. This also finally confirmed that the Identify skill could be used on other people. Perhaps his could now after it had upgraded to common-rarity, but he would have to wait with testing that.

Besides that, he felt like most of what this skill did was something he would never be aware of it doing.

The final point was the rarity. Divine. As in god-tier. Which was kind of insane to imagine. His second-highest skill-rarity was rare, and even those skills he felt were damn strong. How many ranks above rare was divine even?

The only sad thing was perhaps the fact that the skill had such a peculiar nature. If it were a defensive or offensive skill, it would likely be an unimaginably powerful trump card. The passive shroud was nice, but the grass is greener on the other side and all that. He could see several advantages in being harder to track with magic, and of course, with Identify being blocked.

After going through all his new skills and titles, he finally opened his status screen to see the final result.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (F) – lvl 17]

Class: [Archer – lvl 9]

Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 25]

Health Points (HP): 1220/1220

Mana Points (MP): 1560/1560

Stamina: 459/460

Stats

Strength: 49

Agility: 52

Endurance: 46

Vitality: 122

Toughness: 63

Wisdom: 156

Intelligence: 38

Perception: 120

Willpower: 81

Free points: 10

Titles: [Forerunner of the New World],[Bloodline Patriarch], [Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing]

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)], [Alchemists Purification (Common)], [Alchemical Flame (Common)], [Toxicology (Uncommon)], [Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)], [Poison Sense (Uncommon), [Malefic Viper's Poison (Rare)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Rare)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Rare)]

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

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

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

The stat increases were massive across the line. A bit of quick math, he also confirmed that stat percentage bonuses were additive and not multiplicative. Which still resulted in a 20% increase to his wisdom and willpower stats from the titles gained today alone. And that was beside the bonuses from the levels and the 5 in all stats.

Not bad... not bad at all. I should go meet snake-gods more often, Jake thought jokingly to himself, smiling at the ridiculous nature in which he had gotten all of these massive gains. *Imagine what he would have given me if I had brought along a gift... note to self: bring blue mushroom next time.*

Richard sighed loudly as the man finished his report. The former archer, now upgraded to a class called Scout, had brought more bad news. A daily occurrence at this point.

“Sir, that kid is way too volatile. We should just put him down already,” the scout said. “He is too stuck in his own world to notice anything around him. He believes himself some kind of god. Just say the word, and I will have an arrow in the back of his head within the hour.”

Richard shook his head. “No, just keep shadowing him and keep track of his movements. I have seen plenty of his type before. He is an arrogant whelp, but his skills are the real deal. Someone like him is useful if controlled.”

The scout sighed as he turned to the door. “I hope you know what you’re doing, boss.”

“I do too honestly,” Richard said, returning the sigh. He had to admit that he was beginning to regret his decision to let William run wild. The kid was *too*

self-confident, to the level of being pure ignorance. For god's sake, if his rampant killing hadn't made him stick out, the fact that everyone in the damn camp could see his way too high level with Identify did. The young man had held back on learning a profession, not upgrading the Identify skill. He appeared to not even know it got upgraded, despite it being common knowledge around the camp. And now, after having gotten a profession, he still hadn't put two and two together.

No, he had just utterly ignored everything. Instead, he focused on his own foolish mission. Drumming up war. And as much as Richard hated to admit it, the kid's actions were effective. *Too* effective.

For a while, the conflict had escalated, and all hell finally broke loose a week ago when the other faction leaders' son was killed. And not just killed. William had sent his head flying into their base with a dagger stuck in his head.

To make matters even worse, he had written, “Richard says hi” on his forehead. Needless to say, Hayden, the other leader, was royally pissed. He had personally gone out and slaughtered an entire group from Richards faction. From the looks of the battle, he hadn't just killed them but tortured them to death, likely attempting to find the culprit behind his son's murder.

After that, it had only gotten worse. Lines that should never be crossed had been. Now the fights were no longer simply killing each other. Richard could handle that. He had done plenty of that while overseas. But what was happening now was just wrong.

It had reached a point where anyone not from your faction was automatically designated an enemy. The unaffiliated ones, the ones merely trying to survive on their own, had also

become victims. There had even been a single occurrence where two people from the same faction ended up fighting out of pure paranoia, one of them even dying.

Hearing the door to the cabin open, Richard looked up to see Jacob and Caroline entering. Perhaps a small bright spot in this entire nightmare was two people finally finding love through adversity. Richard was genuinely happy for them. Jacob had also proven himself to be invaluable in managing the camp.

“I heard about your friend. I am sorry for your loss,” Richard said as they took their seats in some wooden chairs across his desk. Ahmed, one of the base casters, had been one of the people who fell today. Not by William, but by a group from the other faction. *A necessary sacrifice.*

“Thanks,” Jacob said, looking dejected at the other man. “You know, today marks half of my colleagues and I either dying or going missing.”

Hearing that, Richard smiled internally at the unexpected queue. “Speaking of that archer, what are his whereabouts?”

Taken aback, Jacob looked at the man in bewilderment. He hadn’t seen or heard from Jake since the day they parted, and quite honestly, despite his early confidence in him, he was beginning to doubt he still lived. While Jacob hadn’t expected him to actually come back and check on the regular, he had expected some kind of contact for what was now nearly a month.

“I have no idea where he is or if he even lives,” Jacob answered honestly. “But if he does live, I would expect him to have perhaps made his way through the barrier somehow.”

The barrier was something they had encountered as they went further into the forest, right in the middle of the entire dome that was the tutorial. They had yet to figure out how to enter it, but at least nothing had exited it either.

“Perhaps,” Richard said. He didn’t actually think the archer was involved, but he was a potential red herring. “I have a feeling someone is pulling strings. I have felt it since the very first of their groups got killed. No one ever took credit for the first kills. I have heard no chatter or rumors as to who did it. I fear that a third party may somehow be involved.” Richard said as he leaned back on the wooden chair.

“You think that could be Jake?” Caroline asked, turning the attention of the two men to her.

“It is entirely possible. It may also just be Hayden and his men behind it all,” Richard said.

“I really doubt Jake is involved. I have known him for a while, he isn’t a homicidal maniac. You have seen what people do out there. That isn’t Jake,” Jacob said adamantly.

“I am not accusing anyone. Let’s just not ignore a potential threat. Now, what is the progress around the camp?”

Jacob sighed but complied as he went over the newest key numbers.

More and more combatants had started learning professions to gain more stats and race levels. One of the primary reasons was the general lack of high-level beasts providing experience in the forest. Another reason was the hugely increased danger with the faction war going on.

Levels got harder and harder as you progress, but this difficulty applied to professions and classes separately. Those with high-level classes even had an easier time leveling professions than those focusing solely on professions due to their higher stats.

A balanced approach between the two was deemed the most efficient. Getting a profession to 10 could quickly be done in a couple of days, including unlocking the profession itself.

Even Richard had leveled smithing as that profession gave the best stats for him. The current 'meta' was getting level 25 in one's class and then focused a bit on one's profession.

Jacob reported that Joanna was the first to get her profession evolution. She had gone from Novice Tailor to Experienced Seamstress. The stat gain had doubled from 4 to 10 per level and had, of course, come with some valuable skills.

The second part was that despite the brutality of the conflict escalating, the number of actual deaths was not. It wasn't exactly a surprise, considering the vastly reduced number of survivors. Opening the tutorial panel,

Tutorial Panel

Duration: 33 days & 23:45:06

Total Survivors Remaining: 423/1200

They were close to 200 people by now in their faction, and they needed some way to identify each other out in the forest, as simply remembering everyone wasn't plausible. To fix that, they had code-words for all those going out to hunt.

Finishing the conversation, they said their goodbyes, and the two left the building.

Richard leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes. He had made a lot of gambles this tutorial. Far more than he liked. Hayden and his faction had proven a challenge. William was a useful tool to spur on action. It was also good to have a scapegoat in case too many caught on.

Opening his quest window, he squinted at the progress. Soon he would have half of the entire tutorial in his grasp. After getting rid of Hayden, it should be possible to throw William under the bus as the instigator of the war and try to lessen the resentment between the two factions. It was a plan filled with flaws, but it should be workable.

William had finally picked up a profession, but it didn't appear to him at all how stupid he had been in the past. He also made a mental note to make William go after the trapper, Casper. The trapper had begun to get suspicious of Richard and William, but more than that... he was becoming unstable. William was at least predictable, but Casper was just pure emotion. Richard couldn't help to shiver at the traps he made.

This tutorial was to be the foundation for what he would build in the new world. Sadly, Casper didn't fit into that.

Chapter 34: Manipulation

As he closed his status window, Jake was momentarily a bit lost. He had been in the zone for two weeks, doing alchemy at every waking hour. His first interaction with another living being for over two weeks had been with an ancient being of immense power that had ended up giving him quite an overpowered blessing, along with a several-hour long pleasant conversation.

Now, however, he would have to get back into it. It would frankly be a bit embarrassing if he ended up dying to a poison weeks after receiving the blessing of a snake-god. On that note, they hadn't at any point spoken about how to cure it. Jake hadn't asked, and the Viper hadn't offered up any information. They had an unspoken agreement that it would be... well, boring.

But the Viper did give something, as he thought back to the one solid piece of advice the Malefic Viper gave. To focus on the mana. He knew mana was necessary for all the concocting and brewing he had done; it was easily the most crucial aspect of the crafting process.

Yet the Viper hadn't mentioned anything about alchemy necessarily. He spoke of feeling it around him...

Closing his eyes, he could still feel the ever-present mana in his surroundings. Jake never thought much of it, much like how one would stop smelling it if one lived with a particular

smell for long. The same was valid with mana. If it was just something that was there, you never noticed it. Perhaps that had been a mistake.

Feeling the mana was easy, his Sphere of Perception making it even easier. Jake just wasn't sure exactly what he was supposed to do with that feeling. Moving his hands around, he could vaguely feel the mana being dislocated from where his hand was, but otherwise wholly unaffected.

Did the Viper just mean for him to try and feel it more? No, that couldn't be it. Did he then suggest to somehow manipulate or control it? But Jake didn't have a skill for that. He did have some skills to manipulate mana through his alchemy, but those were very specific.

When doing alchemy, he made use of the small runes in the mixing bowl. He had to control the mana in the bowl through those. One could say that the bowl itself functioned as a joystick, his mana the hand controlling it.

Jake saw no way to manipulate the mana in the mix without these runes.

Jake proceeded to try the whole 'believe-hard-enough-tactic', but it had yielded nothing after an hour of trying. But he refused to give up. The Viper may have been slightly unstable in many ways, but he didn't strike Jake as a liar. A bit a jokester maybe, but he had a serious look in his eyes when he gave the advice.

Instead of attempting futility, he decided to quickly test out his new Alchemical Flame. Like with all other skills, it came with instinctive knowledge of how to use it. Raising his hand and opening it, a small flame appeared, swaying back and forth on his palm.

The heat was low, but so was the mana expenditure. The most surprising was the color of the flame. It was nearly entirely colorless. If Jake poured more mana into it, the intensity and heat increased per the increased mana use.

While playing with fire, he discovered that it could cause him injuries, but only when he poured in the maximum mana he could while holding his hand over the flame for a long time. In other words, the offensive capabilities, at least in its current stage, were nearly non-existent. Not that it was the purpose of the flame to begin with.

As he kept experimenting, he noticed something through his sphere. When he poured more mana into the flame than it could contain, it seeped out the side of his hands, slightly affecting the surrounding mana. A lightbulb went off in his head as he had a revelation.

He couldn't move the surrounding mana, but he had many ways of moving his own. When he used Cultivate Toxin, he always poured mana straight out of his hands into the plants, and when using his crafting skills, he naturally poured mana into the bowl.

So, what if he moved the mana, not according to the pattern of a skill, but simply as an attempt to affect his surroundings? It was weird that the thought hadn't occurred to him earlier, but in his defense, the concept of moving an invisible force was not exactly a natural thing to him.

Hours later, he hadn't found much progress, but he did have some. It was early days, but he felt like he could slightly move the atmospheric mana by using his own as a catalyst. It was currently hugely inefficient, the mana literally pouring out of him. But he did slowly learn and improve.

His huge mana pool was naturally a great help, and his willpower increased his regeneration up to a level where he could keep the practice up for quite a while. Chugging a mana potion, he decided that he couldn't practice using mana all day. He had to keep the alchemy up after all.

He was starting to run low on mana potions, so he decided to start out with those.

The preparation stages were the usual, but he began to feel some faint differences when he started the mana injection part. Despite his brief practice, he could already feel that his control had improved slightly, though it may also have something to do with his increased stats and new profession.

The fact that he was making the most accessible type of potion that was also the closest to pure mana manipulation played a part too.

He had evolved his profession, he had gained massive bonuses all around, and he finally felt like it was time to make a final push to clear this dungeon. His theory on how to cure the poison was still in its early iterations, but it was coming along.

What was ahead of him was days of grinding and practice. If this plan worked, he wouldn't leave early, which gave him two weeks of intense leveling.

Hard work in front of him, and with his life on the line, Jake could only smile in satisfaction. This new world may be a bit fucked up in many places, but it sure as hell was more interesting.

Making their way through the camp, the two newfound lovers made some small-talk. Heading towards the forge, they greeted The Smith, who was currently working hard towards his own profession evolution. The man achieved his class upgrade already. Jacob and Caroline both agreed that he would likely be the first with both an upgraded class and profession from how he was doing.

“Hey Smith, how is work going? Any progress on the spearheads for Casper?” Jacob asked as he got close.

The bearded smith raised his head from the forge as he grumbled. “Didn’t bother. Had the kid make em. Ask him.”

Brief as ever

, Jacob thought, as he turned to ‘the kid’ who worked the forge, beside the man. He had kind of turned into a half-apprentice of The Smith over the last week or so. A caster who specialized in metal-magic. Jacob knew he had also gotten his class upgrade but wasn’t exactly sure when, or what the evolution’s specifics entailed. All he knew was that the young man had a high level.

Going over to the teenager, Jacob asked once more: “Hey Will, Smith told me that he had you make some spearheads for the trappers?”

With a big smile, the kid looked up from the forge with his soot-covered face. He lifted 10 spearheads or so off the ground with his manipulation skill and levitated them in front of Jacob with some difficulty.

“Here they are, Chief! Made them just like Mr. Smith asked!” he replied, seemingly proud of his levitating trick.

Jacob grabbed them out of the air and put them in a small sack he had been carrying. Jacob had never quite liked the kid. He just felt.. off. For some reason, he reminded Jacob of several of the more ruthless CEOs he had encountered when he went to meetings with his father while young.

While Jacob stored away the spearheads, Caroline had gone forward and started wiping the kid’s face with a handkerchief. A gift from Joanna. The kid stood still as she wiped his face clean and healed his slightly injured hands from the small cuts and bruises he got during his crafting. As a caster, his defensive stats were quite a bit weaker than The Smith’s heavy warrior class after all.

“I told you to watch out when working at the forge. I still don’t get why you didn’t just do tailoring with Joanna, Jacob, and I, or maybe even leatherworking like many of the other casters,” she said with slight concern, as the teenager just stared back as his features were revealed once more with the soot removed.

Jacob hated to admit it, but the kid was maybe even more handsome than he was. Blonde hair, clear blue eyes, and a bright personality. Not that Jacob felt any threat to his love-life. All the women in the camp treated William with partiality, like how you treated a little brother or son.

Saying his goodbyes to the two smiths, he left with Caroline to deliver the spearheads to Casper. Casper was working nearly every day on his traps, having also picked up the builder profession. The synergy between those two was... frightening.

He constructed most of his traps alone. He had to in order to get his class bonuses, and the construction itself also yielded experience to his builder profession. However, he couldn't do everything himself, as he often needed help from the smiths to make weapons.

Casper had thoroughly gotten past his trauma of taking another human's life. He had gotten close with another archer, a woman, and they had spent a lot of time together. That was until four days ago where her headless corpse was found just outside their base. To make it worse, Casper had been the one who found her as he was out setting traps.

His mercy to the other side died that day. Before, he mainly tried to make traps to capture. Now he only made to kill. Jacob tried to make conversation but was met with no response as usual.

The first day after she died, Casper had spent the entire day crying and mourning. The second he had started making traps like a madman. He had even tried to leave and fight the other side directly, but luckily, they had managed to stop him. His hatred, however, seemed to only grow by the day.

Jacob barely managed to get a small grunt out of him when he mentioned Ahmed dying. Jacob was lost as to what he could do. He cursed this tutorial, he cursed the system, and he cursed whatever sick fuck had started this entire fucked up war he now found himself in the middle of.

Caroline, noticing his mood as they left the trapper, grabbed his hand in an attempt to cheer him up a bit. It helped a little as they made their way over to the tailors and sat down. It was a good distraction from the madness. Sadly, Caroline couldn't stay as she had forgotten to tell Casper something from Richard, so she left Jacob there.

Back at the smithy, William was working hard as he did every day. The stats didn't do much for him, but he got the ability to craft more specialized weapons for himself. Daggers were all fine and good, but he knew that he could make something better.

The teenager hadn't initially planned on doing the whole profession-crap but had to admit that the race levels and stats were worth it. On top of that, leveling his class was just a waste of time at this point. Even killing other humans for tutorial points seemed like a waste of time considering the difficulty of finding them.

He had tried to piss off the other guy Hayden by killing his son, but somehow it had ended up just making it worse. The number of people fighting hadn't increased much; instead, everyone had gone full-on psycho. He couldn't even do the 'innocent teenager' act anymore without getting attacked on sight.

William found the entire thing baffling. He thought he had a good grasp on human emotions, but the fact that everyone would turn absolutely insane like that was unexpected. He didn't get the point of torturing people. Sure, a bit of torture could get information, but it was well proven through several studies that information gained through torture was unreliable.

Trying to find more lockboxes was also a waste of time as they had undoubtedly been found by now. Beasts were way too damn scarce also. William could find a lot below level 25 if he went back towards the forest's outer perimeter, but the experience from those sucked.

So William made the best of the situation. He had ingratiated himself with The Smith and gotten some awesome training in. This meant that William got a lot of useful guidance early on and leveled his profession faster than he had expected.

He had also managed to improve his social position within the camp. The premier healer, Caroline, clearly approved of him, all the women leading the blossoming tailoring industry liked him, and now he even had The Smith who looked out for him.

By now, pretty much everyone was in the two bases, a fortunate side-effect of his little escalating attempt, which made his plan of being the sole survivor far more probable. Sure, Caroline, The Smith, and many of the tailors were friendly enough, but sadly their existences were detrimental to whatever reward he would get at the tutorial's completion.

As long as nothing unexpected happened, he felt somewhat confident in his plan succeeding. Something he seriously doubted as he had yet to learn of anyone who posed a serious threat to his goals.

His thoughts were interrupted as Caroline returned. William looked a bit confused up as she came alone. She was usually with that boy-toy of hers all the time.

"Hey William, I just came to warn you not to go anywhere close to the enemy camp for now. Richard said it is okay to go out, just avoid going in their direction too much," she said, getting an affirming nod from William.

She sighed as she smiled at him. "I knew you were trustworthy. Sadly Casper is dead-set on going out there alone to set up some traps between our two camps... oh geez, how many tutorial points do you think he has gathered already? He is sure getting high level too, so I hope he makes it back safely."

“Okay, I promise to stay away from there if I head out,” William answered with a big smile. A small glint in his eye as he just made a mental note of his next prey.

Caroline left him to keep working as she made a quick trip past Richard. A bitter look on her face the entire time. Entering the cabin, she spread out her hands as a transparent barrier covered the two of them.

“It’s done. William will go after Casper,” she said as she tried to keep a stoic look.

“Good job, Caroline. I know you don’t like this, but it has to be done. Casper knows too much and is getting both too strong and too unstable. None of us want to risk entering our cabin at night only to be impaled on a cursed spike,” Richard said in a comforting tone.

“It’s just too cruel...” she sighed.

“You and Jacob tried. If he didn’t insist on heading out there alone but listened to the two of you, we wouldn’t have to do this. But now we do,” Richard said as he got up from his chair and went over to her. “This tutorial may be cruel, but it will soon be over. Once we’re back on Earth, we can find time to rest. To rebuild. You and Jacob can get your happy ending, and I swear I will support you as long as you support me. And don’t worry, Jacob doesn’t need to know anything about this... unsavory business.”

Caroline looked at him a bit before turning around to leave. “Let’s just get out of this hellhole and be done with this stupid war already.”

With those words, she exited the cabin, dispelling her barrier in the process. Richard watched her leave as he smiled. *Oh, what the young and foolish won't do for love.*

Chapter 35: Blood of the Malefic Viper

A scrap of paper floated in the air as if a small string was attached to it. It was slow as it weaved out the door, evading obstacles in the way. It finally floated into another room before it landed in the palm of a hand, as a small cheer sounded out.

Jake could barely contain his laughter as he finally succeeded in his exercise. He had made it a habit to do this kind of practice daily, following the advice of the Malefic Viper.

Through mana alone, he had managed to lift and manipulate a physical object. It didn't seem like much, but for Jake, it was huge. Through sheer mana manipulation, he had managed to create a small tether or string that he had then attached to the paper. It was incredibly weak, no more durable than a thread of spider silk. But it was something.

He had hit the books hard on the aspect of mana and how to use it and found a lot.

Mana was, after all, a natural force found throughout the entire multiverse. It was known as one of the big three prime energy sources. Health Points was also known as the vital energy, Stamina, the inner energy, similar to martial artists in legends.

Mana, on the other hand, was the worldly energy. It is the energy used to shape the elements, the laws of the universe itself.

One might be led to believe that one of these energies were superior, but that assumption would be wrong. In many ways, mana was simply another form of stamina, stamina, another state of health, and so on and so forth. One type of energy was able to transform into another.

Potions were perhaps the most straightforward example of this happening. In crafting a health potion, only mana is spent, yet it directly restores health points upon consumption, which isn't to say that health potions are liquified energy of life. While the ingredients did contain some life-energy, most of the potion was still the original crafter's mana. That mana would be transformed, with the entire potion held together by system-fuckery.

In addition, some beings only possess stamina, some only mana, and some don't even have health points. An example of this was a race known as the automatons. According to the books, the automatons are a powerful race of mechanical beings who only possess mana to keep their bodies running.

Another example of peculiar races was the very plants he so often made alchemy with. Some plants had the power to evolve and gain levels and sentience, the most powerful even achieving sapience. These plant-like lifeforms very often don't have stamina but simply have health and mana.

Stats naturally also changed according to race. These stats' names varied and often had similar functions as the ones humans had, but some also changed significantly. Having nine different stats like Jake also wasn't a necessity. Some had less, and some had more.

But the point was that all the resources one had available could, through specific methods, achieve most of what all the others could. None of the books detailed any of such methods, keeping it very vague.

Through the two weeks since the meeting with his new snake pal, he got a better grasp on why the Malefic Viper had told him to focus on mana. It had helped immensely with his concocting, and his practice was very close to reaching fruition.

Looking at the timer, he took a deep breath.

Cured yourself of poison 0/1

Time remaining: 23:58:42

Less than a day remaining. The thought that he could be dead in less than a day was a bit weird. For nearly a month, he hadn't felt anything from the poison whatsoever.

But his progress had been impressive. Actually, impressive was an understatement. Around two weeks had allowed him to grind more alchemy than ever before. He had leveled and leveled a lot, which had even ended up netting him his first "true" race evolution at 25.

The evolution was as he had expected. It had come with a prompt telling him: "yay, you made it to 25, this is just the first step, keep it up, pal!"

There had been little fanfare during the evolution itself, either. Nothing special had happened; he had just appeared in the weird middle-of-the-universe-place again. There he waited, marveling at the absolutely insane density of mana, before being returned back to his bed.

Not that he was complaining about the evolution and what it came with. First of which was the improved stat gains.

Human (E) – A human confidently climbing the evolutionary ladder. 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: +2 to all stats, +5 Free points

What was a bit different was that the evolution had actually come with a skill.

[Meditate (Common)] – Enter a state of meditation, cutting off the outside world. While in meditation, regenerate stamina and mana significantly faster. While meditating, no other actions can be taken, and your perception of the external world is reduced immensely.

Meditate was very similar to sleeping. Once one entered it, all one's senses would be muted to nothingness. One couldn't smell anything, hear anything, or see anything. Only the feeling of touch remained... for most people.

Jake, however, was a bit different. All his senses were pretty much completely cut off like everyone else... but his Sphere of Perception remained. Completely unaffected. This meant that he could meditate without being completely defenseless. But more importantly, it meant he could keep practicing mana manipulation within his sphere.

And oh, speaking of his bloodline, it too evolved with him.

[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. +15% to perception.

Another 5% added. Jake couldn't detect anything besides that. Not that he was complaining.

On the profession-leveling side, he, of course, had gotten a lot also. His grind had allowed him to reach level 43, getting a bit more than a level a day on average. It didn't seem like much, considering that he grinded out the first 25 in less than two weeks, and that also including way more research through books and him learning the basics of alchemy.

But one had to remember that leveling got more challenging with every level gained. So for him to keep up such a good pace was, in Jake's own opinion, quite... prodigious.

Horrible jokes aside, through the progress of the levels, he had naturally gotten some more skills too. Sadly the rate at which he earned them had decreased. Now it was only every tenth level.

At least the first skill came at level 30, though. Jake had been offered five new skills, and they were all... well... a bit fanatical?

Just checking out one of the skills sent a shiver down his spine.

[Preach (Uncommon)] – As a humble servant, the will of your Patron is your privilege to spread. Allows the alchemist to spread the sacred words of the Malefic Viper. Makes the alchemist appear more trustworthy when speaking to others about the Malefic Viper. May his word be law. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of Preach based on willpower.

Yeah, fuck that, was his first thought after checking it out. The four others weren't any better either. One of them was quite literally related to sacrificing people.

Luckily for him, though, he had learned something valuable from the Viper he could apply at this moment. It was common knowledge that two closely related skills could fuse... so he picked Sense Herb.

[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.

After picking it, nothing happened right away. Jake felt the instinctive knowledge begin to enter his mind, the thought of the Malefic Viper having possibly trolled him occurring to him for only a moment before another notification had come. Telling him of the two intended skills fusing, as a new skill appeared.

[Sense of the Malefic Viper (Rare)] – Fusing the skills of Sense Herb and Sense Poison, the Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper has earned Sense of the Malefic Viper. The Malefic Viper sought out many natural treasures on its path to power; it is only natural to learn to sense them. Gives a passive ability to detect herbs and poisons in different forms and a rough feeling of their properties. Allows you to far better sense the poison you have inflicted on others. Adds a small increase to the effectiveness of Sense of the Malefic Viper based on perception.

With the two skills fused, he had gotten an even more useful one. He wasn't exactly sure if it could sense herbs and poisons equally well, and his testing had been inconclusive so far. However, the fact that it now allowed him to sense poison he had inflicted on others was likely going to be very useful.

Jake was a bit surprised the fusion wasn't mentioned in any of the books, though. It was two fundamental skills for Alchemists of the Malefic Viper, so it being noted wouldn't be out of place. Jake had a sneaking suspicion that the system had somehow removed this information, or maybe the skill just didn't fuse like that back in the day?

It wasn't as if the books didn't have any actual examples of skills, items, and even ways of unlocking new evolutions. It had to be said that the information wasn't that plentiful on skills and evolutions, as it could all just be boiled down to one word: Records.

But his skill gains didn't end there. Ten levels later, at 40, he got this second chance to get one. He half-expected to once more be disappointed by choices trying to make him into a cultist but was pleasantly surprised instead. *Very* pleasantly surprised.

[Blood of the Malefic Viper (Epic)] – The blood of the Malefic Viper is a toxin more deadly than most poisons. Allows the Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper to turn their blood poisonous, imitating their Patron. The blood can be used as an ingredient in alchemy and as a deadly weapon against your foes. The nature of the poison is

determined based on the Records of the Alchemist. The blood's toxicity level is based primarily on vitality and wisdom but receives an increase from all physical stats.

It was his very first epic-rarity skill and a juicy one at that. He predicted Epic to be a tier above Rare mainly due to videogames.

The skill itself was great. A bit disturbing to think about your blood turning into a deadly poison, but Jake was kind of relieved to find out that it wasn't a passive ability. He had to actively channel mana according to the skill into his blood, and with that, it would turn toxic.

Using Identify on the poisoned blood didn't yield any results, but he could clearly feel it was different. His new Sense of the Malefic Viper gave him a good idea of how different it was to regular blood. The toxin was somewhere in between high-end inferior-grade poisons he had made and the weaker common-grade ones.

He hadn't had the chance to test the nature of the toxin yet, so he saved that for later. Of course, the blood couldn't only be used as a weapon, but also in alchemy.

At first, he hadn't thought that his blood as an ingredient would have any usefulness. It turned out he was wrong on that one. His blood was an excellent catalyst, especially in concert with the blue mushrooms. Just adding a bit to the mix also made the mana-injection far more comfortable, as he was literally adding a bit of himself.

This had given Jake newfound confidence in his plan for completing the challenge dungeon, and he had been working tirelessly for the last two, nearly three days since he got the skill.

He had found recipes for potions and even toxins that could cure poisons and had even crafted a couple at inferior-rarity to practice. Still, he was unsure as to their effectiveness on whatever had infected him.

His plan wouldn't have worked weeks ago, but he had confidence with his newly improved stats. Speaking of his status, it had gone through a metamorphosis along with him.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (E) – lvl 26]

Class: [Archer – lvl 9]

Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 43]

Health Points (HP): 2460/2460

Mana Points (MP): 2890/3150

Stamina: 528/580

Stats

Strength: 61

Agility: 64

Endurance: 58

Vitality: 246

Toughness: 139

Wisdom: 315

Intelligence: 90

Perception: 205

Willpower: 159

Free points: 0

Titles: [Bloodline Patriarch], [Forerunner of the New World],[Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing]

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)], [Alchemical Flame (Common)], [Toxicology (Uncommon)], [Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Rare)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Rare)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Rare)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Rare)], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Epic)]

Blessing:

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

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

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

His stats had naturally had a meteoric rise with the levels. Primarily his vitality and wisdom had grown immensely. As for free points, he had mainly chosen to distribute them between perception and wisdom but had recently also put some into vitality and toughness. His way of curing himself of the poison would likely require him to be quite durable after all. He had even found out that his exploration of the status had been insufficient.

For example, Jake found that he could bring up how he had distributed his free points if he wanted to.

Free point distribution:

Strength: 1

Agility: 1

Endurance: 1

Vitality: 21

Toughness: 22

Wisdom: 100

Intelligence: 0

Perception: 100

Willpower: 0

Total Distributed: 246

Some perfectionist part of him couldn't help but bring wisdom and perception to 100 each. The percentage increases had also truly begun to show their worth.

Expanded Status Stats: Base stat: Amplifier: Final value: Strength: 53 10,00% 61 (58) Agility: 54 10,00% 64 (59) Endurance: 53 10,00% 58 Vitality: 205 20,00% 246 Toughness: 127 10,00% 139 Wisdom: 263 20,00% 315 Intelligence: 82 10,00% 90 Perception: 164 25,00% 205 Willpower: 133 20,00% 159 Total: 1.134 15,00% 1337

The most noteworthy on this entire screen was, for some reason, the parenthesis. Looking down at his forearms, he had kind of forgotten that he was wearing the bracers at all times. They had kind of become a part of him by now, and he only took them off when he showered, even keeping them on while he slept. Those 3 strength and 5 agility sure being handy.

This screen also demonstrated the power of the percentage amplifiers. Jake got a total of 195 stats from the percentages. His wisdom alone increased by 52.

He also discovered that, sadly, the items weren't affected by percentage-amplifiers.

Closing all the various windows, he went straight back to work, having finished his mana-control training. He doubted he would have time to train that further before he got out of here... if he got out of here.

His plan to cure himself was relatively simple, honestly. Concoct a poison to kill the other poison.

Over the last day or so, he had started to finally be able to feel what was infecting him. With every second moving him closer, he could feel it more and more. It felt powerful yet subtle. But more importantly, it felt far more magical than physical. Narrowing down what type of poison it was should be possible if he had more time, but sadly he didn't.

With Blood of the Malefic Viper, his plan had changed slightly. The goal was still the killing poison with poison approach, but now he would actively use his own blood and align the 'cure' with his own body.

On the herb-side, the main ingredient would be the silver mushrooms from the first challenge room.

[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.

His highly toxic blood would be used in place of water. Aged Moss of common-rarity, on which he had used the Cultivate Toxin skill on daily for the last two weeks, coupled with the concentrated juices of the blue mushrooms, which he had also been cultivating.

The Argentum Vitae Mushroom would then be the final ingredient. The vitality in those was overpowering and would add powerful energy of life to the concoction. The creation would be volatile and would need to be consumed shortly after being finished based on all his deliberations.

He would consume the creation just before the poison flares up. Two extreme bursts of toxicity would then ravage through his body, one of immense death-attuned mana, and the other poison containing overpowering life-energy.

If everything worked as he hoped, these two would cancel each other out while his powerful body kept it all together.

Which was also the reason he had invested some points into toughness and vitality. He had severe concerns if his body could handle the sudden influx of energy.

The plan was a bit stupid and extremely reckless, for sure, but despite the dangers, Jake was looking forward to it. There was also a part of him that was a bit greedy... if he consumed the ten mushrooms as-is, he would get 10 vitality. But if he could achieve some kind of synergy, he should be able to get even more.

Jake believed it would work, and if it didn't, well, Jake would go out on his own foolhardy terms.

Chapter 36: A battle of life & death

Before an important exam or test, there are many approaches to prepare oneself. Some studied intensely up to the very last second, in a desperate attempt to obtain as much knowledge as humanly possible.

This approach often leads to overload and stress, and that during the actual examination, one could not perform their very best.

Another way was to seek approval that one's preparations were adequate. Asking fellow students or colleagues, hoping that perhaps they too felt as underprepared as you, indicating that maybe it was merely your own mind tricking you into thinking you were behind the curve. These people would be found camping outside the examination room for hours before it was their time, trying to probe for any and all useful information from those just tested.

A third way was the path of denial. Shutting down in panic, unable to act. The actual performance from these people, however, varied wildly. Some even performed with incredible confidence despite their panic beforehand. These were also the ones who felt the most relieved after the fact.

Some looked for a way to either get out of the exam entirely or avoid a fair examination. Cheating was the go-to for these. Obtaining the answers beforehand or even during the test. Perhaps even attempting to take high risks to peek at the ones beside you, searching their sheet for the correct answers. Performance-enhancing drugs were not even off the table for these. The most nervous and panicked were perhaps this group.

The final ones were the relaxed ones - the ones who simply rested, trying to get their brain in top shape before the test. Perhaps faux confidence led them to this, or maybe said confidence was well-founded. One could only know after the test was over after all.

Jake had, throughout his life, fallen into all these four categories at one point or another. He had studied till he had headaches and sat outside the exam room for hours, asking anyone for tips. Been a nerve-wrack the night before an exam, not getting a wink of sleep. Once, he had even tried to cheat by sneaking in notes not allowed. He hadn't ended up needing them, and he felt like shit afterward, but he had still tried.

But the approach with the most success for him was the last. He would just relax the day before. Read a good book or even play some videogames, perhaps even a trip to the movies. And then finally go early to bed to wake up well-rested for the exam.

This had worked out for him very well. Jake was the kind of person to have high expectations of himself, often leading to panic. During his years of pursuing professional archery, perfection was the only option. He was competing with the best, so he had to be the very best he possibly could.

University had been very different. In archery, one can quickly come to feel like they had all the knowledge required to perform your best. That the only thing he had left to do was perform his very best in the moment.

When one studied theory on strategic business management, as an example, things weren't as straightforward. There was always more to know, more knowledge to seek. If you felt like you knew everything, it meant you simply weren't aware of how much you didn't know. It was complicated, with endless theories formulated and expanded upon for hundreds of years.

The knowledge on alchemy in the small library, albeit still containing around a thousand books, was already far more than Jake could go through during the month he had been here. Even if he had spent every second reading, it wouldn't be enough. Yet he knew what was in the library was only a drop in the bucket.

The knowledge gained only made him more aware as to how complex alchemy was. Ultimately, all professions were a valid path to power in the system and contained near-limitless possibilities. Even a path to godhood, according to the Malefic Viper.

So, with that in mind, Jake just had to accept that he couldn't perfectly prepare. He had done what he could, and it would have to be enough.

The hours of the day ticked by as Jake relaxed. He read books he had set aside prior, books containing historical tales, reading more like a fantasy novel than actual history. Jake thought of his colleagues surviving outside but

quickly tried to purge the matter from his mind. He had followed the number of survivors dropping by the day, and with only around a third remaining, he knew it wasn't looking good. Some of them were very likely dead, and he wasn't in any way looking forward to discovering who.

But he did have some time to reflect on his own feelings. The solitude had allowed him a lot of time to think if he liked it or not. He had made some realizations. His crush on Caroline had always been just that, a crush. He didn't actually know her at all but only found her physically attractive.

His impression of Jacob hadn't changed in the least. In his mind, he was still the same beacon of positivity and hope he had always been. He was also the one Jake hoped was fine most of all. *It doesn't help thinking about it;* he reminded himself. He needed to get in the right mindset for the final push.

For the last eight hours, he slept and meditated, cultivating the plants he had prepared for the concoction was the only thing that could be called work. That concoction would determine his life or death after all.

Time passed, and it was finally time to begin. With only four hours to his potential death, Jake felt oddly serene. He felt prepared.

He began by collecting the moss and mushrooms. Carefully plucking them according to the methods he had studied. The techniques he had become oh so familiar with over the last month as he carried them to the mixing bowl.

Taking out the Bloodletting Dagger, he made a small cut on the palm of his hand as he focused on Blood of the Malefic Viper, as he saw the now green-tinged blood slowly drip into the bowl. After a couple of minutes, it was filled enough. He had to cut his hand two more times during that time, despite the enchantment making the wounds harder to heal. A testament to his high vitality and a good sign for what was to come.

His health and mana slowly regenerated as he started extracting the toxic juices from the Bluebright Mushrooms, carefully adding the slightly shiny blue liquid to the concoction, as he, with extreme caution, guided the process with his mana.

Letting it soak for a while, hearing the small crackling that sounded like electricity as the blood and mushrooms combined, he started grinding up the Aged Green Moss into a fine powder with a mortar. As he heard the sizzling and the cracking calm down, he added the moss-powder, once more seeing a reaction as the entire thing seemed to boil slightly.

Throughout it all, he carefully injected mana. This part was why he had needed so long, as he needed to carefully balance the concoction and guide it to where he wanted it. The necrotic properties were slowly eliminated from the mix as he focused his mana, thus allowing the vital energy found within his blood to prosper.

He could have done it the other way around, amplifying the necrotic properties, as his blood acted as a catalyst that strengthened that property. But now, the necrotic energy served as fuel for the vital energy, however, he had to be careful.

The reason he had extracted the highly condensed juices from the mushrooms and not just added the entire mushroom was because he only needed a very highly concentrated amount of necrotic energy to remain. That small, condensed ball of energy would become the catalyst for the Argentum Vitae Mushrooms, the final ingredient.

He had added a total of 28 mushrooms worth of extracted liquid. He had tested and probed, and based on his Sense of the Malefic Viper, the condensed energy found within should be enough to help empower the vital energy in the silver mushrooms.

The time he injected mana was long, tiring, and, most importantly, very mana-intensive. His pool of 3150 was quickly being drained. He knew this would happen, of course, as he had invested plenty in wisdom to make this possible.

Perception had also shown its value, especially in complicated crafting processes such as this. Small changes in mana flow were unavoidable, but with sufficiently high perception, Jake could detect them before they became an issue. His senses were tense, focused to the limit.

With only twenty minutes remaining, the arduous process was completed. Jake had technically finished the concoction now and would come out as a potent common-rarity poison. Without a doubt, his most powerful yet. But he wasn't done.

Taking out the 10 Argentum Vitae Mushrooms, he hesitated little as he simply threw them all into the bowl. Nothing happened for the first few seconds, as he carefully observed, both hands on the bowl. But soon, the silvery layer on the mushrooms got eroded, and as soon as a small hole appeared in the first one, the ridiculous vital energy within rushed out like a riptide.

Jake still had around half his mana remaining after quickly chugging his most powerful mana potion before he threw in the silver-shrooms. He had considered not putting the potion-use on cooldown and instead use a healing

potion during the consumption, but honestly, if his plan didn't work, a healing potion wouldn't do jack shit.

His remaining mana pool was liberally spent, as he contained the vital energy rushing out. Very soon, the energies of all 10 mushrooms had started affecting the concoction, and this was precisely the moment he had been waiting for. With a small suggestion through his injected mana, he released the condensed ball of necrotic energy as it clashed with the vital energy.

Or perhaps a clash was not the right word. The vital energy absolutely devoured it, and with his guidance, it assimilated the necrotic poison to fuel itself. The minutes ticked by, one by one, as he pushed his mana into the bowl.

When he only had a measly 300 mana remaining, he felt like he was about done. With a final push, spending over 200 mana, he finally heard a small *ding* as he saw the system messages.

****DING! *: [Malefic Viper's Poison] has been activated! The transcendent power of the Malefic Viper has forcefully increased the rarity of your creation to Rare, increasing all effects substantially.***

****You have successfully crafted [Unstable Amalgamation of Malefic Vitau (Rare)] – A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned****

****'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 44 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

Quickly inspecting the sludge left in the bowl, he couldn't help but make a weird compromise between grimacing and a smile.

[Unstable Amalgamation of Malefic Vitau (Rare)] – An unstable creation, made by mixing opposing energies, achieving something more potent than the sum of their parts. It contains an immense power of vitality, powerful enough for it to turn into a poison. Not fit for consumption. Incredibly Unstable: Unable to maintain current form in 9:57

It was what he had hoped for. Perhaps more than he had hoped for. He had gotten a whole level from it, as he had just leveled up from the last batch of poisons he made also. He quickly threw the free points into vitality. He would need everything he could get.

He hadn't expected Malefic Viper's Poison to trigger. Truthfully, he wished it hadn't. It had thrown all of his prior calculations off-course... he feared what he had made was too strong. Sadly, he didn't have time to attempt anything else.

Looking at the timer, he prepared himself.

Cured yourself of poison 0/1

Time remaining: 2:38

Two and a half minutes, and the poison would flare up to take his life. At that moment, he would drink the sludge in front of him. He didn't dare touch it but would simply drink it straight from the bowl.

As he just sat there, looking at the timer tick down, he did something he couldn't remember ever doing before. He prayed.

He had never been the religious sort. He never went to church, not even during Christmas. But today, he prayed. Not to the gods of earth, but to the one god he had met.

The Malefic Viper may not have been the most stable being he had ever met, but he was powerful. He had blessed him, allowing him to complete the miracle he had created today. He was the one behind his profession. At least it was based on who he was, or his Records to be more exact.

So, he prayed - his prayer as humble as can be.

“I fucking swear, you stupid snake, if I end up dying from drinking mushroom-juice, I am going to return from the dead and hunt you down.”

To his surprise, he felt a response. Just a vague emotion from beyond. A faint encouragement, coupled with a barrage of mockery.

He smiled to himself. He had done what he could, and now it was up to his own willpower and determination.

The timer mercilessly ticked down.

0:28

He looked at the sludge as he put his hands on the side of the bowl.

0:17

He took a deep breath as he thought back to his days here in this dungeon.

0:13

Serenity overtook him as his body relaxed.

0:11

With a quick peek, he confirmed his health pool was full. *Good.*

0:07

He lifted the bowl and prepared to drink.

0:05

“Here goes nothing,” he said as he lifted up the sludge and gulped it all down.

The taste was a bit sweet, but he barely had time to notice it because of what came next. His entire body and mind were consumed by a wave of pain from everywhere the sludge touched. A source of pain that only a moment later was joined by another

From somewhere around his heart, a massive amount of energy suddenly manifested – one seeking only to destroy every trace of vitality in his body.

His instincts screamed at him, making him fully aware that if the deathly energy spread to his brain, it would mean game over. He would be unable to mobilize his will and energy control to fight.

Luckily the energy couldn't easily spread, meeting significant resistance from his powerful physique. But it was far from enough. He felt himself literally rotting from the inside, not unlike what happened during the second trial and the toxic liquid.

But as the energy crept upwards, it met a force it couldn't conquer. His mouth and upper part of the body had already started growing red as the vital energy overpowered his being, also slowly killing him. Tumors began growing at a visible speed as the vital energy had nowhere to go - nothing to regenerate.

The vital energy was not entirely pure either but mixed with the necrotic properties of the Bluebright Mushrooms. Not that Jake had any of these thoughts at this moment, as he simply lay collapsed on the laboratory floor. Every sliver of his focus on the battle within him.

The two energies sought to destroy each other: two mighty armies, one of death, and one of life. Jake's body the battlefield in which they fought. If Jake had not consumed his concoction, the poison that flared up would have been

significantly weaker than it currently was, as the two both sought to destroy, yet also empowered, one another.

With what little will he could muster, with it mainly being his instincts taking charge, he mobilized all the energy he could to protect his head. This was the most dangerous stage, as both energies were at maximum capability, and all he could do was hide away and hunker down.

This didn't mean he only hid away. The two energies fought, but both had failed to recognize the powers already present on the battlefield. Another army rode in from the same place the energy of death had initially come from.

The third source of energy was another source of vitality. But unlike the others, this one was controlled and with purpose. It was Jake's original health points, a massive squadron of vital energy stemming from his second-highest stat; vitality.

It entered the fight, not as a contender, but as a force to control the battlefield. A mediator to make the armies of life and death battle on equal terms, slowly canceling each other out. At the right moment, it would then enter the fray and strike down the vulnerable energy remaining and seize victory.

If one observed from the outside at this moment, they would see a young man lying on the ground. His body was both rotting, but shortly after, regenerating the rotting flesh once more. Other parts were red, as tumor-like growths appeared; however, they quickly got squashed by the energy of death.

Jake couldn't even scream, as his airways also alternated between life and death. At all times, death was a moment away, but it was always crushed by overpowering vitality before it could take hold.

If his vitality or toughness had only been just a few tens of points lower, he would have died by now. But he didn't die. He suffered, he screamed internally, but never once did he wish for the embrace of death. He fought with every fiber of his being to live.

For in the end... what is death, but just another challenge to overcome?

Chapter 37: Leave nothing behind

The Malefic Viper stood in the desolate middle of nowhere, surrounded by the ever-present white mist. He had stood here for days now, unmoving. The decision to leave had been made, but the last step still stumped him. It wasn't that he couldn't or that he didn't

want to go. A single thought would bring him away. But he still felt doubt. It had been a long time since he last left... a very long time.

Suddenly, he felt a small trickle of faith come to him, for the first time in many eras. Of course, he knew from where it came. He had only one being in the entire multiverse who held his blessing after all. The prayer was simple if a little insulting.

The Malefic Viper couldn't help but chuckle to himself as peered through the void into the challenge dungeon, observing Jake drink his concoction.

"Crazy bastard," he muttered to himself, smirking. "And entirely pointless. Should I tell him that his body would be powerful enough to survive the poison already and how he is unnecessarily putting his life at risk? Nah, gonna save that one."

Looking at Jake drink down the sludge, his own hesitation seemed like a joke in comparison. He feared the unknown, while his one blessed mortal faced death with courage and a bit of foolhardiness.

"I guess I should stop stalling."

With those words, he disappeared from the desolate realm.

A ripple went through the multiverse as he passed the veil. An aura that hadn't appeared for eras washed across existence, only detectable to the most powerful of gods. Some had

already felt the movements of karma when he granted his True Blessing, but now there was no doubt.

The Malefic Viper had returned.

Two mighty giants stood on the metaphorical battlefield, one representing life, the other, death. Equally matched as they tried to fell the other. Their fight had allowed them both to grow, but at the same time, had whittled away their strength. The end was near.

Yet, at that very moment, the third, forgotten, entity struck. A mighty arrow of life surged forward, utterly destroying the avatar of death. The giant of life took this chance to leap on the fallen avatar but was only met by the consuming grasp of the hunter. It had no recourse as it was too weak from the long battle.

The war of life and death had finally come to a close. It had only been a bit less than an hour; however, the pain had been utterly consuming, and Jake felt delirious despite his body now slowly healing. Yet he felt triumphant. He had won, all the poison now either firmly nestled harmlessly away in his body or wholly eliminated.

Jake suddenly heaved in a breath of air as his throat finally finished healing, and he could once more draw in air. The experience had also inadvertently taught him that he didn't really need to breathe much anymore. Not that it made the inability to breathe any less hard to get used to.

He stayed on the ground for several minutes as he became aware of his surroundings, noticing he was still in the dungeon. His head was a mess, and he couldn't move a single finger. The pain had subsided significantly, but it still hurt as his body kept healing.

Whatever vestige of poison remained in his system was pretty much gone by now, and his natural resistance would handle the rest.

His mind started clearing up, and as it did, he couldn't help laughing. Or at least he tried but ended up just gurgling out blood instead. After spitting out a lungful of blood and grime, his attempted laughter did go through, though.

He had lived. His foolish gambit had worked. Honestly, he did feel a bit like an idiot currently. Based on the power of the poison, a single well-made inferior-rarity antidote would likely have cured him or at least suppressed the effects enough for his body to handle the rest. Maybe his body could have taken it even without any external help.

His own little concoction had only amplified the flare-up and turned it into the nightmarishly potent poison that nearly took his life. Not that any of it mattered now. He had won after all. And with his victory came a slew of system messages.

You have assimilated a potent source of vitality.

+1 vitality

You have assimilated a potent source of vitality.

+2 vitality

You have assimilated a potent source of vitality.

+1 vitality

You have assimilated a potent source of vitality.

+1 vitality

...

It went on for a bit, and Jake could see that it had periodically given him stats after the initial intense burst.

In the end, he had ended up getting a total of 31 vitality. The energy naturally came from the Argentum Vitae mushrooms, which would have granted him 10 vitality if he just ate them straight up. While fewer stats, that wouldn't have required him to nearly die, though.

With the poison cured, he had naturally also passed the trial.

Dungeon Challenge:

Cured yourself of poison 1/1

Congratulation! You have successfully cleared the Tutorial Challenge Dungeon!

Rewards given are based on performance during all trials.

Dungeon shutting down in 3:57:11

Looking through the message logs, he had completed the dungeon a bit over two hours ago. It had taken him only a couple of hours for his body to heal enough for him to regain proper consciousness. Not that he was entirely healed yet, as he couldn't really move his body. Like, at all.

As for rewards, he had gotten not just one but two titles. However, these were more in line with his initial Forerunner of the New World, compared to Bloodline Patriarch, or his quite overpowered Holder of a True Primordial's Blessing.

[Dungeoneer I] – Successfully clear a Dungeon suitable for your level. +1 all stats.

[Dungeon Pioneer I] – Be the first to clear a dungeon suitable for your level. +3 all stats.

The stats were fine and all, but most important was the number 1 in both of them, in his honest opinion. This clearly indicated that these titles were not just one-offs but would likely grow for every dungeon he did.

Finding nothing else of note in his notification window, he closed it and just lay there. His Sphere of Perception, making him aware of his surroundings, as he noted the bottles of health potions inside one of the cabinets. With nothing better to do, he began weaving a small string of mana to try and drag one of them to him like he had been practicing.

The heaviest he had lifted using only pure mana so far was a pen. So, a bottle, even a tiny bottle, still took quite the effort. First, he had to open the cabinet to get the potion, cursing himself for even closing it, to begin with. Why did he need to close cabinets? Or doors for that matter. Not like anyone else was going to wander in and scold his lack of etiquette.

The process of opening the cabinet was a real struggle, not that Jake in any way minded it. He was alive. And he was feeling great. Well, aside from the whole body-being-paralyzed part. Looking at his health points, they were at a measly 700 out of nearly 3000, and this was after it had regenerated quite a bit. He had likely been below 200, perhaps even below 100.

Health points as the vital energy functioned as the fuel that healed the body and kept a living being alive. Undead creatures famously didn't possess any health points but instead had an energy of death that kept them un-dead.

This meant that the natural healing of the body consumed health points to do so. When one took damage, an initial portion of health is consumed, with another part used to heal the wound afterward. As long as health points remain, so does the life of the being who possesses it.

But being 'alive' is a rather broad term. If the poison had consumed Jake's brain, it didn't mean that all his health points instantly disappear. He would remain alive, and his health points would keep healing his brain. If the poison was then cured, his vitality winning the bout, and his brain healed, no permanent damage would be sustained.

The problem is that the brain was still the organ that served as the director of consciousness. The mind existed within the soul, but it couldn't do anything or even be aware of itself without the brain. Memories, personality, what makes you, you, exist disjointed from the physical body. Many beings in the multiverse don't even necessarily possess a brain or a set physical form; some only having a non-tangible spirit form.

For humans, at least at his current rank, losing the brain would mean losing all semblance of control and consciousness until it is regenerated once more. If Jake had lost access to this control, he would no longer be able to affect the two opposing forces at all. He would be unable to fight on the metaphorical battlefield, which was why he struggled so hard to defend his brain during the assault.

Jake had no idea if this weakness was amendable but guessed that skills existed that allowed a human to still act despite having no brain. Perhaps it would naturally happen with an evolution in the future.

And speaking of health, Jake's epic quest for acquiring a health potion had reached a critical stage. He had managed to budge the cabinet's door slightly, a major win in his book.

After a few more minutes, as he was finally getting close to fully opening the cabinet, he felt a bit of his mobility return. At first, he could move his fingers, then his hand, his arm, and soon he managed to sit himself up.

It turned out, the whole quest for the health potions had been a waste of time. Dragging himself off the floor, Jake still felt weak throughout, as he with difficulty opened the cabinet and took out a healing potion.

He felt a bit better after drinking it, but getting back to top shape would still take a while. Overdrawn vitality was not so easily overcome. From what he had read, the weakness typically disappeared when the health pool was once more maxed out, and he still had about half to go for that.

Walking out of the laboratory, his Sphere of Perception picked up something new.

He had spent 30 days in the dungeon, and with his sphere always active, he had every single minute detail memorized. But in the room where he had initially gotten his profession, two lockboxes now sat on the shrine within.

He didn't hesitate to enter the room and check them out. One of the boxes was rather large, while the other one small. Both were jeweled, and as he approached them to use Identify, he was pleasantly surprised.

[Challenge Dungeon Lockbox (Rare)] – A system-created magical lockbox enchanted with the ability to block off all types of attempts to peek inside before opening. Awarded for passing the Challenge Dungeon.

The bigger box had a rare-rarity. Opening it, Jake saw a pair of boots.

They looked old and well-worn. Both looked to be made of leather that had once been brown but was now a dull grey color. Small scratches and minor imperfection marred their surface, and the soles looked like they had accompanied their last wearer for countless steps. In all honesty, they looked far worse than his slick leather bracers.

Using Identify on the old boots, however, he was not disappointed.

[Boots of the Wandering Alchemist (Rare)] – Boots once offered to an alchemist before setting out on a journey to experience the world outside. Despite being made of simple leather, the Records of the alchemist has left a deep mark on this item, allowing it to transcend many ranks. Enchantments: +20 Endurance, +15 Agility. Reduces stamina expenditure from all movement-related skills by a small amount. Increases sensitivity towards earthbound plants.

Requirements: Lvl 25+ in any humanoid race.

They rewarded 35 total stats and two passive effects. The reduced stamina expenditure was useless to Jake currently as he didn't have any movement-related skills, but he was sure it would show its worth down the line. It would be bizarre if he didn't get any movement skills from his archer class.

The increased sensitivity would likely also be useful, he assumed. Without any hesitation, he put on the boots. He hadn't been wearing anything beforehand after his old shoes were entirely devoured by acid around a month ago. It felt great to finally have something on his feet, and the boots themselves felt amazingly comfortable.

The comfortable feeling only increased as he injected mana into them and felt the familiar feeling of his stats improving.

Feeling great in his new boots, he turned to the other, smaller, lockbox and was once more pleasantly surprised.

[Challenge Dungeon Lockbox (Epic)] – A system-created magical lockbox enchanted with the ability to block off all types of attempts to peek inside before opening. Awarded for passing the challenge dungeon with excellent performance.

He had his doubts if the system would reward him for taking a more difficult path than necessary to succeed, and turned out it did. Barely able to hold himself back, he opened the lockbox and looked inside.

A very expensive-looking necklace lay within. The entire thing was made of what seemed like silver or perhaps even platinum. A green gem was beautifully adorned to the chain. With great anticipation, he used Identify on the beautiful work of art before him.

[Prodigious Alchemist's Necklace of Holding (Epic)] – An amulet awarded to a prodigious young alchemist upon completion of a trial. An ornate creation of high

craftsmanship made of metal attuned to the space-affinity, holding a spacegem in place. Allows the user to store items in a small pocket dimension found within the gem. Due to the nature of the gemstone used, living, non-sentient entities can be stored without harmful side-effects in temporal suspension. Enchantments: Alchemist's Spatial Storage. +25 Wisdom.

Requirements: Soulbound

Jake cracked a big smile as he read it. The good old trope of the item box. And his item box was even the type that could store living items. The 25 wisdom was also more than welcome. The bonus of storing living entities was naturally to allow plants to be stored, and a lot of plant-life went bad not long after being picked, so keeping them alive through temporal suspension seemed almost like a must-have.

He was a bit worried about the Soulbound requirement, as he wasn't quite sure what that meant. Though he doubted he would be unable to use it unless this was a massive prank by the system. If he had to guess, he would say it just meant that it was bound to him.

Picking up the necklace, he put it around his neck before injecting mana into it. With it came the feeling of his wisdom increasing, but it was accompanied by something else - knowledge of how to operate the spatial storage.

In his mind, he had a mental image of a room. The room had no source of light but was pretty extensive. How big exactly, he couldn't quite comprehend. The lack of any point of reference made it even more difficult, as the room was completely empty.

Looking at the timer for the challenge dungeon shutting down, he still had two and a half hours left. Quickly, he went to the library and started storing books. At first, he did it

individually, but soon he was scooping up bookshelves at a time. After keeping all the bookshelves, he even grabbed the desk, chair, pens, and pretty much everything he could get his hands on.

In the spatial storage, he found that the items had barely taken up any space. Quickly he went to the bedroom and threw it all into the spatial storage too. Bed, dresser, another small table, everything went in.

Next, he stopped by the laboratory, but here he met his first difficulty. A lot of the instruments were fastened to the wall and floor. Luckily the mixing bowl, the most essential tool, was able to be brought along. The small burner, however, was fixed. It seemed like he had to either find a new one or use his Alchemical Flame skill instead.

A bunch of the other instruments, like the mortar and pestle, he also brought along. Next, he started storing the potions and poisons he had made over the last month. In reality, most of them had been created the last week only, as he had to empty out a lot of the bottles periodically to recycle them.

Luckily, the cabinets storing the bottles were free-standing, allowing him to grab them whole and toss them into the storage. Looking at the barrels of purified water, he kept the full one and picked up the other as he headed towards the garden.

Carrying it to the garden, he filled it with purified water as he threw it too into the storage. Looking at all the plants, he cracked his knuckles. *Leave nothing behind.*

Chapter 38: Broken

Many herbs were still in the garden and cave. After all, Jake had never made anything above inferior-rarity in potions and still had all the common-rarity ingredients left entirely untouched. With the spatial storage able to store plants, he needed a way to get them into it.

He quickly discovered he couldn't just will them to enter it. Sadly, the spatial storage couldn't just tear them out of the ground.

So, the next one and a half hours went by as he dug them up by hand. He also went by the cave afterward and collected all of the mushrooms and moss.

It didn't take him long to gather everything - his improved physical stats finally being used constructively.

With less than half an hour left in the dungeon, he did the only logical thing he could think of and took a shower. He didn't know when he would next get access to a nice bathroom, something to be made use of as much as possible while he still could.

After cleaning up and putting on his clothes once more, he went to the garden as he waited for the time to end. Looking at his reflection in the pond, he saw the minor changes the evolutions had brought about.

It had made him a bit more handsome if he had to say so himself. His features all a bit sharper. He was initially a bit on the short side but had grown a couple of centimeters too

from the looks of it. His fashion-sense did ruin his improved looks a bit, though. The brown cloak, leather bracers, and old worn boots were standing out like a sore thumb.

He looked a bit funny if he had to say so himself. He wore some old linen clothes he had found in the bedroom dresser if one looked below the cloak. His old clothes had been wholly ruined a long time ago.

As his thoughts wandered, time ticked on, and with a final look at his reflection, he disappeared from the dungeon.

Caroline exited the cabin with Richard after reporting what she had just learned. Casper had made himself known once more.

Two weeks ago, he had wandered out of the camp in the middle of the night. Their expectations were broken as he just vanished without a trace. No one had heard or seen anything from him before today, making them believe that he was actually dead.

He wasn't. He had contacted them through a stake outside their base... addressed to William.

Casper hadn't headed towards the enemy camp... instead, he had gone back. Back to where they had entered the tutorial initially. And now, she and Richard were thinking of what to do.

A small sphere was around them, blocking out all sound as they walked through the camp. “Just send William... wouldn’t it be better just to kill him already?”

“Casper or William?” Richard asked.

“William, of course. Casper hasn’t done anything for two weeks... we can have him return,” she said, almost pleadingly. Jacob had been in a slump emotionally ever since Casper disappeared... and guilt had been gnawing at her too.

“... Fine,” Richard conceded. *Even if William dies, I can figure something else out.* The only positive thing one could say about William was how little he had done for the last two weeks. He had only been hunting beasts really and spent the majority of his time with the Smith.

However, despite all that Richard tried, people began to question too many things. He was also relatively sure Jacob knew that the kid was way off. He had wanted to get rid of William and Hayden already, but sadly no opportunity had presented itself.

Now, with Casper calling out William directly, too many had begun connecting the dots. Richard was unsure of what to do. If he acted like he didn’t know anything, he would appear incompetent. So, he went with the most straightforward solution of hopefully just having the two kill each other.

Can I still use this to lure Hayden out? he thought as he began to gather his hunting-party with Caroline. Not to go after William... they had to keep leveling themselves too.

Casper sat on the ground, meditating.

He knew *he* was coming. The narcissistic bastard wouldn't be able to resist.

For the last day, he had prepared the clearing. Everything was ready for the ritual. He just needed that one final piece.

His last two weeks had been... eventful. It all started when she died.

Her name had been Lyra. His shining star in this hellhole. He had fallen head over heels for her instantly. They had begun a relationship that never had time to truly flourish. He had been too cowardly, and their time too short. She had been murdered.

Hatred overtook him. He didn't care about some war; he didn't care about the other faction leader, claiming that his son died. He was past caring.

So, he made traps, traps to slay the beasts in human skin roaming through the forest. It was his personal mission to thin out the herd as much as possible before he joined her. Casper had no naïve hope of surviving the forest. He knew it would be his final resting place, and he would lay down here gladly to rest eternally beside Lyra.

Yet, at that moment, as he was weeping alone, he heard a whisper - a call from the forest. One he followed.

There he found a door leading to a challenge dungeon. The dungeon hadn't contained any challenge. It was just an island with a single tower on it, surrounded by a black sea. Not of water, but a black sludge that Casper hadn't dared to touch.

Within the tower, he met *him*. Or at least a part of him. And that being offered him a deal, one he couldn't refuse. It helped prepare him, evolve as his race reached level 25. A level he still sat at now. He couldn't progress further quite yet.

Throughout the clearing in which he sat, hundreds of spikes of dark metal were embedded. Runes were running down their surface as each impaled the corpse of a beast.

Casper felt a jolt as he opened his eyes, aware once more, as he looked up and saw the blue-eyed, blonde teenager of his former camp staring back at him. William.

"Hello, oh master of traps and deceit," the teenager said as he did an exaggerated bow towards Casper. He had a playful look in his eyes and a friendly smile on his lips. Yet he was staying pretty far away, not daring to enter the clearing entirely.

"You actually came," Casper said, a part of him a bit surprised despite *his* words.

"It is a free tutorial, mate, ain't nobody telling me where I can and can't go," William answered with a laugh, clearly mocking Casper.

“No, but you follow their whims nevertheless,” Casper mocked back. “So, why have you come, William?”

William completely ignored the first part as he responded to the second. “I am just curious why you asked for me; I don’t recall us having any beef?”

“Stop being willfully ignorant already. Your attempt at starting a war is clear as day to anyone not constantly stuck inside the camp. Richard knows. Half of his men know. So just stop this silly farce and speak as your true self for once,” Casper said, a bit annoyed.

The young teenager's demeanor changed as he looked back, his smile remaining, but his eyes were cold. “Fine. Let’s talk. But I go first... what the hell is your plan out here? Your plan with recklessly trying to hunt down Hayden and his men for days and then just disappear in the middle of it?”

“I wanted revenge, you bloody moron, for what they did to her. I know you didn’t directly kill her, but you still fucking caused it!” Casper yelled before taking a deep breath to calm himself down once more.

William looked at him. Obviously, a bit bewildered at the outburst.

“Gonna be honest, I don’t get why they go so much overboard when killing, and I think torture is quite dumb. But isn’t it equally illogical to react to it like you are? You risked your life needlessly by going closer and closer to their base instead of just going for the easier beasts. Don’t you care about tutorial points or experience at all?”

William didn't ask to provoke. He was honestly curious. He didn't understand it. He had been lost on why the reaction had been so violent from Hayden, to begin with. He had lost his son, an essential asset for sure, but why the response?

Casper looked a bit at the youth before he answered with a question of his own. One, he already knew the answer to. "Have you ever lost someone you loved?"

"Let's say I have; why would that make me seek revenge to the level of forsaking all logic like you?" William asked, a bit confused by the question. He had quite honestly always been a bit stumped when it came to the term 'love'. It seemed like a somewhat undefined emotion, and he was very unsure how exactly it worked.

"If you love someone, they become important parts of your world. If you love someone enough, they become your entire world. Then, if someone takes away that world, wouldn't you want to take theirs in return?" Casper asked, unable to hide his emotions. He hated himself for not realizing how much Lyra had meant to him. They had only spent a week together.. he knew it wasn't logical, but he couldn't let it go.

"But will taking their world away give yours back? If it doesn't... wouldn't it be better to try and construct a new world? Though it does seem a bit stupid to invest so much in something that you lose everything by losing it," William said. He could kind of understand the analogy, but he still wasn't entirely sure.

"You wouldn't understand, William. Love is an emotion far too complex for one such as you to comprehend," Casper said. Purposefully trying to rile the young man up a bit: Petty revenge, if you will.

"Define love?" the youth asked, a bit annoyed.

“You won't ever get it, William. You won't ever understand the feeling of losing someone. Truly losing someone,” Casper said as he smiled at the youth. “And that is your biggest weakness.”

“What the fuck are you on about?” William sneered. A weakness? What was this moron on about?

“You are broken - even more than I am. You believe emotions are a weakness... when your inability to feel is the true weakness,” Casper said as he stood up.

“If they are so important, then why don't you explain them? Make them *actually* make sense for once?” the young caster said, as he was preparing himself to strike. “Because from what I've seen, the only thing emotions bring with them is stupidity.”

“I am not going to waste my time engaging in futility,” Casper chuckled.

William, now well and truly pissed off, went back to a tried and tested method. Threats.

“If you do as I say, I promise not to kill you. You know what I am capable of.”

Shaking his head, Casper could only sigh. “William, that threat only works if the person you are threatening cares about living. Oh, also... I'm stronger.”

As the words left his mouth, they both made their move. Daggers flew out from William as he simultaneously summoned his wall to protect himself against any attacks. Internally, he already summoned up the energy to create his disc.

Casper, on the other hand, just spread out his hands... and the forest hummed. All of the spikes around him began to glow with a ghastly light as tendrils of shadows extended out from each of them. Gathering in a giant sphere of darkness floating above his head.

The daggers didn't even get halfway before they fell to the ground harmlessly, the mana within gone; his control of them lost. William's wall also disintegrated as the mana holding it together was overwhelmed. The energy he was building up to summon his disc was utterly suppressed by the mighty aura of the dark sphere.

"Wha-" William yelled out as he froze up.

"Resentment, William. The resentment of the fallen. Pure emotion turned to power, a curse left by beasts and men alike," Casper explained as he looked up at the sphere.

He wasn't controlling it. He couldn't. It was power far above what he could wield... the result of the magic circle taught to him.

"This is what you call weakness. Look at you. How weak and insignificant you are. Observe the kind of power you are too broken to even attempt to grasp for."

William could only stand there, wide-eyed, his mouth quivering. “Pl... don’t kill me! I didn’t kill- I won-“

“Oh, I am not going to kill you. It would be pointless, anyway. Another has already claimed you. Neither my teacher nor I have an interest in attracting unnecessary conflict. No, you are a witness,” Casper said as he smiled.

From below his cloak, he took out a spike. The same kind he had made countless traps with and killed dozens of humans. On it was more complex scripts than any of the ones around him.

“Goodbye, William. I shall take my leave from this accursed place first. May we never meet again,” he said as he impaled his own heart. The dark runes, spreading from the spike into his own body.

The sphere above reacted to his death, finally finding something to inhabit. The energy of resentment dove down and bore into his body through every orifice as he slowly began decaying. William just looking on at this, horrified and confused.

Moments later, with all the energy now within the dead archer, the runes transferred from the spike lit up. The mana of death spreading from the body. Which was when the final part activated.

An amulet, formerly hidden, activated. And with that, Casper disappeared from the tutorial.

“He did well,” the being said as he nodded in satisfaction.

“Adequate,” a female voice concurred.

“Our Patron gave express orders after all,” a third chimed in.

They had been observing a seer-stone moments earlier as they saw Casper disappear. A powerful magic circle before them activating at the same time. Immense amounts of mana were mobilized as a figure appeared standing in the middle of the circle.

“It’s done,” the newcomer spoke as he walked forwards, bowing to the three of them.

He had done everything as told. He didn’t necessarily know *why* he had to do all the things he had done. It was just a part of the pact he had made. William had been led to the intended spot, and he had witnessed what he had to witness.

“Well done, Casper. The Patron is satisfied with your performance,” the first figure said with unabated envy in his voice as he motioned with his skeletal hand for the young undead to rise. “And welcome to your afterlife.”

Chapter 39: Powershot

Jake cursed under his breath as he walked through the narrow cave. He had totally forgotten the shitty location of the challenge dungeon. At least he could walk out a lot faster than he had gotten in.

He was also happy to finally get his weapons back. He had missed his bow. It would have been a great stress-reliever in the dungeon to do some target practice. The quiver had naturally also come back with the bow.

One of the two daggers he had were now redundant after having gotten the Dagger of Bloodletting. It was common-rarity, and despite being made of bone, it was far sharper and far more durable than his steel knives. And that was ignoring the enchant to make things bleed more.

Another absolute positive was how damn comfortable his new boots were. It was utterly illogical how some old worn leather boots could feel like walking on clouds while simultaneously getting your feet massaged. He feared that he would never be able to go back to regular footwear.

The winding tunnel took him only half an hour to go through this time, though he purposefully ignored all the blue mushrooms in his path. He had had enough of those, for now, and with his bow in hand, he felt himself become slightly restless. He hadn't fought anything for thirty days after just getting a taste of it.

He had briefly considered seeking out his colleagues. But he was afraid that he was not powerful enough. He had minimal information and had no idea what kind of growth all the other survivors had gone through.

Professions are inherently not combat-focused, while classes are. Jake's class only at level 9 meant that he had fewer combat skills. His strength, agility, and endurance were his three lowest stats by quite a bit too. The stats that also happened to be the most important, along with perception, for archers.

Reaching the end of the cavern, he once more found himself at the foot of the hill. He couldn't help but take a deep breath as he looked around and took in everything within his Sphere of Perception. He had been confined for a month, either in small halls or the cave and garden. While the garden was spacious, it was nothing compared to the vast forest.

His sphere instantly picked something up that put a smile on his face. A small group of deer was on the hill above him. They were a bit larger than he remembered but based on the one evolved stag among them, it seemed like the same group he had chosen to avoid before entering the dungeon. *Must be fate*, he joked to himself.

There were five of them: one stag and four deer.

Making his way up the hill, he could only describe his feelings as childish anticipation. He had grown stronger in so many ways, his stats increasing manifold, and yet he had no outlet in the dungeon. He had nothing to test himself against.

He was more powerful than he had ever been now, and he had far more methods than ever before. At the top of the hill, he finally saw the beasts. The stag's antlers were glowing a faint white light, while both the deer and stag had rune-like motifs covering their hides. They weren't even trying to hide that the beasts were magical in some way or another.

Using Identify on the stag, he was happy that the now upgraded skill showed the beast's name and level.

[Lucenti Stag – lvl 24]

Identifying the other ones, he found them all in the low 20's, the weakest only 19.

[Lucenti Deer – lvl 19]

Despite their levels being literally twice that of his class, he felt not a shred of threat from them. This meant that he, with no hesitation, took out his bow while at the same time taking out a hemotoxin of inferior quality that he had stored in the necklace.

He dipped five arrows in the concoction, one for each beast. He had absolute confidence in winning, but not in killing them quickly without the use of poison. He still remembered his quite horrible damage output before he entered, and even with the overall stat growth, it likely still sucked.

But a poison would make up for that. The hemotoxin would increase the bleeding from any wounds Jake made and, of course, deal damage in general. Toxins were most commonly cured by merely having your vital energy overpower and wash it out.

This naturally consumed health points. Some intelligent beings would simply allow a poison like a hemotoxin to remain in their system until it naturally dissipated as its effect was relatively harmless as long as you didn't take any hits.

The beasts, however, had proved themselves to be anything but intelligent. They seemed to function off pure aggression and instinct. And trying to get rid of the poison in your system seemed like a somewhat instinctual thing to Jake. He would know; his instincts were quite something if his bloodline ability was to be believed.

The only slight annoyance with using poisons was the fact that the poison had to stay in its bottle or it would lose its potency fast. Unlike normal pre-system poisons, the mana within concocted poisons would become ineffective within ten minutes or so of leaving the bottle. His Malefic Viper's Poison did extend that duration, allowing it to stay toxic for up to half an hour, so that did help quite a lot.

He also couldn't just soak an arrow in poison and then put it in his storage. As the arrows were conjured, they couldn't be stored, or they would just turn to mana whenever he tried. Not that it would have helped anyway, as the 'duration' of the poison still decreased despite the temporal suspension in the necklace. He tried it with a dagger by coating it in poison, but when he took it out an hour later, all the potency in the poison was gone.

Having his arrows prepared, he nocked the first poisoned one and aimed at the stag. The arrow was loosed with great speed and power as it flew true and hit the stag in the neck, only penetrating with the arrowhead - more than enough to deliver the poison, though.

Momentarily stumbling, the stag, and the rest of its group, for that matter, were obviously taken by surprise. None of the deer had any chance to react before another arrow hit one of them, followed by another and then another.

Jake shot faster and more accurately than ever before, as he hit the last deer just as they had located him and started charging. Deep trails of blood were left after every beast, and Jake was happy to continue peppering them in wounds as they approached.

Only three beasts managed to reach him as Jake had successfully hit the stag in one of its legs, nearly severing it. A second deer was stuck in the eye and was now lying and spasming on the ground, likely only waiting to bleed out. Which left Jake with only three beasts to deal with in melee as the stag very probably wasn't getting back up.

The other three beasts finally made it into melee range, all dropping buckets of blood from their wounds. Jake took out two daggers, one of bone and one of steel. Just as they got close, they all exploded with light, burning Jake's skin and blinding him. Not that it mattered much, as he didn't really need his eyesight that much.

Dodging the initial charge, he swiped the bloodletting dagger across one of the deer, leaving a long gash that spilled blood like a waterfall. The second deer was not much luckier as it was granted several stabs with his other dagger. The third one, he simply allowed to ram into him, as he wrestled it to the ground.

His danger perception had barely reacted, making him willingly take the risk of fighting it in close combat. With the four others down for the count, he didn't see much threat from a logical standpoint. Something that was a mistake, as he failed to dodge a beam fired as a last-ditch effort by the stag in its dying moments.

The beam left a nasty burn-wound, almost like a high-powered laser. Yet despite Jake assessing the wound as 'nasty', it didn't affect much and already started healing itself mere moments after it got inflicted.

As for the beast pinning him down, he raised his hand and placed it on the neck of the creature, digging his fingers into its hide, as he used Touch of the Malefic Viper on full power, throwing away all subtlety the skill allowed. Instantly the effects were made clear. The flesh his hand touched started rotting, showing clear signs of necrosis, as the deer let out a whimper before it collapsed.

Jake got back up and noticed the rest of the beasts either dead or in their final moments. Taking the dagger, he made a quick round and finished the rest of them off.

He had felt the levels more than once throughout the battle and knew it had been a fruitful hunt. Quite honestly, him being level 9 at the beginning was just sad in a way. His stats were clearly not that of a level 9 archer at all.

Opening his status window, he saw the kill notifications for the first time in a month. It felt incredibly satisfying. One could argue it was a bit sad that the first living things he met he had killed. Discounting the Malefic Viper himself, of course. Snake-gods didn't count.

****You have slain [Lucenti Stag - lvl 24] - Experience earned. 4000 TP earned****

****You have slain [Lucenti Deer - lvl 20] - Experience earned. 3000 TP earned****

****You have slain [Lucenti Deer - lvl 19] - Experience earned. 2750 TP earned****

****You have slain [Lucenti Deer - lvl 21] - Experience earned. 3250 TP earned****

****You have slain [Lucenti Deer – lvl 22] – Experience earned. 3500 TP earned****

And as for levels, he had gotten quite a bit in that department too.

****'DING!' Class: [Archer] has reached level 10 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

...

****'DING!' Class: [Archer] has reached level 13 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 27 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 28 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

Four levels from a single fight lasting only a few minutes. The bonus experience from killing higher-leveled enemies sure did its work. While the kill notifications didn't explicitly state that he got any bonus experience, he clearly did. If he had to guess, then classes and professions had separate experience-meters?

The race levels were, however, where the real value lay. Whenever Jake got a level in his class, he got a measly 5 stats and 1 free point. On the other hand, his race levels gave 2 in all stats, or 18 in total, and 5 free points. So, a total difference of 6 and 23 stats per level. Nearly four times.

Of course, his profession was also quite ridiculous, with it providing 15 stats, 5 free points, aka 20 in total. But one had to remember that was evolved and a variant. Plus, it took two levels in either profession or class to get a single race level. It had at least been consistently that way so far.

Passing level 10 in his class naturally also meant something else.

****Archer class skills available****

Jake knew he had to mentally prepare himself after getting skills from his profession. He couldn't expect a random rare or even epic skill from a basic starting class after all. So, with little expectations, he went through the list, the first one being about as basic as he expected.

[Twin Arrow (Common)] – The Archer's arrows are never-ending; a single arrow becomes two. Allows the Archer to shoot an arrow that splits into two during its flight. Adds a minor bonus to the effect of agility and strength when using Twin Arrow.

This one was very fantasy-esque. It had several useful applications; the sneak attack component alone would be great. Oh, you think one arrow is heading your way? Sorry, it was two. But the thing he was most concerned about was how exactly a splitting arrow would work with his poisons. Would both have it? None of them have it? Or only the 'original' one. Or did the skill just conjure new arrows entirely? He just felt there were so many unknowns. If it didn't work with his poisons, he didn't care.

If it merely divided the poison between the two split arrows, it would be worse than not splitting at all. It is far better to deliver one strong dose to one area than two weaker doses in two regions. The former was far harder to heal and get rid of.

With him having more concerns than excitement for the skill, he moved on.

[Bow Bash (Common)] – Who says the bow can only be used at range? Allows the Archer to bash with his bow, knocking back the target. Increases the bow's durability and gives a minor bonus to the effect of strength when using Bow Bash.

This skill was way more straightforward. Just a skill that allowed him to hit people with his bow better. The purpose of the skill seemed to be keeping his enemies at a distance. The skill would indeed be useful, but Jake wasn't exactly getting excited over reading it. Moving on, he hoped for something better.

[Bouncing Arrow (Common)] – The Archer has many tricks hidden in their quiver. Allows the Archer to shoot an arrow that bounces off the first object it hits. Adds a minor bonus to the effect of agility and strength when using Bouncing Arrow.

This one was just gimmicky as hell. It seemed fun and interesting, but he had some serious questions as to the usefulness. He reckoned it was the kind of trick that would

work once against an enemy and then be utterly ineffective from that point onwards. And if one had already seen the trick before, you wouldn't be tricked by it as easily the next time. Again, another disappointing skill in his honest opinion.

[Active Camouflage (Uncommon)] – Sometimes, mere stealth is not enough, but one must hide their very being. Focus your mana and attune your presence to your surroundings, allowing you to stay hidden far more effectively when standing completely still. Adds a small bonus to the effect of wisdom when successfully remaining hidden.

This skill was a bit more exciting. Jake assumed it would allow you to hide from methods of detection other than the five senses. Likely even allowing him to avoid detection from magical perception skills. *Would it work against my Sphere of Perception?* he couldn't help but wonder too.

Another interesting point was that it used mana and scaled with wisdom. All his other skills in the archery class scaled with strength, agility, and sometimes perception. The resource used when activating the skills, or well, skill, as he only had Archer's Eye so far, had been stamina and not mana. This one was also of a higher rarity, so was certainly a contender. As for the last skill, it too was of uncommon-rarity.

[Powershot (Uncommon)] – An Archer with time to line up the perfect shot can be the deadliest foe. Allows the Archer to charge up a shot, increasing the power based on time charged. The longer the shot is held, the greater the stamina expenditure. Adds a small bonus to the effect of agility and strength when using Powershot.

This skill was relatively simple - channel and charge up a devastating shot. Jake thought of the application of the skill, as he had done with all the others. It would sure be useful as an opener since he would have plenty of time to charge up the shot.

One thing he had contemplated was also the possibility of the power behind his arrows not being high enough to penetrate the outer skin, or perhaps even natural armor of an enemy. For example, the big boars had a rough hide protecting them, and Jake remembered barely being able to penetrate it.

Beasts such as reptiles often had natural armor too. Heck, the Malefic Viper was a snake, and even his current form had scales covering the entire body. Jake would be incredibly surprised if said scales didn't offer a lot of defense.

If he thought of other humans, it would also be useful. The prior skills seemed to revolve around trickery and hiding, two things beneficial against humans but not very useful against beasts currently. Beasts at the moment had horrible perception of enemies in their surroundings and were far too easy to sneak up on. Trickery was also wholly unnecessary as the beasts did little more than just charge and used whatever innate abilities they possessed.

Powershot, on the other hand, would allow him to possibly take down one beast far quicker, hence making the fight easier.

On the negative side, the skill was channeled and likely took time to use properly. Chances are, Jake would only ever get one good shot off in a fight, possibly two if he somehow managed to open a lot of distance between him and his foe.

Overall, he was a bit disappointed by the skills offered. Then again, he had been a bit spoiled by the Malefic Viper skills.

Jake had no intention of going after humans at that moment. Never, if he could avoid it. Jake didn't like fighting people, and the challenges he sought after could as easily be found against beasts. So he picked the skill he deemed the most effective against those.

So, in the end, he settled on Powershot. Ultimately, the skill would allow him to take down powerful foes easier, and currently, he saw it as the most useful.

****New skill gained*:***

[Powershot (Uncommon)] – An Archer with time to line up the perfect shot can be the deadliest foe. Allows the Archer to charge up a shot, increasing the power based on time charged. The longer the shot is held, the greater the stamina expenditure. Adds a small bonus to the effect of agility and strength when using Powershot.

And with that settled, it was time to get some more levels under his belt.

As he was preparing to move, he felt something not that far away from him. It was still a few kilometers, but the feeling was... powerful. He couldn't quite describe it, but it felt like a huge mass of energy had gathered there, drained from where he was and everywhere around him. Maybe... maybe even from the entire tutorial area.

No matter the case, he had to investigate. Hopefully... he could find something worth fighting there.

Chapter 40: Defect & Meeting

William looked at the now pitch-black clearing where Casper had disappeared from earlier. He had been standing there for minutes now. William didn't get it. But more infuriating than that was that he didn't understand why he didn't get it.

That power was something William wanted... he *needed* it. But he couldn't even begin to understand what it was. No clue remained either, as all of the spikes and the corpses of the beasts they impaled were gone.

Casper claimed it was some kind of emotional power... resentment. William understood being mad at someone, but how could that possibly be so tangible? His claim of doing everything and reaching the power he had due to love was also... ridiculous. Illogical.

He had never gotten it. Love was a weird ethereal word not commonly found in his internal dictionary. He knew that his parents had claimed to love him. But if love was such an all-consuming feeling as the trapper claimed, why had the parents who claimed to love him chosen to abandon him?

Why did people think he was broken?

William had always thought himself a smart kid. He had been quiet, controlled, and done as he was told. His school-years were straightforward and easy. He never had any friends, and he did recall seeing 'specialists' who concluded that he just had a hard time understanding empathy. Putting him on some spectrum, something that allowed him to avoid much suspicion later on in life.

At only 11 years old, he had found an old book and looked up the word 'love' and tried to do as it said. Do to others as you want them to do unto you, which meant that the next many years were fine. He was a well-behaved child and never did any wrong. The problems only started arriving when his brother was born.

He remembered his parents being happy, having fulfilled their biological quota of two children to carry on the bloodline. He also remembered them being sad when they discovered that the child was a defect. A product that Darwinism would have claimed if nature was to run its course without the interference of society.

William was 12 when the kid was born, and he would never forget the difficulties it brought. His mother had to quit working, and all semblance of free-time and family outings stopped. William may have had his issues, but he still enjoyed what other children did and sorely missed going to amusement parks and the zoo.

As the years passed, the problems continued, and William tried just to do his own thing. His parents had forgotten their otherwise 'troubled' teenager, being far too busy with his little brother who required constant care.

Then, and even now, William never understood why they kept the child. They knew even before the birth that it wouldn't come out whole. It would never amount to anything; it was a failed attempt. In all other areas, you were told that if a product turned out terribly, you just throw it out and start over or move onto more important matters. But his parents had used the ever-ethereal argument of love to bring the child into the world.

Once more, William didn't care. As long as he did nothing illegal, his parents didn't care either. Back then, William had big plans. He enjoyed studying, he liked to learn, and he found great pleasure in learning about other humans, most of all. He learned how they worked and how he was supposed to act around them. But more importantly, how to make them act as you wanted.

His plans were grand. He still remembered the day he found out he had gotten into the best university in his area. He remembered the genuine joy he had felt. But he also remembered his parent's slightly reluctant attitude to his happiness.

It turns out that having a child requiring a person to care for it every hour of the day, combined with a lot of medicine, is expensive. They never told William, but he discovered it himself as he heard his parents whisper in the middle of the night. They were about to go into debt. William would have to move to go to the university... he would need money - money they didn't have.

William did not take the news well that his plans for the future wouldn't become a reality. The child, his so-called brother, was making that impossible. So, William did as he had read in that book so many years ago. He did unto others what he wished they would do to him. So, he helped them.

He knew the law. He knew that the child, now 5 years old, was still wheelchair-bound, and quite frankly, at risk of dying to any unexpected danger. It wouldn't be suspicious if it happened.

A device was used to allow the child to breathe during the night. The thing they called his brother was so defective it couldn't even do that without help. The night was also the only time the child was left alone for just a bit of time. Still regular check-ins every hour, but alone in between.

William snuck in that night. Having just turned 18, he got to work. He considered bringing it up to his parents, but he knew no legal defense was better than not having done anything illegal. With that in mind, he decided to do it alone.

Switching off the alarm was easy enough. Guides to those devices were on the internet if one looked hard enough. Next, he did the most straightforward thing and simply twisted one of the tubes delivering oxygen, stopping the flow. And with that, he went back to bed and slept like a baby. He had done a good deed, after all.

It was a pure win-win situation. His parents would be freed from a burden, their economic situation would improve, and with that, his plans of higher education made possible. He saw nothing getting in the way but a possible legal investigation, but he had made sure to make the twisted tube look like it happened on accident. So, if anything, it would be some unrelated caretaker getting in trouble, as she had been the last one to operate the machine and was responsible for keeping watch.

He was awoken an hour later by shouting and screaming as the caretaker panicked, and his mother was even worse off. His father had been at work, as he was working nearly every waking moment to make ends meet.

William had succeeded. His brother had slept in, never having even woken up. And now he would never wake up ever again. William was proud of himself. After the panic and mourning, an investigation was made, and it was ultimately deemed an accident.

Throughout the entire process, he had never once been suspected. He had only been questioned once, and he just claimed that he was sleeping the whole time.

But to William's surprise, things didn't immediately improve. Despite having removed the burden, his parents didn't get newfound freedom, and the focus of their family didn't go to making sure his university plans were fulfilled. Instead, it became endless mourning, and his mother even deliriously wanting to sue both the caretaker and the company that made the machine due to the alarm failing.

William didn't get why they were so reluctant just to move on. Why they had to act as they did. When the movements to sue got closer and William discovered that the legal proceedings would put the family even further in debt, for what even he could see was a pointless legal-battle, he decided to finally come clean- There was a bit of a risk that an investigation would get reopened, but the risk was worth it.

Their response had been far from what he expected. He knew they would be angry; lying and acting deceitful was not okay after all, but the reaction was way out of proportion. He tried to explain; he tried to reason; his logic had been flawless. He had acted entirely rational throughout it all.

His father had yelled more than ever; his mother broke down crying. After that, he had been sent to his grandparent's place. He was forced to talk to shrinks, therapists, and many other so-called 'experts'.

He was sent into programs, homes, and in the end, a fucking closed facility. His parents never told anyone what he had done, and yet they locked him up like he had been the one to ruin their lives. Like he had been the burden.

He was pumped full of drugs, his logic dying, and from then, it all turned into a blur with only moments of clearness - one and a half years he spent living like that. Even now, his memories of the time were shrouded, like a cloud of mist was obstructing his mind.

He only had a single one with a clear head of those many months as he managed to fool some new hire that he was getting. That he understood what they wanted. That he understood the emotions that they all found oh so important. But he could only fake it for so long until a more experienced employee caught on, and he had no peace after that.

The system saved him. It freed him. Not just physically. It freed his mind.

Here, in the tutorial, he had time to think. He had time to do as he always wanted. He would manipulate, exploit, and do everything possible to win. He had viewed his inability to understand these emotions as a perk for the past month, not a fault.

But today, Casper had made a small crack in that belief. Was he missing something? Was he... broken? *No, impossible.*

There wasn't anything to fix. It was a strength, his strength. He had been called 'mentally ill' before; it wasn't new. Casper was just an outlier. William had brilliantly fooled Richard, Caroline, Jacob, everyone! Not a soul suspected him. He was perfect.

William only saw the world as consisting of two kinds of people. Those useful to him reaching his goals, and those not. If someone didn't hold value for him, there was only the value he would get from harvesting their tutorial points and the experience they offered.

The system itself agreed with his reasoning. It only confirmed his thoughts. He was rewarded for every kill. Not punished like the old world. Rules didn't apply to the strong. And William... William was strong.

He firmly believed that. He was finally untethered. No laws, no parents, no vague moral obligations to anything. The only one he had to please was himself. His only limiter was the extent of his own power. So, he would do anything to obtain more power.

William, lost in thought, found that he had wandered quite a distance. A bit closer to the camp, but not in a straight line. He did see some beasts, but all were below 25, so he was still in the outer area for sure.

As he turned to the camp's direction, he spotted something out of the corner of his eye - a single individual walking through the shrubbery. It was a man from the build, and he was wearing an upgraded common-rank archer cloak, but he saw no bow in sight. Nothing else about him was of interest, as the cloak concealed his entire body.

William considered attacking, but something made him pause. There was a presence to the man. He couldn't put his finger on it, but through all the evolutions and levels, a certain innate sense had been unlocked. And that sense was currently making him aware that the man wasn't simple.

William used Identify on the man. He knew he was terrible at remembering to use it, as he hadn't even bothered to use it on Casper before. Or anyone really. *Something to improve*, he told himself. But when he got the response, his eyes widened.

[?]

It was just... nothing. No feedback at all. A single question mark was all William got. After he had gotten the Identify skill to common-rarity, it had told him the race and level of everyone... but now it didn't work.

One would typically take that as a sign to avoid combat, but William saw it as the exact opposite. This was a perfect opportunity. *Casper was an anomaly; he* reminded himself. This lone person in front of him appeared strong. He was alone. William would make him the case-study of why he wasn't wrong.

"Hello there!" he said with a huge smile. Completely back in his faux persona. "Haven't seen anyone else for a while out here. What you up to all alone with how things are?"

William tried hard to make the man let down his guard. The man he presumed to be an archer took off his hood too, and William got a good look at the man. Brown hair, forgettable face, utterly dull. The only thing that made him stand out was his eyes. His gaze was sharp, focused.

The teenager had met a lot of people out in the wild. He had seen a wide range of emotions: fear, curiosity, caution, anger, and even happiness and relief at some points. But the eyes of the man was neither of those. He couldn't quite place his finger on what his gaze held, but William didn't like it.

He had never tried that before, and it put him slightly off his game. As he was wondering how to proceed, the man answered.

"Good question. Just got here myself. Been a bit busy in an oversized cave for a while. Or would calling it an ancient temple be more accurate?" the archer answered, shrugging before he asked. "You heard of any gatherings of survivors around here? A camp or something like that?"

William looked a bit bewildered at the man. The first part was nonsense. He had been in a temple? The young caster had been many places, and he hadn't seen even the shadow of

something that one could describe as a temple. The latter part was also confusing. How could he not know of ANY gatherings of survivors? The two bases hadn't exactly been subtle with their hardcore recruitment.

"Eh, yeah, we got some bases. I am a part of one of them myself, actually," William answered, seeing an opportunity. "I can bring you to it if you like? It is a bit far, and it is easy to get lost in the forest after all."

"Hm... what's the name of the leader of the camp? Or notable people? And you mentioned bases as in more than one? Just take me as someone absolutely clueless to the situation currently in the tutorial. Because I am," the man answered, dodging the offer of the escort with his own questions.

"Sure thing! We got two bases, one run by a dude named Hayden and another run by another bloke named Richard. Both are a bit bonkers, and a big war is kinda going on. As for notable people... we got a good smith named Mr. Smith? Or well, some call him The Smith. Anyway, he is excellent, and I am sure he could help fix up your stuff," William answered, trying to really sell his camp.

Not that he had any intention of the archer ever making it there in one piece. But if they traveled there together, there was bound to be opportunities.

The archer stood a while contemplating. William's brain was working at high speed, trying to see every possible scenario. He wanted to avoid a straight-up fight if possible, as a direct confrontation with an enemy of unknown power seemed like a bad idea.

Finally, the archer responded. "Sure, I guess you can take me there. Meanwhile, tell me of the other members of your camp. Perhaps I know some of them."

With delight, William smiled and cheered internally. The sucker seemed oblivious to his intentions, on the surface at least. He hadn't spotted any openings yet, but the teenager seriously doubted that anyone could stay completely vigilant at all times. The way back to base was far. Especially far, considering William wasn't going to take him in the direction of the camp at all.

"Of course! My name is William, by the way. A caster, as you can likely see by the robe. It's a bit far, and my physical stats are a bit bad with my class and all, so it may take a while. But! I will have plenty of time to answer any and all questions you may have."

William put on the attitude of a true used-car salesman. He also used the age-old trick of downplaying yourself, inevitably making the other party feel superior, making them more likely to relax.

"Well, nice to meet you, William. Now unto the other members of your camp..."

A bit annoyed that the other party refused to even give his own name, William simply endured as he happily started yapping away about his base's outstanding members.

It was going to be a long trip back.