

## Hunter 34

### Chapter 34: Manipulation

As he closed his status window, Jake was momentarily a bit lost. He had been in the zone for two weeks, doing alchemy at every waking hour. His first interaction with another living being for over two weeks had been with an ancient being of immense power that had ended up giving him quite an overpowered blessing, along with a several-hour long pleasant conversation.

Now, however, he would have to get back into it. It would frankly be a bit embarrassing if he ended up dying to a poison weeks after receiving the blessing of a snake-god. On that note, they hadn't at any point spoken about how to cure it. Jake hadn't asked, and the Viper hadn't offered up any information. They had an unspoken agreement that it would be... well, boring.

But the Viper did give something, as he thought back to the one solid piece of advice the Malefic Viper gave. To focus on the mana. He knew mana was necessary for all the concocting and brewing he had done; it was easily the most crucial aspect of the crafting process.

Yet the Viper hadn't mentioned anything about alchemy necessarily. He spoke of feeling it around him...

Closing his eyes, he could still feel the ever-present mana in his surroundings. Jake never thought much of it, much like how one would stop smelling it if one lived with a particular smell for long. The same was valid with mana. If it was just something that was there, you never noticed it. Perhaps that had been a mistake.

Feeling the mana was easy, his Sphere of Perception making it even easier. Jake just wasn't sure exactly what he was supposed to do with that feeling. Moving his hands around, he could vaguely feel the mana being dislocated from where his hand was, but otherwise wholly unaffected.

Did the Viper just mean for him to try and feel it more? No, that couldn't be it. Did he then suggest to somehow manipulate or control it? But Jake didn't have a skill for that. He did have some skills to manipulate mana through his alchemy, but those were very specific.

When doing alchemy, he made use of the small runes in the mixing bowl. He had to control the mana in the bowl through those. One could say that the bowl itself functioned as a joystick, his mana the hand controlling it.

Jake saw no way to manipulate the mana in the mix without these runes.

Jake proceeded to try the whole 'believe-hard-enough-tactic', but it had yielded nothing after an hour of trying. But he refused to give up. The Viper may have been slightly unstable in many ways, but he didn't strike Jake as a liar. A bit a jokester maybe, but he had a serious look in his eyes when he gave the advice.

Instead of attempting futility, he decided to quickly test out his new Alchemical Flame. Like with all other skills, it came with instinctive knowledge of how to use it. Raising his hand and opening it, a small flame appeared, swaying back and forth on his palm.

The heat was low, but so was the mana expenditure. The most surprising was the color of the flame. It was nearly entirely colorless. If Jake poured more mana into it, the intensity and heat increased per the increased mana use.

While playing with fire, he discovered that it could cause him injuries, but only when he poured in the maximum mana he could while holding his hand over the flame for a long time. In other words, the offensive capabilities, at least in its current stage, were nearly non-existent. Not that it was the purpose of the flame to begin with.

As he kept experimenting, he noticed something through his sphere. When he poured more mana into the flame than it could contain, it seeped out the side of his hands, slightly affecting the surrounding mana. A lightbulb went off in his head as he had a revelation.

He couldn't move the surrounding mana, but he had many ways of moving his own. When he used Cultivate Toxin, he always poured mana straight out of his hands into the plants, and when using his crafting skills, he naturally poured mana into the bowl.

So, what if he moved the mana, not according to the pattern of a skill, but simply as an attempt to affect his surroundings? It was weird that the thought hadn't occurred to him earlier, but in his defense, the concept of moving an invisible force was not exactly a natural thing to him.

Hours later, he hadn't found much progress, but he did have some. It was early days, but he felt like he could slightly move the atmospheric mana by using his own as a catalyst. It was currently hugely inefficient, the mana literally pouring out of him. But he did slowly learn and improve.

His huge mana pool was naturally a great help, and his willpower increased his regeneration up to a level where he could keep the practice up for quite a while. Chugging a mana potion, he decided that he couldn't practice using mana all day. He had to keep the alchemy up after all.

He was starting to run low on mana potions, so he decided to start out with those.

The preparation stages were the usual, but he began to feel some faint differences when he started the mana injection part. Despite his brief practice, he could already feel that his control had improved slightly, though it may also have something to do with his increased stats and new profession.

The fact that he was making the most accessible type of potion that was also the closest to pure mana manipulation played a part too.

He had evolved his profession, he had gained massive bonuses all around, and he finally felt like it was time to make a final push to clear this dungeon. His theory on how to cure the poison was still in its early iterations, but it was coming along.

What was ahead of him was days of grinding and practice. If this plan worked, he wouldn't leave early, which gave him two weeks of intense leveling.

Hard work in front of him, and with his life on the line, Jake could only smile in satisfaction. This new world may be a bit fucked up in many places, but it sure as hell was more interesting.

Making their way through the camp, the two newfound lovers made some small-talk. Heading towards the forge, they greeted The Smith, who was currently working hard towards his own profession evolution. The man achieved his class upgrade already. Jacob and Caroline both agreed that he would likely be the first with both an upgraded class and profession from how he was doing.

"Hey Smith, how is work going? Any progress on the spearheads for Casper?" Jacob asked as he got close.

The bearded smith raised his head from the forge as he grumbled. "Didn't bother. Had the kid make em. Ask him."

Brief as ever

, Jacob thought, as he turned to 'the kid' who worked the forge, beside the man. He had kind of turned into a half-apprentice of The Smith over the last week or so. A caster who specialized in metal-magic. Jacob knew he had also gotten his class upgrade but wasn't exactly sure when, or what the evolution's specifics entailed. All he knew was that the young man had a high level.

Going over to the teenager, Jacob asked once more: "Hey Will, Smith told me that he had you make some spearheads for the trappers?"

With a big smile, the kid looked up from the forge with his soot-covered face. He lifted 10 spearheads or so off the ground with his manipulation skill and levitated them in front of Jacob with some difficulty.

"Here they are, Chief! Made them just like Mr. Smith asked!" he replied, seemingly proud of his levitating trick.

Jacob grabbed them out of the air and put them in a small sack he had been carrying. Jacob had never quite liked the kid. He just felt.. off. For some reason, he reminded Jacob of several of the more ruthless CEOs he had encountered when he went to meetings with his father while young.

While Jacob stored away the spearheads, Caroline had gone forward and started wiping the kid's face with a handkerchief. A gift from Joanna. The kid stood still as she wiped his face clean and healed his slightly injured hands from the small cuts and bruises he got during his crafting. As a caster, his defensive stats were quite a bit weaker than The Smith's heavy warrior class after all.

"I told you to watch out when working at the forge. I still don't get why you didn't just do tailoring with Joanna, Jacob, and I, or maybe even leatherworking like many of the other casters," she said with slight

concern, as the teenager just stared back as his features were revealed once more with the soot removed.

Jacob hated to admit it, but the kid was maybe even more handsome than he was. Blonde hair, clear blue eyes, and a bright personality. Not that Jacob felt any threat to his love-life. All the women in the camp treated William with partiality, like how you treated a little brother or son.

Saying his goodbyes to the two smiths, he left with Caroline to deliver the spearheads to Casper. Casper was working nearly every day on his traps, having also picked up the builder profession. The synergy between those two was... frightening.

He constructed most of his traps alone. He had to in order to get his class bonuses, and the construction itself also yielded experience to his builder profession. However, he couldn't do everything himself, as he often needed help from the smiths to make weapons.

Casper had thoroughly gotten past his trauma of taking another human's life. He had gotten close with another archer, a woman, and they had spent a lot of time together. That was until four days ago where her headless corpse was found just outside their base. To make it worse, Casper had been the one who found her as he was out setting traps.

His mercy to the other side died that day. Before, he mainly tried to make traps to capture. Now he only made to kill. Jacob tried to make conversation but was met with no response as usual.

The first day after she died, Casper had spent the entire day crying and mourning. The second he had started making traps like a madman. He had even tried to leave and fight the other side directly, but luckily, they had managed to stop him. His hatred, however, seemed to only grow by the day.

Jacob barely managed to get a small grunt out of him when he mentioned Ahmed dying. Jacob was lost as to what he could do. He cursed this tutorial, he cursed the system, and he cursed whatever sick fuck had started this entire fucked up war he now found himself in the middle of.

Caroline, noticing his mood as they left the trapper, grabbed his hand in an attempt to cheer him up a bit. It helped a little as they made their way over to the tailors and sat down. It was a good distraction from the madness. Sadly, Caroline couldn't stay as she had forgotten to tell Casper something from Richard, so she left Jacob there.

Back at the smithy, William was working hard as he did every day. The stats didn't do much for him, but he got the ability to craft more specialized weapons for himself. Daggers were all fine and good, but he knew that he could make something better.

The teenager hadn't initially planned on doing the whole profession-crap but had to admit that the race levels and stats were worth it. On top of that, leveling his class was just a waste of time at this point. Even killing other humans for tutorial points seemed like a waste of time considering the difficulty of finding them.

He had tried to piss off the other guy Hayden by killing his son, but somehow it had ended up just making it worse. The number of people fighting hadn't increased much; instead, everyone had gone full-on psycho. He couldn't even do the 'innocent teenager' act anymore without getting attacked on sight.

William found the entire thing baffling. He thought he had a good grasp on human emotions, but the fact that everyone would turn absolutely insane like that was unexpected. He didn't get the point of torturing people. Sure, a bit of torture could get information, but it was well proven through several studies that information gained through torture was unreliable.

Trying to find more lockboxes was also a waste of time as they had undoubtedly been found by now. Beasts were way too damn scarce also. William could find a lot below level 25 if he went back towards the forest's outer perimeter, but the experience from those sucked.

So William made the best of the situation. He had ingratiated himself with The Smith and gotten some awesome training in. This meant that William got a lot of useful guidance early on and leveled his profession faster than he had expected.

He had also managed to improve his social position within the camp. The premier healer, Caroline, clearly approved of him, all the women leading the blossoming tailoring industry liked him, and now he even had The Smith who looked out for him.

By now, pretty much everyone was in the two bases, a fortunate side-effect of his little escalating attempt, which made his plan of being the sole survivor far more probable. Sure, Caroline, The Smith, and many of the tailors were friendly enough, but sadly their existences were detrimental to whatever reward he would get at the tutorial's completion.

As long as nothing unexpected happened, he felt somewhat confident in his plan succeeding. Something he seriously doubted as he had yet to learn of anyone who posed a serious threat to his goals.

His thoughts were interrupted as Caroline returned. William looked a bit confused up as she came alone. She was usually with that boy-toy of hers all the time.

"Hey William, I just came to warn you not to go anywhere close to the enemy camp for now. Richard said it is okay to go out, just avoid going in their direction too much," she said, getting an affirming nod from William.



She sighed as she smiled at him. "I knew you were trustworthy. Sadly Casper is dead-set on going out there alone to set up some traps between our two camps... oh geez, how many tutorial points do you think he has gathered already? He is sure getting high level too, so I hope he makes it back safely."

"Okay, I promise to stay away from there if I head out," William answered with a big smile. A small glint in his eye as he just made a mental note of his next prey.

Caroline left him to keep working as she made a quick trip past Richard. A bitter look on her face the entire time. Entering the cabin, she spread out her hands as a transparent barrier covered the two of them.

"It's done. William will go after Casper," she said as she tried to keep a stoic look.

"Good job, Caroline. I know you don't like this, but it has to be done. Casper knows too much and is getting both too strong and too unstable. None of us want to risk entering our cabin at night only to be impaled on a cursed spike," Richard said in a comforting tone.

"It's just too cruel..." she sighed.

"You and Jacob tried. If he didn't insist on heading out there alone but listened to the two of you, we wouldn't have to do this. But now we do," Richard said as he got up from his chair and went over to her. "This tutorial may be cruel, but it will soon be over. Once we're back on Earth, we can find time to rest. To rebuild. You and Jacob can get your happy ending, and I swear I will support you as long as you support me. And don't worry, Jacob doesn't need to know anything about this... unsavory business."

Caroline looked at him a bit before turning around to leave. "Let's just get out of this hellhole and be done with this stupid war already."

With those words, she exited the cabin, dispelling her barrier in the process. Richard watched her leave as he smiled. Oh, what the young and foolish won't do for love.