

# THE PRIMAL HUNTER

## Chapter 71: Dream

Smiling in satisfaction, Jake got out two empty bottles. Usually, a batch such as this would quickly fill four or five bottles, but the first creation's output wasn't exactly good. He had taken a long time doing the crafting and had thus evaporated a lot of the concoction. But it was kind of expected, so Jake didn't think that much of it. It was a success, and that was the most crucial part.

Bottling it up, he identified the poison.

***[Hemotoxic Poison (Common)] – Greatly increases bleeding on infected entities and makes any injuries harder to heal. The poison must be introduced directly into the bloodstream to have any effect.***

It was literally the same description of the inferior-rarity version, save for it adding “greatly” at the beginning. But Jake could feel that it was quite a lot more powerful. The energy it gave off was palpable, as one should expect after expending more than 2500 mana during the concoction.

Not because the crafting process required that much typically, but because, once more, Jake had done it super slowly and inefficiently. Something that would surely improve as he got more practice.

By now, his armor that could be restored by their enchants had been repaired. His mana was low, and his stamina also wasn't full. He had even lost a few health points due to the toxic fumes released during the crafting process - a hazard of the trade.

Cleaning everything up, he gave one look at the Den Mother as it still sat unmovingly.

*Soon*, he thought as he smiled to himself.

Entering meditation, time passed as he slowly restored his resources. During meditation, all senses except for touch were cut off completely. He could still feel his and the energy moving within his body, but nothing outside of it. With his normal senses, that is. His Sphere of Perception was as always unaffected, and he had made it a habit to try and train it during meditation.

In the beginning, he could only see material things through it, but after the first evolution at level 10, he had started to also faintly feel the mana in the air.

It was only a slight nudge in the wind. When Jake focused, it was as if he could 'see' a faint mist covering everything. As he practiced using his mana, and as his alchemy improved with his mana control, so did his ability to sense it.

At all times, he could feel it around him. He could pull on it and attempt to bend it. He had tried a myriad of things, but so far, the only one he had ever really succeeded in was to weave his strings. It was one of the first-ever accomplishments he had with mana, and it

had stayed that way. But his limitation was that these strings had to be attached to his body. Something that shouldn't be necessary... in theory.

So he spent his meditation trying to do just that. Manipulate mana without touching it directly. His largest obstacle was to have the mana not simply scatter. If he made a string connected to his body, the moment he made it dislodge from himself, it would just get swept up. It was like it had no substance, so it just integrated back into the atmospheric mana.

As he meditated, the hours ticked by, and soon he started to feel a different kind of tired. His stamina was restoring, but he still felt more and more tired. No, exhausted had to be the word. An exhaustion one feels after being up for far too long, and the body finally putting its foot down.

Thinking about it... he had been awake for a long time. He didn't need as much sleep as before; that much was obvious... but didn't he need ANY sleep?

Meditation and stamina potions had kept him going for a long time. Likely too long. The problem was though... he didn't want to sleep.

Doing alchemy, practicing mana control, fighting, all of these were something to do. These things kept Jake's mind active. Occupied. It kept stray thoughts and worries away.

But if he slept, the floodgates would open. The last time he slept, he dreamt. Dreams that to him were nightmares. He saw his family, his friends, the ones in his life he cared about. The dreams only served as reminders of what he may have lost and what he didn't even know if he still had.

It has to be remembered that upon entering the tutorial, Jake's lowest stat was willpower. He had never been the strong-willed type. He was the type to focus on one thing and then become utterly devastated for a long time if it didn't work out.

When he had his accident that stopped him from doing archery, he was depressed for a long time. He never picked up any new hobbies but just wallowed in despair. It was only because he was set on the path of going to university by his parents that he recovered. He had a new goal. But he still never got seriously into any new hobbies again.

The same happened with his first relationship. After that, he had never dared to pursue a new one. The experience had scarred him, and he now hid away from it. And now he was doing the exact same thing.

He knew something bad had happened outside of the inner area, but he didn't want to go check. He didn't want to confront whatever it was. He preferred just to hide away and do his own thing. Fighting to the death was simple. He knew how to do it because the result of the fight relied on him in the end.

But if his family still lived... if his friends were in the only now dozens of people outside who still lived... he didn't know. It was not up to him.

He wanted to avoid anything outside of the one-mind track he was currently on, to put it in other words. He had learned throughout his life to do that wonderfully so. To focus excessively on one goal at a time and complete his set goal with excellent efficiency. It was why he was good at his job and why he was good at archery, to begin with.

Now, however, the distraction of sleep was upon him. He had managed to avoid dreams during the challenge dungeon somehow. He had slept then, but he had managed to dream of alchemy. To dream of his task. Something he feared he wouldn't this time.

Retreating even further, Jake entered into the tunnel connecting the two caves. Fighting the beast was foolish in his current state. He felt sluggish. Slow. He had to sleep, despite his desire not to do so.

Summoning the bed, he just threw himself on his stomach as his eyelids got heavier. The moment his body hit the sheets, his eyes closed, and the embrace of sleep enveloped him.

As his mind started resting, so did the chains he had shackled down his thoughts with. And once more, memories spiraled forth from his subconscious. A dream that instantly felt... wrong.

The dream this time was a memory. One that was depicting a period of Jake's life that was the darkest.

He was at the time living with a roommate while he went to university. They were friends from before and had signed up for university at the same time. To save money, they had decided to get a place together and share the rent.

It was only a small flat, but it was their flat. Everything was honestly fantastic. Despite a few hurdles at the beginning about who did the dishes and finally deciding to just get a dishwasher, their relationship only grew closer. Jake trusted his roommate with everything and believed that his friend trusted him back.

At the time, Jake had even managed to land a girlfriend. She was in the same faculty, and they had meshed well together. Neither of them were the overly social types, so they found happiness by meeting up and watching a movie, enjoying their solitude together.

Jake had two people he had let come close at university. Andrew, or just Andy, and Madeline. He was together with her for a little over two years, and things were also going great there. To sum it up, he had a close friend, a girlfriend, and things were just... great. At least Jake interpreted it that way... because he didn't want to deal with it being otherwise.

It all went wrong on one fateful day. Jake had been visiting his parents for the holidays and planned to stay with them for a few more days between Christmas and new year. But his mom convinced him to go back and spend some of the break together with his peers. Her thoughts had come from the right place, but the result was disastrous.

Jake had thought his roommate was out; he had said that he would be at his parent's until the next day. His girlfriend had said the same.

That day he got off the train and took a bus to their flat. He stopped by a small convenience store on the way to get some milk and other essentials on the way. He wanted to have it stocked up for when Andy returned. To be a good roommate.

With two bags, he waddled up the stairs like a duck. A big goofy smile on his face as he had bought things to surprise the two people he cared the most about from his university life. His plans for a nice dinner the next day were set, and he was excited.

Putting one bag down as he reached the door, he took out his key and unlocked it. It was evening by now, and the sun was already down. He had expected the apartment to be dark but found the light was already turned on at the entrance. *Weird*, he thought as he entered. *Andy must have forgotten to turn it off when he left.*

But that thought was soon expelled when he heard some muffled sounds. Someone was there, after all. Had Andy come back before time also?

He didn't think much of it as he went and put the groceries away. He was halfway when he noticed something off out of the corner of his eye. A blouse was on the couch. The one he had given Madeline for her birthday last spring. Not the best gift, but hey, she always complained about being cold.

This should probably have made him suspicious that something was wrong, but he once more chose not to think about it too much as he finished emptying the bags. She must have come by or something after he left and accidentally forgotten it or something.

After that, he went to take off his shoes to not dirty the place more than necessary. As he went to take them off, he noticed two pairs already being there. Andy's... and Madeline's. *What?*

A feeling started building in his stomach... a bad one. His mind was telling him shit was wrong. VERY wrong. But he kept pressing it down, as he kept making excuses. There had to be a logical explanation. Yeah, they had just both come back earlier than expected and decided to hang out a bit. Totally normal.

Jake, however, still couldn't kill the feeling. Looking at the door to Andrew's room, he decided not to postpone. The muffled sound continued as he slowly got closer. Putting his ear to the door, he was dreading what he would hear.

Luckily, what he heard was not what he had feared - a movie. He admonished himself for his stupidity and paranoia with a sigh of relief, as he no longer hesitated and opened the door with a smile. A smile that quickly faded.

Two people were lying huddled together on the bed. One black-haired man with a beard, and a red-haired woman. Both butt-naked. And both turning their head to Jake as he stood there looking like an idiot in the doorway.

Thoughts spun through his head as he observed them. No one spoke, as the silence was finally broken by Jake turning around and closing the door again.

He went and got his coat and shoes on once more and left the apartment without a word. He got on the bus once more and back on the train.

The entire journey, his face didn't change. The thoughts kept spinning. How could he be so stupid? Ignored all the signs for so long? He would lie to himself if he didn't hold any suspicions before. But he had trusted them.

Arriving at his hometown, he got off the train and back on another bus. His phone had several missed calls from both Madeline and Andy, but he ignored all of them. When he made it to his parent's place, his mother was, of course, surprised to see him after only a few hours. She didn't even get to ask anything before Jake broke down crying on the kitchen floor.



He missed the first month of that semester.

When he returned, he already had a new place. His dad had arranged movers to do everything for him. He acted as if nothing happened as he ignored both Madeline and Andrew.

Before the break-up, Jake was a middling student. Afterward, he soared to the top of nearly all his courses. Jake ignored anything and everything as he dived into his studies. He thought nothing of friends or love. That part of him was cut off from that point on, and it would take many years before a faint spark would reemerge.

Or that was what had happened. But dreams had a way of not being entirely accurate. Jake found himself back to after he had just discovered the two of them together.

As Jake closed the bedroom door in the dream, he went to get on his shoes and coat as he had back then. But instead of a jacket and shoes, he took on his gear - boots, cloak, bracers, rings, and necklace, along with his dagger and sword, and of course, his trusty bow.

He left the apartment like last, but this time he found 'Andy' in the hallway.

"Just going to leave like that?" he asked. He was still naked as if he had just teleported here from the bed. Yet on his face hung a smile Jake couldn't recognize. It felt... wrong.

“Yeah,” Jake answered, as he tried to walk past him, his face blank.

“Like you left Jacob and the others?” Andy asked.

“Yep.”

“Like you left the entire fucking world behind to go play hunter?”

“Exactly,” Jake answered as he turned back to regard Andy. By now, he was entirely lucid - the illusion of the dream broken. He was still dreaming... but he was aware. And he could feel it. The dunking of his heart, as the blood ran through his system. His bloodline and instinct both flaring up. His sphere was observing everything.

He felt the intent of the ‘Andy’ before him. Manipulation, something he would have fallen for so many times before when he disregarded his instincts.

“Not that it matters, Jacob will betray you like everyone else. Oh wait, he already has, hasn’t he?” the fake person before him said, still smiling creepily.

Jake shook his head. He felt what the being before him wanted him to do, and it pissed him off. He felt the thought of killing Jacob appear for a split second, but the way it occurred was too... unnatural. Whatever the thing in front of him tried clearly hadn’t

worked, but he didn't let it show. Why he wanted him to go back for Jacob wasn't relevant because this stupidity unfolding before him only made him reaffirm what he wanted: Power.

A being like the Malefic Viper could disappear for countless years, yet none would dare touch the core of his Order. Not because of respect, decency, or morals. But because of fear. A fear that the backlash would be far more than they could ever handle. A fear that untold power would descend upon them. A power that Jake desired more than anything.

He was no longer the man who would break down on his mother's kitchen floor at a betrayal. He was the man who would make the situation right.

If he had the power he held now back then, what would he have done? Spread tales of their affair to ruin their reputations? Getting them expelled somehow? Tattled to their parents? Beaten one or both of them up? Or worse, killed them?

He didn't know, and quite frankly, it didn't matter. What mattered was that he could. He had the power to do so. Or he would have the power to do so. Besides, if he had that power... would they have dared to betray him, to begin with?

The next moment, Jake disappeared from within the dream. From beginning to end, he had never shown the slightest reaction to anything that was said.

With a sigh, 'Andy' looked to the side as the entire apartment side of the apartment-complex turned to dust.

“I am surprised you didn’t interfere,” he spoke out loud.

“Well, why would I?” a voice echoed out within the dreamscape. **“I am pretty sure you just made him mad.”**

Two green eyes opened in the sky of the dream as everything started slowly disintegrating.

**“Oh and...”** the voice echoed out as killing intent descended on the entire dreamscape. **“Don’t ever pull that shit again.”**

With that, the entire dream turned to nothing, leaving only the fake ‘Andy’ in the void. His eternal smile still on his lips as a spark of interest entered his eyes.

“Truly peculiar...” he spoke before his karmic projection disappeared.

## Chapter 72: Den Mother

His eyes snapped open as the remnants of the dream left him. But unlike normal dreams, he could remember every single detail vividly.

Jumping out of bed, he threw it back into his necklace along with everything else. Right now, Jake was in a really shitty mood.

He was angry. And sadly for the Den Mother, it had been chosen as his outlet. Jake was tired of feeling like he was stuck in some big game. Tired of not knowing why the hell people kept messing with him. Even now, he didn't know exactly why Richard had wanted him dead or why that red-robed spearman had believed he had murdered his son.

No, instead, he would just do what he did best: Challenge and improve himself.

Taking out one bottle of hemotoxic poison, he recklessly splashed it over a bundle of arrows in his hand. He summoned his bow as he walked towards the beast.

Applying the Mark of the Ambitious Hunter was done as he lifted his bow, nocked the arrow, and charged an Infused Powershot. He didn't aim for the head of the beast as it would likely miss.

Charging it as much as he could without affecting his combat-effectiveness afterward, he released the string. The arrow was released in an explosion of mana and stamina, as Jake didn't even wait for it to hit before nocking another. He was angry but also oddly focused.

Perhaps he felt offended by his own thoughts - by his own perception of the weakness that he carried within. He was angry at himself for believing that he was weak. That the only reason why people wanted to manipulate him was because of his own weakness. And the best way to kill that feeling of weakness was to prove that he was strong. At least Jake believed it to be so.

On the other end of the cavern, the Den Mother woke up abruptly when the Infused Powershot was released. It instinctively tried to dodge but was still hit in one of its hind legs - a minor injury, but more than enough for the poison to enter its system.

The follow-up arrived far earlier than the beast had expected too. Five arrows struck it simultaneously, penetrating only a bit, but penetrating, nevertheless. The creature was surprised but not distraught as it located its attacker.

With no hesitation, it charged towards the arrogant human who had dared to attack it. It had been the Den Mother of this group of badgers for such a long time, and now some lone human dared intrude upon its lair? One that felt far weaker than itself even.

It felt the poison, it knew something was wrong, but it didn't have the mental faculties to comprehend what exactly it was. All it knew was that it had to kill the human in front of it as fast as possible.

The first swipe was dodged by the pesky human as Jake Shadow Vaulted to the side, still releasing arrows whenever possible. The Den Mother had predicted this, as it turned its head and opened its mouth.

Out came a torrent of green gas that eroded the very ground it hit. It enveloped the human, as the Den Mother gleefully observed what it believed to be the death of its prey.

Instead, it was met by another Infused Powershot that tore right through its shoulder and out the other side. With the shot, the usual explosion of mana occurred as it blew away all the gas.

Surprised, the giant badger locked eyes with the human and felt something it hadn't in a long time. The feeling it had when it looked at its Den Mother back in the day, the feeling it felt when the King of the Forest had confined it to this cavern.

Fear.

It had misjudged. What was in front of it was not prey; it was a predator, just like itself.

Screeching in fear, it hoped to throw Jake off balance temporarily. The sonic wave passed over him, but he just closed his eyes as he stood unmoving, firing yet another Splitting Arrow.

He felt his ears pop, and the blood flow down the side of his face and unto his neck. He felt the pain, but he didn't care. He didn't need his hearing right now anyway, and the pain was easily suppressed by the pure feeling of ecstasy he currently felt.

The Den Mother was far more powerful than the Alphas in every way. It was faster and stronger, its hide was tougher, making his arrows do far less damage, and it had far more skills and what seemed like a higher level of intellect. But in this fight, Jake had something he had been lacking in many of the others.

Unwavering confidence. Confidence and momentum. For the first time, Jake was the one entirely in the drivers' seat. And the beast felt this confidence as it showed signs of hesitation in its movements and attacks.

It had fallen into the mentality of prey. A dangerous situation if it wished to display all of its strength.

But even with all that going for him, it was still the Den Mother.

The beast sped up as it leaped at Jake, forcing him to Shadow Vault once more. Even in his arrogance, he wasn't stupid enough to take a swipe of the beast's massive claws head-on.

However, he quickly returned the favor with another barrage of arrows. The Den Mother's wounds were slowly building up, as its once beautiful fur now carried a red sheen.

Something unexpected happened then. The badger retreated, a first for Jake. It ran back to where he had initially pulled it from, as it made another screech. This one was not a sonic attack, but something entirely else different - a mating call.

After it screeched, the ground rumbled as three explosions of dirt fell down from the ceiling along with three massive bodies.

Three Alphas fell down around the Den Mother as they guarded her. The Den Mother itself started giving off a faint green sheen as Jake felt the effect of his poisons lessen with his



Sense of the Malefic Viper. Along with it, the wounds on its body started wriggling far faster than before as they rapidly started healing.

*Second phase*, Jake thought, not discouraged at all.

Luckily, Jake still had another bottle of the hemotoxin poison left, as he quickly brought it out along with a handful of arrows as he doused them. He still couldn't see the level of the Alphas, but he could feel that all of them were weaker than any of the others he had faced so far. The ones too weak to gain the favor of the Den Mother.

A favor the Alphas all seemed in a rush to earn as they charged towards Jake. They took a few seconds, allowing Jake to fire a fully powered Infused Powershot. The badger in the front didn't have any possibility of changing directions as its speed was too high. Resulting in it getting hit square in the face and getting blasted backward as the arrow exploded.

Jake had taken out one of the old common-rarity arrows, going for the kinetic energy of that instead of a normal arrow's penetrative force. He knew he couldn't kill it with a single shot, but he could sure as hell make it roll around on the ground in pain for a bit.

The arrow had disintegrated when it hit the beast, the shards of wood and metal all embedding themselves in its face - quite a few even finding their way into its eyes. One could only imagine the pain as the blinded beast rolled out on the ground, trying to scrape the pieces out.

Which left only two Alphas for now. Jake managed to land a hemotoxin-poisoned arrow on one of them before they reached him but didn't have time to shoot the other. He hated to do it, but he was forced to return to kiting once more.

He landed a few arrows but quickly noticed something vital. The two badger's teamwork was... lackluster, to say the least. Whenever he Shadow Vaulted, the beasts both struggled to chase him individually, bumping into each other.

With a flash of inspiration, he realized that the beasts weren't allies to begin with. They were competitors. Both wanted to earn the favor of the Den Mother, and the best way to do so would be to kill the puny human that had wounded her. So both cared more about being the one to land the killing blow than actually managing to kill him.

A weakness he would gladly take advantage of.

Switching up his tactics, he dismissed his bow as he took out his sword and dagger. While the beasts were stronger than him physically, the gap had only narrowed since he had entered the dungeon.

His Mark of the Ambitious Hunter was also still on the Den Mother. He decided to let it be to help keep an eye on the large badger. Besides, it was even damaging her little by little, as with every drop of blood that left her body, a pulse of energy that damaged her vital energy directly was released. Sadly, he could only have one active at a time.

Charging towards the badgers startled them slightly as they also accidentally made eye contact with him. They, like the Den Mother, felt a sense of danger from the gaze of the human.

Their slight hesitation was enough for Jake to make his way to one of them with a Shadow Vault, as he stabbed an arrow in between its ribs. Only one of the beasts was poisoned before, after all, and it was only fair to share the love.

The beast, of course, didn't take kindly to his attack as it snapped its maw of sharp teeth at him. He was, however, already long gone as he jumped behind it. In one fluid moment mid-dodge, he briefly let go of the dagger, as a bottle of Necrotic Poison appeared. Catching the dagger once more, he smashed the bottle, making liquid-death splatter all over both weapons.

Simultaneously, the other badger tried to get to him, but its 'comrade' was in the way, so all it managed to do was to try and go around it awkwardly.

Jake started circling around the badgers as he landed minor cuts here and there. He made sure always to stay extremely close to them, making their big bodies a detriment - the necrotic poison seeping into their flesh.

They got angrier and angrier as they started being more aggressive and less considerate of each other. The situation only got more interesting as the third Alpha charged over. It could only use one eye, and from the looks of it, it was the one most pissed off.

Contrary to what one would believe, Jake actually only found that the fight got easier as another one joined. Like completely feral animals, they tried to crawl over one other and tried to push the other out the way to get to him.

Inadvertently they also landed several wounds on each other, Jake of course gladly accommodating their carelessness. He honestly believed fighting one of the beasts would be more challenging than three due to their reckless style.

He had also managed to poison the third one as he kept building up the wounds on their bodies.

Naturally, he couldn't avoid feeling a bit of pain himself too. He had taken quite a few scratches here and there. Luckily none of them used that skill to release their spikes of poison. Then again, it would likely help him if one of them did, as they would only hurt their allies.

Briefly glancing at the Den Mother, he saw that it was getting closer and closer to being fully healed once more. The hemotoxin in its body had indeed shown its worth by slowing down the healing process significantly.

A minute or so later, the first of the Alphas fell on the ground, Mark of the Ambitious Hunter being applied seconds before it died. Jake didn't want to miss out on that bonus experience, after all.

Two minutes after that, the second succumbed to blood-loss, leaving only a single badly-wounded Alpha left standing. It was too slow and weak by now to pose any real threat, as Jake simply left it to bleed out as he turned his attention back on the Den Mother.

Taking out a health potion, he quickly downed it as his health was starting to dip relatively low. The fight had gone in his favor, but his victory had not come cheap.

His entire chest and arms were marred with scratches and bites, with a lot of venom making its way into his system too. While he could resist most of it, it still burned away quite a bit of his health to fully eliminate.

Feeling the warm flow of the health potion, his wounds started rapidly healing. All the minor scratches disappeared in only a few seconds, but the more extensive injuries remained - including a nasty bite on one of his shoulders.

Taking out his bow once more, he focused on the Den Mother. The beast had its eyes closed as it seemed to focus intensely on healing itself. The skill it used seemed similar to Meditate, as it hadn't shown the slightest reaction to the alphas dying, albeit far more powerful as it also regenerated health.

Smiling, Jake prepared to give it quite the rude awakening. He usually aimed for the middle of the body when using Infused Powershot to ensure a hit. The arrow flew in a straight line after all, and even if it was unbelievably fast, one shouldn't underestimate the instincts of these badgers.

But now, it was utterly unmoving and unaware. It had made the mistake of trusting the Alphas to buy enough time for it to heal. However, the hemotoxin in its system and the many wounds had made this healing process take far longer than expected. As Jake prepared his shot, he got the notification that the last Alpha had bled out. With that, he switched the Mark back to the Den Mother.

Nocking an arrow with a good dose of some more hemotoxin poison, he started to channel an Infused Powershot. He took his time with this one, bringing the equilibrium right to the limit where either his body or bow would break if he went above it.

He aimed right for the eye of the beast. He didn't know if he could penetrate all the way through its skull, but he knew that the eyes of these beasts were incredibly weak. Then again, few living things could claim for their eyes not to be a weak point.

As he released his most powerful arrow yet, it encountered a barrier surrounding the Den Mother. It exploded the moment the arrow hit, making the attack miss, but it also removed any obstacles between him and the dungeon boss.

He began charging another shot, the Den Mother still not reacting. This one, he saw fly true as it struck the Den Mother right in the eye. It managed only to shudder as the arrow went right through and into its skull.

A shriek like never before came out as it started thrashing about as a purple mist started secreting from its skin. Its glossy hide turned completely purple like the mist, as the hair grew sharper and started firing in all directions just like the Alphas had done.

But Jake was already more than a hundred meters away, and the spikes were not aimed at all. The mist was also too far away to have any effect.

So Jake just started shooting his arrows. He used Splitting Shot with every single one of them, just piling up the damage. His stamina was draining rapidly, so he kept the number of splits low to preserve it. He wanted to shoot another Infused Powershot, but he already felt sore from the ones used before.

This situation showed one of the significant weaknesses of most living beings. While health points would prevent one from dying even if the brain was utterly destroyed, the functions the brain held would still be significantly disturbed.

Like when a chicken had its head cut off and still managed to run, so would one lose control of their body. Skills still worked, however, independently of the brain, for the most part. Of course, the senses no longer functioned properly, making the badger both blind and deaf.

Which meant that all it could do was thrash about as its body spasmed. In desperation, it released all of its skills, all to no avail. It couldn't feel the pain, but it knew its health was rapidly draining as the arrows struck it one by one.

It tried to crawl away, but its limbs didn't listen. Its high vitality only served to prolong its suffering as it powerlessly grew weaker and weaker. If it had enough time, it could regenerate the brain, but sadly it would never get the opportunity.

Vital organs took far longer to heal than anything else. Completely destroyed parts, as well as lost limbs, did so too. The beast had far more vitality than Jake, so it could likely heal its brain enough to regain close to standard functionality with only a few minutes.

One had to say that the last phase of the fight was rather anticlimactic. The badger still had many more skills and strengths left to show but never got the chance as it slowly died, unable to even fight back.

Perhaps it was just a bad matchup for it. Jake had misunderstood its ability as it healed. Unlike meditation, it still retained some standard functions.

It could still feel living beings and any mana that entered within 50 or so meters of it. Sadly for it, Jake's arrow didn't give off anywhere near enough mana to wake it up, and he, of course, hadn't needed to walk closer to it.

With an ending not befitting a Den Mother, the very last vestige of life left it.

## Chapter 73: First quest & Venomfang

As the Den Mother died, Jake felt like he had finally gotten out many of his frustrations. However, the feeling of relief was short-lived as his entire body started aching only mere moments later. He had pushed himself to the limit, perhaps even above limits he didn't know he had.

His stamina was nearly depleted after only one fight. His mana had also taken quite the hit as he had used more than a few Infused Powershots.

This fight was likely the first time Jake had ever fully realized his body's potential.

Experiencing a doubling in physical stats in only a few days had done much to increase his combat-strength.

And the results spoke for themselves. Jake had won a convincing victory with the odds more than stacked against him.



Deciding to go through his notifications, he first saw that the three Alphas had all been below level 70. Which meant they were indeed all weaker than any of the other Alphas he had met so far. Nevertheless, the three had still awarded a level as the last one fell, making him level up both his class and race during the fight.

Apparently, he had been too focused to even notice. But he did notice the level he got when the Den Mother died. And speaking of the Den Mother...

***\*You have slain [Den Mother – lvl 82] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 124000 TP earned\****

***‘DING!’ Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 46 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

The Den Mother had been level 82, and not just an average level 82, but clearly a potent variant. Only from what he had seen, the beast could wipe out any group of 5 he had met so far. And by a large margin.

The first blast of poisonous gas alone would likely have killed most. Without Jake’s high resistance from Palate of the Malefic Viper, he would probably have suffered a lot too. And even with the skill, he had still taken damage.

Overall, the Den Mother had been strong. Strong, but exceptionally poorly matched up against Jake. He countered most of what it did.

He did wonder a bit about its name, though. How did it come to be called Den Mother? He doubted it was the name of its race, as he was pretty sure many animals out there in the vast multiverse had what one could call a den mother. Likely it was just something to do with the dungeon, but of course, he had no way to be sure.

Moving down the list of notifications, it was far from done. The next ones informed Jake of him successfully clearing the dungeon.

***Congratulations! You have cleared Tutorial Dungeon: Badger's Den***

***Objective: Defeat the Den Mother (Completed)***

***Bonus reward for clearing the dungeon solo.***

***Dungeon shutting down in: 00:57:29***

He was a bit happy to see that clearing the dungeon solo provided a bonus. He didn't see any treasure chests anywhere, but perhaps they were in the tunnel behind where the Den Mother died.

A pleasant, though not unexpected, surprise was also the upgrade of two of his titles, meaning it wasn't new titles but changes to his existing ones.

***[Dungeoneer II] – Successfully clear a Dungeon suitable for your level. +2 all stats.***

***[Dungeon Pioneer II] – Be the first to clear a dungeon suitable for your level. +6 all stats.***

Both had doubled in value, rewarding him an increase of four in all stats from the upgraded titles. It didn't seem like much, but it was equivalent to two entire race levels, or 36 stats totals. Not a measly sum at all.

It did make him wonder how high the titles went, though. He seriously doubted they doubled every time, as that would quickly escalate to the level of ridiculousness.

Or maybe the most powerful being in the entire multiverse was indeed the mighty Dungeon Pioneer 25, with his or her +50.331.648 all stats.

All jokes aside, even if the title only added +3 all stats per level, it was still a very significant bonus. Jake believed that there had to be a limit, and if not, were everyone in the entire multiverse just farming dungeons all day, every day, to get titles?

*Oh well, something to ask the Viper about next time,* he thought to himself.

Anyway, the titles were excellent and all, but the main thing was the very last message Jake received. Or, more accurately, the quest he received.

### **You have been granted the Tutorial Quest: The Beast Lords**

**The forest murmurs with rumors of a King ruling from the shadows. The four Beast Lords each guard their dungeon as their King commanded, waiting for a suitable challenger to appear. With the death of his lords, the King is sure to be forced into the light. But be warned, the Lords will not meet their end that easily.**

**Objective: Defeat the Beast Lords.**

**Current progress: 1/4**

The first thing was, of course, a realization that quests exist. *Of course they do*

. The system had already proven itself to love a whole slew of game-elements, so quests also being a thing was entirely unsurprising.

As for the contents of the quest, that too was very interesting. Jake remembered the initial tutorial message when they entered, mentioning something about the Beast Lords or something.

Quite honestly, he hadn't paid much attention to it at the time. He had been a bit busy with his entire life and reality itself being flipped upside down. You know, the usual stuff.

Of course, before he could meet this fabled King, he would have to kill the four lords. Very fantasy-esque.

It didn't take him long to piece things together. The inner area had five mountains, with four of them surrounding one colossal mountain in the middle. The dungeon he was in currently had been found at the top of the first one, making it somewhat reasonable to expect the other dungeons to be placed inside the other mountains.

But all of that was for when he got out of here. For now, he still had loot to get to - the first piece perhaps right in front of him on the badger itself.

His Sense of the Malefic Viper kept giving off a strong reaction even after the Den Mother died. Whenever the badgers, including the Alphas, died, the poison on their claws and fangs lost all their effect. Without the supply of energy from the body, the venom couldn't keep up its toxicity.

But the feeling still had yet to subside from the Den Mother. Making it quite apparent that something highly toxic was still within it.

He didn't really want to, but he got out his sword and went towards the corpse of the beast. It felt disrespectful to cut it up. But then again, using the natural materials found on an animal was often seen as a sign of respect in many cultures. *Yeah, that is a good excuse*, he thought to himself.

Cutting the hide was far easier now that the beast was dead. It was still strong but far more manageable. He cut towards the source of the toxin, as he finally managed to move the innards out the way and saw what it was.

It was a small bag-like thing. It was integrated into the beast's stomach-area by many small tendrils going into the flesh. He didn't hesitate as he cut it out, making sure to not spill anything of what was within. Feeling like a plastic bag filled with water, it made squelching sounds as he took it out, It was disgusting, to say the least.

It took him a good twenty minutes to get it out, as he had to walk away several times to get a breath. Not because he lacked air, he just lacked not horrendously smelling air. One had to remember that the Den Mother was several times larger than himself, forcing him to quite literally step into the body of the beast to get it out.

Finally, having the squishy flesh-bag on the ground, he used Identify on it.

***[Den Mother's Poison Gland (Rare)] – A gland containing a highly concentrated toxic liquid, condensed by the Den Mother over a long period.***

*At least it was worth it*, Jake thought to himself as he smiled a bit. One part of the smile was due to the item, and another was due to him seeing a new challenge before him. A rare poison to create something new with. Perhaps his first real creation above common-rarity.

Taking out a piece of cloth from his bag, he bundled up and put the gland in his necklace. The thing was big, weighing a few kilograms easily, which meant that it likely contained liters of highly toxic liquid. Oh, the things he would make with it.

Nodding towards the corpse of the Den Mother one last time in acknowledgment, he went towards the exit of the cavern. Where he, of course, found himself in another tunnel. Because why wouldn't there be another tunnel?

Luckily this one was short, as he soon found that the tunnel broadened. Before Jake even turned the corner, he already saw the two black holes in his Sphere of Perception. *Lockboxes*.

He walked over to them with a smile, a bit giddy to see what he would be rewarded. One of the boxes was small and rectangular, while the other was slightly bigger but relatively flat.

What mattered more, however, was the rarity. The rectangular one was Rare, and the other one Uncommon.

Jake wasn't overly excited or surprised by this. Perhaps a little disappointed even. After clearing the Challenge Dungeon, he had gotten an epic along with a rare item. Then again, this dungeon had been far faster, and in many ways, easier.

Not saving the best for last, he first opened the rare box.

Inside was a small weapon. At first, he thought it was a spike or something, but looking closer, one could see it was actually a carved tooth. Or a fang to be more accurate. It had a simple-looking handle and a slightly curved blade, and from its looks, seemed more suitable for stabbing than cutting. Using Identify, he got a good look at its specs.

**[Venomfang (Rare)] – The fang of the Den Mother still carries substantial remnants of its condensed Records, granting this weapon strength akin to when the beast still lived. The Fang itself has taken shape resembling a shiv, fit to be wielded by the humanoid races. Enchantments: Venomfang**

**Requirements: Lvl 45+ in any humanoid race.**

The whole thing was relatively simple. The dagger only seemed to have one single function: poisoning. It seriously made him think precisely how much the system tailored these lockboxes to the receivers.

He needed a second weapon to go with his sword, and the system gave him one. It was even made of bone, making his Twin Fang style work. Heck, his skill was called Twin Fang, and he had just gotten a god damn fang.

With it even being enchanted with venom also made it all the more suspicious. Though Jake had yet to find out if the poison even worked with his concocted ones, and more importantly if his skills had synergy with the enchantment.

Either way, the weapon was a great addition to his repertoire.



Which lead him to the next lockbox.

Opening it up, he found a black cloth of some kind. Taking it out, he noticed that it was pants that were very smooth, almost silk-like but looking closer, he could see that it was actually woven out of a multitude of long small pieces of hair. Or fur, to be more accurate.

On the inside, the pants had something resembling leather. It, too, had little padding, making the pants look incredibly comfortable.

Identifying the pants, it quickly became apparent what it was made of.

**[Alpha Venomfang Badger Pants (Uncommon)] – Pants made from the hide of an Alpha Venomfang Badger . The hide is refined and comfortable, granting high resistance to slashing and corrosive attacks. Enchantments: Self-Repair. +25 Endurance, +25 Agility. Grants the ability: Badger Jump (Common).**

**Requirements: Lvl 40+ in any humanoid race**

Another badger-themed piece of equipment. Not entirely unsurprising, considering the entire dungeon had consisted solely of badgers. The stats on them were higher than anything else Jake had encountered so far in this tutorial. But then again, so was the level requirement.

And talking of the levels, it was also slightly suspicious that all the items he found he could use right away, or he was extremely close to being able to. One would think that a

dungeon with a level 80+ final boss would drop items better than level 40. Again, it was likely that the loot was designed for whoever cleared the dungeon.

Interestingly, these pants also provided an ability. This was Jake's first time encountering such a phenomenon, and it was quite interesting to see how it worked. As for the ability itself... well, it was rather basic, to say the least.

**[Badger Jump (Common)] – Make a jump empowered with the power of a badger, increases jump height and speed. Adds a minor increase to the effect of Badger Jump based on agility.**

Having no reason to delay, he bound the pants to himself and put them on. The first thing he noticed was how comfortable they were. This was also the first piece of gear where he truly experienced the system's ability to 'fit' it to his body.

The waist shrunk in to sit perfectly on him, while the legs got slightly less baggy after putting them on and binding them to him. The pants in their entirety, taking on a sleeker look. He didn't know if it was somehow linked to the self-repair enchant or if it was just something the system did by itself.

His boots had also fit perfectly the first time he put them on. But that could just be brushed up to luck, as he hadn't noticed them changing in any way. The pants, however, had clearly gotten smaller overall.

He also tried to use the skill.

When he used it, it simply increased his leg-strength slightly while jumping. He found that it worked best when jumping sideways, compared to up and down. And even better if he did a jump from being down on all fours... he didn't plan on using that part very often, if at all.

Eventually, he found it most comfortable to just slightly lean in a direction and then take off. The more horizontal his body was, the more effective the skill was. Perhaps to emulate a badger, as they were usually on all fours.

Feeling a bit experimental, he tried taking off the pants again and found his ability to use Badger Jump gone. He could remember how he did it, but it just didn't work whenever he attempted to. The stats did remain, though, so that was a bit weird, and after putting the pants back on, the skill worked just like before.

A bit sad that farming equipment wasn't a way to permanently gain a plethora of new skills, he made his way towards the dungeon's exit.

Finally, after all this time, he looked a bit less like a hobo. Or maybe just a hobo with nice pants. Either way, he felt pretty good about his gains from the dungeon as he walked out the eerie-looking doorway that marked the dungeon's exit - his next target already in mind.

## Chapter 74: Practice & Ash

Jake was enjoying his trip towards the next mountain quite a bit, though he had a faint suspicion his current prey didn't.

The raptor struggled and writhed as it was held down by its throat. Its assailant's second hand didn't give it time to muster a response before it brought down a knife-like bone on its temple.

Even with the knife in its brain, it didn't die instantly. However, when the venom from the dagger was secreted into its brain, its vitality quickly gave out as the beast stopped moving.

Another raptor jumped Jake but didn't even get close before he whipped around and punched it hard on the side of its head. It stumbled a bit from the blow, giving Jake ample time to wrap his arm around its neck, holding it in a chokehold.

The highly distraught raptor panicked as it started trying to get him to let go. But Jake easily held onto it, as he used Touch of the Malefic Viper on the beast. It took a few seconds, but the creature soon stopped struggling as he got the sweet kill notification.

Letting go, it fell down to join its brethren. Jake looked at the five dead raptors on the ground around him as he briefly cleaned his dagger and put it into his storage.

It had been far too easy. The raptors Jake had been slightly struggling with only days ago now didn't even present a proper threat.

Then again, his stats did experience explosive growth during the dungeon-run. His status, of course, agreed with that notion.

## Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (E) – lvl 47]

Class: [Ambitious Hunter – lvl 46]

Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 49]

Health Points (HP): 3715/3780

Mana Points (MP): 4007/4450

Stamina: 1858/2470

## Stats

Strength: 257

Agility: 349

Endurance: 247

Vitality: 378

Toughness: 207

Wisdom: 445

Intelligence: 168

Perception: 613

Willpower: 246

Free points: 0

It was mostly his agility, endurance, and perception showing growth, which was quite natural considering his class mainly provided stats to those three stats. His new equipment only boosted him further, with his pants adding 25 to both agility and endurance.

His perception had experienced the most significant growth by far. He had decided to stick with his tactic of just throwing all his points into the stat.

He feared that perhaps he was spreading himself too thin, and looking at it, nearly all his stats were at a pretty reasonable level. Maybe a too reasonable level.

Becoming a Jake of all trades, yet master of none, was a dangerous path. If you looked at his stats, then a lot of them did little to nothing during an actual fight.

Having less wisdom, intelligence, willpower, and even toughness and vitality in exchange for strength and agility would significantly impact his ability to actually kill stuff.

Then again, Jake wasn't merely a hunter, but also an alchemist. Without the means provided by his profession, he would be a far cry from where he was today.

What this all came down to was Jake being slightly apprehensive about entering the next dungeon right away. He knew that he was on a timer- the Tutorial Panel ever the reminder.

## **Tutorial Panel**

**Duration: 18 days & 15:54:11**

He had a bit over two and a half weeks left to clear three dungeons and then deal with whatever this King of the Forest was. The next dungeon, of course, being his immediate objective.

But before that, he wanted to accomplish a few things. One of them a must-have and the other one a would-be-nice-to-have.

First of all, get his Alchemist of the Malefic Viper to level 50. Another skill from that was bound to help him. His Blood of the Malefic Viper had helped him tremendously, and he hoped to get an equally helpful skill.

Second of all, he wanted to try and improve his Advanced Archery skill. He had upgraded it to common-rarity by only spending a few hours with Casper back during the beginning of the tutorial, and by now, he had improved by a lot.



He felt that he was close to upgrading it even before his class evolution, and now only a thin line separated him from finally getting it. What exactly he needed to cross that line he wasn't sure of, which was why he chose to wait a bit before entering the next dungeon.

What he needed wasn't to have the stressful situation of a life and death fight function as a catalyst. Instead, he needed to find that little thing he was missing, and the problem was that he didn't know what that was. The skill could get upgraded within the hour or in years for all he knew.

This is why he was currently taking his sweet time getting to the next volcano-like mountain. He had decided to clear one of the valleys and, at the same time, do some relaxing practicing.

The raptors had been an outlier. They had run at Jake from behind while he was just trying to read a damn book, and he had ended up just smashing them in melee. He had quite honestly seen no reason to bring out a bow and start kiting around.

He also saw quite a lot of value in familiarizing himself with his new Venomfang dagger and correctly practicing his Twin Fang Style some more. Honestly, he barely focused on technique during close combat but simply moved according to his instinct most of the time.

The hours slowly ticked by as he started clearing out the valley closest to the next volcano-mountain-thing. This one was mainly inhabited by the Lucenti Deer and Stags, making Jake suspect that the dungeon would be the same. The valley closest to Badger's Den had been filled with badgers, after all.

As he practiced his archery, he focused on the entire process - the act of drawing an arrow from the quiver, nocking it, pulling back the string, taking aim, and finally releasing it.

He was already very intimate with archery before even entering the tutorial, which had netted him the upgrade of the archery skill. To get the upgrade, he simply had to confirm the knowledge he already held, and the system recognized it.

Compared to back then, Jake had experienced remarkable growth in the art of archery. His most prominent development in the field of speed.

His training before had been formal and competition-based. It focused on the proper forms and techniques - to remain focused on aiming and landing that one shot on the target.

But combat was very different. In a tournament, Jake would have time to aim for sometimes dozens of seconds, have time to focus on his breathing, and then finally release the arrow once he felt like it was the optimal time.

In combat, however, the enemy didn't give you time to relax and take your time. A charging Alpha would force anyone to fast-track the entire process and fire the arrow as fast as possible.

A second area where he had improved was shooting while moving - a field where he still had plenty of room to improve in. Even now, he mostly Shadow Vaulted away, took a stance, fired an arrow, and then Shadow Vaulted away once more.

Instead, it would be far more effective to shoot while moving, especially while airborne as Jake sometimes jumped out of the way of an attack. In other words, he needed to improve his multitasking.

He had great form and technique in general, but he had to change elements of his style away from some of the habits he had formed. The habits were useful in an archery competition, but only a hindrance during mortal combat.

He needed to hammer out his faults and to focus on improving them. He showed skill above what he actually possessed as his instincts were more than happy with helping him during combat.

But with a renewed focus on what he was doing, he started to notice and iron out the small faults he discovered. He often over-compensated with how far he drew back the string or how he sometimes overanalyzed an enemy's movements and ended up missing.

After half a day or so of practice, he finally decided to put down the bow. He hadn't used a single skill the entire time, and the only thing he ever did to spice up the fighting was sometimes to fight a deer or two whenever they got in melee.

The stags were his favorite practice partners. They seemed smarter than badgers and actively tried to dodge his attacks. On top of that, they preferred ranged combat, firing magic attacks from their antlers. It was mainly glowing bolts of light and the odd beam here and there, along with the occasional barrier of light that blocked an arrow.

To make the fights even more interesting, the beasts could even heal themselves and others. And not a slow-acting heal like the Den Mother, but nearly instantly. When there was only a single one of them, it wasn't that bad, but when he ended up against three of

them and they repeatedly healed each other, it got a bit... complicated - for the poor stags, that is.

All it did was to extend their suffering. The fight ended up being far longer than it should have been, as the three stags healed each other. Jake even gave them time to heal and practiced aiming at specific areas of the creatures.

His default approach was always to aim for one of the common weak points, such as eyes, nose, mouth, ears... pretty much the face. But the face was also the place the beasts protected the most, especially the stags with their barriers.

Their spells were all cast from their antlers, and surprisingly the antlers were quite close to their faces.

All in all, he had learned a lot about the beasts - knowledge that would surely become useful whenever he entered the dungeon.

As for the spoils of his efforts, he had only found a single lockbox. In it was a common-rarity upgrade token, which he promptly put in his spatial storage. He still had a few swords and daggers that could be upgraded, but he decided to save it if he ever needed it. The famous last words said before forgetting a consumable in your inventory forever.

Having found a lovely tree to sit under, he took out his alchemical supplies. He wanted to get that level 50 skill, so he decided to make the final push. Besides, he needed more Necrotic Poison. The hemotoxin had worked wonders on the badgers, but the stags could cure the poison before it managed to increase his damage much.

Necrotic Poison, on the other hand, was fast-working and did far more immediate damage. Jake did briefly consider trying to make another type of poison but decided against it. He had to recognize that he had limited time left in the tutorial, and he had set the goal for himself to at least see this so-called King of the Forest.

Sitting comfortably, he started concocting the poison. His body relaxed while his mind started working as he focused his mana. He had already taken out all the ingredients and placed them on a cloth beside the bowl. To better practice mana-control, he even used his mana strings to pick up and add the ingredients, becoming more and more adept at using them.

He had considered if his application of mana was correct. He had ended up making strings and threads out of it initially and had kind of stuck to that approach. He could still fire out pulses and use it with his skills, but besides that, he didn't really use it daily. Which kind of made sense as his only combat skills that used mana was Infused Powershot and Touch of the Malefic Viper. Both of which were far too complex for him to analyze properly.

The hours continued to tick by until he finally heard the satisfying sound of a successful craft, followed by the even more satisfying sound indicating his level-up.

The silent clearing seemed ever so tranquil as the molerats feasted on the vast amounts of meat. Many of the corpses were easy enough to eat, but many of them were still wearing armor, clearly annoying the beasts.

One rat scratched out meat from within a chestplate, while another was eating out of a boot. The last one approached another of the many corpses. It didn't look or smell particularly appetizing, but the food was food.

It was a burned body, charred all over. The only thing uncharred was a shiny breastplate.

Just when the hungry rat tried to take a bite, a sword lying nearby flew over and skewered it to the ground.

Instantly a flurry of movement was kicked up. The molerats panicked as all the metal scattered about in what had once been a battlefield started vibrating. The vibration soon turned to more as they all flew towards the corpse with the shiny armor.

But instead of crashing into him, they were instead absorbed by the corpse. Tens of swords, spears, axes, and arrowheads, everything metal, disappeared into the body, leaving all non-metal parts behind.

The two surviving rats tried running but were both skewered by the same sword that had killed their kin just seconds earlier.

Soon the noise died down as the battlefield returned to silence once more. Several minutes passed without anything happening until suddenly, a small twitch was seen. A single finger on the corpse moved as the ashen shell cracked, revealing healthy skin beneath.

## Chapter 75: Scales of the Malefic Viper

***\*'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 50 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 48 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

Briefly basking in the ever-satisfying feeling of level-ups for a while, he decided to get into the meat of things without unnecessary delays.

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

It had sure been a while since he last unlocked any skills for his profession. Which did make him a bit excited to see what would present itself.

Skimming the list, he noticed all the usual ones, but also quite a few new ones. Four, to be exact. The first of which was a quite interesting common-rarity skill.

***[Spectral Hand (Common)] – Sometimes, all you need is an extra hand. Summon a hand of mana able to interact with and hold physical objects. The hand is weak and lacking in dexterity, making it unsuitable for strenuous activities. Adds a minor bonus to the effect of wisdom when using Spectral Hand.***

While he couldn't be totally sure, he was ninety-nine percent sure he unlocked this one due to his practice with mana. He was already using his strings to add ingredients,

effectively acting as hands, and Jake believed this was the system recognizing those efforts.

Not that he had any interest in picking it. He could already do what it did, albeit a lot worse. He was sure one of the other skills would prove far more valuable than a common-rarity third hand. Besides... he felt like he would eventually learn to conjure a hand of mana even without using a skill, but just through pure mana manipulation.

Moving on down the list, he got to the uncommon skills, of which only two new ones had appeared.

The first of which was a skill that he had seen mentioned in many of the alchemy books, so it wasn't exactly a surprise.

***[Distill Powder (Uncommon)] - Poison can come in many forms and is far from limited to a liquid. Allows the Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper to distill a concocted poison, making a powder that holds similar effects. If the powder is burned, release the poisonous product into the air. The effect and nature of the poison are dependent on the poison distilled. Adds a small bonus to the effect of wisdom when using Distill Powder.***

This one was a bit tempting, mainly due to giving him a far more solid area of effect attack. It would be a way to do continual damage to more enemies at once. If he had been able to release a cloud of poisonous gas into the dungeon, it would have, without a doubt, done untold damage.



On the other hand,... the thought of the skill just rubbed him the wrong way on so many levels. He had gotten over using poisons on beasts, but he feared what the road could lead to if he started using more and more extreme means. He was pretty sure chemical warfare was outlawed for a reason.

Yet, he couldn't deny how effective poison was. It would make him stronger if he could burn Necrotic Poison and just release a cloud of death upon others.

Skipping over the skill, for now, he moved on to the next one.

***[Brew Flask (Uncommon)] – For when you need that little extra push to win the battle. Allows the Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper to craft flasks which provide temporary bonuses. The nature, magnitude, and duration of the flasks vary based on the material used. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of created flasks based on wisdom.***

This skill was far more fitting for an alchemist- the kind that isn't a walking war crime.

He had already read many different kinds of creations an alchemist could make, and flasks were one of the most common products along with potions. Potions carried short, temporary effects, and most of them only lasted for a few seconds.

Flasks, on the other hand, could last hours or even days. They could give a vast array of bonuses, such as bonus health and mana, increased stats, or other buffs. It could be compared to equipping a new item for the duration of the flask.

The skill was extremely tempting, but it came with one issue: Time. Jake didn't have that long left in the tutorial, and he quite frankly didn't feel like he had time left over to get into crafting something entirely new that very likely had its own entire methodology behind it. He also doubted that his first creations would give any worthwhile effects compared to the effort required to craft them.

And even if they did, it wasn't even a sure thing that he would manage to craft one before the tutorial ended. Not even if he focused all his time on it. It would also get in the way of his quest to kill the King of the Forest. It was also assuming he already had the required ingredients or could find them.

He was far better at making poisons anyway. He was an Alchemist of the Malefic Viper and not an Alchemist of Tasty Flasks, after all. Besides, his profession and all his skill-set were just more suited for poisons.

It was still a skill he would pick up later if he ever got the chance. It had many pros, but the lack of time and immediate usefulness eliminated it for now. The final skill option only further cemented his decision.

***[Scales of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – The Malefic Viper's scales are the first, and often the only required, line of defense. Allows the Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper to turn parts of his skin into scales, vastly increasing the effect of toughness and adding a certain damage threshold. All damage below the threshold is nullified. The scales are exceptionally resistant to magic, allowing the alchemist to handle toxic substances better. Passively provides 1 toughness per level in any profession related to the Malefic Viper. May you continue down your path, o chosen of the Malefic One.***

Reading the description, he had to double-check it to make sure he hadn't read it wrong. Especially the rarity of the skill. Ancient. Discounting Shroud of the Primordial, this was the highest he had ever encountered.

Jake still wasn't sure about the different rarities, but he was pretty sure Ancient was above Epic, but below Divine. But by how much it was above or below those two, he didn't know.

The skill itself was more than he had hoped for from a defensive skill. He had hoped for something like a mana barrier, maybe even a parry or blocking move or something from his class, but this went way above his wildest wishes.

It even provided him more stats, another first from a skill. Well, permanent stats. His Big Game Hunter did give stats during actual combat with high-level enemies, but it was only temporary. This one, however, would be a permanent addition. Almost as if his profession now provided more per level.

Which made him think... *does it work retroactively?*

If it did, the skill would instantly provide him with 50 toughness. 55, in fact, if you counted his title giving an extra 10%. If the percentage bonus also worked, of course. It worked with stats gained from titles, so shouldn't it work with stats from skills?

Not that it ultimately mattered, as he would pick the skill anyway. He needed a defensive skill, and this one was just far too good ever to pass up.

Picking the skill, he instantly felt a warm flow go through his body - a quite intense warm flow.

***\*Gained Skill\*: [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – The Malefic Viper’s scales are the first, and often the only required, line of defense. Allows the Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper to turn parts of his skin into scales, vastly increasing the effect of toughness and adding a certain damage threshold. All damage below the threshold is nullified. The scales are exceptionally resistant to magic, allowing the alchemist to handle toxic substances better. Passively provides 1 toughness per level in any profession related to the Malefic Viper. May you continue down your path, o chosen of the Malefic One.***

The warm flow going through his body was more significant than any level-up he had experienced so far. His skin itched all over as it strengthened, and he had to hold himself back from scratching himself.

A few minutes later, the discomfort disappeared, and everything returned to normal. Well, a new normal. Checking his stats, Jake saw that it had grown by not just 50 points, but 55.

Without waiting, he lifted his arm and activated the skill. His skin’s texture was instantly replaced with dark green scales that seemed to reflect the false sun above. They were nearly identical to the ones he had seen growing all over the Malefic Viper while in his humanoid form.

He tried poking them with his fingers and felt the tough surface. Weirdly enough, it didn’t feel much different than when he touched his skin directly. It was an odd feeling, like if he just had a lot of calluses there or something.

Taking out his Venomfang, he tried cutting himself. The blade managed to cut through the scales quite easily, leaving a small wound on his arm. Maybe testing with his new rare dagger wasn't the best... but he did feel *some* resistance.

After he removed the dagger, he waited a bit to see if the scales would regenerate, which they, to his disappointment, didn't. Instead, they disappeared after only a few minutes, as his skin returned to... well, skin.

It hadn't consumed much mana, but then again, he hadn't transformed a huge area. Which, of course, led Jake to a realization. He finally had a skill that used mana that he could use actively in combat. Maybe his vast mana pool and high wisdom would prove more useful now.

He spent the next few minutes doing various tests until he decided to put his new skill to a real test. The description said it was strong against magic, and he happened to have an army of angry stags with light beams nearby.

Gathering all his alchemist equipment into his storage, he made his way further into the valley.

It didn't take him long to encounter a small group with 3 deer and a single stag. The deer were not that exciting, as they mainly engaged in melee and acted as guards for the stags.

Taking out his bow, he fired an Infused Powershot and instantly killed the first deer. The next two didn't even make it to him before they were riddled through with Splitting Arrow. And a bit of necrotic poison, for good measure.

The stag had tried to heal its companions in vain, but they died too fast for it to do anything. Instead, it turned its attention to Jake as it fired off a beam of light.

Jake happily received it as he raised his now scaled arms in front of his body. A bit of the beam went through and hit his chest, causing burns, but the part of it that hit his scales did absolutely nothing. It was as if the beam just disappeared whenever it encountered the scales, and Jake only felt a bit of warmth there.

He let the beast fire a few more beams at him as he blocked attack after attack. The stag was level 54, and yet it was utterly unable to cause him any real damage with the beams whenever they hit his scales.

Finally, after seven beams, the stag decided to mix things up as it started charging its beam. The stag would have no time to do this in normal conditions, but its enemy was just standing there and taking its blows, making it take the chance.

After a handful of seconds, the beam was released. The beam was far more intense than the others, and Jake panicked slightly when his sense of danger warned him. Instinctively he covered his entire upper body with scales as he was somewhat pushed backward.

As the beam dispersed, Jake was surprised. Surprised by how little it had done. He felt a bit hot and a tingling sensation, but otherwise, he was completely uninjured. He had only lost a few health points even after taking the attack.

By now, the stag was well and truly scared. The human had just taken everything it could muster and yet stood there completely fine. And to make it all worse, the man was now covered in scales.

The beast didn't release any more beams but instead made a final gambit as it charged towards him.

Jake happily met its charge as it took the opportunity to test his new scales' physical defense. With his entire upper body still covered, he decided just to let the beast hit him with all it had... which could have gone better.

The stag lowered its antlers, and with only a few meters between them, it suddenly sped up and took Jake by surprise as it hit him square in the chest.

The impact sent him backward like a rocket as he smashed into a tree. It may have seemed dramatic from an outside perspective, but the damage done wasn't that bad, his danger sense making him aware of that fact before he was even hit.

Getting up, Jake easily dodged the follow-up charge as the stag impaled the tree.

Not bothering to waste any more time, he took out his dagger and finished off the beast in only a few venom-doused strikes.

Looking himself over, he saw several scales on his chest with small indentures and cracks. Clearly, their ability to soak magical attacks was far above their physical resistance. Not to say that their physical defense was weak in any way.

One had to remember that Jake was currently going with the pants-only style, having a bare chest, meaning that the scales were the only obstruction between his bare skin and a row of pointy antlers.

He did still have his cloak too, but he was honestly getting tired of it being ripped and torn during every fight, ultimately just getting in the way. Clearly, the item was meant for lower-leveled individuals.

And on the point of equipment, he decided to keep going further into the valley. His bare chest, common-rarity starter bow, and shitty cloak meant that he had plenty of upgrades still to find. Even his bracers were getting quite old, providing far fewer stats than his newer loot with their measly 5 agility and 3 strength.

The hours went by as he did several more tests for his new scales. In conclusion, they were brilliant - pretty much an overpowered defense against magic, and decent physical resistance.

On the con list, was without a doubt, the mana consumption. To cover his entire upper body had drained more than a thousand mana, and when the scales got damaged, he had to pour in even more mana. Less than to summon new ones, but it was still costly.

When the scales were summoned, he could maintain them relatively cheaply, but they still drained far too much to have them up for long periods. He doubted he could keep the scales active for more than a few hours on his entire body, even with his full mana pool.



Without mana to keep them up, the scales would last for around three minutes. After that, they would disappear as if having never been there. Jake did find that his skin was still pristine beneath, even if the scales had been damaged, which was nice.

His final test had been with poison, but he discovered that he didn't have anything potent enough to do a proper test. Perhaps the gland from the Den Mother would be good enough, but he felt like it was a waste of an excellent future ingredient.

Half a day later, he was finally done scouring the valley as he looked disappointed at his bounty - two more common-rarity tokens, as well as another pair of stupid uncommon steel boots that provided strength and toughness. They were worse than his current boots in every way.

Besides, they looked uncomfortable as hell.

He had gotten a level, though, reaching 47 in his Ambitious Hunter class, so the time wasn't wasted entirely, but it was far less efficient than the dungeon. He had briefly considered grinding to level 50 in his class before entering the next dungeon but decided against it. It would take far too long, and besides, he felt like he could handle the next dungeon.

Feeling ready, he looked up towards the second smallest volcano-like mountain. The location of the second dungeon and Beast Lord if his assumptions were correct. And, hopefully, also the location of a damn shirt.

## Chapter 76: Lucenti Plains

The path up to the mountain wasn't as easily traversed as he had hoped. Unlike the badger valley, he didn't find any easily accessible way forward.

Instead, he was met with a wall of stone – a steep cliffside. He tried climbing it a few times but quickly found that his climbing skills, coupled with the smooth stone surface, made it improbable that he could climb up there. He tried to use his weapons to climb, but it was more than a little unwieldy... Venomfang was too strong, and the cold from his sword made it break the stone as it cooled down.

After walking back and forth for a few minutes, trying to find a spot to climb, he got an idea. Could he use his mana strings?

He had made several strings over time and even used it to retrieve dropped weapons and such. In theory, he should be able to make a rope of his strings and climb up the cliffside.

Thinking it was quite a shot in the dark, he was surprised when he quickly strung together an invisible rope of mana. After practicing for a few minutes, he managed to make it longer and sturdier and even managed to hoist himself up in a tree using it.

*Damn, I am good,* Jake thought to himself as he marveled at the immense progress he had made in his mana control. He had slacked a bit recently, but with his stat growth and alchemy skills improving, he had gotten quite good without even noticing.

It still hadn't materialized as a skill, discounting Spectral Hand. He remembered that his focus on the practice came from those few words given to him by the Malefic Viper during their first meeting. Those words had opened him up to the possibility that mana control was possible outside of using it for skills.

By now, he was sure that many others had also caught on, but he still felt like he had an early-starter advantage compared to many others.

With this new mana rope, Jake managed to attach it to small protrusions on the cliffside. Climbing to those protrusions, he made another rope attached further up and slowly made his way up the cliff.

Granted, it would have likely been faster just to go back the way he came and find a more direct path, but he believed that he hadn't wasted his time in the grand scheme of things.

Finally, reaching the top, he smiled triumphantly. The ropes had dispersed already as they turned to nothing whenever they lost contact with his body. He felt like controlling mana outside the body, without him touching it, should be entirely possible. He just wasn't sure how to do it yet.

Having gotten out of the valley, he didn't delay as he rushed to the dungeon entrance.

The layout was incredibly similar to the other mountain, and he quickly reached the long passageway leading into the hollow volcano. He had a sneaking suspicion that he was in for another mountain filled with long passages whenever he entered the dungeon itself.

Only a few raptors were in his way, but they were swiftly handled with a few barrages of Splitting Arrow.

Reaching the mountain's inside, he quickly spotted the door to the dungeon and wasted no time rushing to it, placing his hand on it.

### ***Tutorial Dungeon Discovered!***

***Dungeons throughout the universe offer groups and individuals a chance to pursue strength and treasures through exploring the pocket dimensions known as dungeons. This variant is only found within the Tutorials provided by the system to newly integrated races.***

***Requirements to enter: N/A***

***Requirements to enter met.***

***WARNING: Only 5 challengers allowed per party attempting the dungeon. Only one party allowed at a time. Note that dungeons can be entered and exited at your own discretion.***

***Enter Dungeon?***

**Y/N**

The message was exactly the same as when he entered the badger dungeon. He accepted the prompt and felt his vision and body shift.

*Totally gonna be another shitty cave,* Jake joked with himself.

His sphere was the first to register his new surroundings, and it made him aware he was in a rather large open space. The next thing he felt was... a breeze? In a cave? But as his vision returned, he found himself not standing in his anticipated cave but instead on a small hill surrounded by a broad plain.

***You have entered the dungeon: Lucenti Plains***

***Objective: Defeat the Great White Stag***

He was quite honestly taken aback. The change of scenery was far more extreme than he had anticipated.

Every dungeon he had entered so far had been enclosed spaces - one an ancient temple and another a cave. But this... this was a god damn open plain - the sky above, with a large open space before him.

On his small hill, he could see a large number of beasts running around. They were groups of deer with a stag or two generally leading each small group.

The plains themselves were a mix of tall grass and open ground. The grass was easily three meters tall, where it was tallest.

Looking behind him, he saw that perhaps this space wasn't as large as he had first imagined. While it looked enormous, it soon became apparent that it was, in fact, quite limited. He saw that only a hundred meters or so behind him, the plains suddenly stopped, and it turned to stony ground.

Activating Hunter's Sight, he peered into the distance and saw only nothingness. It was like he was in an oasis in the middle of a desolate world - an oasis consisting of a plain with herds of deer running around.

Turning his attention back towards the beasts, he used Identify on one of the groups.

**[Lucenti Deer - lvl 61]**

**[Lucenti Deer - lvl 60]**

**[Lucenti Deer - lvl 62]**

### **[Lucenti Stag – lvl 65]**

Just like Badgers Den, it was the same beasts but with higher levels. The levels themselves were only slightly higher than the badgers had been, making Jake feeling quite confident.

But he quickly identified a few problems. The biggest of them soon entering his sight.

### **[Great White Stag – lvl ??]**

The beast was... majestic. He honestly had no other way to describe it. It stood drinking from a pond in the middle of the plains. It had antlers that looked like they were made out of the most delicate ivory, the purest white color covering its entire body, making it appear albino.

A bit further away were tens of deer, all split into smaller groups. Each group had a few does and a stag or two in them. They all seemed to keep a reasonable distance from the Great White Stag.

But that didn't mean it was alone. Around it were three nearly equally beautiful creatures.

Also pure white, but without the antlers. They seemed almost to give off an aura of gentleness as they stood by the stag.

Identifying them, it became clear that they were also far from ordinary beasts.

**[White Doe – lvl ??]**

**[White Doe – lvl 72]**

**[White Doe – lvl ??]**

The levels were higher than any of the other beasts besides the stag itself.

On a side-note, this identification did help confirm a theory he had about the Identify skill. He had wondered where the line between it showing question marks and the actual level appeared.

He noted that he could see the level 72, but not any of the others. This made him guess that this was likely the maximum. His current level in his race was 48, making those with quick math realize it quite easily. He had already kind of theorized it before, but now he felt pretty sure.

Jake believed that he could identify things up to 50% above his level. Meaning 72 was his current limit. But he would have to test it further to fully confirm it. If he was lucky, then one of the other does would be level 73. Of course, he needed to level up for that to matter.



Which shouldn't be a problem considering the many meat-bags of experience populating the plains.

This abundance of prey, however, led him to a second problem. Or well, the quantity itself was not the problem; the issue was what they were doing.

As he saw right away, these deer were not stationary like in the Badger's Den. Instead, they ran around, making it far too hard to pin down a group. To make matters worse, there was a good chance he would get engaged by a second group after attacking the first.

Each group of deer did not strike him as particularly powerful. They were the same deer and stags that he had hunted many of before, save for their higher level, and even without his new Scales of the Malefic Viper, he felt like he was more than capable of hunting them.

But that didn't mean he was eager to engage an army of the beasts.

He decided to take his time to observe from where he stood. It didn't take him long to notice that there seemed to be a pattern to their movements. The same routes were followed, as paths had been made in the tall grass.

From where he stood, he couldn't see exactly where to and from they were running due to the damn grass.

He tried marking one of them with Mark of the Ambitious Hunter as he followed it. He noticed it going into an area he couldn't see due to the tall grass where it stopped. It didn't move for a good twenty minutes before Jake got impatient. He felt like he was wasting his time just sitting there.

Sneaking down from the hill, he decided to put his Basic Stealth to the test as he entered the tall grass.

He snuck towards the deer he had marked, as he made efforts to avoid the other groups as they ran around. However, this was a relatively short journey as he noticed that these beasts had a far larger area of engagement than the badgers did. One had barely entered his sphere before it seemed to become alert and turn its attention his way.

The rest of its group also stopped up as they looked into the tall grass where he was hiding. Jake tried to make himself smaller as he stood utterly still. In his sphere, he could see the deer move its ears back and forth as its nose sniffed the air.

Jake controlled his breathing as the beasts stood there, still a good nineteen to twenty meters away from him. As the stag walked up to the edge of the tall grass, he closed his eyes as he focused on calming down his beating heart and held his breath while, at the same time, trying to suppress his own aura.

Slowly lowering himself to the ground, he made sure not to rustle any of the stalks of grass as he lay flat on his stomach. This turned out to be the right decision as a beam of light cut through the air where his chest had been only seconds before.

Through pure willpower, he managed not even to twitch an eyelid as the unexpected attack swept across the grass above him, cutting off the upper half. The cut-off grass fell down as it collapsed, covering the completely unmoving Jake.

Having not hit anything seemed to satisfy the stag that had fired the beam as it did a bellow to its followers, making them move on.

Jake, now entirely covered in the fallen grass, did not budge, but a small smile could be seen on his face. Not just because he had avoided a potentially shitty situation, but because of the system message he just got.

**\*Skill Upgraded\*:[*Basic Stealth (Inferior)*] --> [*Advanced Stealth (Common)*]**

He honestly didn't feel like he had done much to deserve the upgrade. Then again, his archery had a similar upgrade just because he thought about how to do archery for a bit.

Looking at the new description, not much had changed.

***[Advanced Stealth (Common)] – The deadliest blow is the one not seen coming. A proven artisan in the arts of stealth, you have learned to stay undetected far better than a mere novice. You now find it even easier to blend into the environment, waiting for just the right moment to strike. Adds a minor bonus to the effect of agility and perception while successfully remaining undetected.***

It was clear to him that it was just a straight-up upgrade. Upgrading stealth had not been on his to-do list, but it was welcome for sure.

Thinking back, he had actually done a lot of sneaking around in the tutorial. He had crept around the dinosaur-filled mountains, and his time in the outer area had consisted of him trying not to be found by other humans.

He also had a theory that prior knowledge did play in quite a bit. Just like with his archery, Jake did, inadvertently, have some experience on how to sneak. Something he suspected most people who liked to stay up too late in their parents' house had.

However, Jake's thoughts on the implications of the upgrade were interrupted as he was brought back to reality. The stag he had marked earlier had started moving once more.

Taking it as his cue to stop wasting time, he started sneaking towards the spot where it had been sitting still for a good half an hour.

Managing to stay undetected for the rest of the trip, he soon found himself overlooking a small downward slope into a mini-valley of sorts. The middle of the valley contained a spring and a pond not unlike the one the Great White Stag was at.

From where he was hiding, no deer was close enough to spot him. He, however, had a clear view of the pond and the animals around it. The stag that had nearly discovered him was currently drinking some of the water along with its compatriots.

Jake briefly considered attacking them but decided against it. It was too risky with the groups running around. Instead, he made a trip around the clearing, finding to his surprise that no deer was within a few hundred meters.

At the same time, he felt that his mark had stopped once more. It was a good kilometer to the north of the pond he was currently at, making Jake take a risk and rush towards it, still hidden in the tall grass.

It didn't take him long to get there, discovering yet another, almost identical, valley and pond. His marked deer was happily drinking the water, just like the deer at the other pond.

Once more, he decided to wait a bit when an idea of what was going on occurred. Which proved to be the right idea as the group stopped drinking and left once more - this time towards the big pond in the center with the White stag.

Less than a minute later, a new group of deer appeared, this time from the north. Which meant it was not the same one that had nearly spotted him earlier.

Jake decided to make his way back to the pond he was at before, at which he discovered a new group of deer. A few minutes later, they too left, running back towards the center pond. And waiting five minutes or so, a new group appeared.

*Yeah, I think I got it,* Jake thought to himself.

It was pretty simple. At any point, only a single group would ever be at a pond, and every time they would stay there for a good 20-30 minutes. Afterward, they would either move on to the next pond or return to the middle and then a new group would appear within a few minutes.

With each pond being isolated, this was without a doubt the intended design. The ponds were the killing area, and Jake was on a timer to take down every group before the next one would come. At least that was the theory that Jake was sticking to.

As the group left the pond, Jake waited patiently for the next one to arrive. It was time to put his theory to the test.

## Chapter 77: Pondering on ponds

The wait was short as he heard the sound of cloven hooves hitting the ground. Soon he saw a group of deer approach the pond, just like all the others had. But the fate of these beasts would not be just another peaceful drink.

He had already prepared his arrows with poison aplenty, and his resources were full, which meant it was killing time.

Jake saw no reason to delay his attack as he stood up from his hiding place and took out his bow. Nocking an arrow and drawing the string, he started charging an Infused Powershot, aiming for the stag in the middle.

The moment he started charging the mana, they all turned towards him in a startle to his slight surprise. He was a good sixty meters away, far further than he expected for them to notice him.

His reaction, however, was swift as he released the arrow. Despite them noticing him, it still hadn't even been a second from them turning their heads to an arrow arriving, penetrating the skull of the stag before it had a chance to mount a defense.

Despite the damage, Jake had not actually managed to kill the beast. However, he had managed to temporarily disable it, as it staggered and fell down on its hind legs.

With their leader out of commission, the four remaining deer briefly showed confusion before they charged towards him in unison. An expected response, as they were met with a barrage of Splitting Arrows.

Without their leader and designated healer, the deer had a hard time putting up a proper fight. Two fell before they even reached him, and a third one died as Venomfang stabbed it in the abdomen, releasing deadly toxins.

Before he got the opportunity to finish off the last beast, a light fell over it, making its wounds heal at a visible rate - the damn stag had gotten up once more, and from the looks of it, it was completely unharmed.

*Bloody healers*, Jake complained as he kept fighting the deer.

The fight quickly got prolonged, as he time and time again failed to land fatal blows due to the stag erecting barriers, and whatever damage he did inflict got healed right away. The damn stag didn't even try to attack Jake a single time, seemingly satisfied with just healing the deer.

The standstill continued for a good five minutes before the stag started running low on mana. Jake had been OK with just slowly draining the beast, as the deer had yet to do any damage to him. He knew the Necrotic Poison, and the toxin from Venomfang wasn't that easily healed.

He had been honed against far more challenging opponents. While the deer was stronger than most beasts, it was still weak compared to an Alpha Badger. And Jake had only grown stronger since he faced off against those.

When the final barrier shattered under his dagger and penetrated the neck of the deer, it collapsed with a yelp as the venom took hold. A swift stab with his sword finished it off before turning his attention back towards the stag. He had expected it to be already charging his way but was taken aback by what it did instead.

It ran. It bloody ran. Ran back towards the center pond, aka back towards the location of the Great White Stag.

*Shit*

. Jake pulled out his bow once more, simultaneously focusing his senses on the Mark of the Ambitious Hunter he had just placed on the stag. Nocking his arrow, he drew the string as the beast disappeared from his sight, hidden by the tall grass.



The paths created by the beasts were not straight lines, far from it. But luckily Jake knew precisely where the thing was even without a direct line of sight.

He took his time to line up the shot. When it felt just right, he released the arrow, as it exploded forward. The grass was parted like the Red Sea as it tore through everything in its path. The stag didn't even register it coming before it was hit in its hind, penetrating through its midsection, out the neck.

With it out of mana and far from in optimal condition, this spelled instant death. Jake barely saw it all happen before the grass flowed back into its original place, obstructing his view once more. But the notification of the kill was all he needed to confirm his success.

***\*You have slain [Lucenti Stag - lvl 67] - Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 94000 TP earned\****

***\*'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 48 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 49 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

Finally, getting some levels again felt great. It was weird, considering he had leveled less than a day ago, but after his trip into the badger dungeon, he had gotten impatient with his leveling speed. He felt like he needed more, and he needed it faster.

Fighting prey far above his level, coupled with Mark of the Ambitious Hunter, undoubtedly helped him level far faster. He wasn't sure of how big the bonus was, as it just said that it gave him bonus experience whenever he killed a marked target higher level than himself. It wasn't like he got an exact number of experience earned per kill, to begin with. Could it even be quantified into a number?

But he did make it a habit to mark every beast before he killed it. It barely had any cost to use, and the effects were more than worth it just for the damage.

The duration seemed partly based on his enemy's level, making it expire faster on stronger foes. He had tested it while doing alchemy by just marking the highest leveled thing he could find and then just leave it be. He had considered just marking the Great White Stag but decided against it as he would likely have to swap it around a lot.

His intuition told him facing the Great White Stag with his current strength was a bad idea. But the deterrence was not absolute. It was like he had first felt as he stood before an Alpha Badger. It would be a bad idea, but it was not impossible. But banking on getting a skill upgrade just in time to win the fight like with his first Alpha wasn't exactly a reliable tactic.

Not that it mattered currently. Jake had ample time to gain more levels from all the beasts running around before he would have to face the big boss.

There was one thing that intrigued him, though. The ponds that the deer seemed to patrol around. One still needed sustenance at E-grade, but it seemed like overkill to go about drinking it all the time. Jake himself barely needed to eat and drink anymore, making the fact that these deer drank all the time suspicious, to say the least.

It didn't take him long to discover why, as he made his way to the pond. The water was as clear as it could get, but that wasn't the important part. It gave off an aura and even a faint feeling from his Sense of the Malefic Viper. He decided to use Identify on it to confirm his suspicions.

***[Lucenti Water (Common)] – Water infused with strong light-affinity mana, making it purer and hold certain magical properties. Can be used as an ingredient in many alchemical recipes or simply consumed in its raw form to restore mana for those possessing the light affinity.***

His Identify yielded him quite the information, once more proving the worth of his knowledge-related alchemy skills.

What he couldn't explain, however, was the feeling from his Sense of the Malefic Viper. It was only a faint sensation, but it was clearly there. It was telling him a herb was nearby. But the water was clear, with not a single living thing within it.

Several shining rocks were scattered on the bottom, but his Identify didn't give him any proper response.

On a closer inspection, he found what may be the explanation for the trace energy of herbs in the water. On the pond's side, submerged half a meter or so, several small holes were hidden. They were nearly impossible to see with one's eyes, but his Sphere of Perception made them clear as day.

But what was more important was where the holes were leading. They were clearly extending towards the center pond. Which would mean that whatever was infusing this water with mana would likely be found in there.

For now, however, he focused on this pond. He wanted the shiny rocks, and he wanted the water. While he couldn't identify the stones, he could feel the mana in them. The water itself was at least a common-rarity alchemical reagent that he was sure to find a use for at some point. He still had a library worth of books, and there was sure to be something on light-affinity water.

Speaking of affinities, Jake did wonder what exactly was required for obtaining an affinity. Or if it was even something one obtained. More specifically, he wondered how one unlocked the skills. Currently, he had the nature-affinity offered from his class, but that was still the only one.

*I can figure that out later*, Jake thought to himself as he started collecting the water and stones. However, it didn't go as planned as when he touched the water; it felt like his hand got scalded.

Grimacing, he pulled back his hand and saw that it had turned red. He had even lost a few health points. *Well, there goes my plan for trying to drink it.*

His body clearly disagreed with the water, but he was still adamant about collecting it. The water would hurt his skin, but he would like to see it hurt his scales. The dark green scales soon covered his hands and arms as he took out one of the barrels he had 'borrowed' from the challenge dungeon.

Luckily the water didn't affect the wooden barrel, so it was easily stored. The water still clearly tried to burn Jake's hand but was utterly unable to harm the scales. This meant that he safely collected two barrels of the water and the stones - stones, which also tried to burn his hand.

*Pretty sure having the light-affinity is off the table*, he sighed as he put the collected items into his spatial storage.

As he prepared to head onward, he spotted something out the corner of his eye. A deer had come from the north path and was currently staring at him... and the four dead does around him. It was with a group of two other deer and a single stag.

He was, however, once more surprised at its action. Instead of attacking, it charged towards the path leading towards the center pond. Simultaneously, the two other does headed towards Jake, as the stag started charging up its antlers.

With no time to consider the situation further, he took out his bow and focused on the doe running towards the center. He didn't need his intuition to tell him that letting it get away would result in a bad time - a very bad time.

He marked the beast as he fired a quickly charged Infused Powershot. The shot flew true as it struck the doe in its hind leg, the impact cutting the limb off.

To his displeasure, this didn't stop the beast as it managed to get up quickly and continued limping forward. He wanted to shoot another arrow but was interrupted by the two deer closing in on him.

Every second counted as the fleeing deer got further and further away. Jake decided not to risk anything as he tried to disengage from the beasts attacking him.

He used his rather unassuming skill Badger Jump to fire straight up into the air in a flash of inspiration. Followed by a Shadow Vault, he became ethereal as he made it even further up. Perhaps a bit further than he had planned.

The entire dungeon lay bare before him as he looked down. He had wanted to jump out of reach but had managed to get a good hundred meters up instead. It wasn't the plan, but Jake didn't have time to consider his horrid estimation of his own ability to travel vertically as he quickly locked onto the still running doe below him.

With ample time as he fell, he fired an Infused Powershot down towards it. It soared through the air and hit the beast right on its back, utterly smashing it into the ground. He didn't need the notification to know that it was dead.

Not that his problems were solved just like that. He still faced the minor issue called gravity as he accelerated downwards. He did take advantage of his falling, as he fired a strong Splitting Arrow that split into nine as it rained down on the two does awaiting him below.

The stag managed to block two of them with barriers, but the rest cut into the two beasts. The moment before Jake hit the ground; he took out his Venomfang and Shortsword of Icy Winds.

He impacted not the ground, but the top of one of the beasts, as he managed to take advantage of their momentary confusion caused by the arrows. Two downward thrusts penetrated deep, as the joint force of his fall and his high strength tore into the beast.

His forearms smashed into the deer just before his legs hit the ground. The deer smashed into the soil from the impact, taking the main brunt of the damage as it softened Jake's fall. Not to say that Jake had gotten off completely unscathed.

The fall resulted in both of his legs hurting like hell, his forearms being bruised, and his wrists aching. The deer was, of course, completely and utterly dead. The other one... not so much.

Still not wholly prepared, Jake got kicked by the remaining deer, stumbling to the side. It hurt, but the damage was minimal as the beast didn't have time to put proper force behind the blow.

Mildly annoyed, Jake swung his weapons following his Twin Fang Style, slicing and stabbing the beast again and again. The stag was still healing it, but Jake had learned his lesson. The slow and steady approach would only lead to more reinforcements coming.

While circling the deer, Jake finally saw his chance. After a solid stab, Jake shifted the situation by kicking the deer, launching himself backward in the direction of the stag.

A Shadow Vault borrowing the momentum accelerated him towards his new target as he brought down his vicious attacks once more. The stag had a far harder time healing the wounds inflicted on itself when it had to at the same time focus on avoiding fatal blows. Jake wasn't holding anything back either, as he stabbed Venomfang up through its jaw, penetrating all the way through to the brain.

The blow made the beast unable to cast its spells any longer, which in turn allowed him to finish it off swiftly. The assault had happened in only a few seconds, giving the deer no

chance to come to help the stag. Not that it stopped the doe from still attacking, netting it a quick death as it had lost its designated healer.

With no remaining beasts alive, Jake retreated back into the tall grass. If his prediction were correct, then a new batch of deer would soon arrive. So all he had to do was wait patiently and observe from a safe distance.

The wait took twenty-five minutes, but unlike the usual group appearing, he instead saw the enormous white form of a stag towering above all the other beasts.

It turned out the big boss had arrived to check out the crime scene.

## Chapter 78: Introspection

The otherwise peaceful pond was now disturbed by blood and dead beasts - a situation that seemed to not sit well with the Great White Stag as it slowly walked in.

Jake was a bit more than a hundred meters away at this point, as he observed from a small hill. His head barely popped up to the top of the grass, leaving it still partly covered. He was unsure if this distance was safe, but he guessed it was. If it weren't... well, he would handle that problem if it presented itself.

The Great White Stag slowly walked around the clearing for a bit, sniffing the ground here and there and inspecting every single one of the corpses. The three does following it did



so silently, though Jake could clearly feel that they were very alert and ready to spring into action at any moment.

He couldn't help considering attacking now. The stag was alone with only its three usual followers with it. In the center, it was always surrounded by close to a hundred other beasts... but he didn't attack.

His mind told him 'yes', but his instincts and intuition gave him a resounding 'no'. Something felt off about the entire situation. Why would the big boss come here only with three followers? It seemed far too convenient.

So he waited.

The clearing's perimeter was scoured carefully by both the Great White Stag and its followers, forcing Jake to duck down a little lower. At one point, he felt his danger sense vaguely warn him that they got close. Too close.

The white stag kept sniffing around the area for a few minutes before it suddenly seemed to get bored. It bellowed at the does around it, as they all sprung into action. Jake momentarily thought he was discovered, but quickly calmed down when he saw what they were doing.

They bit into the dead deer that he had killed and started dragging them across the soil. The stag merely watched them work as they gathered up the corpses and put them all in a big pile. When they were all gathered up, the stag finally made its intentions clear as its antlers started giving off light.

Jake instantly felt it in the air. The very atmosphere seemed to change as the fake sun above darkened. The sky turned black as a bright white orb appeared - a moon.

Or, more accurately, a representation of a moon. It wasn't the moon from earth, but an entirely unblemished marble. There were no craters on it, nothing at all. It looked like a perfectly round pearl floating above. What happened next, however, made him aware that this was not merely an illusion.

The antlers of the Great White Stag pulsed with mana and light as the moon above came alive. A beam descended on the pile of corpses less than a second later, enveloping it entirely. It had to have a radius of at least 3 or 4 meters, with a mana intensity far above anything Jake had ever seen before. Discounting whatever the Malefic Viper had done, of course.

A few seconds later, the light stopped just as abruptly as it came. What was left was... nothing. Not a single piece of the beasts remained, not even a single drop of blood on the grass. Which lead to the second point... the grass was completely untouched. In fact, it seemed to have more vitality than before the light descended.

With its work done, the stag's antlers stopped glowing as the sky returned to normal. With its does in tow, it sauntered back towards the center pond once more.

Jake was left astonished by the display. The power behind it was above what he had imagined. But what was even more incredible was how the hell the beast had done it. He had a pretty good sense for mana by now, but whatever the hell it did, it didn't do entirely with its own power. It was like it had pulled pure unadulterated power out of nothing.

That, or it had somehow amplified whatever mana it did use to create a bigger phenomenon. Like how a single spark could lead to a house burning down, it too had merely released a spark starting the entire process.

He knew that the power he released from his Infused Powershot was more than just the sum of its parts. The system amplified it, but whatever the Great White Stag did was on an entirely different level. There was something more behind it, but he couldn't figure it out no matter how much he thought about it.

But for some reason, despite his astonishment, he wasn't deterred at all. Its display of power was noticeable, yes, but it wasn't above and beyond what he could face. It was more the concept behind the attack that stunned him.

In fact, the display only made him more excited to face it eventually. To discover what more it would have in store for him. For him to overcome it. But first, he still had a lot of other deer to kill. He could likely wait at the pond for another group to appear but decided to head north instead.

He would move swiftly from pond to pond and eliminate the groups one by one. Then finally, he would strike at the Great White Stag. Based on the number of enemies, he should easily reach level 50 in his class before the final battle, giving him yet another edge.

With a plan and tremendous motivation, he dove into the tall grass, already looking forward to the next battle.

William dreamt as he experienced memory after memory. Of the things he had done in the past and how he had dealt with it. Countless visions of his behavior and rationalization superimposed on each other, forcing him to reflect on his path, whether he liked to or not.

He remembered how he had killed his brother, the pain he had inflicted upon his parents, and all those he had hurt through his actions. The nurse who got fired and sued, the people he had manipulated to get what he wanted.

In some ways, emotions could be considered a weakness. In certain scenarios, they could lead you astray or to make the wrong decision at the wrong time. Get emotional and do something you would come to regret.

William had only two memories, where the emotions felt truly real. One was when Herrmann died, and the other was during the final battle. Where he had, for the first time ever, felt hatred and killing someone not for pragmatic reasons, but because he truly wanted that person dead.

How he, in the final moments, had displayed strength above and beyond what he should be able to. But it was chaotic. Uncontrolled. Too close to the weakness that led to the escalated war. The suicidal actions of Hayden and even Herrmann himself.

No, William would transcend above that because the dreams made something absolutely clear to him. *This* tutorial was *his* to claim, his foundation to build his power upon. He felt the whispers in the back of his mind, guiding him. The specter of Herrmann proudly showing him his rightful path.

William understood. Through this, he could reach beyond perfection because that was his destiny.

Jacob sat cross-legged in the square, surrounded by all the other survivors of their camp. He was speaking of hope and bringing up the spirits of the people.

Most of them had been non-combatants, to begin with. Most of the survivors were middle-aged office workers who never had any desire to fight. They were understandably distraught after the death of every single combatant except for Bertram. And it wasn't like he had ever been a top fighter.

But with his new class, all of that had changed. The hopeless had turned to an optimistic view of the future. Jacob spoke of the wonders of the system, the existence of gods, and how he had even met one. He spoke of a way out of this tutorial.

He had segued into the thought that perhaps death was not the final end. Everyone knew of religious messages, and with gods being a real thing, it led many to the natural conclusion of an afterlife existing. At first, he had met resistance, but as he got better, so did he get more convincing.

He had also disclosed his new class, not by name, but by function. He had called himself a guide of sorts. To prove his claims, he had enlisted Bertram's help to teach him a bit about combat. Just the theoretical stuff.

With this knowledge, he had taught the warriors, and in only a few hours, one of them got a level - a class level. The survivor was only at level 14 before he leveled, but it did prove the possibility of leveling a class without fighting. Which was, of course, another source of hope.

As for Jacob himself, well, his progress was on another level.

***\*'DING!' Class: [Augur of Hope] has reached level 36 - Stat points allocated, +8 free points\****

In only a few days, he had gained 11 levels. From merely talking and teaching. He was ecstatic at the new possibilities opened up before him, and his enthusiasm for the system and his new class only seemed to speed up his progress further.

As one knows, an engaged and interested teacher is far better than a bored one. And Jacob was at the peak of interest.

At level 30, he had also earned another skill that only helped him further.

***[Enlightenment of the Holy Pantheon (Epic)] - Blessed by the Holy Mother herself, you have become her spokesperson among your race. To fulfill your role, you must know what to teach. Grants knowledge of the teachings of the Holy Church directly from the Holy Pantheon itself. Increase the effect of all light-affinity mana. Grants a karmic path connecting you with the Holy Pantheon.***

When he gained the skill, he felt an influx of knowledge like never before. He suddenly knew of many gods, and of course also of the Holy Mother herself. It was only surface-information about the specific members, but he did discover that the Pantheon consisted of many gods, with the Holy Mother being the supreme leader.

What he gained the most, however, was the knowledge of their teachings. Teachings of compassion and working together. Of the importance of cohesion and in guiding others towards a greater path. Teachings against the chaos that so often ruled.

To embrace fate and move to realize one's true destiny.

It was a path of order. To be civilized and taking care of one another. Compared to the tutorial nightmare, this path was far more aligned with the old rules of earth. But it did have some rather significant differences.

First of all, the act of killing was viewed as a necessity. In the end, the system was supreme, and to advance, combat and killing had to be done.

But it also recognized that perhaps not all were fit for killing and fighting. Instead, these people could support the warriors. They could walk the path of professions and only pick up their weapons in the greatest of emergencies.

The teachings were not complicated at all. They were simple and easy to understand. Like a normal religious text, the skill also granted Jacob a plethora of stories to tell - stories that exemplified the teachings.

Most important out of all of the teachings was the power of faith. The possibilities opened to mortals through aligning themselves with gods - the synergetic relationship between a god and his or her followers. The god and their followers acting as teachers and guides. Leading the mortals towards a brighter future, while the god would be supplied with even more followers and the power of faith.

The knowledge given by the system was far from complete. It was like a study-guide of information he could now access, giving him something to go through whenever he used his newly gained Meditation skill.

Jacob had also received something he didn't expect to. After he became an Augur and determined himself to lead them, the system responded as it gave him a quest.

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

**Objective: Become a respected leader of at least 95% of the other humans during the tutorial.**

**Current progress: 98%**

**Quest Completed!**

**Reward given upon the conclusion of the tutorial.**

After he got the quest, it only took a day to complete it. He didn't know if getting the quest was a good or bad thing, but he chose to believe it was good.



Looking out at the fervent believers in front of him, Jacob smiled, satisfied. All of them had come to follow him, and in turn, the Holy Church. It was incredible how easily people grab on to the slightest shred of hope in what they otherwise believed to be hopeless situations.

His only regret was the knowledge that this hope sadly wouldn't last... the fate of every single one of them, himself included, had already been written.

## Chapter 79: Moment of Curiosity

Jake dismissed his bow as the stag fell to the ground, never to move again. The fights with the beasts had only gotten more comfortable as he got accustomed to all their tactics and fighting styles. In the end, they were just beasts, making their strategies repetitive and straightforward. It had started getting a bit boring as they stopped being real challenges.

But at least the experience was good. Only four ponds cleared out, and Jake had reached his first goal.

***\*'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 50 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 50 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

He waited for a few moments after the notifications. After a few seconds, it became disappointingly clear that he wouldn't get anything for getting his race to level 50. He had kind of hoped to get some amazing bonus or something. At least a skill or something. His only consolation was that his class, of course, didn't disappoint.

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

Yet again, he decided to take the slow approach and go through the skills one by one. He quickly dove into the tall grass once more as he hid far away from any potential enemies. The pattern of other deer coming to investigate the pond he had just cleared was sure to repeat itself.

When he found a safe spot, he sat down and entered meditation as he went through the skills. He was low on both stamina and mana anyway.

He had a total of five new skills to pick from. The maximum he could be offered. The first one not being overly exciting, though.

***[Stealth Attack (Common)] – The most decisive blow is the one not seen coming before it is too late. Increase the power of the first attack made to an otherwise unaware foe. Works with both ranged and melee attacks. Adds a minor bonus to the effectiveness of agility and strength when using Stealth Attack.***

He was ninety-nine percent sure this one came from him advancing his stealth. He could see the usefulness of the skill, but the common-rarity tag just put him off. He was sure

that he could get better at some point. If he advanced stealth more, chances were new skills would follow suit.

So he skipped it as he swiftly moved on to yet another common-rarity skill.

***[Grappling Shot (Common)] – Getting to the right vantage point or merely climbing whatever impedes you is invaluable to any hunter when hunting his prey. Shoot an arrow with a string of mana attached. The arrow will easily stick to any surface it encounters without doing any notable damage to said surface. Adds a minor bonus to the effectiveness of agility and wisdom when using Grappling Shot.***

This one was at least a bit more interesting. Jake assumed he unlocked it through his small rock-climbing session and by his constant use of mana strings. But while the way he had unlocked it was interesting, the skill itself was not.

Discounting any fantasies of cosplaying as a vigilante in a bat costume, he didn't see many practical uses. If he really needed to climb something badly, he could just use the same tactic he used before.

The only other exciting thing he could find about the skill was that it scaled with wisdom and agility like his Shadow Vault of Umbra. Not that it had any effect on his decision to skip it over. His next option at least looked quite a bit better.

***[Descending Fang (Uncommon)] – A fang descending like the clamping mouth of a snake. Do a downward strike with a melee weapon, significantly increasing penetrative power and damage inflicted. Damage improved further if the weapon is benefitting from Twin Fang Style. Adds a small bonus to the effectiveness of agility and strength when using Descending Fang.***

This was the first true melee skill he had been offered that he would have to use actively. The skill was also clearly linked to Twin Fang Style and was likely also influenced by his liberal use of Venomfang.

The skill itself was without a doubt useful. Jake's favorite move was to stab, to begin with, and it also made applying the venom far more effective. Besides, it was far more suitable for stabbing than cutting with the dagger formed like a sharpened fang. Hence the name Venomfang.

To say the skill didn't tempt him would be a lie. It fit right into his style, and it would prove incredibly useful. He decided to reserve judgment, though, until he had also checked out the last two skills. The first of which was also incredibly interesting.

***[Conjure Spectral Weaponry (Uncommon)] – One does not need to carry a weapon if they can manifest one at any time. Summon a replication of any weapon used prior composed solely of mana. Only the form of the weapon is replicated, and it does not retain any enchants or material integrity. The summoned arms' power and durability are based on wisdom and the mana expended during their creation.***

This one likely had similar roots to the Grappling Shot skill. Jake's mana practice, to be more exact. He also had the option to learn Spectral Hand in his profession, so it was pretty clear that his improvements were recognized.

As for the skill itself? It was useful for sure, but Jake nevertheless felt unsure. There were many unanswered questions, such as how well the conjured weapons would hold up to his current gear and other details, such as how long it took to summon things.

His quiver took a few seconds per arrow, and if the speed of conjuration from the skill were anything close to that, it would prove pretty useless in combat. It took him practically no time to dismiss and summon things from his spatial storage, making that far more effective.

And, of course, there was the last point. Jake felt like he could do what the skill did without it. He could learn how to make a bow or a dagger from mana. Not that he felt anywhere close to able to do that, but his mana strings' tangibility and strength got more robust by the day.

Which left the last skill - one that felt very familiar.

***[Bestial Survival Instincts (Rare)] – The Ambitious Hunter has learned from the beasts he hunts and can now imitate their superhuman senses. Has a small chance to feel a distinct sense of danger from any attack, and improved reaction time for a brief duration after triggering the effect. Adds a small bonus to the chance and the accuracy of the extra sense based on perception.***

The skill seemed just to explain what his bloodline ability already did, though in more detail and from the description, just straight-up worse. It only had a chance to activate, and it improved his reaction time? His bloodline already did both of those things far better.

But if he took the skill in isolation, ignoring his bloodline, it would surely be useful for someone that wasn't him. His danger sense helped him immensely in combat and helped him gauge how strong a blow would be before it hit him, as well as warn him of any attacks he hadn't seen coming.

Thinking back, he remembered many of the beasts he was hunting to have some kind of danger sense. But none of the humans he had fought had it. Perhaps it was just something many creatures got, but humans had to pick special skills for. Or maybe it came with levels as one's combat instincts were honed.

The best example of a beast with the skill had to be the Alpha Badgers and the Den Mother. Both of those showed near precognition-level power to react, though he would still call it far less reliable than his own. It seemed to not really differentiate between harmless attacks and lethal ones, like how the Alpha dodged a random glass bottle tossed at it.

Yet despite all these cons, Jake got curious. How exactly would the skill work for him? Would it improve his already existing abilities? Double-down on the same, and just give him massive headaches from two danger senses activating at the same time? Maybe just do nothing?

Jake couldn't help but be attracted to the skill, like it resonated with him somehow. His intuition didn't really give him any details as to what would happen either. He did, however, get the feeling that it wouldn't bring him any harm to get it.

He went through the list once more and hovered a bit on one of the skills he had passed over at level 40. There was still the one rare skill that offered him better mental defenses. It was attractive for sure... but it just didn't excite him that much.

There was also the active camouflage... but at the point he began thinking about taking that, the thought of what would happen from picking Bestial Survival Instincts had already overwhelmed him.

In the end, curiosity got the better of him. *Well, here goes nothing.*

***\*Gained Skill\*: [Bestial Survival Instincts (Rare)] – The Ambitious Hunter has learned from the beasts he hunts and can now imitate their superhuman senses. Has a small chance to feel a distinct sense of danger from any attack, and improved reaction time for a brief duration after triggering the effect. Adds a small bonus to the chance and the accuracy of the extra sense based on perception.***

The second he gained the skill, he initially didn't feel much except for the cold sensation of instinctual knowledge of how the skill worked enter him - just like with every other skill. The feeling, however, quickly changed as he felt a warmth spring up. He began to have a vague sense of annoyance at the new skill, an annoyance that soon turned to disdain.

Distinctly he heard the sound of his heartbeat.

**THUMP!**

The sound felt all-encompassing. The sound didn't come from his physical heart, but something deeper within.

**THUMP!**

The warmth got more intense as he felt like his blood was heating up, but it didn't feel uncomfortable in the least, but more like something within him had stirred. Like the intrusion of this new skill upon the domain of his bloodline had awoken it. Angered it and him. He felt angry, as if he wanted to just rip the skill right out of his status menu.

**THUMP!**

The feeling kept increasing as the heartbeat continued. Time itself seemed to stand still as the system message appeared.

**\*Synergy Detected\***

**Due to your bloodline, the skill *[Bestial Survival Instincts (Rare)]* is evolving.**

**\*Skill Upgraded\*: *[Bestial Survival Instincts (Rare)] --> [Extreme Bestial Survival Instincts (Epic)]***

He read the message as the warm flow increased, but he didn't feel any better at all as even more instinctual knowledge began to enter his brain. His heartbeat showed no intentions of stopping either.

**Due to your bloodline, the skill *[Extreme Bestial Survival Instincts (Epic)]* is evolving.**



**\*Skill Upgraded\*: *[Extreme Bestial Survival Instincts (Epic)] --> [Supreme Bestial Survival Instincts (Ancient)]***

Once more knowledge came, and once more, he found it wanting. It was weak, a downgrade. *Not good enough.*

**Due to your bloodline, the skill *[Supreme Bestial Survival Instincts (Ancient)]* is evolving. Maximum rarity reached. Evolution unsuccessful.**

Jake finally felt the warmth slow down as the skill seemed to cap out. The knowledge entered his head throughout the entire process as he got a far better understanding of the skill and its full evolutionary path.

A logical part of him knew that it was a great skill, but that part of him wasn't what was in the forefront. No, that part of him that was his more impulsive and instinctual side, wasn't satisfied. It was still so weak. Inferior to what he already had, what he already was. A lesser part of himself that he had no need for, that was better off culled.

**THUMP!**

A heartbeat that reverberated through his entire soul, sending out a pulse of energy. The warmth returned with a fury, unwilling to give any room for the new skill. His bloodline had been challenged; its territory entered without permission. And like a primal beast, it refused to give any leeway - a fact the system quickly recognized.

***\*Synergy detected\****

***Congratulation! Your [Supreme Bestial Survival Instincts (Ancient)] has successfully transformed.***

***\*Skill transformed\*: [Supreme Bestial Survival Instincts (Ancient)] --> [Moment of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)]***

***Congratulation! You have successfully created a new Legendary skill. A great accomplishment for any being, but even more so one still so early on their path.***

***Title: [Legendary Prodigy] earned.***

Jake instantly knew that now it was truly over; his bloodline had won.

No, that wasn't right. *He* had won. Jake's face was grimacing with a toothy smile as blood trickled down his neck from biting himself in a fury before. A brilliant smile of victory - his fists closed, blood hitting the ground from him clenching his fists so hard.

He felt like he had just wrestled a mighty beast to the ground. Like he had continuously dominated it despite all its struggle.

The windfall from his moment of curiosity was immense. The warm flow disappeared a few moments later. He felt more powerful than ever before, and it didn't take him long to locate the source as his new title.

***[Legendary Prodigy] – A true talent standing at the pinnacle of his generation. Young, yet showing promise above even the elders of yore. Due to your immense accomplishment of creating a legendary skill while still below D-grade, you have proven yourself a true legendary prodigy. +10 all stats +10% all stats.***

The title was as good as his Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing. A title he had gotten from being blessed by a literal god.

An extra +10 in all stats was... immense, granting him a total of 90 stat points right off that bat. This was, of course, ignoring the 10% to all stats. As with the other titles, it worked additively, putting the percentage increase on top of the bonuses he already had. Not that it made the bonus any less massive. That 10% represented an increase of a few hundred total stats - a bonus that would only grow as he did.

Jake couldn't help but briefly feel like the title wasn't earned. It had been luck and pure coincidence.

But then again, could he genuinely claim that? It was due to himself that he got the bonus. It was what he was that made it possible. His bloodline was a part of him; it would be like blaming himself for being good at archery because he had functional arms. Besides... it wasn't the first time he had been called a prodigy.

As for the skill itself... Jake wouldn't dare to complain.

***[Moment of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)] – Instincts ascended to touch upon the concept of time itself. Through your supernatural instinct for survival, you seize the moment of crisis and turn it into one of opportunity. Momentarily slows down time if a blow would otherwise deal substantial damage to the hunter. The hunter is unaffected by the slowdown and can move uninhibited for the duration. Has an internal cooldown between each activation. Effect and internal cooldown of the skill are based on perception.***

He honestly had no idea what to think about it. From the description, he couldn't imagine it being weak, but at the same time, he had no idea exactly how powerful it would be. He knew that the rarity of skill alone wouldn't instantly make it the best, but often also had a lot to do with the skill's complexity... and from the looks of it, this one was pretty complex, right?

The skill said that it "touched upon the concept of time itself" ... did that mean it literally controlled time? That it wasn't just his instincts going into overdrive or something like that?

He had felt the momentary slowdown when a blow approached. It was something familiar; the brain goes into overdrive when one is in danger. A usual concept, even before the system. An idea that he had apparently brought to an entirely new level.

Separated by the endless void, two gods both looked on at this, one chuckling and the other sighing, a smile still on his lips despite his despondent mood - the first cheering as the strings of fate got jumbled up once more, the second shaking his head as yet another complication appeared.

## Chapter 80: Cleaning up the plains

Jake clenched his fists together, feeling the strength in his grasp. He felt invigorated. Without a doubt, stemming from the massive influx of stats and the new skill.

Funnily enough, this was the first skill he had ever unlocked that didn't come with a single iota of knowledge. Usually, he would know at least some basic things about it. Like how to activate it, how many resources it generally consumed, potential cooldowns of the skill, and so on and so forth.

But with his Moment of the Primal Hunter, he only got what the description gave him. He understood why, though. It was a skill he had created, named after his bloodline itself. Perhaps the system didn't have the info, or it was just the normal thing to happen when one made their own skill.

Or maybe, it kind of assumed he already knew since... well, he was the creator.

He opened his status menu for the first time in quite a while, and it was starting to get quite impressive if he had to say so himself.

## **Status**

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (E) – lvl 50]

Class: [Ambitious Hunter – lvl 50]

Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 50]

Health Points (HP): 4124/4350

Mana Points (MP): 3254/5050

Stamina: 1205/2990

## Stats

Strength: 308

Agility: 414

Endurance: 299

Vitality: 435

Toughness: 308

Wisdom: 505

Intelligence: 204

Perception: 758

Willpower: 291

Free points: 0

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

**Class Skills:** [Basic One-Handed Weapons (Inferior), [Advanced Stealth (Common)], [Advanced Archery (Common)], [Hunter's Sight (Uncommon)], [Basic Twin Fang Style (Uncommon)], [Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra (Uncommon)], [Splitting Arrow (Uncommon)] [Big Game Hunter (Rare)], [Infused Powershot (Rare)], [Mark of the Ambitious Hunter (Rare)], [Moment of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)]



**Profession Skills:** [Herbology (Common)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Concoct Poison (Common)], [Alchemist's Purification (Common)], [Alchemical Flame (Common)], [Toxicology (Uncommon)], [Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Rare)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Rare)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Rare)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Rare)], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Epic)], [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)]

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

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

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

He had experienced tremendous growth across the line, the massive title being the main culprit behind it. Jake's still massively growing perception was even more insane.

Every single free point had been dumped into perception. Everything added together meant he got 9 for every level in his class and 7 for every level in his

race - a truly massive amount amplified further by a huge percentage increase, which ultimately meant Jake's perception was more than 250 points above his second-highest stat.

And so far, he hadn't regretted it. With every point in the stat, his bloodline ability grew stronger. The two last skills he had gotten in his class scaled with perception, and he felt like he could only get more skills scaling with it.

A split of his free points between strength and agility would likely have made him stronger here and now. But Jake wasn't satisfied with just being strong here and now. He knew there was an entire world out there to explore and that this tutorial would only be a minor point in his life. If he survived, of course. And if he didn't... well, who cares? If he died, he wouldn't be able to feel regretful anyway.

The fact that his new legendary skill scaled with perception did make it all a little bit better too. He would still have to test it in actual combat, but since it required him to be in potentially deadly danger, it wasn't something he could just practice.

This dungeon wasn't ideal for it either. The deer constantly moved around and the ever-looming danger of the Great White Stag appearing in the middle of a practice session, quite frankly made it a terrible training ground.

Not that the prospect was as scary as it was only a few minutes ago. Even before this power-up, Jake felt confident in facing the beast in one on one combat. Now even more so.

But first, he had to finish his meditation. Running out of stamina in the middle of a fight would make any power-ups irrelevant after all. Before he entered meditation, he chugged a stamina potion, restoring a good portion.

Cutting off the outside world, he started meditating. He felt his regeneration speed up as more energy started condensing within. Where exactly all the energy was stored, he still didn't know. But if he had to guess, it had to be in some metaphysical way, just like how his bloodline didn't actually seem to have anything to do with actual blood.

Taking advantage of the fact his Sphere continued to function during meditation, Jake wasn't wholly paralyzed from doing anything productive as he practiced mana manipulation.

Speaking of the sphere, he still had no idea exactly how fast it grew in area. It had stopped at a bit less than 30 meters in all directions and been like that

even before the massive stat gain he had just gotten. What did improve, however, was the detail of what he saw.

Color was still out of the question, but mana had started getting more visible to his inner eye. It was still faint, but at least he now knew it was there and could even 'see' it. His string of mana that was invisible to the eye was visible to his sphere at least, likely due to how condensed it was, which made it far easier to practice.

Like he had done so many times before, he started making strings. The fact that mana constructs were possible was only made more evident by the Spectral Hand and Spectral Weaponry skills. And if a skill could weave it together, so could he.

Even before today, he had tried to make more complicated things. Ropes were just strings woven together, but if he wove enough together and focused on keeping them straight, he suddenly made a staff. Making the strings weave together in a sharp point, and he would have a spear.

It was simple for him to do. To create the form itself took little effort, but the problem was maintaining it. No matter how much he focused, he couldn't make the things he made more robust. They always felt fleeting, like a strong wind could blow his constructs apart.

Of course, that was ignoring the colossal problem of them instantly dissolving the moment he stopped being in physical contact with the mana. So far, he didn't see any solution to the problem, so he kept focusing on merely making his strings stronger.

His approach was simple. Push in more mana and try to condense it. If he just pushed in more mana, all he would get was to make it longer. Instead, he needed to put more mana into every individual string, squeezing it together.

The progress for that was slow but steady. To use a rope of mana as climbing gear just a few weeks ago would be a pipedream. Even lifting a dagger off the floor or use it to retrieve his bow from the ground in the Badger's Den was slightly challenging.

Waking up, he drank yet another stamina potion, nearly filling the resource pool entirely. His mana consumption was far lower during his practice than what he regenerated during meditation, allowing that pool to stay full too, which meant that he was currently in top condition.

He still had groups of deer left to slay before it was time to take on the white stag. He felt more confident now, but it was still unnecessary to engage the boss without proper preparation. Besides, who knows what tricks the beast would have up its hooves?

So he continued his hunt. A process that was only easier than before as he took down stag after stag. They weren't even a real challenge before today, now even less so.

It took him only half an hour or so in between every pond, where he quickly brought down any beast he encountered before he rushed on to the next. The Great White Stag had no way to keep up or pin him down. Every time the White Stag came upon his kills, it called down the moonbeam, which in turn told Jake exactly where the big boss currently was, making it far too easy to avoid.

Nearly an entire day later, he couldn't find any more enemies. There were seven ponds in total spread around the plains, with an eighth in the middle – the largest one. After going to all seven of them, even being slightly reckless in staying close to the natural paths between them, he still didn't find any deer.

So he went towards the middle pond. There he found what he had hoped for. A single white stag and three white does standing around - not a single other beast anywhere.

Still being a bit cautious, he decided to wait a bit to see if any more would come. He drank one final stamina potion, committing himself to wait an hour before he would engage the boss. While waiting, he entered meditation as he checked his notifications.

Quite a few levels were gained after he had killed close to a hundred enemies in less than a day, which was clearly reflected on his notification window.

***\*'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 54 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 52 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

He had gotten a bit less than he had expected. Though, with how easy it had been, he nearly felt like he had gotten more than he should have. Jake didn't know how he measured up to equally leveled people, but he sure did well even against higher-level beasts.

Then again, he did have a class suited for it. His Big Game Hunter skill gave a constant bonus to his agility and strength as he always fought higher-leveled enemies, helping him close some of the stat disparity. Besides that, he was clearly just stronger than whatever he met.

It was pretty clear to Jake that beasts grew far less in strength per level than humans like him. Or maybe it was just a result of him having a variant class and profession, while the beasts he fought were generally just more ordinary types.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to compare a human with something like the Veteran Archer class and an equivalent more common profession-upgrade.

In that same vein, it would be fairer to compare Jake to beasts like the Alpha Badgers or even the Great White Stag and the Den Mother. If he went by game-logic, then dungeon bosses should have hidden amplifiers or something to make them stronger beyond their level.



But Jake was quite sure they were just powerful variants. Jake wasn't delusional enough to believe that he had the best available class and profession imaginable. Far from it, in fact, as he thought that his class was just 'good' but not great.

However, he did have his bloodline - a power outside of classes, professions, and his race. It granted him advantages, tangible as well as intangible. His high proficiency in combat, for one thing, was made possible due to it. It likely even provided him a bunch of other benefits he hadn't even noticed yet. The recent skill upgrade and transformation just being one such example.

The next time he met the Malefic Viper, he would have to ask about bloodlines more in-depth.

Opening his eyes, he noted that it had been an hour since he had entered meditation. Not due to some magical internal clock, but because he became aware that the cooldown for drinking another potion was over.

Both his mana and stamina were above 90%, with his health being full. Jake wasn't sure what poison would work best for the Great White Stag, so he decided on his most potent kind, aka Necrotic Poison. It was the kind he had created the most of, and the type he was most confident in concocting by far.

He was, however, not quite ready to go yet. He quickly created a few more potions and poisons before initiating his final hunt to finish the dungeon. He needed to make another batch of stamina potion as well as another batch of Necrotic Poison.

Only the best was good enough for the final boss, after all.

So far, he had just used his blood infused with Blood of the Malefic Viper to coat his arrows. It was quite a bit weaker than the actual poisons, but it only consumed a bit of mana and health to use.

The concocting and brewing both went well and the created poison and potion were his best yet. They had also been his fastest creations so far, proving that his stats were not just for show when it came to his profession either.

He coated all sixty arrows in his quiver, after which he flung the quiver with now poison-soaked arrows over his shoulder. The poison would last for a while due to the often forgotten effect of Malefic Viper's Poison.

As he had gained ample levels, he attempted to Identify the beasts one last time before engaging.

**[White Doe – lvl 75]**

**[White Doe – lvl 74]**

**[White Doe – lvl 72]**

**[Great White Stag – lvl ??]**

This time it yielded results. The White Does were all at a higher level than any of the Alpha Badgers by quite a bit, but still below the Den Mother. With his current level, his maximum Identify went up to 78, meaning the Great White Stag was above that. Not surprising as the Den Mother had been 81.

Before he started meditating, he had already picked out the spot he was currently at as the ideal vantage point to attack from. It was a small hill with tall grass growing on it, with clear sight to the middle pond. Nearly 150 meters separated him from the Great White Stag, giving him ample time to land decisive blows before they could make it to him.

The Great White Stag would surely have ranged methods of attack, but Jake was confident in battling at range. The issue was the three does that - if the other does were any indication - would charge him in an attempt to engage him in melee.

Contrary to what he perhaps should, he didn't feel any fear, but only excitement. *Show me what you got.*

He summoned his bow and nocked an arrow. He felt his mana and stamina churn as he pulled back the string and activated Infused Powershot. He let the power build up as the intensity increased by the moment. The veins on his arms bulged as a visible shimmer of energy emitted from his entire body.

*Now!*

The arrow was released in an explosion of might, pushing down all the human-sized grass surrounding him, with the closest strands being utterly annihilated. It was without a doubt his most powerful Infused Powershot to date - one that the doe in its trajectory didn't notice before it was too late.