

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 91: A final gift

Jake felt like he was suddenly submerged in oil. Everything went completely black, and his entire body felt like he was deep underwater. Even sound seemed to disappear as he was left with nearly no external stimulus. He said *nearly* as two things still worked - his sphere and his roaring sense of danger at what was heading towards him.

He tried jumping back fast enough but took a deep cut across his chest as he jumped backward. It was followed up by another strike that sought to impale him through his heart. He managed to barely weave to the side of the blade as he felt it brush past him, the dense mana surrounding the huge sword burning his side.

It wasn't just that Jake had gotten slower. The ratman had gotten stronger and faster. It moved as if it hadn't taken a single injury during their entire fight. But in his sphere, he clearly saw what was truly going on.

The ratman was burning up with mana. It came out of every orifice, and even the puncture wounds Jake's arrows had caused earlier. Every vestige of energy was being burned, and it was only a matter of time before it would collapse.

But Jake didn't have that much time, as he barely managed to avoid a swipe of its sword but was still caught in the wave of dark mana, blowing him back. He felt the dark mana dig into his body as he felt the energy within him being drained. Health, stamina, and mana all took a hit as the mana ravaged through him.

Dodging once more, he used his Shadow Vault to dodge an overhead blow and instantly regretted it. The moment he turned into the ethereal shadow, the dark mana dug into him, draining him at an alarming rate as he quickly disabled the skill. To make it even worse, this resulted in him failing to dodge away as far as he wanted and was blown away by the blade smashing into the ground.

He knew he couldn't keep it up. He needed to change the status quo. Dodging was not an option, and he was slowed down far too much by the domain of darkness to flee. His evasion skill was more than useless. So, instead of trying to avoid the enemy, he charged.

The ratman was faster and stronger than him, but it did have one major disadvantage; its weapon and fighting style. The heavy sword was great at medium range, and its waves of dark mana allowed it to even fight well at long range.

At short range, it had issues. The blade was too long to properly land hits, and coupled with the Nest Watcher's giant size; the small human was a difficult target to pin down. However, Jake needed an opportunity to get in close, and the ratman seemed more than content to keep him away. So he played one of his final cards.

He ran straight towards the rat without any intention to dodge - his Venomfang in one hand and his shortsword in the other. The Nest Watcher responded with an overhead smash. The raised blade descended like a meteor as his danger sense exploded out with warnings of him being obliterated.

But just before the blade hit him, it seemed to stop mid-swing. The roaring waves of mana slowed down, the smoke-like mana pouring out from the ratman moving in slow motion.

Moment of the Primal Hunter

Jake, the only one unaffected by the warped time, dodged the blade easily as time resumed to normal once more. The ratman was still confused as the dagger cut into its right knee. The hunter had held nothing back as the Descending Dark Fang penetrated the wound left by an arrow earlier and utterly shattered the kneecap.

Despite the dark mana's effects buffing it up, the Nest Watcher still could no longer use the leg as he knelt down on the other one. The ratman would likely be able to do a quick repair and resume motion in a short time. If Jake let him.

A sword and dagger cut into it once more from behind, stabbing into its back and shoulder. It tried to swing its sword behind it but failed to hit anything, as the two weapons dug into its flesh again.

Jake avoided the armor covering the Nest Watcher with his blades. It only covered parts of the body, and a lot of it had broken off by now anyway.

After landing two more blows, he decided that enough was enough and retreated backward once more. He had injected far more poison into the ratman, and even if the dark mana was keeping it at bay currently, it would still spell the doom of the Nest Watcher.

The ratman kept kneeling as he tried standing a few times but failed. Soon the domain darkness was dispelled as everything returned to normal once more. As normal as a sewer dungeon filled with constant darkness could be.

By now, the ratman was well and truly spent. Down on both knees with the blade dropped to the side. Cracks covered the ratman's entire body as the dark mana had clearly taken its toll.

The ratman looked up at Jake, who stood only a few meters away now, its eyes fixed on his.

"You kill King truth?" It asked, the words barely coming out.

"That or I die trying," Jake answered truthfully.

"King strong. Very strong. Trapped nest," the Nest Watcher said, as it picked up the fallen blade slowly. Jake didn't react as he could see that it genuinely could barely lift it. "I hate. If you truly kill... I help. Nest died long ago. You do... revenge."

"Help me? How?" He asked, a bit confused. He doubted the ratman could exit the dungeon even if it wanted.

"I make plan... but I weak. Trapped. Never leave. But you leave. I give curse, you kill King," It said, as it lifted the blade and held it in both hands. "You accept?"

“Sure.”

At his confirmation, dark mana started leaving the body of the ratman as it entered the blade. At the same time, the blade started shrinking down into a small marble. As the mana was channeled, he clearly felt the ratman grow weaker and weaker.

“I done. Take gift. Kill King. Revenge Nest,” the Nest Watcher barely managed to get out before the last remnants of life left its body. Its eyes closed as he saw a final wisp of energy enter the bead in its hand.

****You have slain [Nest Watcher – lvl 96] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 152000 TP earned****

****’ DING!’ Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 64 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points****

It was a solemn end, but it had been a good fight.

It... no, he fought well, Jake thought as he walked up to the dead Nest Watcher. He nodded at the corpse as he accepted the gift it had used its last remaining life to hand him.

[Dark Bead of the Nest Watcher (Epic)] – A bead made of condensed dark mana. The last hope of the Nest Watcher to get revenge on the King of the Forest. Can be thrown at foes to inflict them with a powerful Curse of Darkness upon shattering. The curse will severely limit perception and drain energy until dispelled. All of the resentment of the nest will be unleashed if used on the King of the Forest.

The bead was clearly a powerful weapon. It was a one-time use attack. One clearly made for the King of the Forest, and Jake would happily reserve it for just that. It would maybe give him the edge he needed.

Jake put the bead in his storage. While he planned to face the King all along, he now had just a little more motivation.

He started limping towards the dungeon's exit when he was reminded of the one remaining Incubator. It was still just lying there on the stones, seemingly unaware of everything that had happened. The small molerats surrounded the three other incubators' corpses and appeared to be nipping at them.

With disgust, Jake downed a healing potion and took out his dagger and sword. No matter how much respect he held for the Nest Watcher, its nest was now dead. There was nothing left to salvage, and he may as well finish the job.

Ten minutes later, he walked out of the reservoir with two bloody blades in his hands. The job was done, and the final Incubator, as well as all the rats, were now dead for good.

****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 65 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points****

****' DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 58 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

He read the notifications and continued onwards. As expected, this was indeed the end of the dungeon as he entered a new small room with a wooden door leading into it. The room held two lockboxes summoned by the system, but also many other things.

In one corner was stacked hides from what appeared to be dead deer. The hides were faded, gray, and dirty, obviously having been there for a long time. It wasn't hard to conclude that this was where the Nest Watcher had lived.

The rest of the room was simple. There were no books or any type of entertainment - just a bunch of old hides and some rudimentary furniture such as a single chair and tables all made of the same bricks as the walls and floor.

For the powerful Nest Watcher to live in such terrible conditions... Jake could understand why he hated his existence. It also explained why he had been so slow to react to the hunter's initial assault, which allowed him to kill two Incubators before he even appeared.

Jake felt a tinge of sadness. It reminded him of his own experience in the challenge dungeon. Except the Nest Watcher didn't have any endgame. He was stuck in the hellhole

that was this sewer with no way out. And with the door to exit the dungeon in his very room...

Jake shook his head to dispel the thoughts as he turned his attention to the lockboxes. He could do nothing for the Nest Watcher now but get stronger and kill the King of the Forest. Perhaps this was the ratman's intention all along. Find someone powerful enough to possibly stand up to the King and then give them the bead that he had clearly been preparing for a long time.

One of the two lockboxes was large and rectangular, with the other one small and square. Jake decided to open the small box first.

Within, he found a rather nice-looking pair of black gloves. Picking them up, they felt leathery and not the cheap imitation leather-leathery. The gloves only covered the hand and only extended a few centimeters up the arm, meaning they didn't get in the way of his bracers at all.

[Gloves of the Nest Watcher (Rare)] – Gloves made from the cured leather of an unknown creature. Provides strong protection against both physical and energy attacks. User can channel mana through the gloves that can then be released as a blast of mana. The blast's power is based on the user's wisdom and intelligence, along with the mana consumed on use. Enchantments: Self-Repair. +35 Intelligence.

Requirements: Lvl 55+ in any humanoid race.

Reading the description, he was rather pleased just by the simple fact that he could use them. Interestingly enough, they didn't appear to be of the dark affinity at all. It wouldn't have stopped him from using them as he wouldn't encounter compatibility problems like with nature and light mana, but he still preferred affinity-less equipment. He felt like it fit him more.

The effect was also exciting but had to be tested before he could draw any worthwhile conclusion. It appeared to be strong, and he was always looking for ways to better use his mental stats during combat.

Enchantment-wise it was relatively simple. Self-Repair appeared to be a staple of system-made equipment, and while the stats on the gloves didn't benefit Jake much, they were nevertheless welcome. Intelligence, if nothing else, did make his Infused Powershot marginally more powerful.

Turning his attention to the other box, he opened that one too.

What was revealed was leather armor for the upper part of the body. It appeared to be made of the same material as the gloves and even sported the same colors. It had long sleeves and covered everything from the bottom of the neck to the edge of the pants.

Jake couldn't help but be ecstatic.

Finally, a god damn shirt! For far too long had he gone with a bare chest. Far too long spent getting scratches all over his upper body and having to feel half-naked. Some decency had finally returned to his life. His happiness only increased as he identified the armor.

[Armor of the Nest Watcher (Rare)] – A chestpiece made from the cured leather of an unknown creature. Provides strong protection against both physical and energy attacks. The Nest Watcher's life force runs through this armor, blessing the wielder with great vitality and toughness. Enchantments: Self-Repair. +75 Vitality, +50 Toughness.

Requirements: Lvl 55+ in any humanoid race.

The armor didn't have any ability or extra effect. Instead, it just provided a buttload of stats and solid defenses, which quite honestly suited Jake just fine. Though, he would have worn it even if its only ability was not to be torn whenever something even remotely touched him. Yes, he still hated that damn cloak.

He took on the armor first, and he felt the warm flow of stats after he injected mana into it, binding it to him. He felt like it would take a few minutes before his body adapted to the increased stats. But more than anything, it just felt great to finally have some measure of defense between his bare skin and the claws and teeth of the beasts.

Next, he picked up the gloves. Putting them on, he once more felt the increase in stats after yet another injection of mana, binding them as well.

They fit like a glove, Jake joked to himself, the horrible joke fully intended. Perhaps the solitude did have some adverse effects.

He did a few stretches in the new armor, feeling out the flexibility of it. It almost didn't impede him at all, and he felt great wearing it. He had nearly forgotten the feeling of being fully clothed after going the better part of a month not being so.

Heck, he even looked quite good if he had to be honest, though a bit edgy with the whole all-black theme going on. Well, all-black except for his old brown boots that still looked like they were about to tear and break at any point. An appearance they had had since the moment he got them.

Feeling comfortable in his new armor, he flopped down to the ground to meditate. He considered doing it outside but decided to get as much meditation time before the dungeon would kick him out, making full use of the faster regeneration from the dark mana.

One dungeon left, Jake reminded himself as he entered meditation.

Chapter 92: Willful Ignorance

"Fucking die already!" William yelled as the huge beast in front of him refused to submit. It was far from the first time he had fought the damn thing, and this had to be the time he would win.

The Den Mother was covered in wounds as the huge sawblade cut into its side, managing to cut into its guts until its dense muscles stopped it. The damage from the blow was far from lethal, but it was starting to build up.

William heaved for breath as his mana pool was far closer to empty than he felt comfortable with. It was barely enough for one more spear. It had to be enough.

Spear of Ferroras

He summoned the ornate spear and pushed himself forward with Metal Manipulation. The beast was one step too late, exhaustion making it slow and sloppy, as the spear penetrated it through one of its eyes.

With every last point of mana, he pushed himself and the spear forward, forcing it into the brain of the damn dungeon boss.

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

****'DING!' Class: [Metal Savant] has reached level 59 - Stat points allocated, +6 free points****

Seeing the notification, he let himself fall backward as he laughed out loud.

“Fuckin’ finally.”

He had spent more than a week in the shitty den, but it had all paid off in the end. He had finally defeated the last boss and cleared the dungeon.

It had been quite the journey. It took William only two days to get through the first Alpha, but then another five for the next room with the alphas and the Den Mother. He had to leave the dungeon a few times between to exit and grind out a level here or there to get an extra edge.

He even went outside at one point after he saw something interesting. After only a week remained of the tutorial timer, the dinosaurs were no longer confined to the inner zone. He had gone out and found tens of them rummaging through where Richard's base had once been. It was quite comical that he had even considered not killing them when they would all have been ripped apart by beasts anyway. No way they could have resisted dozens of level 40+ raptors storming the camp. The dinos gathering in the camp had allowed him to kill a good deal, though.

It had been a long grind, and now it all felt worth it with the damn Den Mother lying dead. It was his 8th attempt where he finally managed to kill it. Luckily the design of the dungeon made it easy as pie to retreat if shit got bad. The tunnel between the rooms was too small for both the alphas and Den Mother to fit through, allowing him just to leave whenever.

Which was especially good after he was very close to dying after his first fight with the Den Mother. When three freaking alphas had appeared in the middle of it all and started chewing him out, he barely managed to retreat to the tunnel where he hid and meditated.

Afterward, he went in and out of the tunnel, killing the alphas around the Den Mother one after another, retreating and regenerating between kills. Finally, he had only the final boss alone, allowing him to focus solely on the oversized rodent.

He didn't know if he would call it lucky or unlucky that the dungeon didn't reset upon leaving and entering again. On the one hand, it was nice that his progress stayed, but on the other, a resetting dungeon would be a godlike grinding spot.

The grinding with the current setup had been rather mediocre, averaging just a bit over a level a day. It did get harder to level the further he went, so it really wasn't that bad. His main limiter was the long time it took for him to regenerate. His ability to absorb metal did help a bit, but it was far from enough.

Getting up from the ground, he looked at the corpse of the large Den Mother. He didn't bother dissecting it but couldn't help himself with kicking the corpse a few times and spitting on it before he moved through the last chamber.

A single lockbox with the loot was there, making him smile. He doubted he could get anything close to the armor Herrmann had made him, but he wasn't going to complain about getting free stuff.

He opened the box, grabbed the loot, and exited the dungeon. He did get a title giving him +1 in each stat, which he honestly didn't care for. There was less than a week left of the tutorial, and he still had that one last survivor to get rid of.

He didn't know how strong the archer had grown, but William doubted Jake would be worth much. From what he heard, he nearly died to Richard and Hayden, even taking severe injuries. Besides, he had spent a week exiting and reentering the dungeon without catching sight of the guy or any kills left by him.

If William didn't know better, he would guess that Jake was just hiding in some hole somewhere, hoping for the tutorial to end. A lamb waiting to be slaughtered.

But before finding him, William decided to grind out one more level, reaching 60 and getting yet another skill. No reason to take any chances after all.

He could almost hear the begging and pleading from the archer that had once nearly ended him. It was going to be so sweet to cut him up, one little piece at a time.

Checking the time, he began grinding once more, still daydreaming of ripping Jake apart.

Tutorial Panel

Duration: 6 days & 23:01:45

After finally getting the level, he checked it one last time and saw sixteen hours had passed. Being drained from the dungeon and farming, he decided to take a quick nap before continuing his grind while looking for the archer.

One where he dreamed once more – in it, a figure with green eyes came to him and whispered what he wanted to hear: His prey's location.

Jake didn't even exit the dungeon but was just thrown out the moment the countdown finished. Well, teleported out was perhaps more accurate as he found himself, still in meditation, suddenly in the dark hole outside the door where he had entered.

He continued his meditation for a bit and soon noticed an odd phenomenon. The dark mana in the hole started disappearing as he meditated. Only half an hour later, one could see through the once perfect darkness with the naked eye, and a full hour later, there was no trace the mana had ever been there at all.

Jake opened his eyes and saw that the door still appeared to leak small shrivels of dark mana, and in a day or so, the hole would likely return to the same darkness as before. Not that it was any of his business.

A quick Badger Jump later, he found himself atop the hole once more within the hollow mountain. Finally, he bothered to check his notifications, seeing that his titles had indeed upgraded once again.

[Dungeoneer IV] – Successfully clear a Dungeon suitable for your level. +4 all stats.

[Dungeon Pioneer IV] – Be the first to clear a dungeon suitable for your level. +12 all stats.

He was beginning to wonder if those two would ever cap out or something. It seemed ridiculous if he could continuously clear dungeons and upgrade the title infinitely. He could only imagine someone with Dungeon Pioneer M increasing all stats by 3000.... Actually, that didn't sound that bad, considering one would have to be the first to clear dungeons a thousand times, and the levels alone from that would likely make those stats insignificant in comparison.

He still suspected there was a cap, though. He wasn't sure; he just had a feeling.

The next part that had been updated was his one quest.

Tutorial Quest: The Beast Lords

The forest murmurs with rumors of a King ruling the forest 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 now fallen. The King has taken notice but has yet to make a move. Continue with the quest, and you shall inevitably meet.

With the Nest Watcher's death, your presence is now beginning to become truly worthy of notice. The King of the Forest will not sit idle as you attempt to dismantle the careful balance his domain has attained. With only a single Beast Lord left standing, your quest is soon complete, and the King shall come.

Objective: Defeat the Beast Lords.

Current progress: 3/4

Reading it, he got a bit giddy as he finally faced the big bad King of the Forest. But before that, he still had a dungeon left to clear out. Checking the time remaining, he noted that he indeed was a little pressed on time.

Tutorial Panel

Duration: 6 days & 4:49:32

The sewer had been far longer than he expected. If the next one was the same, he wasn't confident in doing it and still have time to prepare and face the King. But he would have to make do with the time he had and hope that the final dungeon turned out faster.

Chugging one last healing potion, he began moving forward, his health, mana, and stamina all at a healthy level. He didn't have the luxury of delaying any more as he made a beeline for the next dungeon.

It was a bit lucky that he hadn't suffered as terrible wounds in the sewers as he had against the Great White Stag. Perhaps it was because the type of damage he received against the stag was of the light-affinity while the Nest Watcher's damage was dark affinity. He had been a lot more injured overall back then, though.

It was evident that he had great dark-affinity and horrible light-affinity. It did make sense that the two were opposing forces, and it was likely the same with fire and water affinities. He would have to ask the Malefic Viper or someone else with a bit more experience dealing with the system.

Running at a brisk pace, he headed towards the next dungeon. He did meet a group of raptors who decided to leg it when they noticed him, clearly not interested in a fight. It was a bit disappointing as he would have loved to try out the new Mana Blast from his gloves as he had decided to call it.

Not that it stopped him, as he practiced a few times while running. It reminded him a lot of the Explosive Punch he had unlocked quite a while ago. This attack didn't require blowing up his own arm, though, so it was a huge step up.

The other difference was, of course, that this one used mana. And while Jake didn't know how powerful the blow was, it sure did wonders on the boulder he tried it on, blowing it to pieces. It was like walking with a hand grenade in your hand, ready to explode whenever he willed it. In other words, it was awesome.

Continuing, he soon saw something he hadn't expected - a corpse. And it wasn't one he had killed himself, as he had never been there before. The wounds also appeared to have been made with blades or maybe daggers. Humans, not beasts, killed it.

He stopped up to look at them for a bit. Had some of the other survivors made it to the inner area?

It doesn't matter; it has nothing to do with me, Jake thought to himself as he prepared to keep going. Barely managing to turn around, he spotted something standing there on the hill leading up the mountain.

A humanoid figure completely covered in what appeared to be silver. It looked like a mannequin, but it was clear that it wasn't as it started walking towards him. As he walked, metal peeled away from the face, revealing a smirking face that Jake recognized.

"Missed me?" William said as he looked down on Jake. Both figuratively and literally.

"... What was your name again?" Jake asked, genuinely unsure. *It was something with 'W,' right... William, I think?*

William, however, froze briefly, not expecting that response. Had the idiot hit his head at one point?

"Are you fucking daft or what?" he asked with evident annoyance.

"Sorry, you haven't exactly been on my mind. I just remember you as this metal-casting backstabber..." Jake answered as he considered what to do. "I don't know... can you just go? I am kind of busy."

"Come on, stop playing around; you have to know what this is?" William declared in a mocking tone. "Two people remaining. The final confrontation between the last survivors! The decider! An epic battle of destiny where the true champion is found!"

"What the hell are you on about?" Jake asked with real confusion. Last survivors? What did he-

Total Survivors Remaining: 2/1200

...

How hadn't he seen it? He had checked the timer so many times. The number was always there, right below. Had he somehow overlooked it? Maybe it had, for some reason, not appeared?

However, William understood what was happening far faster than Jake as he saw the conflicted look on his face.

"Holy shit," William said as he started laughing. "And people call me a fucking lunatic... holy shit, you're for real! You cold bastard. I killed the last one like a fucking week ago. Jacob, that guy, had apparently become a lunatic and made them all go full-on Kool-Aid. Ah, but no worries, I killed him quickly, and I actually felt a bit bad about it, so we're all good, right?"

Jake just stood there as the guy kept talking, mocking him as his brain was trying to catch up.

"And you managed just to ignore it? I am honestly impressed; not even I could do that. And I even had a doctor tell me that I am indeed a fucking psycho, but you are just winging it!"

William spoke as he walked closer to Jake, now only a few meters between them as he continued.

“Or are you just a coward? Too scared to check. Ah, that’s it! You are just a damn coward hiding away in your own little world! So afraid of being a disappointment to everyone that you'd rather never see them again? So afraid of rejection that you would rather let them die while you do nothing? Hehehehe, this is a fucking comedy, man... and you’re the butt of the joke.”

“Just-”

“Oh, the coward spea-“

“- die.”

The distance was closed on an instant, the move far faster than the teenager had ever predicted. He covered his face with the armor in panic, but it didn’t matter.

A dagger coated in dark mana exploded down unto his chest, smashing into his prized armor and into his chest with a loud crunching sound. He was pressed into the ground, creating a small crater. His mind rattled as he failed to muster any response.

Jake didn't let up and give him a chance to either as he punched down, releasing a blast from his new gloves. The crater only grew as Jake released another and another. He continued hitting, soon without any bursts of mana being released when he ran out of mana. But he kept slamming his bloody fists into the distorted armor below him.

He didn't stop even when he got the notification. He just kept rampaging. Until suddenly, he stopped halfway through yet another punch.

"What the fuck am I doing..." he muttered to himself as he fell backward on his ass. He was sitting in a crater that had grown to several meters wide and nearly a meter deep, the distorted armor encompassing the metal caster's body at the center - blood leaking out of every small crevice or tear in the armor.

Tears started to gather in his eyes as he punched his broken fist into the ground.

"WHAT THE FUCK AM I DOING!"

Chapter 93: The Balance Broken

Jake didn't have a lot of close friends growing up, but he did have some. One of them was Patrick or Pat for short. Pat and Jake went to daycare together and even entered the same school. They were in different classes, but they still met up during recess and went to each other's places after school nearly every day.

They had the same hobbies. If one got a new cool comic book or movie, they just had to watch or read it together. Everything was idyllic and pleasant until one small thing came between them.

Jake had lent Patrick one of his new video games for the weekend, but when Patrick came Monday, he didn't have it. Jake didn't chew him out or anything but believed it to be a genuine mistake and asked him just to bring it Tuesday.

Tuesday came around, and still no game. Jake asked again and again. Finally, Patrick broke down and claimed that he had accidentally broken the disc and had lied about it. Jake was furious and told him their friendship was over if he didn't get him a new copy of the game.

Patrick cried, but Jake was steadfast and ignored it. Until he got home, where he too cried. His parents told him to forgive and forget, but Jake was too damn stubborn even back then.

A week passed, and the two of them hadn't spoken a single word. Well, Patrick had spoken, but Jake had ignored him.

Two weeks passed, and Jake kept ignoring his oldest friend despite the pleas and apologies. At that point, Jake had already begun to forget about the game as he had moved on to newer and better things, but nevertheless, he refused to forgive.

On the third week, Patrick came up to him and said that he had something for him during recess. But when the break came around, he couldn't find Patrick anywhere and found out that he had left school early that day.

From then on, Jake completely ignored him. No matter how his former friend tried to explain, Jake didn't listen for even a second.

Two months later, Patrick changed schools. Jake didn't care; he had moved on then and had just started getting into archery.

He learned a few months later that the reason Patrick changed schools was because of bullying. And not the 'tough-it-up-kid'-kind, but the 'trauma-for-life'-kind. He was beaten, isolated, belittled, and, as Jake learned later, stolen from.

Patrick never lost the game. One of the bullies stole it the day he came to return it. Patrick, being non-confrontational, didn't want to get Jake involved and just lied. Instead, he tried to fix it himself.

He managed to pool together all of his allowance and money from some odd jobs to buy a new game three weeks after he lost it. He had brought it to school and wanted to give it to Jake that very day. Instead, his bullies emptied his bag, found the game, and decided to play frisbee with the disc. When Patrick stood up to them, he was beaten, and his parents were called and took him home.

And what did Jake do the moment he learned all this? Absolutely nothing. His old friend lived less than a kilometer away from his house, but he didn't go over. A simple apology, a single "I am sorry," and perhaps he would have had his friend back. But Jake just continued ignoring him.

Jake never heard from or spoke to Patrick again. He moved away a few years later.

And the most pathetic part?

More than a decade later, Jake received a friend request on social media. It was from Patrick. The message attached was just a simple “hey remember me” kind of message, at first, but in the end, it finished with an apology for never returning the game as promised. It was phrased as a joke... but Jake couldn’t move past it.

It was an olive branch, an opportunity to make things right once more. And what did Jake do? He pressed the red cross on the window’s border, leaving the request pending even when he entered the tutorial.

Jake didn’t know why he remembered Patrick specifically at that very moment when he sat on the ground, hands bloody and heaving for breath.

Maybe it was because the entire situation with his former friend exemplified exactly how pathetic Jake felt. He was a god damn coward, and he had always been.

Jake was a loner. It was hard for him to let people in. People represented a nearly inarticulable way for him to fuck something up.

If he did let someone in, he started to care, and he feared letting them go once more. He would ignore anything that could break the careful balance established - to the level of

ignoring his girlfriend's blatant cheating, to ignoring the obvious fact that she did it with his best friend.

But perhaps the only thing he feared more than letting those close go... was to let them back in once more. It was to confront the broken balance and try to restore it once again. He feared the conversation he would have with Patrick if he let him in once more... so he just avoided that conversation.

It was the same in the tutorial from the very beginning. When Joanna lost her leg due to something Jake did, be it his fault or not, it broke the balance. Every second he was with her was one where he had to address that fact.

Being presented with an opportunity to get away and be alone when Richard appeared... he pounced on it right away. It was a way for him to escape the consequences - a way for him never to confront her and have a difficult conversation.

Jake, however, still had to admit that no matter how much he enjoyed solitude, he still craved companionship. He didn't fear being lonely; he feared being truly alone. Jake had wanted to reunite with his friends once more. To see the always handsome and coolheaded Jacob and his butler-guy Bertram, the passionate Casper, the two energetic cousins Dennis and Lina... even Caroline after the betrayal, he wanted to know *why* she did what she did.

He had truly missed them, so he tried establishing contact. Instead, he was met with his biggest fear... an ambush that broke the balance completely. The one he had a crush on wanted to kill him for reasons he didn't understand, his former friend Jacob appearing not to understand the situation at all.

It was a mess - chaos. It was a situation that Jake didn't want to confront... so he ran. Once more, he was ignoring the problem. But he still held on a small sliver of hope. And then the day came where the number of survivors fell from hundreds to only around 50.... and that was the last day he remembered ever seeing the number of survivors.

That was the day the balance was broken beyond repair. He had worked with statistics long enough to know that many of the dead were bound to be his former colleagues and friends. He had even reached the conclusion that among the dead, Jacob had to be one of them. He hadn't proven himself capable of proper self-defense, after all.

So Jake had continued his quest to conquer the tutorial. He had replaced everything with the single goal of killing the King of the Forest and ignored everything else. The same as he had always done.

He had ignored Patrick and focused solely on archery. Ignored his cheating girlfriend and former best friend to concentrate on studying. It was how Jake dealt with every situation: Pretending like it didn't exist and either hope it resolves itself or everyone forgets about it. Or the worst option... for no one to be alive caring about it.

What had triggered him in William's words was that it was all true. That a psycho teenager mass-murderer understood him better than he possibly even understood himself in that very moment. That the fucking psycho could *relate*.

However, the final straw was a faint feeling in the back of his mind when he saw that number of only two survivors: Relief. He hated himself for it. He hated that he felt like a burden had been lifted from his shoulders. He hated that he liked never having to confront any of his colleagues for the choices he had made - for the choices that could have possibly saved their lives.

Jake hadn't known that Patrick was bullied. He never saw it, and he was only a kid. But after their friendship was over, he did notice it. Yet he did nothing.

Back then, Jake was never bullied. He was always tall for his age growing up, and he had never been the type to back down from a fight. He would often win a fight as he seemed to have a natural talent for beating up others while not getting himself beaten. Which back then was enough for all the school bullies to mark him as off-limits.

When Patrick stopped hanging around with Jake, he became an easier target. With Jake, he had been safe from the bullying, at least when they were physically together. He had acted as a shield, but when Patrick lost that shield, the bullying escalated.

Yet despite knowing Jake did nothing to help his former friend. He was willfully ignorant, and even then, felt a sense of relief when he moved away. Because Jake knew he could have helped his friend. But he had failed him.

Just like how he knew he had failed Jacob and all the others after he saw the number of survivors drop drastically... he could have gone there. He could have gone and checked on them, and he would likely have been able to help them.

But doing so would require him to confront the broken balance. To face the fact that Caroline betrayed him, the fact that many of them were dead, the fact that their relationship was not the same as it had been before.

As Jake sat there submerged in his own deep thoughts, something changed in the atmosphere. The trees' rustling leaves stopped, the wind ceased, and Jake sat completely still as if frozen. In fact, the entire tutorial seemed to freeze like a still picture at that very moment.

A man appeared out of nothing as if he had simply walked into a picture. He had long white rustled hair and an even longer beard. But most weird was his smile, a smile that didn't appear to hold any meaning but simply was.

The man walked towards the crater as he headed for the broken armor and the one within it.

"Such a mess," he mused to himself as he waved his hand. William and the armor both disappeared as the man turned his attention towards Jake. Or more accurately, the one standing behind Jake.

"Not very nice of you to steal someone else's kill like that," the scaled man who stood beside Jake said, as he regarded the white-haired one.

"It is of no consequence," the old man said as he ran his finger through his beard, a trace of annoyance in his eyes. "Besides, were you not the cause of this? You told me to leave your Chosen alone, and yet you go and mess with mine."

"Oh, that? Yeah, *that* is of no consequence," the Malefic Viper said mockingly. "But the body of the mortal you just stole is of consequence."

The old man raised an eyebrow as he kept on smiling. "Oh? I cannot possibly see what you would want the dead body of a mortal. Why is that, if I may ask?"

“You may not,” the Viper answered. “All that matters is that the kill belongs to my Chosen. I have more claim on it than you do. Are you truly going to steal what is rightfully mine?”

The man looked back at the Viper as his eyes sharpened. His smile still there, yet his tone didn’t reflect any jovial mood. “... What do you want?”

“If you want the body, you owe me one. Simple as that,” the Malefic Viper said, returning the smile.

“We both know that is no simple matter. How about I compensate our young friend over there?” he said, motioning towards Jake.

“Yeah, as if I am ever letting you do that. Either you leave the body here, or you owe me.”

“Have you not done enough damage already? Has the interference of you and your Chosen not created enough chaos? Why do you needlessly attempt to ruin this tutorial?”

“I don’t know... why don’t you ask fate? Oh, but before that, leave the body and let your little experiment end here. Or. You. Owe. Me.” the Viper said, the last four words heavily emphasized.

“... Fine.” And with those words, the white-haired man disappeared. As if the illusion had been broken, everything started moving once more. The change was that the body was now gone and the Viper still standing at the crater’s edge.

“Who was that?” Jake asked, his head still lowered.

“Oh? You saw?” The Viper said as he walked over to him. “That is actually quite interesting. Time was kinda stopped, you know.”

“Yeah, I get it. So who was it, and why take that damn body?” Jake asked

“He is an old soul like me. Goes by Eversmile, though, of course, that isn’t his actual name. Guy hasn’t stopped smiling for eras; it is actually quite creepy.” The Viper joked. “As for why he wants the body? Because he is a maniac. What is important is that he now owes me one.”

“Right...” Jake answered as he looked up at the sky. The appearance of what he presumed was a god, and the stopped time had at least served as a nice distraction. For a few moments, that is.

Sitting down beside him, the Viper joined him in looking towards the sky. “Out of all the character flaws to have, it’s not the worst, you know.”

“Right...”

“I would say that William guy had way more severe issues.”

“Right...”

“Alright, deflection's not working, got it,” the Malefic Viper said as he turned his head towards Jake. “But seriously, is it really that bad? Have you really done something so inexcusable? Is being selfish really that big a sin? Heck, this is isn't even being selfish; it's not wanting to deal with someone else's unrelated problem.”

“How the hell is it not my problem when I ignore my friends and leave them to die to some psycho!?” Jake yelled at the god.

“How is it? Is their weakness your responsibility? Why is it not their fault for not getting their shit together?” the Viper asked with a laidback tone.

“So I should just go full-on selfish psycho and ignore everyone around me?” Jake kept yelling.

“You could, and it would be perfectly reasonable,” the Viper answered. “No one else is your responsibility unless you make it so. No one ever deserves your forgiveness or compassion. No one is ever entitled to your goodwill.”

“So the best way is just to end up alone and sad until the end of time?” Jake said but instantly realized. “Sorry, I didn’t mean...”

“No, you are right, that way also sucks,” the god said with a melancholic smile.

“Letting others in sucks too. It creates a weakness, an opportunity to be hurt. But being alone also sucks. It is quite a conundrum. I guess all I am saying is to pick those you let in carefully. Avoid those who will eventually end up hurting you. Living alone isn’t the solution, but neither is bearing the burden for everyone around you.”

“And how exactly do I know who to trust and who not to?” Jake asked.

“You don’t; that’s why it’s hard. But if it helps with anything, then your pal Jacob is still alive together with that Bertram guy, Casper too. You picked good friends there at least,” the Viper smiled teasingly.

“Wait. How? I thought William killed them?” Jake asked, a mix of surprise, happiness, and skepticism.

“Oh, he did. But Jacob, for example, is now the kind of guy that is annoyingly hard to kill. Heck, when it comes to getting a powerful variant class, he has both you and that William-guy beat ten times over.”

“Is he still in the tutorial?” Jake asked a bit expectantly.

“Nah, he is out and done, officially failed it. Left prematurely. To the system, he is counted as just another dead survivor,” the Malefic Viper said dismissively. “Oh, but Casper did kinda die... anyway, you will see them after the tutorial; it will make more sense then.”

“Oh...” Jake said as he fell into thought.

“Just coming out and saying it right now, you will be a god damn coward if you don’t at least speak with them when you get back on your planet,” the Viper said, this time only half-teasingly.

“Right,” Jake answered, feeling a bit better. “So, what to do now?”

“Two things. First of all, I may or may not have been the one who sicced William on you today. Partially to get revenge on Eversmile, who was also the bastard in your dream, by the way, and partially because I wanted to be a good friend and let you punt that psycho for killing so many of your friends. Also... it will do you good in the long run.”

“Not sure how to respond to that one... thanks, I guess? What will happen to him now?”

“Oh, he will probably be revived or something – oh and good riddance for smashing that little shit the first time around. He gets a full ten out of ten for being annoying. Either way, just kill him again next time, and that will be that. Though I doubt Eversmile will allow him anywhere near you moving forward. Now, on to more important things-” the Viper said, as he pulled out two bottles from the empty air, “-drinking!”

“Where the hell did you get beer from?” Jake asked, clearly confused as he looked down at the familiar bottle.

“Your fridge,” the Viper said as he popped it open.

“How the-?”

“God things.”

“Oh... right.”

Chapter 94: Beers & Exposition

At the edge of a crater in the middle of the forest, two figures sat drinking. The crater’s epicenter still carried the outline of what had once been a person with small smidgens of blood here and there.

Around the two people drinking were several empty bottles. They chatted as they drank down the familiar liquid that Jake hadn’t tasted for over two months. It was oddly nostalgic despite it not even being that long. It took him back to simpler days with way less fighting and death.

Of course, he was still thoroughly grounded in his new reality by the scaled man he was drinking with.

They had chatted about useless stuff for the most part. Jake had asked a few questions about the system, though, and gotten some useful pieces of information.

Halfway through the conversation, Jake took out a small notebook he had kept with many questions he had built up surrounding the system. It took a bit of convincing, but he managed to get the Viper to spill the beans on some details. They both knew that it was just Jake's attempt to keep his mind occupied, but the god relented.

One of the questions were related to the dungeon titles:

“Nah, the dungeons titles are as normal as they come - 5 levels to the title at E-rank, increasing with every race evolution. Don't worry too much about it; you will get those done quite naturally more often than not. The stat bonuses increase as well. It is pretty normal for most everyone at the higher ranks to cap out at least the Dungeoneer title before every evolution.”

Jake did try to get some info on actual dungeons but got shut down on that one. The Viper seemed quite adamant that for Jake to find out himself would be way more fun. The only thing he said was that dungeons came in many different forms, some of them not even recognized as real dungeons. They were also apparently temporal abnormalities that could “remember” who entered it and generated a new subspace for every new party or individual.

He also managed to get some precious info on the loot he had received:

“Gear? Eh, it has pretty set rules, actually. One can only get so much in a specific stat before equipment no longer gives anything - 20% per individual stat. But you can only get a maximum increase of 15% to your total stats, so you can’t get the full 20% in all of them. And yes, that’s after all other bonuses such as titles, skills, consumables, and so on. Making the number of stats you can get from gear increases even further. Strong gets stronger and all that. Though the stats from gear, as you have no doubt noticed, don’t receive any percentage bonuses.”

He even managed to get some excellent info on affinities.

“Affinities are just what kind of mana your body is naturally aligned with. Most of it is innate and cannot be changed unless you do some really wacky shit. Classes can also offer a skill that grants you affinity towards a type of mana - even one you usually would never be able to achieve.

“That isn’t to say that affinities are set. They get more locked in the stronger you get, but it is possible to influence them somewhat at a low level. Environmental factors often do play a role. In other words, if you are born on a planet filled with water, chances are you are going to have water-affinity.

“And if you wanted to, for example, get the water-affinity, it may be possible if you decided to reside within a space with only mana of that affinity for a long enough period. But your level of affinity likely won’t ever reach a high level, so most just stick with whatever they have.

“As for how many different affinities there are? Not telling!”

Jake had to be honest that he felt a lot better after only a few hours of chatting. He still felt like a piece of shit, but it was better. But the Viper did have one question.

“How did you know about Eversmile? Pretty sure time was stopped, and you looked like you were very much affected,” the Viper asked.

“I don’t really know. At one moment, I am just sitting there, and the next, I feel an influx of information in my mind, just a bunch of impressions bundled together. It showed the guy appear, make the corpse disappear, you coming, some talking or something, and then he was gone again,” Jake answered honestly, trying to describe the weird feeling.

It clearly came from his sphere. It was as if his sphere had kept observing even after his mind was stopped, and upon resuming, it threw everything that had happened at him. It wasn’t painful or anything, and the knowledge was way more comfortably digested and understood than even what he got through a skill by the system.

“Interesting. Not to snoop, but it is related to your bloodline, right?” the Malefic Viper asked.

“Yeah,” Jake answered, not wanting to hide anything. He knew that if the Viper wished to do him harm, he would already be a goner either way. And his intuition told him that the god in front of him genuinely didn’t have any malicious intent... despite his name.

“I figured as much. But the next time anyone asks you that, act stupid or something. Bloodlines aren’t to be spoken of liberally,” the Viper warned.

“Yeah, I guess you shouldn’t share the details of your skills,” Jake answered, seeing the logic in the words.

“Skills are one thing; bloodlines are another,” the Viper said, shaking his head. “The details of your bloodline should be your closest guarded secret. The fact that you have one cannot be hidden, but what it does most certainly can. And while even the general power of it can be sensed by certain means, the specific details are only ever known to you and those you have shared it with.”

“Why bloodlines specifically?” Jake asked, a bit confused. Yes, his was most certainly extremely powerful... but why did he need to keep it under wraps?

“Because bloodlines have a few distinctions that set them apart from everything else, one of them being...” the Viper said as he turned a bit grave. “...they are hereditary.”

“I remember reading it somewhere...” Jake said, before asking. “How the hell does that even work?”

“Jake, do you know what bloodlines even are?” the Viper asked, still sober.

“From what I gathered, innate abilities of some kind?” the hunter asked.

“They are so much more than that... and yet so much less. Bloodlines are innate, as you say, but to call them abilities would be wrong. Bloodlines simply *are*. The system has granted all the skills you possess; they are given. Controlled by a particular set of rules. Bloodlines aren’t.

“A bloodline exists outside the system. They aren’t controlled by it, simply interpreted. One could say that a bloodline is the one thing that truly belongs to you. That has always belonged to you, always been a part of you. Which isn’t to say bloodlines and the system don’t affect each other. They most certainly do. Just as much as any other part of what makes you, you. If not more.

“So I hope you can understand why many covet a beneficial bloodline. Why many factions, clans, and powers want to have a bloodline enter their fold. It represents a vast advantage above others. A bloodline doesn’t take up a skill slot; it isn’t capped or controlled. If it gives anything positive, it is pure gain with no drawback.

“I cannot even begin to tell you the advantage a good bloodline can give you. But remember that while a bloodline can be a blessing, it can also be a curse. Not just because others want it, but because the bloodline itself can be more a burden than a gift. From what I have gathered, you have one of the good ones. Treasure it, explore it, but keep that treasure buried deep and only share it with those you truly trust.

“I am not saying that you shouldn’t enter a faction or create connections with your bloodline as a bargaining chip. All I am saying is to do it with caution. And if anyone ever tries to force you... well, throw me a thought. I haven’t done a nice massacre for a while.”

The long speech contained a lot...

None of the books he had ever read contained even close to that much on Bloodlines. Everything he knew about them was from the system or some vague mentions during the challenge dungeon. He did ask Casper after he unlocked it back then, and he didn't know a thing. He had a lot of questions, but especially one burned in the back of his mind.

"How did I get a bloodline? And what determines what it does?"

"You didn't get a bloodline; you have a bloodline. And nothing determines what it does. You are your bloodline; to talk about the two of them as if separate is nonsensical. You have always had your bloodline, even before the system. Albeit far weaker and inactive for the most part."

"I think I would remember having supernatural powers before the initiation," Jake answered, a bit skeptical.

"It may have been inactive, but based on the feeling it gives me, I doubt it. Think about what it does very carefully. Can you truly say that you haven't felt even a tinge of its effects in your life? It wouldn't be much, just small occurrences or areas where you did almost impossible things."

Jake fell into thought at the question. Maybe he had? Thinking about it, his bloodline just made him better at ordinary things. It gave him great intuition, enhanced instincts, and great awareness of his surroundings if he had to boil it down.

He had always had a pretty good gut feeling about things, which is also why he did so well at his job. Of course, his personal fault of often ignoring his gut feelings to avoid problems hindered that effect a bit.

As for better instincts? Who is to tell? He had great reflexes and the ability to control his body – one of the reasons why he had been good at archery. His bloodline also increased the perception stat, and the only stat he had entered the tutorial with at 10 was perception. Which meant it was already as good as it could be.

“Yeah... maybe I did,” he said after a bit of thinking. It was honestly hard to say. It was as the Viper said. His bloodline just made him more... him. It increased innate things that all humans had. Everyone had gut feelings; everyone had instincts and that weird ‘eyes on the back of their head’-feeling if someone stared at them. Jake had just taken it all to the next extreme level.

“Just keep it to yourself is all I am saying. It is quite possibly your greatest advantage over others,” the Viper said, as he emptied the bottle in his hand.

“How common is it to have a bloodline?” Jake asked.

“Quite rare, though more common the higher rank you get. They are a lot more common for new initiates like you, but new bloodlines appearing in older universes are quite rare. Especially the useful ones,” the god said, fishing out yet another bottle from empty air.

“Why is it more common at higher ranks? Didn’t you say that it is something you are born with?” Jake asked, a bit confused.

“Yeah, that is how bloodlines appear. But it isn’t always how they are attained. Some bloodlines are also just awakened at a higher rank.”

“How could you then attain a bloodline at a higher rank? Is it possible to steal a bloodline?” the hunter asked, considering the horrible implications of that.

“Hah, no. I told you already, you are the bloodline, and the bloodline is you. Absolutely inseparable,” the Viper said with a small laugh.

“I guess I have to explain a bit about souls. The bloodline doesn’t really exist in your body but within your soul - the deepest part of your soul. A soul is made up of many layers, each serving a function.

“The outermost layer is what you use to interact with the world. It holds your senses, your thoughts. If it is broken, you lose consciousness. That layer will just regenerate with time. Heck, yours has already been broken a time or two. A lot of skills and magics interact with this layer.

“The second layer holds memories and experiences. This layer is far harder to get to, but it is possible through magic. This is the layer that many schools of magic, such as mind magic, hypnosis, and illusions, touch upon.

“The third layer is the subconscious layer. This is quite similar to the second layer in that it pretty much still holds everything the second layer does, just in a weird condensed form. This is where your personality and your motor skills and such reside. Touching this layer with magic is only done by the most powerful, and even then, it is often only to affect it slightly.

“The fourth layer holds your energies - your mana, your stamina, and your health. Affecting this layer is far easier than any of the others, funnily enough. But to permanently affect it is borderline impossible.

“Finally, there is the core. This is often referred to as the Truesoul. This part does only one thing, and yet it does everything. It holds your Records. Everything you are, everything you have ever done, all your stats, your skills. No skill can touch upon the Truesoul. It is only the system that can ever touch this layer.

"It is deep within this Truesoul that your bloodline dwells. It has come to be without the system, and it is intricately interconnected with your Records. In fact, some say that the Status Menu is just an overview of your Truesoul given by the system.”

Jake sat quietly listening to the useful exposition. Without a doubt, this conversation had been the most informative he had had since the initiation by the system. But one thing did bug him.

“You said that one could attain a bloodline though, and if it is in this Truesoul, then how can anyone get it? Didn’t you say that bloodlines were outside the system?”

“The system cannot create bloodlines, but it can recycle them. When you genuinely die, your Truesoul returns to... somewhere. It returns to the system. From there, it can be recycled. While the system cannot or perhaps will not, touch the bloodline, it can extract it.

“This bloodline can then be granted to someone else. This isn’t to say that it is easy to get one. It is among the highest tier of rewards the system ever gives out. It can only be earned through extraordinary means and/or incredibly difficult trials or tests. From this,

it's quite clear how much the system values bloodlines,” the Viper finished as he handed Jake yet another bottle of beer.

“Kind of curious, do you have a bloodline?” Jake asked, knowing full well that he had just been told that sharing it was not advised.

“Well yeah, but I wasn’t a lucky bastard like you. Mine is the attained kind,” the Viper said in a mocking tone.

“Sorry for being born oh mister ‘I am a literal god,’” Jake joked back. “So, what rank were you when you got your bloodline?”

“Getting an inch and asking for a mile,” the poor god shook his head in faux disappointment. “I was already a god when I got mine. So yeah, I had to get all the way to godhood without being a cheat.”

“Once again, I humbly apologize, oh supreme one,” Jake snickered. “Does your bloodline also give a stat increase?”

Raising an eyebrow, the Malefic Viper asked: “Does yours? Percentage or flat value? What stats?”

“It increases perception by a percentage. Was 5% at that weird G-rank, 10% at F-rank, and now 15% at E-rank,” Jake answered as he took another chug of his beer, savoring the taste.

“And I assume this is far from the only thing the bloodline does?” the Viper asked.

“Nah, it does a bunch of other things. Even upgraded a rare skill straight to Ancient-rarity before just transforming it entirely and allowing me to make a Legendary skill. Oh yeah, that netted me another title,” Jake said nonchalantly. It shouldn’t be that fantastic in his own mind with how powerful bloodlines sounded, but still somewhat useful.

“Jake,” the Viper said. “From this day on, NEVER talk about the details of your bloodline again. Especially not the stat part and the skill.”

“Wait. Why? Is there something wrong with that?” Jake asked, taken aback. “Doesn’t your bloodline do something similar?”

“No, it doesn’t,” the Malefic Viper said with a severe look. “Not even close.”

Chapter 95: Of Fate & Destiny

“Okay... no talking about bloodlines...” Jake said, a bit hesitant but not arguing back.

They both sat in silence for a while before the Viper spoke again. “But... it does explain quite a few things...”

“What do you mean?”

“About this entire tutorial of yours. This tutorial was more than a little... unique. Eversmile said that it was ‘ruined’, but I think ‘changed’ would be a better word.”

“... again, what do you mean?”

The Malefic smiled at him as he leaned back. “I guess we should talk about it... so let me tell you a story Jake... about a particular tutorial during the integration of the 93rd Universe.

“In this story, we have two main characters - one who enters with his nine colleagues, and one who enters on his lonesome. The lonesome one quickly finds his stride as he discovers a wand and kills the ones he entered with. This shall be the impetus for him to realize his destiny.

“As for the other, he struggles a bit more. But he has some competent people around him who help him in the start. But already on the first day, it goes wrong when a large beast attacks them, and they lose two.”

Jake looked confused as he interrupted. “That isn’t what happened, we-“

“This isn’t your story Jake, so stop interrupting,” the Viper said with a playful smile. “This is the story of what was to happen. A story of fate and destiny.

“Now, where was I? Oh yeah, two dead colleagues. Anyway, they struggle to survive and end up making camp to rest for the night. One of our protagonist’s colleagues sits watch alone for a while as they try to get sleep. But the night would not turn out to be a restful one.

“Three attackers appear in the night, and despite his efforts, the one on watch dies. Jacob mourns as he has lost three friends that day. Dennis, Lina, and Jake.”

Now even more confused, Jake did all he could not to interrupt, as he had even forgotten the bottle of beer in his hand.

“They fight off the ambushers but take injuries. They are soon found by a man named Richard and his lieutenant Nicholas. Half-coerced, they join him.”

After that, the Viper pretty much summarised what had happened to his colleagues while he was in the dungeon. How they had struggled and how many had died as they were split up. But there were some differences that Jake quickly noticed...

“I killed Nicholas,” he said, instantly giving an apologetic look as he had interrupted.

“That you did, Jake. You not being dead at this point sure screws up the story, right? Anyway, let me continue.

“Now, our second protagonist is our old friend William. The chosen one. Born with an incredible innate talent for mana manipulation and a mentality very suited for one striving for the top. Ruthless and determined.

“But he is also broken in many ways. He is arrogant, delusional, and most importantly, he is limited in comprehending the world. He does not understand emotions, which will come back to bite him in the ass down the line but is very beneficial in the early days.

“Ah, but I wouldn’t worry because the screenwriter will fix this through some character development. The screenwriter, Eversmile, will pay off other divine actors, and they will outsource to their mortal counterparts in the tutorial. Make sure he develops in the intended direction. Gets the things he needs when he needs them.

“He teams up with a few essential side characters. While Richard manipulates William, Richard himself is slowly being manipulated by his former right-hand-man, Nicholas.”

The Viper then once more summarized what happened after he left the dungeon. Again, with slight changes that the god made sure to point out. When he came to the final fight, he summarized it but added.

“Without Nicholas’ betrayal at the final moment, William got put out of commission for far too long. In this version, William is also betrayed because Nicholas fears his power, and he ends up fleeing the battlefield - wounded but still alive and able to keep up his leveling speed.

“Hayden is also still alive in this play, which is why the fight is so equal, to begin with.

“Nicholas returns to camp, where things go downwards. He is even crueler than Richard and forces the second protagonist Jacob to still work for him and keep everyone in line. Those who step out of line are openly killed... or worse.

“Yet Jacob holds on to hope and gives them hope too... finally realizing his own destiny as he becomes an Augur. He begins to truly lead the camp as he grows in levels, with even Nicholas coming to respect him as a spiritual guide, with Jacob happy to remain a supporting character.

“Until one day, William returns. Far more powerful than before, he slaughters every single fighter in the camp, Nicholas included. He did not come for the crafters, but he changes his mind when he gets the quest to be a leader. He is a perfectionist, after all.

“Jacob pleads, and in the end, is allowed to save the souls of the crafters. After that, he is ‘killed’ and ascends like in your version.

“After that, William goes and does his own thing, the sole survivor of the tutorial. With the quest in the bag, he travels and kills until the end.

“And as such ends perhaps the most interfered with tutorial of the 93rd Universe, if it isn't the most messed with ever. With Eversmile having spent far more resources than reasonable but getting a disciple out of it, the Holy Mother an Augur and your pal Casper still an undead. Counting the bodyguard of the Augur, Bertram, only four survivors out of 1200 remained. Me, still within my own realm, doing nothing.”

“But that isn’t how it went,” Jake concluded.

“No, that is what was meant to happen. What fate had in store, and what had been divined by the most powerful of gods. Yet introduce one new element, one single actor not following the script, and destiny goes down the shitter.

“A single hunter that didn’t die the night he was supposed to. Holding a bloodline that was not part of what was divined, and the will and determination to shatter the chains of fate over and over again.”

“So... to summarize, a bunch of dickwad gods played... well, gods, and manipulated everything in this tutorial to get what they wanted? Or at least tried to?” Jake asked, more than a little annoyed at the notion.

“Pretty much,” the Viper smiled.

“I am still not sure I get that whole destiny or fate crap,” Jake said, wondering out loud. “If a single variable, a single moment of chance, can alter the course so significantly, can you even call it fate?”

“Normally, yes. Fate, in my view, is just a glorified analysis of probabilities. With the support of skills, stats, and the system, they tend to often be correct. Especially when some are satisfied surrendering themselves to their fates once they know it. Or go one step further, and try to realize an intended destiny, even if it is a bad one: your friend Jacob, case in point.

“Eversmile, The Holy Mother, and those gods that Eversmile paid off did much to direct fate in the direction they wanted. They divined what would happen and made slight changes to get what they wanted. Sacrificed pawns and played their game. Jacob being a willing pawn. This is likely why he could become an Augur, to begin with.

“Augurs don’t challenge fate; they work to realize it. And when fate is written by the gods...”

“Yeah, I get it... I still don’t like it, though. When am I to know if I am doing things because some god wants me to or if I make my own decision? How do I know I am not just following some fate or destiny that *you* created for me, and that this entire conversation is just an attempt to make me do something?” Jake muttered, clearly frustrated.

“You don’t. But I can promise you that I won’t try to guide you down some preset path I want you to walk. That isn’t how friendship works. I can give you tips and advice, but I will never tell you what to do. The reason why I gave you Shroud of the Primordial is because I abhor those who try to manipulate destiny and fate.

“With it, only the most powerful of gods can possibly influence it. You will be a constant spanner in their carefully constructed machine of fate. Every single one of your actions will fuck it up to the level of them not even bothering,” the Malefic Viper explained with a toothy smile.

“So... I will piss off a bunch of gods just by existing?”

“Nah, don’t take it that bad. Most gods don’t try to mess with fate. Even the powerful ones, such as the Holy Mother, only tend to follow fate and use it as a tool to judge who is worthy of uplifting and who is not. Only maniacs like Eversmile fuck with it on a large scale like this tutorial.”

“Wait, won’t William return to Earth too? Won’t that mean that Eversmile fellow will keep fucking with things there to try and... wait, what does he even want?” A question he should likely have asked a long time ago.

“I don’t know, but if I am candid, I don’t even think he is that annoyed at what happened here today. In his mind, it will just spice up whatever insane experiment he has ongoing,” the Viper said with a shrug. “Though I am positive he is at least a little annoyed.”

“This is all a lot of information I don’t have any idea what to do with...” Jake sighed as he looked up towards the artificial sun. “It all feels needlessly complicated...”

The Malefic Viper couldn’t help but hold back a laugh as he spoke in a cheerful voice.

“And that, Jake, is why I have never cared much for the concepts of fate and destiny. Because the actors that truly matter are unconfined by it, they are the ones who go above and beyond what their destiny has in store. Not a single god has ever been divined to godhood, not *one* genuinely remarkable being destined to reach their station.

“I was once divined to die at only D-grade. Tens of times at C-grade. Hundreds after that by seers, soothsayers, augurs. One after another, I shattered their feeble divinations.

“So all I ask of you, Jake, is to keep doing exactly what you already are. Keep telling destiny how much of a little bitch it is, and reach for power that was never fated to be yours. Because fuck fate, fuck destiny. The path you forge is your own, and don’t ever let anyone tell you otherwise.

“You call it complicated? Well, it fucking is, so stop giving a shit about it. You do you, and I think you’ll be just fine. Learn from your mistakes, improve yourself, never be satisfied with where you are or what you have.

“Anyway. Today you shattered fate and fucked up Eversmile’s plans with a slight assist from me. Just put William out of your mind and focus on what *you* need to do. If I recall correctly, you have another dungeon to clear.”

“All in a good day’s work,” Jake said, smiling. “Thanks, man... I needed to get my head straight.”

“No problem. That’s what your best-bud-god is for,” the Viper said, returning the smile.

“But there is one thing that has been bothering me for a very long time,” Jake said, as he suddenly turned severe. “Don’t you have a name?”

The Viper looked at Jake for a few moments before he burst out laughing. “I totally forgot! Man, this is just fucking awkward...”

Extending his hand forward, he made a big goofy smile. “Name’s Vilastromoz, better known as the Malefic Viper.”

Taking the hand, Jake shook it as he smiled. “Jake Thayne, better known as just Jake. Nice to meet you... Villy.”

Grimacing a bit, the Viper chuckled. “While I have been called Vilas before... that one is a first. I am pretty sure I know of at least a handful of religious organizations who would have you lynched for such blasphemy.”

“Oh, come on, Villy... what if I promise never to badmouth blue mushrooms again?” Jake laughed at the threat of being hunted down by several multiversal forces.

“Deal!” Vilastromoz, or Villy, said with a victorious grin. “You escaped righteous retribution this time!”

“Lucky me,” Jake said before he actually turned a bit serious. “You told me he would bring William back to life, right?”

“Yeah, but it is a one-time thing through the method I am suspecting. The psycho kid won’t be able to be revived again, so his next death will very likely be his last,” the Viper explained.

“About that... could you promise me something?”

“Depends?”

“If I ever die,” Jake said without hesitation, “promise not to revive me.”

“Wait, why?” the Viper asked, genuinely confused.

“Because it would feel... hollow. I don’t want to have some divine measure up my sleeve that can save me or some literal deus ex machina descend to fix me if I fuck up... I want my battles to be of life and death. If my opponent is risking their lives, it would feel unfair not to do the same. It would take the excitement out of it... lessen the value of the challenge... it... wouldn’t feel right. To know that ‘I won’t really die’ would be... boring.” Jake said, trying to explain his emotion as best he could.

The Viper looked at him with hesitation before he answered... “Alright, as long as it’s *your* challenges and *your* fights. I don’t want you killed because of some rogue element who wants revenge on me through you. Deal?”

“Deal,” Jake said as they shook hands for the second time that day. “Anyway, time for me to head off... I got stuff to do, and I am kind of on a timer. We aren’t all bored immortal gods after all.”

“Yep, ya better get going. Cya around, and don’t get in over your head,” Vilastromoz said while he swept up all the beer bottles, making the area look like he had never been there.

The moment Jake was out of sight, however, he frowned a bit.

He had spoken a lot about fate... and how he had masked Jake through the Shroud of the Primordial. It was enough to hide him from any but the strongest of gods who specialized in divination and karma... even enough for it to obscure Eversmile's sight slightly.

But... there still was one person who could predict it. Himself.

When he made his prediction to see what would happen if he made William go to Jake, Vilastromoz clearly saw the result. But he also saw a bit beyond that.

It wasn't perfect, as even his own skill obscured his prediction slightly... but he saw enough... and no matter how he looked at it, the result was clear.

Jake wasn't fated to win against the King of the Forest.

Chapter 96: William & Jake

The smiling white-haired man stepped through the void, into what appeared to be an ordinary western suburban house. But outside the windows was not the streets of the suburb, but a vast void of nothingness.

He waved his hand and summoned a broken, nearly body-shaped mess of metal, blood, and gore. With another wave, time itself reversed, and the armor returned to pristine condition once more. Everything returned to normal, except for the life of the person inside the armor.

Death, even with the system, was not that easily circumvented. To restore a broken body was simple. But to truly revive someone who has died... difficult. Difficult and costly. Even to the gods of the highest order.

Even if one managed to revive the dead, it often came with several drawbacks - mental issues, inability to utilize their stats, missing skills, etc. But perhaps most crippling was the loss of a future. The inability for the revived to progress properly further on their own path.

There were ways to truly revive the dead. Ways for it to have not a single drawback... but that required several conditions to be met, and often special items or skills with a considerable cost. Luckily, Eversmile had all of those.

Flicking his wrist, he took out a small golden leaf. [Golden Leaf of Yggdrasil]. An item far from easily obtained, and one that couldn't be bought no matter how much money one spent. To Eversmile, it had cost him a favor to the old tree herself. A hefty price, but he had believed it to be worth it.

Yet, it had cost him another favor for something as simple as retrieving the body of an E-grade mortal. A cost he had not expected. Eversmile did feel an ounce of annoyance towards his fellow Primordial for exploiting his desires, but it was par for the course for the Malefic One.

Eversmile moved the body of William to a bed in the room and lay the leaf on the young teenager's forehead. Moments later, it started shining and sunk into his brain, disappearing.

Moments later, the teenager's eyes opened wide as he screamed towards the ceiling.

William's last memories flickered in his mind. The sudden pain, the shaking, the disorientation, and the feeling of powerlessness. And then... nothing.

He had died. William felt it. He remembered dying; he remembered how it all turned to nothing. Everything he had been, everything he could be snuffed out in mere moments.

"Good, you seem awake and aware," William heard a voice say as he sat up with shock. He saw a weird-looking man with a creepy smile on his face.

"What the fuck happened, and why am I here?" the teenager asked as he jumped up from the bed.

"You died, of course," the old man said, "and I revived you."

William looked with wide eyes at the creepy old man as he kept smiling. He had really died...

“Why would you do that?”

“Because, little one,” he said as he ran his hand through his beard, “I find you worth studying.”

“So, what, you revived me to be some fucking guinea pig or something?”

“No, no, not at all. I revived you for you to continue being you. Of course, your death changed things a little, but perhaps I can turn this to my advantage,” Eversmile said, smiling as always.

“What would you say to becoming my disciple, little one? To become my student, and on your path to power, so shall I learn from you. I believe this would be very mutually beneficial.”

“Disciple? What are you on about? Where the hell am I, and what happened to the damn tutorial? What the fuck is going on!?” William asked, distraught at the situation.

In a few minutes, he had gone through dying, being revived, finding himself transported to who knows where, and now asked by a creepy old smiling man to become his disciple. What the hell was this?

“The tutorial is over for you. You failed it the moment you died. But don’t worry, you will still get a reward of some sort. But you have lost half of your points and the qualifications to receive any extra bonus awards based on what happens in the tutorial moving forward,” Eversmile answered patiently.

“I took your body from the tutorial to where we are now. Just a small spot I picked, and I hope you like the surroundings. I hope they are comforting.”

William looked around him for the first time and noticed... this was his damn house. His parent’s house. He saw the familiar globe on his desk, his bookcase, dresser, and he had been lying on his own bed.

“Are we on Earth?” he asked, his eyes darting around the room.

“No, it is still transforming. I just assumed that familiar surroundings would prove helpful.”

“Where the fuck are we then? And how did you get my house to wherever here is?” William yelled out as he tried looking down a window. A window that only showed pure darkness.

“This isn’t truly your house; I just remade it to look like it. Copied it, if you will. Why, do you not find it suitable?” Eversmile asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No, I fucking don’t! This is creepy as fuck, you are weird as fuck, and this entire fucking thing is fucked!” William screamed out.

“Now, now, calm down, little one,” Eversmile said, still smiling amicably. “I do not wish you any harm at all. I understand your frustration, but please, ask of me anything, and I shall try to accommodate or explain.”

“First of all, get me out of this creepy ass house and tell me who the fuck you are already!” William yelled, veins showing on his neck.

“The first one is easy,” the old man said, as he waved his hand.

The entire house turned to small wisps of lights little by little as William lost his footing but kept floating where he had been. The whole house disintegrated in a matter of moments, leaving the two floating in the vastness of nothing, the only source of light left a single lamp from the building still suspended between them.

“As for who I am?” he said, his smile growing a bit larger. “I am known as Eversmile of the Twelve Primordials. I am a god, but more than that, I am a scholar. I hold many other titles, little that hold any meaning to you; just know that I wish to learn about you. From you.”

Having once more lost his bearings, William looked around at the void surrounding him, as he felt genuine fear. He felt that with a single thought the being in front of him could make him cease to exist or condemn him to live out the rest of his days in this... nothingness.

“Wha... what do you want?” William stammered out.

“I want you as my disciple. My follower. I wish to teach you and see you prosper from that knowledge,” Eversmile answered, unconcerned with the mortal’s apparent fear. His aura was bearing down on William, indifferent with the distraught it brought him.

“Why... what do you want me to learn?” the teenager got out after a bit.

“Karma, little one,” The old man said. “The bonds that bind us all together, the connections we form willingly or unwillingly. The feeble strings of fate that bind us together, the unbreakable chains that make two lovers inseparable.

“The power that binds our words and actions together, the power that judges the truth from the lies. A concept none can escape from, that affects us all. The favors owed, the promises made, and, perhaps, the one most interesting of all for you, the blood debts owed.”

William just looked at him, unable to comprehend what was going on, but a single figure appeared in his mind when he heard the last part.

He shook unwillingly as the memories just before he felt his mind rattled come forth like a tidal wave. The final word he heard a cold “die,” the last thing he saw was those two eyes staring at him... William was afraid... he didn’t want to meet those eyes again... ever... they regarded him like he was some pathetic bug...

“I...I don’t-“ he muttered.

Eversmile just kept smiling as he saw the young man before him slowly deteriorate mentally.

While Vilastromoz and his Chosen had sidetracked his experiment, it didn’t mean it was ruined. Oh no, far from it. This was good too. But he did plan on making sure that the subject didn’t encounter the Viper’s Chosen any time soon. He had a feeling the results of that would be... unfortunate.

And not for the Chosen.

Jake walked through the forest once more, still savoring the taste of beer in his mouth. It was amazing how something so normal for him less than two months ago felt so damn good now.

He had learned a lot from the conversation... and it had helped him get his head straight.

It felt nice to know that apparently, his bloodline was pretty damn good. The things about fate and destiny and all that crap were really far above his paygrade. Jake just wanted to hunt and challenge himself right now... he didn’t want to or feel like he had the time or desire to think about such needlessly complicated subjects.

Also, it made him think back on something he had asked just after the Viper had summoned the beers:

“Won’t it mess up the tutorial that you have come here?”

“Nah, I didn’t do anything, did I? The system can be pretty lax when the interference is non-existent like this. But if I went and actually did something to help you... well, I don’t even think I could,” the Viper had answered, shrugging.

Jake wasn't sure exactly how much or how little the gods could actually do in the tutorial. He assumed there were some limitations. Why wouldn't Eversmile have just saved William before Jake killed him if there wasn't?

Walking through the forest, Jake was finally able to think a bit more clearly about what had happened. The entire fight, if you can even call it that, had been over in an instant.

William had clearly not been prepared and had underestimated Jake to the extreme. He hadn't been even five meters away at the end, hadn't been on guard at all.

If he had been ready, perhaps it would have been a fight. But instead, he was smashed into the ground before he could react, the dark mana, as well as the impact, disorientating him. He hadn't managed to muster any retaliation as Jake had bombarded him with blasts of mana right after.

The caster had low vitality and toughness, something entirely normal for a caster. Jake had far higher agility, as one would expect from an archer. Coupled with a powerful weapon, a rare quality skill, and the element of surprise, it wasn't that surprising of a result.

Opening his notification, he finally saw the messages he had received - the first one of the kill itself.

****You have slain [Human (E) - lvl 42 / Metal Savant - lvl 60 / Novice Smith - lvl 24] Experience earned. 72.654.214 TP earned****

He was a bit shocked that he had reached level 60 in his class, especially considering how easily he had died. Also... what was better, prodigy or savant? Maybe similar? Damn, he should have checked the notifications before the Viper left so that he could have asked him.

The other part that surprised him was the number of tutorial points. That was actually a lot. Jake had more than William, even before he had just gotten half of his, but that still meant William had gathered nearly 150 million tutorial points.

That was the same as around 4000 level 40 mobs, which quite honestly was just far more than Jake had imagined. But if he thought about it... how many beasts did the parties kill to clear the entire outer area? And William had apparently killed close to every other survivor. The number of creatures they must have killed together had to be... immense. And William had gotten half of that.

Now Jake had gotten half of his. He opened the tutorial panel, the full one, for the first time in a while.

[Tutorial Panel]

Duration: 5 days & 23:16:41

Total Survivors Remaining: 1/1200

TP Collected: 257.547.125

His tutorial points were honestly quite insane. 257 million. More than 100 million of those from the sewer dungeon alone. He had killed a lot of rats. *A lot.*

He had spent around 5 hours talking with the Viper. Considering how little time he had left to clear an entire dungeon and then face the King of the Forest, it did seem like a waste of time on the surface. But Jake didn't regret it at all.

Mentally he had been a god damn mess, and he honestly still was. At least it wasn't repressed anymore, and he could face it openly and work to better himself.

He already had very few people in his life he considered close. It was just a few of his close colleagues, most now dead, and his immediate family. His parents and brother, to be more exact. He had steeled himself to seek out his family first thing after the tutorial.

He did miss them. He hoped that they survived, and now actually had started thinking about it. Before, it was just another thought he had ignored. But now he had faced it, and perhaps even begun preparing himself a bit mentally. Their death was probable, especially if you took his tutorial as a reference.

The fact that he was the only human left in the tutorial did weigh on his mind quite a bit, but it was manageable. If he had to look on the positive side... it did mean that there would be no more disturbances. That he had absolutely no excuses anymore to not succeed in his quest to slay the King. His only source of failure would be his own incompetence. He preferred it that way.

Jake had to admit that no matter how many soul-searching conversations and meaningful reflection, he was still, in the end, very much a one-track-mind type of guy. He excelled when he had a goal to work towards, and he was good at doing just that. Now he just had to try and not let it destroy everything else around him.

Returning his attention to his system messages, he went to the last thing on the list, which he had neither expected nor ever thought of. Upon killing William, he had received and apparently completed a tutorial quest.

Tutorial Quest: A Leader is born

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

Current progress: 100%

Eliminate other leaders: 0/0

Quest Completed!

Reward given upon the conclusion of the tutorial.

He had never asked for nor wanted this quest, and yet he had completed it. He didn't know why he got it, and he honestly didn't care. If Jake was sure of one thing about himself, it was that he wasn't suited to be a leader. He was already terrible around people; he could only imagine how awful he would be at leading them.

Who knows, maybe the reward will be okay? Jake thought as he tried to cheer himself up a little.

Closing the notification menu, he moved on to the next course of business, which was the second-largest mountain-like volcano in the tutorial area - the location of the final dungeon and the final Beast Lord.

But before that... it was time for some spring cleaning.

Chapter 97: Spring cleaning = Loot 3.0

Jake practically flew through the terrain as he ran across the valley, scanning it with his sphere wherever he went. He didn't really encounter any enemies on the way, something he very much appreciated.

William had done an outstanding job of clearing out a lot of beasts in the inner area. Not that it particularly mattered as all the beasts he came across avoided him like the plague - all except for a single buffalo that had chosen to stand up to him, which netted it a quick Infused Powershot to the face.

He was currently scanning the valleys for those sweet lockboxes. It was clean-up time.

His rationale was that he still required a few critical pieces of loot, and if he were stronger, he would be able to clear the final dungeon more easily. Likely even take some more risks to do it faster, or compromise on how he liked to fight.

The Malefic Viper had told him about equipment, and he had done the math on how much more he could get. As he could have a maximum of 20% in any given stat, but only 15% of his total stats could be from gear, he saw that he had ample space to grow.

Currently, he had a total of 353 stats from equipment. It felt like a lot, but the total amount he could get was 603, meaning he was only a little over half of what he could at maximum have. A quick calculation of his stats showed how much he could get in each:

Strength: 18/71

Agility: 60/90

Endurance: 45/67

Vitality: 75/94

Toughness: 50/68

Wisdom: 35/101

Intelligence: 45/45

Perception: 20/202

Willpower: 5/64

Total: 353/603

The only stat he had maxed out on was intelligence, and it appeared that it had been maxed out the moment he got his gloves. The ring he had taken off the Ice Witch what felt like ages ago together with the gloves did indeed provide precisely 45.

None of the other stats were capped at all. Where Jake really wanted to find some equipment was to get some more strength and agility. He felt like those two would have the most immediate value. Not that he would complain about getting some more perception either...

His perception was already at a ridiculous level, having reached over 1000 with all his titles and his bloodline. 1033 to be exact. Yet he had kept investing all his free points into it as it just seemed efficient. He had to admit that he was starting to feel the lack of value in it, besides the raw number just going up.

While it did increase his reaction speed and his senses, his body could no longer keep up. For a while, it had been like that, actually. His agility and strength were simply not able to follow the commands he issued it.

Having gotten the Mark of the Ambitious Hunter was quite fortunate. The damage increase it was meant to provide was likely meant to be far less than what his version of the Mark provided. But as it scaled with perception, Jake's increased the damage done by quite a bit, especially coupled with his primary damage source being through poisons.

Still, he likely should have considered investing some more points in the two physical stats, but it wasn't like they were at a terrible level. And he often made up for his lack of raw power in stats through his Infused Powershot and newly gained Dark Descending Fang.

Of course, he also got the bonus from Big Game Hunter, an often forgotten skill that raised his strength and agility against higher-leveled foes, meaning it was pretty much always active during fights. The bonus wasn't that big, but it did help him to close the gap somewhat.

So, if he had so much available space to improve just by being a bit lucky and finding some lovely baubles, he wasn't going to ignore it. Getting only 100 stats more would be the same as several levels. If he got lucky, he could even find some more unique items and, if he got *really* lucky, a bow.

Besides, it was calming to run through the valleys with his speed as he scanned it - the wind blowing through his hair, the feeling of freedom and ease of movement as he jumped forward, sometimes tens of meters in a single long leap.

He spent nearly three hours doing this, going through most of the valleys in the inner area that he hadn't been to earlier. He had pushed himself both physically and mentally with his sphere, and it felt great when he looked at the pile of loot he had gathered.

First, he sorted all the useless stuff. He had a bunch of gear clearly suitable for heavier classes, such as breastplates, greaves, steel gauntlets, two-handed axes and swords, a shield, and so on and so forth.

He had collected more than 50 things in total, of which only five held any value or were interesting enough to note. The first of which was an upgrade token.

[Tutorial equipment upgrade token (Uncommon)] – Upgrade any common rarity starting item from the tutorial to uncommon rarity.

This one was pretty self-evident, and he had been very tempted to use it on his bow right away the moment he found it but had held off in case he actually found a better bow.

The second item was something he found interesting but had no intention of ever using.

[Hatchet of Halfdan the Brave (Rare)] – A hatchet infused with Records of a fallen warrior Halfdan. With his axe in hand, he fought for his family and fell for his home. The axe is made of simple wood with an iron head. Grants the wielder a small part of the once-great man's bravery. Enchantments: Grants the skill: [Halfdan's Bravery (Rare)]

Requirements: Lvl 50+ in any humanoid race.

This one was interesting because it came with actual history and, of course, because of its rarity. Jake had wanted to try to use it to see what the skill was but found himself unable to bind it. It was weird because he didn't feel like it was related to mana-affinities. It was just like the weapon... didn't like him or something. Quite rude, actually.

The third piece of loot was one he would actually use, an upgrade to an item he already had.

[Ring of the Ruby-eye Tiger (Uncommon)] – A ring created by embedding the crystalized eye of a Ruby-eye Tiger into a band. The Records of the tiger powers the enchant, granting some of the beast's might to its user. Enchantments: +30 Strength, +20 Agility, +20 Perception.

Requirements: Lvl 40+ in any humanoid Race

This ring would replace his Ring of Brilliance, which would lose Jake 10 intelligence, 10 wisdom, and 5 willpower, but it would be more than a worthy trade-off. He also found it interesting to compare it to the other ring he already had:

[Ring of the Jade-eye Tiger (Uncommon)] – A ring created by embedding the crystalized eye of a Jade-eye Tiger into a band. The Records of the tiger powers the enchant, granting some of the beast's might to its user. Enchantments: +20 Perception, +15 Agility, +15 Strength.

Requirements: Lvl 30 in any humanoid Race

Apparently, tigers with special eyes were popular to make rings from. Or maybe the system had just selected that archetype for some reason. Nevertheless, it was just the kind of ring he had wanted. He did get two other rings too, but neither of those were of any interest to him.

Jake had also discovered through this that he could only have two rings on for some reason. Well, he could technically have as many on as he could fit on his fingers, but he would only get the benefits of two of them. Whenever he tried to bind the third ring, it wouldn't work before he 'let go' of one of the two he already had.

The weird ability that all rings carried that made them not get in the way by making them effectively intangible also only worked on two rings at once. It was weird that he had to put his rings on before the gloves, but he could neither feel nor see he had a ring on upon putting the gloves on. *System-fuckery to the rescue*, Jake laughed a bit internally.

The fourth item of interest he had found was one of those special items he had hoped to find, one that could hopefully prove useful against the King or perhaps the final Beast Lord:

[Seed of Entangling Roots (Uncommon)] – A seed filled with the dense power of life and nature. Infuse with mana and throw it to the ground for roots to sprout and entangle your chosen foe. Seed is consumed upon use.

It could temporarily incapacitate, something he could see a myriad of advantages with. At first, he had feared he would be unable to use it due to lack of affinity, but luckily it had responded positively to his mana. He also had one more idea to maybe make it a bit... interesting.

If he used his alchemy skills to infuse some poison into it through Touch of the Malefic Viper and then used Cultivate Poison to make it fester and work its way through the item, he could perhaps make it do a bit more than just entangle foes. But he wasn't sure if he would ever find time to try that out.

As for the final item of value he found... it was a weapon rumored and foretold of for ages, one he had only dreamed of yet never truly imagined he would get - a new bow.

[Windsoar Bow (Rare)] – A bow made from a tree inhabited by wind elementals. The string made from the sinew of the beast that dared destroy their home. Now restored to a form made for hunting down the beasts hated by the young elementals. The elementals' spirit and mana have left their mark upon the wood, making it light and flexible. The remnant will of the spirits within blesses any arrow fired. Enchantments: Windsoar

Requirements: Lvl 50+ in any humanoid race.

He was very, VERY pleased when he found the bow, but he did have one sneaking fear in the back of his mind. Could he use it? He still remembered the nature affinity-blade and the light-affinity staff that had both been unusable. Heck, even the axe he had just found didn't like him.

This bow was clearly of the wind-affinity or something like that. Heck, it clearly had both a mana-affinity *and* a history attached to it. Jake knew he had dark-affinity, but did he also have wind?

With more than a little internal fear, he had grabbed the bow in his hand and injected mana into it after sending a little prayer the way of his friendly neighborhood god.

And praise the Viper, for he felt the mana slip into the bow with no resistance and instantly felt the connection with it - a major success, to say the least. It had also inadvertently confirmed that he had the wind-affinity as well as dark-affinity.

Feeling the bow out in his hand, he got used to the weight as he noted how light it was. Unnaturally so, as it felt practically weightless. Luckily it didn't affect the bow itself as he nocked an arrow and pulled the string.

As with his old bow, the pull strength was magically altered somehow, making him struggle to pull the string, but not overly much.

Firing an arrow, he instantly felt one big difference from his old bow, however. While the arrow's power had only increased by a little, he could feel the changes around said arrow.

As it flew through the air, it was as if the wind gave way to it. Like it gently moved out of the way and pushed it forward towards its target.

Upon striking the tree he had aimed at the arrow went straight through and out the other side. If he had to estimate, then he would say his standard shot was around 10-15% stronger with the new bow. It wasn't as much as a melee weapon provided, but it did have one more significant advantage.

Currently, his largest limiter on Infused Powershot had been his bow. He knew that if he pushed more mana into it than he currently did at his maximum power, it would explode just like his first bow had done during his fight with the Alpha Badger.

But with this new bow, he could push it further. His own body still limited him, but the bow wouldn't be the bottleneck for now.

Infused Powershot had been his bread and butter for quite a while. He had nothing that could come even close to a fully charged Infused Powershot. The power behind it was quite honestly ridiculous. Powershot before he had upgraded it was already great, and Infused Powershot simply made it better in every single way. He truly felt like he had

lucked out in getting the upgrade. It had been what catapulted him to his current strength, without a doubt. Of course, he knew it was only possible because of his adamant body.

Jake smiled to himself as he put all of the loot into his spatial storage. Most of the items he couldn't use were thrown in one of the corners, while another corner held leather gear and even another common-rarity bow he had found.

The pile in that corner had the name of 'backup' stuff. It was for if any of his current equipment broke or was lost. Better safe than sorry after all.

His last piece of business before heading off to the dungeon was to spend his uncommon upgrade token. As he had found a bow, he no longer needed to upgrade the old one. His only other two pieces to upgrade was a dagger or his cloak.

Even if he upgraded the dagger, he wouldn't use it. Upgraded, it would still not come close to Venomfang in power, and his Shortsword of Icy Winds would very likely also still be better. Besides, he had kind of begun getting used to fighting with a dagger and a shortsword.

Daggers sucked at blocking while a shortsword was quite a bit better. It also gave some more much-needed reach to his blows. It was still a shortsword, but it was far longer than a dagger.

So, he was left with only one thing to upgrade - his cloak. The cloak he had hated for a long time due to its uselessness and frailty. Now, however, it would finally be able to become useful again. He took out his old cloak and identified it, noting the absolute lie that said it was strong against slashing attacks.

[Archer's Cloak (Common)] – A cloak handed out for the tutorial, now upgraded with a token. Made of resilient cloth that is resistant to slashing attacks. Enchantments: Self-Repair.

Requirements: Tutorial Attendee. Archer Class

Use Upgrade token on [Archer's Cloak (Common)] Y/N?

He used the token on the cloak and saw it get enveloped by light, just like it had been when it went from unranked to common-rarity.

Soon the new cloak appeared, looking just the same as before - brown and rather unassuming. But when he Identified it, it became clear it wasn't as simple anymore.

[Archer's Cloak (Uncommon)] – A cloak handed out for the tutorial, now upgraded with a token. Made of resilient cloth that is resistant to slashing attacks. The cloth automatically helps the wearer meld into his surroundings when supplied with mana. Enchantments: Self-Repair.

Requirements: Tutorial Attendee. Archer Class

An extra effect had been added. Jake didn't waste any time picking it up and injecting mana into it. After binding it to him, he put it on and tried supplying it with some mana. The entire cloak soon turned different colors, looking like camouflage. He even vaguely felt that other signs of his presence were suppressed, such as his mana signature, aura, and likely even emitted heat.

But more importantly, upon bringing a common-rarity dagger down on it, he felt the resistance on his blade, making him unable to tear it in a single slash.

Finally, the cloak had graduated from uselessness.

With the cloak on, he felt all geared out and well covered from head to toe.

He had spent a bit over 3 hours collecting items, and it had given him an increase of 50 stats, a new cloak, and a new bow, along with some other exciting collectibles.

All in all, time well spent - time he should easily make up for in the dungeon with the final Beast Lord. Checking the time, he started sprinting onward.

[Tutorial Panel]

Duration: 5 days & 20:04:32

Chapter 98: -Valley of Tusks

As he jumped up the cliff and began running the final stretch to the dungeon, he checked through his full status.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (E) – lvl 58]

Class: [Ambitious Hunter – lvl 65]

Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 51]

Health Points (HP): 5429/5460

Mana Points (MP): 5111/5320

Stamina: 3629/3820

Stats

Strength: 403

Agility: 534

Endurance: 382

Vitality: 546

Toughness: 390

Wisdom: 532

Intelligence: 260

Perception: 1053

Willpower: 326

Free points: 0

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

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

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

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

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

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

His status was starting to get rather large. He could still remember when it barely contained anything and even had a few N/A's in there. His stats had all grown a lot, especially his perception that was truly at a ridiculous level by now.

He really hoped to get a skill to make better use of the high perception at level 70. His Mark already did so as well as his Moment of the Primal Hunter, but that was about it. Of course, the stat did still help passively, but most of his skills did scale with agility first and strength second.

But that was for when he reached level 70.

Rushing up the mountainous path, he soon found himself at another tunnel leading into the volcano-like mountain. He ran through it quickly and found himself within.

The layout of this one was relatively simple. It was all made of stone with pillars of rock everywhere. Overall he saw nothing of note but the entrance to the dungeon.

On the far most side of the area was the dungeon door, and he didn't waste any time as he rushed to it, placed his hand, and accepted the prompt. His vision went black for a few seconds before he regained sight.

You have entered the dungeon: Valley of Tusks

Objective: Defeat the Horde Leader

He found himself in a deep valley made of only rock and soil. Curved jagged spikes poked out from all sides of the cliffside around him, making it all seem somewhat intimidating.

It was perhaps more accurate to call where he currently was a gorge rather than a valley. It was only twenty or so meters across, after all, with vertical cliffs to each side. They extended upwards farther than his eyes could see, with the spikes only multiplying the further one got up.

However, the first thing he noticed when he entered the dungeon was not how it looked, but how it felt. After the sewer dungeon, he had begun to focus on the mana in the air far more, and the mana in this dungeon also felt... different.

It somehow felt more solid. Not dense, just solid, like it had weight to it. If Jake had to take a guess, he would say it had to be that a lot of mana in the area carried an affinity. Perhaps earth, rock, soil, or something like that.

Interestingly enough, it didn't seem to have any adverse effect on his mana regenerations; it had increased ever so slightly if nothing else. He couldn't tell if it was due to his incompatibility with the mana outside or his compatibility with the mana inside, though. And with the timer ticking down, he didn't have time to sit down and meditate on his environment.

He had yet to spot any enemies, but he saw the path curved slightly ahead, obstructing his vision. The left side was blocked off, leaving only the right direction open. The dungeon appeared relatively linear, which was totally fine with Jake. Most certainly better than another damn maze, especially with his limited time.

Jumping down from the small cave on the side of the gorge he had entered from; his sphere instantly picked up a barrier of mana forming behind him, blocking off the entrance.

He looked up and saw a shimmering wall of mana with yellow and brown colors. This was the first time he had experienced the entrance being blocked off right after ent-

CRASH

An explosion of stone and rubble erupted from the left side of the gorge as Jake whipped his head around to see what was happening.

Through the dust at the path he thought blocked off emerged tens of huge hulking figures - thick skin and two huge tusks, with far too much muscle, running on all fours. Jake didn't need to use his skill to identify them at all. Boars.

But that wasn't the issue. The issue was the fact that they were all charging straight at him in a small narrow gorge.

Well, fuck, he thought as he turned tail and ran as fast as he could. Fighting dozens of the hulking monstrosities at once didn't seem like the wisest course of action.

Luckily for him, he outpaced the beasts. Unluckily they had other means of attack than trampling. The gorge's rocky walls seemed to come alive as spikes of rock erupted from them, firing straight towards the lone running human.

Jake managed to barely dodge as he felt more and more head towards him. Soon it wasn't just massive pillars, but small shards of rock, pebbles, and even a freaking boulder tossed at him.

While he managed to avoid most of it, he did get hit by many smaller attacks. To his pleasant surprise, none of the shards managed to draw blood as the combined defense of his cloak and armor blocked most of the damage. It still hurt like hell, though.

The damn gorge seemed to continue endlessly as he kept running and dodging for several minutes. It did curve slightly, but all that did was to make any end always out of sight.

He was starting to get impatient as he took out his bow and attempted to retaliate. He didn't even manage to nock an arrow before he was forced to jump out of the way, making him quickly shelve that idea again.

Hundreds if not thousands of attacks battered him from behind as he kept running. It improved as he got further and further away, and the larger attacks no longer reached him. While pebbles and shards of rock still annoyed him, they were bearable.

Finally, having a bit of leeway, he got the chance to assess the horde of boars following him properly. And a horde it was. He estimated at least 60 boars in the stampede, all large and bulky, each and every one of them easily the size of a van.

Steeltusk Boars. Jake had encountered them before, but never in this number and never at this level. His Identify only confirmed what he already knew.

[Steeltusk Boar – lvl 79]

The level was higher than he had expected. They were nearly at the Ratman Swarm Controller's level, and if he had to estimate their strength, he believed them all to be roughly equal to the Alpha Badgers, which is to say that a direct fight against a damn army wouldn't end that well for him.

This wasn't to say he couldn't take potshots with the increased distance. With a leap forward, he used Shadow Vault and increased the distance between himself and the horde further, as well as outrunning any projectiles currently aimed at him.

With a bit of room, he took out his bow once more and, in a spinning motion, fired a Splitting Arrow behind him. He wanted to use Infused Powershot but using it while moving was inadvisable. His goal was to sow chaos among the beasts rather than actually cause them worthwhile damage, so Splitting Arrow was better at that anyway.

The arrow split into ten as it traveled, hitting the beasts in the front. The arrows' speed, coupled with the boars' own charge, resulted in them not mounting any defense. Four of the porky-boys in front were hit and squealed in pain and anger.

One of them tripped due to the arrow hitting its leg, making it stumble slightly. While it would hardly matter usually, the charging boars behind made it a massive problem for the beast. The slight slowdown made the one behind it bump into it, and soon a boar traffic jam resulted in several of the beasts smashing into and tumbling over each other.

Jake took the opportunity to once more Shadow Vault and shoot yet another Splitting Arrow behind him. He had also poisoned the arrows with a bit of his blood, but he honestly didn't expect it to do much damage. However, it slowed down the entire horde enough for Jake to get all the way out of their attack-range.

Being free of attacks, he kept running and firing arrows until he could only hear and not see the stampede behind him. He had hoped that they would trample each other to death, but it appeared they were simply too bulky to do so effectively. After the first few shots, they had also started to defend themselves a bit, making his attacks even less effective.

A few minutes later, he finally saw an end to the ridiculously long gorge. Keeping up his sprint, he made it out as he saw the entire area opening up before him. A vast valley appeared before him, nearly utterly flat with nothing of interest in sight. The only thing was huge pillars of stone littering the entire area.

With his Hunter's Sight, he could easily see all the way to the other side of the valley. The entire thing was circular and was formed like a massive hole in the ground. The walls were practically vertical, just like the gorge had been. He couldn't even see how far up they extended.

Not a single living thing could be seen in the entire valley. Something that would very soon change as the stampede of boars got louder and louder.

Rushing into the valley, he quickly started considering his options and looking around; there was only one way in and out... it was like a damn arena. The only geographical features he could make use of was the pillars of stone littering the area.

They almost served as trees in a forest. And a forest was great for ambushing. Jake didn't hesitate as he made his way to one of the closest pillars to the gorge and quickly rushed behind it. Up close, they appeared even bigger, towering upwards and being easily 10 meters in diameter and several hundred meters in height.

They were made up of stones stacked on top of each other- tightly balanced stone formations that represented both opportunities as well as danger.

He started climbing one of them but stopped after getting only fifteen meters up as the first boar came into sight as it came out of the gorge. Pushing mana into his cloak, he made sure it covered his entire body as the cloak started turning into the same color as the stones on the pillar.

Completely unmoving, he simply observed as the beasts exited the gorge. With his newfound height advantage, he could see the entire horde. He had estimated there to be around 60, but now he could clearly see how wrong he had been. There had to be closer to a hundred of the damn things... if not more than a hundred.

However, what caught his eye more than the numbers was the hulking monstrosity that led the rear of the horde.

It was several times larger than any of the other beasts, towering over them. If the other boars were compared to vans, then this would be a huge truck. Massive muscles covered its entire body, and a single golden tusk exited one side of its mouth, giving off strong mana.

Jake already knew it before identifying the beast, but it was indeed what he believed it to be.

[Horde Leader - ??]

From where he was hiding, he could feel its aura. It was strong. Strong, but not unmanageable. He had feared that the Horde Leader would be D-grade, but he was now sure that it wasn't. It was close, very close, but not quite there yet.

Before he could face the leader, he would have to get rid of the horde. Fortune smiled upon him as he saw what the boars did the moment they entered the valley.

They all spread out as some kept rampaging onwards, while others slowed down right away. Almost as if in agreement, they all seemed to forget the hunter they were chasing only a minute or so earlier. Even the one still having an arrow sticking out of its snout apparently didn't mind.

Jake soon found out where they were going. They all headed towards different pillars and... started eating them. The boars munched on the stones as if they were the tastiest stuff around, while the hunter hanging up on one of them was momentarily dumbstruck.

What made him even more flummoxed was the boar eating... 10 meters right below him. He was currently standing on top of one of the rocks protruding from the pillar, camouflaged, looking down at the damn thing munching away.

He had already surmised that these boars had earth or stone manipulation or something like that. The one he had faced outside in the forest also had those capabilities. He was a bit surprised at not coming across a single boar in the inner area, but he hadn't thought much of it, honestly.

They quite obviously didn't have a vision that allowed them to look upwards or any kind of ability to properly sense enemies. Jake wasn't even adequately hidden where he stood. Not a single one of the dumb pigs noticed him, though.

Looking around, he saw that there weren't any other boars within thirty or so meters of the pillar he was currently on. The Horde Leader was already far off in the distance, devouring one of the more gigantic pillars.

Jake decided to take a bit of a risk as he took out his bow. He kept close watch of the still eating beast below him as he began preparing his poisoned arrows. He still had a few bottles of his best Necrotic Poison left, but he was starting to run out. It should be enough for the rest of the tutorial, though.

Soaking all the arrows, he redeposited the now empty bottle as he nocked one of the arrows. He had feared that the boar would feel it when he began channeling Infused Powershot as the Lucenti Stags had, but it didn't appear to notice a thing as he felt the mana build up in the bow and the stamina in his upper body.

Once more, having reached a new pinnacle of attacking power with the new bow, he released the fully charged shot straight down the less than 15 meters separating him and the Steeltusk Boar.

An explosion of energy rocking the entire pillar made the boar twitch slightly just before the arrow hit it. It penetrated straight through its spine as it bore a barrel-sized hole through the large beast, its heart in the path of the attack. The damage from the blow coupled with the poison more than enough to ensure the beast would soon be dead.

As the arrow hit the ground below the boar, it exploded, sending rocks everywhere, shaking the pillar and the earth.

And then... all hell broke loose.

Chapter 99: Going with the flow

Jake tended to be rather good at predicting what the response to his attacks would be. He had expected the closest boars to rush towards their now dead comrade, or perhaps to all start searching frantically for the killer.

It turns out that this time Jake had predicted a bit wrong. Just a tiny bit. While the big piggies didn't react much to him channeling mana, they apparently really didn't like it when someone made the ground explode and killed one of their pals.

In fact, they liked it so little they all appeared to have gone berserk. More than 10 Steeltusk Boars were currently rushing red-eyed towards the pillar Jake was hiding on, the ground shaking beneath their every step. It wasn't just their footfalls causing the shaking either. Mana swirled in the air as rocks of all sizes rose around them.

The enraged beasts, however, had one major issue. They had nothing to attack. They reached the corpse of their comrade, full of fire and fury, with no outlet in sight.

Jake had smartly focused every fiber of his being on standing absolutely still while covered by his camouflage cloak, channeling everything he had into utilizing Advanced Stealth.

Without any immediate target, the boars did as any reasonably enraged beast would do. They began destroying everything around where their comrade died - including the pillar he was hiding on.

Huge boulders started flying about, and the pillar itself began being ripped apart. One of the beasts even rammed the thing, causing it to shake.

Jake, getting the hint, jumped off the pillar, hoping to land behind the boars surrounding it. He fell through the air, boars still in his sphere as he observed them. He watched them all through his fall, and not a single one of them noticed him.

That is until his feet hit the ground. As if he had set off an alarm, all of the beasts turned towards him in an instant, eyes red, gleaming with a thirst for revenge.

Well, fuck, Jake thought as he legged it.

He sprinted straight back towards the gorge, the enraged beasts following him with more vigor than ever before. Scratch that, it wasn't just vigor. They were actually significantly faster than they had been before, catching up to him at a pace far faster than he found comfortable.

Forced to use Shadow Vault more than three times in less than ten seconds, he knew the situation wasn't sustainable. He did manage to reach the gorge once more, but all that did was to make his path of retreat more linear.

The gorge was the only place he could flee to, though. The rest of the valley was full of more boars and, of course, the Horde Leader itself. Running through that would only serve to increase the number of crazed beasts chasing him.

So, Jake ran through the gorge, the stampede close behind him. They didn't even bother flinging spells at him, but the shaking caused by their running did slow him down slightly. He had to Shadow Vault repeatedly to get just a small semblance of distance, but in mere seconds they would catch up once more.

Jake's mind worked at high speed, trying to find a solution. Stop and fight? No way he could kill them all; he counted 14 of the damn things, all around or above level 80. It wouldn't be impossible to win, but he would likely have to use his Moment of the Primal Hunter as well as everything else he got. The end result would still be him out of commission for quite a while. Fighting was swiftly designated to last resort.

Keep fleeing? He could lose focus for a mere moment and get impaled or run out of stamina far faster than them. They didn't appear to slow down either. Based on what he knew about the boars, endurance wasn't an area they lacked in.

Potshots were also out of the question. No way he could manage to shoot a single arrow as things were. Even if he did manage to shoot an arrow, the damage it would do would be negligible.

As his head churned for ideas, he also observed the boars close enough to be within his sphere. He noticed that the air around them seemed to give off a faint sheen. It reminded him a lot of the Blade of Nature guy he had fought so long ago.

Were the pigs doing something similar? They were clearly boosted by something. Jake kept observing them as he dodged, and he felt the energy slowly seeping out. It wasn't mana; no, it was stamina. Somehow the beasts were burning through stamina to strengthen themselves.

Jake had tried something like that a fair bit of time ago. It had ended in exploding limbs as he went too far with the energy. But while he overloaded it, he did feel the increase in power. It was to a crazy level, but it also came with crazy drawbacks.

What the boars did appeared to be similar in nature. Back then, Jake's problem had been the lack of an outlet for the energy, making it repeatably build up in his arms in a constant cycle. His final act of desperation had been to release all the energy at once, hence the exploding arms.

Their outlet wasn't exploding their limbs, no, it was their entire bodies. As the energy was burned through, they released it through their pores. A concept Jake had theorized long ago but hadn't dared to try.

Now, however, the circumstances pushed him to it. He decided to try something he had feared to try before. His control of energy had only increased since then, and he thoroughly believed that if these damn pigs could do it, so could he. Skill or not be damned.

As he ran, he began to look inwards. He felt the inner energy that flowed through his body - stamina. It was in a constant cycle as it circulated through the metaphysical veins he had come to call meridians. He could feel the energy moving faster now that he was running than it usually did while idle.

Stamina, as he had already explored, was like the fuel of the body. It constantly circulated to keep him moving and fighting. A more powerful body naturally required more fuel, explaining why stamina expenditure increased with his physical stats.

When he had been level 1, a measly 80 stamina could keep him up and awake for an entire day. Now he would be lucky if it could keep him fighting for half an hour, even without using skills.

As his power increased, so did the power of the stamina flowing through his system. As he expended more stamina and performed more requiring tasks, the speed of the flow increased. If that was true... perhaps the opposite was too. If he increased the speed and/or power of the flow, his own power and ability to do more difficult tasks increased.

And now... he would finally put it to the test.

He focused on the flow within. He felt the energy in every crevice of his body, the constant idyllic flow. And then he pushed it. He pushed the flow ever so slightly to move faster. For the cycle to rotate more quickly. And the energy listened.

The cycle's speed increased only a little while Jake focused every bit of willpower he had to control it. At the same time, he felt the changes outside his physical body.

His running speed increased. Every footfall was faster than the one before. The boars that were only a few meters from him, now being slowly left behind.

Jake felt the power in his body swell. He felt stronger and faster than before. It felt like when he had gotten one of the titles that increased his stats by a percentage. But this wasn't something as fantastic as that. Certainly not as sustainable.

The quiet river that was his meridians was now amidst a brewing storm. The wind pushed the energy to flow faster and faster, while Jake focused all of his willpower to stem the tide. It was challenging to do while at the same time running and not falling over from the shaking ground. His instincts, once again coming to the rescue.

With his body being on autopilot running, his foci could be entirely on his internal struggle. The experiment had worked. The flow of the stamina had increased, and so had his power. Now the issue was to let the rampant energy not rampage through and blow up his entire body in a - what albeit would be - glorious shower of blood.

He began to control the energy more, willing it to slow down as much as he could. But he knew he needed an outlet. But with the external pressures on his body, it was hard.

Soon his eyes picked up a glimmer of hope. He had managed to make it all the way to the entrance of the dungeon once more. More importantly, was the fact that the barrier that was blocking it was gone.

Without hesitation, he leaped up to the small cave, the boars hot on his tail. They couldn't fit in the cave from what he had seen, but it wasn't a bet he was willing to take. He placed his hand on the portal-door and instantly was transported outside.

The second he was out, he sat himself down in meditation. The slight slip of focus from exiting the dungeon had thrown the energy ravaging his meridians into disarray. With renewed will and his undivided attention, he grabbed hold of the energy to control it.

With every ounce of will, he managed to control the flow somewhat. But he still needed to find an outlet for the energy. It was still ever so slowly building up, and even if he felt himself get stronger by the moment, he also felt himself get more unstable.

His body began to make small jerks here and there - a twitching muscle or a tapping finger outside of his control. Like mini seizures, symptoms increased in frequency as he felt out the energy flow, looking for any way to let it out.

He was sitting still, but his body desired to move; it demanded to move. But he knew indulging it would only worsen his condition. He needed it to calm down and not stress it further.

Seconds that felt like hours ticked by as he sat there, twitching uncontrollably outwardly while being full of serenity inwardly.

Until finally... he found something. As if a small valve opened, energy started slowly fizzling out of his nose and mouth. Soon it also came out of his ears and even from his eyes.

More and more outlets appeared now on his skin. From his arms, chest, legs, every single pore on his body began letting out the pent up energy.

He kept a steeled resolve and control as he meticulously let out the energy a little at a time not to injure himself more than necessary. However, he felt immense fatigue overtake his body as more and more energy was let out.

Not that his mind experienced that at all. It made sure that the flow of energy slowly decreased as the excess energy left his body.

It took nearly an hour before the stamina stopped leaving his body and his internal flow returned to its normal idle state. The balance was restored, and his body finally felt at ease as the twitching and spasms stopped.

His entire body was covered in sweat. The stamina was intangible, so it just passed straight through his clothes, but that didn't mean the physical stress didn't still exhaust him.

With his mind, he summoned a barrel of water from his spatial storage and climbed into it. Or he tried to climb into it but was unable to even lift his own body weight.

Giving up, he just lay back on the hard ground. His entire body was aching. It felt like he had just done the most insane exercise imaginable, and everything hurt. Looking at his stamina, he also saw that it was down to only a bit over 300, which is to say less than 10%.

In a bit over an hour, he had expended around 3000 stamina just from speeding up the circulation. He could use more if he kept using his skills in quick succession, but the drainage was still intense, to say the least. Heck, he was even meditating during it all, making the actual amount consumed even more than 3000.

All of that even ignoring the fact that his health had also dropped to less than half. The internal damage and overexertion had resulted in him repeatably pulling his muscles and overloading his organs, forcing his body to keep healing itself.

Weakness was something Jake hadn't experienced in a long time. It wasn't as if he was utterly helpless, though.

Strings of mana were extended from all over his skin, pushing the ground beneath him and lifting him up. Without moving a single muscle, he managed to get his body into the barrel purely with mana usage.

Feeling the cool water washing over him was relaxing, and he felt his tense muscles relax a bit more. It did little to alleviate his actual exhaustion, but it helped treat the symptoms. It also helped wash off all the sweat and dirt.

He was still fully clothed but frankly didn't care much. The only thing he had thrown off was the cloak as he soaked in the barrel for a while. As he sat there, he felt the mental exhaustion also strike. He was tired, and he needed a rest. Meditation wouldn't help against that; he needed to sleep.

Thinking back, the last time he truly slept was just before fighting the Den Mother. The constant fighting, meditation, and levels had somehow managed to keep him going, but it could only do so much. He was getting closer to not needing sleep at all, but not quite there yet.

What he also hadn't forgotten was the nightmare that followed his last sleep. Without a doubt, something that had helped him to avoid the desire to sleep, both consciously and unconsciously. He remembered the influence of a 'fake Andy' that tried to push him to do things he didn't want to.

Lifting himself out of the makeshift bath, he didn't even bother to summon the bed as he lay there on the ground. His clothes would have to make do as bedding. He dreaded what images his mind would conjure up upon sleeping, but he couldn't delay it any longer.

His only hope was that his body would be back to normal by the time he awoke and that he wouldn't sleep for too long.

Closing his eyes and relaxing his body, he fell asleep instantly.

Chapter 100: The right way forward

The family sat gathered around the table, enjoying their breakfast. The rays of sunlight hit the table, highlighting the vast selection to choose from.

Scrambled eggs, bacon, sausages, bread, whatever one wanted. Caleb had even convinced their dad to make pancakes that morning. Mom had objected, but Caleb had gotten his will. It was only his birthday once a year, after all.

Jake was enjoying one of the aforementioned pancakes, with perhaps a bit too much honey on. Which, of course, resulted in an admonishing gaze from his mom across the table. One he tried to ignore as he sheepishly put the fork into his mouth, the honey dripping down on the plate.

It was three weeks before the system arrived. Jake had gone back to visit his parents and brother to celebrate his brother's 27th birthday.

Also at the table were his parents as well as Maja, Caleb's wife. They had gotten married at what many considered a young age, but Caleb felt it was the right thing to do after she got pregnant. A pregnancy she was currently seven months into. Also... it made the loan on their new house a lot cheaper.

Maja sat at the table, her stomach clearly showing, as she spoke to his mother, Debra. Debra gave all the tips about having a first child, along with embarrassing anecdotes about Jake and Caleb.

“Jake used to be very quiet, while Caleb kept us up all night every night,” she said, as she jokingly added. “Caleb was quite lucky we had Jake first, or we wouldn’t have mustered up the courage to have another.”

“Mom, come on, I can’t have been that bad,” Caleb protested, getting only a giggle from Maja.

“He still keeps me up all night even now,” Maja said without thinking.

The rest of the family all looked at her awkwardly for a moment with Jake’s dad, Robert, nearly choking on his coffee.

Maja seemed to realize the meaning of what she said as she turned red, and frantically tried to explain.

“Snoring! He snores!” she protested loudly, earning only a chuckle.

In an attempt to help his wife, Caleb swiftly changed the subject as he turned to Jake.

“So, how is work these days? Heard your company is quite busy after going public last month.”

Jake, getting the hint, helped dispel the awkward atmosphere and gladly answered.

“Yeah, management is all up in our asses about putting out the, and I quote, ‘biggest numbers to date.’ I am not even sure management knows what half of those numbers mean.”

“Can’t be all bad, don’t you get along with that Jacob fellow?” Deborah asked.

“He can only lift up the average intelligence of the management that much,” Jake joked.

“I agree; they can’t be all that bright,” Caleb said, nodding. “They were dumb enough to hire you after all.”

“Cal, be nice!” Maja said as she poked him in the arm with her elbow.

“Birthday boy using up his leeway fast,” Jake said, pointing his still honey-covered fork at his brother. “Going to have to take back presents if you don’t behave soon, young man.”

“I apologize, oh bringer of the big numbers,” he answered, holding up his hands in mock surrender.

It was the last time Jake had met his family. After that, he had been busy, and the trip back to his hometown was pretty long.

Caleb and Maja lived in the same town as his parents. It wasn't big, but it was decently sized, having around 40.000 inhabitants. Caleb worked as a teacher at an elementary school, while Maja studied at the university half an hour away in a larger city.

Maja had practically been a part of the family forever. She grew up next door and was over almost every day. Jake had been the older brother, with Caleb and Maja being the two younger siblings due to their closer ages.

When Jake moved away for university, the two of them had started hanging out alone. Things developed as they do, and the two ended up going out, getting married, and were now looking to start their own family.

Jake didn't see his closest family as much as he should. He was always in the weird paradox that going to see them seemed like such a hassle, and he always looked forward to just relaxing alone after a long week of work.

On the other hand, he enjoyed being around them. They were the only people in his life he was truly close to. The only ones he could openly joke and have fun around. He didn't feel like he had to put up any walls or to filter himself. He could just be him.

His parents were just average folk - the supporting and loving kind, who had never put him down for any decisions he had made but helped push him forward towards making the best ones.

His mother had worked as a bookkeeper and his dad as an engineer. They had neither been rich nor poor, growing up solidly in the upper-middle class. The classical family unit, if you will.

To Jake, these four people were the most important in his life.

“When does your plane take off again?” Caleb asked as they were cleaning up the table.

“Need to be at the airport before 5,” Jake answered as he put the plates in the dishwasher.

“So, any plans for the day?”

“I have already prepared everything for that stupid conference, so not really.”

“Well, now you do,” Caleb said as he put on a sinister smile.

The rest of his day was spent walking around carrying heavy furniture. The two newlyweds had gotten a bigger house a month or so earlier, and they had waited for Jake to get home to provide his free moving service. At least he paid him back by making his brother offer a free taxi-ride later that day.

Taking off to the airport, he gave his mom a hug, his dad a slap on the shoulder, followed by also giving his old man a hug. With that came a promise to return home for his mother’s birthday the next month.

Caleb and Maja drove him to the airport as promised. With only his carry-on bag, he didn’t need to be there much in advance, but he was still kind of in a hurry. Not too much in a hurry for a proper farewell, though.

“Take care of Maja, Cal,” Jake said, as he gave his brother a hug. The manly kind. Turning to Maja, he also gave her a light hug.

“On a side-note, Jake,” his brother said, “Any progress on the Caroline front?”

“None at all.”

“Gotta get your shit together.”

“I am pretty sure it never will turn to anything,” Jake answered, quite assuredly. “Take care, you two. I hope we meet again.”

“Of course we will. I am not one to croak that easily,” Caleb answered, as assuredly as Jake.

Jake smiled as he waved the two of them off. He started walking onwards, but instead of a gate, he saw a portal leading into a forest.

“I hope you are right, Cal,” he said to himself as he walked through the portal, the dream dissolving around him. “I really do.”

Jacob sat quietly as he read the oversized tome in front of him. The faint frown and the serious look in his eyes, coupled with his handsome features, made it look rather picturesque. At least Inera thought so as she kept throwing glances his way.

It hadn't been long since she had come here. Inera's father had at the behest of the higher-ups arranged for several ancient and expensive tomes to be transported here, and she would personally act as a teacher for the young man.

His presence was... different. Almost ethereal. He was weak, yet he gave off an aura and feeling that made one unable to ignore him. Inera had been with the church since birth, yet she had never felt a man as holy and at the same time weak as Jacob.

The Holy Mother herself recognized him. An Augur, a class she had only ever read of in old scriptures but never actually encountered. A rare variant class with requirements still unknown, possessing skills and powers eluding the scholars even today.

Always beside the young Augur was another interesting one - the one called Bertram. Another mystery to her, as he too was a type of entity she had never encountered before.

A guardian bound to the Augur through karma, conviction, and personal belief - his class reforged upon becoming a guardian, now possessing one just as mysterious as the Augur himself. And while the Augur himself could not fight, his guardian was another thing altogether.

Bertram had shown tremendous growth from the teachings her father had given him. He was even praised by the Grand Master, acknowledged for his foundation and ability to grow. His semi-immortality from his connection to the Augur was only making him all the more peculiar.

Rather than man, perhaps he would more easily be compared to a summoned familiar. But even that was wrong, as such entities very rarely reached the level of sapience, and they all were more comparable to monsters rather than the enlightened races.

All in all, Inera found it equally puzzling and enjoyable to interact with the two of them. They were very different from anyone she had ever met before. Not just due to their classes.

Their common knowledge of the system was close to non-existent. They asked questions even small children knew, and her father gladly explained everything to them. She had a hard time wrapping her head around anyone living in a world without the system, which the two of them apparently had.

But what surprised her the most was the blatant blasphemy the two uttered without a care in the world. They questioned the pantheon's goals openly, questioned their methods, and the very root of their belief.

Yet the Grand Master didn't react to it once. Almost as if he expected it. Inera also knew that her station was not one to question the Augur either. His level of recognition from the gods was far above her own, maybe even her dad's.

Her father held the title of Grand Master of the Templars of Morning Bright. One of the many orders of templars under the church. As a man solidly in the B-rank, he had great renown and recognition within the church.

Even with his great title and honor, he hadn't met any of the higher rank gods. He held the blessing of one of the subordinate gods in charge of their part of

the church, a blessing far less honorable and impactful than one bestowed by the Primordial herself.

Inera herself had yet to receive a blessing but hoped to one day get one. She instead had something called a Baptism on her status screen in place of the blessing, and it did nothing more than open up new paths. She was a priestess in the order and had recently been transferred to this area to help train new acolytes. What she hadn't known was that the only ones she was meant to help train would be Jacob and Bertram. And that her father would do most of the vital teaching himself.

And speaking of teaching, she did learn quite a lot. One of their earlier conversations had especially interested her.

"Augur, the church has many hopes for you. Not just for your own planet, but even beyond it," the Grand Master said, as he sat across the table from Jacob.

"Oh? Would it be wise for me to divide my attention away from my homeworld? Does the church not have more suitable individuals for such a task? As a human, should my focus not be on my fellow humans?" he answered with a bunch of questions.

Inera had to agree on that. Preachers, diplomats, pilgrims, and missionaries were not a thing the church lacked. They could always use more, but out of all, only the Augur could spread the holy word in his own universe.

He was essential to get a foothold before the universe truly opened up to the rest of the multiverse. Getting a solid foothold on one civilized planet would carry far more weight than merely spreading the word sparsely to many different places.

“While that is true, you forget one of your greatest advantages,” the Grand Master said, as he continued. “Upon being initiated into the system, you received three gifts. One was the tutorial, and all the benefits found therein. The next a title to give you a small bonus and forever enhance your Records, allowing you to more easily unlock variants at lower grades. The final one a skill.”

“Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races.”

“Exactly. This skill is perhaps your most significant advantage over all other holy men. It allows you to communicate and understand all beings in the

multiverse capable of advanced communication. No matter what means of communication, even those with methods you cannot even begin to comprehend. Even new languages will automatically become a part of you. It is the type of skill one can only ever hope for.

“The only time it will not work is if the words are purposefully made to speak in code. It even applies to the written, hence why you can read all the tomes here without any struggle. Of all the gifts the system has given you, this one is by far the most valuable to an Augur.”

“I see, that is certainly food for thought,” Jacob answered, nodding. “I will still, however, argue that Earth shall be my primary objective. To guide my fellow earthlings towards a better future is what I truly wish for.”

“While certainly, Earth is important, so is the rest of your universe. Earth will have many contending voices, and it is limited how much support we can provide with the restrictions of the system in place.”

“Which is exactly why it is so important I focus on it. The voice of the Holy Mother must not be drowned out,” Jacob argued.

The Grand Master didn't seem to agree, however. "A voice is only as powerful as the one making it. Without the necessary strength, none will listen. It is risky for you to make yourself a target. Oftentimes, natives are not as susceptible to our beliefs as they should be."

Inera had simply observed the two men speak, as she acted like she was still reading a book. After their discussion, which had ended inconclusively, Jacob had taken the tome he was currently reading, while the Grand Master and Bertram had entered one of the training rooms.

She couldn't help thinking about why her father had made sure she transferred here. He had clearly pushed for it hard with the higher-ups and managed to get her here. She honestly couldn't see the reason...

On the other end of her stare, Jacob sat reading. He had, of course, noticed the young woman throwing glances at him. Despite her clearly being far above him in levels, her ability to be subtle was about as good as a kid's.

Unlike her, Jacob was far from new to politics and had already begun to put things together. But he did wonder why she had been the one chosen. He assumed it was due to the Grand Master's personal meddling and desires. Despite the appearance of purity in the Holy Church, it was clearly not empty of politics.

For now, however, he would keep focusing on his preparations for the return to Earth. He was genuine in his desire to spread the word of the Holy Mother. He believed it could help his fellow earthlings unite around something greater than themselves.

But even more so... he was looking forward to meeting old friends. Through the Pantheon's knowledge, he learned about Jake and his role in the tutorial. Or, more accurately, his lack of a role.

Jacob couldn't help but wonder how different it could have gone if Jake had been with them. If they hadn't betrayed him. And after that, he had overly relied on his abilities as an Augur and not even considered asking his friend to help them. If they had just killed William and Jake had stayed there with them...

He had made many mistakes, and his decisions had been flawed, no doubt due to Jake muddling fate so much. Not that it was Jake's fault, Jacob just regretted how everything had gone down.

Yet Jacob was happy for his friend. He had found a path that was his own. The former manager had known Jake for many years, and he had always seemed... lost. Like he didn't have any long-term goal. He never cared for promotions or raises, he didn't personally invest himself in the company's growth, he just did his thing, and went home.

But now, he had a purpose. One Jacob couldn't see or begin to augur, but perhaps that was for the best. As an augur, his role was to make people realize their ideal destinies and the whole's ideal destiny. Yet, he still had certain qualms.

Returning to Earth after the time of the tutorial ended would be a tumultuous time. Jacob had also resigned himself to having enemies then, but one thing he was sure of was that Jake was not his enemy. Not because of some divine ability or grand interpretation of fate, but because of one simple fact: Jake was his friend.