

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 81: The Great White Stag

The arrow met the doe's turning forehead, as it didn't stop in the least upon encountering the hard skull but cut through like it was made of butter. It went through the brain and, because of the upwards angle it was shot from, into the beast's neck. There, it went through its throat and out beneath its right hind leg. However, what came out at the end was not an arrow but merely a few remnants of energy.

In its wake, it left everything destroyed. The entire head blew up, and the internal organs were shredded into a paste. No amount of healing could save the doe. It was dead before any of its companions could even react.

Even if they had tried to react, they now had their own issues to deal with. Another, albeit far weaker Infused Powershot, pierced through the air right towards the Great White Stag. It managed to block it with a barrier, but the arrow still shattered it and managed to penetrate a few inches into the stag's side.

Less than a second later, a third shot arrived aimed at one of the two remaining does. Even with its reduced power, it was not to be trifled with as it hit the beast in its left front leg. The arrow pierced right through, resulting in the doe stumbling to the side.

However, the fourth arrow found no purchase as the last White Doe dodged the blow with elegance.

Jake's initial assault had held nothing back. With no regard to his stamina and mana consumption, he had managed to kill one and injure two. Despite the two damaged ones only being minor, it was enough to deliver the arrowheads' liquid death. As he observed, he could already see the necrosis setting in at a visible rate.

Not that he was about to let up just yet. The arrows continued raining down, this time with Splitting Arrows. His aim was on the already injured doe, hoping to capitalize further on its limited mobility. He delayed the splitting of the arrow as long as possible to increase accuracy, forcing it to only clone itself when it got closer - another perk of his increased ability to control energy. Finally, when it was only 30 meters from the doe, it split as Jake could no longer hold back the split's activation. But he had achieved his goal.

The first barrage managed to hit with five of the nine arrows from the split. The Great White Stag had managed to help its companion in the last moment but only blocked one of the arrows that would have hit. Sadly, the one stopped arrow was the poisoned one - a deliberate move by the stag, no doubt.

With the initial element of surprise over, the beasts started to organize themselves. The wound on the stag was already gone, its hide back to pristine condition once more. The wounded doe was also healing fast as light descended upon it, but it was not in fighting condition yet. The last White Doe had already begun its charge towards Jake.

Something that proved to be a mistake. With the distance between them and the stag still busily focused on healing, the doe was isolated with no support.

Individually the does had never been a big issue; They only got annoying to deal with with a healer behind them. Jake felt no pressure from a single isolated beast.

He kept bombarding it with arrows while it ran towards him. Every shot was a Splitting Arrow and coupled with its momentum, it was unable to avoid all of them. It did, annoyingly so, avoid every single poisoned one.

It only suffered minor injuries here and there before it was only a few dozen meters away. Jake believed he still had time to fire a few more arrows but was interrupted as the doe subverted his expectations.

In a flash of light, the doe did what Jake could only describe as teleportation. Like a beam of light, it appeared right before him - but what surprised him even more was its method of attack.

A bright blade of light was now protruding from its forehead, not an antler-shaped one, but an edge of pure energy. Its head was pointed downwards as the blade was clearly aimed towards his midsection, and with a swipe of its head, it attempted to cleave him in half.

But Jake was fast enough to react in time. He awkwardly jumped backward, resulting in the blade still cutting into his chest with its very tip. Instead of soft skin, it instead encountered dark green scales. The edge was stuck dead in its tracks, its swiping motion interrupted.

The tip of the blade chipped as the blow did nothing, clearly leaving the White Doe distraught. Capitalizing on the momentary display of weakness, his bow disappeared, and a weapon appeared in each of his hands. A sword and a fang-shaped dagger approached the beast from both sides as it still had its head lowered at an awkward angle.

In a moment of panic, the beast hesitated, which allowed him to land a solid blow. His Venomfang penetrated its neck, while his sword went for its head. It never arrived, however, as the doe was awoken from the dagger.

With a loud bellow, its entire body exploded in a flash of light. Jake felt a searing sensation on his whole body, but the blow was more physical than energy. Like a bubble expanding around the beast, he was pushed back slightly.

The flash had blinded his eyes, but he ignored it as he relied on his Sphere anyway. At first, he had believed that it had tried to blow itself up, but it seemed only to try and create some distance. The blade of light reformed as it attempted to ram him, clearly trying to take advantage of his temporary blindness.

An incorrect assumption he gladly took advantage of. Acting as if blind, Jake let it nearly hit him before he moved slightly to the side, simultaneously summoning another set of scales to protect his flank. The blade scraped under his raised right arm as its head followed suit.

He quickly brought down his arm as he put the beast in a chokehold. A Touch of Malefic Viper quickly invaded the beast's body, making it bellow once more, this time in pain.

It exploded once more in the same bubble of light, but his hold was too strong. He kept channeling the Touch as the health of the doe slowly drained.

With his other hand, he started stabbing the beast in its abdomen with his Venomfang, doing even more damage.

The doe struggled for only a few seconds, releasing light constantly as it seared Jake's unscaled skin. However, in the end, it succumbed to the constant influx of poison, wrecking it from within.

He let the beast go as it dropped lifelessly to the ground.

Not even ten seconds had passed from the moment the beast teleported before him till it died, not even allowing any of the other beasts to engage him. It had been an uneven fight from the beginning.

His eyes were still scorched, and his sphere didn't detect any enemies within it. He refocused his vital energy, healing one of his eyes as fast as he could. Opening it, everything was blurry, but it was enough to land his Mark. He landed it on the doe, which was fine as that was his next target anyway.

Summoning his bow once more, he resumed his attack. Without his eyesight, one would imagine that his accuracy would suffer immensely, but it didn't matter with his tactic. He could feel where his enemy was, and that was enough for now.

Pulling an arrow out of his quiver, he nocked it and started shooting once more. He could feel the beast's reaction instantly, meaning their attention had undoubtedly been on him. But from how slowly the doe avoided the blow, it had to still be wounded. Jake was a bit surprised the Great White Stag hadn't managed to heal it but didn't have time to question it.

Pressing his advantage, he continued firing. His ammunition was limited, but he had to make do. Rushing into melee was an option, but he preferred to buy time for now while hopefully still doing some damage. He could already feel his eyes healing.

As he fired, he focused on the movements of the doe. Jake, as an archer in the secular world before the integration, had concentrated on shooting stationary targets. He had improved immensely in technique over the last month or so in the tutorial and learned to hit moving targets far better.

Now, without his eyesight, he was forced to push this notion to the extreme. With 150 meters between himself and his target, he was sure to miss if he simply shot directly for his foe. Splitting Arrow helped, but it didn't make his aim foolproof.

Focusing on the doe's movements, he released an arrow aimed slightly to the right of the beast, followed swiftly by an extremely fast Infused Powershot to the left of it. His hope was to feint it into dodging the first arrow - a feint that worked.

As it moved slightly away from the first arrow, the second far faster Infused Powershot hit it straight in its chest, penetrating all the way through and out the other side. Far less damaging than his initial Infused Powershot, but the damage was done.

With it lethally damaged, the next two arrows quickly finished it off. Jake, of course, couldn't directly see his Infused Powershot hitting, but the beast's reaction to the shot was enough for him. The notification of the kill two arrows later sealed the deal.

Now all that remained was the Great White Stag. It hadn't moved at all for quite a while, and he was slightly confused at its actions.

It hadn't put up a single shield to protect the White Doe he just took down. From how fast other stags healed, it should have had ample time to heal it too. But it had only done some quick healing. His vision still blurry; he barely managed to see it and land his Mark. The system without a doubt helping him.

He fired an arrow at the stag but got no feedback from the shot. If he had to guess, the stag must have blocked it.

Jake pushed his vital energy to heal his eyes faster as the seconds ticked by. The stag did nothing, and he felt that shooting any arrows towards it would be a waste of time.

With him actively focusing on healing his eyes, it only took ten or so seconds for him. Opening his eyes once more, the first thing that struck him was how dark it was.

The sun was gone, and the sky was filled with stars. The stars and a single moon was floating far above. Jake's eyes widened as he quickly looked around. Seven pillars of light sprung up from around the dungeon, all shooting towards the moon above. Looking at them, he could almost feel the immense mana within.

Each source of light originated from one of the pools around the dungeon. But that wasn't all of it.

The paths between the pools also started to give off a faint glow. Like a spark had been ignited, a pattern of light was drawn on the plains. Each pond connected, each path a line upon a more extraordinary work of art.

And in the middle of it all was the middle pond.

The stag stood inside it, the water nearly reaching its belly. Its entire body gave off an ethereal glow as it seemed to be the one directing it all.

Whatever the hell was happening, Jake seriously doubted it was anything good for him. He would have to stop it, one way or another.

His first attempt was to take down the stag. He charged his Infused Powershot, imitating the first one he had shot. It was his full power, as it carried everything he had.

He released the arrow as it fired towards the stag. But the second it reached the edge of the pond, it encountered an impassible barrier of light. The barrier shimmered as it was revealed to be a near-transparent pillar of light descending from the moon.

Around the pillar appeared more than a hundred ghostly apparitions of does and stags. All were running in concert as they defended The Great Stag, powered the shield that protected the middle pond. He even saw three particularly powerful figures, identical to the three White Does.

The Great White Stag didn't even seem to register his attack. In fact, it seemed only to continue shining brighter and brighter. He could clearly feel the amount of mana condensing, meaning the stag only got more and more powerful the longer it stood there.

With his most potent attack utterly ineffective, he quickly tried to find a new plan. Would the barrier block him if he approached it in melee? Could he break it with a continued assault? Should he just let it run its course?

All the ghostly beasts protected the central area... and Jake quite honestly didn't feel like approaching would be wise.

As he considered his options, his eyes darted around until it landed on one of the closest ponds. An idea sprung to mind. He would have to somehow stop the transfer of power from the ponds.

Rushing down from his vantage point, he ran at full speed towards the pond. Should he maybe collect all the water? Or could he somehow drain it all off somewhere, or perhaps somehow cover the hole?

All of his solutions seemed either stupid, ineffective, or extremely slow to pull off. He would have to do something sooner rather than later.

He made it to the pond only a few seconds later. It was indeed the ponds giving off light towards the moon. The water was glowing with power, the mana intense.

Jake understood. The dungeon was a giant formation. A pattern, a circle of magic, or whatever term one wished to use. It was the reason why the deer ran between the ponds. They created the lines between the focal points - the ponds.

And now that formation was active. Active, and from the looks of it, empowering the lord of the dungeon, the Great White Stag. Perhaps the deaths of all other living beings in the dungeon had all been a part of this grand ritual. A grand scheme he had walked headfirst into.

Now he understood why he never felt any particular fear from facing the stag in open combat. Because it never planned on fighting him openly, to begin with.

The mana in the air was almost visible by now as Jake was forced to make a decision. The exit of the dungeon was long gone, meaning the fight was unavoidable. Not that he would have ever run.

As he looked at the small pond before him and the massive amount of mana within, he couldn't help but think of alchemy for some reason. His concoctions and how much the pond reminded him of a mixing bowl.

That stray thought led to an idea. Why *couldn't* he make it into a concoction?

The idea was insane, but Jake didn't need to create anything worthwhile. He just needed to fuck up the mix.

He needed to make the most unstable shitshow of a concoction he could manage.

And feed that clusterfuck of toxins straight into that damn moon.

Chapter 82: No rest for the wicked

As with any concoction, one first needed ingredients, but of course, Jake had no ingredient-list to go by with this one. So he decided to just go for whatever he felt like would do the most damage. The first of which was a little gift from the Den Mother herself.

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

The gland was a big sack of liquid venom. While it most certainly would be considered an atrocity by many well-renowned alchemists to use such a precious ingredient so wastefully, Jake quite frankly didn't give a damn.

As for other ingredients, what could be better than a lot of blood infused with Blood of the Malefic Viper? If there was something he still had plenty of left, it was health after all. His entire body was a highly toxic ingredient in itself.

Jake took out a mana potion and quickly drank it, feeling his pool fill quite a bit. The last part of this brilliant creation would require quite a bit of mana, after all.

Standing in front of the pond, he couldn't delay any longer. He summoned the Gland from his spatial storage, tossing the thing right into the pond. As it entered the pillar of light, it started getting burned up, but it was too late as the gland's contents entered the water.

Without waiting, Jake took out his dagger as he cut both of his wrists while at the same time suppressing his natural healing. Finally, he covered both of his arms in Scales of the Malefic Viper as he plunged them into the pillar and the water.

Instantly he heard the sizzling sound of the water burning into his scales. The water was already starting to turn darker from the Gland's contents, and the addition of his blood only made the situation all the more volatile. His last move proved to be the nail in the coffin.

Touch of the Malefic Viper

Not a single thing was held back as he poured his mana into the skill. Both his hands took on a dark green glow as all the water around them began changing color.

At the same time, Jake started manipulating the water with Concoct Poison. His influence was minor as it was clearly not a controlled concoction and without help from the enchanted mixing bowl. But it was enough. Jake didn't need to make a controlled creation; he just needed to infuse his will into the pond.

It took only a few seconds for the pond to go through drastic changes. The water started bubbling as if it was boiling. At the same time, the otherwise bright white beam also started changing. At first, a faint green gleam could be seen within the light. A gleam that soon turned darker into a dominating dark green color.

Jake felt himself connect to the concoction. He felt his connection to the moon above and to the entire formation that controlled it all. He felt the mind of another being wrestling him for control of it - the Great White Stag.

But Jake wasn't fighting for control. It was a losing battle from the beginning, as his connection was far too weak. Besides, he didn't need it. He just needed to break it from within. Corrupt it. Something he was more than capable of.

The dark beam continued to feed energy into the moon as it started darkening. Festering. Cracks formed on the moon above as it got more and more unstable. He felt the madness and anger from the Great White Stag. He felt its struggle.

From the other six ponds, the light grew more assertive - the power increasing. Simultaneously, the moon started to repair itself, with only the small area where Jake's beam hit it still remaining corrupted.

He felt himself lose the battle as his mana kept draining while the Great White Stag seemed to have an endless supply of energy. He needed more.

Jake leaned forward, allowing himself to tumble into the water. The burning sensation wasn't gone, but different. It was no longer the power of light but the overpowering toxicity of the pond that now burned into him. But Jake could use that.

He opened his mouth and started drinking the poison. He hadn't used that part of the skill for a long time to avoid burning through his supply of ingredients, but Jake had never forgotten the usefulness of Palate of the Malefic Viper when it came to regenerating mana from consuming toxic materials. And now he needed mana, and he had plenty of toxicity.

He felt his mana instantly surge as he drank the concoction, but at the same time, his health dropped. His skill could only negate a part of the poison and use it to regenerate mana, while a big part of it did what any poison does, as it started to drain his vital energies.

With the increased mana, so did he raise his output. Touch of the Malefic Viper allowed him to inject poison into anything he was in physical contact with. And currently, his entire body was in physical contact with the water.

In a burst of poison from the skill, his mana pool drained faster than ever before. But at the same time, the toxicity around him helped regenerate it. He reached a slight equilibrium. However, his problem was the third part of the equation.

His health points were draining rapidly. He had taken little actual damage from any of the does, but he still couldn't keep up the current status quo for too long. Yet he pushed it further, as he released a whole batch of toxic ingredients from his storage as well as nearly a hundred bottles of his weaker poisons - the ones he didn't need to begin with.

The toxicity of the pond exploded upwards, becoming more and more deadly by the second. The beam of light had lost all semblance of white at this point, as it ate into the moon above.

Corruption spread through the moon faster than before. The ground gained by the other ponds was quickly retaken as the celestial object cracked and turned darker. Like veins of black blood, the cracks expanded and pulsed with power.

The Great White Stag tried to fight back, but the corruption was too strong. It wasn't because it was weaker or because it had fewer resources available. It was just a simple fact that corrupting something was far easier than purifying it.

For but a moment, Jake felt the control of the stag slip. He capitalized as he made a final push, his mana control on full display. A pulse of power hit the moon as a crack spread from top to bottom. The crack seemed to mark the end of the conflict as the entire moon shattered like a broken mirror.

All the power that had built up slammed downwards towards each of the ponds. Jake felt it coming but was unable to do anything as it hit the pond.

The water flew everywhere as Jake got tossed out of the pond, flying nearly fifteen meters through the air and landing in the grass.

He heaved for breath as he finally became aware of the state of his body. He looked like he had been submerged in acid, a sentiment that wasn't entirely inaccurate.

Without his high stats, he would have been dead a long time ago. All the scales on his body had disappeared already as he had stopped supplying them with mana. But they had lasted long enough for his arms to be in a less horrible state than most parts of his body.

His entire body was bloody as he had infused every ounce of blood that left his body with Blood of the Malefic Viper, which had been quite a few liters, considering how he currently looked. He had also taken a lot of damage internally as he had consumed parts of the concoction, eroding him from within.

A human before the initiation would have been dead ten times over – but Jake was more than alive as he started scrambling to get on his feet.

The fight wasn't over yet.

As the pulse hit his pond, so had it hit all the others. The moon was shattered, and now only dim stars remained above. It was black as night as he saw the creature stumble through the tall grass in the distance.

The majestic demeanor was gone, the fur no longer a beautiful white color. It had dimmed and grayed, its crown of antlers now broken on one side. It only seemed to have a single functional eye, and it walked with a slight limp as it made its way towards him.

It's one eye, however, did clearly convey all it had to say. Burning hatred directed towards the accursed human that had broken the ritual.

Two broken bodies stood, staring at each other for a while. Jake swayed slightly from side to side as he stood, his legs not quite as stable as he would

have liked. But his eyes didn't show the slightest hint of weakness as he stared into the bloodshot eye of the stag – unable to suppress a smile from how much he was enjoying himself.

Both their mana pools were utterly dried up. Everything had been expended. The stag had the slight advantage of being in a better state physically. In contrast, Jake had the remnant of poison still in his body, slowly being consumed by Palate of the Malefic Viper, regenerating mana.

The stag made the first move as it charged, likely provoked into action by the human's smile. A dim flash of light enveloped its broken antlers as it tried to impale him. It was a sloppy attack, but so was his dodge.

He jumped to the side, rolling on the ground as the stag struggled to stop its charge. It staggered as Jake wobbled to his feet – at the same time pulling out his Venomfang as he met the next attack.

It was yet another sloppy charge, but this one managed to scratch him on his left shoulder. At the same time, he managed to land a cut with his dagger, evening out the trade. This continued for a while, as they slowly made minor injuries to each other.

While Jake managed to recover mana faster than the stag, he also had to use more. Several Shadow Vaults had to be used to avoid getting impaled. Simultaneously, the stag was relying solely on physical strength, slowly regenerating a bit of mana naturally.

No winner was clear after the first few minutes of struggle. Wounds accumulated on both of them, the poison seeping into the stag, making it weaker, while Jake's blood-loss and still falling health made him slower too.

Jake finally managed to land a solid blow as he pulled out a bottle of Necrotic Poison, catching the stag by surprise when he tossed it in its face. He managed to use the opening to cut into its remaining eye, blinding it entirely.

He believed he had finally gotten his victory, the beast blinded and weakened.

That belief was quickly snuffed out at the very next moment. With a bellow, the stag raised its head towards the sky. Mana, more than he believed it could possibly have left, shimmered over it as its fur returned to the brilliant white it had originally been.

Whiter, in fact, as it started shining. The moonlight returned as Jake looked up and saw the moon he had destroyed earlier. It was far smaller, but its power was still unlike anything the both of them should be able to muster at this moment.

He quickly saw the reason. All of the Great White Stag's herd had created the new moon with their ghostly apparitions. Giving their last vestige of energy for their leader.

The light from the makeshift moon descended on the stag as its antlers shattered completely. However, they didn't fall to the ground but turned to mist as they rearranged themselves in a pattern in front of the stag - a formation nearly identical to the one Jake had ruined.

Power surged as the formation exploded with mana. A beam of pure light energy flew towards Jake's battered body as his sense of danger warned him of the lethal attack.

He could try to dodge, but he didn't. Instead, he began running towards the attack that would, without a doubt, end his life.

And then... it slowed.

For but a moment, everything seemed to come to a crawl. The beam of light continued onwards, no faster than walking speed. The swaying grass around them now stood almost entirely still. Everything was moving in slow motion.

Except for Jake.

Moment of the Primal Hunter

He didn't think; he simply moved. He ran forward, right towards the stag. He sidestepped the beam of light heading his way, and the millisecond he was out of its path and right in front of the stag, time resumed to normal.

In real-time, not even half a second had passed. But to Jake, it had easily been five full seconds. More than enough to close the distance.

The Great White Stag didn't even understand what had happened. One moment the human was about to get obliterated by the beam, and the next, he was nearly in front of it. It couldn't see, but could still feel that it had missed. To make things worse, the beam was still firing, the stag unable to stop it.

Jake got closer as the circle of magic started fizzling out as the beam disappeared. The moon was gone once more, the stag returning to its dull gray color. It was exhausted. Exhausted and not ready for his attack at all.

He didn't stab it. Instead, he grabbed its front leg as he lifted the stag off the ground with a spinning motion. He spun around as he tossed it through the air, right towards the still half-full pond that now resembled a toxic swamp.

It couldn't do anything as it fell right in the middle of the concoction of death. It could only bellow towards the silent dimming stars above as it tried to get out of the pond. But it was already too late.

The once-great stag was too injured to muster enough strength to fight off the toxins. It tried, but when it finally thought it could get out, an arrow hit it right in its midsection, sending it tumbling back into the pond. It kept struggling, but soon its legs gave out as it stopped moving.

Soon after, it was no longer able to hold on as Jake got his notification.

****You have slain [Great White Stag – lvl 93] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 146000 TP earned****

Having seen the notification and seeing that he had completed the dungeon, Jake, tired and spent, fell backward unto the grass.

He couldn't truly rest quite yet, though.

Objective: Defeat the Great White Stag (Completed)

Bonus reward for clearing the dungeon solo.

Dungeon shutting down in: 00:59:51

Scoffing at the message, he closed his eyes and entered meditation, hoping to restore enough to be able to move about just a bit. *No rest for the wicked, I guess*, he thought as he kind of hated the system for only giving him an hour this time. *At least it was fun.*

“Power comes in many forms. A single individual may be able to strike fear into countless others. They may be able to annihilate civilizations. But can they bring life to a new generation? Educate them? Grow in the soil what we need to grow as people? No, they cannot.

“A lone wolf is just that: Alone. We all have our own limits, our own destinies. We cannot all be the protagonists of fate. But we can nurture those who are. None of us here are fighters or those who shall stand against our enemies. We are instead the ones who forge and sharpen their blades, who take care of their children when they fight - the ones who build their homes, their abode to rest.

“There is no shame in this. We are all a part of the greater whole, servants of destiny. A wolf with a pack to support his every move will go further than one who stumbles through the darkness alone. And even if the pack leader of this generation fails, who is to say the next will?

“It saddens me, but we are that lost generation. The ones to pave the way for the heroes of tomorrow. The ones to illuminate the path ahead for our children. We will build the foundation for a better future. We will sacrifice ourselves. But we can do so with pride and with the smile of the Holy Mother upon us.

“We will be a part of a greater destiny. A greater whole. The unsung heroes of fate. And in turn, we will find deliverance and new life within her halls.

“Many of us have already fallen - we are but a scattered pack. Our warriors have fallen, but we still have hope. So hold no fear for with hope, we shall fear nothing.”

Jacob finished as he looked out at the fervent flock in front of him. They were the scared and traumatized ones who couldn't or wouldn't fight.

His sermons happened several times every day. He would talk about different topics each day, but they all held the same message. The message that they were stronger together than apart and that there was no shame in serving a greater purpose.

After shaking hands and reassuring them once more, he excused himself to his cabin, only followed by Bertram and Joanna. The one man and woman who didn't hold a fervent gaze.

"Do you honestly believe all that stuff?" Bertram asked when they were finally alone.

"What matters most is that they do," Jacob answered with a relaxed smile. "Hope is good. Even in a hopeless situation."

"False hope is not," Bertram answered. "Are you still sure that skill is actually accurate?"

"The divination was quite clear. Far more so than I expected it to be," Jacob answered with a sigh. Something he didn't disclose was just how weird it was for it to be so precise. Fate was not so easily peered into, yet his very first vision had been so clear... because it truly was already written.

Only hours after getting his new class, he had used the skill Divination of the Augur. He had expected vague imagery, but what he had seen was

indisputable. A tornado of metal would enter the base to shred everything and anyone in its way. Those that ran would surely still be struck down.

It wasn't hard to interpret. But the next part was what was more challenging to interpret fully.

It showed the people in prayer, each holding a candle. One by one, their lights would die, and they too would fall to the ground - their lights, joining together. In the end, only two would stand. They would meet the tornado outside, and they would greet it.

One a winged man, the other a golden warrior.

The winged man would soar towards the sky, surrounded by the motes of light from the candles. The golden warrior would fall to the tornado yet join the man in his ascension. The tornado would find no lives to take but only meet an empty camp.

That was where the vision ended. Jacob had been confused for a long time, but he had begun to understand. They would not survive the tutorial. At least

they would not exit the same as they were. He had tried to divine different paths, but he soon understood... he wasn't meant to fight fate.

He was meant to realize it – a realization that alone netted him five levels instantly.

Jacob had grown over these few days. Grown far more than he believed possible. As the survivors' belief grew in him, so did their speed of levels and Jacob's own. Most of them had only gotten two or three levels in their classes, but he had gotten far more.

This speech today had pushed him all the way to level 50. It was a truly meteoric rise, and he believed that he was faster than even the most talented of hunters had been.

As for skills, he had gotten two. The first one was yet another support skill. One he had chosen based on the vision he had seen. He knew it was the one to pick the moment he saw it.

[Lantern of the Augur (Ancient)] – The fallen souls are never truly lost to the Augur. Summon a lantern that can store the souls of the fallen. While

in the lantern, the souls do not experience any decay but are instead nurtured. The souls must enter of their own free will. Capacity and power of the souls stored are based on willpower and wisdom.

The lantern was a magical object. It was tangible to no one but Jacob himself. Jacob, and one other person. The one he suspected to be the golden warrior seen in his vision.

When he reached level 50, he only had this belief strengthened. The skill he had unlocked being the reason, of course.

[Appoint Guardian (Unique)] – The Augur of Hope is not a warrior, but his loyal guardian is. Appoint a guardian, intrinsically linking your karma and destiny to theirs. The guardian will receive a new class, as well as an entirely new path. But be warned, for that path will not, and cannot, diverge from your own. As long as you live, so will your guardian, and should you fall, so will your guardian. Can only be used on a willing participant. Skill can only ever be used once, so choose wisely.

He had many exciting choices, but he instantly knew this was the one. But he didn't pick it right away. While Jacob already knew who he wanted to be his guardian, he was not arrogant enough to just assume his chosen person wanted to as well.

Luckily, Bertram had agreed without a second thought. The middle-aged man didn't show much emotion, but Jacob still picked up through his skills that the man was happy. Happy at being asked and happy that he would not have to leave Jacob's side.

Bertram had been with Jacob his entire life. The one part of his life his father had forced upon him. When young, he was a babysitter, a butler, and most importantly, a friend. He had driven him to school every morning, picked him up, and helped take care of him.

He had always been the stoic sort. He didn't talk much, and he never had. At the company, he had been Jacob's personal assistant, more or less continuing on the legacy he had already built.

In the tutorial, he hadn't shied away from his role either. Jacob had initially feared that he would be left behind, but Bertram had remained by his side. A sentiment that touched Jacob deeply as he knew how much the man sacrificed. Out of everyone in their group of colleagues, Bertram would be the one Jacob assumed to have the highest chances of excelling in this new environment.

Of course, he no longer thought that, with both Jake and Caroline going above and beyond all expectations. But now one of those was dead, and the other unknown. Though based on his conversation with the Holy Mother, Jake still lived.

But through all of the hardships and fights, Bertram had remained by his side. He had stayed behind when all other fighters went to war. No matter how much others had tried to push him to join them to hunt beasts, Bertram had stayed. He had still managed to evolve his class, but only through the hunts that Jacob had compelled him to participate in.

And now, at the end of this tutorial, Jacob could offer the opportunity to appoint him as his guardian formally. To make their fates truly intertwined.

“And you are sure you wish to do this? There will be no way of going back. If I die, you die. We will be together if we want to or not,” Jacob asked as he looked at his oldest friend.

“No different from normal then,” Bertram answered with a slight chuckle.

"I guess so," Jacob answered with a relaxed smile. "So, shall we just get it out of the way?"

"Hit me with your best shot, kid."

Jacob gladly did so as he pointed at Bertram and used the skill on him.

On Bertram's side, he got a notification. It was not something that could be forced upon him, after all. An easy choice, as he accepted.

Jacob and Bertram had both expected... something to happen. But it was over just as it began. A faint light shimmered over Bertram as he got bombarded by a list of notifications. Skills lost; others gained. But more importantly, was what they both felt.

A connection like no other. A golden thread of karma thicker than any other, one forged by the system itself.

“Wait a second!” Jacob said with a faux horror. “We totally forgot to discuss the salary!”

Chapter 83: Loot & Healing

Jake opened his eyes when he saw the countdown for the dungeon shutdown reach 13 minutes. He had initially decided to get up at 15, but two more minutes shouldn’t hurt, right?

During his meditation, he did have time to go over his notifications.

****’DING!’ Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 55 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points****

****’DING!’ Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 51 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

****’DING!’ Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 53 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

****’DING!’ Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 56 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points****

****'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 57 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 54 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

He had gotten a grand total of four levels between his profession and class. After killing the second White Doe, he got a level in his class, and after finishing off the last doe and the Great White Stag, he had gotten two entire levels more - it hadn't been level 93 for nothing.

The level in his profession was also an unexpected gain. It also reinforced the notion that one didn't necessarily need to create potions to level, but doing difficult practice could also lead to levels. He reckoned the same would be right for classes, actually. Would he be able to level by just practicing with his bow?

A fascinating but utterly useless thought that Jake quickly suppressed as he only had a dozen minutes left before the dungeon would shut down.

It took quite a bit of effort, but he managed to get himself on his feet. He also took out a health potion as the cooldown was over by now. Like a desert meeting rain, his body greedily absorbed the potion's vital energy, instantly making him feel a lot better than before.

Thank the Malefic Viper I am an alchemist

, he thought with a slight chuckle, already walking towards the pond where he had thrown the Great White Stag.

To his surprise, the concoction that had once filled half the pond was gone. When the formation overloaded, it had sent half of the water flying; it was now splashed around the area. It was quite easy to see where it had landed as it was where all the grass had died. But there was still a lot left, enough to nearly submerge the entire stag.

But the pond itself was completely empty of any liquid now. Even the corpse of the Great White Stag was gone. However, where the stag had died, there now was a single out of place item - a small pebble-sized object, no larger than a fingernail. He could easily feel the mana pulse out of it, his Identify making it clear it wasn't a simple item.

[Corrupted Mooncore Shard (Epic)] - The shard of a Mooncore, corrupted by an immense amount of toxicity. It is unstable by nature and will not last more than a few months in its current state. Contains highly concentrated volatile energy as the energies clash within. The mana of the moon and the foreign mana in a constant cycle of mutual destruction.

Requirements: Cannot leave the tutorial area.

Jake, like the description, had no idea what to use it for. It seemed like a ticking time bomb that he couldn't take out of the tutorial based on the description. Very intriguing if he had to say so himself.

He had clearly been the source of the corruption, but that also meant it had been uncorrupted before his interference. Had this been the item that the stag poured all the mana from the moon above into? Was he meant to get this item in its uncorrupted form?

He didn't know, and as the countdown to the dungeon shutting down hit 8 minutes, he didn't have time to find out either. What he did know, however, was that he shouldn't try to inject mana into it, or he was pretty damn sure it would go boom. Not that he planned on leaving it behind, as he threw it into his storage before moving on.

First, he rushed towards the middle pond. If the last two dungeons were any indication, then he would gain a lockbox or two. Maybe he would even finally get a jacket or something as he was getting a bit tired of running around bare-chested. Even just a cloak would be fine. Just not the shitty archer cloak.

Less than a minute later, he reached the center pond and inspected it. The water had lost all luster, and a quick identification yielded no result. Which meant it was indeed just normal water now, holding not a single magical property of note.

What was, however, of note was what was in the water. In the center was a magical circle carved into the bottom of it. Exactly where the Great White Stag had been standing to control the formation. It didn't take a genius to conclude that this was the controlling circle or something. Not that it mattered anymore, as it was clearly broken based on the cracks all over it.

There was one fascinating thing about it still, though. In the middle of the circle was a book. A book that brought back a sense of déjà vu. It reminded Jake of the giant tome that had granted him his profession back in the day.

Though this tome was gray with the depiction of a moon on the cover. It was beautifully designed, to say the least, and of course, he used Identify on it.

[Akashic Tome of the Lucenti Mage (Unique)] - Allows the user to acquire the class Lucenti Mage if compatible.

Requirements: Lvl 24-99 in any class. Compatible user.

Jake picked up the tome and noticed that it wasn't wet in the slightest despite being underwater. It was like the liquid didn't even make contact with its surface.

When he picked it up, it instantly made him aware he couldn't use it. Clearly, he wasn't what was deemed a compatible user. Though, to be fair, he wouldn't have wanted it anyway. He had chosen to be an archer and not a caster, and he was more than happy with that choice.

Throwing the tome in his spatial storage, he looked around the area a bit more as he scanned it with his sphere. He didn't spot anything worth noting, at least nothing containing mana or was identifiable. He did note what looked like the remnants of a few withered plants, but nothing useful.

With nothing else of note at the center pond, he rushed back towards the entrance. It didn't seem like there was a dedicated exit, which didn't really surprise him considering the dungeon's open design.

Making his way to the exit, he finally spotted something. A single lockbox sat at the entrance, and Identify told him it was rare. Based on the size and the shape of the box, it

appeared to be a long, long weapon of some kind. Jake couldn't help but hope for it to maybe be a bow. It was a bit long for it, but it was still possible.

Opening it, he instead found a staff.

[Staff of Lucent Realms (Rare)] – A staff made from the Great White Stag's antlers and ordained with a moonstone. The concentrated power of moonlight within makes it suitable for most light-affinity casters. Allows the user to borrow the power within the moonstone once a day, reducing the cost and significantly increasing the power of any skills related to the concept of moonlight.

Requirement: Lvl 50+ in any humanoid race

Jake read the description and had to admit that the staff did seem strong, if utterly useless to him. Touching it, he also felt that he clearly had a Greatsword of Nature-situation all over again, aka incompatible with him.

Tossing the staff into his storage together with the tome, he placed his hand on the door as he exited the dungeon.

As he exited, he also checked out his last two notifications.

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.

Two lords have fallen. The King has taken notice but has yet to make a move. Continue with the quest, and you shall inevitably meet.

Objective: Defeat the Beast Lords.

Current progress: 2/4

It had gotten a bit foreboding. Jake wondered who or what this so-called King was, but he would eventually find out if the system were to be believed. Of course, he had a few more dungeons to clear out first.

The second notification he got was about his titles upgrading, now providing 1 and 3 more overall stats.

[Dungeoneer III] – Successfully clear a Dungeon suitable for your level. +3 all stats.

[Dungeon Pioneer III] – Be the first to clear a dungeon suitable for your level. +9 all stats.

Overall, his gains from the dungeon had been significant. While he hadn't gotten any new gear, he had gained 10 levels in his class and one in his profession, and it had only taken him a bit more than two days.

Checking his tutorial panel, he found that he had ample time left to clear out the two next dungeons at his current pace.

Tutorial Panel

Duration: 13 days & 22:45:10

With nearly two weeks, he didn't see what could stop him. But first things first was to get back in peak condition. His current resources were still dangerously low, and he had no intentions of getting into a fight at the present time.

HP: 825/4560

MP: 914/5260

Stamina: 712/2390

While he could move naturally, he still felt weak all over. So he began meditating inside the mountain-like volcano. After a bit less than an hour, he exited meditation, chugged a healing potion, and closed his eyes once more.

This repeated for nearly an entire day as he alternated between potions until he returned to peak condition. He had honestly underestimated how much damage he had taken. To fully heal, his body had taken far more vital energy than he had first believed. Healing corroded and heavily poisoned internal organs wasn't that easy. The poison itself wasn't the issue; it was the damage left by the light-affinity mana.

After the first half a day, his mana was up to a healthy level allowing him to resume doing a bit of mana practice while he was just sitting there anyway. It was unsurprisingly boring to meditate, and trying to weave constructs of mana was a pleasant pastime. He honestly felt a bit bad for those without a Sphere of Perception who could only just sit there and do nothing.

Walking out of the tunnel leading into the volcano, he again found himself overlooking the inner area. Nothing had really changed since he entered, and he was more than happy to just move on to the next dungeon.

Dungeons were clearly far more efficient than the beasts outside at this point. Besides, enemies outside of the dungeons were only in their low sixties at the highest, and those were often solitary beasts like the buffalos.

Scanning the geography, he quickly found an easy way towards the next volcano-like mountain. It was naturally the third smallest, which should be the third dungeon to do. He

briefly considered maybe clearing a valley or two in the hope of finding some more equipment but ultimately decided against it.

The loot in the dungeons was far better anyway... if Jake could use it, that is. And even if it weren't, the levels would make up for it either way. Getting good gear was all well and good, but he would eventually outgrow it. As an example, his bracers only provided 5 agility and 3 strength, along with their minor bonus to stealth while hidden in shadows.

His cloak had become useless, to the point where he didn't even wear it. Even the smallest scratch or attack ripped it up, forcing him to spend time mending it. Even then, it didn't provide any meaningful defense against anything but projectile attacks. And it wasn't like there was anyone else around to see him run around in only his pants, boots, and a pair of bracers.

As he ran towards the dungeon, he came across a single pack of raptors in their early 50's. Surprisingly the beasts didn't attack him but ran away the second they noticed him. There was no good reason to waste time chasing them down, so he decided just to let it go.

All other beasts on the way reacted the same. The moment they spotted him, they tucked their tails and advanced in the opposite direction. Jake couldn't help but wonder if he really looked that scary...

It did, however, result in him quickly making his way to the mountain with the dungeon. Yet another tunnel that he found himself within.

While the first two had lush greenery within, this one was just soil all over. There was only one change in the ground, a vertical hole right in the middle.

Jake jumped down from the entrance into the volcano and landed on the soil. He felt it was relatively soft and reminded him of the earth that had been in the challenge dungeon. Jake held himself back from collecting some of it. If he really wanted it, he could get it after the dungeon.

He walked up to the hole and looked down. It was around 10-11 meters deep. He only knew that due to his Sphere of Perception, though. His eyes didn't allow him to see a single thing, no matter how hard he tried. Even Hunter's Sight didn't give any result. It was like a strange kind of mana was within the hole. One that made it pitch-black. And while he could see inside with his sphere, everything did appear a bit obscured and blurry, still.

It didn't feel dangerous, though, so Jake decided just to take a plunge as he jumped into the hole. A few meters down, everything went black as the darkness enveloped him.

Landing, he found stone beneath his feet. And not just ordinary stones. Bricks. The walls, too, were made of bricks, making it clearly manmade. Or alienmade. The point is that some kind of intelligent race constructed it.

In front of Jake was the usual door that marked the entrance. Placing his hand on it, he received the standard message and didn't hesitate to accept it.

Time for the third dungeon.

Chapter 84: True Protagonist

His entire body ached with pain. Pain, unlike any he had ever felt before.

But he could only smile at the sensation because pain meant that he was still alive.

When he had regained consciousness, he didn't know. But he did know that it had been several days since he had nearly fallen. His entire body cooked inside his armor, his skin cauterized, the blood in his veins boiling, and his eyes popping out from the heat.

But despite all that, he had lived. Held on to his last sliver of health. He should have died; he knew that. But hadn't because death was not his destiny. He was chosen, so his body refused to die, and slowly, he started to heal.

His entire body healed at once, meaning that all parts healed at a nearly equal pace. It only took a few days before his limbs started returning to peak condition, but his internal organs had still taken a long time to return to a functional state.

And today, for the first time, his sight returned. He could always see through the breastplate still on him, but now he could finally observe the world through his own eyes. Today, he was finally ready to make himself known once more.

The ash on him scattered as he moved his body. His skin revealed below, healthier than ever. His mind, sharper than before. William felt reborn like a phoenix experiencing nirvana. Reforged in both body and mind.

Looking around, he saw the now already half-eaten corpses of the ones he had slaughtered. He saw the dead rodents that had dared to think him just another cadaver to consume.

He had absorbed the armor and weapons of the fallen. He had regained his mana and was now far more potent than before. His skill to absorb metals had even upgraded in rarity, now allowing him to absorb even enchanted metals.

With his mind, he extended his armor to cover his entire body once more, only leaving his face visible. As he looked around for useful items, he was disappointed to find not a single enchanted item anywhere.

It didn't take him long to put and two and two together. The other survivors must have come to gather the loot. In the end, no matter a herbivore or a predator, humans would be forever greedy. William saw no scenario of them leaving good stuff laying around.

He was lucky they hadn't found him. He had been entirely burned, likely being why no one had recognized him as being alive. But luck was but to be expected. For a protagonist to experience supernatural luck wasn't out of the ordinary in the least. At least that is what William believed.

His domination of the tutorial was, however, not over. As his tutorial panel clearly showed, he had more to kill.

Tutorial Panel

Total Survivors Remaining: 49/1200

Duration: 14 days & 00:40:44

As he looked through his logs, he found an entry he had expected.

Tutorial Quest: A Leader is born

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

Current progress: 2%

Eliminate other leaders: 0/1

He had gotten it the moment he also got the notification for killing Richard - a sweet notification indeed.

****You have slain [Human (E) - lvl 34 / Stalwart Bulwark - lvl 41 / Tyrannical Conniver-lvl 28] - Experience earned. 27.254.214 TP earned****

Despite the level difference, William had gained several levels from that one fight. But then again, he had killed a lot of people.

He had gotten revenge. He had fulfilled the final wish of his first friend, Hermann Schmidt, and now he could return to his own agenda.

Over these last few days, William had a lot of time to think and dream as he slipped in and out of consciousness. With his body idle, he only had his own mind to keep him company. William had, for the first time, felt anger and had become illogical because of his emotions. And the feeling was oddly... liberating.

Before, he never felt anything when he killed, just a mild satisfaction from the levels and whatever else he got. He enjoyed the benefits from the kills, but not the act of killing itself. He did make a game out of it, but that was just to spice up the monotony.

The concept of emotions had been opened to him. He was acutely aware of it. But unlike an average person, William viewed it as only another tool. He had seen that emotions could allow one to perform feats above what they should otherwise. But he had also seen it corrupt them.

Herrmann had been corrupted, the trapper Casper had been corrupted. So many people in this tutorial had been infected with the curse that was chaotic emotions. By guilt, loss, depression, bloodlust, and uncontrollable urges for revenge.

He would not fall to the same fate. Yet, he could not simply write them off. Herrmann had made armor far stronger than he should have been able to make, and Casper had displayed power that even the current William couldn't comprehend.

It had been close during his fight with Richard. He had lost himself towards the end, felt the inklings of corruption enter his mind. His thoughts turned cloudy, his desires illogical. His actions... emotional.

But with a long time spent laying there, he managed to find his footing once more. He healed himself of much of the affliction that had come over him. He felt close to what he did before entering the tutorial once more. Through the many dreams that came to him, he felt enlightened as he came to a new understanding.

He was now beyond his prior definition of perfection. His potential had increased.

He had already reaped the benefits once. He would have never upgraded a skill like that without the massive stimuli from the near-death experience coupled with his raging emotions. It was a cocktail that forced him to overcome what he currently was, drag everything out from within to realize his desire.

And William was acutely aware of his desires. He wanted power. At first, he did so only as an instinctual craving, but now he truly desired it. He desired to reach perfection, to become an insurmountable existence, and he would stop at nothing to realize that craving.

Richard had held power, but it was the fragile sort. Power reliant on others. He had been betrayed by those he believed to be his allies, which had ultimately contributed to his death. A fate William had no intentions to repeat.

Which was why he didn't care much for the quest. William did not see himself as a leader. Not because he believed himself incapable of leading, but because it wasn't necessary. Yet his dreams made him aware that he was to complete it.

Right now, he had earned the loyalty of 2% of the tutorial. A rounded up number, he was sure. He was the leader of only one survivor, and that was himself - a fact he had no desire to change. Even in all his arrogance, William didn't believe it possible to make them all loyal to him, so he would have to do it the hard way...

There was also the other leader, who William already knew was Jacob. It had to be. Weirdly enough, he didn't really feel any desire to kill the man, but he knew he would have to. It was possible to force him into leading the camp into being loyal to him, but William had kind of killed his girlfriend...

So he started walking back towards the base. He hoped they had not scattered to the winds at the loss of Richard but had stayed. It would be easier that way, and he would be able to get the unpleasant business out of the way faster.

It did not take him long to return. He didn't even bother to attempt a covert approach as he simply strolled through the open gate. He feared for a moment that the survivors had left, but just as he entered, he spotted two people sitting just inside. Jacob and that warrior guy who was always around him.

“Hello, William,” Jacob said, being the first to open his mouth. The warrior at his side, silently observing.

“Well, hello there, Jacob,” William answered, returning the man’s smile. “Been a while, eh?”

“It has. I see that you have healed up alright. You looked terrible the last time I saw you.”

At that, Williams’s eyes sharpened. Had Jacob found him on the battlefield? William didn’t remember seeing him... which meant it was during the first days when he was still blacked out. But if that was true... why hadn’t he killed him? The man in front of him was also clearly not on guard at all. He was too damn relaxed. He couldn’t help but use Identify on him and was instantly taken aback.

[Human – lvl 37]

What the fuck? William thought to himself as he lifted his guard instantly. He also identified the warrior, with a level that at least wasn't much of a surprise.

[Human – lvl 26]

He had no idea what the hell had happened this last week. What had the otherwise utterly useless ‘manager’ done to become so strong? And his previous comment also vexed him annoyingly so.

“So you went to the battlefield?” William asked, the mana in his body churning, ready to strike at a moment’s notice.

“I did. But I am not talking about your injuries. You looked confused, last I saw you. Distracted. Like you had lost something, and that you had a wrong you had to make right. And from the looks of it, you have succeeded in doing so,” Jacob answered, still smiling at the young man in front of him. “I am happy for you that you have found yourself again.”

What the actual fuck is wrong with this guy? William questioned. He knew Jacob was many things, but stupid was not at the top of that list. Naïve, idealistic, passive, a pushover, all of those were on the list. But not stupid. He must know that William was the instigator of the slaughter that had happened. That he had been the one to kill Richard, and yet he seemed just not to care.

William had thought a lot about desires for the last week, which made it natural for him to ask.

“What the hell do you want?”

“Does it matter? You have clearly chosen your path already, and my wants won’t change your actions. You have come here with a goal to accomplish, and my words will not dissuade you,” Jacob answered.

“So you are just going to sit there and die, or what? While I kill you and everyone else here?” William asked, clearly annoyed. An annoyance that only got worse as the warrior didn’t even react at the apparent threat and Jacob just kept smiling.

“The others have already found their peace. I have no desire to die, but once again, my desires will not change the outcome. This is how it is meant to be. We can only hope to struggle against fate, and that hope is enough for me. I have altered the course slightly, made the transition ideal.”

“Oh, really?” William asked, as his mana churned. Without warning, a colossal sawblade was fired out from his hand, hitting the warrior. To which the warrior just tilted his neck upwards, displaying only a faint smile as the sawblade cut his head off. But before the severed head even hit the ground, his entire body turned to light that entered Jacob. William didn’t get a kill notification...

“Sorry, William, he does not die so easily. As long as I live, he will return to my side once more after a while,” Jacob answered the question the teenager had yet to ask. He didn’t even try to hide the sadness of imagining his friend die. While death was not permanent, Bertram would still feel pain. But at least he had died nearly instantaneously.

Jacob knew this was not a fight they could ever win, not that he had ever had the intention to fight. Even with all the survivors in the camp, it would only be a one-sided slaughter. They had all known, and they all joined him only a few minutes before William arrived.

“Oh yeah, and what about the others?” William asked, trying to wrest back some semblance of control of the situation. He felt like he was just doing precisely what the fucker in front of him expected from beginning to end. A feeling he definitely did not desire.

“As I said, they joined me earlier,” Jacob said as he summoned a lantern. Around it, many motes of light flew. 45 motes, to be exact.

William instantly opened the tutorial panel with his mind and widened his eye at the number.

Total Survivors Remaining: 3/1200

“Wow, and people call me a psycho. You already killed them all,” William whistled. He honestly hadn’t looked forward to killing them. The thought of it alone made his still slightly rampant emotions protest annoyingly. So it was a welcome surprise that Jacob was just another hypocrite that-

“No, that wasn’t necessary. They simply accepted the inevitable and agreed to join me in reaching for a fate above their station. They put their hopes in me, a burden I agreed to carry happily, with a promise of deliverance to the Holyland,” Jacob said as he got up.

William considered attacking at the sudden movement but felt not an ounce of threat from the man in front of him.

“Come with me,” Jacob said as he motioned for William to follow, which he did, partly out of curiosity and partly out of some weird power compelling him to trust the man in front of him. A power which he was very aware of, but only piqued his interest more.

They walked to the middle of the base, where he saw a sight he hadn't expected. 45 people sat with their legs crossed in the square. All of them pale with a smile on their lips. Not an ounce of life remained in any of them, yet not a single wound could be seen anywhere. In front, a woman William clearly remembered to be a colleague of Jacob's... but she too sat lifelessly.

"I spared everyone from the unnecessary pain this act would bring," Jacob said. "I apologize for making the decision without you, and I hope my death can help alleviate any frustrations. My only request is that you make it quick. I know my own fate, but I have never been a big fan of pain."

William only got more and more confused. Had he walked into some freaking kool-aid drinking cult? The people were clearly dead, and not a single one of them seemed to give a hoot based on their facial expressions.

"So that is it, you are just offering up your neck?" William asked, standing a few steps behind Jacob.

"William, you have already found a path. Your path. I cannot say if it is one towards oblivion or greatness, but it is yours. I have nowhere to guide you, and I doubt I would be able to even if I tried. You already have a teacher who can offer you far more than I ever can," Jacob answered as he turned to look at the teenager. "Besides, would you spare me if I struggled? That quest won't be completed on its own."

"You are fucking weird, Jacob, you know that, right?" William asked. "Just so you know, this isn't personal."

A spear appeared in William's hand as he stabbed it through the head of the man in front of him. It pierced right through and out the other side as the curse within starting turning Jacob to metal. A process far harder than William expected as the curse struggled against the Augur's high vitality and willpower. But with Jacob not struggling in the least, the curse quickly found purchase and transformed the still smiling man into a statue.

****You have slain [Human (E) - lvl 37 / Augur of Hope - lvl 50 / Novice Tailor - lvl 24] - 94.541 TP earned****

William didn't feel an ounce of satisfaction from the kill. He did, however, take notice of the notification. First was the class, Augur. He couldn't quite remember exactly what that word meant, but he was pretty sure it was religious or something. At least the guy had been preachy as fuck.

The second part was the lack of experience gained. Why hadn't he gained any fro-

Just as he thought this, the statue before him lit up with light. It's surface cracked and exploded as light consumed the entire camp. A beam descended as William was knocked back - knocked back, but unharmed. The final thing he saw a figure floating up before all light disappeared, and for a brief moment, the entire outer area of the tutorial was covered in darkness.

Once light returned, he saw that the metalized statue of Jacob was gone. All of the corpses of the crafters had also turned to dust.

William stood confused, wondering what the fuck was going on. *What a peculiar fellow*, he thought, as he actually found the developments welcome. At least it was interesting, and he had a feeling he would meet the Augur again sometime in the future.

Checking the number of survivors, he saw what he expected - no surprises there at least.

Total Survivors Remaining: 2/1200

This tutorial's final curtains were drawing closer, and with that the true protagonist of this trial was soon to be found. And William was more than confident that he would be the one standing in the end. Only a single afterthought remained - a single challenger.

A lone archer who William didn't even see as a threat. Just another bullet point to get checked off.

Tutorial Panel

Duration: 13 days & 23:51:10

Something he had plenty of time to do. Because if William's dreams had made one thing clear, it was that this tutorial was his stage.

Chapter 85: Into the dark

The first thing that struck him was the smell - an all-encompassing stench that seemed to mask any other scent. Jake was happy that perception didn't just straight-up make his sense of smell more potent, or he may have just fallen over and died there and then. At least he would have wished that he was dead.

The second thing he noticed was that the unnatural darkness persisted even within the dungeon. Jake couldn't see a single thing, no matter what he tried or did. It was clearly magical, though he couldn't find any immediate explanation.

The notification upon entering did help inform him why the smell was there, at least.

You have entered the dungeon: The Forgotten Sewers

Objective: Defeat the Nest Watcher

He didn't even bother questioning how he had gone from a mountain to a sewer. Dungeons obviously didn't exist physically in the world outside but were some kind of alternate space. A bit like his spatial storage, just on a far grander scale.

He had already gone to an old temple during the challenge dungeon, so a sewer wasn't that far off. What did surprise him, however, was how modern the notion of a sewer like this was. It also didn't seem to have much to do with beasts at all.

There wasn't any noticeable movement in this sphere either. The only thing of note was the dripping water from the ceiling and small water streams running across the floor in places.

While Jake couldn't see anything with his eyes, he could still see plenty through his Sphere of Perception. It was, however, affected. When it was at its max range at nearly 30 meters, everything felt murky. The air itself looked almost liquid, obscuring everything.

It was mana - extremely dense mana. And the mana wasn't the pure kind Jake was used to, but altered in some way. If he had to make an educated guess, he would say that it was dark-affinity mana, or maybe shadow-affinity mana or something like that.

What mattered was the effect of it. It obscured sight completely, making anyone in it blind.

Jake decided to try creating some light as he took out some wood from his spatial storage. His Alchemical Flame didn't produce much light but heat it made plenty of, allowing him to set fire to the wooden stick quickly.

The wood caught fire as a flame sprung forth. But that was where the expected stopped.

It clearly burned, and he could see the flame. The light, however, was as if contained within the flame itself. Like a dark barrier blocked any light from reaching beyond the flickering fire.

He tried putting his hand into the fire, and it only got eerier. It was like a vacuum of light appeared wherever his hand was. He didn't see his hand, but merely a black hand-shaped object enter. It was as if the concept of light itself wasn't allowed to exist.

Was that the gimmick of this dungeon? That one had to do it in absolute blindness?

While it wasn't optimal, Jake would be able to manage with his sphere. But he had to do something about the murkiness. He closed his eyes, more out of habit than function, focusing on the sphere. He had done so many times before, either extending the range slightly or, as he did currently, limiting the range.

30 meters quickly became 25...21...18...16...13....11...10. When it reached around 10 meters, Jake stopped as everything was now far clearer. Like putting on on prescription glasses, everything had turned from a blurry outline to nearly perfect once more.

He could now finally begin to inspect the details around him. While he couldn't see them, he could easily guess from their shapes what everything was. He also became aware that it wasn't because his sphere couldn't see through the darkness, but because it could see too much of it. The mana was so dense it started flowing together, but with his sphere reduced in size, he could far more easily distinguish the physical objects from the dense mana.

The walls were made of bricks, the floor beneath him made up of cracked and dirty tiles, while the ceiling above was arched. Overall, he would call it a very stereotypical sewer.

He started walking forward as he got more used to the new environment. Weirdly enough, he actually liked the darkness. It felt comfortable, like a warm summer breeze. He didn't like the whole not-seeing part and the horrible stench, but otherwise, it could be worse.

After walking less than ten meters, his sphere picked up something ahead - a crossroad. There was a hallway leading to both the right and to the left. He could also just continue onward, but this did make him stop and think.

Oh god, is this a damn maze? Jake cursed internally as he stood in the middle of the crossroad. Why the hell did it have to be a maze?

All the damn hallways were identical, with not a single sign of enemies or any markings anywhere. So, Jake did what any reasonable person would do when in a maze and went left. Not because of anything particular; he just kind of had to pick left.

He had decided to with the age-old method of just always turning left and following the left wall until he found the exit. If the dungeon had an exit. While it wasn't the fastest method, it was far safer than just walking around randomly.

Besides, it wasn't like he had to slowly walk all the time. Picking up the pace, he started running through the sewer as he stuck to the left wall. It didn't even take him a minute and a few hundred meters before he encountered a change.

On the wall was a pipe of some sorts. It was rather large, easily big enough for Jake to walk through if he lowered his head a bit, that is. The thing about it that made him stop, however, was what lay within it.

A four-legged figure was within the pipe, less than a meter from the entrance. It was unfurred with two big front teeth sticking out of its mouth. The rest of its face was just two big holes for its nose. It didn't have eyes or ears from what Jake could observe.

As he inspected the unmoving beast in his sphere, he got the thought to try and Identify it. The skill didn't specify that one needed to use one's eyes to Identify something. It was just the most natural thing, and he had never needed to not just look at whatever he identified.

He tried focusing on the beast as he mentally tried using the skill. It didn't work at first, but it was like a switch flipped, and suddenly the skill reacted.

[Molerat Creeper – lvl 76]

The first thing he was a bit taken aback by was the level. It was as high as the White Does and nearly as high as the Den Mother had been.

Of course, he had also to consider other factors. The molerat was alone, and the level wasn't everything to consider when determining how strong a beast is. It was still pretty high, though.

More annoyingly, though, was the layout of the maze. Jake had no conceivable way to attack the beast from range - in front of the pipe was a wall only a few meters away, and there was only one way forward or going back from where he came.

It was pretty clear from the molerat posture that it was sitting in ambush as the nose rose up and down slightly. It had likely already detected Jake long before he noticed it and was now just waiting for him to get closer.

Jake thought for a bit before he pulled out his bow. The beast didn't have any ears from what he could see, but maybe it could still hear somehow. He raised his bow and, as silently as possible, nocked an arrow. He carefully pulled back the string as he fired a weak arrow, aiming for the wall in front of the pipe.

The arrow flew out and hit the stone, making a very audible *clink* echo through the entire tunnel. Jake gritted his teeth at the noise while the molerat only seemed to slightly raise its nose a bit more.

Both blind and deaf... Jake noted mentally. Likely their only way of perceiving anything was through smell. Of course, it was also entirely possible that they had some kind of extrasensory ability.

Jake decided to take the risk and started walking forward as if he hadn't noticed the rat. He walked at the wall opposite of the pipe as he got right in front of it. His already poisoned dagger and sword ready.

The instant he did, the beast lunged forward. Of course, Jake was ready as he instantly stepped backward, making it smash into the wall. It clearly hadn't expected him to do that as it seemed to hurt itself quite a bit.

His next action didn't leave it much room to maneuver as he attacked it with his dagger and sword. It didn't even manage to collect itself before it got several deep cuts. It jumped backward, losing half of its snout in the process.

However, it was Jake's time to be surprised as the beast was attacking him again. What surprised him was the precision of its attack and how it aimed straight for his neck. It clearly couldn't see anything, and yet it managed to go for his jugular somehow.

With its snout cut off, he also doubted it could smell anything. So how the hell did it see him? Was it magic? It hadn't used any magical skills yet, making Jake doubt it.

He wrestled a bit with the beast, kicking it back once more. He didn't finish it off as he was more interested in learning how it located him. He tried jumping back and to the side, but it followed him quickly.

Jake tried a few different things. His first thought was that it somehow detected mana. He tried to summon a ball of strings in his hand but found it quite challenging to do for some reason. He eventually managed to do it anyway, but the mana consumption was way above average. *Something for later*, he noted mentally.

What was most important was that it didn't seem to react to his mana at all; it just continued its frenzied assault. He tried a few other things until he tried summoning his Alchemical Flame. He instantly felt the beast focus on his hand as it attempted to bite it off.

Smiling in self-satisfaction, Jake rushed forward, no longer wasting his time with the wounded beast. A solid stab to the heart later, and the rat stopped moving, followed by a kill notification a few moments later.

It was the heat - the beast could see his body heat despite the dark-affinity mana. It was an evident strength, but also a massive weakness if exploited. Something he was happy to do.

He continued onwards for a while until he came across yet another pipe. This one had two Creeper's within it, though. It didn't matter much to him, as the things weren't all that strong. Weaker than the White Does by far despite the similar levels.

Standing ten meters away, he took out his bow and got an arrow from the quiver. The conjured arrows imitated reality very well, even to the point of the wood being flammable. His Flame sprung forth on his hand as he ignited the arrow. He could clearly see the rats react within the hole as they seemed very interested in what he was doing.

Firing the arrow at the wall as he had tried with the last rat, he this time got the response he wanted. Both beasts jumped out towards the arrow without hesitation as Jake followed up with a Splitting Arrow. The creatures discovered nearly instantly that they had been bamboozled, but his feint had bought enough time for them to be peppered with arrows.

10 meters didn't seem like a lot, but in a relatively narrow tunnel, it sure as hell wasn't when a dozen or so arrows were flying at you at once. Both beasts were hit with arrow after arrow as they attempted to rush towards him. One died before it even reached him, while the second one fell shortly after. Of course, he had remembered to poison the arrows beforehand - only the best for his new creepy rat friends.

Moving on, he thought about how one was meant to do this normally. Without his sphere, that is. Unless one had some powerful light-affinity item or-

Oh... *oh*.

Jake smacked himself mentally as he looked into this storage and fished out an item he had collected plenty of. A small stone he had found within one of the many ponds in the Lucenti Plains.

The moment it appeared, the darkness was pushed back for nearly two meters around him as light and color returned.

There was only one minor problem... the stone hurt to hold, and it only took a few seconds before it ran out of energy and became inert. Jake assumed you could channel more mana into it to make more light, but sadly Jake couldn't do that, as the light-affinity and he clearly didn't get along. Besides... he actually preferred the total darkness. It felt more comfortable than the light-affinity mana given off by the stones.

Throwing the broken rock on the ground, he moved on, focusing on his sphere and the dense mana all around him.

Well, maybe this isn't going to be that bad after all, Jake thought to himself as he continued onward. Following the left wall, of course.

The archer had been there - corpses on the ground all around, badgers dead in droves. An entire valley cleared out, in fact.

William had entered the inner area right after getting rid of Jacob.

He couldn't help but frown when he entered the inner area. He found many corpses after searching around for a bit, many of them killed days, maybe even more than a week ago. The tutorial panel still showed two people alive, and William refused to believe it not to be that bastard Jake.

But after searching for a long time, he didn't find anyone. Not wanting to waste much time, he, of course, began grinding some levels. Being level 54 in his class, William didn't gain that much experience from the lesser beasts he encountered, but he managed to make do with sheer numbers.

He started clearing the valleys and mountains one by one. Like a meat grinder, he slaughtered everything living he saw. Eventually, he found himself before a hole in one of the five weird mountains. A tunnel of some kind clearly.

This was the smallest mountain with all the badgers around it, and William couldn't help but inspect what may be found inside.

Within, he noticed a door sitting in the middle of it all - a totally out of place wooden door.

Floating down by manipulating his armor, he landed in front of it as he inspected it for a while. Summoning a sword from the armory in his armor, he tried pushing the door open.

It didn't work as the sword couldn't even touch the door, as if a forcefield surrounded it, less than an inch from its surface.

William tried a few other things until he tried poking it with his finger. When he did so and saw the system message, he couldn't help but make a giant grin, and with a thought, he disappeared into the Badger's Den.

Chapter 86: The right way

Jake walked through the shithole that dared call itself a dungeon with sloppy steps. Once in a while, a damn rat jumped out at him before swiftly being executed. He had stopped caring about elaborate tactics many hours ago.

The first few hours went fine and all. Shoot a burning arrow, kill rats, repeat. It got a bit tedious after the tenth time, sure, but Jake kept it up. The experience was frankly shit compared to what he had gotten in both of the other two dungeons.

He had kept up his tactic of following the left wall all along, but he felt like he was getting nowhere. That was until he saw the corpse of a rat he had slain earlier, meaning he had started circling back again. Jake kept going, however, thinking at worst he was just going to end up at the crossroad around the beginning of the dungeon.

It was as expected when he came across a bunch more corpses, but it started getting weird after that. Taking a few turns, he found living rats, which he quickly got rid of. A few minutes later, he once more found himself in front of the same dead rats from earlier.

Jake began marking the walls here and there, something he should have likely done far earlier. It took him hours where he kept walking, seeing his signs left behind at times, but when he came across his first sign for the second time in an hour, he started to realize that something was well and truly off.

After several more fruitless hours, he finally found the problem; the damn walls were moving. Or at least something made the layout change all the time. In other words, following the left wall had proven not to be a foolproof strategy.

He had to find some other way out... and sooner rather than later. He was still on a timer if he had any hope of facing the King of the Forest. Two days had already passed since he entered.

It wasn't all bad, though. Jake had managed to gain two levels during those two days. It was far less than the other dungeons, sure, but it was something. Still faster than the outside too probably.... the darkness was a bit tiring, though.

This had put him at level 59, only a single level away from his next class skill gain. He couldn't help but be hopeful of unlocking something akin to his Moment of the Primal Hunter once more. His speed had been fast if he said so himself, even considering the bullshit that was this dungeon. But he had a strong feeling he shouldn't bank on getting random legendary skill upgrades.

The rest of his time, he had just spent trying to practice with his mana threads. They were far harder to summon in here as the mana in the air seemed to suppress it. It made him consume far more mana than usual and make the threads disappear the instant he stopped focusing on them.

Weirdly enough, he hadn't needed to drink a single mana potion, though. For some reason, his mana regenerated far faster within the dungeon than outside. Likely because of the high mana density he theorized.

He also began to be able to make his threads of mana last longer and longer. He wanted to find a way to let his threads remain in the air without him having to provide them with massive amounts of mana continually.

The method he was trying was to make use of the mana in the atmosphere. He would do this by mimicking the mana, allowing his own to 'survive' within it. Maybe even tap into the mana around him to be self-sustainable if he really outdid himself.

So far, it was actually looking promising. Jake seemed to slowly adapt to the environment as the dark-affinity mana became more familiar to him.

Another thing he practiced was his senses. He had relied overly much on his sphere and sight for the entire tutorial he had begun realizing. If he was in an environment where the sphere got completely suppressed along with his sight, he would have no recourse at all.

Which was why he also tried using his hearing and, with much suffering, his sense of smell. The molerats could somehow smell him despite the all-encompassing stench permeating the sewers. He wanted to see if he could replicate some of that.

It had been... less than successful, especially on the smelling side. Jake had started getting used to the stench, but whenever he tried to focus on his sense of smell, he felt like someone threw a stink-bomb in his face.

In the hearing department, he had some more progress, though. He had gotten better at zoning out unnecessary noise, but it was far from having any practical applications yet. But as he had fuck-all else to do while walking through the shitty maze, he decided to at least be constructive. The one thing he wanted to avoid was not doing anything.

Not doing anything meant that he had time to think about things he didn't want to think about - distracting thoughts unrelated to his current goal of defeating the four Beast Lords and finally the King of the Forest. And that was something he wanted to avoid at all cost.

He continued his multitasking practice as he kept himself entirely occupied both mentally and physically as he continued walking forward. He decided to ignore his stay-on-the-left-strategy and switched to a just-go-whenever-strategy.

Which turned out to actually help as in only a few hours he found himself back at the crossroad he had first chosen to go left at. He decided to check the dungeon's entrance and found it exactly where it had been before. However, he didn't even consider exiting. He had come here to defeat the dungeon boss, cost what it may.

So, he turned back and delved into the dungeon once more. He didn't turn left this time but decided just to sit down and meditate at the crossroad. He wanted to learn how to properly control his strings before he continued. So with his full focus on the dark mana around him, he entered meditation as countless strings of mana sprung out from his entire body, as he also began formulating a plan.

He walked through the grand hall with a relaxed smile on his face - a silent guardian walking by his side, marveling at his surroundings.

As fate would have it, Jacob had not perished, but he still instantly knew that he was no longer in the tutorial. He had 'failed it' if one could say that.

His tutorial panel was still there but was inactive. He had lost half of his tutorial points, not that there were many of them to begin with, and he could no longer see the number of survivors. The only thing he could see was his amount of points and the countdown for it to end.

Not that he ultimately cared much for the entire tutorial. In fact, he was happy to no longer be there. He was unsure what his future would be like, but he was looking forward to whatever was ahead. After leaving, he had tried to divine the future, but it had been far too vague for him to see anything. Confirming to him that the tutorial had been... abnormal.

As to how he had survived? His legendary skill One More Light.

He was still unsure exactly how it had worked, but he didn't feel everything suddenly becoming black after he died but was instead surrounded by light.

After what could have been hours or days, he found himself standing on a magic circle. His spirit form was enveloped by light as he once more returned to life. Shortly after reviving, a slight tug was felt in the back of his mind. He responded to it as he knew exactly what, or more precisely who, it was.

His mana, health, and stamina all drained down to less than half as it poured into an outline of a tall man beside him. It didn't take long for the process to complete and Bertram to appear.

They had one minor problem, though. Both men stood naked, clothes apparently not being transferable across realms in the form of a spirit.

A problem that was quickly resolved as they looked around the room they had appeared in. Everything was made of what appeared to be pure white marble, with only golden motifs and patterns as decorations. There was nothing really in the room, except for two white robes laying on a small table right in front of the circle.

Jacob and Bertram took the hint as they got dressed and walked out of the room, and now they walked through the hall. Bertram looking all around him with Jacob simply feeling genuinely relaxed and serene for the first time in a while.

"Does this whole resurrection thing mean you are immortal?" asked Bertram after a while.

"Pretty sure being immortal means not dying of old age, something I am pretty sure I still will," Jacob answered jokingly.

"Very funny. You know what I mean," Bertram answered, not as amused by the joke as his young master.

“No, I won’t simply be able to cheat death once more. The skill was called *ONE* More Light for a reason. It only works once. I still have the skill, but I can feel that I would truly die if I were to die once more. Maybe things will change later, but for now, I am as mortal as anyone else,” Jacob answered thoughtfully.

“Disappointing,” Bertram grunted as they continued walking in silence.

The hall was long, far too long for what could be considered reasonable. Then again, it was likely not made with weak mortals like Jacob and Bertram in mind. Countless rooms were on either side of the hall, all closed off by shut doors.

They didn’t try to enter any of them. It was faint, but they both felt the call from the end of the hall. Something, or someone, was making it very clear that they were supposed to go there. So they did.

Half an hour later, they found themselves exiting the hallway as they entered yet another, somehow far grander, room.

Golden chandeliers hung from the ceiling, tiled white floor, and furniture that looked to be made of silk. The most interesting thing, however, was the walls. All of the walls were either covered by indentures of bookcases or beautiful floor-to-ceiling paintings, all depicting female figures in an abstract style.

The paintings gave off a strong feeling as they stared at it, and both felt themselves be drawn in by the absolute beauty of the artistry. In particular, they both stared at one showing a woman in a yellow robe, surrounded by children. However, even more so than the artistry of the piece was the strong mana and aura given off by the painting, giving them both a feeling of relaxation and inspiration.

“A fine piece, is it not?” they heard a voice speak out behind them. Turning, Jacob and Bertram saw a woman in a white robe, not much unlike their own. Her appearance could only be compared to the beautiful paintings around them, with her perfect unblemished face and long blonde hair.

“Indeed it is,” Jacob said, quickly collecting himself. Not because of her beauty, but because of how much she resembled Caroline... almost eerily so.

“A gift by my sister; I will be sure to share your admiration with her next we meet,” she answered with a smile. “Perhaps she will even gift you one in appreciation.”

“I am unworthy of such a kindness, miss...?”

“Priestess Inera,” she answered as she bowed slightly. “It has been a while since anyone arrived here, everyone being busy with the initiation and all.”

Jacob raised his eyebrows but kept his composure as he joked.

“Apologies, I still had a bit of dying to do.”

“What?” she asked, clearly quite confused by the guest. “What happened?”

“Complications, no biggie,” he answered as he touched his forehead where the spear had gone through. “Not a pleasant experience, I must say. But enough about me, could you tell me what we are here for?” Jacob asked as he led the conversation forward.

“Oh, yes! Sorry, I was just distracted a bit!” she said as she scrambled over to one of the desks to pick up a weird-looking gem. “Where did you say you come from? It is unusual for new members to come here directly. I haven’t seen you before, so I assume you are new, right? Ah, but I also just started, so if you have been here before, I am so sorry!”

Jacob was amused by her panicking. He had spent far too many years around people faking everything about themselves, and he could tell that the girl in front of him was genuine.

Of course, it only got more comical considering her aura. Jacob couldn’t feel it clearly, but she was clearly stronger than him. And not just by a bit. He felt a bit of suppression from her but managed to keep his calm. A lot better than the sweating Bertram at least.

“I came from the tutorial,” Jacob answered, not thinking much of it.

“Huh?” she turned her head with a look of shock.

“What?”

“What tutorial?”

“The one run by the system, dear,” a man’s voice interrupted as yet another figure entered the room.

It was a tall man, nearly two and a half meters tall, who made even the tall Bertram appear tiny. He looked not a day older than Jacob himself and was solidly built, muscles practically brimming beneath his simple clothes. What was more noticeable was his aura. Far beyond anything Jacob had ever felt before.

“Da...Grand Master!” Inera spurted out, bowing deeply. Jacob was about to repeat her action when the man stopped him.

“There is no need for that, Augur,” the man said, as he stopped Jacob from bowing.

“By the will of The Pantheon, I am to be of assistance until it is time for you to return to your own universe once more,” The Grand Master said, as he motioned to the still bowing priestess. “I believe you have already met my daughter.”

With a nod, Jacob confirmed as the man continued.

“Our time is short, so let us not delay. Over the next few days, we shall prepare you for your return and study. Let us together bring the glory of the Holy Church to the 93rd universe and spread the word of our Holy Mother.”

Jacob felt an almost magical pull from the words but resisted it. “No, not yet.”

The Grand Master looked at the Augur, confused for a moment before Jacob summoned a lantern with 45 motes of light floating around it.

“I have done as I was meant to, and now it is time for you to do what you have promised,” he spoke into the open air. The Grand Master was confused as to whom the Augur spoke, as he cut in.

“We can handle this at an opportune time, but for now, it's more important t-“

“No,” Jacob answered.

****’DING!’ Class: [Augur of Hope] has reached level 51 - Stat points allocated, +8 free points****

“We made a deal.”

****’DING!’ Class: [Augur of Hope] has reached level 52 - Stat points allocated, +8 free points****

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

His aura soared as the Grand Master finally became aware of who the Augur spoke to. His face went white and then red as his eyes were wide at the audacity. "I am aware of the pact, but as unblessed mortals, they will first need to be—"

"I didn't make any deal with you," Jacob dismissed him as he looked towards one of the paintings on the wall. "I made it with *you*."

****'DING!' Class: [Augur of Hope] has reached level 53 - Stat points allocated, +8 free points****

A divine aura spread in the room as the Grand Master, Inera, and Bertram were all brought to their knees, only the latter against his will. The motes of lights stirred as they entered the largest painting, the one depicting the Holy Mother herself. Not long after, each of the motes disappeared.

****'DING!' Class: [Augur of Hope] has reached level 54 - Stat points allocated, +8 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 39 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

Jacob smiled as he saw the final wisp disappear, and he knew he had done his part. While he could not save their bodies, he had at least saved their souls. Fate had been realized, even if it was an unpleasant one.

****'DING!' Class: [Augur of Hope] has reached level 55 - Stat points allocated, +8 free points****

“Pleasure doing business with you,” he said with a smile said towards the painting as the divine aura faded, him still the only one able to remain standing. “Now, let us prepare for what's to come.”

Chapter 87: Dark Mana & Dark Tunnels

The darkness permeated his entire being as he sat in meditation. His regeneration was far higher than it had ever been before as the mana poured into him. Meanwhile, tendrils of dark mana spread throughout the hallway, making him look like some eldritch octopus with tiny arms.

Occasionally his entire body would turn into a shadowy ethereal figure for a few moments until it returned to being flesh and blood once more.

Three whole days had passed without Jake moving a single finger. The tendrils of dark mana were, however, more active than ever before. They wrapped themselves into different shapes and sizes as they reached further and further away from him.

Jake opened his eyes once more as he looked forward. Yes, he looked. The darkness that had blinded him now only seemed like a mist, slightly obscuring everything. At the same time, his sphere expanded back to its usual 30 meters, functioning nearly the same as outside the dungeon.

Everything had finally clicked as he began to comprehend the mana around him better. Unlike the mana he was used to, this mana was oppressive and consuming, far less accommodating to whoever or whatever resided within it.

Raising his hand, he tried gathering the mana into the shape of a ball. Strings of mana sprung up in his palm as they wrung around each other, forming his desired shape a few moments later. Throwing it at the wall, he smiled as the ball persisted even after losing contact with him. It did start fading, but it existed long enough to strike the wall and dissolve into a puff of smoke. Inspecting it further, he felt it had left a small mark, meaning it hadn't been entirely harmless.

While it was useless in combat, it did mark him passing a huge milestone. He had tried to imitate the Mana Bolt he remembered the casters making and had succeeded somewhat. Which had, in turn, helped prove his theory he could make things from mana even without a skill.

The fact that he could make dark mana wasn't to say that he couldn't make normal mana anymore. His mana was still innately the same pure mana; he had just found a way to change its affinity. And it wasn't like the transformation was seamless.

He had the tendrils of darkness active all the time because of the time-consuming process involved in changing the affinity of his mana. It wasn't as quickly done as just thinking about it. It was more akin to doing alchemy, where he had to change the energy's nature to either restore health or stamina.

Of course, there were differences, but his starting point had been that thought. And it appeared that by understanding the mana, he could better adapt his body and senses to it. Naturally, it also helped that the mana was passive, merely existing in the atmosphere.

It didn't have any intent baked into it, unlike what would happen if someone used a skill with dark mana. If, for example, someone made an area filled with dark mana like the dungeon Jake was in, it would still blind and affect him. It would be less than a few days ago, but it would still work.

As the mana was passive, it also meant that it didn't fight back when Jake tried to consume it to regenerate his mana pool faster. In fact, the dark mana was even more comfortable to absorb than the mana outside. His fastest regeneration had still been while he was in the Challenge Dungeon, though, and he was starting to suspect that it had something to do with the affinity of the atmospheric mana.

The mana in the sewers was made up nearly entirely of the dark-affinity, and whatever wasn't would quickly be consumed by it. Jake had observed the mana in his Alchemical Flame be consumed, as well as the light stones he tested out a few days prior.

It reminded him of what he had read and encountered during all his practice for alchemy. The reason why one had to use Purified Water while making potions was twofold. First of all, one purified it to eliminate any impurities, and second of all to remove whatever affinity the mana in the water held. Which, pretty much always meant removing any water mana within.

Water inherently holds water mana, and a fire had fire mana, and so on and so forth. This didn't mean all the mana in those objects was of that affinity, but some of it would often be. Most mana everywhere was still pure mana, and the mana in the air was ordinarily just pure affinity-less mana.

That the forest outside would hold mana other than just pure mana was just a logical conclusion. But it likely wasn't as pervasive as the dark mana and didn't have the nature of consuming light and other kinds of mana. But it did mean that if the mana weren't compatible with him, he wouldn't be able to absorb it, hence regenerating mana slower.

The mana outside was clearly less compatible with him than the mana in here. Luckily the vast majority was still pure making it only a slight annoyance in retrospect. If he had to guess, then he would say a lot of the mana outside was nature-affinity. It would make sense with him not able to use the Greatsword of Nature and the description he had gotten from the Nature Affinity skill.

Ultimately, this resulted in Jake concluding that he had the darkness-affinity. At least manipulating dark mana was something he could do.

Jake shook his head as he returned to the matter at hand and attached several strings of mana to the walls around him. By now, hundreds of strands of mana were flowing through the air, waving as if weightless.

He began walking down the central path as the strings stretched behind him. Every now and then, he placed one of his strings on the wall or floor. He didn't run as he still focused on maintaining his connection with the lines and feel for any changes.

After fifteen minutes, such a change occurred as one of his strings moved unexpectedly. He kept track of it as he felt it move around, suddenly appearing somewhere entirely else.

It had to be noted that the walls were solid. And when Jake said solid, he meant solid. Their thickness was more than his sphere, meaning they were at least 30 meters of solid material. In other words, dungeon-fuckery was going on – a subcategory of the almighty system-fuckery.

As he walked, he felt more and more strings move. It was the earliest ones he had placed, and it was almost like they were following him. Like the dungeon moved together with him as he moved. A suspicion that turned to all but confirmed as he continued moving forward.

When he briefly tried backtracking, the strings mana didn't move but stayed where they were. But this didn't mean he could just start walking back the way he came and end up at the entrance. He felt his strings mana not just move straight towards him but also shift slightly in height and verticality, which meant that the layout was shuffling behind him.

Did this mean that he could potentially randomly reach the exit by just wandering around? He doubted it, but he couldn't rule it out.

Along the way, he encountered several rats sitting about in the tunnel. They all fell quickly, as Jake didn't pay them much attention. He had no interest in prolonged fights, as it would only make it harder to maintain control of the mana.

He did, however, take note of one thing - the only thing that marked any real difference in the layout - the pipes. Jake peered into one with his sphere and found it continuing into the wall more than he could see. Jake stood in front of one for a while but decided to not climb in one just yet. Instead, he placed a string of mana on it as he continued onward.

Continuing onward, nothing more of interest happened until he finally felt a reaction from the string on the pipe. It suddenly started vibrating as he felt his string of mana snap as he lost connection to it.

It was as if the pipe had simply disappeared. It hadn't moved like the rest of the dungeon but simply ceased to be. Jake had an idea but decided to continue forward, and to no surprise, he found yet another pipe shortly after. This one didn't have any rats in it, a regular occurrence, but he felt something familiar.

A small vestige of his own mana was still on the pipe and had nearly been consumed by the all-encompassing dark mana around it. If it weren't because of him spending three days focusing solely on feeling his own mana, he would have missed it.

The pipe hadn't disappeared. It had moved instantly. *Does this mean there's only a single pipe*

? he asked himself as he stood before it.

He decided to finally just climb into the dumb pipe. It was small and dirty, and he quite frankly didn't want to, but it was the only thing that seemed to act differently than everything else. It had to be the key to continuing onwards.

Climbing into it, the first thing he noticed was the stench that seemed to be even worse within the pipe. The bottom of it was covered in a steady stream of water, with the entire thing being perfectly circular. It was difficult to move through as getting a grip on the sides was hard, and he could barely crawl on his hands and knees while within it.

But he soldiered on as he kept focus on his strings behind him. 10 meters in, and none of them had reacted, the same with 20 and 30 meters. When he was 40 meters in or so, something did happen, but not with the strings. In front of him, his sphere picked up a figure moving at him... fast.

Jake barely had time to summon his dagger before the rat reached him, mouth open and teeth aiming straight for his head.

He somehow managed to avoid it in the small enclosed space by lowering his head, smashing it into the water stream below. At the same time, he stabbed forward with his dagger at an awkward angle, hitting the rat in its shoulder, making it squeal in anger.

The blow seemed to do little more than making it angry as it snapped forward once more. However, it didn't miss as Jake felt its jaws close around his shoulder, and the teeth sink in deeper.

Relying on his instinct, he pushed a leg forward as he pushed himself upwards, pressing the beast into the top of the pipe, pinning it. Its mouth was still open and its teeth deep in his shoulder, resulting in the bite doing far more damage. But it did also mean that the beast was stuck.

Jake started stabbing the rat with the hand that wasn't hanging limp from the bite. It tried to retaliate with its claws, but they were too short and weak to land anything more than a few scratches.

He kept stabbing again and again until the notification appeared. He released the pressure on his leg as he collapsed to the side. The damn rat was still stuck in his shoulder, so he lifted it out, seeing the teeth slowly exit his deep wound.

Throwing the dead beast to the side, he winced in pain. Drinking a healing potion, he felt the calm energy enter his body as he felt his wound start healing.

He wanted to take a break badly, but he also knew it wouldn't be a good idea. If one rat could come through the pipe, who was to say there couldn't come more? In the enclosed space, he didn't even feel confident in escaping if he somehow got swarmed.

To make the situation even worse... his bow was longer than the pipe was broad. Meaning he couldn't use it in there even if he wanted to.

Climbing further, he kept notice of his strings as he moved forward as fast as he could. It was a bit hard with one of his arms still weak and healing, but he managed to suppress the pain. The damn rats also had some kind of magic imbued in their bites. It wasn't poison, but something else - Possibly a curse or some kind of dark mana spell. Either way, it was annoying but manageable.

Luckily, he wasn't attacked again before he saw the end of the pipe. He quickly exited it as he scanned the area he now found himself in.

It was identical to the sewer he had come from, but he knew there was a difference. His strings of mana were still attached on the other side of the

pipe, which meant this new area wasn't merely a reshuffling of the old. It was somewhere new, which meant he had progressed.

I hate this fucking dungeon, Jake cursed as he began attaching even more strings of mana to the area around him.

Oh, how he wished this area wasn't just a damn repeat of the other one. Luckily, the wish came true after walking for a while as he noticed a change. On the ceiling ahead of him hung something. A beast with its claws imbedded deep into the stone.

Jake kept walking as if he hadn't noticed while he Identified it.

[Molerat Snatcher – lvl 71]

The level wasn't anything notable, and the aura it gave off wasn't any more substantial than any of the other rats. His shoulder still hurt, but against a single rat, he should be able to manage either way. He didn't feel like using his bow either, so he just went forward with his dagger.

As he got below the rat, it dropped down silently as it tried to bite his head off. Jake quickly reacted by raising his Venomfang, skewering the beast through its mouth.

It tried to bite down on him anyway, but he quickly stepped to the side and kicked it into the wall. A follow-up stab and repeated kicks kept the thing down until he managed to finish it off.

The rats were honestly just too weak. Jake would have to compare them to level 50 deer when it came to open combat. Of course, he had to commend their stealth skills, as he honestly would have never noticed them without his sphere.

Even with his sight partially restored, he still didn't see the rat. It was as if his mind didn't register it before his sphere picked it up. After he was aware of its presence, he could suddenly see it if as if it been there all along. It likely possessed a powerful stealth skill.

And if its ambush failed, it was weak and quickly finished off.

Continuing onwards, he did find a few more Snatchers, but he didn't even bother using his melee weapons. With 30 meters between them, he could easily pick it off with his bow before it had any chance to do anything. It was easy, and it was boring.

At least another kind of beast spiced up the monotony a bit. He didn't see any new pipes even after nearly half an hour of walking. None of his strings had been moved either, which meant this part of the dungeon wasn't shuffling.

His strings still did help a lot, though, as they helped him understand the layout better. He felt like he walked straight, but he was slightly curving to the left as he walked through the long tunnel. Jake felt that he would end up curving back to where he started if he continued straight ahead, so he began correcting it by taking turns whenever possible and he felt like it made sense.

This did mean that he at least covered new ground. He did feel his first strings from beyond the pipe start snapping after a while, but it wasn't because anything had happened to him or them; he just wasn't able to maintain them due to the distance.

It wasn't a big deal as it only helped confirm to him that he was progressing. A confirmation that only got stronger as he spotted something else new ahead.

A room. Yes, not just another damn tunnel. Instead, the tunnel opened up to reveal a new area.

Standing at the new area entrance, he had to revise his assessment of it being a room. It wasn't but was more akin to what had once been a water reservoir. Only a few centimeters of water remained at the bottom now, but it looked like it had once been a big basin.

At the moment, he stood at an overlooking platform with stone steps leading down into it and a path all along the wall to either side. He couldn't see the end of the room with both his eyes and sphere, which meant it was a relatively huge place.

As he moved another step forward, the tunnel behind him was cut off as a barrier of dark mana appeared. Jake turned back abruptly as he touched it. However, he was quickly interrupted as he started hearing sounds of loud clattering from the empty basin below.

Since entering the dungeon, his intuition had been annoyingly silent. He never got a feel which way was better or not, at least nothing he noticed. Yet now, it made itself known to tell him the most obvious thing:

This isn't good.

Chapter 88: Many Rats! Handle it!

The clattering got louder as Jake felt tensions rise. He summoned his bow and nocked an arrow, prepared for whatever may appear. He could hear the sound coming from the far end of the basin below. Whatever it was, it was coming from there.

The barrier of mana felt completely impassable when he touched it, and it had also cut off his strings of mana. With even those strings cut off, he seriously doubted he had any way of getting through it even with Shadow Vault, which meant he was stuck with whatever was coming towards him.

As the sound echoed, he saw the first sign of movement in his sphere. Dozens of small rats entered his sphere at once, heading towards the stairs leading up to him.

Jake didn't even hesitate as he released a Splitting Arrow. He multitasked and identified one as he nocked another arrow.

[Molerat Swarmer – lvl 46]

His first arrow gave him several kills, but it barely made a difference. Hundreds of the things inhabited the basin below and were all now swarming towards him.

Jake managed to shoot four more Splitting Arrows, killing more than twenty rats before the first one reached him. He cursed his injured shoulder that had slowed down his speed as he summoned his sword and dagger.

The first rat was cut cleanly in two as it jumped towards him, with the second one suffering a similar fate. They were all the size of common housecats, which made them huge for rats but relatively small compared to anything else he had encountered so far.

Five more rats died before one managed to slip through and tried to bite him on the leg. Its teeth didn't sink into flesh as expected but were stopped by the fur pants he wore. It still did some damage, but it failed to draw blood.

This made Jake jump back from the pain as he attempted to keep the beasts at bay. Individually they didn't pose a threat; heck, a dozen didn't even matter to him.

The issue was that he wasn't dealing with just a few dozen rats. In his sphere, he only saw more and more rats entering. It was as if an endless wave of rodents had been unleashed upon him, and if he didn't do anything, he would soon drown in it.

The only thing giving him any respite currently was the limited space on the stairs leading up to him. But even that advantage was slowly being removed as the endless stream of rats started piling up below as they all tried to climb towards him.

Rats also began ascending the walls of the basin below, slowly closing in on from his flanks. He was well and truly surrounded. The only place with no attackers was behind him, where the barrier blocked him off.

He cut them down one after another until he could no longer keep them all at bay.

A rat slipped through and was about to land a bite on his stomach when a set of black scales appeared and blocked it. Instead, its teeth chipped as if it had tried to bite steel.

Jake no longer held anything back as he covered his upper body in scales. His pants and boots protected his legs and feet, but his exposed upper body needed protection badly.

His blade and dagger danced through the air in a reckless assault to anything around him. He no longer focused on defense but only on killing anything in his vicinity.

He instantly started to feel the mana drain. While the rats couldn't bite through his scales, they still wore them down and forced him to spend mana repairing and maintaining them. It was unsustainable in the long run, but for now, it was still manageable.

Minutes passed, but it felt like hours to Jake as he was in a constant state of focus. His instincts and sphere worked in tandem as he fought less like a human and more like an efficient, almost bestial killing machine.

It quickly became clear to him, however, that this wasn't going to end well. Despite the hundreds of dead enemies, he didn't feel like he had even put a dent in their numbers.

He had reached level 60 already, but he didn't have the option to choose a skill despite that. The system wouldn't allow him to do so while still fighting, closing off the possibility of getting a skill to get him out of the situation.

No, he had to try something else. Instead of staying where he was, he charged forward, slicing and dicing anything in front of him as he advanced. He had to find the source of the rats.

Fighting through the basin was slow and tiring. Jake's progress was impeded by waves of rats trying to climb over each other to bite him. He stepped on several, nearly falling, and was repeatedly forced to expend more and more mana to maintain Scales of the Malefic Viper.

He had somehow managed to carve a path through the beasts for over 60 meters when his sphere finally picked up something - a figure unlike the army of rats attacking him.

A tall figure stood at the opposite end of the basin in front of yet another dark barrier blocking off what he assumed to be the path forward.

At first, he believed it to be a human, but soon it became clear it was barely humanoid. It stood on two legs but had a chubby body covered in fur and a staff in one of its claws. Claws that even had an extra growth resembling a thumb.

Its face looked a lot like an average rat, but it wore a ragged robe covering its fur. He focused on it through his sphere while he fought and managed to Identify it.

[Ratman Swarm Controller – lvl 81]

Its level was far higher than any of the rats, and the name made its role pretty damn obvious.

With a target in sight, he continued with renewed vigor. The problem of the constant swarm of rats didn't diminish in the least, however, as they kept coming.

There was a finite amount, but their total number was in the thousands. They were spread throughout the basin initially, and many were still just gathering, likely at the controller's behest.

Jake had to finish it off and finish it fast. Taking a risk, he started building up mana within himself as he continued getting closer to the controller step by step. After a few seconds, he felt that he had built up sufficient energy as he released it.

An explosion of pure mana appeared around him, briefly pushing back everything. The rats, air, even the dark mana was pushed back. It hadn't done any real damage to the rats, but it had created the opening he needed.

With a Badger's Jump, he shot up to the ceiling, nearly smashing into it. At the same time, threads of dark mana shot out of him as they attached themselves to the stones above.

Instead of falling back down, he hung by thin threads of dark mana. It wouldn't last for long, but all he needed was a single shot. Taking out his bow, he began channeling an Infused Powershot. His stance was shoddy, and it wouldn't be the best he could fire... but it would have to make do.

The rats didn't idle as they still tried reaching for him. They climbed on the walls and even managed to dig their claws into the ceiling as they tried crawling towards him. At the same time, the rats around the Controller started building a barrier with their own bodies.

The controller was just barely inside his sphere, and even without it, he had used Mark of the Ambitious Hunter on it before he jumped. His energy continued building up in his arms and bow as the rats got closer and closer.

Right before the rats reached him and his threads broke, he released the stored energy as the arrow flew forth. The explosion of mana broke his mana strings and sent him falling towards the ground, as he kept his focus on the controller.

It summoned a wall of dark mana in front of it in a last-ditch effort, but to no avail. The arrow shot right through the wall of rats and pierced the dark mana like it hadn't even been there. It continued right into the controller's chest, blowing a hole the size of a fist through the ratman.

The moment the arrow hit, all the rats seemed to freeze up briefly. Those on the ceiling and walls lost grip as they fell down, and the rats fell over each other in their moment of confusion.

Jake didn't receive a notification meaning the Controller still lived, but he had a golden opportunity. While falling, he quickly soaked his dagger and sword in Blood of the Malefic Viper, ready to continue his assault.

He sprung forth upon hitting the ground and used Shadow Vault in one fluid motion as he launched towards the still reeling ratman.

It held one claw to its chest and raised its staff with its other, smashing it into the ground. When it hit, it echoed throughout the basin, and all the rats around Jake started moving to attack him once more. But it was already too late.

Jake reached the Controller and tried to stab it. The ratman managed to block with its staff at the very last moment, but it failed to stop the follow-up kick to its gaping wound, making it tumble backward. It didn't manage to collect itself before a blade swept in from the side, decapitating it.

With the Controller dead, the rats around him once more lost their cohesion. Jake reached out and grabbed the staff dropped by the ratman, and quickly checked the description.

[Swarm Control Rod (Unique)] – A rod used to control the Molerat Swarmers. Lost upon exiting the Forgotten Sewers. It can only be used with compatible skills. Upon the destruction of the staff, kill any bound by it.

That description said all he needed to know as Jake tried smashing the staff into the ground as hard as he could. Sadly, all it did was hurt his already aching arm as he didn't even scratch it. Even his Venomfang didn't do anything.

The rats were still confused, but soon they started collecting themselves a bit. They were no longer acting with cohesion, but instead individually. And individually, they still wanted to take a bite out of the tasty human in the basin.

Jake desperately tried breaking the staff to no avail as the rats closed in on him once more. He tried injecting mana into it, using Touch of the Malefic Viper, and even putting it into his spatial storage. Nothing worked, and he couldn't put it in his storage at all.

As he was about to just throw it aside and try and fight the damn things, he thought of his Alchemical Flame. The flames were the hallmark of many alchemists, allowing one to break down materials and ingredients while also acting as a heat source.

He summoned the flame around the staff, and momentarily thought it another failure until a small crack appeared on the staff's body. Pushing even more mana into the skill, the flames erupted in power as the staff slowly started getting broken down.

As it did so, he swung the burning staff at nearby rats to keep them at bay until finally, it broke in two mid-swing. The rat he had tried to hit dropped lifelessly to the floor along with all the others. Instantly the basin went from a flurry of activity to complete stillness.

Jake got flooded with many notifications for the kills but only got a single level despite the thousands of rats that just died.

****'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 62 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points****

During the course of the battle, he had earned 3 levels in total, counting the final one. It was pretty apparent that he got less experience from them due to how he killed thousands of rats by breaking the staff. If he didn't, he would have likely gained three or maybe even four levels just from smashing a rod.

And speaking of the staff, he noticed ashes left behind by burning it. The wood had a strange purple color, almost as if it was ground up crystals. Using Identify confirmed it wasn't anything ordinary.

[Lesser Ethwood Ashes (Uncommon)] – The ashes left behind by burnt Lesser Ethwood. Used in a myriad of recipes related to the soul and mind. Has no effect upon direct consumption.

Using his necklace, he didn't have to scoop up the ashes as he simply deposited it directly into the spatial storage. There wasn't that much left after burning the staff, and he had no idea what to use it for, but with so much space left remaining in his storage, he saw no reason not to hoard.

Jake sat down on the floor amidst the corpses of rats as he breathed heavily. He was pretty damn drained of both stamina and mana as he had freely been using skills during the entire fight, not holding anything back.

His pants had small holes in places, but by supplying mana, the self-repair enchant got to work as they started mending. The fight had gone as well as one could expect, though. He must have multiplied his total kill count by many times during this one dungeon dive. One point that especially experienced a lot of growth was his tutorial points.

He had earned full points from all the rats he had killed. Even those that died after smashing the staff, making his total amount multiply instantly. He still had no use for the points currently, and his current guess was that they only show their worth after completing the tutorial, which meant that they were of no importance or consequence for now. If he failed to defeat the King of the Forest, it wouldn't matter anyway.

Jake couldn't help but find it kind of funny, though, that the shitty sewer dungeon had gone from being the least effective source of experience and tutorial points to the most rewarding in such a short period. Then again, it came with associated risks.

Without his scales, he would have been eaten up whole, and without his bloodline allowing him to be aware of his surroundings, he would have likely died before even reaching here. He could only imagine how horrible the dungeon would be for a regular party entering. Though, of course, they would have their own methods to survive and progress.

After examining his body and waiting a bit to be entirely sure no more enemies came, he entered meditation. Finally, he had the time and opportunity to pick a new class skill.

Chapter 89: Dark Attunement

Jake was two levels above the required one for choosing a new skill, but luckily, it didn't seem to have any adverse effect. He had feared that delaying it for too long would lead to complications, but then again, the restrictions about skills-gain in combat were system-imposed, so it would be kind of bullshit if it punished him.

Before checking the skills available, he quickly made a small prayer to finally get some kind of area of effect skill. If he could shoot exploding arrows or maybe emit poisonous mist or something like the Den Mother, he could have easily dominated the Controller and the army of rats.

If he couldn't get that, he could maybe settle for another time-manipulating legendary skill. That wouldn't be too much to ask, right?

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

Opening his system menu, he began going through the skills where five new entries had appeared, aka the maximum.

The first skill he started with was weirdly enough both exciting and boring at the same time

[Dark Bolt (Common)] – The starting point for many aspiring dark casters. Allows the hunter to summon bolts of dark mana to defeat your foes. Those hit suffer a penalty to perception and suffer damage over time as the dark mana ravages their very being. Adds a minor bonus to the effect of intelligence when using Dark Bolt.

Reading the skill, he found it interesting he even had it. It seemed like a caster spell and not a hunter one at all. But then again, he had learned how to condense bolts of dark mana and could do so without a skill, so maybe the system was just offering up a skill to do the same.

If it became an official skill, he could likely use it without any long wind-up. It would also undoubtedly be stronger, if not just for the effectiveness bonus from his intelligence the skill provided.

That was the exciting part, with the massive drawback of the skill itself being how little it appealed to him. Jake was an archer, a hunter, above anything else. He wasn't going to start becoming a mage any time soon. If it was a skill that complimented his hunter skills like Shadow Vault, he could roll - or vault - with it, but this skill was clearly aiming towards an entirely different path than his own.

In other words, he would prefer to choose some other random skill he had unlocked prior. While throwing magic around seemed like a fun thing to do, it wasn't really him. Maybe in the future, he would pick up some more mage-like skills.

Moving on, he read the next skill.

[Tendrils of Darkness (Uncommon)] – Of all the senses, perhaps the one of touch is the most universal. Summon invisible tendrils of darkness that allows you to feel the area around you. The Tendrils are weak to energy attacks, but their ethereal nature makes them immune to physical ones. Range of the tendrils scale with perception. Adds a small bonus to the effect of intelligence and perception when using Tendrils of Darkness.

This one was very similar to the Dark Bolt one. It was just a skill apparently mimicking what he had already done, albeit likely in a far more efficient and effective way. This was likely a skill stemming from his exploration method of placing strings everywhere.

But to Jake, this skill made even less sense than the Dark Bolt. The only reason he had used it was due to the unique circumstances he had found himself in.

He could easily see it being useful for someone without his Sphere of Perception. If one spreads the tendrils out around oneself, it would be tough for anyone to sneak up on you. Of course, his sphere already had that part covered, and quite honestly, he believed his sphere was leagues ahead. Yet the skill was different enough that he doubted it would be a repeat of Moment of the Primal Hunter.

It also kind of carried the same caster-like sentiments of the Dark Bolt, though a bit less. While it did hold some uses for him, he believed that he could teach himself to do those things without a skill. With that in mind, he moved on to the next option.

[Distracting Shot (Uncommon)] – Every arrow is not necessarily meant to strike your foes, but simply to create an opportunity to do so. Shoot an arrow copying your mana signature and aura, distracting those of lower intelligence or those unaware of your current position. Adds a small bonus to the effect of agility and perception when using Distracting Shot.

This skill was at least quite a bit different - nothing about dark mana with this one. Jake didn't know if this was related to him distracting rats earlier in the dungeon, though. Back then, he had just shot some burning arrows after all. And while it had worked out rather well then... the skill didn't really excite him.

It was just dull. If Jake wanted to distract something, he could do it by just firing a regular arrow, and if the enemy were smart enough to know that was a diversion, it would likely not fall for this skill either.

Heck, it directly said that it only worked on stupid things. Sure, it was way better than a burning arrow, and while it likely could be useful, but it didn't really mesh with Jake's current style of combat. He could incorporate it, but it didn't really appeal to him.

So with that in mind, he continued down the list of skills.

[Descending Dark Fang (Rare)] – A fang coated in dark mana descending like the clamping mouth of a snake. Do a downward strike with a melee weapon, significantly increasing penetrative power and damage inflicted. Dark mana makes the wound harder to heal and drains energy until dispelled. Damage improved further if the weapon is benefitting from Twin Fang Style. Adds a small bonus to the effect of agility, strength, and intelligence when using Descending Dark Fang.

The first rare skill finally appeared. It was pretty clear from the name and description that this skill was an upgraded version of the Descending Fang skill he had skipped when he reached level 50. Interestingly enough, he could also still pick the normal Descending Fang along with this one.

Jake had wanted a good melee skill for quite a while. He had to admit that the Descending Fang skill had appealed to him quite a lot, and this upgraded skill even more so. All the benefits added by dark mana appeared to synergize well with the damage over time effects from his poisons and the venom from Venomfang too.

Increasing penetrative power would also make it easier to apply his affliction to ones with strong resilience. If he had met someone or something with a skill like Scales of the Malefic Viper, he would have difficulty dealing proper damage without using Infused Powershot.

Overall the skill seemed like a great addition to his arsenal, finally giving him an excellent melee combat option. He was already pretty competent in that department due to the massive benefits from his bloodline. His high stats were also helping quite a lot.

The fact that his Venomfang, the most potent weapon he had by far, benefitted from the skill even more due to being made of bone only made it all the better. Besides, using Descending Dark *FANG* with Venom*FANG* just seemed fitting.

Unless the last skill was a significant surprise, he had pretty much decided on this one already as he checked the final skill... which was a surprise.

[Dark Attunement (Unique)] – You have shown yourself to have exceptional dark-affinity, allowing you to create and manipulate dark mana more easily. Permanently transform a part of your mana-pool to Dark Mana, empowering and reducing the cost of all dark-affinity skills. This mana innately limits the perception of those affected and consumes other types of mana-affinities. Also allows the user to absorb mana of the dark-affinity more easily. Beware that while Attunement opens many paths, just as many are severed.

Jake had to read the skill over a couple of times. In fact, he wasn't sure that calling it a skill was correct. It was something far more than that. It was to choose a path - a decision that would matter far more than anything outside of class or profession selections.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that turning his mana into that of the dark affinity would have lasting consequences as well as perks. He would become a hunter using dark magic. A powerful path for sure, he surmised.

But... he didn't like it. It didn't feel right. He wasn't even sure if it would work properly with all of his skills. Or would it just upgrade things like his Infused Powershot? Would Touch of the Malefic Viper work the same as before?

Perhaps it would immediately make him more powerful, but he feared the sense of permanence in the skill. The commitment to a path, one he could likely never reverse, and even if he could, it would come at a high cost.

The fantasy did have great appeal to a more juvenile part of him- the thought of being a hunter hidden in the dark, killing all before they even knew of his presence. It was a great fantasy, but fantasy is all it would ever be.

This didn't mean he would cut himself off from the use of dark mana. The skill had confirmed that he held a great affinity for it, which had a lot of value in itself.

So, in the end, he skipped it. Perhaps he would embrace an affinity at another time, but for now, he wanted to keep his paths open and his future an open book. Thus he picked the Descending Dark Fang skill.

****Skill Gained*: [Descending Dark Fang (Rare)]***

He felt the influx of instinctive knowledge on how to use the skill as he continued his meditation. He hadn't gotten the area of effect skill he had hoped for, but instead a strong single-target one. On the other hand, the gains from just the skill choices' information carried a lot of value. Overall it had been a fruitful session of meditation and skill selection.

Jake continued his meditation for half an hour more or so before opening his eyes, drank a potion, and reentered meditation once more. As yet another hour passed, he awoke again, drank a potion, and meditated a bit more. Another hour passed as he drank another potion, but this time he didn't reenter meditation.

Getting up on his feet, he felt rather good. His health and stamina were still not full, but his mana pool had been topped up due to the high mana density environment coupled with his own affinity to said mana. He still had some questions about affinities, such as why the dark mana helped regenerate his regular affinity-less mana, but those were questions for another time.

Stretching a bit, he decided to move on further into the dungeon. He did so at a relatively relaxed pace as he took his time. He still needed time for the potion cooldowns and, in concert, his body to heal.

The exit to the reservoir was indeed the barrier the Controller had been standing in front of. After the Controller died, the barrier disappeared, opening the path forward. If he had to guess, then he would say the ratman was a mini-boss of sorts.

The Ratman Swarm Controller had been weak on his own, with his magic somewhat subpar and his physical strength only a tiny bit better. It was clear that the role of the Controller was to, well, control the rats.

Walking through the basin's exit, he found himself in yet another sewer tunnel, but at least this one was a bit more spacious than the others. Any change was a good change in this damn dungeon, according to Jake.

As he walked for a few minutes, he still hadn't encountered anything until something new appeared in his sphere. Contrary to what he had expected, it wasn't another rat or even anything living for that matter - instead, strings of mana extended from one end of the wall to the other.

Jake briefly felt like someone had stolen his shtick, but soon noticed that the strings served an entirely different purpose. The stones on the floor that were covered by a steady stream of water concealed long spear-shaped objects right below where the strings were.

It was a god damn trap. The first proper one Jake had encountered in a dungeon since maybe the Challenge Dungeon. And it was a quite vicious one at that. Those spears were clearly covered in a dense layer of dark mana, meaning getting skewered by them would do far more damage than just a flesh wound.

Quite extreme for what to many will be their first encounter with a trap, Jake thought to himself as he observed it in his sphere. As this was a tutorial, this would indeed likely be the first trap for many, and for most, that first encounter would be lethal.

Of course, Jake had also to consider that the dungeons were made for parties to enter together. If a dedicated healer stood behind with an armored warrior in front, he would have a good chance of surviving. But Jake, in his solitude, didn't even consider that. To him, these dungeons had been solo adventures, after all.

Jake didn't even take out his bow but instead condensed a bolt of dark mana in his hand and threw it into the strings. The moment it hit them, the entire floor exploded upwards in a cloud of smoke as the stones broke and the spears extended.

The power behind them was quite honestly insane. Even with Jake's high stats, he would have been skewered before even having time to react appropriately. While he didn't think it would kill him outright, he sure as hell didn't want to test it.

Jake waiting a few moments but noticed that the spears didn't reenter the ground as he had expected. Cautiously walking up to them, he noticed that the spears were made of a similar material to the staff he had taken from the ratman.

While he could get past the spears around the sides, he instead summoned his Alchemists Flame and got to work. He had time to spare while he regenerated, and while he didn't know what the weird ash he had gained from the staff could be used for, he didn't believe that one could have too many materials of uncommon-rarity.

The process was slow, but he managed to burn down all the spears in less than 15 minutes before continuing onwards. Collecting the ashes, he was starting to get a worthwhile pile in his storage.

Soon, he encountered a few more traps and a few hidden rats sitting and waiting to ambush him. *Wow, this dungeon has it all, an encounter with traps AND rats*, he scoffed internally.

All of it was passed relatively quickly as he killed the rats and ignored the traps.

Sadly he only encountered two more spear traps, meaning he didn't gain that much ash. The other traps were just other boring things like the walls smashing together, pitfalls, and even a trap that caused the floor to erupt into black flames.

As it was starting to get a bit too annoying, he finally saw the end of the tunnel, and if he was lucky, the end of the damn dungeon.

Chapter 90: Nest Watcher

The tunnel opened up once more as Jake found himself in a small circular cistern. Water was stored below and a cross-shaped bridge allowed one to get across without getting wet. The road straight ahead led to another hallway while the path to either side led into pipes.

Jake had just entered the area when a rat appeared directly opposite him. He was prepared to take it down when it took the path to the left and entered the pipe. And that was when something truly interesting happened.

The pipe disappeared for just a few seconds before a new, perfectly identical one appeared. Jake couldn't be sure if it was the same pipe; all he knew was that some dungeon-fuckery was going on. Was this perhaps where all the rats in the dungeon came from?

He knew that he was looking for a nest of some sort. His objective was to kill the Nest Watcher after all and to watch a nest, there needed to be one. And for the nest to be where the rats came from also seemed rather logical. *I'm a genius*, he joked to himself.

Checking his stamina and health one final time, he proceeded forward. The trap-filled tunnel had given him time to down a few more potions, topping him up entirely.

Walking at a brisk pace, he crossed the bridge and entered the tunnel, headed towards what he presumed to be the nest. A prediction that proved correct as he soon found himself on yet another platform overlooking a reservoir. But unlike the last, this one didn't appear to be filled with thousands of weak rats.

The darkness still obstructed his vision, making him unable to get a good look, but he could feel something down there. Four strong presences, none of the auras weaker than the Den Mother had been. Unless the dungeon had decided to up the bullshit even further, this had to be the end.

He prepared his arrows and sword and dagger with poison as he waited the last twenty minutes for his potion cooldown to be over. Good to go, he began his assault.

Jake jumped down into the basin, his bow already out and an arrow nocked, ready to be drawn.

Advanced Stealth on full display, he advanced as sneakily as he could. He could feel the auras of the four powerful beasts, but none others. Perhaps they were hidden by a stealth skill like most rats possessed in the dungeon, or there were indeed only four of them.

Soon the situation became clear to him, and it wasn't what he had expected. Four giant rats were lying on the ground together, surrounded by a massive number of smaller rats.

The big rats were quite frankly far too big for it to make any sense. They looked like they couldn't even move...

They were hairless like most of the other rats in the sewer, but their proportions were just all off. Their bellies were inflated to ridiculous sizes, and their external limbs looked like they could barely carry the beast. It didn't even have any claws.

He identified one of the enormous rats and got at least a partial answer through it as to what the hell these things were.

[MoleRat Incubator – lvl ??]

The name made it quite clear what the function of these rats was, and it also explained the many tiny rats around them, one of which he also identified.

[Molerat – lvl 10]

They were indeed just pups. Far too small to pose any threat, yet Jake knew that leaving them alone would be unwise.

This was a dungeon and not the actual world. The death of these pups would mean nothing. They were never going to mature; they were just background noise added to the real challenge.

Jake looked around a bit further but didn't spot the so-called Nest Watcher.

If it doesn't want to show itself, then I will make it, Jake thought as he covertly marked the first Incubator with Mark of the Ambitious Hunter while he made tendrils of shadows attach to the three others. None of them even reacting to his actions.

After that, he retreated to the entrance of the reservoir once more. There were no obstacles between him and the Incubators, meaning he had a free line of sight. Well, he couldn't actually see them, but his arrows would move unobstructed.

With the mark as a guide, he started channeling an Infused Powershot. There were roughly ninety meters between him and his target, giving him ample time to bombard them before giving them the chance to retaliate. He was unsure of the Incubators' combat capabilities, so he decided that it was better to be safe than sorry. Maybe they would awaken and be true monsters after he attacked it?

When he reached the limit of energy he could charge, he released the arrow. The explosion of mana pushed back the dark mana around him for a brief moment and shattered the stones directly below him as a testament to the power behind the shot.

A power that soon tore into the first Incubator's head, obliterating it entirely.

****You have slain [Molerat Incubator- lvl 86] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 132000 TP earned****

Focusing on his tether attached to the second Incubator, he managed to focus on it enough to place a new Mark.

Nocking another arrow, he prepared another shot right away and released the string once more towards the next target.

****You have slain [Molerat Incubator- lvl 85] - Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 130000 TP earned****

*****DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 63 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points****

*****DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 57 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

Surprisingly it also died in a single shot. The second attack hadn't even been close to as powerful as the first, yet it had proved lethal. But the momentary surprise didn't slow down his movements at all as he marked his next target, charged, and released yet another attack. This one didn't manage to kill it directly, but he felt it hitting through the mark.

He instantly fired another, but this arrow didn't hit at all. The Incubator still lay unmoving where it had always been so something had blocked his attack.

He quickly tried switching the mark to the next Incubator. Firing another arrow, it too got blocked. Jake decided to just charge a powerful Infused Powershot once more before shooting. He guessed that the last two had erected a barrier or something, and the best way to break that would be through sheer force.

Charging it up, he felt his danger sense explode, followed by something entering his sphere - something fast.

Jake fired the arrow prematurely at one of the incubators as he ducked. Where his chest had been only milliseconds prior, a crescent wave of dark mana passed. The wave continued as it cut deep into the stones behind him, making the entire wall explode and crumble.

To his surprise, he heard the sound of a kill notification on yet another Incubator as he was forced to once more jump to safety from another dark wave of destructive mana. And just as he was starting to get his bearings, he saw *it* enter his sphere.

It was tall and standing on two legs, easily towering over two Jakes put together. It had hair all over its body and looked almost human except for its head. It was another ratman - a ratman wearing a helmet.

It was a lot like the Swarm Controller, but this one was far bigger in every aspect. It wore heavy armor that looked to be made of some kind of black exoskeleton, and over its shoulder, it carried a huge crude black sword that looked to be made of stone. He could see the muscles hidden beneath the fur, making it crystal clear it was the warrior-type.

But as Jake observed it, it observed him back, and to his surprise, opened its mouth in a roar.

“Human! Why kill!?”

Jake was taken aback by the words. No, by the fact that it could even speak. He had assumed all the enemies he met in dungeons just to be common beasts. While some, like the White Stag, had shown signs of intelligence, it was nothing close to speaking.

This ratman, however, overturned his expectations...

As he took too long to answer, the ratman roared once more.

“King send? Why come?”

Jake finally collected himself as he answered honestly, seeing no reason to hide anything.

“I have come to defeat the Beast Lords on my way to kill the King of the Forest.”

Now it was the ratman’s time to be taken aback for a moment before it started laughing with a bizarre rat-like laugh.

“Hah! You pup! King's strong! Human weak!”

“Must be embarrassing to die to a pup,” Jake answered as he once more lifted his bow. He didn't bother chatting with the ratman any more than this. They would have to fight no matter, as he had already Identified his opponent.

[Nest Watcher – lvl ??]

If the fight was inevitable, why delay it? It was doubtful that he could learn anything useful from the ratman. On the other hand, it would give the Nest Watcher time to maybe call for reinforcements or have the one remaining Incubator to do something. He also wasn't sure if there was only one Nest Watcher...

The ratman reacted as Jake fired a Splitting Arrow towards it by swinging his oversized blade, releasing a crescent wave of black mana. The arrows still in mid-flight were annihilated by the wave as it continued onwards straight in the direction of their shooter.

Dodging, Jake fired another barrage of arrows but was met by another wave of mana released by the now charging ratman. The ratman didn't look like it had any intention to chat anymore either.

Jake decided to switch it up a bit as he used Badger Jump to create some distance as he charged an Infused Powershot. This time, the Nest Watcher didn't attack but blocked the arrow with the blade's flat part.

It was pushed back a few steps but didn't seem otherwise affected as it continued its charge. Jake continued firing a few more arrows, but they were either blocked or pushed away with a wave of the giant blade.

Soon he could no longer keep the distance as he came face to face with the giant figure. He barely reached its waist, and he felt the overpowering aura as it brought down its sword upon him. He dodged to the side as the ground where he had once stood exploded in a flurry of dust and dark mana.

Jake managed to make use of the opening as he landed an arrow in the leg of the ratman. Physically it didn't do much damage, but it had managed to penetrate the skin. Soon the area around the wound was black from the necrotic poison, clearly doing worthwhile damage.

Not that it could be seen on the bipedal rat as the assault continued with the same vigor and power as before. Jake kept dodging its blows as he managed to land potshots once in a while. The damage slowly accumulated as the poison ravaged the system of the ratman from within.

After a solid shot to the knee with an Infused Powershot, Jake finally managed to stumble the Nest Watcher and making it fall on its knee. This allowed Jake to open up a worthwhile distance between them. A quick Badger Jump coupled with a Shadow Vault put a good 50 meters between them almost instantly as he began charging yet another Infused Powershot.

The entire reservoir was a mess at this point, with broken stone everywhere and considerable gashes in the walls and ceilings.

He felt the power build up as the ratman got up once more. But contrary to belief, it didn't charge again but instead pointed its blade towards him - black mana condensed around the blade as it started being charged with energy too. To Jake, it only looked like a black hole condensed somewhere in front of him, his sight still impeded by the dark mana. An affliction the rat clearly didn't suffer from.

Jake welcomed the challenge with a smile, however. The battle seemed to come to a standstill as both charged their attacks for nearly ten seconds. The hunter was the first to release his string. The attack was the most powerful one he could muster with his current stats and skills.

Right after, the ratman also released the energy he had built up. A torrent of dark mana poured forth and condensed into a blade-shaped beam headed straight for the incoming arrow, and of course, the one who had shot it.

The attacks crashed together in an explosion that seemed to shake the entire dungeon. However, it was clear that the dark mana won out as it continued onwards, weakened but far from weak.

Not that Jake had any intention of being in its way. He had already used a Shadow Vault to the side even before the attacks hit each other, as he had no confidence in winning a direct confrontation of power.

He was faster than the Nest Watcher, but he was far behind in the strength department. His most considerable advantage, as always, was in his instincts and high perception,

allowing him to read the situation better and make the best split-second decisions in the spur of the moment. And now was one such moment.

Quickly he fired yet another, far weaker, Infused Powershot at the ratman. It was something he had clearly not expected as the arrow hit him in the chest, blasting him backward and shattering a part of his armor. Jake followed up with a Splitting Arrow towards the still shaken giant, managing to land additional wounds. They were minor, but everything was starting to add up.

The ratman roared as he released a barrage of black mana waves, forcing Jake to retreat once more. He could feel that draining the Nest Watcher of mana likely wasn't going to happen due to the atmospheric mana, but its health and stamina had to be lacking at this point.

This was the first dungeon boss that Jake had faced in what he would call a genuinely straight-on fight. The Den Mother had been poorly matched against him, and he had partly cheesed the battle, while the fight with the Great White Stag had been more about the moon and ponds than any direct confrontation.

It felt good just to have a fight like this. The Nest Watcher was powerful but not above what he could manage at his current level of power. Overall, it was quite a lot stronger than him, but he was now about to bring it down with his instincts and effective kiting tactics. Of course, he knew that ninety percent of the damage he had done was due to his poisons, but all of it was part of his strength.

Jake continued his assault as he continued dodging wave after wave, as he kited around the hall, never allowing the ratman to get in melee range and land a blow.

As victory was in his grasp, something suddenly changed. The ratman stopped attacking as he stood up straight and regarded Jake, who had also stopped attacking.

“You strong.... but King Stronger.” The ratman said as it heaved for breath.

“Right now... maybe this King is. But I only grow stronger. Perhaps I can’t win today, but I still have time,” Jake answered as he already expected the fight to be over. The ratman was a dead rat walking with all the poison in its system. It was a foregone conclusion already, and he had nothing against waiting for the last of its life to drain away.

“No. You not,” it answered. “King... too strong. He... apex... you do lose... not that matter-“

With those words, the Nest Watcher exploded in a torrent of darkness that consumed all light, and Jake's sight disappeared completely once more. Energy pressed down on him as he felt like a tsunami of dark mana suddenly washed over him.

“-cuz you die now.”