

# THE PRIMAL HUNTER

## Chapter 51: Meeting old friends (1/2)

Waking up, Jake found himself covered in sweat as he abruptly sat up. The damp cave and the high humidity of the forest just outside not doing him any favors either. He could still remember parts of the dream, but what mostly remained was a feeling.

Loneliness.

He had spent so long without any real interaction with others, the only reprieve being his meeting with the Malefic Viper. He couldn't exactly count the meetings with William and the group he had fought earlier. The first meeting was with someone clearly plotting, and the other 'conversation' had few words that weren't curses tossed at him.

Perhaps he was rushing into things, but he felt a need to clear up the misunderstanding. To at least have the possibility of reuniting with his colleagues. While they hadn't been super-close, they were still the closest thing to friends he had.

Especially Jacob, Casper, and Caroline. Mainly the first two, though. More than a month had allowed him to rethink the silly crush he had on her in the past. He realized now that it was only a pipedream, that he had idealized and romanticized the thought of having a relationship once more. While she was physically attractive, he didn't even know her that well, actually.

He just hoped they had all managed to survive. Based on the importance Richard seemed to place on healers, Caroline should be fine. With Caroline having feelings for Jacob, chances are she would do everything in her power to also keep him safe.

If he had to go by competency, his bet on survivors would be that Ahmed and Bertram were also still kicking, with Casper also having a good shot. As he thought about it, he couldn't help but realize how lightly he took life... how he was 'fine' with expecting people he had called colleagues a month ago to be dead.

Then again, did he truly have the right to mourn the deaths of friends? He had taken many friends from others himself already... his number of kills being firmly in the double digits by now.

Shaking his head, he got off the bed and depositing it in his spatial necklace once more. After that, he took out a barrel of water to quickly clean his sweaty body. While it was a bit of a waste of purified water, it wasn't like he couldn't just purify some normal water later.

Feeling clean, he threw everything useful into his storage and exited the cave. The artificial sun was up, and beasts were once more roaming about, making sounds he could faintly hear in the distance.

Having decided to attempt to make contact with his former colleagues, he started heading inwards towards the tutorial area center.

It took him only a short while with his speed to head inwards. He was aiming for the area with the least amount of animal cries.

Continuing, he spotted something in the distance between the trees. It looked like a curtain of water extending towards the sky. Behind the curtain, he couldn't see anything correctly, yet at the same time, it appeared utterly transparent.

Getting closer, he soon found himself standing right in front of the barrier. The first thing he noted was how his Sphere of Perception got completely thrown off by the barrier. It wasn't that it blocked him per se; everything just felt... distorted. It was a weird feeling he honestly couldn't quite describe.

Extending his hand towards it, he felt nothing from his danger sense. Identify also yielded no result. Deciding to risk it, he attempted to place his hand on the barrier, only for it to pass right through.

Quickly retracting his hand, he backed away from the barrier once more. If his guess was accurate, this barrier was some kind of entrance to an inner area of sorts. While he certainly wanted to go, for now, he had already decided to contact his friends.

Not knowing if the barrier was a one-way thing, he thus decided to postpone it.

Instead, he started walking around the edge of the barrier in search of Richard's camp. If his friends were anywhere, it had to be with him.

Luckily it didn't take him long to discover a camp. Or a small village would be more accurate. It was a few kilometers away from the barrier, but it wasn't that hard to locate due to all the smoke it emitted.

It looked relatively simple, with a small wall and quite a few wooden cabins encompassed within. Climbing a tree, Jake got a better vantage point as he started scouting the place.

Dozens of people were walking about, most of them busy working on different things. Some were smithing at a small makeshift smithy, including a huge bearded man who seemed to be in charge. Others worked surrounded by tens of strung-up beasts as they were skinning their hides and transforming the raw materials into different products.

The last group he saw was a group of women and a few men sitting together, working with what seemed like threads and needles. *Where the hell did they get those from?* he thought to himself.

But more surprising to him was the woman in the middle. Joanna. Jake could only smile happily as he saw a familiar face after such a long time. She even had her leg back and seemed to be in quite a good mood, considering the circumstances.

Her presence also confirmed to Jake that more of his former colleagues had to be there. It took him a while, but finally, he saw two people walk out of one of the cabins. One of them, a blonde-haired man that even at this distance, Jake could identify as Jacob. The other was a woman wearing quite an elaborate white dress. Caroline.

Jake's smile grew as he saw them. At least three of them still lived. He decided to stay hidden in the treetop for a while as he observed the base's happenings. Jacob was walking

about, talking with people, and from the reception, he seemed to be well-liked even here in this post-system world.

Still smiling, he summoned a piece of paper and a pen from his spatial storage; Items he had brought along from the challenge dungeon. He decided to write a note, as walking into the base didn't seem like the brightest idea considering them all believing him to be some mad killer.

He just wrote a simple request for a meeting. Depositing the pen once more, he took out an arrow and some string he had made from the stalks of a common-rarity herb. A waste for sure, but the stem was more robust than any rope he could make with the limited materials around.

Tying the message to the arrow, he took out his bow and waited. After only a few minutes, Jacob and Caroline entered a clear area as Jake aimed at the ground in front of them. The distance was hundreds of meters, but Jake had absolute confidence in the shot even without using any skills.

Letting go of the arrow, it took flight and landed only a meter or so in front of Jacob and Caroline, who both jumped back in fright, with Caroline even summoning a magic shield of some kind. Jake, however, didn't stick around as he jumped back, letting gravity do its work as he fell to the ground.

Landing softly from the 30-meter drop, he started sneaking away in case anyone was coming to investigate where the arrow came from. The ball was in their court now, and he dearly hoped that they would be open for dialogue to clear up this stupid misunderstanding.

Back at the camp, a small uproar had occurred as everyone thought they were under attack. Jacob quickly managed to calm them down, but not before Richard made his way over to see the commotion.

An arrow was sticking out of the ground with a piece of paper tied to it. Picking it up, Jacob got it loose but didn't have time to read it as he was surrounded.

"What happened here?" Richard said as he walked up to see Jacob holding the arrow and paper in his hands.

"Someone decided to send a message by an arrow; it seems," Jacob answered, as he began untying the paper.

"Who?"

Unfurling the paper, Jacob quickly scanned it and saw the name at the bottom as he became solemn.

"Jake," he answered. "He wants to meet. Says there's a misunderstanding."

Richard's eyes turned sharp as he looked at the paper. "Give it here," he said as he nearly ripped it out of Jacob's hands.

The message was indeed just a short request for a meeting. Few words, just saying that Jake wanted to meet and explain himself with a promise that he wasn't looking for a fight, along with a location not too far away.

But weirdly enough, the first thing Richard asked had nothing to do with this request itself.

“Where did he get the paper? And this is clearly written with some kind of pen.”

This question stumped Jacob and Caroline as well as all the onlookers. Where exactly had he gotten it?

Caroline quickly assured that he hadn't entered the tutorial with them. The paper wasn't regular kind either, but a grayer and coarser version. The pen used was also of the old ink type, and not a modern one either.

This, however, was still an extremely puzzling matter to everyone. Had Jake somehow made the things himself? If so, why had he made it? And how exactly?

Jake had naturally never thought that the simple act of using paper and pen taken from the challenge dungeon would cause this much debate and confusion in Richard's camp. No one in both Richard's and Hayden's camp had ever done a dungeon. At least no one had returned from one.

That is if the finders had even reported it. The dungeons were hidden, and if they were found, many would keep it a secret. Perhaps to enter later or to make sure no one else could.

This meant that all items used by the survivors besides Jake were self-made either through skills or pure human ingenuity. The diverse collection of people had allowed them to get access to many more modern items of comfort, albeit in rather rudimentary forms.

A lively discussion started in the middle of the camp, with even quite a few people advocating to capture Jake to learn of his secrets. Especially the crafters got involved in the discussion. Heavily pushed by Joanna, who had been brought up to speed by Jacob. She didn't want to see Jake harmed either.

However, Richard quickly shot that sentiment down as he dragged Caroline and Jacob along to his own cabin for a sit-down. While the mystery of the paper and pen were intriguing, Richard already had other plans.

*That fucking mutt, just when you need him, he acts like a stray,* Richard cursed inwardly. William had talked with Richard earlier, and they had agreed for him to leave for a bit. But not after telling him all the details about his attacker...

Someone Richard quickly identified as a certain troublesome archer.

"We should give him a chance. This note clearly indicates that he wants to open a channel of communication. This can still be solved diplomatically," Jacob said, as he got a bit heated at Richard insisting not to meet him.



“Or it could be a trap to get you and your friends alone for easy pickings. Our best healer included, as I doubt I can talk her out of following you,” Richard said with a sigh.

“I can meet him alone, I-”

“No.”

“Cara, I am sure it is best if I-”

“I said no, Jacob. Either you don’t go, or we both go. Bertram too,” Caroline said, leaving no room for further discussion.

“And there you have it. Are you seriously telling me to let you go out into the forest with only you and two others? You can’t fight for shit, Jacob, and Caroline is a healer. Bertram can maybe buy you some time, but in the end, how are you going to handle someone who can take down entire teams alone?” Richard asked rhetorically.

“I trust Jake enough to at least give it a shot. He asked to meet so close to the base that I am sure we can manage to make it back even if it turns sour. Bertram and Caroline at least can; you know they can handle themselves,” Jacob argued, refusing to back down.

The discussion went back and forth a bit longer, getting more and more heated. Finally, Caroline butted in and calmed them both down as she whispered to Jacob.

“How about you go back for now, and I try to convince him? This is getting nowhere.”

With a grunt, Jacob agreed, leaving Richard and Caroline alone in the room.

Richard had naturally heard the whispering. It was kind of a useless thing to do with the increased perception everyone had.

Outside the cabin, Jacob was waiting patiently as he saw Caroline put up her barrier, blocking out sound.

Jacob planned on going to the meeting either way, but it would be preferable to have Richard on board. As he stood there, Joanna walked over.

“Jake is alive,” she stated. “How do you think he made it out there? With everything going on, I can’t imagine what he has had to go through...”

“Jake is resourceful,” he smiled. “He must have found something special out there. Maybe he has even managed to avoid this stupid war.”

Bertram, who had turned up behind Jacob at some point, butted in. “As much as I hate to admit it, I have to agree partly with Richard. I don’t like the thought of going out into the forest to meet him.”

“We have known Jake for years. Do you really think he wou-“

“Jacob, how well do we really know him? We all saw that he is capable of on that first night. After that, he purposefully provoked and ultimately killed six of Richard’s men. I do agree that the Jake in my mind from two months ago couldn’t do that, but the Jake from that first night sure as hell could.”

Jacob turned to his old, old friend. “Do you trust me?”

“Always,” he answered promptly.

“Then trust me when I say that this isn’t Jake. My judgment may not always be perfect, but I am sure of this one. Besides, we both know the real culprit anyway.”

“Yeah...” Bertram agreed after a bit of hesitation. Joanna looked a bit confused but read the mood.

“I’ll head back over. Be careful out there,” Joanna said, giving both of them a quick hug.

Jacob and Bertram stayed behind, waiting for Caroline. Now was the best time as William had left less than an hour ago. He tended to be gone for extended periods, meaning they should have eight or ten hours at least.

*Please let me be right*, Jacob thought as he saw Caroline exit Richard's cabin.

## Chapter 52: Meeting old friends (2/2)

Jacob happily walked towards the exit of their base, Bertram on one side, Caroline on the other. It had been a few hours since Jake's message arrived and the subsequent meeting with Richard. Caroline had somehow managed to convince him to let them leave with just the three of them.

According to her, he hadn't been happy about it and had holed himself up inside. Jacob wanted to go and smooth things out with the camp leader, but Caroline had talked him out of it. So, for now, he could only take the fortune he had been given and go to the meeting.

Caroline had stipulated that they needed a proper plan before going to the meeting, something Jacob had agreed to instantly. He did like making plans, which was why they had taken so long to leave. Jake had only specified a place to meet and not a set time. From how it was written, he wanted it to be sooner rather than later, but a few hours shouldn't be too long. The meeting area was quite open-ended, but Jacob had confidence in them finding each other.

The walk wasn't very long, only a kilometer or so from their base. They had built right next to the barrier, so the area he could be in was somewhat limited.

A hundred meters or so away, Jake sat. He, like Jacob, was nervous about the meeting. He even feared the same outcome, though for different reasons. Jacob feared that he was wrong and that Jake would turn on them. Jake feared they wouldn't believe him and think he was actually the culprit, inevitably resulting in them turning on him.

Perhaps it was the nervousness, but Jake somehow only spotted them moments before they spotted him, despite his higher perception. He had to control himself and not rush to them. Instead, he chose to stand still and let them come to him.

Jacob relaxed a bit as he saw Jake just standing there, his hood down and face visible. Especially his nervous face made him relax. He couldn't help but chuckle inwardly as Jake's face looked nearly identical to how it had the first time he was forced to make a presentation to management. And all the times after that, actually.

*Jake hasn't changed*, he told himself; *it must be a misunderstanding*. Perhaps he was just naïve, but he truly believed in Jake.

Bertram and Caroline, on the other hand, didn't share his sentiment. They both glared at their former colleague, and both had up their guards. Unlike Jacob, they didn't see him as good old Jake, but as a potential threat. Not for the same reasons, though.

His demeanor was somehow different. His face looked roughly the same, but his stature exuded some hidden confidence. An innate sense of inferiority was also faintly felt, making them aware that he was more powerful than them. None of them knew this, but this was the suppression of rank...

But more importantly, they both tried to identify him to find out they couldn't. A phenomenon they had never met before. Even if they couldn't see level, it would at least show something. But for Jake, it just gave a simple question mark. Giving them the same surprise William had, as William hadn't shared that detail with the others.

Jake remembered telling Jacob to come alone, but he was honestly pleasantly surprised that Bertram and Caroline also came along. Scouting the area with a quick look, he didn't see any signs of anyone following them.

Jacob and the others stopped five or six meters away from him, as both just stood there for a bit. Jake had run through this scenario a few times in his head before and finally managed to get something out:

"Eh... Hey Jacob, how you doing?" he asked, as he instantly slapped himself mentally. What the fuck kind of question is that?

"Oh... I am fine... you?" Jacob said, also feeling a bit awkward himself now.

"Fine... I guess..." Jake answered.

...

"So, you called us, or well me, out here?" Jacob said, taking the lead as Jake did not indicate that he would continue speaking.

“Yeah... I had some weird run-ins with people in the forest,” Jake answered, now finding a bit of confidence. “They seemed to believe I had done things I have no idea about.”

“Jake, how many people have you killed since entering the tutorial?” Caroline cut in, staring daggers at him.

A bit taken aback, Jake was surprised by the stern tone for a second, mostly because he had never heard Caroline speak to anyone like that before.

“I think...” Jake began, as he thought about who he had killed. 3 attackers during the first night, 6 people Richard sent after him, and the party of 5 with the green warrior. “Too many... but far from enough to have caused some war. After we split, I have only had to fight humans twice, once against a lone caster and the other time a party of five.”

Bertram and Caroline looked at each other to assess the reaction of the other. Bertram thought that either Jake had managed to turn into an Oscars-worthy actor during the last month or he was telling the truth.

Caroline could only sigh inwardly, however. This... wasn’t going as planned. Jake wasn’t the bestial existence William had described; he was far too familiar... *shit*.

“See guys; I told you Jake didn’t do it!” Jacob said as he turned smiling to the others, now in a far better mood. “William lied.”

“William?” Jake asked as he raised an eyebrow. “Metal caster, young, blonde hair?”

“Yeah... he was the lone caster you met, right?” Jacob asked, looking at Jake’s sour expression.

“Fucker tried to ambush me after saying he would take me to meet you guys in Richard’s camp,” Jake said, now with his guard up a little, as his mood took a turn.

“I guess this confirms that it is him...” Jacob wondered aloud. “Which means he must also be the one who killed Casper as he tried to pin it on you...”

“Wait, Casper is dead?” Jake asked

“We believe so,” Bertram said, as he too now wondered what the hell was going on.

Caroline was also starting to reconsider this entire thing. Letting Jacob come here was a bad idea, but she had to. *Just a little longer...*

“This is the first time I have seen any of you from our group. Who else didn’t make it?” Jake asked, trying to calm himself down after discovering the death of Casper. It had somehow hit him harder than he expected. Ripping off the band-aid now and accepting those they lost as soon as possible seemed like the best thing to do.



“Only the three of us as well as Joanna remain. Oh yeah, Joanna got her legs back when sh-”

But before Jacob could finish, Jake spotted something behind him enter his Sphere of Perception. A faint shimmering in the air. He instantly became alert and activated Archer’s Eye to confirm his suspicion.

Seconds later, the shimmering disappeared, revealing Richard along with four others.

Before Jake could react adequately, he spotted more and more figures appearing within his vision, as the shimmering disappeared gradually, revealing person after person.

“What the hell, Jacob!?” Jake yelled as he backed away from the three of them, ready to take out his bow.

Jacob, now also fully aware of the situation, looked confused about and spotted people also appearing behind Jake. One of them, being a person in a red robe with a spear on his back. Hayden.

“I... I didn’t!” Jacob said, trying to explain himself.

“He didn’t know,” Richard said as he stepped closer, his massive tower shield at the ready. His armor and weapon also clearly above common-rarity.

“Sorry, Jacob, but I couldn’t risk it,” the warrior said in a slightly apologetic tone as he turned to Jake.

“Surrender. Come with us nice and easy, and we can get to the bottom of this together. If you didn’t attack anyone as it has been claimed, we could let bygones be bygones. We can even forget the... situation that came out of the last time we met.”

While the words indeed sounded genuine, Jake didn’t buy it for a second. He didn’t need social awareness, only his instincts, to feel the faint killing intent given off by the man - a clear desire to kill hidden in his eyes.

Focusing on his Sphere of Perception, he registered far more presences all around him. He could only curse himself for not having been more cautious and keeping his guard up. No way they should have been able to get that close even if some kind of magic hid them.

“This wasn’t what we agreed! There is no reason for all this! We can-” Jacob protested but was interrupted by an intense glare from Richard.

“Enough. Jake, what will it be?” Richard asked. But Jake didn’t even have time to answer as his danger sense alerted him to an attack coming from behind.

He saw a man wearing a red robe wielding a spear charging straight at him.

Jake felt pressure from the man, instantly making him aware that this wasn't someone to take lightly. Which was only further confirmed as the spear started burning, leaving a trail of fire behind it.

"DIE!" the charging man yelled, releasing a wave of fire towards Jake. His eyes filled with unbridled bloodlust.

Being prepared, the archer efficiently managed to sidestep the horizontal cone of flames as he tried jumping to the side, only to be interrupted by more people exiting the forest.

A screen of light appeared before him, blocking his path, as Jake was forced to dodge another fire wave once again.

Jake could hear Jacob yell something, but was too busy to listen. This situation was dire - enemies all around him, with no clear path of escape.

More and more people entered the fray as arrows and spell started flying about, aiming for him. Ice, fire, spikes of earth, and lightning sparks flew around his ears as he dodged as best he could, still getting hit now and then, however.

A whip of fire he was unable to avoid wrapped itself around his foot, halting his movements as he saw the red-robed man holding it on the other end. More whips came out from the other mages around him, of all elements.

Jake panicked as he tried to Shadow Vault away but found it blocked by the whips holding him down. He could barely move his limbs as he felt at least two lashes holding each of his limbs - a clearly pre-practiced tactic.

Richard decided to no longer sit still as he charged towards the immobilized Jake.

With his panic-level increasing, Jake struggled and moved a little, but it was too late as an arrow struck him on the shoulder, followed by more spells. His common-rarity cloak blocked a bit, but far from enough.

His instinctive will to survive took over, drawing from within, as Jake drew on his deep pool of mana. More than he had ever done so before. No intricate thread or such thing was created. He just opened the floodgates. A transparent sheen of mana started coming out of his pores as he yelled.

With the yell, he released an explosion of mana, dispelling the whips and sending all the spells and projectiles aimed at him flying in all directions. The earth broke apart as cracks appeared on the ground. Even Richard, who was charging at him and all the other warriors, were thrown back by the shockwave.

Shocked, everyone saw Jake's figure as the dust settled. He was on one knee, wounds covering his body. The unbridled release of mana seemed to have taken a toll on his body, as he appeared visibly weaker.

An ambitious warrior continued the attack as he charged with a downward slash.

With speed far surpassing the warrior and faster than any of the onlookers could react, Jake tossed a bottle to the side, hitting the warrior right in the face.

Falling backward, the man screamed as his skin started peeling off and rotting. The healers around him reacted fast, but before they could even heal him, half his face was gone as he collapsed dead on the ground, still decomposing.

Everyone's shock brought Jake enough time to down a health potion as he rushed away, not conservative with his resources as he used Shadow Vault.

As Jake started moving, so did everyone around him exit their stupor as their assault continued.

To Jake's horror, the red-robed man also had a powerful movement-skill, as he sprung two wings of fire and rushed with inhuman speed towards him. Gritting his teeth, he could only draw his daggers to block the blow. The momentum was too strong as he was thrown back. Ultimately it worked to his advantage, however, as he managed to put more ground between them.

Pulling out more poison bottles, Jake started throwing them towards his attackers as he retreated. The pursuers were ready as different shields and walls appeared to block them, leaving them utterly ineffective.

Richard and the spear wielder were chasing him, one charging forward with his tower shield raised, and the other with a bubble of fire enveloping his body.

As Jake Shadow Vaulted once more, he got a bit further away, but halfway through his second one, he screamed as he smashed into a transparent wall. Without even lifting his gaze, his sphere made him aware of the culprit as he turned and saw Caroline with her hands extended in front of her body.

*Fuck*, Jake cursed inwardly, as Richard got to him first. The man was far slower than Jake in attacking, leaving Jake plenty of room to dodge. Richard, however, had never planned to hit him.

Behind him, Caroline's barrier blocked him when a wall of light appeared to his left, with Richard jumping to the right, raising his shield as a phantom of the shield appeared, also blocking the path to his right.

Jake barely had time to turn towards his last path to move as he spotted the spear-wielding fire-caster at the end, in a stance with his spear pointing right at him. Barriers blocked him to all sides; Jake had no path to dodge or escape.

### **Trail of Embers**

Jake heard the man's voice echo as he flew towards Jake with far more speed than before. He couldn't even react as the spear penetrated through his chest and out the back, shattering Caroline's barrier, Jake flying away still impaled on the spear held by the red-robed man.

His entire body felt like it was burning on the inside as he flew backward. His health dangerously low; both his lungs scorched, and his internal organs burned beyond recognition. A state in which any pre-system human would be long dead.

Finally, they both encounter a tree, impaling Jake on it as the caster laughed manically. “This is for my son!”

Jake, feeling no need to answer, summoned all the strength he could as he pushed himself forward along the shaft of the spear as he grabbed hold of the man. The man was surprised at seeing Jake being able to move, and more so at the nearly dead archer putting his hands on him.

This surprise was nothing compared to his astonishment as he felt an intense pain in his chest. Looking down, he saw his red robe slowly darkening as the flesh beneath started going through necrosis. Alarmed, he let go of his spear and stumbled backward, also allowing Jake to get free.

Taking no time to see his handiwork, Jake struggled as he halted away. His body in pain, but not at an unbearable level compared to what he experienced during the final trial in the challenge dungeon.

Hearing Richard and the others catching up, Jake gritted his teeth as he managed to Shadow Vault once more and tried to get out of sight.

Their chase didn’t let up, however, as Jake was forced to keep Shadow Vaulting, again and again, his wounds only getting worse. He passed Richard’s base as he made his way towards his goal.

Finally, he found himself at the mysterious barrier blocking off the inner area once more. He hoped it was some instance, not unlike the challenge dungeon.

Without hesitation, he stumbled through the barrier as his surroundings changed. His sphere fed him information as space seemed to rapidly expand around him, and he found himself in what seemed like an entirely different world, the barrier still behind him.

Lying on the ground, he crawled to rock, turning back towards the barrier, a bottle of poison now in hand. If any of those fuckers were going to follow him, he sure as hell would greet them with a bottle of poison to the face.

No matter how long he waited, however, no one came. At least not from the barrier.

Behind him, he saw three creatures enter his sphere. They looked like dinosaurs or something. Managing to stand back up somehow he saw their levels.

**[Redhide Raptor – lvl 39]**

**[Bluehide Raptor – lvl 40]**

**[Greenhide Raptor – lvl 40]**



Smiling weakly, Jake stood there as the beasts closed in on him.

*What a shitty way to die*, he thought, as he threw the bottle of poison towards the blue one and readied himself as they all charged at him.

## Chapter 53: Goals

Jake didn't know how much time had passed before he opened his eyes once more. Or, to be more accurate, he saw out of his already open eyes. He found himself in a rather lovely-looking room. Scratch that understatement; it looked like the presidential suite of some over-the-top fantasy world.

Gaudy, clearly magical, chandeliers hung from the ceiling, with every piece of furniture overly ornated with extremely detailed carvings - all of them depicting a snake.

"So, how long ya gonna stand in the middle of my bedroom before saying hi?" a voice said, startling Jake out of his stupor.

Turning around, he saw a scaled man, now wearing quite a nice-looking outfit. It was a combination of a modern suit and a more old-school style. If he had to put his hand on it, it looked like something Dracula might wear.

“How did I get here?” Jake asked frowning. He couldn’t remember what he was doing before this and got a headache whenever he tried to.

“Now, this is where it gets interesting. Our connection from the blessing is two-way, you know? Though this is a first for me for someone to appear like this. Just know that you did this,” the Malefic Viper said, chuckling as he added. “Though I did help a little bit.”

Bringing a hand to his head, Jake still had no idea what the hell had happened. Turning to the Viper, he asked. “Where exactly are we?”

“My bedroom,” The Malefic Viper said, still smiling. “More accurately, we are in the headquarter of my little Order. The great, the magnificent Order of the Malefic Viper!”

Spreading out his arms with a goofy smile, Jake could only chuckle a bit. “Very humble of you.”

“Well, a certain amount of ego is certainly required for one to ascend to godhood,” the Malefic Viper said, as he took a seat at the table. “Come on, take a seat, and calm down a bit.”

Following the advice, Jake sat down on the chair as he rested his head in his hands. What exactly was he doing before he got here? He remembered wanting to meet his colleagues. But after that, everything seemed all murky to him.

He had made contact... met them... ambush... Jake suddenly opened his eyes wide as he remembered. He had been betrayed. He had run. He got through a barrier, and the final thing he remembered was charging into a group of three raptors before he blacked out.

"I died," Jake muttered as he looked towards the ground. "I fucking died."

The Malefic Viper looked at him a bit as he laughed out loud. "So, is this the afterlife you expected?"

Jake, still somber, looked up at him. "So... this is what happens when you die? You appear in a gaudy room with a god cracking jokes?"

"Well, that entirely depends on a lot of things, but yes, a blessing can affect where your soul ends up after death," he answered. "Though no, unless extraordinary circumstances represent themselves, death means death. End of story."

"Does dying during the tutorial count as such extraordinary circumstances?" Jake asked bitterly.

"Sadly not. At least I have never encountered it," the Viper said. "Death, no matter how it happens, will result in you leaving the tutorial for good and all rewards lost. Besides anything directly related to circumventing death, dying in combat results in just that: Death."

He made a big silly smile at Jake as he finished, the archer looking back confused at him. Until it finally hit him.

“Wait, what the fuck, I'm not dead?” Jake asked as he perked up, staring daggers at the Viper. “What the hell, man?”

The Malefic Viper answered by laughing hysterically at Jake's outburst. “You should have seen yourself! Pure gold! Pure gold!”

His amusement was shortlived, however, as he turned severe. “This doesn't make your situation good, though. Your body is in a shitty state, and your life force is unbelievably weak. Your physical body is likely in a very vulnerable state right now.”

Jake, hearing that, also turned serious. “What can I do? And how the hell am I here if I am not dead?”

“You can't really do anything except trying to calm down. Your body is healing by itself; you just have to not stress and inhibit said regeneration. As to why you are here... because you chose to. Or at least part of you did. Not something I have experienced before with someone of such low rank,” the Malefic Viper said, as he continued the lengthy explanation.

“Karmic projections aren't that uncommon, but the way you did it is exceedingly risky. One could say that a part of your soul has traveled through the karmic bond created by the blessing I gave you last time we met. I would recommend not doing it this way again, as if the other party has even the faintest of nefarious intent towards you, crushing your projection, and thus the fragment of your soul would be extremely easy. The damage to

your soul wouldn't be easily healed from that and can result in many negative side-effects."

Jake couldn't help but get a bit scared upon hearing that. "How the hell did I manage to sever a part of my soul and send it here?"

"On that matter, I can't help you. Well, I could, but I am not going to. Methods to do things like that are not exactly common knowledge," the Malefic Viper said as he shook his head. "Perhaps you simply sought to seek refuge somewhere and accidentally made your way here with a part of your soul? Just a guess."

That certainly was a possibility when Jake thought about it. Perhaps his instincts had taken over and, in desperation, somehow managed to do it. Which also kind of was an example of how his instincts were just that: Instincts. It was fast kneejerk reactions and a powerful sense of intuition. This meant that he far from always made the best decisions when he relied purely on his instincts. Especially not in complicated matters.

Perhaps coming here was a mistake. At least Jake didn't think the Malefic Viper had any evil intentions towards him, so he shouldn't be in any danger. But making his way back to his body and the tutorial was, without a doubt, his top priority.

"Can I return to my body somehow? Or is my consciousness split or something? How exactly does this work?" Jake asked.

"Nah, things aren't like that. Whenever your body is ready, you will naturally return. I made sure of that. It's also just a small part; it ain't like you made a clone," the scaled god answered. "Just wait and hope someone doesn't finish off your body in the meantime."

Jake didn't get why the guy was still in such a merry mood despite his possible demise at any moment. "I barely dare ask, but... what would happen if someone did that?"

"Poof!" The Viper said as he made a small cloud of smoke appear from his hands, "and you're gone."

"So... death?" Jake asked, sour at the showoff in front of him.

"Yep. Permanent," he answered. "Though don't worry, I have a feeling you'll be just fine."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Jake decided to trust him for now. "So... what am I supposed to do in the meantime?" Jake asked.

"Well, since you dared to intrude into my personal chambers, the least you can do is to entertain me a bit," the Malefic Viper said jokingly. "What have you been up to since passing the challenge dungeon? And did ya get any nice rewards?"

"I guess It was decent..." Jake began as he explained what he had been doing since their last meeting. To his surprise and embarrassment, the Malefic Viper had heard his small prayer before ingesting the unholy amalgamation of poison he used to pass the challenge dungeon.

He told of returning to the tutorial forest but quickly found that there really wasn't much to talk about, so they did like their last sit-down and started discussing broader subjects and themes instead.

Elsewhere in the Order, a green-haired woman sat meditating. Opening her eyes, she sighed as she thought of how to handle the Malefic Viper's return. The banquet had gone well, and the proper ceremony would begin in only a few days.

She couldn't help but chuckle a little at the thought of the ignorant ones that the Malefic Viper had talked to the day prior and their surprise upon discovering that they had conversed directly with their Patron.

Getting up, she decided to walk the halls. She was the Hall Master after all. The Lord Protector had returned to his realm and had begun making his own preparations together with his direct followers. The ceremony would be grand for sure.

As she walked the hall, she eventually ended up close to her Patron's chambers. Not wanting to disturb him, she prepared to leave but heard voices coming from the room.

"That sounds utterly idiotic of you," an unknown voice said.

Surprised, the Hall Master stayed to listen. She knew of everyone with access to this area of the Order, and yet she didn't recognize this one. She considered scanning the room with her mana but feared that it would offend the Viper.

More Importantly,... who was this person speaking to? Could it be their god? No, impossible, no one would dare-

“Hey, give me a break. I thought it sounded like a great plan at the time,” she heard the Malefic Viper answer as he laughed.

“If the goal was to get slapped across the face, then sure,” she heard the other person answer, also laughing.

Frozen she stood there... was this person... mocking her god? Had another god entered without her knowledge? But what god would dare come here and talk so casually with the Viper himself?

No, she had to investigate, even if her life depended on it. Perhaps it was a test to see her devotion by not allowing slights to his honor? Yes, that had to be it.

With great resolve, she made her way to the room. She already decided to enter, but teleporting in would still be a bit too disrespectful.

As she was about to knock on the door, it opened, revealing the happenings within. Two people were sitting at a small table. No, one god and a... projection? She felt the faint aura of the Viper himself coming from the conjured image, but the aura it gave off was of a different person.



“Ah, Jake, this is Viridia, the big boss of my Order. Well, Snappy and I not included. Boss of the mortals, I guess, would be most accurate,” he said, as the projection also turned to look at her.

Jake and the woman looked at each other as both froze.

To Jake, she looked... impossible. Green hair, glowing yellow eyes, and a face that would put any model from Earth to shame. Quite frankly, she looked far too perfect for it to be natural. Perhaps she had a hidden skill or something, but Jake felt like the only reasonable response would be to show loyalty towards her.

Luckily his bloodline didn't really care for that, so he managed to stay seated.

Viridia, on the other hand, was equally surprised. This person was Jake, her Patron's supposed 'friend'. Obviously, the man was weak, but she got a weird feeling as she looked into his eyes. She couldn't quite describe it, but if she had to compare it to something, it would be a lesser feeling of reverence, not unlike what she felt when she was in the presence of her Patron.

It was the result of the True Blessing without a doubt. The blessing on top of the massive benefits it already granted was also a message. That he was chosen. Most holders were known as popes, prophets, saints, and champions. It was a way to mark the most critical mortal by a god. Which thoroughly made Jake an outlier.

“Eh, nice to meet you,” Jake said.

“This servant greets the chosen one,” Viridia said as she knelt, surprising Jake.

“Aaaand she made it awkward,” the Malefic Viper laughed with faux annoyance. “Come on, take a seat. We were discussing how to handle rejection when your former crush decides to try and kill you in cold blood.”

“And the people I thought were my friends,” Jake added, as he seemed a bit downtrodden. “Though I still think it is all based on some stupid misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding or not. It wouldn’t matter if you died now, would it?” the Viper said, shaking his head. “What’s done is done; the goal now is to move forward. And get your sweet revenge, of course. You fucked up this time, stupidly walking into an obvious ambush like a moron, and got smashed. Learn from it, and don't do it again.”

"I don't know... I just thought that I cou-"

"Well, you thought wrong. Stop being so naive and trusting. You're far too weak to act like that."

Turning to Viridia once more, who was still standing there unsure what to do, the Malefic Viper ordered.

“Take a seat, and give us your thoughts. A female perspective is always valuable.”

Rushing as if a scared rabbit, she hurried to sit down as she tried to calm herself down and formulate a response. This situation was far too informal for her taste, and she couldn't help but get nervous. Steeling herself, she managed to squeeze out: "I believe the advice of the Patron to be the best thing to do."

Shaking his head, the Malefic Viper sighed to himself inwardly. Devout followers were nice to have, but they made for terrible conversation partners. Turning back to Jake, he continued.

"Jake, what do you want?"

"I want to return to my body and hopefully not die, I guess?" he answered.

"No, what is your goal? What do you want in the long run?" the Viper asked once more.

*What do I want?* He hadn't really thought much of it. He wanted to survive, of course, and that had been the main thing everything revolved around. He had always been a rather one-track person, focusing on the matter at hand first and foremost. The looming threat of death had, of course, been a good motivator not to get too lost in thought in the dungeon.

But thinking on it more in-depth, why did he want to survive? What for? Besides the basic instinct to survive that every living being had. What did he want to achieve? Right now, he wanted to somehow clear up the misunderstanding with Jacob and the others... or did he really?

He did want to get revenge on that red-robed bastard with the spear along with Richard and that metal caster.

If thinking long term goals, however... he wanted to find more challenges and fights. Not just fight weak or scheming prey, but powerful enemies. He craved the near-euphoric feeling he got from fighting the ambushers on that first night.

He wanted to overcome challenges and climb higher in the system. See exactly how powerful he and his enemies could become. He wanted to improve.

“I want to do whatever I want,” Jake answered after thinking deeply on the matter.

“True freedom is indeed a worthy goal,” the Malefic Viper said as he nodded. “But what do you want to do with this freedom?”

“I want to be able to see what this multiverse has to offer. Challenge myself and see exactly how far I can go. Or at least go out in a cool way,” Jake answered with a cheeky smile.

The Viper returned the smile: “Then don’t allow yourself to be chained down by your past. Stand above all of them. Schemes and planning, in the end, fall before absolute power. Reach a level where your word becomes truth; misunderstanding dispelled with a wave of your hand. Your enemies either cowering in fear or dead. To strive for progress is to keep moving forward ruthlessly.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jake laughed as he looked towards the ceiling as it started getting blurrier by the moment.

“I think my body wants its soul back,” he said, as he stood up from the chair, the Viper doing the same.

“Take care, my friend. May we meet again soon,” the god said, adding. “Let’s hope it’s not due to you being near death, though. Stay true to yourself, but stop being stupid.”

With a final fist bump with the god, he nodded. “Thanks for the talk.”

“Just remember, Jake,” The Viper said, as he turned unusually severe, letting his aura wash over the room. “Freedom doesn’t come without power, and power doesn’t come cheap. Strive for it. Hunger for it. Make it, so you are never betrayed again. So no one dares to. And if they do... crush them like the pathetic ants they are. You will find yourself on a mountain of corpses. Be sure you’re the only one standing on the top.”

These were the last words Jake heard as his projected body disappeared as the soul fragment returned from whence it came. Turning to the even more astonished Hall Master who had just silently been observing everything, he smiled.

“So, what ya think?”

However, she didn't hear the words as she was shaking from the pure killing intent in his aura that still lingered. For all of his antics and unusual personality, she had nearly forgotten.

The Malefic Viper had never been a benevolent god.

## Chapter 54: Class Evolution

But he understood. He had been soft. He had been forgiving and hopeful to the point of naivety, and it had nearly resulted in his death. His mistake wasn't to approach Jacob and the others to talk. It was not to be strong enough in case it went south.

If he had been more powerful, it wouldn't have mattered. It would be inconsequential even if the rest of the tutorial showed up to kill him if he only was powerful enough to tell them all to sit the fuck down and listen to his explanation.

So he needed power and a lot of it. He was done having fun with fights for now. He couldn't stop himself completely from enjoying a good fight, but he wouldn't go out of his way to challenge himself. At least not now. He was on a timer until the tutorial ended. May as well make use of the time properly.

His most immediate objective was to feel anything other than pain. Luckily, he slowly became aware as he felt his senses return one by one. His Sphere of Perception first and, unluckily, smell being the second.

A horrid stench entered his nostrils. A stench, he quickly recognized as the smell of rotting flesh. His sphere promptly made him aware of the source of the stench as three half-decomposed corpses lay around him.

Still unable to move, he could only lie there with his eyes closed. He didn't feel the sunlight from the artificial sun making him aware that it was nighttime now. His meeting with Jacob and the others had been before noon, meaning at least 10 hours had passed since he collapsed here.

Luckily no one had followed him through the barrier. Or perhaps they were unable to. He had no way to know and quite honestly didn't care. He could only be happy that he was left alone.

As for the raptors... he could barely remember how the hell he had killed them but based on their states, it involved a lot of poison. Though they sure had done a number on him based on his missing left arm.

Another random occurrence was that the stench seemed to keep away the other beasts. It was dark, so if the creatures here adhered to the same rules as the ones outside the barrier, Jake should be good.

Still unable to move, he decided to use the time to go through his notifications but didn't get further than the second one, after that first warrior he killed with a bottle to the face.

***\*You have slain [Human (E) - lvl 28 / Apprentice Spearman of Embers - lvl 41 / Builder - lvl 16] - A small amount of bonus experience earned for killing an enemy with a class above your class level. 624.458 TP earned\****

That... was the red-robed man with the spear. What the hell? How did he die? Jake did land a Touch of the Malefic Viper on the guy doing some damage, but far from enough to kill him. Caroline and other healers were also close, meaning healing him should have been entirely possible.

Even without healing, his natural vitality should keep him alive. And yet he had died. Meaning someone or something else had finished him off. Once again, suggesting that the situation wasn't so black and white as he first believed.

Had he just been a pawn for Richard to finish off Hayden all along?

And speaking of manipulating bastards, where was William? He wasn't present in the fight. Luckily. Jake doubted he would have made it out if that metal caster had been there as well. Hayden, Richard, and the others packed a punch for sure, but he still felt that the William he had met days ago would come out ahead.

William was weak defensively, but he could likely take down both of them if he played it smart. It would take him some time, but it should be possible. If he faced them together, though... yeah, dead William.

Going on to the next few messages, he saw that he had indeed managed to kill the three raptors alone. Despite not being aware of exactly how the hell he managed that.

***\*You have slain [Bluehide Raptor – lvl 40] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 40000 TP earned\****



***\*'DING!' Class: [Archer] has reached level 24 - Stat points allocated, +1 free point\****

***\*You have slain [Redhide Raptor – lvl 39]. Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 38000 TP earned\****

***\*You have slain [Greenhide Raptor – lvl 40]. Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 40000 TP earned\****

One level in archer after the first raptor. The experience indeed was great. Great enough, in fact, for the next message to have appeared.

***\*Class Evolution Requirements Met\****

***You have hunted beasts far above your level with great resolve, showing both ambition and perhaps a bit of foolhardiness. A determination to face that which you shouldn't. It has been a lonesome hunt, not shying away from confronting these foes alone. Skilled with a bow as well as melee, you have shown diversity in your art of killing, willing to resorting to any means to obtain the final victory.***

***Begin Evolution now?***

Y/N

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

The warning at the end did scare him a bit, considering he had been out cold. He also had a vague feeling that actually choosing to evolve right now maybe wouldn't be the best idea. He had no idea if something unexpected would happen like when he upgraded his profession.

So he patiently waited as more and more feeling returned to his body. When he finally moved a bit, he managed to summon a health potion from his necklace and use a mix between mana control and his feeble hand to drink it.

He instantly felt the warmth flow through his body as his body healed at a visible rate. His severed arm even started growing out in a far less scary and disgusting way than he thought it would. It was like it just slowly grew out like a tree-branch that ended in a hand.

Moving the arm, it felt the exact same as before without any issues. With a sigh of relief, Jake managed to sit himself up as he started meditating.

A few hours later, he opened his eyes, feeling in a good enough condition to evolve. While he wasn't in top shape, he was good enough for now. Checking the notification window once more, he accepted the evolution.

With little fanfare, five options appeared before him, just like when he upgraded his profession. Like last time he started going through them one by one. The first one being the expected linear upgrade.

***Veteran Archer – An archer who has proven himself to be of some skill and possesses some amount of experience. A safe and sure step forward, taking no risks but staying on your proven path to power. A class focused on ranged combat, mainly using bow and arrow, coupled with light options for melee such as short-swords and daggers. The class is fast and flexible, focusing on agility over strength. You have yet to truly prove yourself outstanding on your path, but perhaps you will find your stride and true potential in the future. Stat bonuses per level: +3 Per, +2 Agi, +2 End, +1 Str, +2 Free Point***

The first option was kind of... boring. The description also more or less insulting whoever picked this as being unremarkable. Jake also remembered seeing the archer he had killed together with the green aura warrior having this class. Poor guy must have been so disappointed when he saw two of his friends get cool classes. Everything about it just screamed mediocrity. Likely an option anyone meeting the evolution requirement as an archer would get.

Even the stats were underwhelming. Giving only 10 stats total. Half of what his Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper currently provided. And that was on top of classes usually providing more stats than professions based on his reading during the challenge dungeon.

Naturally, he moved on swiftly as he went to the next option.

***Novice Mana Archer – An archer not just relying on his bow, but the wonders of mana. A class focused on combining magic and archery to create something greater than the sum of their parts. While still using a bow and the occasional light melee weapon, you have shifted your focus to the magical aspects of fighting and still exploring how to***

***truly use it. Your focus is split, but you believe this diverse path may lead you to the pinnacle, even if you have only just begun treading it. Stat bonuses per level: +2 Per, +2 Agi, +2 Wis, +2 Will, +2 Int, +1 Str, +1 End, +2 Free Points***

This one was instantly far more interesting. It seemed to focus not only on archery but also on magic. Something similar to the warrior who had the Aspiring Blade of Nature class or the spearman? Integrating magic into a more physical fighting style.

The stats were a bit underwhelming, providing only 14, but still far better than the Veteran Archer. However, he felt that the class would provide far more powerful skills and a further chance of evolution than the Veteran Archer option. It was only called Novice Mana Archer, after all, leaving plenty of room to grow.

He did have his reservation, though. It didn't appear that strong, and it did make Jake wonder if he went wrong with his mana training somewhere to not unlock anything better.

He was honestly still quite tempted, but he still had three options to go through, with the next one being quite the departure.

***Apprentice Rogue of Umbra – The rogues of Umbra are known for their cunning and stealth, striking while one with the shadows. You are but an apprentice in the craft, still early in your journey, but you have shown promise so far. A class focused on light melee weapons and stealth, along with ranged options such as bows and crossbows. The class is fast and flexible, focusing on agility over strength. Compared to many other types of rogues, the Rogue of Umbra does not shy away from the powers of magic, however, openly embracing the power found in the shadows. Praise be Umbra. Stat bonuses per level: +3 Agi, +2 Wis, +2 Int, +1 Str, +1 Per, +1 End, +1 Vit, +1 Tough, +3 Free Points. WARNING: Skills pertaining to the Archer class may be lost or changed upon becoming an Apprentice Rogue of Umbra.***

Straight from mana archer to evil shadow assassin. Or maybe just an ordinary shadow assassin. The class was also quite a shift in focus, going from a ranged class to one more focused on melee.

But it wasn't the typical kind like the one he had fought. This one also seemed to incorporate magic quite a bit together with the regular rogue-ish approaches.

As to how he got the option? Well, likely a combination between his bracers with the word Umbra on them and the skill Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra. On top of that, he had also fought a lot in melee with daggers, acting quite rogue-ish if he had to say so himself.

Not that he had any intentions of taking it. While it did provide one more stat point per level than the prior one, there were just too many red flags. First of all, "Praise be Umbra"? This was clearly some religious shit - he said to himself only a few hours after having a chat with a god.

He had in his sphere seen the looks that the Hall Master tried to hide during his conversation with the Malefic Viper, ignoring whatever she used to hide her facial expressions. She had looked mortified whenever he cracked a joke and looked like she half wanted to strangle him and half kneel before him the entire time - quite the vexing experience.

Becoming a Rogue of Umbra would also very likely create a link to another god. Which he still wasn't sure was a good or a bad thing. The Malefic Viper was a nice dude, but he doubted all gods were the same as him. It didn't take a genius to know that it could lead to complications later if getting this class came with the expectations of joining some weird assassin club or something, which he had no intention of.

As a departure from the archer class, it also meant that he risked losing some skills. In general, if he had to pick, he would rather go with Novice Mana Archer. Luckily, he had two other options remaining.

***Bowman of Decay – The Bowman of Decay seeks not simply the pleasure of a good hunt but the pinnacle of death itself. The ultimate beauty of all life is its inevitable decay as death takes hold. You have learned to inflict such decay upon others. Having moved away from the usual path of archers, the Bowman of Decay focuses on afflicting their foes with slow, excruciating deaths. While still using a bow and the occasional light melee weapon, you have shifted your focus to the magical aspects of fighting. Your bow now but a medium used to inflict your magic of death and decay. Your path is sure to leave behind much desolation in your wake. Stat bonuses per level: +3 Int, +3 Per, +2 Wis, +2 Will, +2 Agi +2 Vit, +1 Tough, +1 Str, +2 Free Points***

Yeah... *what the fuck*, Jake thought as he finished reading it. Was he really that terrible? So bad that the system decided that he surely would be an excellent wandering war-crime. Taking a step back, he decided to still evaluate the class, though he was sure as hell not picking it.

It gave 3 more stat points per level than the Rogue, but this time it got more focused on magic than anything else. It was practically a magic archer, the highest bonus even in both intelligence and perception.

If he looked at it from an objective view, the class would likely synergize exceptionally well with his profession. It would maybe even make his poisons even more powerful and give him methods of empowering them.

The thought of becoming a mage also did seem very tempting. Jake had been practicing hard in his mana control and had improved tremendously in his own opinion. Though he had nothing to compare it to, he felt like it was pretty good. He had even managed to break free from the attack earlier by overflowing every pore of his body with mana. Which, in retrospect, wasn't a very effective way of doing it. Nevertheless, this class would, without a doubt, make far more use of his growing control of mana than an upgrade like Veteran Archer.

Yet... he just didn't like it. If he had to choose, he would still pick the Novice Mana Archer one over this. It may just be him being a bit of a hypocrite considering how many people and beasts he had killed by literally rotting their flesh away, but he didn't want that to be his main focus. He could live with doing it, but not for it to be what ultimately brought him to the top.

He reaffirmed himself to skip over this one, moving on to the final option.

## Chapter 55: Ambitious Hunter

Jake breathed out a sigh of relief when he saw the last option.

***Ambitious Hunter – The Ambitious Hunter is always seeking out true challenges and the most powerful of prey. To you, the hunt is not only about the question of gaining power or death, but to enjoy the journey itself. It is not something that can be taught but is a part of who you are. A class focused on ranged combat, mainly using bow and arrow, coupled with light options for melee such as short-swords and daggers. The class is fast and flexible, focusing on agility over strength. The Ambitious Hunter's path to power may be more complicated than many others due to their endless thirst for worthy enemies, but power is inevitable if one survives. Stat bonuses per level: +5 Per, +4 Agi, +3 End, +2 Str, +4 Free points***

From the description... it wasn't incredibly awesome. But the name alone stood out to him more than anything in any of the others. Hunter. The word seemed to resonate with him. Unsurprising, considering his bloodline was called "of the Primal Hunter".

He also felt like the description, well... described him. Described his goals. He hadn't seen himself as an incredibly ambitious person for many years, not after his archery incident. His plans were simply to... exist. Of course, he enjoyed himself in his free time, but it wasn't like becoming a financial consultant was his dream.

But now he felt driven. He had a goal, had ambition, and was more than willing to hunt for it.

Closely reading the description, there seemed to be little difference between it and the regular archer class, besides the number of stats and types of skills it would likely offer. But the essence of the class and its purpose seemed to be very much the same.

The stats had the same total as Bowman of Decay. 18 stats in total per level. Which is still less than his Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. Which showed that the class wasn't that special or that he had really lucked out with his profession. One had to remember that professions tended to give fewer stats than classes, after all.

Jake remembered the Viper's words of staying true to himself... and while maybe the Bowman of Decay was more powerful here and now, this class was far more 'him' than anything offered beforehand.



It likely wouldn't make him that much stronger immediately, but he was still satisfied as he unhesitantly accepted the class and felt the familiar warm flow of information entering his mind along with the pleasant sound of the level-up.

***\*Congratulation, you have successfully evolved your Class\****

***\*'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 25 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 35 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

What followed was naturally the skills, the first one being an upgrade to his Archer's Eye, a skill he had since the tutorial's very beginning.

***Skill Transformation: [Archer's Eye (Common)] Has been upgraded to [Hunter's Sight (Uncommon)]***

***[Hunter's Sight (Uncommon)] - The hunter's eyes are trained to track down and kill their prey. Allows the ambitious hunter to spot prey more easily as well as their weaknesses. Passively gives a small increase to the effect of perception on visual organs.***

The skill was a straight-up upgrade, and he even felt a slight increase to his eye-sight if he tried looking intensely at his surroundings. The change was very minor, however. Overall it didn't change much besides the "easier to spot weaknesses"-part that was new. He would have to test that in combat.

The last skill was where the real juice was at.

***[Big Game Hunter (Rare)] – A true hunter seeks not the easy prey but a true challenge. Having hunted bigger and stronger prey than most, the Ambitious Hunter has become more accustomed to facing higher-level enemies. Increases the user's resistance to auras and gives a small increase to strength and agility while facing enemies above your highest level class or race. The bonus is based on the disparity between the level of your prey and you. Limit of 1.25x your level or 50 levels, whichever is highest. May your hunt be fruitful, and your ambitions reached.***

The skill seemed extremely good, especially for what he was planning. The limiter on the bonus was a bit annoying, though, as his race was currently at 35 and his class only at 25, making him lose 10 levels worth of bonuses.

It would take him until he reached level 44 or so in his class for it to be the highest one. And that was assuming he didn't level his profession at all, which he sure as hell planned on.

Ultimately, none of it mattered much to him currently. His body was still healing, and he was getting closer and closer to being in fighting-condition. Soon, he should be able to drink another health potion and with that, it would be time to hunt.

The hunt was made slightly more difficult by a minor issue, however. He had lost both of his melee weapons in the brawl earlier, and he currently only had a few unranked daggers in his spatial storage. He felt quite sad about losing the bone dagger, mostly. It had served him well and synergized well with his fighting style, so he would have to rely on his bow for now. At least he had enough targets to hunt, though.

In the inner area, there were beasts everywhere, and high-level beasts at that. Wandering sources of experience, just waiting to be claimed.

He would have to hurry before the other survivors made their way in here. First, he needed to get as much experience as possible, and second, he wasn't looking for another fight right now considering his near-death experience.

His only hope was that the conflict between the two factions would buy him enough time to reach a more comfortable level of power.

Looking at the tutorial screen, he noted the number of survivors still going down slowly.

#### **Tutorial Panel**

**Duration: 24 days & 18:25:23**

**Total Survivors Remaining: 341/1200**

*25 days left*, Jake thought to himself. *25 days to hunt down everything worth killing in here.*

“Jacob, please just talk to me for god's sake,” she said as she ran after the man who quite clearly ignored her on purpose. “I did what I thought was the best for everyone! None of us knew if he did it or not, and I just didn’t wanna risk it.”

Snapping back, Jacob turned to her. “How many times do I have to tell you that I fucking knew. But you would rather kill an innocent man. You know the truth too, and yet you lied and used me!”

“I already told you I am sorry!” Caroline said, genuinely distressed. “Just tell me what you want me to do?”

“I want you to leave me alone for a while. I need to think,” Jacob answered as he kept walking away, leaving Caroline behind with a desolate look on her face.

Nothing had gone as Caroline planned when it came to Jacob. Jake had been allowed to talk for way too long and made it pretty damn clear that he hadn’t been the culprit they were seeking.

On top of that, they even failed to kill him. How he had managed to survive all those attacks was still a wonder to Caroline. Everything in that fight had been way too surprising.

The beginning had gone as planned, and they had even managed to chain him down with a string of control skills. That should have been that, but somehow, he had managed to cause an explosion of mana to come out of his body, which fucked up everything.

That explosion had given Caroline quite the impression. The raw amount of mana used in it was insane. What was even more insane was it being Jake who caused it. He was an archer, for god's sake. Where the hell had he gained so much wisdom? Based on that explosion alone, he might have even more mana than herself despite her being a healer.

The evasion-skill was also just pure bullshit, in her opinion. The speed of it was quite intense, combined with his speed making him far faster than pretty much anyone else in the entire tutorial.

But what was even more surprising was how he disappeared as he ran away. The Scout had been chasing the near-dead man but failed to return with anything. He had lost him close to the giant dome or barrier.

The Scout had tried to enter but had failed like all the others when he had tried, making it improbable that Jake entered there. And even if he somehow did go in there, no one knew what awaited on the other side.

After Jake escaped, she had tried to smooth things over with Jacob, but her first attempt had backfired hard when she tried to play innocent, acting like she didn't know the plan. Jacob wasn't stupid and saw through it quickly.

In retrospect, it was quite stupid to act ignorant, considering how she had fought and clearly coordinated with the others. Her small attempt to backpedal a little and claim that she had been fooled and had only aimed to capture her former colleague hadn't gone over well either.

All of it had resulted in Jacob ignoring her and even moved into Bertram's cabin for now. It was a small one the man had built for himself with his profession and was way worse than her and Jacob's current one.

She still believed everything could be smoothed over. Their relationship wasn't going to break because of one person coming between them. They were going to come out stronger on the other side and closer than ever.

It wasn't like everything was all bad either. Sure, Jake got away, but they managed to take out Hayden. The troublesome former colleague of hers had managed to poison him before he escaped leaving the man in quite the precarious situation when he found himself surrounded by Caroline, Richard, and many other strong fighters from their faction.

He had fought back but had fallen quite easily. Poisoned and in a weakened state after using that ridiculously powerful spear attack of his, he was stabbed from behind by Richard. They had even managed to take out a few of the men Hayden had brought along.

They did fail in killing Hayden's second in command, a powerful light mage and the one who had managed to turn them all invisible for the ambush, but they were satisfied nevertheless.

The war was back in full swing once more, but this time it was different. Hayden was dead, and the leadership structure of the other base was in disarray. They even had quite a few people switch sides since the fight.

Richard was preparing an assault to end the other faction once and for all, giving him full control of the only camp left in the tutorial. The attack would be sooner rather than later, not giving the other side enough time to reorganize, but just enough time for those who wanted to defect to do so.

Caroline cheered herself up a little as she made her way back to the other crafters. They didn't like what had happened but didn't protest much either. Most of them didn't exactly speak up either but stayed out of it as they had chosen to focus on their professions, mainly from a desire to avoid the violence otherwise permeating this tutorial.

On her way over to the other tailors, she saw the Smith doing his work. One of the few strong fighters who had refused to participate in the fight because he wanted to focus on crafting. With him was another one who hadn't attended. William.

The kid had come back only a few hours ago from who knows where, and after complaining a bit about missing the fight, had started doing some smithing. He seemed to still be a bit mad about not getting payback on Jake, but otherwise, he seemed calm enough.

However, if you asked William, he wouldn't describe himself as only "a bit mad". He was fuming. How unlucky had he been? By mere hours he had missed the fight. To make it worse, they had even failed in killing him, which meant that he was still out there.

William was also aware by now that he didn't need to wear his mask much anymore. Jacob had given him dirty looks, clearly showing he knew, and of course, his new partner Richard knew. He had already asked William to join him in the assault on the enemy base, one he would happily join.

In only a few hours, their assault would begin. The entire tutorial would be involved if one didn't count Jake.

The two factions had done an excellent job of gathering everyone up. The whole "with us or against us" mentality had done wonders to force any lone survivors or smaller groups into choosing a side or getting caught in the crossfire. Only a real freak like Jake could survive that.

As he did his work at the forge, the Smith approached him.

"How are you doing, kid?" he asked while stroking his beard, making William wonder how the hell it hadn't been burned off yet.

"Fine, just a bit annoyed they didn't get that Jake guy is all," William answered as he put on his fake smile.

With a nod, the man smiled back. "Come with me over to my lodgings for a bit. I have something to talk to you about."



William, a bit taken aback, subconsciously nodded his head. This was weird. But William didn't fear anything happening as he was more than confident in defending himself.

As they walked, William couldn't hold himself back from asking. "So... what is this about?"

"Just a discussion on the future," the man rather dismissively said. "We should talk in private."

Growing even more suspicious, William nevertheless followed. He was pretty sure the Smith had some inklings as to his true nature... but if he did, why would he ask him to meet in private?

Was this perhaps too risky? Should he just try and quietly have the man exit the base with him and dispose of him quietly somewhere?

No, that would only make him appear more suspicious. Richard wouldn't like that. He couldn't do anything stupid like that. Not yet.

Entering the cabin with the bearded man, William closed the door behind him as he asked. "So?"

"Patience," the Smith said as he took out a small disc of metal from beneath his clothes. "Wouldn't want anyone listening in now, would we?"

As he said that, a blue glow was emitted from the disc as William instantly jumped back and got ready to fight. However, nothing else happened as the light spread to the cabin's walls as it left a faint blue sheen upon them.

As William looked around, the walls, floor, and roof were also now covered in what seemed like blue film.

“No need to panic; it is just a sound isolation barrier,” The man said as he took a seat on one of the chairs. “This way, not a single word or wisp of mana gets out.”

“How did you do that?” William asked as he narrowed his eyes, still ready to strike at any time.

“A skill granted by my profession allows me to make small accessories like that. Didn’t manage to make this one until yesterday,” the Smith said with a small laugh.

“Back to my original question. What do you want to say? And why do you need this barrier to say it?” William asked.

“Oh, this barrier is as much for me as it is for you,” he laughed again. “We both have secrets we don’t want others to know.”

William, now thoroughly convinced that this man was on to him, prepared to strike just as he started talking again.

“And the reason I asked to talk to you is because of a mutual acquaintance of ours,” he said, as his smile broadened.

*Richard? No... Jake? Doesn't fit either,* William thought before just asking. “Oh, and who is this mysterious person then?”

“Not a person,” the Smith answered, “a god.”

## Chapter 56: Metal Savant

For a mortal to meet a god was far from an ordinary occurrence throughout the multiverse. Only the most extraordinary ones had the chance to interact with divinity up close. And even then, it was rare.

The tutorial, however, was as far from ordinary as anything gets. It was an event that affected every single living being in the entire multiverse. Not the tutorial itself, but why it happened; it marked the start of a new era as the multiverse expanded with the introduction of yet another universe.

Gods, among all, were the entities of the multiverse most involved with the tutorials. It was one of the few times where they truly moved with greed and desire. It was a time to

earn rewards otherwise unachievable for them - a chance to gain more power and influence.

The most significant way to get these rewards was through finding capable mortals among the new initiates. Finding them and making them into your follower. This was done through something like Jake's meeting with Malefic Viper in his realm. This also meant that Jake's experience of meeting a god wasn't unique. Casper had met one... and so had the Smith.

It was later than Jake, but he had shown great potential in smithing and was recognized by the system.

At least that is what the Smith was currently telling William. He told him of how he had met a god and had been granted a blessing along with guidance. Contrary to what William expected, he hadn't met Ferroras, however, but instead one of his fellow gods, one known as Camicus, the god of the forge.

"Sounds interesting and all, but what does this have to do with me?" William finally interrupted as he was getting tired of the long explanation.

"Ferroras, the god of iron, has taken quite a liking to you, kid," the Smith chuckled. "But apparently you rejected him or something?"

"I don't think I did?" he answered, actually being honest for once. He couldn't remember ever turning down a god, unless...

“I was told you had a class offered. One related to the god of iron,” The Smith explained. “You just didn’t pick it.”

William did recall getting a class with Ferroras in the name. However, it was honestly not that good and provided far worse bonuses than his current Metal Savant one.

Looking at his old system messages, he went back a long ass time before he finally returned to when he had his class evolution.

Metal Savant, he naturally already knew as it was his current class.

**Metal Savant – The Metal Savant stands among the top of geniuses when it comes to manipulating metals. Having shown extreme talent as a caster and as a manipulator of mana, you have started walking down a glorious path to power. The class is highly focused on metal manipulation and all magics related to metal. The class's nature is inherently offensive, leaving defenses up to the caster's skill, focusing on intelligence and wisdom. Your path has just begun, but you have shown yourself a true savant. Stat bonuses per level: +7 Int, +5 Wis, +4 Will, +2 Per, +6 Free Points**

The class was excellent, in his opinion. It had made him superior to every other survivor he met except for that dark star Jake. The stat bonuses were a straight-up quadruple compared to what he had before the evolution, going from 6 per level to 24. Most of his free points had gone into intelligence, but he also started putting quite a bit in vitality after his run-in with Jake.

As for the Ferroras class, he passed over... it was quite honestly terrible compared to what he got.

**Promising Mage of Ferroras – A mage of Ferroras showing great promise on his path to power. As a caster, you have made clear your ability to manipulate metal and mana itself, offering you a clear path to power. The class is highly focused on metal manipulation and general metal magics but is specialized in iron magic. The class's nature is balanced between defense and offense, making you a versatile fighter at both range and melee. Your future patron god Ferroras believes in your talent. Stat bonuses per level: +4 Int, +3 Wis, +2 Will, +2 Tough +1 Vit, +1 Per, +4 Free Points**

Everything about it was just worse. The descriptions were similar to each other as both of them were metal mages, but this one was just so much less impressive. William wasn't promising, he was a god damn genius. And that last sentence about his "future patron god believing in him" just rubbed him the wrong way. Reminded him of what that damn psychologist kept telling him.

The class also gave way fewer stats, only providing 17 per level. That was more than an entire basic caster class's worth of difference. William would have genuinely been an idiot if he had picked that shitty class just because some equally shitty god had attached his name to it.

"Well, yeah, I did get it, but I chose another one that I liked more," William explained, not showing any signs of going into further detail.

"What's done is done," the Smith answered. "But you did pick up a skill with his name attached later on, didn't ya?"

"I did. So what?"

“That is how you become attached to a god kid. At least partially,” The Smith explained as he continued. “Karma or something like that. Anyway, it means that the god is aware of your existence, and he wants to help you.”

“And why the hell would I become the follower of some god?” William asked dismissively. He had no interest in attaching himself to some wacky religion.

“Because you can’t win this shit alone, William,” the man answered. “Yet together, we can win this tutorial. I can craft things for you to make you far more powerful than before, and in turn, you can wipe out everyone else. Especially Richard.”

Suddenly William started paying far more attention. He knew how much of a difference strong equipment could make, and based on that isolating barrier; the Smith wasn’t entirely without talent when it came to crafting. Having his assistance would undoubtedly prove useful.

“Why Richard in particular?” William asked curiously. He wasn’t aware of any conflict between them.

“I didn’t enter this tutorial alone, you know? I came with my son and daughter in law,” The Smith said as his mood took a downward turn. “I promised to protect them. I tried to. We thought the nights were safe, but it turns out that was the time for the bottom feeders to come out. Richard and his folk disagreed with us three just sticking together. They killed both of them while I was away hunting during the night...”

“That sucks,” William said without even thinking. *Wait; what? Why does that suck?*

“Thanks,” the Smith smiled. “You know, my son was only around your age. Too early to get married, but they claimed to be in love, and who was I to stop them?”

Wiping a tear away that had appeared in the corner of his eye, he continued. “That is why I want payback on that fucker. I can fight, but I have always been a smith and not a fighter. I can’t win. But you can, William. My god has told me this is the way to fulfill my dream and guided me. I know you are far stronger than you let everyone know. Let me help you get even stronger.”

William kept his solemn expression, even though he deep inside thought how stupid this was. That fucking trapper Casper all over again... yet he didn’t think it was that stupid. He understood why the man wanted revenge for losing them... but he didn’t know why. Even Casper had begun to appear less unreasonable... *what?*

“Okay. But what do you need me to do?” William asked as he was trying to understand why he had all these weird thoughts. He was experiencing thoughts he couldn’t understand...

“I need you to find the resolve to do whatever is necessary. You have to be willing and able to kill. Not just beasts but humans too,” The man said as he sighed. “I know it is unfair of me to ask of you, but I beg you.”

The Smith’s face was solemn as he looked at William with an apologetic gaze.



William looked a bit at him. He felt like agreeing, but he had an agreement with Richard already. By all accounts, the camp leader could offer him more benefits than the lone smith. Yet... he agreed.

“Fine... but how?”

“Come,” the Smith answered as he stood up from the chair, “join me at the forge.”

With that, the man waved his hand as the floor of the cabin split open, and a furnace appeared. He summoned a forge and a hammer, along with a bunch of different ingots of metal out of nothing.

“A storage skill,” the man answered before William could ask, “only works with items related to smithing, but it gets the job done.”

Standing tall, he looked William in the eyes. “Now, time for us to get you ready for the big battle.”

Jake climbed the hill as he got higher and higher. He avoided all the beasts he could as he had no intention of getting into any melee brawl for now. Basic Stealth, while undoubtedly a skill he didn’t notice often, still proving itself useful. With it being night, there were plenty of shadows around to activate his bracer's bonus effect.

Sneaking up, he soon found himself at a crevice. He called it a crevice, but it was more like an immense valley in between two mountains. He had to admit that he had

underestimated the size of the inner area by quite a bit. Sure, it was about the same size as the entire outside area in pure square kilometers, but the big difference was in verticality.

This area was filled with mountains, crevices, and valleys, the tallest mountain in the center of the area upwards of a kilometer tall. While that didn't sound like too much, one had to consider that the mountain had no top but looked more like volcanos. As in, it had a hole on top.

Something the three other mountains he could currently see also had in common. Hopefully, they weren't volcanos, though. He didn't see any smoke coming out of their tops, but then again, he was pretty sure that was just something that happened in movies and cartoons.

As for the type of beasts in this inner area... raptors. A whole lot of raptors. They seemed to be the primary enemy and came in all kinds of colors. A few other dinosaur-like beasts also roamed about, but the vast majority were raptors.

However, the raptors only occupied the open area on the mountains and sometimes between mountains, but they mainly appeared as 'filler' beasts. In the crevices, like the one Jake was currently overlooking, the biodiversity increased tremendously. The world below the cliff seemed like its own entire world.

Pulling out his bow as he observed the first beast he saw roaming about below. It looked like an evolved version of the badgers found outside in the forest from where he stood. His high perception allowed him to see the beast clear as day. Not to mention Hunter's Sight improving his eyesight significantly.

Another difference between this area and the outer one was the behavior of the beasts. Here they didn't go into that weird comatose state during the night but instead continued milling about. Nocturnal animals like the badger actually got even more active during the night.

Taking out an arrow, he grabbed the arrowhead with the palm of his hand as he channeled Blood of the Malefic Viper to turn his blood into a toxin. Allowing the arrow to cut into his hand, he thoroughly soaked it in his blood.

After the fight with the survivors, he was starting to run a bit low on poisons. He had started throwing them all around him during the battle, wasting most of them as they harmlessly broke against ground or trees. Heck, despite throwing so many, he only got a single kill as healers were present on the battlefield. Coupled with people seemingly being aware of his use of poisons. Thanks to that William fellow, no doubt.

Shaking his head, he got back to the matter at hand as he nocked the blood-soaked arrow. Drawing his bow, he started charging a Powershot as he traced the movement of the beast. After about 10 seconds, he released the string to an explosion of force as the arrow was released and flew towards the still unsuspecting badger.

The poor beast didn't know what had hit it before it suddenly got slammed by an arrow that completely disintegrated as it hit its back. The poison proved to be thoroughly unnecessary as the kinetic force behind the arrow alone smashed the beast's insides into an unrecognizable mess.

The beast was dead pretty much instantly, and what little vitality remained in it was quickly snuffed out by the poison that, together with the arrow disintegrating, had been spread all over the broken form of the beast.

The notification confirmed the death as he felt the level-up.

***\*You have slain [Venomfang Badger – lvl 48] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 56000 TP earned\****

***\*’DING!’ Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 26 - Stat points allocated, +4 free point\****

A level 48 beast one-shot by him. He didn’t know if he was overpowered or what, but it sure as hell seemed extreme. Then again, he didn’t have others to really compare himself to. Though based on that spear attack from the fire caster, he too could likely reproduce the result. One also has to remember that the only reason why he could channel Powershot for so long was due to his high defensive stats.

Sitting down, he relaxed his numb arm as he allowed it to slowly recover. While he could kill a beast many levels above him in a single attack, it didn’t come easy. His stamina expenditure was insane, and the strain on his arm also got bad enough that he even lost health points during the charging of the shot.

He knew ten seconds was too much, but he was still testing. He would improve it slowly and find the perfect balance. Between rotating stamina potions and firing arrows, his hunting speed should be extreme if his theory was correct. And whenever he did get too low on stamina, it would just mean a great chance to make a few more potions and maybe even a concoction of poison or two.

As he relaxed, he thought over his plans, as he also pondered other exciting parts of the tutorial.

The number of tutorial points per kill also seemed to go up two thousand per level for all beasts above level 25. Based on the raptors, the boar, and the badger that Jake had just killed, that is. He still had no idea what use exactly those points had. According to the description of the tutorial, they would likely show their worth whenever the tutorial ended.

Getting up, he exited his thoughts as he saw other badgers had started gathering around the corpse of their fallen comrade. Taking up his bow once more, he massaged his shoulder and cracked his neck as he prepared another poisoned arrow.

It was time to get this hunt started for real.

## Chapter 57: Metal & Nature

The inside of the cabin was far too hot for William, and yet he couldn't make himself look away. With every swing that brought the hammer down and every spark released upon impact, he got more and more entranced.

The Smith had been planning all of this for a long time. He was currently doing the finishing touches on his magnum opus with vigor and skill that William could only sigh in admiration at.

He was making what looked like a breastplate at first sight, but if one looked closer, it could be seen that the shape was slightly off. This piece was only part of the final product,

after all. A single layer of the armor that would be combined with the rest upon completion.

William's greatest weakness was, without a doubt, his defensive capabilities. While he could kill almost anything in moments, the same was true for himself, being killed in return. The fight with Jake was a great example. A single cut and he had nearly croaked.

The Smith was aware of this weakness. Or he at least had assumed it was so. What he was making was not just a chestplate, but an entire set of armor. The metal looked like silver but based on how hard the man was hitting it, and how little it gave away, it clearly was something else.

He wanted to ask but based on the man's facial expression; he seemed to be in deep concentration. William had quite a bit of insight into metals due to his class's nature, and he could nearly see the mana and stamina oozing out of the man as it entered the armor. But what was even more impressive was how easily the armor absorbed everything.

When he injected mana into metals to attune them to his use with his manipulation skills, it usually came with a lot of waste. Especially if he had to take control of metal, he had not used before. But this armor greedily took in everything like a famished man at a feast.

He briefly considered it worth killing the man just for the metal alone, but for some reason, the thought just felt... wrong.

Wiping the sweat off his brows, the Smith smiled at William as he summoned another piece of the final armor as he started attaching them together. With his hammer raised once more, he continued the work. It looked simple, almost comically so, but William

could see the intricate patterns in which the mana moved through the hammer as it entered the armor with every hit.

Hours passed, and even though it had been so long, neither of them felt the passage of time. William was too engrossed in the creation process while the Smith was wholly absorbed in his work.

Nobody came to disturb them during this time. Everyone was busy preparing for the final fight with the now-dead Hayden's faction. With the isolation barrier in place, the cabin's intense creation process didn't make any disturbances to outsiders either.

Finally, the Smith breathed a sigh of relief as he put the hammer down. Taking the completed piece off the anvil, he smiled in satisfaction as he started cleaning it. William wanted to jump forward and grab the armor but decided against it. It was his, to begin with... but it felt wrong to take it before the Smith gave him permission to.

With a nod, the man finished cleaning the now shining silver armor. It looked like only a piece of plate mail that only covered the chest. It was solid but looked easy enough to move around in. But of course, William knew it wasn't so simple. The Smith had attached several pieces of armor to it. Parts now seemingly integrated into the plate mail - a complete set of armor covering one from head to toe. Helmet, leg-guards, bracers, gloves, all of it had been melted into this final piece of armor.

This clearly showed how prepared the Smith had been. All of these were made from the beginning. He only had to do the final part. And for some reason, he had wanted William to bear witness to this last part of the armor's creation.

Placing the now finished armor on a table, he called over the young man waiting in the room with him.

“Come over here, kid,” The bearded smith laughed. “Check out the armor. Not bad, eh?”

Not hesitating, William went forward as he identified the armor.

***[Expanding Blessed Mithril Armor (Rare)] - An expertly crafted full suit of armor created by a skilled smith pouring in all their talent. Reaching a high rarity, if barely, this achievement has been achieved not through intricate enchantments but through pure strength of the materials used and the craftsmanship required for its creation. Extremely high ability to absorb and store mana. Enchantments: Expanding Armor. Kinetic Force Diffusion.***

***Requirements: lvl 25+ in a humanoid race.***

William couldn't help but be impressed and yet slightly disappointed at the same time. He had hoped for stats or something, but it sure was powerful. What he didn't understand was what the Kinetic Force Diffusion did.

“What is that Kinetic thing about?” William asked the smith, who, in turn, was closely observing him back.



“Something you sorely need is what it is,” The Smith laughed. “It does so you won’t get turned to mush inside the armor when a guy hits you with a big hammer or something like that. It disperses the force throughout the armor’s surface instead of a single point, effectively allowing the armor to absorb more of the blow.

“In other words, it does so even someone like you can take some hits,” the Smith finished explaining.

With wide eyes, William did a complete 180 with his disappointment. That sounded damn overpowered. Of course, he didn’t know precisely how effective it was, but it sure as hell made the armor way better. He could easily see himself get killed by substantial impacts if he didn’t have it.

“So, are you satisfied?” The Smith asked as he smiled at the young man.

“Satisfied for sure!” William smiled back. Not the fake smile he was used to but a genuine one. This armor was well worth the wait. He felt... grateful.

William hadn’t had that thought with anyone else in this tutorial. But for the first time, perhaps the first time in his life, he felt indebted to someone. He felt like he owed the bearded man something. For him to possibly be at least a bit the person, the Smith believed him to be.

“I am happy to hear that,” the tired crafter said, as he handed William a plate of metal covered in cloth. “I have left some information on this for you... it’s about the war and the armor and what I hope for you to do. Open it when we’re done.”

As he said, he had a sad glint in his eye for a second before continuing. “Now... for the second part.”

The hunter was faster than thought possible by any pre-system human as he sprinted up the mountainous path. Despite his speed, however, what chased him was faster.

No higher than up to his waist, the small beasts zoomed up the path as they crossed several meters with every footfall.

Their sharp teeth all dripped with acidic spit, making sizzling sounds whenever it hit the ground during their chase.

The hunter still managed to stay ahead as he turned into a shadowy form and flew forward, avoiding their assault. The second he landed, he turned around as he fired an arrow hitting the small beast, making it fall to the ground.

The wound left by the arrow quickly started festering and rotting as the beast thrashed in pain and confusion. The other creatures simply ignored its death-throes as they leaped over the soon-to-be-dead comrade of theirs.

The beasts were relentless. Relentless and numerous.

They had started chasing Jake nearly half an hour ago after he sniped a big buffalo-like animal. The beast had managed to survive the Powershot and had promptly charged at him. Jake had believed himself to be safe considering the nearly 100-meter tall cliff that he stood on as he shot at the beast below.

Oh boy, had he been wrong! The beast just started literally running vertically up the wall. It was honestly one of the silliest things Jake had ever seen, but sadly he had been too occupied not getting smashed by the massive beast to appreciate the comedy.

The fight had been rather long and only ended after he managed to mount the beast while injecting the Malefic Viper Touch.

He had won the fight, but it had made quite the spectacle - a spectacle that had attracted a few of these pests. To his dismay, the first one who saw him started making loud shrieking noises, which attracted even more of the damn things.

They were small green raptor-like animals, the size of golden retrievers. But they were incredibly fast and agile while also having highly toxic bites. Jake could handle being bitten as the poison didn't really affect him due to his Palate of the Malefic Viper, but it still hurt like hell.

He had already killed more than ten of them, and yet five still chased him. The buggers were nothing but determined, at least.

Shadow Vaulting once more, he managed to slip away from the two that had gotten closer as he landed another poisoned arrow on one of the beasts, making it tumble to the ground.

In return, he got four spits of acid his way fired by the other small dinosaurs. The speed of the liquid was too fast for Jake to avoid as he simply covered his head and let it rain down on him. It did hurt a bit, but it honestly wasn't that bad.

It had to be said that the poor beasts were incredibly poorly matched against Jake. Their power focused on the use of acid and poison, two things Jake had significant resistance to. At the same time, they didn't really have any particularly strong poison resistance of their own.

Their speed was impressive, and they had dodged a majority of Jake's attempts to strike back, but in the end, it was a battle of attrition.

Jake was able to take the buggers down in one shot, while they could barely harm him. Their damage came through the venom excreted through their bites, which in the end only helped Jake recover a bit of mana every time they took a bite out of him. He couldn't just tank their attacks, but he could easily handle their occasional strike that landed.

Which was why it only took a few more minutes before the last beast was dead on the ground. When it was down to two of them, Jake didn't bother dodging anymore as he simply met them in melee. Getting hold of them one by one, he used Touch of the Malefic Viper to take them down swiftly.

Exhausted from the chase, he lay down on the ground as he stared up at the sky. Another reason he had switched from using his bow was slightly more embarrassing... he had run out of arrows.

Despite having two quivers, his starting one, and one taken from the archer who was with the nature warrior, he had used all the arrows in both of them. Mainly because of the damn beasts constantly dodging him.

If he found another upgrade token, he, without a doubt, would want to upgrade the quiver. It should also help make his arrows better, making them not always break whenever he shot them. Even now, they often broke when he hit a beast.

Speaking of the quivers, he took the one he had stored in his spatial necklace out, as he started injecting mana into it along with the quiver on his back. Another perk of being better at handling mana was not making direct skin contact with an item while injecting mana. Though it did make it way faster and more efficient.

As he relaxed, he started going through the fight. In the end, the battle had been rather fruitful. Opening his notifications-menu, he saw that he had gotten two whole levels from the struggle with the dinos and the buffalo. The dinosaurs' levels weren't that high, but he had killed quite a number of them.

***\*You have slain [Acidtooth Compsognathus – lvl 42] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 44000 TP earned\****

The highest leveled one had only been 42, with the rest of them being between 38 and 41. But the experience had gotten him to the next threshold nevertheless.

***\*'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 30 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

**\* Ambitious Hunter class skills available\***

He was excited to finally get to some new skills in his class. While he had technically gotten Hunter's Sight and Big Game Hunter, the first one was just an upgrade to what he already had, while the other was passive. He had felt that ability during his fights. It was subtle, but he did feel like he got slightly faster and stronger whenever he fought beasts of a higher level.

If he weren't perceptive, he wouldn't have noticed it or just brushed it up as adrenaline or something like that. Not that he knew if that chemical compound even had any effect or was even a real thing of consequence after the system and stats became a thing.

As was customary by now, he started going through the skills one by one. The ones before he evolved his class were still available save for a few exceptions. Some of them clearly because they had upgraded versions available on the list below.

The first skill was entirely new, however.

***[Basic Nature Affinity (Inferior)] – One with his surroundings, the Ambitious Hunter finds inspiration and solace in nature itself. Grants the hunter the nature-affinity. Allows the hunter to change his energies into one with nature-affinity, granting it slight healing and regeneration properties. It also allows the user to absorb mana of the nature-affinity more easily.***

This skill was his first time encountering an Affinity skill. He knew this type of skill was prevalent among many mana-users throughout the multiverse who wanted to use a kind of mana they didn't have a natural affinity to.

As for the skill itself, it held quite a bit of attraction to Jake. But it was still in the area of only being 'a bit'. Everyone held natural affinities by default, and from the sword earlier, he more or less confirmed that he didn't have the nature-affinity.

An affinity skill wasn't an active skill. It would allow the user to change the property of the energy, but that was about it. Jake could already use his mana currently, but not that effectively quite yet, as he was still practicing and improving. His little explosion of mana during the trap was a great example of this.

Mana could be used for pretty much anything. Nature-affinity mana was just another subcategory of a type of mana. Jake had even read that if one becomes sufficiently skilled in a kind of magic, their type of mana could change, so the status window started showing "nature mana" instead of just mana. While this would undoubtedly limit the individual in many ways, it would also significantly empower whatever used nature mana.

The skill would also open Jake up to many new skills when he reached level 40. There was even a chance that the affinity skill itself would come with another skill, though he doubted it.

But while the skill would open a lot of doors, it would close far more. It wouldn't make acquiring other, more opposing affinities impossible, but it would make it astronomically more difficult. In other words, he just didn't feel like committing to a path currently. He was also afraid if it would have any adverse effect on his alchemy.

While he knew it likely wouldn't hurt it, probably even improve his skills in making potions, he did have a lingering fear it would adversely affect his poison concocting. It was just a little fear, but his intuition advised him against it. And if he had learned one thing, it was to trust his instincts above anything else when it came to decisions like this.

With all that in mind, he moved on to the next skill.

## Chapter 58: Herrmann Schmidt

Jake moved on down the list of skills, and he had to say that the second skill was a bit more... traditional.

***[Piercing Arrow (Common)] – The first strike is often the most important when hunting. Grants the hunter the ability to infuse an arrow with energy to increase its penetrative power. Increases power depending on stamina expended. Adds a small bonus to the effect of agility and strength when using Piercing Arrow.***

This skill was also fascinating, and it would likely synergize incredibly well with Powershot too. But did he genuinely need a more powerful opening shot and more preparation for now? Would his arrows even be able to handle the skill, or just break apart?

If the skill said that it conjured an arrow, he would be far more excited about it. Many skills had to do that, but this one clearly didn't.



Assuming he did get the skill to work correctly, it would bring his opening attack to a ridiculous power-level. It was already quite silly with Powershot and his poison alone, but coupled with this... perhaps he could even have killed that giant buffalo.

Postponing the decision, he moved on to the next one. It was one of the skills that had gotten an upgraded version.

***[Hunter's Tracking (Uncommon)] – The hunter does not sit silently in his lodge but actively hunts for his prey. Unlocks proficiency in tracking down prey based on limited clues left behind. Also allows the hunter to more easily identify characteristics of the game, including mana signatures and aura. Adds a small bonus to the effect of perception while tracking.***

This had been one of the skills he'd wanted back at level 5 in the early days of the tutorial. He had chosen Basic Stealth back then instead, a decision he hadn't felt any regret towards, but he did have moments where being able to track people would be useful. Such as when he was searching for his colleagues.

In hindsight, however, perhaps it was good he hadn't been able to track them down earlier. If he hadn't leveled up and acquired Shadow Vault, he would undoubtedly be a dead man by now.

If he thought about the current benefits the skill would provide... it was somewhat limited. It was the type of skill you hated not to have when you needed it, but rarely found yourself in a situation where it was actually necessary.

But even more importantly... Jake felt like he could learn a lot of what the skill did by himself. He was already starting to get a basic understanding of recognizing energy given

off by others. He also had his Sphere of Perception, which allowed him to quickly search an area far more effectively than he ever could with his eyes.

Instead, he would try and get a skill that did something he was incapable of, something that did something impossible to learn for the current him.

Sure, the skill would still be beneficial even if he learned everything himself merely due to the stat effectiveness increasing effect, but he honestly felt it wasn't worth it. So he moved on.

***[Hunter's Trapping Expertise (Uncommon)] – The Hunter has many tricks hidden up their sleeve and are not limited to merely facing their prey in direct combat. The Ambitious Hunter instead uses the materials found during his hunt to improvise and create traps to get an edge. Unlocks proficiency in creating traps and tools associated with traps, along with knowledge of how to use them. Adds a small bonus to the effectiveness of stats based on the nature of the used trap.***

This skill was very much like the prior one, as in another upgraded skill that was more focused on granting knowledge and know-how than actual abilities. He wasn't a fan of it. He didn't exactly plan on going around placing traps anyway.

He preferred to take a more... active approach. He liked to be the hunter, not the hunted. Instead, he would rather strike with a fast and deadly blow rather than sit back and wait patiently for his enemy to slip up. For pretty much the same reasons as the prior skill, he skipped over this one too.

***[Splitting Arrow (Uncommon)] – One arrow becomes many; one fallen prey becomes a field of death. Fire an arrow that splits into several copies while in flight. Each arrow***

***strikes with the power of the original. Adds a small bonus to the effect of agility and strength when using Splitting Arrow.***

This one was a bit like the first Piercing Arrow, aka a skill that had an active effect, but he instantly liked this one far more.

Perhaps he was still quite biased due to the previous fight, but having some area coverage would be very useful. Sure, the damn beasts could dodge one arrow, but could they escape five? Ten?

Just like with Twin Arrow, he still had the consideration if his poison would work with it. It said that it would make an arrow that splits and strikes with the arrow's original power. Did that include poison?

He couldn't precisely use logic to figure it out. This was quite literally the creation of matter itself. Making something from nothing. Sure, it did require energy from him, but it was still matter-creation.

Speaking of Twin Arrow, he was pretty sure this skill was an upgrade of that. They were incredibly similar, but this skill allowed him to make more than a single copy.

Overall, he had five skills that he considered. He did briefly look back at Active Camouflage but decided against it rather quickly. Much like the trapping skill, he preferred to move and chase down his enemies rather than sit in ambush.

The Piercing Arrow was also eventually ruled out. He didn't need anything more to prepare for his first strike. He already had Powershot and all his poisons. What he needed instead was something to help him during actual combat.

So, In the end, it came down to Splitting Arrow or Basic Nature Affinity. Both of those would help him a lot here and now. Nature Affinity would surely help him survive this mess and synergize well with his already high vitality and mana pool, as it would likely open up possibilities to use his mana more actively.

It naturally also reminded him of the warrior with the Aspiring Blade of Nature class. Thinking back, that man was still among the strongest survivors he had met during this tutorial. While he did seem weaker than both the spear-wielding fire-guy, Richard, and William, he was undoubtedly strong. His defensive powers at least were spectacular, easily blocking Jake's arrows with his energy alone.

He hadn't been using nature mana, however. It was instead stamina, or inner energy, infused with nature-affinity through some skill. *Wait*, he thought. Couldn't he use his stamina for something other than his active skills? If he could use it to enhance himself like the warrior...

Why couldn't he? It was clearly stamina the warrior had used. Sure it had a nature-affinity... but what stopped him from just doing the same thing with his unattuned energy? He could do so much with mana without any skill attached to it; why not stamina?

With the epiphany, Jake completely forgot the skill decision and even dropped the quiver he was still holding in his hand conjuring arrows.

Sitting down, he entered meditation as he allowed the inspiration to wash over him.

“William, can you promise to fulfill my wish? To avenge my family?” the Smith asked in a solemn tone.

“Of course, I already promised you...” William nodded. He owed him that for helping him, right? The Smith had done far more for him during this tutorial than Richard or anyone else. He had helped him learn to smith, patiently guided him, and now he was even making this armor for him. He *felt* like he owed it to him.

“Thank you,” the Smith smiled as he went over to the armor and placed both hands on it as he turned to William with a sad smile. “My son was named Gunnar Schmidt, my daughter-in-law Karin. She was pregnant with my grandchild to be-”

William suddenly got an awful feeling as he heard the man talk.

“-Please fulfill my final selfish request of keeping their memory alive.”

A glow started to encompass the man as he kept eye contact with William. The young caster wanted to stop whatever he was doing but found himself unable to act.

“Farewell, my young friend. May you find happiness in this new world, and finally come to understand yourself.”

With those words, an explosion of mana came out of the man as it entered the armor. But soon, other energies began coming out too. First, his stamina started pouring out, followed by his vital energy. Every last ounce of energy flowed through his hands and into the now also glowing armor.

“Stop it!” William finally managed to yell as he stepped forward. He didn’t know why. He couldn’t understand it, but he didn’t want the man to die. *What the fuck is wrong with me?*

But it was too late as the final mana and stamina left the man. With only his health points being poured out. It was not just his health points disappearing, but his very life source itself. His already slightly graying hair turned completely white as his complexion withered.

The otherwise powerful muscles and healthy skin turned white, thin, and sickly. The Smith aged decades in seconds, leaving William completely unable to help or do anything.

As the final vestige of energy left, so did what life remained in the Smith... no Herrmann Schmidt.

He had told his name to William a long time ago... yet it was only at this final moment that he remembered.

At this point, William was dumbstruck. The seconds passed by as Herrmann's now withered corpse still stood with its hands on the armor. The armor itself had lost a lot of its shine, now no longer silvery but looking more like regular steel.

William, however, didn't care much for the armor currently. He just stood there frozen as the wheels in his head spun at high speed. He was confused, angry, shocked, but most of all, he felt a sense of... loss.

Snapping out of it, the young man walked towards the corpse. He was unsure what to do when he finally stood right before it. Was he supposed to move him? Would he have wanted William to do that? And when the hell did he start caring about what other people wanted?

Gathering his courage, he moved his hand towards the corpse, attempting to move it to the bed or something. But the second his hand touched him, the entire corpse turned to dust and fell to the ground.

Shocked once more, William stepped back in fright as he noticed something drop on the floor in front of him. Water.

Moving his hand to his face, he felt the liquid coming out of his eyes. He was crying. *Why?* These tears were real. They were real, and he didn't like it. Didn't like it one bit.

It hurt. Something in William's chest hurt a lot. It wasn't physical pain, but something else. He hadn't ever felt that before. When he remembered the old smith that would have admonished him for acting like a scared cat when he jumped back earlier, the pain only worsened.

William wasn't stupid. He knew what this was. Something he believed to be a defect, a disease he had never been afflicted with more. Grief. Something his parents and his psychologists had hoped for him to start somehow understanding for oh so long.

And now, when he finally understood that emotion, he so dearly wished he never had. It was a disease, a weakness. It made one do stupid things. According to William's grand philosophy of life, feelings were the key to all things stupid in this world.

Emotions were what made the entire faction-war go haywire. It had been the death of Hayden, an otherwise major powerhouse in this tutorial, as he had foolishly rushed to their camp with far too few men after Richard had sent an archer to fetch him after Jake had made contact.

It had been the death of Herrmann.

Trying to push the intrusive thoughts out of his head, William tried to focus on something else. The most apparent being the armor in front of him. When he looked at it, he got an oddly familiar feeling as he used Identify on it.

***[Expanding Armor of Herrmann Schmidt (Epic)] – An armor made by the Prodigious Smith of Camicus, Herrmann Schmidt. All of his hopes, desires, and goals, even his very life, have been poured into this armor, giving it abilities far above what its materials or enchantments would indicate. Already powerful before the final sacrifice of the smith, the armor is now even more powerful. The armor's ability to absorb and store mana has been improved along with the materials' overall quality. Can only be worn by one chosen by the smith before his death. May his memory and Records live on through this artifact. Enchantments: Expanding Armor. Kinetic Force Diffusion. Grants the ability: [Legacy of Herrmann Schmidt]: Summon the Armory of the fallen smith.***



### ***Requirements: Soulbound***

The armor had... improved, but the description didn't make William happy at all. It only made the hurt worse. The smith had indeed poured all he had into it. This armor was his legacy, his final memory. All that remained of him now was this armor as even his corpse was only dust.

William knew that this armor belonged to him and him alone. It wasn't something that could be stolen or sold. It was his to keep until the day he died. It was the result of the man's desire for vengeance, along with his endless belief in William being able to carry out said revenge.

Emotions had killed Herrmann, but it had also allowed him to transcend his limits and create something he may never have been able to otherwise. He had managed to turn his emotions and obsessions into strength.

And William would carry those feelings. Those desires and goals. He had already decided to kill Richard before, but now... now he wanted to. Not because of experience points, tutorial points, or any other tangible benefits.

He wanted to do so because he had promised to. Because it was the final wish of his best... no, only, friend. He would remember his first real friend's son, Gunnar, and his daughter-in-law, Karin.

Placing his hand on the armor, he injected mana into it and found it flowed through the armor more easily than anything he had ever encountered. He instantly felt a connection with the armor along with the knowledge of how to use it.

Taking off the robe he still wore, he picked up the armor and put it over his head. It was light, far lighter than one would expect. Stats, of course, also helping. The metal felt warm, like the embrace of a caring father.

Nearly by instinct, he tried spreading out the armor as it slowly started sliding out to cover the rest of his body, almost as if it turned liquid. It first spread down his thighs and down his forearms, slowly taking form at William's own discretion. He felt that he could make it go far faster, but he enjoyed the feeling of the warm metal covering him.

Finally, the armor covered his hands and lifting his feet one by one; it protected them in boots. The final part was an open helmet that left his face still visible. Slowly he made the metal cover his face leaving only two small slits for his eyes.

But even those he ended up covering. If one looked at him now, it would look like a golem of steel. By design, William had made it entirely airtight. He could hold his breath for easily an hour with his improved stats, and even if he needed air, he could always open up small holes.

It had to be said that this wasn't all a function of the armor itself. Without Metal Manipulation, it wouldn't be feasible at all to alter the form of the armor. Yet it was so perfectly made for him that he could manipulate it oh-so easily.

With his skill to ‘see’ through metal, he didn’t even need holes for his eyes. The only scary thing was the sound. The sound of his own heartbeat as he stood encapsulated by the warm glow of the metal.

For the first time since entering the tutorial, William truly felt safe. He felt like he could take on anyone and anything.

Slowly he retracted the armor to once again only cover his chest. Putting on his robe once more, he covered his chest, entirely concealing his new armor.

Turning back to the clothes on the floor that was all that remained of Herrmann, William made a sad smile as the tears welled up again. Shaking his head, he instead looked down at the now cloth-covered plate mail. If anything indeed remained of Herrmann in this world, it would be the very armor he was wearing.

“I promise you, old man. I shall show them what the two of us are truly capable of.”

The final thing he did before exiting the cabin was to unfold the sheet of metal Herrmann had told him to look at after everything was over.

Unfolding it, he saw that it carried a voice recording of some sort. As he listened to the old man’s voice, he felt sad, but the message within made him smile a little.

It was only fitting that his first friend was a sly one...

## Chapter 59: Stamina

The warm flow went through his body as it quietly circulated through his system. The stream of inner energy was the natural cycle that was ever-present in any living being who possessed the energy and subsequently required it to function.

This was also why there was a passive drain of stamina whenever awake. Whenever the body was moved, a minuscule amount of this energy would get used. Of course, skills took far more energy as they easily drained hundreds of times the typical stamina consumption in mere moments.

Which was likely where the name stamina came from. It was the resource that allowed physical actions and skills.

It was very similar to mana in many ways. Except stamina was the ‘mana’ of the body. Much like a caster without mana would be unable to cast a single spell, a human without stamina would be unable to even move a finger.

The two energies were so similar in so many ways. Which made sense as there were ways to change one to the other. But if Jake could do so much with mana... why couldn't he do it with stamina? But instead of injecting it into an item, why not inject more of it into some regions of his body?

He could already kind of do that currently. Whenever he used Powershot, he infused his arms, shoulder, and upper body with incredible energy. Enough so that if he channeled for too long, his body started taking damage from it.

Whenever he used Hunter's Sight and Archer's Eye prior, he also did so with stamina.

With these skills, no conscious effort to move the energy was made by him. It was the skill and, subsequently, the system doing all the guidance. He simply had to think he wanted to use Powershot and focus on doing it. Yet he remembered the feeling he got while doing so.

Which was what he was currently trying to do. At first, he couldn't find this flow of energy coursing through his body, but eventually, he managed to feel the slight wisp of energy.

He focused on the feeling as he followed the flow. It was an odd sensation feeling the energy travel through channels in his body he was never aware of. Or perhaps they hadn't been there before the system reforged his body upon entering the tutorial for the first time.

If one were into eastern martial arts and medicine, one would call these channels meridians. Jake had no way to further learn about these channels' details, but he was nevertheless determined to discover the basics.

He did discover that these 'meridians' weren't actually physically present. They were more metaphysical channels within his body that could change and weave to deliver energy as they pleased. He also discovered that the core of it was around his heart... the same place he felt his vital energy exit from.

Time slowly passed as Jake sat deep in meditation. Every single shred of his consciousness was solely focused on the stamina traveling through him. Slowly he started to try and nudge it a little here and there. Speed it up, slow it down, even perhaps try and change the way it traveled slightly.

While he did find minor success in the first two, he got nothing when he tried to change the direction.

The energy was his own, to begin with, a part of his body. It was energy just like mana was. So he tried experimenting with treating it more like it was mana.

Attempting some of the methods he used when making potions, more specifically stamina potions, he started to find rapid progress.

The artificial sun had already come up once more at this point, as Jake finally opened his eyes.

Standing up, he started punching the air. Or shadowboxing if one wanted to get fancy with the wording. Partway through, he started speeding up slightly as he focused on enhancing himself. It was a small difference, but it worked.

He tried increasing it as he got faster and faster. His fists started whistling through the air as the power got higher and higher. As his movements began to look like a blur, he suddenly felt something was very wrong. He felt numb in his arms, followed by pain, not unlike when he used Powershot for too long. But this was far worse.

He tried to stop the flow and the influx of stamina but found himself unable to. The speed stopped increasing, and he kept boxing, needing some kind of outlet for the energy.

The veins on his arms started bulging and turning red, his fists moving despite Jake trying to stop them. By now, he was entirely out of his stupor and discovered how utterly stupid he had been. He had focused so much on being able to do it and not at all on how to stop.

Finally, the flow reached a crescendo as both his arms suddenly burst open like they were overinflated balloons. Blood spewed everywhere as he screamed out in pain, falling backward unto the ground.

The stamina consumption had stopped, no longer having a medium to travel to with his arms no longer being there.

Below his shoulders, he now only had two small stumps left. The pain was nearly unbearable, but Jake managed to summon a healing potion from his spatial storage, as he somehow managed to uncork it and empty the small bottle down his throat through the use of mana strings and his teeth.

He felt like an idiot as he lay on the ground. He had believed himself to be on to something genuinely remarkable. And while he kind of had, it at the same time was perilous to play around with. He couldn't help but laugh a bit to himself. Within such a short period, he had managed to lose three arms, counting the one he lost to the raptors. Quite impressive.

He also found it absurd how little he cared about it. Before the system, losing an arm would be a lifelong disability. Now, he just found it a minor inconvenience as it took slightly longer to regrow an arm than heal an ordinary wound.

Looking at his health points, they had only decreased by a bit less than 1000 despite losing both his arms. An amount that was nearly instantly regenerated upon drinking the health potion earlier.

But he had learned something. His practice was not entirely useless. If he could control his inner energy a bit better, it should help his use of skills. Say, what if he tried to speed up the charging of Powershot by forcefully increasing the flow of energy?

One of the benefits of Powershot was the immediate release of energy whenever he let go of the string. All the inner energy stored in his limbs was released at once into a single devastating blow.

Compared to his disastrous shadowboxing earlier, where the energy just kept building up without any sign of stopping or outlet. He could let out a bit of energy with every punch, but far from enough.

It was a bit like having a power supply in a computer. While the power supply was technically drawing power from a source able to deliver far more energy than necessary, it would only take what was required and then deliver that to the other computer components where needed.

What he did before was to hammer two nails into a power outlet and attach two cables directly to his graphics card, frying it real good. Sadly for him, the body didn't have any natural breakers or security systems build in.



But at least it only targeted his arms. He could only dread what would have happened if he tried to speed up the flow in his entire body. While it would likely grant a significant increase in power, it would equally as likely result in a rapid decrease in being alive.

While the thoughts spun in his head, his arms were slowly regrowing. At the same time, the system popped up in front of his eyes.

***\*Warning\* Skill selection still in progress. Postponing or delaying your choice may lead to adverse effects.***

*Oh shit*, Jake thought, as he was reminded of what he was doing before his small moment of disastrous enlightenment.

Opening the menu once more, he subconsciously checked the list and was surprised to find another new option.

***[Explosive Punch (Inferior)] – A reckless strike may lead to an expected victory. Punch an enemy with extreme strength, dealing the same amount of damage to the enemy as well as yourself. Adds a small bonus to the effect of strength while using Explosive Punch.***

Reading it, he felt rather insulted. Yet it also helped confirm his suspicion that one could somehow unlock skills through their actions.

He did wonder why he hadn't seen anything related to his bloodline, though.

It provided at least two tangible abilities. Sphere of Perception as he called it, which of course, allowed him to 'see' everything in a sphere around him and the danger sense, which gave him a supernatural sense of how dangerous something was, or if something was dangerous at all.

These two were just among the more tangible benefits. The everyday help from his instincts, along with his intuition, both also did wondrous work.

And yet it didn't provide anything but the bloodline ability. Jake opened the window to see it to confirm and was a bit taken aback.

***[Bloodline of the Primal Hunter (Bloodline Ability - Unique)] – Dormant power lies in the very essence of your being. A unique, innate ability awakened in the bloodline of Jake Thayne. Grants the Sphere of Perception. Grants an improved sense of danger. Enhances all instincts and intuition. +15% to Perception.***

The description had changed. It hadn't been a massive change, but it had changed nevertheless. Looking at the log, he couldn't see the old version of it. But he could remember the wording quite well. It had merely said that it enhanced innate instincts, enhanced perception of his surroundings, and enhanced his perception of danger.

*Did the system just copy my thoughts?* he pondered as he kept reading the ability. The function of the ability hadn't changed, and he didn't feel any difference either. It was just

the wording. The wording used was the same terms he had made up on a whim to describe the ability more easily.

The ability had always been rather special. First of all, it was the only system message Jake had ever seen that mentioned his name. Even those that alluded to his name did so by addressing him. But this one clearly said that Jake Thayne was awakened, speaking of him in the third person. Making Jake wonder that if others somehow obtained this ability if it would say the same.

***\*Warning\* Skill selection still in progress. Postponing or delaying your choice may lead to adverse effects.***

*Yeah, yeah*, Jake thought as he dispelled the message that popped up once more to warn him of how much time he wasted just thinking about stuff.

In the end, he settled on the Splitting Arrow skill.

***\*Skill Gained\*: [Splitting Arrow (Uncommon)] – One arrow becomes many; one fallen prey becomes a field of death. Fire an arrow that splits into several copies while in flight. Each arrow strikes with the power of the original. Adds a small bonus to the effect of agility and strength when using Splitting Arrow.***

This skill would give him a more practical approach to handle crowds of enemies and provide an additional attack he could use during direct combat.

In the end, Basic Nature Affinity just didn't appeal to him that much. His intuition told him the same, and as he had just gone through, that one was good enough to warrant its own unique ability.

Feeling the knowledge enter his mind, he instantly wanted to try out the skill. Remembering his current lack of limbs, however, he sadly had to postpone it as he sat up.

The dead beasts were still all around him, and his sphere didn't pick up anything within it - nothing of importance anyway.

He decided to meditate once more to regenerate his stamina and mana faster. While his mana was pretty much full, his stamina was reduced to less than 30% after his battling and experimentation earlier. So calling his reckless use of stamina inefficient would be a colossal understatement, too, it seemed.

Jake focused on the vital energy during this time. Meditation had the considerable drawback of completely cutting off all senses in the body. Except for touch, that is, which meant that he could still feel the energy moving about as it reconstructed his limbs.

He didn't even attempt to influence it in any way. Perhaps he could have tried to speed up the healing process, but he decided just to let it do its work. He had done enough experimentation with the energy for now.

Learning from the movement, however, wasn't out of the question. This energy didn't move through any set channels but inhabited every single piece of Jake's body - his flesh, blood, bones, everything.

The vital energy-concentration in other parts of his body started gathering towards the two limbs as they slowly regenerated. Rapidly being restored by some unseen source around his heart at the same time.

The bone grew out as if it were a small tree slowly reaching towards the sky. The flesh was like the moss and bark growing on the tree as it slowly piled on top. If one looked from the outside, it would look like the small stumps gradually extended down his arms, as the ends of it seemed to ripple slowly. Disgusting, to say the least, but far above what any modern medicine could achieve.

It took a few hours before the regeneration finished. Jake's arms still felt weak, but they were nearly perfectly fine once more. As it wasn't his first time losing a limb, he knew that in just a few hours, they would be as good as new. Or, well, as good as old. He also found his bracers that had been blasted away and put them on again.

Having more spare time, he took out his mixing bowl from his necklace. No reason to slack off even if he couldn't fight properly.

Besides, he still had to replenish his poison storage at some point. His blood infused by Blood of the Malefic Viper was undoubtedly strong, but the common-rarity necrotic poison was more potent.

But even more importantly, his blood could only take on the necrotic properties. He still had other more acid-like poisons, hemotoxins, and he was even thinking of concocting some powder he could turn into gas.

He had held himself back from doing so before. He still had some moral inklings. Using poison mist or powder was no different from many modern chemical weapons. Something outlawed by every civil society, and its use was generally considered an atrocious war crime. As he had no way to control the poison mist or gas once released, he was very reluctant to use it.

Yet he was slowly beginning to get over some of those moral barriers now. If poison would help bring him such power... it was worth it. He still had his own morals, his own code. The weapon, no matter how despicable, was always just that: A weapon. His deployment of said weapon was the only thing worth considering.

The mixing itself was soothing, and he went on a bit longer than he anticipated he would. After hours, he was finally rewarded with a level.

***\*'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 46 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 38 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

Smiling, he enjoyed the warm flow of the stats. He had decided to try and get his profession to 50 before the end of the tutorial. He was pretty damn sure the skill offered would turn out to be useful, considering the epic skill he got last time.

Checking the tutorial panel to see his time remaining, he was a bit shocked.

## Tutorial Panel

**Duration: 22 days & 22:54:11**

**Total Survivors Remaining: 204/1200**

The number of survivors had dropped... significantly. As he had it open, he saw the number go down.

**Total Survivors Remaining: 203/1200**

*First time catching it*, he thought, but seconds later, it happened again.

**Total Survivors Remaining: 202/1200**

And again...

**Total Survivors Remaining: 201/1200**

**Total Survivors Remaining: 200/1200**

**Total Survivors Remaining: 199/1200**

*What the hell is going on?*

## Chapter 60: Idiots

A few hours earlier, while it was still early in the morning, the base was in full motion. The smiths worked overtime, the tailors doing the last work, and all the warriors readied their weapons and prepared themselves to make sure all their resources were fully replenished.

The order given was to march towards the now deceased Hayden's base only minutes from now. They had all expected the command to come sooner or later, but it nevertheless came a bit earlier than most would have predicted.

As for Richard himself, he was currently in the large cabin functioning as the headquarter of his base. With him were Caroline and three other influential members of his team. Notably absent from the regular group of leaders was Jacob, who had yet to soften up after the whole Jake debacle.

Richard didn't sweat it much. They still had more than three weeks remaining, and despite his anger, Jacob had always done his job. Not happily, but he did it. His sense of responsibility seemingly trumping his anger.



Looking around at the other leaders in the camp, he was quite satisfied with himself. He had chosen to have a leader from each starting class present as if to represent their faction. Caroline naturally was the representative of the smallest group, the healers. Warriors had been bundled into one, Richard taking charge of all of them, while the three others were an archer in the Scout, a caster who had recently been replaced by William, and Joanna representing the craftsmen and craftswomen.

His desire to conquer the base of Hayden was still being questioned even now. Especially by the middle-aged woman who saw it all as utterly unnecessary bloodshed.

Richard believed that the light-caster, and former second-in-command, of the enemy faction's remnants still wanted to fight. The caster likely thought that Richard wouldn't risk storming their somewhat fortified base, even with their advantage in numbers. It was illogical and unnecessary, just like the craftswoman said.

He would agree, if not for small detail.

### **Tutorial Quest: A Leader is born**

**Objective: Become the sole leader of at least 90% of the other humans during the tutorial.**

**Current progress: 57%**

### **Eliminate other leaders: 1/1**

The quest had been obtained on the second day of the tutorial. Before he had even properly established his camp. He had been surprised at the notification, but at the same time excited.

There is no way such a quest wouldn't reward something worthwhile. Of course, the only obstacle in his way had been Hayden. A man who, as the quest objective showed, also had the same quest as himself. Or at least the man had also been recognized by the system as a faction leader.

His aim was naturally not a measly 90%. He wanted to complete the quest with a 100% completion rate. The quest clearly said "at least 90%" which indicated rewards for having more. A bonus he would gladly claim.

All he needed now was to wipe out what remained of Hayden's goons and then hunt down that troublesome archer Jake, along with any other stragglers. Striking down any dissidents within his own faction shouldn't prove much of an issue, either.

Looking about, he saw all of the people as his skill made him aware of their loyalty. Many of the recent defects from Hayden's camp weren't considered loyal quite yet, but that was kind of expected.

Richard was also annoyed to see that William, that moron, was no longer considered loyal. He was joining their assault, however, so all was good. He would make use of the teenager to wipe out his enemies and then put him down.

Having concluded their meeting, and William confirmed his tactic, the five people exited the cabin as everyone except the craftswoman went towards the gate.

“Listen up, people!” he yelled as he made his way to the middle of the camp and stopped. “Hayden is dead, but his people remain, and I fear they thirst for revenge. We have given them the chance to step down, but they refused! Tell me, are we going to let them truly start another war again!?”

“NO!” he heard several yells from the group - his own planted people, along with a few others.

“Exactly!” he continued. “We should crush them before they gather themselves and attack! Show them that we aren’t afraid!”

Cheers sounded out as he smiled to himself in satisfaction. It was only a stupid act, but it had always worked to build morale and cohesion.

More and more people came to the middle of the base, as the nearly 200 people stood in front of him. Some of them weren’t combatants but had simply come to send off their friends, but most were there to join him in his conquest.

Seeing a figure in the front, the warrior smiled to himself - a young man with blonde hair and piercing blue eyes.

“William, I am happy to see you join us,” he said as he smiled at the teenager.

He didn’t fear William. Not in the slightest. The young man had shown himself to be deceitful and powerful. But he hadn’t shown himself to be foolhardy or overly stupid; he should know that Richard would only bring him benefits. He couldn’t imagine the caster turning on him any time soon. Purely from a pragmatic standpoint, then Richard was extremely favored in the coming battle, and for William to try something would be stupid.

“Will the Smith join us also?” Richard asked as he looked around.

“Sorry, partner, he isn’t a fan of stuff like this,” William answered, as he cheerfully laughed. “You know the old man cares more about smithing than anything else in this world.”

“A shame, his hammer would have been more than welcome,” Richard said regretfully. The Smith would have been a great asset, but then again, perhaps it was good to leave him behind. He was another of the unloyal subjects that Richard would turn or eliminate in time.

“But we have you here, so be sure to show us what you are made of, my friend” Richard laughed as he patted the young man on his shoulder. Feeling metal below the robe surprised Richard a bit, but he didn’t think more of it. He was a caster focusing on metal, after all.

William kept up his fake cheerful smile while he inwardly sneered - sneered, and seethed in rage. *Who the fuck does he think he is to call me a friend? That was only for Herrmann to do!*

Suppressing his emotions, something he never believed he would ever have to do, he followed the rest of the merry band as they made their way towards Hayden's old camp. William learned on the way that the light caster's name was Desmond. A soldier who was working under Hayden, who had exemplified himself during the tutorial.

A lot of defectors were more than happy with sharing every little tidbit of information they could. While no one knew it for a fact, chances were that some of these people were the ones behind the atrocities committed against their factions.

With that in mind, Richard believed they did this to get the other leaders as fast as possible in the good graces of himself, which was also why practically all of them had joined this attack. Besides, it gave him an excellent excuse to throw them all in the front.

William didn't care either. What faction you belonged to was irrelevant. Today would be a slaughter, with William happily taking on the role of the butcher. And he wasn't picky on what to put on his chopping board.

Less than an hour later, they finally stood within eyeshot of the wall erected by Hayden and his comrades. Walking closer, they stopped only 20 meters or so from the gate, as they heard yelling and confusion from behind the wall. They hadn't exactly been subtle in their approach.

“DESMOND YOU COWARD, GET THE FUCK OUT HERE!” Richard yelled as the sound boomed out. The volume far above what a human could ever do before the system.

No response came from the base, but a few people were peeking over the wall in shock and horror. After only ten seconds or so, Richards slim patience was spent as he opened his mouth once more.

“If you aren’t coming out,” he said as he walked towards the wooden gate, “then I am coming in!”

Raising his tower-shield, he pushed it forward as a shockwave shot out of the shield, easily smashing the fragile wooden gate off its hinges.

What met him was a beam of light, followed by a string of other spells as they bombarded Richard along with the other warriors to his sides.

“SHIELDS UP!” he yelled as they all raised their shields. Blue barriers appeared and enlarged in front of their shields, making an impenetrable wall, easily blocking all the spells and arrows.

“ADVANCE!” the warrior yelled next, as they all started marching forward in formation.

The people on the other side struggled as they slowly backed off and kept firing spells to no avail.

A few spells were thrown the other way, but the other side kept retreating as they clearly focused on defense rather than offense.

Richard was a bit confused at the response. It seemed chaotic and sporadic... yet planned. But he didn't worry much as he spotted the unique robe of Desmond among the retreating people. The caster was also clearly firing light beams here and there, though he seemed to be doing a rather half-arsed job as the spells were on the weaker side.

The advance was slow but steady, as Richard happily let the other side waste their mana. The shields currently deployed by him and the other heavy warriors were skills they had all learned at level 20. The shield barely consumed any stamina to keep active once deployed.

Everything was going far better as expected, though Richard was surprised at the lack of people. There were perhaps 40 people in front of him, even though Desmond should have more than a hundred. Did that many people desert or flee into the forest? Or...

Before his thoughts could go further, he heard an explosion from behind, followed by screams of pain and panic.

*Shit*, Richard thought, as he turned back. *What the fuck is happening?*

What Richard didn't know was that the man he was currently suppressing wasn't Desmond.

Desmond wasn't stupid or reckless. Hayden had never been the brain of their operation, especially not after his son died. He had been overly emotional and spontaneous, which was why Desmond had taken charge of most of their planning and management.

Which was also why he had more easily united the remaining survivors of their camp. Far more quickly than Richard predicted.

From behind the attacking force, the forest shimmered as dozens of people were revealed. Ironically, Richard had been struck by the same trap he had used against Jake.

Simultaneously, the plants that Richard had thought to be deserters turned towards the weaker casters as they charged towards them.

Sandwiched between the two forces, and with Richard having pushed together with a group of other warriors and elites, the mediocre fighters started a desperate struggle as they were beset on all sides.

While he had surely underestimated the enemy, Richard wasn't a total slouch, however, as he quickly remobilized his men as they charged backward once more to face the so-called 'deserters'.

Chaotic fighting ensued as the groups started clashing and mixing. Richard had issues trying to make it back towards Desmond as he had a mix of allies and enemies between the two of them, all fighting desperately.



It had to be said that the majority of the survivors were barely fillers, people who had barely managed to get their first class evolution, with even a few not having them at all. Most only had the basic evolutions, not offering them much power at all.

This meant that the truly powerful individuals who had gotten more powerful classes easily distinguished themselves.

A caster with a stone staff fired spike after spike into the masses, killing Richard's men one by one. However, he soon met his end as a glowing red arrow fired with a Powershot blew off his head, shattering the mana barrier he had hastily erected.

The one who had fired it, the Scout, didn't exactly have an easy time either, as he was cleaved in two by a two-handed blade as it descended from a warrior surrounded by weird energy giving off a deadly feeling. A warrior who soon found himself at the other end of a barrage of spells, tearing him to pieces.

Individual strength distinguished you, and naturally also made you an obvious target.

But not every such standout fell. The genuinely extraordinary, despite the many attacks coming their way, managed to prevail. Richard simply shrugged off most attacks or blocked them as he confidently rushed towards his enemies. Desmond also quickly blocked ranged attacks with a barrier of light or dodged away with an ability akin to Jake's Shadow Vault.

Caroline easily defended herself as several transparent barriers revolved around her. Other standouts were also around, such as a former light-warrior, who was now drifting around among the casters, cutting them down one by one.

Not everyone had an incredibly high vitality and toughness like Jake or powerful defensive techniques such as Richard and Caroline. Most were also used to fighting in tight-knit teams, using coordination and planning to take down beasts and other enemies.

This fight, however, was not one of planning or deliberation. It was a senseless slaughter, where cohesion and teamwork lost all meaning. The number of former allies felled by their friends was not just one or two, as big spells were flung out among the crowd.

The deaths piled up as the stench of blood permeated the otherwise peaceful-looking forest. The number of survivors dropped each second, as the weaker survivors quickly got thinned out by the more powerful. Casters were naturally the most vulnerable as they were the class with the lowest defensive capabilities.

Archers did a bit better due to their high agility as many of them fled to the outer area of the battlefield, taking up a position to shoot from there.

Healers were few and far between, but those around did manage to attain the closest thing to teamwork. With warriors on all sides, Caroline, as an example, easily kept herself and the surrounding warriors safe. Even finding time to assist Richard and some others here and there.

Warriors were the ones that shined the most in this mess. The melee brawl was their natural element; as they slashed and smashed with their weapons at anything they determined an enemy.

All the resentment that had been suppressed by framing Jake was now back with a vengeance. The anger and brutality revived with more force than ever before. Barely anyone had liked 'playing nice,' and now they could finally let loose.

Soon less than fifty people remained as the fighting slowed down. On one side stood Richard and more than 30 others, all but a few covered in blood and gore from the brutal slaughter.

On the other side stood a pale-looking Desmond, with a rapier-wielding warrior at his side. The warrior didn't look too good either, as apparent wounds were present all over his body.

Not that Richard and the dozen or so fighters at his side got off scot-free. But they had an advantage the other side didn't. Only a single healer remained, likely in the entire tutorial: Caroline. The passive aura given to all healers and her powerful skills from her class above level 40 replenished their side.

"Give up, Desmond, and you may still live," Richard said, as he smiled viciously. The results were clear, and he was the victor.

Briefly looking at the number of survivors, his grin only got bigger.

**Total Survivors Remaining: 108/1200**

He knew that everyone who wasn't here had to be back in his base based on a quick headcount.

"Just end it quickly," the caster said as he made a sad smile, looking somewhere or at someone behind Richard.

"With pleasure," Richard said as he walked forward, preparing to stab in the man.

Instead, he was met with an explosion of light as the ground shook. When the light died down, all that remained was the light mage's body, along with several of his dead comrades surrounding him.

And of course, Richard, who stood with a transparent barrier in front of him, with Caroline right behind, her hand raised as she channeled the spell.

"Fucking idiot," Richard chuckled as he walked towards the now even more injured warrior who had dropped his rapier.

"I agree," a voice said as the barrier in front of Richard shattered. Turning back in shock, he saw Caroline with her eyes wide as a spear impaled her heart from behind. To make it worse, everything around the wound started slowly turning into metal as her body looked like it rusted.

“WILLIAM WHAT THE FUCK!?” Richard yelled. Metal that looked like steel or perhaps silver covered the young man's entire body except for his face as he stood there. His goofy smile gone, and a level of hatred in his gaze Richard didn't know he could even display.

Instead of answering, William simply repeated Richard's own sentiment: “You are indeed all fucking idiots.”