

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 41: Clash

Jake walked beside the young caster as the teenager happily chatted away. Jake was taken aback from learning about two massive camps that combined held nearly all the remaining survivors in them. He had come here looking for the source of mana before, but instead, he found a caster, and from his aura, it didn't feel like it was him. *Oh well, this is fine too.*

The archer was able to remain relatively relaxed as he walked. He had naturally inspected the young man when they first met.

[Human – lvl 24]

He was happy to see that it now worked on humans finally. It only showed race level, making Jake have no idea about the teenager's class or profession's details. He knew he was a caster based solely on his clothes.

Jake didn't feel like sharing any personal information either, despite the other party's subtle, and not so subtle, probes. The caster called himself William or Will for short. He had stressed the last part quite a bit. Being friendly was all well and good, but Jake seriously didn't like the guy. He was far too chippy and animated to appear genuine.

All of that was naturally ignoring the fact that William was likely going to try something. He wasn't sure what, but he had a feeling. If he had to make a guess, Jake would guess a classic ambush, or maybe he would just try to backstab him at some random point?

Jake wasn't afraid, though. He was low-key looking forward to it. With the kid being a well of information, he saw no reason not to travel together for a bit. It would also allow him to better understand the level of power other survivors possessed. Even if Jake couldn't win, he was confident in escaping with his high vitality and toughness.

They walked a while, the teenager still talking and Jake giving short brief answers. His Sphere of Perception passively making him aware of his surroundings like always. He was still half-expecting an ambush to be somewhere, but no matter how long they walked, he saw nothing.

Suddenly William stopped as he knelt, motioning Jake to do the same. Perfectly aware that nothing was in the area, Jake nevertheless played along. *This is silly.*

"Did you spot that? I have a skill that allows me to see hidden concentrations of mana, and there is a big ambush just up ahead. They haven't spotted us yet, but I am unsure how many there are," the teenager said as he pointed down the small hill they were approaching.

"What do you want me to do?" Jake asked, trying to act as seriously as he could. His sphere still didn't pick up quack. While he wasn't going to rule out people being able to hide from it, there sure as hell wasn't anyone close.

“You are an archer, right? Can you maybe go up that hill we passed earlier and try and see if you can spot anything from up there? I know you guys got, like, super high perception, right?” William asked, motioning with his hands once more. “Don’t worry, I will keep watch here and help in case they try anything!”

Jake nodded along as he listened. *Cool story*. Yet he followed the directions. Was he really going with that?

Jake started slowly walking up the hill, going backward, trying to act as if he was still actually looking for an ambush. William had turned his back to Jake, as he seemingly focused hard to keep an eye on things.

After a few meters, Jake turned his back to William, and the moment he did, a barrage of daggers flew soundlessly out from beneath the casters robe. Jake couldn’t help but smirk internally as the expected attack came, but he quickly frowned his brows a bit at the power and number of attacks.

Fourteen daggers were coming. Without any hesitation, he jumped to the side, all the blades missing their initial attempt to skewer him. As he barely got a footing, the daggers turned in the air and swiftly came his way once more. A bow appeared in Jake's hand with a quick motion, as he dodged once more and returned an arrow towards the caster.

William had turned towards Jake at this point, surprised that the archer had dodged his sneak attack. Even as he dodged the second and third blow, the archer seemed to have eyes on his back. The counterattack was quickly blocked by William, as he was once again surprised.

What surprised him this time was not the power, but the lack of it. The arrow had been weak. He doubted the attack was from someone with even 100 strength. Something pretty much all physical fighters had - especially one an even higher level than himself.

The arrow thus easily got blocked by his iron wall, as he continued to manipulate the daggers. This was by far the most slippery foe William had ever faced. He wasn't as fast as others he had met, but he seemed to be perfectly aware of all the attacks aimed at him.

The arrows continued as he blocked again and again. It felt like a waste of time, but the archer just kept shooting. Not wanting to lose momentum, William started deploying walls of iron to try and trap the archer, but he kept weaving in and out, never having more than one side blocked at a time.

He wanted to throw a disc, but the arrows made it hard to focus. He couldn't lessen his control too much on the daggers or the walls, either. It was beginning to annoy William, and he was starting to get impatient.

Jake was in his own mind relatively relaxed throughout all this. He felt in control, and he felt the kinetic energy of the daggers lower than expected. The walls were a bit of a problem, but he reckoned the other party was draining mana fast.

Another thing he quickly noticed was the control of the daggers worsening as he moved further away. With a plan in mind, Jake kept retreating more and more, as he saw the caster start chasing him. The wall of iron always floated in front of him, making Jake only able to see that. With his eyes, that is.

As he managed to jump a reasonable distance back, he felt the caster somehow slide himself forward, almost as if he was flying. No, he was controlling his own body like he controlled the daggers.

Jake took this chance to stop retreating, deposited the bow in the necklace, and charged towards the caster. Dagger of Bloodletting in hand, he managed to close half the distance as the daggers caught up to him from behind.

Taking a gamble, he chose to betray expectations as he allowed five daggers to hit him in the back, penetrating into his flesh. However, his movements were unaffected as he vaulted over the wall of iron, swiping down with his dagger.

William was surprised by Jake's gamble as he scrambled to activate mana barrier, one of his starting skills. The barrier barely did anything as the dagger came down. William did manage to slide himself backward slightly, only taking a minor cut to his forearm.

Smirking, he had the daggers resume their assault at full power, forcing the archer on the defensive once more. In William's eyes, Jake had taken far more damage from the daggers in his back than the minor cut he had inflicted. Of course, he didn't know about Jake's ridiculous vitality. And he hadn't noticed the blood already on the dagger before it cut him.

He only noticed as he started getting slightly dizzy, losing control for a moment allowing the archer to close in a bit more. William, in panic, looked to his arm and saw the wound, now black and festering.

What the fuck? he yelled in his mind, now genuinely panicking. He had experienced poisoning from the evolved badgers before, but this felt way worse. To make matters even more horrifying, the archer was nearly upon him once more.

As the archer was only a couple of meters away, William made his final gambit. No longer aiming to necessarily kill his enemy anymore, all he thought of was to escape. Even if he won, the poison would simply consume him anyway.

The final card William had up his sleeve was called Flashing Steel. The newest skill in his repertoire. His entire body lit up with a bright light reminiscent of a flashbang, as small pieces of scrap metals exploded out of him. The whole area around him exploding as a small crater formed.

Jake was already too close and even with his danger sense he was taken entirely by surprise and only managed to raise his hands as the metal hit him. The metal's momentum shot him backward tens of meters before he finally hit a tree, unfortunately only pushing the daggers in his back further in. It was like he had just been hit by a super-powerful frag grenade at close range.

The final thing he saw before the caster left his sphere was William flying backward himself, as he manipulated his own body once more. Jake quickly lost track as he saw the caster disappear into the trees.

Pushing himself off the tree, he had smashed into, groaning as he tried to reach for the daggers sticking out of his back. They hurt like hell, but his bodily strength was not comparable to an average human anymore. Ripping the daggers out took a while because some of them were tricky to reach, but he got it done in a few minutes.

His frontside was perhaps even worse than his back. The scrap metal that William blasted him with at the end had quite the power behind them. Luckily his cloak had absorbed a lot of the impact, leaving it in tatters. He really hoped the self-repair enchant still worked despite the extensive damage.

Sitting on the floor breathing heavily, Jake meditated as he thought back on the fight. He had underestimated the other party. He had seemed carefree and inexperienced during their walk, but the caster had been ruthless and calculating in the battle. The control of his abilities impressive.

Jake had only met one survivor so far, but his plans of approaching his colleagues just yet were already questionable. He didn't have any clue as to William's relative power compared to everyone else. He knew that the teenager was a part of Richard's base, which led Jake to believe that Richard had to at least be stronger.

Lack of information was a great weakness for him currently. What if William was just an example of a regular member of Richards base? He had confidence in facing one caster of that level, maybe even two if he got the jump, but anything more, and he would surely be on the losing side. Even then... he had only won because of his poison. If the caster had known about it already, Jake wasn't one hundred percent sure things would have gone as well as they did.

William had during their conversation been very careful to reveal nothing about the powers of others. He did, however, mention that both bases combined had numbers in the hundreds. If facing just one other survivor had ended up with him losing nearly a third of his health, facing any random small squad would likely be fatal.

Worst of all, while Jake had won, he had likely failed to kill the opponent. He used the word *likely* as there was still a chance the caster wouldn't make it. Before his charge, Jake had used Blood of the Malefic Viper to soak his dagger in his toxic blood, effectively

poisoning the enemy. He would need a healer for sure, as Jake doubted the kid had high enough defensive stats to battle it himself. That, or he would need a potion.

Which was another thing Jake didn't know about. Did they have any alchemists? If they did, could they make any detoxification potions? Smiths, tailors, and builders had all been mentioned, so them having professions was indisputable. It was also very believable that they would keep any knowledge of alchemy hidden from outside sources, along with other powerful profession types.

All of this ultimately led to Jake being very hesitant in trying to seek out his former colleagues. He had parted with Richard by killing a bunch of his men, so he had serious doubts that the guy would just welcome him with open arms.

No, for now, he needed power. Power to be able to seek them out with his head held high, and at least the confidence to escape if things went sideways. So, he decided to hunt. His class was only level 13, and he could efficiently kill level 20+ beasts for some quick levels. His colleagues would have to wait for now.

After meditating a while, he took out a health potion and drank it. It filled his pool back up quite a bit, his body visibly healing. *I need to get stronger.*

Turning towards the depths of the forest once more, he started searching for new prey. It was power-leveling time!

Caroline looked at the gloves in her hand as she smiled proudly at her creations. They were only inferior-rarity and didn't offer any stats or anything. But it did give her plenty of experience to her profession.

“Oh, those are nice. Made for a certain someone, eh?”

Turning her head, she saw Joanna taking a seat. The premier tailor and the one who had taught her a lot of the techniques she currently used. Caroline jokingly hit Joanna on the shoulder, reprimanding her. “Stop it... I just thought he needed some gloves, you know?”

“Hehe, don’t get me wrong, I am supporting you 100%! You and Jacob are so cute together; it reminds me of when I first met Mike...” Joanna said, her bright smile dropping towards the end.

“Joanna, we don’t know what happened to everyone else,” Caroline said, laying a hand on her friend's shoulder. “I am sure he is just in another tutorial, and I am just as sure that he is fine. Mike was always a tough guy; he can take care of himself.”

Smiling, Joanna snuggled up to her young former colleague. “You are such a sweetheart. No wonder Jacob couldn’t keep his hands off you. Talking of Jacob, have you guys talked to-”

But before she could answer, an archer stormed over to them, yelling loudly.

“Is Caroline here!? Come quickly, we got an emergency! Richard is asking for you asap!”

Without any hesitation, Caroline got up as she ran after the archer. Around the gate to enter their camp, she saw dozens standing around, a few of Richard's men keeping them away.

As she got to the gate, she saw one of the other healers sweating as he tried to heal the caster on the ground. As she saw that the wounded person was William, she was taken aback. One of his arms was entirely black, and protruding veins were visible, extending from his shoulder onto his chest. Instantly she knew that he had been poisoned by something powerful.

Richard stood at the side, throwing her a glance. She looked questioningly back at him. When he nodded, she got to work.

Focusing, she started casting a curing spell, as she allowed the other healer to continue trying to keep the young man stable. The poison was strong. Very strong. And to make it worse, it even had magical properties making it only harder to cure.

But Caroline was not the strongest healer in their base, possibly the entire tutorial, for nothing. She flooded the teenager with a pulse of mana, washing away some of the toxins. A couple of powerful pulses later, the black color had started fading slightly. With a final push, she managed to dispel every trace of poison within the teenager.

William himself was unconscious as she and the other healer managed to finally fully heal him. Caroline felt that the only wound on his body was a small cut on his arm. If they hadn't healed him, he would have died without a doubt. A significant weakness of casters was not getting any defensive stats from their classes, and from the looks of it, William really had terrible physical stats.

From her assessment, a warrior like Richard, especially with his class evolution, would be able to fight the poison himself, solely due to his higher toughness and health pool.

William, now healed, still hadn't woken up. From what Caroline felt as she flooded his body, both his health pool and mana pool were pretty much empty. She didn't know their values, but she could get a rough estimate that he was low.

After making sure William was fine, the next task was to find out what exactly had happened. She put up the barrier around them with a wave of her hand, only her, the archer, and Richard within.

"What happened?" she asked.

The archer, who was, in fact, the Scout who had been following William, shook his head.

"I don't know. I was following the little psycho as always when I failed to notice a trap. I don't know what the hell it was, but I was stuck there for hours, it didn't even do anything, I was just stuck... until suddenly I saw him fly over me, and the second he did, the magic binding me was dispelled too... it was fucking weird."

"So, it's Casper?" Richard said frowning.

"No," Caroline shook her head. "This isn't the same type of attack as his at all. He is focused on curses, dark mana. This was poison. Moreover, the cut on his arm was made with a weapon for sure. This isn't a beast, either."

“An accomplice then... or an entirely new player. This isn’t Hayden. Casper would never work with him, and if Hayden had poison this strong, he would have used it before. Shit, this is all getting needlessly complicated,” Richard sighed with annoyance.

“What’s the plan?” the Scout asked. “Make the kid wake up, get info, and finish him off?”

“We could, but I have a better idea,” the former heavy warrior said. “For now, get him in one of the cabins.”

The entire situation was a shitshow, and everyone was aware of it.

Someone or something had potent poison, and Caroline was the only healer who could cure it. The other healer could heal through it, perhaps giving the person a chance to rely on their own stats to survive before they ran out of mana. But it wasn’t a reliable method at all.

The matter of William nearly dying spread throughout the camp like a wildfire. William was viewed favorably by most in their base, especially the crafters. The Smith, without a doubt, the one favoring him the most of everyone

None of them really knew about the kid from Richard’s understanding. They only knew the persona he had cultivated while within the camp. Which meant a lot of people had gathered around his cabin, asking worried questions. Even if they wanted the teenager dead, it would be incredibly difficult. *Plan C then*, he thought.

Jacob had also gathered outside with the others. While he was undoubtedly worried about William, he was more concerned with Casper. It wasn't a secret that the trapper had called William out, and now the caster was nearly dead... he could only fear the worst. Either he had tried to kill William, or he was a victim himself... *damn it*.

Taking a deep breath, he looked towards the sky, the artificial sun hanging above. Even if everything was bad... he couldn't be the one to break. He knew others relied on him. Jacob had a responsibility. He refused to let others lose hope, so he would grasp for anything he could. Because at times, he felt like hope was all he had going for him.

Chapter 42: Twin Fang Style

Jake held the bowstring as he felt his stamina slowly drain. When he finally let go, the arrow literally exploded forth from the bow as it smashed into the ostrich. The arrow itself broke into splinters upon impact due to the massive power behind it. Not that the ostrich fared any better.

The arrow had hit it on its neck, effectively blowing its head off. Jake could only smile at the tremendous power of his new Powershot skill. The stamina drain was quite insane when he made shots like he just did, but it was still oh so satisfying to do.

The skill had many drawbacks, though. First of all, you had to stand nearly entirely still while channeling the shot. You could make minor movements by turning your upper body but taking a step would 'drain' a bit of the charged up energy and force you to sometimes start over entirely, which wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't for the second big drawback.

It was a very slow skill to use. It took several seconds to charge a shot that did just half-decent damage, while it could easily take close to 10 seconds to fire a shot like Jake just had. The skill's power increased exponentially as he charged, but so did the stamina drain and the general drain on his body.

Funnily enough, his high defensive stats turned out to be very useful with the skill. He could imagine if he tried to use the skill after simply leveled to 10 in his class a month ago. He wouldn't even be able to charge the shot for 5 seconds without his arm giving out.

Earlier in the day, he had tried to do the maximum charge he could. He held it for 12 seconds before his arm simply gave out as it's veins burst, and half his arm got covered in blood along with a very sore shoulder and upper body. However, this did show the skill's potential as the arrow hit a tree carving a fist-sized hole into it. The wooden arrow was borderline disintegrated upon impact, completely splintered in all directions.

If he had been able to use that skill against the metal-manipulating caster, he would have been able to pierce straight through that wall of iron, or at least have the kinetic force behind the impact be strong enough to send the wall smashing back into him. Too bad the guy didn't allow him to stand still and charge a shot for over 10 seconds. Quite rude, actually.

Checking his notifications, he noted that he had put another level under his belt.

****You have slain [Velocta Ostrich - lvl 24] - Experience Earned. 4000 TP earned****

****'DING!' Class: [Archer] has reached level 19 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

The leveling was getting quite a bit slower now, and that was disregarding the difficulty in finding beasts. He had yet to see a single one above level 25 so far, but he had also purposefully avoided heading further into the forest.

It had been around two days since he met the caster who called himself William. He knew the caster still had to be alive as he had never gotten any notification for the kill. He wanted to avoid other people for now as he still deemed it too risky to meet others. A squad of Williams would very likely result in certain death.

So, he leveled. His plan currently was to get to at least level 25 before making contact. It all depended on how long his leveling would take, but for now, he had time. Looking at the tutorial panel, he noted that less than a month was remaining.

Tutorial Panel

Duration: 29 days & 23:17:03

Total Survivors Remaining: 389/1200

He said less than a month, but it still was still nearly an entire month - plenty of time for a lot to happen. A month in the dungeon had resulted in him getting a profession, level it 44 times, evolving it once, and even evolve his race twice. Oh yeah, and he met a god.

Jake was still worried about his colleagues, but if they had lived to now, he saw no reason to rush to their side. If they hadn't survived... he would process that if that time comes.

The levels had naturally also come with a skill at level 15. Jake had honestly been expecting nothing and had thought of going with the basic tracking skill he passed up at level 5 over a month ago. The logic behind it being to try and use it to locate his colleagues when the time came.

He also considered getting basic dual-wielding briefly. Jake preferred using a weapon in each hand a lot more than just a single dagger. So when he finally leveled and saw the options, he went with a new option that was a welcome addition for sure.

[Basic Twin Fang Style (Uncommon)] – The twin fang style is an ancient dual-wielding fighting technique. Fighters of this style prefer shorter weapons and do not shy away from using afflictions to take down their foe. Unlocks basic proficiency in the Twin Fang Style and adds a minuscule bonus to the effect of agility and strength when using a fitting melee weapon. Grants an increased bonus while wielding melee weapons of bone.

It was essentially a kind of dual-wielding specialization. How Jake unlocked it, he didn't know. Maybe it had something to do with the Dagger of Bloodletting being made of bone, but it also mentioned the use of afflictions, which was very closely aligned with his profession.

Of course, there also was the whole Malefic Viper angle to consider, fangs being easily associated with vipers after all. Not that it mattered much in the end, he was just happy with the skill.

As with other skills of its nature, it came with a lot of instinctive knowledge. But compared to an inferior-rarity skill, this one also came with more ‘true’ knowledge. Like he had been thrown a guide-book into his memory, but he still had to learn and practice it himself, which he had spent a while doing whenever he had time. Yet he found that he barely used what it taught. He only used it to improve his existent style, if you can even call it that. Currently, he just acted based on instinct when fighting, relying on making split-second decisions over anything else.

Speaking of other skills he was offered, they were all rather basic. One of them even gave a small passive danger sense, which he found kind of funny considering he already had one through his bloodline. He did consider picking it up to see what would happen but skipped over it.

Having obtained another skill requiring practice did give him more to do while not hunting. He was already practicing his mana techniques whenever possible, so having a physical exercise was actually pretty nice.

His mana manipulation was improving steadily. He had gotten some inspiration from his spatial storage necklace and learned how to use mana better intuitively. Using items, however, wasn’t close to the same as having to manipulate the mana yourself. It was as if the system pretty much did everything for you. You just had to think about what you wanted.

On the topic of items, he had tried hard to locate more lockboxes but had ended up with not even a single common-rarity item or token. The area seemed to have been entirely scoured by other survivors, which was likely also the reason why nearly no beasts remained. He remembered before the dungeon that if one looked for beasts, you found beasts within minutes. Now he was happy if he saw two small groups within an hour.

Jake knew this meant he would have to move inwards soon. He hoped to get a skill, either increasing his speed or his defenses at 20. Beasts were naturally not his concern; in fact,

he hoped to meet stronger beasts than he currently was as those below 25 were a bit boring.

Walking through the forest, Jake still enjoyed the atmosphere, something he doubted most did, considering that some war was apparently going on. But he liked it. Perhaps the confinement of the dungeon was still at the forefront of his mind, but he loved how open it was. The weird 'immortal birds of ambiance' even appearing endearing now. Yeah, those were still a thing. Somehow dodging every single arrow effortlessly. He couldn't even use Identify on them.

As an extension of that, then if he had to mention one thing he hated about the new world and the tutorial more than anything, it was the lack of information. Jake liked to know things. While instinct was good most of the time, that didn't mean knowledge wasn't just as important.

So not knowing anything was annoying him endlessly. Not knowing how his parents were or if they were even alive, the state of his other family members, how the world was currently looking outside... what would happen to all the animals on earth. All of this was disregarding his general lack of knowledge about the system and the tutorial itself.

All of this, with him being fully aware that he knew far more than most, heck, he was still carrying an entire library-worth of books around with him. He hadn't really had the time or desire to read since leaving the dungeon, but at least he had the option.

Everyone else had to be far more in the dark than himself. Unless Jake had missed another massive happening besides the whole faction war going on, they should all be utterly clueless as to how pretty much everything worked. Which kind of made Jake think that for a tutorial, this place sure sucked at teaching them anything.

Though despite that, Jake still thought he was doing pretty well. A bit less well after meeting that William fellow, he thought he was pretty strong on average. Looking at this status, it sure also amplified that thought.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (E) – lvl 31]

Class: [Archer – lvl 19]

Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 44]

Health Points (HP): 2986/3100

Mana Points (MP): 3248/3680

Stamina: 694/1040

Stats

Strength: 105

Agility: 126

Endurance: 104

Vitality: 310

Toughness: 157

Wisdom: 368

Intelligence: 107

Perception: 247

Willpower: 180

Free points: 0

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

Class Skills: [Basic One-Handed Weapon (Inferior)], [Basic Stealth (Inferior)], [Advanced Archery (Common)], [Archers Eye (Common)], [Powershot (Uncommon)], [Basic Twin Fang Style (Uncommon)]

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 experienced significant growth, especially his agility and strength, now both being above 100. He had decided to put all his free points into strength and agility, trying to get them to an acceptable level. It was a bit sad that wisdom, his highest stat by quite a bit, did nothing for him in direct combat. He had his Touch of the Malefic Viper, but he only used that in emergencies as he prioritized using his daggers and bow for now.

He had also collected quite an amount of tutorial points too.

TP Collected: 313.920

He called it quite the number but compared to most everyone in the tutorial, it likely sucked. Which, by the way, was another bullet point on his list of information he would really like to have. What the hell are tutorial points even used for? A frustration he very much believed he shared with a lot of others in the tutorial.

He also made a mental note that he had yet to sleep since he left the dungeon. He had made it a habit only to meditate to restore stamina and mana, partly due to the weakness that came from sleeping. It did take him quite a while to mentally filter out the constant feedback from his sphere when he wanted just to rest his head. Yet, at the same time, he didn't want to completely cut off the outside world, leaving himself vulnerable.

Instead, he had somehow managed to relegate the sphere solely to his instinct. It was still active, and he had been woken up from his meditation once when a lone beast came close. His sphere had reached a radius of around 15 or 16 meters by now also. It was far more potent closer to him than further away.

Where most growth was found was his ability to also feel the mana, however. After his first level 10 evolution, he had been able to vaguely feel something, while now it was nearly second nature for him to detect it.

After sitting down and meditating for a few hours, both his mana and stamina were fully restored, and his health points had also managed to regenerate passively.

One peculiarity Jake had noticed with how health worked was the interaction between toughness, vitality, and to a lesser extent, endurance. While vitality increased health and health regeneration, it didn't mean that they increased 1 to 1. Someone with 100 vitality and 1000 health would take longer to regenerate from 1% HP than someone who only had 10 vitality.

Toughness made this process even slower. With higher toughness, health got harder to lose as the body durability increased. But it also got harder to heal the now tougher body. Jake had also discovered that endurance did make the body slightly more durable, but far from as much as toughness. He wasn't exactly sure how exactly it made him more durable, but it clearly did *something*.

Oh, another thing just got on the list of information that I very much hate not having, Jake thought. If the system would be so kind as to just send him a spreadsheet of how stats worked exactly, it would be fantastic.

Shaking off the frustrating feelings, he got up, fully restored, and started hunting for prey once more. It was dark by now, but that didn't really affect him at all. He doubted it really affected anyone by now, as most would have gotten significantly higher perception just from race levels.

However, the beasts were still docile during the night, making the fights more manageable, but finding them harder. At least they sometimes made loud noises during the day.

As he walked, his sphere continuously scanned his surroundings as he practiced levitating a pen above his hand. Levitating it was easy enough; the difficulty lay in keeping it tethered to his hand while he moved.

After more than two hours, he finally came upon a beast, and as he Identified it, he could only smile.

[Steeltusk Boar – lvl 28]

The big piggy had gone from being an Irontusk to a Steeltusk boar. Relatively linear evolution tree it got going on there.

This was naturally the evolved version of the first level 10 beast he had ever fought. He felt a strange excitement when staring it down. This had been his first real challenge in the tutorial, and back then, he had faced it together with his entire group of colleagues. They had won after Jake emptied his full quiver in the beast... but not without taking significant damage to their group. He hoped Joanna had somehow managed to stay alive. Jake realized how much of a dick he had been back then, and not just to her, but pretty much everyone. He felt a lot of regret from how he handled things. Not leaving them and going his own way, but how he left.

Shaking his head, Jake dispelled the thoughts. He shouldn't dwell on a past he couldn't change. He could only move forward and attain more power. Only then could he reunite with them. And it wasn't as if there was anything wrong with enjoying that process a bit...

With a smile on his lips, he drew the bone dagger in one hand and a starting dagger for archers in the other. Perhaps this beast would finally give him an exciting fight...

Chapter 43: Big Pig II: Steeltusk Edition

Jake sauntered before the mighty beast. It easily towered over him, reaching the size of a small van. It hadn't grown massively compared to its prior evolution, but Jake could feel the power hidden within its porky body. The boar was built like a tank, with a hide perhaps comparable to one.

As he got closer, the beast seemed to wake from its stupor as it turned towards him, glaring. Perhaps the system was doing its magic since it was night, but it didn't immediately attack. It just stared at him. He instinctively felt that if he moved just a couple of steps closer, the beast would charge with abandon.

The logical move would be to take out his bow use Powershot with the maximum charge to do massive damage or even kill it with a single attack, but where was the fun in that? Where was the challenge? He didn't even use any poison either.

Instead, he took a step forward and entered its range, and as predicted, the beast squealed as it made its way towards him. A charge he gladly met with his own. A bit stupid in retrospect, but he trusted in his powerful body.

The result was as he expected as the beast rammed into him, making him fly backward, but not before landing a good stab with the bone dagger on the snout of the big pig. This

did little more than anger it further as it tried trampling him along with everything else in the surroundings.

This time he decided to dodge as he rolled to the side and started moving around the pig as if dancing. If he had learned one thing, it was that these things had horrible mobility. However, this was highly made up for by the hide on its side being near-impenetrable to regular attacks.

All of this was true, for the Irontusk boar. But the evolved Steeltusk one had more tricks up its sleeve. As Jake moved to the side, the ground beneath him suddenly shifted, nearly making him lose his balance. Simultaneously, the earth itself seemed to help rotate the mighty boar, making it turn far faster than Jake had first calculated.

Forced to move back due to the unforeseen circumstances, Jake was not distraught but happy. The stronger the beast, the more interesting the fight. He could kill the creature far faster and easier if he used poisons, giving him a reliable backup if his pure melee approach failed.

But he would be damned if he didn't even try. Training dual-wielding yourself is all well and good, but it was nothing compared to the experience one would get in live combat.

Which was the ultimate reason why he had chosen to engage in this dance of death. Totally nothing to do with having a bit of fun with the first beast above level 25.

The moving ground made his dance difficult, his steps sometimes not finding the expected foothold, but he nevertheless managed to avoid the tusks time after time. He knew that even with his durable body, it would hurt like hell to get impaled.

An issue that quickly materialized was the weakness of the starting knife he used. Against the formidable defenses of the boar, it couldn't even leave a mark with his slashes. Only when he stabbed did he manage to barely leave a mark. Even the bone dagger only managed to make light cuts. The enchantment was doing work, though, making each of those small cuts bleed far more and for longer than usual.

Minutes passed as Jake dodged and weaved, stabbed, and cut, while the beast furiously tried to pin him down and skewer him. As the damage to the creature increased, so did its fury and bloodlust. With little warning, the beast's eyes suddenly started to emit a red glow, as the entire boar started to give off a similar red aura.

Jake felt his danger sense flare up as he raised his arms to block, and with a squeal of fury, the boar turned its head and hit him with one of its tusks, sending him airborne for a few moments. However, the boar was far from done as the very earth seemed to reach up and grab hold of him as the beast began a full-power charge straight at him.

With no way to move, he tossed his two daggers into the air and prepared to meet the beast. Its size was both a strength and a weakness, as Jake managed to slide between the two tusks aiming at him and instead have the snout of the beast crash into him.

He felt all air leave his lungs as he managed to grab hold of the boar, avoiding to get trampled beneath it. The beast with berserk-movements tried to shake him off, but Jake kept hold as he managed to somehow get up on the back of the creature.

Through his sphere, he managed to locate the bone dagger and, with an unprecedented level of skill, weaved a string of mana that nudged the blade to fall towards his hand. He felt like a warrior from a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away as he caught the dagger and shanked it down into the back of the beast.

The beast's response was to throw itself to the side, attempting to squash him beneath it. Jake pulled himself up by the hide of the massive creature and avoided finding himself between the ground and a van-sized pig.

He kept delivering stab after stab until finally he was forced to let go and jump off, as the beast started rolling around while at the same time manipulating the earth itself to try and get him off. The beast's berserk state was still active, making it promptly stop rolling around and continue its reckless assault.

Jake could, however, feel that the beast had started getting slower. Blood was everywhere by now, on the creature, the ground, and even himself. Dozens of bloody holes covered its hide, still oozing out blood.

With the beast's speed reduced, and Jake having adapted to the shifting ground, the fight had gotten significantly more straightforward. He dodged and jumped around the beast, landing cut after cut, as it increasingly grew desperate in its attempts to lock him down.

After several minutes, the beast had only managed to inflict a couple of minor injuries on Jake, the worst one being a long gash on one of his shoulders. Jake called it a minor injury, though, before the system it would without a doubt have required a trip to the emergency room. But his high vitality kept him in top shape, and he felt that his was health still in good condition.

A few minutes later, the beast finally collapsed from its wounds, no longer able to muster any strength to fight back. The ground manipulation kept going even after the creature couldn't move as it continuedly tried to hit Jake with pitifully weak attacks.

Jake was starting to feel bad for it, and finally pulled out his bow and fired a Powershot into the head of the unmoving beast, ending its life instantly.

****You have slain [Steeltusk Boar – lvl 28] – Experienced earned. 16000 TP earned****

****'DING!' Class: [Archer] has reached level 20 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 32 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

Despite the less than satisfying ending, Jake had still very much enjoyed the fight. There was just something about fighting a powerful enemy.

Looking at his health points, he found them only having been reduced by a sixth. Far less than he had lost during the short exchange with the metal manipulating caster, which showed that other humans indeed were the real danger of his tutorial.

Despite him barely losing any health, his cloak didn't avoid suffering catastrophic damage once again. Luckily the self-repair enchant remained active even after being utterly ruined by William's final attack, but now it was once more tattered.

He had also discovered that if he injected mana into the cloak, the repair function would speed up significantly. It still took its time, though. Speaking of injecting mana into items, that was another important thing he had considerably explored over the last few days.

Most materials could be made stronger by injecting mana into it. The primary reason why the trees were so strong was their ability to absorb the ambient mana. The same was true for nearly anything, even anything completely non-living. Stones, metals, even the properties of the air itself changed and got amplified by mana.

Without injecting mana into his bow, for example, it would without a doubt break when using Powershot. He was still in the early stages of practice, but he believed that it should be possible to also improve already enchanted items somehow. Currently, he couldn't inject any mana into his bone dagger. Despite not being enchanted, the normal archer dagger also rejected most of the mana he tried injecting.

Of all his items, only the ones with self-repair and his bow accepted mana injection. He could use mana with his other things, like his spatial necklace, but that was not really injection per se. Mana injection is more like how one would directly shoot electricity into a bar of metal to heat it up and eventually make it melt if too much was injected.

However, for his necklace, it was like you injected that mana into a transformer, which then correctly applied the mana to fulfill the desired function. Such as taking an item in or out of storage. As to how this metaphorical transformer worked... that was way above Jake's paygrade.

He was learning a lot about mana these days, but he was also very actively studying it. Before he met with the Malefic Viper, he had taken a lot of its properties for granted. He had seen it as just the system doing its thing and saw no further reason to question it. And even if he did question how things worked, he couldn't do anything with the mana then.

But now he actively questioned everything he could. He experimented happily with mana manipulation at all times, and his control had vastly improved without a doubt. His little trick of pulling the bone dagger to himself during the fight was more than proof of that. Also, it felt really awesome to do. Could he just have deposited it in his necklace and not throw it into the air? Sure, he *could*, but the other way was way cooler.

The fact that no skill had appeared or been made available regarding mana manipulation was a bit weird to him, though. He could clearly levitate objects and do things akin to telekinesis, and yet no skills had come.

Then again, he didn't have a skill related to manipulating stamina or health points either. He had tried controlling those two sources of energy and found it way harder. He could kind of control his vital energy to focus on specific areas as he had done during the final part of the challenge dungeon, but Jake couldn't shape it as he could with mana.

Stamina, on the other hand, was a dead-end so far. He had theorized that he should be able to use it to enhance his own body somehow, as it was known as the inner energy. The fact that nearly all physical skills used stamina to function proved that stamina could significantly affect the body.

Of course, it could just be the system doing system things. One energy could exhibit the properties of another, after all. In the end, Stamina, Health, and Mana were all just different forms of energy. Not to say that one could necessarily combine all three to make something more powerful. *In before that's how you make divine energy or something like that*, he joked to himself.

Exiting his thoughts, he entered the system menus.

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

Checking the list, he found the usual suspects he had been offered at level 10. While some of them still appealed to him, especially the Active Camouflage skill, he chose to ignore them all for now. He had been offered two new skills of interest, though - both of them falling into the evasion type. The first skill of which was a bit weird.

[Disengaging Shot (Common)] - An arrow may not only be shot to wound or kill but also as a tool of escape. Allows the archer to shoot an arrow that directs and amplifies all kinetic energy into a backward force. Must have a suitable weapon to use. Adds a minor bonus to the effect of agility when dodging using Disengaging Shot.

Talking immediate drawbacks was the fact that it required a bow and arrow. This, of course, limited the ability quite a lot. He couldn't use it in melee with his daggers, and he couldn't use it in split-second emergency situations as he would have to actually shoot an arrow to activate it.

On the positive side, though, it would be godly when kiting. Depending on the stamina requirements, Jake would be able to use it continuously to quite literally blow himself around the battlefield. He couldn't help but imagine himself trying to fly through the air by repeatably shooting arrows towards the ground. That would sure as hell be cool... though likely very stupid-looking if even feasible.

Moving on to the second skill, the first thing that struck him was the name.

[Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra (Uncommon)] – The power of shadows is an often used tool for anyone looking to escape. Tapping into the Records of Umbra, embrace the shadows for a brief moment, becoming ethereal. Allows the archer to momentarily become one with the shadows. Can only be used in straight lines. Adds a small bonus to the effect of agility and wisdom when using Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra.

The skill was somehow related to something or someone called Umbra. Thinking about it, he checked out his bracers.

[Leather Bracers of the Novice Rogue (Uncommon)] – A pair of leather bracers made of fine leather, originally designed for new initiates in the Order of Umbra. Enchantments: Self-Repair. +5 agility, +3 strength. Increases the effectiveness of all stealth skills, further amplified while remaining hidden in the shadows.

Requirements: Lvl 5+ in any class or humanoid race. Stealth-based skill.

Had he somehow managed to acquire Records related to some entity named Umbra solely through using bracers holding the name?

He understood why he got skills related to the Malefic Viper as the profession was quite literally named after him. Could the mere act of having those bracers somehow influence him that much that it would open up entirely new skill options to him? He was honestly a bit taken aback at the prospect. He kind of assumed that Umbra was a god... would it then be considered blasphemy to take the skill when he already had the Malefic Viper ones?

Well... at least the Malefic Viper didn't seem like the sort of person to care much about that, and the skill was looking very juicy. The fact that it made use of his high wisdom was also a huge bonus. He also assumed the skill made use of both mana and stamina... but he couldn't know before taking it.

As a basic skill, it was also very appetizing. Basic implied plenty of room for improvement, aka skill upgrades. Jake had improved his archery skill through being good at archery, so would he be able to improve that skill too by being good at... Shadow Vaulting?

The description of the effects of the Shadow Vault was also quite honestly very awesome-sounding. To become one with shadows and dodging around sounded very fantasy-like, but more importantly than that, it sounded pretty damn handy.

Ultimately the choice of skill was a no-brainer. One required a bow and was kind of gimmicky, and the other one literally allowed him to dodge like a shadow without any immediate drawbacks. With that in mind, he picked it.

****Gained Skill*: [Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra (Uncommon)] – The power of shadows is an often used tool for anyone looking to escape. Tapping into the Records of Umbra, embrace the shadows for a brief moment, becoming ethereal. Allows the archer to momentarily become one with the shadows. Can only be used in straight lines. Adds a small bonus to the effect of agility and wisdom when using Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra.***

Jake instantly felt the knowledge stream into his mind. Vaguely he also felt like the dark night became several shades darker as he felt the information being implanted.

A few seconds passed, and everything returned to normal as Jake now had a vague idea of how the skill worked and how to activate it, but far from enough. Needless to say, it was testing time!

Chapter 44: "Partners"

William listened to the woman talk on and on about the importance of others. His parents were also there, both off to his side, a chair's width too far away for it to ever be considered close. His mother was still a mess, and his father stoic.

His crying mother told of how hard it was, how it felt like she had lost both her sons. Something William naturally took offense to. How could you compare that defective product that they had called brother to him? A fully functional and overall excellent person.

But he didn't show it on his face, of course. He had never quite mastered the act of fake-crying, so he just looked down and pretended to be sad. He was sure it was fooling everyone, even the boar sleeping in the corner.

The woman, a therapist, was the only one who knew what had truly happened, what he had done. William had accepted this, as from what he had read, she wasn't required to report of past crimes committed, only suspected future ones.

The fact that his parents insisting that he "didn't know better" and "didn't do it on purpose" likely also helped. Of course, he was more than happy to reinforce that misconception, or at least he had tried to, but the damn woman in front of him was sharp and had seen through his act.

She also knew he wasn't actually sad currently, but he had to play it off to his parents, at least, as they were the ones currently sitting on the giant cookie jars. And his therapist had given him good advice on how he should focus more on other people's perception of his actions. He had to admit that a lot of her arguments had logical consistency, so he followed them.

William saw the therapist as one of the few people he had ever grown to respect. She was smart and, without a doubt, the best manipulator he had ever seen. She could speak entirely differently with him, his parents, Richard sleeping on the recliner, and when he and his parents were together. It was terrific and a great learning opportunity for him.

His father, still stoic as ever, asked while petting the badger on his head: "So the medicine is working? We want to make sure everything is alright before we take any further steps."

"Yes, they are helping greatly. We have even been able to lower the dosage recently as we are making great strides. I do believe William has more tutorial points than Richard also," The therapist answered with a smile.

William just sat there listening but was still a bit annoyed at the insinuation that he was somehow not complete. Yet he had to accept that to others, he perhaps did appear to lack something. He could make up for that by acting like he did have that *something*, but not always and not to everyone.

"William, do you have anything to say?" she said as she turned to him.

He had trained his response, and with as much faux sadness, he stammered out. “I am sorry... I really didn’t know how much it would hurt everyone... I promise I will get better, and nothing like that will ever happen again.”

His mother teared up even more at that, and even his father slackened his worried facial expression slightly. If only he could throw some fake tears in and not be covered in blood, it would have been perfect.

“And William, what about that other thing we talked about?” The kind therapist said as she smiled at him once more.

A bit confused, William wondered... what else? She rarely ever addressed him doing these sessions, to begin with, but what else did they talk about?

No, this entire situation was wrong. What was going on? He looked questioningly at The Smith standing at his side, but he just shook his head, as confused as William himself.

“You know what I mean, William. That other thing we talked about you lacking,” she continued, the smile on her face now gone. A dark aura began spreading from her as a giant sphere of darkness ripped the ceiling apart.

“We talked about how weak you are, William. How pathetic you are. So broken and weak... unable to ever truly grasp for power.”

As she finished, the door was kicked in, a cloaked man with a weapon rushing towards him. He couldn't react before he was stabbed in the chest by the dagger of bone.

The archer simply looked down at him as he fell to the floor, completely paralyzed. Those eyes, staring at him like he was some defenseless critter. He couldn't move; he couldn't breathe. He felt life slowly seep out of his body as he was absolutely powerless. His chest was rotting as the poison spread, the laughing face of Casper staring down at him mockingly from within the sphere of darkness above.

He tried to scream as he found himself sitting up from a makeshift bed in a cabin. His heart was pounding as cold sweat covered his entire body.

Due to his scream, the door was swiftly opened as he saw the healer Caroline enter. William couldn't help himself from shaking... he didn't want anyone to see him right now. He felt weak.

"William, how are you?" Caroline asked, but she looked and spoke to him differently than usual. Her voice wasn't warm and friendly, but a bit cold.

William, doing everything he could to calm himself down. Too shaken to even pick up Caroline's changed demeanor. "Ye... yeah. I am fine. I am just tired, and I feel like shit."

He closed his eyes as he tried to gather his thoughts. He had lost. Lost and nearly died in the process. What the fuck was that archer? What the fuck was up with him and his stats? Who in their right mind makes a build entirely centered around perception and defensive stats? Also, the poison... it wasn't purely physical, but magical and far more potent than the venom from the badgers. Did he even have magic?

As William was gathering his thoughts, Richard entered the cabin too. The young caster didn't even think about it, as he was too stuck in his own head. He did perk up when a barrier surrounded the cabin, however."

"Huh?" he exclaimed, confused as he looked up and saw the cold eyes of Caroline and Richard on him.

"So, what happened?" Richard asked.

William looked back and forth between the two as he put on his innocent teenager mask.

"I went to look for that Casper fellow in case he needed help, bu--"

"Cut the bullshit; we know you didn't," Richard interrupted. "You went to kill him like you've killed so many others. This ridiculous farce is over, so stop spewing out garbage and tell me *exactly* what happened."

Once more, William was surprised. *What?* he knew? How? Richard had been fooled for so long, Caroline too, when did he-

“Did you think I wouldn’t know? You weren’t exactly subtle, William. You are powerful, yes, but you are also young and inexperienced. A powerful weapon that I have let run rampant for too long,” Richard said before continuing.

“I know your type. I am not some shrink who thinks you’re lesser for what you are. You are a brilliant young man with endless potential to be the perfect soldier, but every soldier needs a commander - a guide to let you reach your full potential. With your intelligence, you know the benefits of a support system.”

William looked confused at the man, perhaps even more than before. He looked... serious. What?

He had never been in this position before.

“When?” was all he could manage to stammer out.

“I was on to you the first day we met. Did you think I wouldn’t notice a living weapon waltz into my camp?”

The young caster wasn’t sure what to do at this very moment. William didn’t feel like they were about to attack him, and quite honestly, he still felt too weak to fight, which was weird, as all of his resource pools were full.

“What do you want? You want me to play soldier?” he asked, trying to look stoic. He had to at least put up a front.

“No, I want you to play super-soldier. I am proposing a partnership. I will be at the back, supporting you to reach for higher power, and you will help me be the leader of this camp - an agreement of mutual benefits. I know you want tutorial points and levels and that my death would offer you plenty... but what I can provide you with while alive is far more valuable.”

William felt pleased with the man's attitude. *So that is why he hadn't done anything for so long.* There was actually someone smart enough to recognize his worth. *Fucking finally.*

“Fine,” he agreed. This was good, right?

“Great!” Richard said with a happy smile as he went over and patted the young man's shoulder. “You cannot begin to comprehend how glad I am to have you as a partner. I couldn't imagine anyone better. Caroline, make sure he is in top condition.”

“Of course, boss!” Caroline said with a smile as she went over to heal the young man. William didn't feel much from what she did, but he did feel a bit of strength returned. “I have done all I can; the rest is just fatigue. It should be all-good in a few hours!”

“Alright then, let's give William time to rest,” Richard said with a happy nod.

“That's it?” William asked, confused. Were they just going to leave him here unattended?

“We can find out who the idiot is who attacked you when you are in top condition. Just find me or send someone. We’re partners now; I can’t tell you what to do,” the warrior said before exiting the room with Caroline, the barrier disappearing along with her.

William wasn’t exactly sure what just happened. He was pretty sure it was a good thing, though.

Outside the cabin, Richard walked with Caroline; his smile had changed to one of disdain.

Richard had walked in with one of two purposes, and he had already discussed the plan with Caroline beforehand.

The first scenario was getting information out of William about who attacked him by acting stoic and press him. Then Richard would take advantage of his still weakened state and just finish off the kid. With him fully healed from earlier, Richard theorized he would get all of his tutorial points and full experience. Caroline may have also gotten some, but that was fine. Caroline was one of his people, after all.

The second scenario was what played out. William was vulnerable and open to manipulation. Despite how powerful he believed himself to be, he was shaken from whatever had just happened. The broken kid was even more broken than before, so Richard took advantage of that. He stroked his ego and got in. At the final moments, his skill made him aware. William was now ‘loyal’ to him. His quest confirmed the same thing, too, by going up a single percentage point.

Not that he hadn't been unknowingly loyal for a long time. Richard had purposefully sent the less ‘loyal’ groups to areas the Scout informed him William was in. As predictable as

he was, William would then kill them. In Richard's mind, this was a win-win. He would have people who weren't loyal to him killed, or he would lose an attack-dog.

He had only needed to do this three times total before he just led his people entirely away from William. For a long time, Richard had hoped that the idiot would just get himself killed against Hayden's men, but sadly that hadn't happened. William, in all his arrogance, was, in the end, still a coward. If he knew a party was strong, he would avoid them entirely. It was almost comical how every time Richard went out, William would go in the exact opposite direction.

As to why he decided to bring William in now? Because he was vulnerable enough. Richard could feel his weakness the second he saw him. A broken child, unsure of himself, so Richard gave him the recognition he so dearly craved for at that moment. He began by first establishing that he was in power by putting William down and then extended an offer of partnership, to appear like he really needed him. The kid had eaten it raw.

His loyalty was fickle, the foundation a fucking mess, but it was enough for now.

All of the crafters were already considered loyal to Richard. Perhaps loyalty was the wrong term, but his skill and quest sure counted them. If he had to guess, then he would say it was more reliance than loyalty. Ultimately, he now considered them his people. The only one who didn't give him the response was The Smith, but he could handle that in time. It wasn't like he needed *everyone* to be loyal either.

Jacob was another example of this. He shifted loyalty nearly daily. It was peculiar, but Richard never got any sense of danger from the man. The same was true for that guy Bertram who followed Jacob around at all times. He had never displayed loyalty even once towards Richard, yet he was clearly a trustworthy man who had undying loyalty towards Jacob. Again, it wasn't really a problem, as he clearly cared for Caroline, and Caroline was undoubtedly loyal.

It was necessary to have William converted or dead. All Richard now had left was Hayden and his party and a possible third threat, aka what attacked William.

Oh, and on a final note on William... while he was a useful dog, he wasn't exactly a good dog. A bit too feral for Richard's taste. A wild dog couldn't just be tamed that quickly after all. You could feed it and keep it loyal for a while, but Richard wasn't under any illusions that William wouldn't end up backstabbing him at some point.

Against Hayden, William would be a helpful tool. It's the only reason why he even bothered to convert him today. But once Hayden and his camp were either assimilated or decimated...

The mad dog would have to be put down.

Chapter 45: Shadow Vault & Instincts

In a small corner of the tutorial forest, a very peculiar thing was happening. A man was repeatably jumping around, more times than not, finding himself smashing face-first into a tree. He seemed to turn into something resembling a shadow, quickly moving forward and then turn back to his normal tangible form with every jump.

This weird man was naturally Jake testing out his newly acquired Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra. The skill took quite a bit getting used to, which was the reason why he needed to practice it as much as he did.

The skill was quite simple, actually. With little to no warning or preparation, Jake could speed up his movement in any direction he was currently moving, turning into a shadow-like substance, and then appear once more whenever he reached his designated target, or the uptime of the skill ran out.

When he was a shadow, no physical object could touch him, instantly making Jake want to try phasing through walls. Sadly, that hope was quickly squashed. While he could phase through small things, he had no way of getting through a tree, for example. If he thought back to his fight with that caster William, he also doubted he could get past the wall of iron. He found that objects with a high mana density were harder to phase through, and a conjured wall had to be very mana-dense.

He could, however, phase through smaller objects. So, dodging through the swing of a sword, a thrown dagger, or an arrow was entirely possible. Though he did notice, it increased mana consumption when he did so.

The reason why he kept crashing into things was due to the speed increase and the disorientating effect of suddenly accelerating. It was like suddenly stepping on an escalator going far above what any safety standard would ever permit.

One moment he would move normally, and the next suddenly accelerate several times that speed for less than a second. The skill itself wasn't teleportation, but just swift movement after all. However, it could easily appear as if he had just teleported to the untrained eye when he used the skill at maximum output.

The fact that he took on the characteristics of a shadow only made it more challenging to use. It was like suddenly becoming weightless, and everything just felt... off. The fact that it moved in a direct line also made it even more confusing.

So, he trained. As one says, practice makes perfect. While he wasn't exactly aiming for perfection on his first day with the skill, he needed to be at least able to use it without accidentally getting himself killed during combat. He could totally see himself crash into something far more dangerous than a tree.

The damage he took to both his health and mana pools when he crashed into objects like trees was already quite insane, to begin with. The sudden

momentum coming to an instant stop as he hit the tree made his mana instantly drain by several hundred points, and his health points drop even more.

One lucky thing with the skill was that it also phased all his equipment. Even if he had a bow in his hand, it too took on a shadowy look. He tried it with a couple of different things and found that pretty much anything he touched would get Shadow Vaulted with him. It did increase both mana and stamina consumption of the skill, though.

He also discovered with some experimenting that the enchant with his boots did indeed reduce stamina expenditure. And despite it saying it was only by a “small” amount, it turned out to be quite significant. It wasn’t just a straight-up percentage decrease but had some more advanced math behind it.

If he did a small vault, consuming only 5 stamina with the boots as an example, the cost got reduced by a whopping 3 points. In other words, a 60% reduction. However, if he did a more extended vault, consuming 30 stamina, the boots would only reduce it by 10 points or so, aka around a 33% reduction.

His maximum consumption from a single vault so far had been 78 stamina, and then it had reduced cost by 17, which was a weird 22% or so reduction.

Quite honestly, the math behind it stumped him, and he decided just to write it off as the system doing system things.

There clearly was a pattern somewhere. He doubted it would just be entirely random. Jake just didn't see the value in crunching the math and trying to discover the formula. Without it, he already had a good feeling for how much stamina he was consuming, and he didn't exactly have time to calculate much during combat. Especially not with a defensive skill.

The vault also consumed mana, of which no reduction was available. The cost was around the same as the stamina counterpart – not counting the reduction. The mana expenditure got a lot higher, however, if he phased through objects of any kind. Luckily, Wisdom was still his highest stat by quite a bit, and he didn't really use much mana during normal combat, to begin with. So, despite the relatively high cost of dodging through objects, he could manage.

He couldn't help but think of how useless the skill would feel if he only had his archer class, however. The mana consumption would drain him in only a few vaults, leaving him with a dead skill. But with his current resource pools, he could easily make tens of high-power jumps. If he could avoid smashing his head into things, that is.

But he was getting better. And fast. In only a few hours, he had gotten the short jumps down and was quickly able to move a few meters back and forth in quite fluid movements. The long vaults were still quite hard, but that too was improving drastically for every minute.

Quite honestly, his bloodline abilities felt like a total cheat here too. His sphere was utterly unaffected by him turning all shadowy and kept him completely aware of his surroundings. He 'knew' when he was about to hit something, and he seemed to slowly be able to train his instinct to understand the skill better.

A vital distinction had to be made between moving on instinct and moving deliberately with thoughts behind every action. If Jake tried to dodge a sword swing intentionally, he had first to register the weapon approaching, then he had to decide to evade, and then the method he would use to avoid. If he decided to use Shadow Vault, he would have to use the skill, and all the decisions related to that, like what way to dodge, how far, and how fast.

If it was done instinctually, however, only the first step was needed. And that was more than handled by Jake's overpowered danger perception. By then, he simply had to not fight what he already instinctively wanted to do and vault. It was like he just 'knew' what was best to do without deliberating it.

Everyone would naturally rely on instinct there. A boxer blocks based on intuition; when someone throws something at you, you lift your hand to block instinctively. Jake just took the entire concept to another level. He didn't just raise his hand to block something thrown; he would catch it out of the air and fling it back if it was an attack. Of course, his instincts weren't flawless.

Relying so much on only his Instincts could also easily backfire. Jake wasn't omniscient, and feints had a considerable effect on him. His instinctual reactions also ultimately relied on himself. If he was attacked by a skill he could in no way understand, his instinct wouldn't know how to respond appropriately either. His danger perception did help quite a bit there, but it too had many flaws.

If he had to bring up an example, it would be during the fight with William. The final attack had hit him hard. He had been showered with pieces of metal and shot back, taking a lot of damage. His instinct hadn't managed to react, and his danger perception had only activated at the final moment.

The same was true for the daggers that William controlled to attack him with. Their ethereal movements were hard to understand, making his instinct only able to try and keep up with their attack-pattern. His danger perception made him aware of them at all times but felt more like a constant buzzing telling him that those daggers are dangerous.

The way he had won the fight had also been straight up against his instincts. To dodge or block an attack was the most natural thing to do, so his instinct naturally screamed at him to do so. Instead, he had chosen to ignore the attacks and get hit, ultimately gaining an opening to win.

If he listened solely to his instincts during that fight, he would likely never have had the chance to land a hit before either he or the caster ran out of resources. While he would undoubtedly have won that battle of endurance, he didn't believe the other party would be stupid enough to stick around long enough to run out. Though, of course, Jake could be wrong.

There is also the fact that five daggers in the back barely fazed him. They penetrated a few centimeters into his flesh, dealing barely any real damage. With his high vitality, he could have taken dozens of those daggers, the only real problem being the pain.

Pain his instincts naturally wanted to avoid. To feel pain is just the body's way of saying: "dude, you should stop doing that."

In the end, his instincts were only a guide or an emergency tool for when his thoughts couldn't keep up. It did also have aspects he couldn't at all understand, however. It seemed to, at times, make him aware of things. It allowed him to get vague feelings around things, such as how strong a beast was compared to himself or how much damage a specific attack would do before it even hit him.

Many warriors of the multiverse likely could do many of these things. Sensing the power-level of others wasn't a new concept at all. Learning how much damage something would do also seemed like a relatively simple ability if one had enough experience on the battlefield.

Even beasts were able to determine how dangerous attacks were. Jake saw several of them avoid the more damaging attacks while just tanking the weaker ones. Of course, it depended entirely on the beast.

In the end, he could only sigh at how many unknowns there were. Bloodlines and their associated abilities were only for the holder of the bloodline to truly understand. The system offered no advice, only a simple explanation of the bloodline. And even that had many examples of holding minor flaws or lacking information.

Not that Jake had any complaints about his bloodline. He wasn't delusional. He knew it was his greatest weapon. He knew it was the only thing he had not been granted by the system, something that belonged to him and him alone.

As he sat there, relaxing, he heard some noise above him and felt like something was looking at him. He focused on his sphere and saw one of the weird-ass birds staring down at him. It was rare they got so close... in fact, this was the first time one of them had ever entered his sphere, and...

Birds aren't real. The Sphere of Perception confirmed that.

When he focused on the bird, all jokes aside, he didn't see a physical animal but pure energy. A mana density that was just... utterly insane. Jake couldn't even find the words to describe how ridiculous it was.

Jake felt confused, but he didn't let it show. He still felt a gaze upon him. It was clearly originating from the bird, and yet it wasn't...

It made him think... who or what was observing him? The birds were clearly just mediums of some kind... scouts. Based on their mana density, it wasn't

related to any of the survivors. It felt far closer to the power shown by the Malefic Viper than himself.

Was a god behind those birds? If so, why? Did the system allow a god to directly observe like this? Could the god interfere? He didn't think it was the system itself making them; it appeared far too omnipotent to need conjured super-birds to keep an eye on people.

Also... those birds had been around since day 1. Like they were native to this place where the tutorial took place... like whatever or whoever had placed them here knew that it was a tutorial area. *Wait...*

Jake had been under an assumption for a long time... one that he was beginning to doubt. *Who has ever said that the system created the tutorials? What if a god did?*

Clearly, gods could interfere with the tutorial. Heck, the Viper had placed a dungeon there. Who is to say that other gods or powerful entities weren't also influencing things. Who is to say a god didn't also create this outside area? Maybe even the rules? Or did a god work with the system to do all these things? Some kind of collaboration?

But most importantly, he thought, why the fuck am I sitting here thinking about stuff I can't, in any way, shape, or form, find out at the moment, but can just ask the Viper about next time we meet instead of being productive?

So with that, he returned to what is truly important. Trying not to Shadow Vault into trees.

Chapter 46: Unexpected Encounter (1/3)

For so long, they had waited, generation after generation, era after era. Their hope never died, their conviction eternal. Yet the branches died out one by one. Now only a single hall remained - the once glorious order corroded by the march of time.

For only the gods are immortal. Only the gods can stand against time and preserve what was. Perhaps the only reason why his hall had survived so long was that they had one such god among them.

Here, in this world, they were still respected. They had power, after all. But outside, in the other universes, their once mighty order was nearly forgotten. The Lord Protector, the god who watched over them in place of their Patron, having no desire to leave. So, they could only wait. Wait for the day of his return.

The current Hall Master was one of those waiting. She had been in her position for many generations, and like the many predecessors, she too was patient, never losing faith. Every year she dreamed of their Patron's return. And every year, she found herself saddened when nothing happened.

If not for the Lord Protector and the grand legacy left behind, perhaps even they would have forgotten the Malefic One. Many, even today, still doubted he would ever return. But she believed that the Patron was out there, and as long as they waited, as long as they remained forever faithful, the Malefic One was sure to reemerge.

Suddenly she was awakened from her meditation as an old man teleported into her chamber. He wore a black robe with a snake's motif on it, one similar to her own. However, his snake was not giving off the same aura as the one on hers. One had to distinguish ranks after all.

“What do you disturb my meditation for?” the Hall Master asked, slightly annoyed. If this were another petty squabble with the Brimstone Conglomerate, heads would roll.

“Honored Hall Master, the Lord Protector has ordered you to his realm. Immediately,” the man said, bowing deeply.

The Hall Master kneaded her brows, feeling a mix between excitement and fear. This was only the second time she would meet the Lord Protector. The only other time was during her inauguration as Hall Master, and even then, it was only him making an appearance briefly. She knew that the Hall Master that was before her had only met him twice also, the first being his own inauguration and the second being when he reached the peak of mortality. The Lord Protector didn't even bother to show up at the funeral.

“I shall go at once,” She answered as she teleported out of her chamber. She couldn't teleport straight to the entrance of the Lord Protector's realm but had to walk the majority of the way due to all the protective wards and spells put up through the ages. A minor inconvenience compared to the security provided.

As she walked further and further down towards the entrance, her nervousness only grew. But at the same time, so did her hope. Had it perhaps finally happened?

Unlike most other grand orders or churches like theirs, the Malefic Order did not build grand castles or towers that breached the skies. Instead, they built into the ground, making vast networks of caves, which wasn't to say that the splendor of their order in any way could be belittled. The gloriousness and grandness of their halls were among the best. Caves could easily be far more extensive than some landmasses, especially with a bit of space magic mixed in.

The entrance to the Lord Protectors realm finally entered her sight after only a few minutes of descending. The portal unadorned and straightforward, being merely an archway of stone with a portal in. Taking a deep breath, she stepped through.

This was her first time in the Lord Protectors realm, and her expectations were most certainly met. The realm was not very large, perhaps only the space of a few smaller planets. But numerous reptilian creatures lived on the vast landmass that floated beneath her. Very few buildings stood on the entire continent, and only a single one was of any note - the Lord Protectors abode, she assumed.

"Come, child, come quickly!"

She heard the venerated voice of the Lord Protector as she promptly teleported to the source. The god sounded... emotional.

After teleporting, she found the Lord Protector, all alone with a gleam in his eyes as he stared at a colossal obelisk made of black stone. The Hall Master had never seen this obelisk before, but she instantly knew what it was. And she knew what this meant.

On the obelisk, a rune had lit up - the only rune on it. A profound green aura shrouded the obelisk, an aura that made even the Lord Protector's seem weak in comparison. The rune represented a single message. A message they had been waiting for oh so patiently for oh so long.

The Malefic Viper was coming.

The Hall Master could only tighten her knuckles as she started shaking from excitement. Their Patron, their one true god, was coming back to them. After Eras of waiting, the Malefic One would finally return and once more bring glory to their order. Her eternal faith, their undying belief had not been misplaced.

But instantly, she was brought back to reality. *Oh no!* So many preparations had to be made! They had to get everything in the absolute best of conditions. She had to brief all the other leaders and minor branches around their world. There was so much! She only hoped paradoxically that the Great One would perhaps take a few more days before he-

“HELLO LITTLE SNAPPY! MISSED ME!?”

Old habits die hard. A common phrase for most, one would imagine. But Jake had never thought that a 'habit' could get old after less than a month. Without even thinking about it, he had found himself munching on mushrooms. Much to his horror, he even found enjoyment in it. The mana gained was a nice bonus too.

One thing led to another, and now Jake found himself sitting beneath a tree with a mixing bowl in his hand with moss and mushrooms floating in the purified water. After his fight with the boar and a lot of practice with his new Shadow Vault skill, he was excited to find new strong opponents to test himself against.

But after hours of looking around, he only came across a few weak beasts, none of them even breaking level 20. Barely worth getting out of bed for. So instead, he had gotten bored and started doing a bit of alchemy. It helped calm his nerves, and he needed to practice using his Alchemical Flame anyway.

He had already mixed a few common-rarity poisons and considered if he should start learning how to make stamina potions. He hadn't needed them during the challenge dungeon as he only used stamina passively, but with his new archer skills, that had changed significantly.

He hadn't gotten a level, but it wasn't surprising considering he had only done alchemy for a few hours, and the concoctions were some he had trained many times before. He still had plenty of ingredients left in his spatial necklace, so he didn't really worry about running out any time soon.

As he was about to begin another concoction, he sensed someone looking at him. At first, he thought it was one of the not-bird-birds, but it wasn't. Raising his head abruptly and turning to the side, he activated Archer's Eye instinctively and saw a man standing at the top of a hill wearing an archer cloak similar to his own.

Shortly after, he saw four other figures appear around the archer. From the looks of it, three different kinds of the warrior class and a caster. Jake, with his high perception, used

Identify on each of them, as they didn't seem keen on approaching him quite yet either. Likely also all trying to identify him currently.

[Human – lvl 19]

[Human – lvl 20]

[Human – lvl 18]

[Human – lvl 21]

[Human – lvl 20]

They were all lower than the caster that called himself William, but that wasn't grounds to underestimate them. There were five of them, and one of them had a rather mean-looking two-handed sword. That warrior also happened to be the one at level 21 and was even wearing plate armor. Armor Jake guessed was enchanted, either by upgrading it with a token or just by finding it.

From a quick glance, he noticed that they all seemed to have relatively decent gear. The archer's bow even looked quite a bit nicer than his own. All of their armor or cloaks were for sure upgraded, none of them looking like they only had what one started the tutorial with.

From what he could see, there were four men and one woman. He couldn't see their faces properly, but from their posture, they were all clearly on edge - a perfectly understandable response to seeing Jake, a solitary unidentifiable human in the middle of nowhere. If possible, Jake wanted to avoid conflict and just move on with his day. Though information would be useful, as he had some doubts about the validity of what William said, considering the guy did turn out to be a backstabbing bastard.

Jake, seeing no reason for conflict, acted like he put the mixing bowl beneath his robe as he deposited it into his spatial storage. No reason to openly advertise that he had it after all. He then got up and started walking towards the five people in an as non-threatening manner as he could. Which is to say he walked with both hands held out in front of him, showing he wasn't armed. Something he could change in the blink of an eye with his spatial storage.

The warrior with the two-hander went a step forward from the group and yelled. "Who are you? Why are you alone out here? And what was that in your hand before?"

Jake, seeing no reason to lie, but didn't exactly feel like sharing much, told them the truth for the most part. "I am just an archer, and I am alone because I kind of like it that way. Also, it was just a bowl earlier, see?" he said as he pulled out the bowl once more, making sure to make it seem like he pulled out from beneath his cloak.

However, they seemed to care little for the bowl, as their gazes all sharpened when he refused to give his name.

"Are you Jake?" The caster asked as she stepped forward, glaring at him with quite a bit of hostility.

Jake was a bit taken aback at the question. The only ones in the tutorial who knew his name were the ones his colleagues had shared it with. Richard also knew it without a doubt, and while he wasn't exactly on friendly terms with Richard, he doubted the man would still have people out hunting for him after so long. Besides, if they knew his colleagues, it was more than worth the risk to strike up a conversation.

"Yeah, where did you hear my name?" he asked, hoping to finally get some helpful info.

What he got instead was a bolt of ice followed by an arrow. The three warriors didn't stand still either as they all charged the instant they confirmed his identity.

Jake took a moment to react, as he barely managed to jump to the side to avoid the ranged attacks because of his danger sense. *What the hell is wrong with them?* he asked himself as he saw the eyes of the opposing party. The hostility was almost palpable as the caster yelled.

"This is for Mickey, you fucking psycho!"

"Don't lose your cool and let him run!" the warrior with the big sword said in a stern tone before he sped up, a green glow swirling around his body.

Jake only got more and more confused. *Who the fuck is Mickey?* But he didn't have time to contemplate further, as he jumped backward, dodging the first swing of the warrior. This had to be some kind of misunderstanding. Perhaps another guy named Jake killed that

guy? It wasn't out of the question for more people named Jake to be in a 1200 people group.

"Listen, I think there is some kind of misunderstanding here! I didn't kill anyone named Mickey as far as I recall! Please, just calm down! There is no reason for us to fight," Jake tried, as he kept dodging the blows of the warrior.

"Don't listen to him! Richard warned that he tried shit like this versus the metal mage!" one of the other warriors, an upgraded light-warrior as far as he could see, warned.

Jake, at the mention of those two, instantly sharpened his gaze. So, William and Richard did work together. And it seemed like that caster wasn't happy about their last bout at all, even now sending people after him.

Everything suddenly seemed a lot clearer to Jake. They weren't here for revenge for some guy named Micky; they were here to kill him. Heck, maybe Mickey was a guy from the squad Richard sent after him so long ago. Not that any of it mattered. In his mind, these five were now unquestionably marked as enemies. Yet he wasn't about to give up trying to get something useful out of them.

"So, you are with Richard and that metal-caster William. Tell me, do you know of other survivors in his camp? Names such as Jacob, Casper, or Joanna?" he asked.

An effort that went unrewarded as they all simply continued their assault. *Fine*, Jake thought, *have it your way*.

They were slower and weaker than him in pretty much every way. Sure, the warrior without a doubt had higher strength than him, but all in all, he still saw them as weak. Compared to William, none of them had shown anything that could genuinely threaten him. Well, he would be in for a lot of hurt if he let that massive two-hander hit him, but no way he was going to let that happen.

Having decided to stop being diplomatic, he no longer held back. He quickly summoned his bow as he Shadow Vaulted backward, much to the onlooker's shock as they saw him turn shadowy and fly backward.

With bow in hand, he decided to go for the weaker ones first. As he was preparing to shoot the caster, however, an arrow with far more power than he expected headed his way, allowing him only narrowly to avoid it. Parts of his cloak was still ripped apart from the wind pressure alone. *Powershot, shit.*

A quick glance informed him that the archer had started charging another Powershot, making Jake instantly switch his focus to him. He knew the strength of that skill, but also its massive weakness.

Nocking an arrow, he shot it towards the archer, but his attack instead struck a wall of ice that popped up before it. Cursing, Jake could only dodge once more as the two other warriors reached him, one the light-warrior and the other a medium-warrior from what he could see. Both upgraded classes, too, of course.

With his weak defenses, the light-warrior became his next target, as he quickly dismissed his bow and drew his bone dagger along with another random archer one. With no time to poison anything, he had to make do. The warrior was faster than Jake with his movements, but Jake had a small edge in strength and a relatively large advantage in technique with his Twin Fang Style, insane perception, and instincts.

Positioning himself to block the archer and caster's line of sight, he dodged the medium warrior's sword as he closed in on the light-warrior. With slight panic, the man tried to jump back as he threw small knives at Jake. Knives, he decided to ignore as he just let them hit his body. The cloak blocked nearly everything, only leaving a few meaningless scratches on his tough body.

However, the warrior was far less durable than Jake. Surprised that Jake just tanked the attack, he took several cuts across the chest with the bone dagger before Jake tried to finish him off by plunging his other dagger into his neck. Sadly, he had no time to assess if the man was a goner, as the two remaining warriors had reached him once more.

Shadow Vaulting away, he once more drew his bow and started bombarding both of them with arrows. The heavy warrior manipulated the aura around his body to block them, with the medium warrior choosing to dodge instead. A dodging attempt he failed, as an arrow nailed him in the leg.

Seeing his opportunity, Jake managed to land two more arrows on the man before he had to Shadow Vault once more as another Powershot came his way.

With some distance, he withdrew a bottle of necrotic poison and retreated behind a tree, still keeping an eye on the warriors that were still within his Sphere of Perception. He had bought himself some time to apply the poison as he saw the party try and save their comrades. He had confidence in the damage on the light-warrior being lethal.

However, the medium-warrior seemed to already be getting up, as his wounds already started healing rapidly. Not natural health-points rapidly, but a self-healing skill rapidly. Something that wouldn't happen again that easily with poison in the mix. More than a

dozen arrows now soaked in some of his most potent common-rarity poison went back into the quiver.

Okay, round two.

Chapter 47: Unexpected Encounter (2/3)

If simply taken as an archer, Jake wasn't anything overly impressive. He was relatively strong and fast through his many levels in his race, but he was still a bit behind those with evolved classes. He still got an edge during combat due to his lack of hesitation and powerful bloodline, though. But overall, fighting an entire team with class-levels higher than his own wouldn't end well. If one disregarded his other primary source of power, that is.

However, If one added his profession, the equation changed. The pure stat amount of toughness and vitality it had provided made him far more robust than nearly everyone else, especially in prolonged fights. But without a doubt, his greatest strength currently was his potent toxins. A single arrow or a single cut transformed from a minor wound to almost certain death.

And now he had applied his poison. He hadn't done it from the beginning of the fight for many reasons. First of all, he wasn't sure it would turn into a battle. Secondly, he wanted information more than anything, and if it didn't end in a fight, he would just waste a bottle of poison. Now, however, the time for talking was over.

From behind the tree, he saw his enemies get ready to flank him once more. A tactic he would gladly exploit. Taking a normal non-poisoned arrow, he nocked it and started

charging a Powershot. The skill was weak in open combat, usually, but it had its time to shine. Now was one such time.

With the timing just right, as the medium warrior entered his line of fire, he released the arrow. The man didn't even have time to react before he was hit, the arrow exploding from the impact as it hit his chest. The man wasn't left in a much better state than the arrow as a huge gaping hole had blown open in his upper chest, taking with it his heart and lungs. Needless to say, the man was well and truly dead.

Having two down, he switched to poison arrows as he Shadow Vaulted away from the tree once more, seeking refuge behind another. Them being unable to pin him down was a significant advantage that he didn't want to lose. Besides, while the plate-wearing warrior was undoubtedly strong and had formidable defenses, he had gotten that by having far worse mobility. Hence, he would be saved for last.

Two Shadow Vault later, and he discovered that the enemy archer had entered his sphere. And from how he moved, he was not yet aware of Jake's location. Seeing him split up from the ice caster, he made his move.

He stalked the archer with his sphere as a guide while staying out of sight from all three enemies. The other archer moved slowly, only at walking speed, with his bow fully drawn, ready to shoot at any sudden movement. His caution was natural but misplaced. Jake never planned to enter his line of sight after all.

As the archer entered a small clearing, Jake saw his chance and shot an arrow from directly behind the man. He managed to react only at the very last moment but still ended up with an arrow hitting him on his upper backside - an annoying but otherwise very easily manageable wound. If the necrotic poison was disregarded, that is.

The archer only had time to roll out the way and rip the arrow out before he felt that something was wrong. At first, he felt a weird numbness, followed by intense pain that seemed to spread through his very being. Next, he was hit by the smell - the smell of rotting flesh. With horror, the archer yelled, attracting his comrades who rushed over to him.

Jake had taken refuge behind a tree once more but kept close enough for the dying archer to still be within his sphere. The warrior and caster made it to their dying comrade and were both stopped dead as they saw the archer rolling on the ground shrieking in an inhuman voice.

As he rolled around, pieces of rotten black flesh fell off. The grisly sight ended before long as the screaming also died down. It had taken less than half a minute from the arrow hitting to his death. Yet this half a minute was enough to bring endless nightmares to those seeing it.

Before the two, the archer barely resembled a human anymore. The entire back area and most of the upper body had completely rotted away. An entire arm was lying off to the side, having become detached as the archer rolled around.

Even Jake from behind the tree had to take deep breaths to calm himself. This was the first time he saw the actual result of his poison taking effect. The only other time he had done anything like this was when used Touch of the Malefic Viper on a beast. But this had been a human.

He still vividly remembered the water from the second challenge room that nearly killed him. The feeling of your limbs slowly rotting away, the indescribable pain. He didn't like it. He didn't like it one bit. But poisons were his best weapon.

In the end, the only thing he could calm himself down with was that he hadn't been the aggressor. They had attacked first. He was just defending himself. They were allies of Richard and William, two people who both had attempted to have him killed before. They were his enemies, and to your enemies, you show no mercy.

He remembered back on a conversation he had with the Malefic Viper during his visit to his realm.

The Viper told of a story from when he was younger before he became a god. He spoke of how he had just gotten the ability to assume a humanoid form and how he had tried to enter the world of civilization and become, well... civilized.

The Malefic Viper talked of his naivety back then. He believed that the enlightened humanoid races were not like the beasts he was used to, but would have values above simply striving for more strength. He had gotten close to people, and he had believed them as if he was a gullible child. Beasts didn't lie after all. They either attacked or retreated. A monster that would first become your friend to then stab you in the back was unheard of to him.

Until it happened. For wealth, the Malefic Viper was betrayed and his betrayers attempted to kill him. Of course, even then, his strength was above most of his peers, and he was not so easily thwarted. But yet again, he had believed the man when he claimed it was all a big misunderstanding.

So, he spared him. Spared him out of misplaced compassion and benevolence. A benevolence returned by having the few humanoid friends he had made slaughtered. The man had hired a far more powerful force to take down the Malefic Viper out of something as simple as pure pride. He had made a contract with a powerful king to hunt down the Viper and steal his treasures.

Of course, the Malefic Viper returned this favor by massacring the man, his forces and turned his head to the country of the foolish king. Personally. In retrospect, the Viper confessed it to perhaps be an overreaction to let the entire kingdom face his wrath.

It ended up resulting in the destruction of nine planets.

After this entire inhuman massacre, the Malefic Viper was not shunned or hunted. Even if he had killed innocents, women, children, elderly, he was never admonished for any of it. Instead, he was revered for his power. Praised for his boldness. But more importantly, no one dared to assist anyone in ever betraying him again, as now the consequences were clear as day.

The lesson the Malefic Viper wanted to teach Jake was a few things. The first was not to trust blindly and to not show mercy to one's enemies. The second point was that power ruled supreme. Might makes right, as one says. Additionally, if one shows the cruelty and the ability to cross certain lines, your enemies will hesitate and falter the next time they deal with you.

Jake didn't fully agree with this interpretation, as cruelty can also lead to a far stronger response than one predicted. That the enemy will not be discouraged from fighting but instead be far more resolute in destroying you, throwing all caution to the wind.

And that was precisely the situation Jake now found himself in. After the initial fear wore off, the warrior and ice caster didn't flee or go on the defensive. Instead, they abandoned all signs of caution, as they both yelled obscenities.

“Get the fuck out here, you fucking coward!” the warrior yelled, followed by the Ice Caster calling him far more insulting things. Not that Jake necessarily disagreed with some of the things they called him. He just honestly didn’t care. Allies of William and Richard didn’t have any right to teach him anything about decency and honor.

Withdrawing another bottle of poison from his necklace, he prepared himself to strike. Jumping out from behind the tree, he fired an arrow at the delirious woman. As he had expected, the blow was blocked as a shield of ice popped up behind her. Automatically activated from what he could see.

This, of course, gave away Jake’s position, as both turned towards him, rage in their eyes. Spikes of ice started coalescing in the air as the caster stepped out from behind her wall, and the warrior charged towards him. The same green aura still enveloping him.

Jake was fully aware that his regular arrows couldn’t break through this green aura, so instead, he threw the bottle he had prepared earlier. While the bottle’s speed was slower than an arrow, it was still far too fast for the warrior to avoid.

The bottle struck him as he blocked with his arms, the liquid within splashing all over his upper body. A sizzling sound was heard as the aura began being eroded, and the man retreated as he seemingly focused on protecting himself. Jake was aware that the necrotic poison was far weaker thrown like that compared to getting applied to an arrow, but he had to make do.

With the warrior out of the way, Jake made his way towards the ice caster. After only a few steps, the ice spikes she began conjuring earlier made their way towards him, prompting him to make a full power Shadow Vault straight through the spikes. He felt a considerable drain on his mana as he passed through spike after spike. But the tactic paid off.

He now found himself within only a few meters of the caster who's facial expression had changed from one of pure anger to one of abject fear. Giving her no quarter, Jake continued his assault as he stepped towards her once more, activating Shadow Vault another time.

Just as he vaulted, a wall of ice started getting summoned, but it was too late. Before the wall could fully form, Jake appeared behind the caster and went for an overhead swing, straight for her head.

In a final gambit, the caster seemed to release all her mana, sending a wave of frost exploding out of her, hitting Jake and freezing the ground all around her. Jake, however, did not retreat as he instead pushed forward, bringing down the dagger on the woman.

Her toughness proved inadequate as the dagger managed to enter the top of her skull. He hadn't poisoned the blade, but he knew this blow was lethal either way. The notification hitting him less than a second after his attack landed only confirmed as much.

Not that he had time to look, as one opponent remained. With an explosion of ice and green aura, the wall made by the caster prior was smashed apart as the warrior charged through it. His armor and body had clear signs of the poisons still lingering, but he had managed to cleanse most of it. This slightly surprised Jake, as it displayed that the mysterious green aura seemed to possess both strong defensive and self-enhancing effects.

As the warrior saw the dead caster with Jake standing over her, his anger reached entirely new levels.

Completely berserk, he started swinging his massive blade back and forth with far more power and speed than before. In the end, this did little for him, as at the same time, all semblance of technique disappeared from his attack, ultimately making it far easier for Jake.

Not backing down, Jake engaged in melee, dodging and weaving around the man as he avoided every single swing. It reminded him of fighting the boar, though the boar had been both weaker and slower. Though at least the beast had magic to pin Jake down, something the warrior sorely lacked.

The fight continued towards the expected conclusion for a few more minutes as Jake felt the green aura around the man get dimmer and dimmer. His speed and power also gradually slowed down, allowing Jake to land small cuts here and there.

In the end, Jake managed to kick the man's arms when he made a far too predictable downwards blow, disarming him. Another kick made the man stumble, as he fell to the ground only a few meters from the caster's corpse.

The fact that he lost his weapon and got knocked down brought back some clarity to the man's eyes, prompting Jake to talk.

"What do Richard and William think they can accomplish by sending people after me like this? Except for donating me experience and tutorial points, that is," Jake asked, seeing no reason to be cordial.

“Revenge for what you have done, you fucking lunatic,” The man answered with a far calmer voice than Jake had predicted. Though he felt the apparent signs of weakness from his tone. He, too, knew that he was dead no matter what.

“Revenge for what? Killing people Richard sent after me, or for fighting back when that William fellow tried to backstab me?” Jake said with a mocking voice. How goddamn ridiculous were these people?

“For killing... everyone... for starting this... war,” The man said, his voice getting weaker and weaker.

Jake could only stand there confused at his words. Something was off. Way off. From how he had said “everyone,” it sounded like it certainly wasn’t just for those people he had killed sent by Richard. Could it be the three ambushers from the very first night of the tutorial? No, that couldn’t be it either.

To make matters even more confusing, he was clearly blamed for starting a war. The war was likely the one William had alluded to between Richard’s faction and those other guys. But why the hell was *he* getting blamed for it?

“I didn’t do anything!” Jake protested as he looked at the dying man. He didn’t hesitate to take out a health potion. “Here, drink this health po-“

Before he could finish, the warrior knocked the potion out of his hand.

“Why wou-“ Jake tried again, but the warrior’s arm dropped to his side, having used his final vestige of strength to knock away the only thing that could save him.

Jake just stood there. “God fucking dammit,” he spoke out loud.

I am pretty sure I would remember starting a goddamn war, Jake thought with much frustration. Had their entire fight indeed been based on some huge misunderstanding? Was it a mistake fighting them?

No, Jake shook his head. Even if it had been a misunderstanding, they had clearly been dead-set on fighting him. He had tried to talk, but they had shot his attempt down. He had to remember; they were enemies. And he couldn’t afford to show mercy to enemies. It was simple...

With a sigh, he sat down on the ground. For now, he wasn’t going to think of it. Next time he would try harder on the diplomacy part. *Focus on what you can.*

And with that, his focus shifted to his notification screen.

Chapter 48: Unexpected Encounter (3/3)

The Hall Master stood frozen as she slowly turned around. What she saw was a scaled man, looking more human than reptilian. He wore a simple looking black robe and had what she could only describe as a big goofy smile on his lips. His long black hair tied behind his head, revealing his green eyes.

He looked unimpressive, but the aura that he gave off was more powerful than anything she had ever come across. It felt like she stood before the incarnation of death and decay itself. Yet she felt not a shred of fear. The only feeling that inhabited her body was pure joy, combined with a massive dose of nervousness.

“M... master! You have returned! I... I...” the Lord Protector stammered as tears started streaming down his face. He had waited for so long, far longer than any other being in the Order of the Malefic Viper... and he was also the only living member that had ever met the Viper before in person. Well, except for the Viper’s disciple, but that guy was a bit looney.

With a step, the Malefic Viper appeared before the Lord Protector, and to the Hall Master’s surprise, gave him a big hug.

“I am sorry little one; it must have been hard for you. You’ve done well,” the Viper said as he rubbed the head of the Lord Protector, who was now fully bawling his eyes out.

The Hall Master could only stand there frozen as she observed. The high and mighty Lord Protector, crying his eyes out, and the Malefic Viper, a being she had only ever heard of in legends, consoling him like he was a small child. She had dreamed of the Malefic Vipers return for so long, but this scenario had never been one she had imagined.

“So, Snappy, who is this young lady?” The Viper finally asked as he stepped away from the Lord Protector, who quickly managed to calm himself down.

The Hall Master was now even more beside herself as both the gods turned their attention to her.

“Ah, this is the newest Hall Master of the Order; she is more or less the highest-ranking member of the order as we only have this one hall remaining. I believe she is the descendant of one of the Ladies of the Verdant Lagoon,” The Lord Protector said, as he had now managed to entirely compose himself, returning to his more stoic demeanor that he usually displayed.

“Oh, those girls. That brings back some memories. Good to see they left some nice descendants with the order. Wonder what they’re up to these days,” the Malefic Viper said, as he stepped closer to the frozen Hall Master. “So, what are you called?”

The Hall Master, now suddenly thrown out of her stupor, managed to get out: “My name? Viridia, my lord!” She said as she did everything she could to compose herself. “May I have the honor of welcoming the Malefic One back to the Order, and apologize for our inadequate performance in the Patron’s absence! I swear on my life that-“

“Woah! Stop, stop, stop! I just asked for your name, that is all. You have nothing to apologize for, geez. I am the one who should apologize to you if anyone was going to. But I already apologized to little Snappy earlier, and I don’t make two apologies in a day, so we can’t have that. Just relax, okay? Everything is fine. The fact that the order is still even around is more than impressive in its own right,” the Malefic Viper said as he raised his hand and gave her a pat on her head, pretty much just petting her.

With a smile, Snappy went over to them and asked: “May I know why Master chose this time to make his return?” but instantly realized that it might have come off wrong. “Not that there is anything wrong with making your return now! It is great, in fact! I am just thinking that with the new universe being integrated and everything. If there was some relation, that’s all!”

“Snappy. Relax.” The Viper shook his head as he turned and landed a gentle chop on the Lord Protectors' head. “And yes, it's entirely related to the new universe. Remember that dungeon I made back in preparation for the second era?”

“The one with the spikes?” the Lord Protector asked. If he recalled, that was the only dungeon yet uncleared. He hadn't lived when it was made, but the Viper had spoken of it in length.

“Yep, that one. Someone actually cleared it.”

“Oh! Did Master make a new worthy follower!? Perhaps a great reward was granted for your new followers' performance in the tutorial?” Snappy said with glee but instantly frowned. “Wait, that can't be. The tutorials have yet to conclude.”

“I didn't make a follower, no,” he answered with a giant goofy smile. “Believe it or not, I think I made a friend!”

As Jake opened his notifications screen, he was instantly assaulted by a stream of messages.

****You have slain [Human (F) - lvl 18 / Apprentice Rogue - lvl 26 / Novice Leatherworker - lvl 10] - A small amount of bonus experience earned for killing an enemy with a class above your class level. 425.241 TP earned****

****You have slain [Human (F) - lvl 19 / Apprentice Swordsman - lvl 27 / Novice Smith - lvl 11] A small amount of bonus experience earned for killing an enemy with a class above your class level. 467.111 TP earned****

****You have slain [Human (F) - lvl 20/ Veteran Archer - lvl 28 / Novice Builder - lvl 12] - A small amount of bonus experience earned for killing an enemy with a class above your class level. 489.965 TP earned****

****You have slain [Human (F) - lvl 20 / Neophyte Ice Witch - lvl 30 / Novice Tailor lvl 11] - A small amount of bonus experience earned for killing an enemy with a class above your class level. 591.235 TP earned****

****You have slain [Human (F) - lvl 21/ Aspiring Blade of Nature - lvl 33 / Novice Smith - lvl 10] - A small amount of bonus experience earned for killing an enemy with a class above your class level. 703.458 TP earned****

****'DING!' Class: [Archer] has reached level 21 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

****'DING!' Class: [Archer] has reached level 22 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 33 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

****'DING!' Class: [Archer] has reached level 23 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point****

Jake could honestly only sigh once more at the messages. Three whole levels in his class from the relatively short fight. It was almost criminally more effective than hunting beasts. Even worse was the number of tutorial points earned.

He was closing in on four hundred thousand points before the fight, but now he had over three million. They had increased more than 7-fold. From the rules, he knew that he had obtained half of the group's points; half of what they had struggled and put their lives on the line to get, robbed in one swoop.

Looking at the classes on the notifications, he also learned quite a lot. The three first seemed to have rather basic upgrades. Two apprentices and one veteran. However, he wasn't sure if the veteran was a low-level upgrade or a higher one. He assumed low as the man had been on the weaker side, honestly.

The two last were the interesting ones. The woman had been a Neophyte Ice Witch. Neophyte made one think it was low-level or that she was just beginning to step on that paths; perhaps Ice Witches were just a really high-tier class? She had been a bit strong, but she was far off compared to the metal caster. Too bad he had failed to kill him to see what his class was called.

The last one, aka the plate-wearing warrior, had by far the most interesting class. Aspiring Blade of Nature. It reminded Jake of his own Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. An unusual adjective before the class seemed to indicate that it was somehow a bit higher level, while the 'rank'-based ones, such as apprentice or novice, seemed to be more straightforward paths. 'Neophyte' was also likely a 'special' adjective. Of course, he seriously doubted it was as simple as that.

And speaking of professions, theirs were extremely uninteresting. All were just novice ranks. Though Jake did confirm the existence of four types of professions besides his own. Tailors, Smiths, Leatherworkers, and Builders.

He had to look at the bright spots of this shitty situation, after all. He couldn't sit there and dwell on what the hell was happening or why they had targeted him. Information was necessary, so he just had to appreciate what he got.

For his free points, he split them between strength and agility. He still felt that he was either weaker or on par with others despite his significantly higher race level. He knew that evolved classes would add far more stats than the basic starting ones. The 6 stats in total from each archer level did seem quite pathetic compared to his 20 from Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper.

Closing the notification window, he got up and exited his meditation. He hadn't been down for long, but he had managed to regenerate a bit of stamina and mana. He was honestly wondering if he even needed sleep anymore. He hadn't felt the need since exiting the challenge dungeon. In there, he only slept for a few hours once in a while to relax his head. Something that hadn't been necessary yet here in the forest.

Looking at his surroundings, he spotted the big sword dropped by the warrior. It was quite simple-looking but had a relatively nice-looking green gem embedded in the handle. Using Identify on it, he was a bit taken aback.

[Greatsword of Nature (Rare)] – A sword crafted from metal often found in areas with high concentrations of nature-attuned mana. Through the ages, this sword has been filled with the energy of nature itself, giving it the ability to bless its wielder. Enchantments: Energy of Nature's Strength: Absorb and assimilate the powers of

nature itself found within the blade, strengthening your inner energy with its properties.

Requirements: Level 20 in any class or race. High nature-affinity.

The blade was... great. The enchantment was very interesting. This blade was likely the reason for the man's class and mystical aura. It was somehow inner energy, or stamina, infused with the 'energies of nature' as the sword described.

Either way, the sword was good. Jake couldn't help but pick it up. It was a bit heavy, but nothing he couldn't handle. The energy from the warrior was still lingering within the blade, so Jake decided to let it be for now. He could feel it slowly dissipating as he looked at it, after all. In only a few minutes, he should be able to try and claim it as his own.

But the fact that the man had dropped such a weapon made Jake think of something he had entirely disregarded. Looting. It wasn't like beasts dropped loot like in games, but humans sure did. He could take their equipment. It felt dirty and dishonorable... but Jake felt like it would be pure stupidity not to do it.

He needed power; everyone did. *The dead won't blame the living for trying to stay alive.* He thought to himself. *Unless the said person had killed them, of course. So, these dead would kind of be pissed at me for taking their stuff... yeah, not going down that road.*

Disregarding that entire train of thought, he went to the warrior and identified his armor. It was common-rarity and upgraded just like his cloak was, even with the same enchant of self-repair. As he had plenty of space in his spatial storage, and with the armor self-repairing, he saw no reason not to keep it. Luckily, he didn't have to strip the dead man,

as he could directly deposit it the second he felt the man's last vestige of mana leave the armor.

Next, he went to the Ice Witch and identified her items too. He tried to be fast about it, as he honestly still felt very uncomfortable looking at the dead body. The robe was common-rarity like the warriors and his own. She also had a common-rarity wand that he honestly had no interest in. But she did have a ring on her finger that yielded a pleasant surprise.

[Ring of Brilliance (Common)] – A ring with a gem crafted by a skilled jeweler. The mana in the gem grants the user increased mental stats. Enchantment: +10 Intelligence, +10 Wisdom, +5 Willpower.

Requirements: Lvl 15+ in any humanoid race

Like the armor of the warrior, the ring and wand were stored in his necklace too. He also threw in the robe of the caster without thinking, instantly regretting it as the woman was now half-naked with only ragged clothes beneath that looked like it had been haphazardly sewn together from pre-tutorial clothes.

Quickly he took out a sheet of cloth he had brought from the dungeon and covered her body. It was as much for himself as for her. He had already decided to burn the corpses, partly as thanks for the equipment, and partly out of a weird sense of respect and to honor them putting up a good fight. It just felt like the right thing to do.

But for now, he moved on to the other corpses. As he walked towards the archer, he took out the ring and started injecting mana into it until he felt a connection form and the warm flow of stats increasing. By that time, he had already arrived before the rather

gory-looking archer. The robe was a totally lost cause, and his Identify turned up with nothing indicating it was broken as his poison consumed the man.

But he did find the bow and dagger that the archer had used lying a bit off to the side. He had dropped his bow when Jake had first shot him, and while the blade was still a bit... dirty, it must have fallen off early in the process. Identifying both of them, he wasn't surprised, but still happy with the result.

[Archer's Bow (Common)] – A bow handed out for the Tutorial, now upgraded with a token. Has a robust wooden structure and string. Enchantments: Self-Repair.

Requirements: Tutorial Attendee and Archer Class (current or former).

[Archer's Dagger (Common)] – A dagger handed out for the Tutorial, now upgraded with a token. Has a sharp edge made of high-quality steel and a strong wooden handle. Enchantments: Self-Repair.

Requirements: Tutorial Attendee and Archer Class (current or former).

His current bow and old dagger were both not upgraded, so two upgraded versions were more than welcome. However, the dagger needed a good cleaning before using it, something for later, as he deposited both of them into his storage. He could bind them to himself with mana and just have the self-repair do the cleaning too.

Next, he checked the rogue and swordsman but found nothing of interest. They both had common-rarity gear, though the rogue did have boots that were also common-rarity but offered just a bit of endurance except the normal self-repair enchant. Of course, they were utterly useless to Jake as he already had his far better Boots of the Wandering Alchemist.

Having looted what he wanted, he returned to the greatsword that was still on the ground. He couldn't put it in his spatial storage as long as the warrior's energy still resided within.

As expected, the energy was gone entirely after his looting tour. Unable to hold himself back, he tried to bind the sword to himself. But the moment his mana entered, he felt a strong resistance, followed by a retaliatory force that sent a burning sensation up his hand.

Cursing, he drew back his hand. Somehow the sword had communicated to him that he wasn't able to bind it. Apparently, he wasn't attuned to nature or maybe he didn't have the right affinity or something, going by the requirements. Maybe it had something to do with nature typically seen as related to life, and his current approach to most anything was pretty much the direct opposite of that with his poisons? Or something entirely unrelated, like some innate talent?

Either way, he stored the blade in his spatial necklace. Who knows, maybe he could find someone to use it later on. No matter what, he saw no reason not to keep it around even if he himself had no use for the oversized sword.

With everything gathered, he started preparing their send-offs. The fight had likely been on the wrong premise and merely the result of a huge deadly misunderstanding.

The least amount of respect he could give his opponents was not to leave their corpses lying around. He remembered many civilizations used to burn fallen warriors, and even in modern countries, cremation was the norm in many places too.

Gathering the bodies, he made sure to transport the half-decomposed archer carefully. Afterward, he gathered some wood and lay all the corpses on top of it. His Alchemical Flame quickly started burning the bodies along with the wood. The flame did nearly nothing to living targets, but due to the ever-present system-fuckery it worked wonders in breaking down objects or setting things ablaze.

As the pyre burned, Jake decided to continue what he did before the battle: Alchemy. He was getting low on stamina after the many Shadow Vaults, and it was more than about time that he learned how to make stamina potions.

He sat down beside the still burning pyre, taking out the book on how to make them from his spatial storage. With his new movement skill, he had confidence in escaping pretty much anyone, so he decided to let the pyre serve as a beacon to perhaps draw other survivors to him. The only ones that should see this pyre's smoke would be people already out and about; therefore, it was unlikely to attract anyone.

He clearly needed information. He was filled with questions while having no answers. The risks associated with seeking out Richard or even the faction that opposed him also seemed just too numerous. Once more, due to his lack of information.

A meeting with any of his colleagues would be the best. While they hadn't been the closest of friends, they at least knew him a bit. They should know he wasn't the type to go around randomly attacking people and trying to incite wars.

Jacob especially should know this. That guy had such good insight into other people, so even if he and Jake hadn't known each other for long, he should still be able to reassure others that he wasn't some monster.

Looking at the burning pyre, however, he knew he wasn't exactly helping his own case. He doubted the friends of the squad he had killed would accept him going: "Hey, yeah, sorry I killed your friends, but it was all a big misunderstanding! No hard feelings, right?"

With a big sigh, he half-distractedly read the small book. This entire thing was a fucking mess. Why couldn't it just be easy? Killing beasts to get points and humans attacking you being just psycho enemies.

Looking up from the book, he looked towards the sky. He really wished he could ask someone for advice on what exactly to do. His instincts weren't exactly helpful here, as he was sure it would only advise killing anyone who dared raise a weapon against him. It didn't care for motives, thoughts, or morals. It was pure. Simple. Perhaps living just following your instincts would be far easier.

Shaking his head, he decided to cut off all distracting thoughts and focus on his alchemy. Worrying would do him no good. Stamina potions and levels, however, would do him a lot of good.

Keep it simple, Jake thought to himself, and take the complications as they come.

Chapter 49: Enemy of the people

The room was filled with tension as both sides sat staring at each other. As always, it was a contest of who would speak first and break the silence. Both sides seemed to see it was a weakness to be the first to make their thoughts known, which is why Jacob reluctantly ended up taking that role.

“Ahem, gentlemen,” he started as both Hayden, and Richard turned their eyes to him. “As we discussed yesterday, Hayden, we did a thorough check of the people you presumed us to have killed, and after a lot of searching, we were still unable to have anyone take credit. In fact, the majority of the fights either have no surviving members from our camp or maybe... we were never the party fighting your men, to begin with.”

Hayden didn't even react but still sat there stoically. The man was nearly as tall as Richard and as strongly built. No way anyone would think the man was a caster just based on his build. The spear on his back certainly didn't help either.

The only thing really giving away his original class was the red robe he was wearing. It wasn't the starting robe simply upgraded but likely an item of higher rarity. His spear was the same, also a far cry from the simple equipment given out at the beginning of the tutorial. Overall his look was sleek and deadly.

Richard, on the other hand, was built like a tank. Full plate armor and a massive tower-shield strapped to his back with a sword sheathed at his side. He had even acquired a helmet, truly finishing his look. While both men were huge, Richard still had a few centimeters on the other man.

As to who was most powerful... Jacob didn't want to find out. Both had upgraded classes, of course, and he seriously doubted they were the standard kind.

“So, you are saying some mysterious third party is out there and wiping out squad after squad, and somehow none of us noticed? Wouldn’t that be a bit too convenient?” Hayden said, extremely skeptical of the entire premise.

“If the third party intends to somehow ‘win’ this tutorial, it is plausible. If the individual believes that victory entails wiping out all other survivors, that is. And based on the description and rules of this hellhole, it would make sense,” Richard said, as he leaned back on his chair, making it give out loud creaking noises.

“Think about it. Humans award far more experience and especially tutorial points compared to beasts. The system encourages us to actively kill each other for higher rewards. Would the final reward then not be highest for he who has managed to kill all other tutorial attendees?”

Hayden didn’t necessarily disagree, but that didn’t mean he believed the warrior.

“Oh, I am not saying it isn’t possible. But how the hell do you propose a squad could manage to dance around our detection for so long? Perfectly executing everything? The only way I see that being possible is if this group has information and a network within either of our factions. And I sure as hell don’t have some lunatic killer cult within my group.”

“Unless,” Jacob said, as he hesitated a little. “Unless it isn’t a group but one individual. An individual with powerful perception skills allowing him to avoid us. A person with the fighting skills to take down entire squads single-handedly.”

“And who do you propose this mythical being is? Me? This tin can?” He said, pointing at a slightly offended Richard across from him. Continuing, he raised his voice with a mix of anger and annoyance. “Or are you saying it is some other unaffiliated guy?”

“Jake Thayne,” Richard said. “A guy I had the misfortune of meeting early in the tutorial. He was a cocky bastard and threatened me, so I sent my best men, including my right-hand, after him. He slaughtered six of them and sent the last guy back a broken mess with a message. From the message, he seemed to enjoy having people after him and even taunted me to send more. Needless the say, the guy is a complete wacko.”

Hayden sat in silent contemplation for a while as he digested the information. But he quickly identified an issue he wanted to be elaborated on.

“You seem to know a lot about this enemy of yours. Also, you said this happened at the beginning of the tutorial. Do you have any proof this guy is even still alive?”

“I think Jacob should be able to answer the first part,” Richard said, as he waved his hand at his base manager. “As for why we think it is him? A member of my group encountered him. He isn’t a pushover by any means, and yet he barely managed to escape with his life intact due to a strong escape skill. The description fits like a charm. This member also told us that he saw Jake kill another member. A certain trapper you may have heard of.”

At that last part, Hayden’s eyes hardened. That damn trapper had killed many of the men he had sent to keep an eye on the enemy base. Yet he had disappeared not long ago, the magic in the traps he had laid down gone too.

Turning to Jacob, he continued as he asked: “So, what do you know about this guy?”

Jacob could only sigh as he started explaining the same things he had to Richard a few days prior.

He explained how he and Jake had been colleagues before the system arrived. What he knew about him, but also how little he knew about him. Jake had always been a very private person. He went to work, did his job, and went home afterward. He wasn't much for social excursions or heading to the bar after clocking out.

In other words, a loner. He then explained the tutorial's happenings - his uncanny abilities to fight, but more importantly, about the first night they had spent here. About how Jake had killed the three attackers that night, all men of a higher level than himself. How he had been smiling when they found him standing surrounded by the brutally slaughtered men, completely covered in blood.

He briefly mentioned what Richard said about how they split from Jake and finally touched on William, who was the only one who had ever survived fighting him. Retold the story that William had told them about how Jake had killed Casper and tried to kill the caster himself, only narrowly escaping.

Jacob also explained all the abilities he was aware of Jake possessing. How he was skilled with a bow and had even helped train Casper a bit. He explained his uncanny perception ability. Jake's training with Casper to unlock it was an open secret; everyone knew that Jake had something... extra, so to say.

The poison was another critical point he emphasized. It was potent, making anyone not extremely durable an easy target. Something Hayden as a caster had to look out for. Richard did add that he believed the poison to be a newly acquired power as he hadn't

used it much before. Clearly done to try and handwave away any questions as to why nobody had been found killed by poison before.

Overall, Jacob had to admit that Jake, based on his own description alone, did seem like quite the vicious foe.

As he spoke, he saw Hayden get gloomier. Jacob also had to admit that the more he explained, the more plausible it became that Jake was able to do this. Plausible, not probable. Jacob still staunchly refused to believe that Jake had done what he was accused of.

Jake was a loner, and he had indeed shown himself to be capable of killing. But he hadn't been a complete maniac, and he clearly cared for his colleagues, which is why he didn't believe that Jake had killed Casper.

Sadly, for now, he couldn't do anything. Richard was in charge, and clearly, even Bertram suspected Jake to have done it based on a prior conversation. His old friend had brought up the point that they hadn't seen Jake for a month, and during that time a war had been going on.

Inhuman cruelty was inflicted upon others during those battles. To think that Jake had just chilled by himself during that entire time was delusional. Unless he had been stuck inside a cave for a month, he had to be aware of what was going on.

Jacob couldn't know if Jake had... changed. He didn't think he had, but he didn't know. If Jacob had to really choose one lone psycho going around killing people, it would be William and not Jake. Yet Richard had very adamantly vouched for William, and somehow the teenager's flawed story had turned to truth.

Besides that, he had to look at the bigger picture of having a big nasty third party to fight. During these last two days of negotiations, no one had been killed from either side by the other faction. At least none they were aware of. A complete ceasefire, so to say.

They were able to gather the two leaders in the same room together. Even if Jake wasn't the culprit, heck even if no culprit existed at all, the benefits of believing one existed makes it all worth it.

In the end, all Hayden cared about was finding his son's murderer, and all Richard cared about was to make it through this tutorial with a strong faction to bring into the new world. Even if neither of them genuinely bought into the narrative, it was still beneficial for them to open up a communication channel to reach their goal.

"Alright, let's say this guy is the one behind this mess. What are we gonna do about it?" Hayden asked.

"I would advise for us to create powerful squads to scour the forest. Find him and kill him," Richard said.

"Without definite proof, I think we shou-" Jacob tried before being interrupted.

"If what you say is true, isn't it quite idiotic to send more people after him in such a disorganized manner?" Hayden said, ignoring what Jacob said.

“I agree, but people want in on the action. You are not the only one who lost someone dear to them. Many are burning with a thirst for revenge. Having found an outlet and a target, many have started to become restless. Not that I can blame them,” Richard said with a faux downcast mood.

“Which is why we are here,” Jacob said. Hayden, apparently not ignoring him as long as he said something the caster agreed with. “Together, we should be able to cover far more ground and avoid clashing out in the forest. We already have some plans in motion to try and lure him out, but with your cooperation, we would be far more confident.”

After thinking for a while, Hayden sighed as he acknowledged that perhaps it was time for their conflict to be put on pause indefinitely. As long as he could find his son's murderer, nothing else mattered. Even if this Jake guy weren't the culprit, a closer relationship with Richard and his group would allow him to locate the killer more easily. “Fine, I am in. What's your plan?”

At the same time elsewhere, the perpetrator of this entire plot, together with Richard, was happily walking along a small cliff-path. He was now fully healed, and as he saw his conspiracy grow its own legs, he refocused on getting stronger.

It was so easy, mainly because Richard apparently knew this archer that attacked him beforehand. When William described his abilities, Jacob and Bertram were brought in, and they confirmed the guy to be someone named Jake Thayne. It was almost too perfect.

William didn't care about the negotiations; he was far too busy focusing on himself. He needed power... to prove that he wasn't weak and to work with his new partner. William was beginning to really like the idea of having Richard as support.

He had even given him two mana potions the man had stowed away somewhere.

He would never admit it, but William was... unsure. For the first time in his life, he had begun doubting himself. After waking up, two shadows were hanging over him. Two archers who had both beaten and broken him one after another. With that feeling of desperation, William had begun seeking more power... to reach above his former definition of 'perfection'.

William trained his smithing with newfound vigor after waking up, and in only a few hours, got another level, also reaching 25 in his race. He had excused himself to his cabin, set up a metal cage, and begun his evolution.

This was the first clue as to how Jake was so much stronger than him. Another evolution that nearly doubled the stats from each race level. But more importantly, he discovered something else.

The invisible barrier cutting off the inner zone could now be passed through. With some probing, William learned that, to others, it was still inaccessible.

With a gleam in his eyes, he entered. His biggest blight of having no high-level enemies was gone. The level 25 evolution was the key to the inner area all along.

In this area, far more beasts roamed. Yet that wasn't all... the entire inner area was a world of its own. As in, the inside was larger than the outside. If he had to guess, the inner dome's size was nearly the size of the entire forest outside.

The beasts were stronger here. William had already met many more powerful beasts in here than he had ever even seen outside. Some he couldn't even identify. And the creature he stood before at this moment was one such beast.

It was a raptor with a red hide that had lines resembling lava running through them. It didn't take a genius to identify that this thing used fire. The ashes and burned down bushes in its surroundings were also a pretty good clue.

With a snicker, William prepared himself to strike.

Not that he didn't believe he couldn't beat them. He was growing stronger every day now. He had been level 39 in his class and only 10 in his profession when he fought Jake. Now he had already gained 3 levels in his class and of course a new skill. His first epic rarity skill.

Putting his hands together as if praying, he focused on the skill. Slowly spreading his hands apart, a long object started to materialize.

A spear made of iron with intricate runes covering its surface.

Putting his hands out to his sides as he finished, the spear appeared as William breathed heavily.

“Spear of Ferroras,” he muttered as the spear hummed in recognition. By far, his most powerful skill. It was named after the god of iron, carrying the same name as his wand.

Laying his hand on the spear, he felt the power it bestowed entering him. His physical stats getting an immediate increase.

Lifting the spear, he prepared to throw it. The weapon conjured could be used in melee, but it was when thrown that its real power was revealed.

Leaning back, he threw the spear towards the unsuspecting raptor. The beast didn't notice the incoming attack before it was too late.

The spear penetrated into its durable hide like it was nothing, embedding itself deeply. The beast roared but had no time to run after its attacker before the spear exploded in a silver light encompassing it.

****You have slain [Redhide Raptor – lvl 44] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 48000 TP earned****

****’DING!’ Class: [Metal Savant] has reached level 43 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points****

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

Reveling in the warm glow of the level-ups, he observed with glee as the silver light subsided. In its place stood the statue of a raptor made entirely of iron. The spear's true power wasn't how sharp it was or the buff it granted its wielder. It was the powerful curse placed upon it that sought to turn anything it touched into iron.

Walking up to the statue, he placed his hand on it as it started slowly liquifying and flow into his body, replenishing his mana pool.

As the last part of the raptor disappeared into his hand, he started walking back towards Richard's base. The meeting with Hayden should be done by now, and he was more than excited to learn what they decided.

Hopefully, an all-out hunt was agreed upon, but one can only hope.

Chapter 50: Friendship

Shadows danced on the cave wall as the flame flickered back and forth heating a bowl with green liquid within it, taking on a stable form. With a smile, Jake took a deep breath of the aroma as a notification appeared.

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

****'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 45 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 34 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

Jake had finally managed to craft a stamina potion. It was a bit weird that he felt so much happiness from making something of inferior-rarity considering him pumping out common-rarity poisons like it was nothing. But it was still very satisfying nevertheless.

Looking at his creation, he was quite pleased.

[Stamina Potion (Inferior)] - Restores 485 stamina when consumed.

He couldn't help but think back on the first mana potion he had crafted. It would only restore 87 mana, which was so bad. He still had the potion saved away within his spatial storage, as a memento. He somehow had managed not to consume it during his initial grind, and for sentimental reasons, he kept it around. It reminded him of how far he had come.

Putting the potion into his storage, he took out a bed instead. It was a bit paradoxical how physical exertion seemed not to affect Jake's exhaustion level, but reading about alchemy and doing alchemy seemed to tire him out so quickly.

He felt like getting some well-deserved rest and recuperate his resource and mental energy in the meanwhile.

Sitting on the lonely bed in the middle of the small cavern, he distributed his free points. He had decided to start investing in perception once more as he was beginning to feel comfortable with his level of strength and agility. Besides, he was closing in on his class evolution, which was sure to help his more combat-related stats immensely.

Opening his status screen, he nodded to himself at the progress. It wasn't overly much, but he was slowly and surely improving. His main goal, of course, was to evolve his class as fast as possible.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (E) – lvl 34]

Class: [Archer – lvl 23]

Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 45]

Health Points (HP): 3182/3220

Mana Points (MP): 2587/3900

Stamina: 516/1150

Stats

Strength: 124

Agility: 145

Endurance: 115

Vitality: 322

Toughness: 166

Wisdom: 390

Intelligence: 126

Perception: 277

Willpower: 195

Free points: 0

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

Class Skills: [Basic One-Handed Weapon (Inferior), [Basic Stealth (Inferior)], [Advanced Archery (Common)], [Archers Eye (Common)], [Powershot (Uncommon)], [Basic Twin Fang Style (Uncommon)], [Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra (Uncommon)]

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)]

It was good to see that his physical stats were no longer straight-up horrendous.

Many of his improvements also didn't show up on the status screen at all. His control of mana had seen vast improvements over the last few days, and he believed that he soon would be able to use it more actively.

Now he only infused his weapon to make it not break upon use, and the occasional levitation work. Of course, this was outside of alchemy. But he knew that mana could do so much more.

The warrior with the green aura was a great example of this. The aura Jake felt from the man reminded him more of stamina than mana. Yet the effect it had achieved was roughly the same as what Jake guessed a mana-based skill would do.

Of course, Jake knew that a skill had to be the driving force behind it. But if it were anything like his Alchemical Flame or just general mixing skills from his alchemy profession, trained mana control would be tremendously helpful.

The aura around the man didn't appear controlled at all. It was active at all times and based on how short the man could fight in top-condition, Jake guessed it was draining a hell of a lot of energy. If it were instead Jake, he would have been able to control it more, likely making the skill better in every way.

It was hard not to get a bit giddy at the thought of getting something like the warrior had used. Especially if he could get one that used mana, finally giving him the ability to make use of his large mana pool during combat.

But all of that was for later. For now, Jake was too tired to even practice.

Closing the status menu once more, he laid back on the bed as he rested - his first real sleep since exiting the challenge dungeon. While meditation did wonders, possibly even allowing one never to require sleep at all, Jake still liked sleeping. Besides, he trusted his instincts and danger sense to warn him of any would-be assassins or beasts.

As he slept, he also dreamt for the first time in a while. He dreamt of his old life before the system. His job and his family, which was pretty much all he had, really. The dream felt oddly lucid and only made Jake... sad. He couldn't help but feel how wasted it all was, how he had just gone through the motions, day after day with no goal in mind.

Due to the nature of his job, he didn't really lack money. He was relatively frugal, to begin with, so he always had enough money to buy anything he ever really wanted. The only real ambition he ever had was to be a professional athlete in archery before that ended.

But in this new world, he had meaning. Every level was a new goal, every skill or evolution a huge milestone. He never really had an existential crisis before the system; he just worked and spent his free time doing whatever he found entertaining.

Plus, he felt something oddly compelling about the prospects of a never-ending journey. Before the system, everyone had a rough idea of how their life would go. Be born, get educated, work, retire, die. It was simple, and the focus was on how you made the best of the time you had.

The system, however, did away with that entirely. Taking the concept of finite life and throwing it straight in the garbage. Jake could feel it even now, and the Malefic Viper's existence had proven that immortality was a possibility. One could imagine the chances of it happening were low, but the potential was there.

With no certainty, it gave new meaning to everything. Every level-up, not just some temporary benefit like some extra money in your bank account but a permanent upgrade to who you are. An advantage that could potentially stay with you forever. Even if the realm of immortality were never reached, one's lifespan would still be significantly increased.

This brings us back to Jake's dream. Because he did have something that he wanted except seeking more challenges and more levels, he wanted to find his family and help certain people in the tutorial.

Jake felt overwhelmed with a sudden feeling of loss. He had been alone for most of the tutorial and had had little time to think in general. Always focusing on something. But now, in his lucid dream, he didn't have anything else than his own thoughts.

He was naturally planning on trying to locate his family members the second he got out of here. But he also realized that needless worrying would do him little during his own tutorial. No... instead, he should focus on what he could do now. Get stronger and try to help his colleagues. Help his only friends...especially Jacob. He had done so much for Jake

already, the least he could do was not to leave him to die... if he even still lived. Jake also feared what him being blamed for all those murders would mean for his colleagues. He had to do something.

Slowly his consciousness started fading away as he slipped out of his lucid state and simply became a spectator to the imaginations of his own mind. He dreamt of events he had gone to, the bonds he had made but was also reminded of the bonds he had lost or severed with his own hands.

Slowly even the dream faded away, or perhaps he simply became unaware of it.

The Hall Master had never been as panicked as she was at this moment. Wandering back and forth in her chambers, lost as to what her next step should be.

Her meeting with her great Patron had not been as she expected. Despite her endless imaginations of their encounter, the way the actual meeting went had never occurred even in her wildest dreams. The great Malefic Viper had not been as she believed he would but instead seemed too... relaxed. If not for his aura, at the risk of sounding blasphemous, she wouldn't have thought for him to even be a god. Much less the Malefic Viper.

And now she had to prepare for the great assembly. All of the different hall branches would send their important members to the headquarter, and a great meeting would be held. It was both a meeting and a celebration of the return of their Patron.

But instead of being in a celebratory mood, the Hall Master was instead wrought with worry. Disregarding her fears of disappointing the Malefic Viper and the Lord Protector,

now she was also deathly afraid of the branch-leaders' reaction when the Malefic Viper would make his appearance.

Yet, at the same time, she felt a tremendous amount of excitement. The return of the Viper was sure to mark the start of massive changes. The return to glory, if you may. The Order had once in its history been one of the most glorious organizations of the entire multiverse after all, and she dreamed that they would one day return to being one. Something that was now possible.

With all of those wonderful prospects, she still had one colossal headache, however. One relating to a particular mortal the Viper had spoken of only a few days ago...

"A friend?" The Lord Protector asked, with a perplexed look on his face.

"Well yeah, you know... a buddy - a mate. You would like him for sure Snappy," the Malefic Viper said with a smile as he patted the Lord Protector on his back.

The Hall Master had been dumbfounded. What did the Patron mean by a friend? Friendship indicated a certain degree of equality between two parties. The implications of that...

"Master, please, you have to explain more. Who is this mortal to be deemed worthy for you to refer to him as a friend?" The Lord Protector asked, clearly skeptical of the quite ludicrous sentiment. The Hall Master could only agree that the prospect of a mortal referring to a god as a friend indeed seemed preposterous. The only mortals that could ever truly do so were the strongest of demigods.

The Malefic Viper was silent for a while before he turned to the Hall Master. “Tell me, kid, do you fear me?”

Without any hesitation, she answered. “Of course, my lord, anything less would be preposterous!”

“And you, Snappy?”

“To not fear the powerful is an act of foolishness,” He answered stoically.

“Well, Jake didn’t. Oh, his name is Jake, by the way! Anyway! He didn’t have a single shred of fear, just a lot of confusion and curiosity,” The Viper said, still smiling.

“He knew I wouldn’t hurt him... but more importantly, he knew I couldn’t. Heck, I even tried scaring him a bit by attacking, but he didn’t even flinch!”

“How is that possible?” The Lord Protector asked.

“How do you think a mortal, who hasn’t even been initiated to the system for a month yet, does that?” The Viper asked, clearly directing the question to both herself and the Lord Protector.

“Bloodline,” she answered promptly.

“Bingo!” The Malefic Viper said as he clapped. “and while I don’t understand the specifics of it, it sure as heck gave me a strong feeling. Sent shivers down my spine, I tell ya!”

“So recognizing the mortal’s bloodline makes him worthy of being bestowed your friendship?” the Lord Protector asked, still a bit confused. For a mortal to appear with a powerful bloodline wasn’t exactly new. The Viper and Lord Protector both had met many like that before. Even members of their Order had been born with such bloodlines.

“First of all, Snappy, while I am far from an expert, I don’t think that is how friendship works,” the Viper said. “Secondly, no, he’s my buddy because he’s a swell guy. Either way, he made me think about some important things, and ultimately decide to leave my realm and stop wallowing anymore. So no complaining.”

With that, the Viper didn’t speak of his new... ‘friend’ any longer. Instead, the talk turned to the grand ceremony that they would hold to announce the Malefic Viper's return. Announce it to not just the Order but the entire multiverse.

A few more bombs were dropped, like how the Viper casually mentioned granting the mortal a True Blessing, but the Hall Master had honestly stopped trying to comprehend the logic behind her great Patron at that point. In the end, who was she to question the thoughts of a Primordial?

Which is what led back to her, wandering back and forth in her chamber, contemplating.

This Jake posed many challenges. But at the same time, many opportunities. While she, as Hall Master, had unrequited loyalty towards her Patron, she wasn't blind to politics and hierarchy. There was a reason why she had managed to climb to the top and have the highest title amongst mortals in the entire Order. At least she had been the highest...

Now, she had been knocked down to second place. No amount of politics could trump the chosen of the Malefic One himself.

A good relationship with this mortal was thus a must. Any relationship becoming relevant was all contingent on him surviving the tutorial, though. Afterward, they would also need to contact him, but with a True Blessing connecting himself and the Patron, that shouldn't be an issue.

All of that had to wait for now. The other leaders were starting to arrive, and she could no longer have the elders handle all the hassle.

Exiting the chamber, she went to the banquet hall that had been in constant use for the last few days, welcoming all new arrivals. Food from all across the multiverse was gathered, prepared, and cooked by high-level cooks. It wasn't like anyone of their level needed it; instead, they ate it for the powerful temporary buffs it provided. Also, of course, because it was delicious.

This gathering wasn't for the young talents, but the old leaders. The excitement was visible as she went across the hall, greeting one person after another.

Suddenly, however, she heard a voice she would never forget.

“You should have seen the thing, the colors indescribable, and the taste euphoric!” the man said, as he laughed with the others, making large gestures with his arms while standing in a crowd of three reptilian servants.

The Hall Master didn’t share in the merry mood as she stood frozen, staring at the man. The scaled man. Their Patron, the Malefic Viper.

None of the people around him had any idea about his identity, and his ability to conceal his true aura was naturally at a level above reproach.

With a sigh, she walked towards them. This really wasn’t going as she had expected.