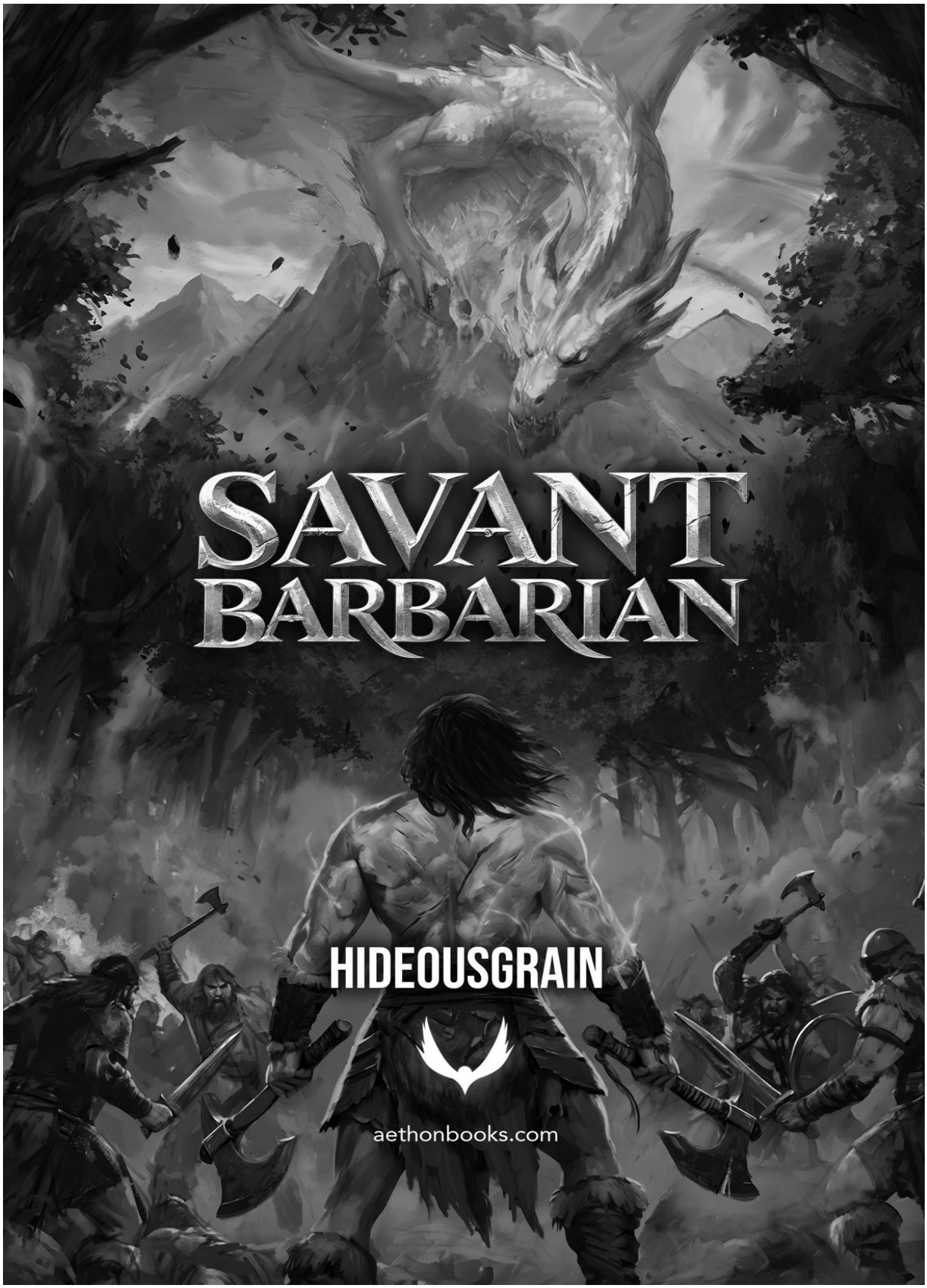

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CHAPTER 1

“Is it time already?”

Only a few lone rays of sunlight made it through the hut’s roof and onto the scroll. No wonder his eyes were dry.

Hakon’s fingers brushed the edges of the old leather, the markings upon it dancing in the pyre torch light beside him. No matter how much he wanted to continue, could he handle the consequences? If he chose the old writings over the Rite, his father would kill him. Literally.

He could already imagine it. His father’s fingers closing around his throat in an iron-tight grip, lifting him high for the tribe to see. His neck snapped to soothe the Ancestor spirits.

Taking a deep breath, his moves slow and meticulous, Hakon closed the hide scroll. Today he did not want to give his father a reason to loathe him. Or the Ancestors, for that matter.

He rose from the creaking chair and slid the scroll onto the sparse shelf beside a dozen others. No one in the tribe owned so many. Most people had no use for scribbled lines they neither wanted, nor could, understand. Of course, that excluded the Shaman. His stock was far greater. So he claimed.

“Later,” Hakon muttered.

He had been close, so close, to understanding one of the big words. The kind that felt important. As if it might untangle the rest of the mishmash without the Shaman’s help.

Stepping out into the open room, a familiar shadow blocked the entrance. A towering frame filled the doorway; wide as it was tall, built from muscle and decades of constant battle.

“You are nervous.” The gravelly voice of the chieftain, Hakon’s father, echoed through the hut. Sharp. Judgmental.

Dark eyes flicked past Hakon to the shelf. “The scribbles again?”

The air grew heavier and cracked.

“You should have trained before the Rite,” his father said, disappointment cutting deeper than anger. “Instead, you read?”

Hakon opened his mouth, then closed it. He had no excuse.

“The Shaman has arrived,” the chieftain continued. “Do not be late.”

That was an order, not a request.

His father’s jaw tightened when Hakon didn’t move right away, and, without another word, he left.

“You need a good fight,” Hakon muttered after him. “Raid the Pearot Tribe or delve into a Fracture.”

The words went unheard. That was probably for the best; otherwise, the chieftain would have given him a beating, Rite or not.

Father had been tense. Ever since the next Rite was announced by the Shaman. It had been cycles since the last Rite in Taskur, and with each passing season, doubt crept deeper into the tribe.

Were the Ancestors angry? Had they turned their backs?

This cycle would change everything.

The young would undergo the Rite and awaken as warriors. The Ancestor spirits would judge them and, if worthy, remove the first seal of the curse the Fallen had cast upon the tribes. So it was told.

And the chieftain expected his son’s Rite to be special. He expected Hakon to follow in his footsteps and become a real warrior. Hakon wanted that as well. After several disappointing cycles, it was time for him to awaken and become his father’s equal. To take the first stride into surpassing the chieftain.

That thought made him smile. His father had become even more impatient over the last few years, as Hakon grew into his frame. Maybe his father knew that once Hakon finished the Rite, things would change.

Oh, how they would change. Hakon could scarcely wait.

He pulled the fur from his shoulders, exposing his bare chest shaped by blood, sweat, and cycles of relentless training. Scars crossed his skin, each one earned in a bloodbath. His fingers lingered over them before closing around a necklace resting against his collarbone.

A Wind Wolf’s fangs. A Nightshade Panther’s claws. The same claws that had torn into his flesh. The same fangs that nearly ripped out his throat. Those were his trophies. His greatest possessions. A sign of power. A promise to the Ancestor spirits.

Hakon did not rush. He fixed the trophy necklace’s position, then secured his axes and bone daggers with the practiced movements of a hunter.

“The Lifeblood within me stirs,” he quoted one of the old tales with a chuckle, hand pressed over his pounding heart.

Excitement coiled tight in his chest. After cycles of waiting, the day had finally come.

He stepped out of the hut in long, confident strides, and the tribe noticed him. Several residents, each tall, towering, and covered in muscle, smiled. They eyed him, their expressions widening as they noticed the necklace. The trophy necklace was that special. It was proof the wearer ventured into the wild to hunt creatures only those who should have already undergone the Rite were meant to best.

Hakon escaped death by a hair’s breadth more often than he could bother to count, but it was all worth it. For today. To show everyone what he was capable of. That he did not need his father to be a real warrior.

He might be the chieftain’s son, but the trophy necklace earned him respect that was, for once, not inherited. They respected him for his strength and achievements, not his blood.

He soon reached the masses gathered around the tribehold’s center. Marked by colossal stone statues from the Ancestors’ era, stood the heart of the tribe, the Monolith. A black structure made of indestructible material. Not even the strongest warriors could scratch its surface. It was the greatest gift the Ancestors left behind, with the promise to grant the strength needed to survive and shed blood for them.

“The Zeldron,” Hakon mused, glancing at the statues. Neither time nor nature’s wrath had managed to wear them down. They stood as tall as he remembered, guarding the Monolith, protecting the Ancestors’ gift.

His smile widened, only to crack as he caught wind of Ulfur and his friends. If one could call them that. They followed Ulfur everywhere. Not because they liked him but because he too left the tribe to hunt. He was strong, his potential as promising as Hakon’s, and their parents’ rivalry only

fueled the competitive fire. As did the tribesmen. They too wanted to see who was going to become the next chieftain.

Would a new family rise to claim the tribe or would tribe leadership remain in the Taskur family? Hakon was willing to give everything to make sure Ulfar would not defeat him. Not now, not ever.

People were gathering around Hakon, but he waved them off until only Björn the Bear and Astrid Ironheart remained.

“Skincrawler?” Björn asked with a bright smile. He was as tall as a bear and just as hairy. Most of his body was covered in thick brown hair, though it did little to hide his hulking muscles.

He was strong, his trophy necklace adorned with a single paw; a bear’s paw.

“I am ready. Have been for several cycles,” Hakon said, shaking his head.

Astrid stood quietly by their side. She greeted Hakon with a slow nod, the faintest hint of a smile tugging at her lips.

If Björn was a normal member of the Taskur tribe, Astrid was… well, Astrid. She was different from anyone Hakon knew.

Astrid was short for a tribeswoman. She wore her long golden hair in an intricate braid for the occasion. Her pale skin was marred by a few scars. Too few for all the claws and fangs adorning her necklace. Most of her prey could not compare to the Nightshade Panther, but Astrid was deadly. On the surface, she looked like she might break easily. Those who grew up with her knew better.

The finger of a Pearot tribesman attached to her necklace made clear what happened to those who underestimated her. Thinking back to her encounter with the lusting man of the Pearot tribe, Hakon could only smile. Astrid showed everyone what she was capable of that day.

She nudged Hakon’s side and motioned toward the Monolith. The Shaman had arrived, his bare body covered in tattoos that moved with his every motion. It was as if the intricate designs on his skin were alive. Some tattoos appeared oddly familiar. They resembled something Hakon had seen before. Somewhere.

The Monolith!

His eyes flicked past the Shaman, locking onto the engravings of the Ancestors’ gift.

“That look.” Björn grunted, pointing directly at Hakon’s face.

“Again?” Astrid asked quietly, shaking her head. Somehow, that bothered him more than Björn’s finger jabbing toward him.

“The Rite,” she added before he could say anything.

Lips sealed, Hakon watched the Shaman as if bewitched, his gaze drifting from the engravings on the Monolith back to the lifelike tattoos. He only faintly noticed the first of Ulfar’s people stepping toward the Monolith, until the man blocked his view.

“Only blood earns remembrance,” the Shaman intoned as the man cut his palm with a bone dagger.

He pressed his bleeding hand against the Monolith, blood running down his wrist. A single droplet trickled to the ground, the sound of its splash barely audible beneath the low hum reverberating through the tribehold’s center.

“May the Ancient guide you,” the Shaman ushered, pressing his own palm against the Monolith as it began to emit a faint, semitranslucent glow.

His eyes turned white, his expression impossible to read.

“Bloodbearer,” he declared, his tone deeper, *more*, than it had been moments ago, the word echoing through the tribehold.

“Thank the Ancestors!” the newly awakened warrior roared, flexing his muscles as his body expanded.

The excitement died seconds later. His expression distorted to one of unbearable pain: sickening crunches resounded, his skin tore open, and blood spilled from his orifices all at once.

“What an idiot.” Hakon shook his head.

While not exceptional, Giant Blood was powerful. Anyone awakening it would grow considerably, their physical might rising greatly depending on the synergy with their Barbarian Physique. Physical traits like Giant Blood worked well with the tribes’ physiques, especially the Blood of Zeldron, the Barbarians of Taskur, were known to awaken. Even better, there was a history of Giant Blood among Bloodbearers within the older warriors. They would guide the young warriors.

The idiot would fare well in the next hunt, assuming he didn’t kill himself by using Giant Blood before his body could adapt.

“So much lust,” Björn grunted, eyes fixed on the women of the tribe. They stared at the idiot, who had yet to suppress the potency of his power, with naked desire. Greedily.

That came as no surprise. As stupid as the man was, he was the first in many cycles to awaken a power. Nearly ten cycles had passed, and the women could sense the strength resting within him. It was just waiting to erupt.

“Are you a skincrawler now, or do you want to be like him?” Hakon asked half-mockingly. When Björn glared at him, he added, “Don’t worry. They’ll calm down once a few more Bloodbearers awaken.”

The first Awakening of a Bloodbearer after ten cycles of drought carried the same thrill as returning successfully from a hunt after a season of misfortune. It was intoxicating, though fleeting. The excitement would fade once the same ‘miracle’ happened several times in quick succession.

“That fool is nothing. I am better!” Björn growled, pushing through the masses toward the Monolith. To make a point. To awaken a great power and show Hakon.

“You had to do that, didn’t you?” Astrid asked, shaking her head. Though the smile on her lips widened.

“Yes.” Hakon shrugged, moving closer to the Monolith as well. “He’ll be fine. I doubt the Ancestors would bless him with a failed power.”

“Rootkeeper!”

The Shaman’s voice thundered through the tribehold once more. Hakon froze before his head snapped toward the Monolith. Björn was nowhere near the Monolith just yet. It was one of Ulfar’s friends who’d awakened the power of a Rootkeeper.

Rootkeepers were no warriors. Those bearing the power of Rootkeepers would never match their peers in battle. Still, the power was vital; tending the tribe’s fields, sustaining it through the longest winters. As long as someone stood beside them in defense, all would be well.

And one of the women joining the Rite was very eager to do so. She approached the Monolith in large strides, eyes lingering on the cursing Rootkeeper. She slashed her palm open and slapped it against the stone, licking her lips greedily.

“Bloodbearer!”

Her muscles bulged as dormant power roared to life, though she didn’t trigger it. Instead, she turned toward the Rootkeeper with a predatory smile. She could protect his fields, if she wished. And from the look on her face, she very much did.

The Rootkeeper didn’t seem pleased. Not because of the Bloodbearer woman, but because he would never become a true warrior. Combat brought honor. Power. Authority. Survival. To rely on others was… pathetic.

He would live, and he could fight if he chose to seek battle, but his path lay elsewhere. The Ancestors had different plans for him.

“He looks decent enough,” Astrid commented lightly, noting several women casting interested glances toward the handsome young man.

“Interested?” Hakon joked, but the glare she shot him promised certain death.

Even then, looking like death incarnate, Astrid remained as beautiful as ever.

“Some people look too good,” Hakon added, slower now. “Only fair the Ancestors do not waste the power of legends on such idiots.”

That earned him a raised eyebrow.

“Be careful what you wish for,” she said quietly, her words carrying a meaning he failed to grasp.

“Did you say something?” Hakon asked, already refocusing on the Monolith.

“Nope.”

Light coalesced in the hands of a furious warrior as soon as he stepped back from the Monolith.

“Lightcaller!”

Booming laughter resounded through the tribehold, only fueling the warrior’s fury. There was little he could do against it. He had awakened an unsuitable power.

Words of ridicule spilled from the mouths of those fortunate enough to awaken as Bloodbearers. They reveled in their comrade’s misfortune.

“How exactly did you attract the Ancestors’ ire?” Ulfar guffawed, his voice loud enough for everyone to hear. “Was it because you slept with the butcher’s whore?”

“That was uncalled for. They will fight.” Astrid tore her gaze away from the Lightcaller and fixed it on the butcher, who looked particularly enraged.

He’d always had a short temper, and Ulfar knew it.

“Zask is going to kill his wife once he’s butchered Eren,” Hakon growled, glaring at Ulfar who only looked more pleased at the discord he had sown.

Had awakening Behemoth Blood not been enough for him?

Eren was no friend of Hakon, but everyone knew he’d had a rough childhood. Worse still, he was raised by the butcher and his late wife.

“Savage boy,” Björn shook his head. “To fuck Zask’s wife after all he did to help him.” He snorted. “The Ancestors made the right call. Eren deserves to be punished.”

When the commotion around the Monolith grew too loud, the Shaman cleared his throat. It was a simple act, yet it silenced everyone. Even Zask’s fury dimmed. He still glared at Eren with hatred, but even the butcher knew better than to interrupt the Rite.

“Continue,” the Shaman said quietly.

Björn responded by charging toward the Monolith while the others remained distracted. He cut his hand and pressed his palm firmly against the stone in one smooth motion.

“Blessing!” the Shaman announced.

“The Blessing of the Bear!” Björn’s laugh resounded like a thunderstorm, cutting the Shaman’s announcement short.

He ignored the Shaman’s glare as he walked back, several firm hands clapping down on his shoulders while dozens of warriors congratulated him. The issue between Zask and Eren faded from the crowd’s attention. Except for those involved.

Up to this point, only two awakenings had been truly unfortunate. Everyone else gained physical traits, most of them Bloodbearers; Giant Blood of varying potency, to be precise. If the tribe had its way, they would continue down that path. Stronger warriors meant better odds in the coming raids.

Astrid was the first to move. She brushed past Björn without a word and completed the Rite in a silent second.

“Blood–” the Shaman halted mid-sentence, his eyes widening slightly. “Blood Fury!”

A cacophony of cheers erupted across the tribehold.

“She really had to outdo me,” Björn grumbled.

Blood Fury was a curious power. One of the few non-physical awakenings the Barbarians took pride in. Many wished for Blood Fury over Giant Blood. Some even valued it more than Ulfar's Behemoth Blood. It was the power of legends.

"The Ancestors favor her," Hakon said, smiling as her eyes met his.

Astrid's strength was written in blood. Every wound, every kill fed her power; whether the blood belonged to her enemies or herself. The scrolls Hakon possessed spoke of legendary figures drenched in slaughter, warriors pushed beyond mortal limits through bloodshed alone. Used properly, Astrid would become one of them. She did not need a warrior to guide her, for the blood of her enemies would teach her all she needed to know.

The masses gathered around her as she returned, her expression empty, unreadable.

"Your turn." She stared straight into Hakon's eyes.

"Skincrawler?" Björn asked again, grinning brightly.

"No. I am ready."

Hakon strode toward the Monolith, confidence in every step, the trophy necklace swaying against his chest.

After cycles of waiting, all he wanted was to awaken. Keeping pace with the legendary powers of Ulfar and Astrid would be ideal, but Giant Blood would suffice. It was a solid power, well-suited to him.

He was not as wide as most Barbarians, yet that never bothered him. Those who mocked his 'lacking' mass had been challenged; arms broken, faces shattered.

His gaze flicked to his father.

The chieftain stood unmoving, stoic, his eyes cold and devoid of emotion as they settled on Hakon.

Watch and see.

A roar echoed through his mind as he stepped before the Monolith. This was his time to shine. The first step toward surpassing his father.

The Shaman's voice rang out, but he failed to understand a single word. He removed his blood dagger, cut deeper into his palm than necessary, and slapped his bleeding hand against the Monolith.

Something stirred within Hakon. His stomach churned and twisted as something he had never felt before broke free. It was painful, though not unbearable. Even then, it didn't last long, as a soothing warmth spread through his body.

Lifeblood. Or “mana,” as the Shaman and some hide scrolls called it. It spread through Hakon for what felt like an entire night but couldn’t have been more than the blink of an eye. His mana receded and returned to the mass that had taken shape in his chest. No, it hadn’t just appeared. It was only that he could now sense it. Now that he was a true warrior. A real fighter. Awakened.

Euphoria struck even harder than his father’s mace. It filled him to the brim, until Hakon recognized what was amiss. There was no power. No surge, no ancestral imparting of information. Where was the power he’d always been promised?

And then he heard the Shaman. The word that dug deeper than it had any right to.

“The Mind.”

Roaring laughter resounded almost instantly, led by none other than Ulfar’s deep and thunderous laugh. He sure enjoyed himself.

Hakon tuned out the laughter and mocking voices that cut in between the cacophony and did something stupid. He looked his father’s way.

The chieftain didn’t grace him with a single glance. Instead, he looked at the group to the left. At Ulfar and the Giant Blood warriors.

I disappointed him again…

Clenching his fists, Hakon embraced the pain of fingers digging into his cut-open palm. More blood dripped, crimson droplets splattering and joining those that had come before. Bleeding, embracing the pain, was the only way to let out the frustration and anger bubbling beneath his skin.

Yet it didn’t change the situation. The Ancestors had decided. They chose a non-physical power for him. One with a path no Barbarian would bother to tread.

But what exactly had they chosen for Hakon?

A piece of old, half-torn leather adorned with cursive lines forming words coalesced before him. The Ancient Scriptures. A gift of the Ancestors. They revealed the harsh truth.

Hakon Taskur – Level 1
Race – Barbarian
Ancient Power – Enhanced Comprehension
Bloodline – Wildborne Lifeblood

At first glance, everything seemed in order. Hakon had to take a second look to note the problem at hand. Ancient Power aside, his Bloodline was wrong. It should have read Blood of Zeldron, not Wildborne Lifeblood. Lifeblood, he knew. He felt it within him, deep in his abdomen. Still, this was odd. Wrong.

The Rite continued around him. Laughter resounded in his ears as it all came slowly to an end, and for the first time in a long time, Hakon's mind was blank. The Rite changed everything.

What now?

Before he could clear his mind and focus on the obvious mistake the Ancient Scriptures must have made, or on Enhanced Comprehension, whatever that was supposed to mean, Hakon was interrupted.

A heavy pressure settled over him. It felt old, ancient even, and his head snapped up toward the source: the Shaman.

His tattoos glowed and peeled from his skin as he grew in height and width. The pressure intensified until it felt inescapable, as though the weight of a long-lost era pressed down upon Hakon's bones. But it was not force alone that weighed on him. It was much more than that.

"The Rite has concluded, and with it comes the rise of a new generation. The Rite is not an end, it is the beginning. Remember this, young warriors: a dry blade earns no song, no seat at our feasts. Meet death as you would meet your kin, and you shall walk with us, your Saga sung beyond the turning of ages. By blood. By fate. Stand unbroken, and fight until you earn death's embrace at last." The Shaman's voice rolled through the tribehold, the air trembling with every word, each syllable carrying a depth no living lungs should have been able to produce.

"Reveal your power. Revel in the blood of your enemies, and through it, surpass your kin." The voice, one that sounded nothing like the Shaman's, continued even as blood poured from his lips and his eyes, which resembled the stars of the approaching night.

"When the stars fall into their ordained paths, a Warlord shall rise from the blood of his enemies. A Challenge will be called, young blood against young blood, and their names will be carved into the seams of fate. The strong will rise, their Deeds etching a Saga of legends. The weak will fade, forgotten."

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CHAPTER 2

A Challenge would come when the stars aligned. Nobody really knew how soon that was. Only the Shaman would know, and even he had to wait until the Ancestors told him.

But a challenge was a challenge. The young would fight one another, spilling their blood to determine who was the strongest among all those who went through the Rite.

His father, the chieftain that came before him, and the chieftain before that, had all been the greatest warriors among their peers. Therefore, the Challenge of the young would determine the next leader as well.

Hakon understood what that meant. He had to emerge victorious in the Challenge. It had to be him or…

Or I will never be able to prove myself to my father.

Becoming the next chieftain was a necessity. For his family, and also himself. Because he would never truly surpass his father if he did not become a chieftain.

Hakon had already failed his father too often. One more time, and it would be over. His father would abandon him. Just like he abandoned Hakon's mother. Memories of his mother pulled on old scars, but he swallowed the sorrow and pain. As a Barbarian, a true warrior, he had to be strong and resilient. Emotions were for the weak, and Hakon refused to be one of them.

He was strong. At least, he had been. The Rite turned the tide. It weakened him greatly. While the Bloodbearers and Blessed's physiques were already much greater than they used to be, he was the same. Nothing changed for him. After all, Ancient Powers of the Mind did not reinforce the

physique, the most important asset of all Barbarians. It was what they needed the most, for it protected them against the threats of the wilds, be it harsh winters or fierce monsters.

A heavy sigh escaped his lips.

Ulfar felt more dangerous than before, and so did his followers. Even the Giant Blood warriors were a threat now. The Ancient Power's strength was one thing. That did not even include the power they would acquire from the older warrior's teachings. For they too were Bloodbearers and Blessed.

Hakon narrowed his eyes as his senses perked up. Something stirred in the back of his mind, but he discarded the odd sensation when the Shaman's voice rang out once more, each word resonating with the entire tribe.

"When the silver moon is ripe, Tribe Taskur's young warriors will fight. Wield the Ancestors' gift as a blade meant to kill, and grow strong enough to prove they chose right," he intoned as the tattoos returned to their original places.

With that, the Rite came to an end. Excited, triumphant cheers echoed through the surroundings, and the older tribesmen joined the young. Many gathered around the Behemoth Blood. Most did, and their numbers included the men and women who'd been with Hakon before the Rite started. They changed sides, and Hakon could not hold that against them.

Ulfar had awakened a great Ancient Power. Everyone could sense its presence. It was ever-present, and he had yet to use it actively.

"Can you beat him?" Björn asked, the joy of his own awakening momentarily forgotten.

"No," Hakon answered without hesitation. There were no 'ifs' or 'buts'… Ulfar was stronger.

"You have several nights until the silver moon is ripe. That should be more than enough for you." Astrid spoke in a manner that didn't allow rebuttal.

Björn, however, did not recognize her tone and quipped, "Astrid might win. If the Blood Moon is with her."

Several sets of footsteps rang out from the side before Astrid could punch Björn, and several presences, some tinged with bloodlust, weighed down on the group.

Ulfar greeted them with a smile that could not have been any more predatory as they turned around.

“The Ancestors recognized your worth. Or how worthless you are,” he bellowed, towering slightly above Hakon when he had been shorter before the Rite. His Ancient Power lived up to its legends and provided Ulfar with the strength needed to lead a tribe. He would soon be powerful enough to stand side by side with the older Barbarians and would surpass them. Just like he had surpassed Hakon.

And now it was time to make an example. To show the tribe that he was superior to the man everyone once called his rival.

“Are you done?” Hakon asked.

He was not that easily swayed. His temper may not be the best, but Hakon trusted the Ancestors. They would not be so cruel as to give him an Ancient Power weaker than Ulfar’s. If they chose the Mind for him, so be it. He would use it to crush Ulfar. To show the tribe that he was more than just the chieftain’s son. Even his father would have to acknowledge him.

Ulfar’s right eye twitched and his face hardened, but he did not stoop to squash him in front of everyone. Not without a challenge. He knew better than to enrage the tribe.

“I will crush you,” he growled and left, his Giant Blood followers spitting, “Failure,” at him.

Hakon and Björn just stared at the leaving pack and then at each other. Ulfar was no fool, but he certainly acted like one at times.

“Astrid is going to kill them.” Björn let out a laugh as they both turned to Astrid.

She couldn’t hear them, her eyes as cold as the fiercest winter, a crimson hue pouring out of her as her Arcane power triggered subconsciously.

Hakon shuddered, death looming over the group until Astrid finally calmed down.

“The chieftain would not mind the loss of a dozen Giant Bloods, would he?” she asked, a touch too calm.

He shrugged. “As long as you make up for the loss of their strength. So… no, he will not care.”

“Speaking about your father.” Björn had stopped laughing and looked to the side, lowering his head. “Chieftain.”

Astrid followed Björn’s example, and so did Hakon as he turned to see the chieftain.

His father didn’t grace him with a glance. He offered a nod to Björn, and his eyes gleamed ever so slightly as he looked at Astrid.

“The Ancestors favor you, child. Make use of their blessing. Fight well, child.” His gravelly voice rang in Hakon’s ears even though the words weren’t directed at him. This was as far as the chieftain ever went to praise someone. Such words meant little from others, but from him, they were the greatest compliment Hakon had ever heard, and they were aimed at Astrid.

That stung. It shouldn’t have, not after so many cycles, but it still did.

The chieftain returned to the hut. While he did not say anything to his son, Hakon knew better than to let his father wait.

“Do you want to hunt tomorrow? Together?” Astrid asked, but Hakon shook his head.

“I am sure your mother will pull you through the Deepshire Cavern Fracture. Even if she doesn’t want you to be a chieftain, Blood Fury changes everything,” he reasoned.

“It doesn’t change much,” Astrid sighed. “The old hag wants nothing more than to torture me.”

The young warriors knew she didn’t mean her words literally. Then again, Astrid’s mother had considered leaving Taskur for cycles, and her voice had grown louder with every season the Shaman did not return to perform the Rite.

Now that her daughter had awakened, that was no longer the case. She had a new project to pour her strength and energy into: Astrid

“Have fun,” Hakon announced and left to follow his father back to the hut.

The chieftain waited before the entrance, carrying a mace and a sword. No words were exchanged, the meaning clear when he lobbed the sword toward Hakon.

They walked silently to the back of the hut, where an open field waited; a small area void of greenery. Specks of dried blood adorned the ground, giving it a savage touch. And that it was: savage. What looked like a makeshift arena to spar in was more of a ring of punishment, depending on who looked at it.

“The Tribes are on the move. Unlike us, the Onyr, some of the smaller tribes, and the Pearot retained the Ancestors’ grace. Their warriors awakened every cycle, which the Pearot used to either claim some of the smaller tribes or destroy them when they didn’t submit. The Onyr will

probably submit to the Pearot in a cycle or two if nothing changes," his father said matter-of-factly while hefting his massive mace.

He entered the arena, and Hakon followed, balancing his sword in his strong hand.

"You think the Ancestors favor Pearot and their allies?" Hakon asked, ready to fend off his father the moment he stepped fully into the arena.

"No." The chieftain laughed coldly. "They pitied them. We grew too strong too fast, so they begged the Ancestors for mercy."

His father spat to the ground. "But the Ancestors are fair. They would never abandon their blood. In exchange for taking the Rite from us for so many cycles, they blessed us all the more now that the Shaman has returned."

Hakon raised an eyebrow at his father. His guard lowered for no more than a split second, but his father took advantage of it. He blurred, appeared before his son with blinding speed, and rocketed the mace into Hakon's side.

It looked like a light blow at first glance; Hakon knew better. He braced himself for the worst, only to be hurled through the air.

His side burned. Several bones cracked but did not break. Shooting up from the ground, sword still resting in his hand, Hakon stood once more.

"I knew the Ancestors would not forget our tribe. I expected a lot from them." The chieftain shook his head, disappointment sprawled across his face. "And I was right. They did not forget us. Two powers of legend awakened in the same generation. That is unheard of. Yet, I was wrong as well. My expectations were wrong."

Dark, emotionless eyes rested on him. "You are a warrior now. You, just like your friends and peers, will join the warriors in the fight against Pearot once the time has come. But who will lead the young generation to battle? *You*?"

He blurred once more and appeared in the exact same spot. Anticipating the move, Hakon planted his feet firmly into the ground, sword raised. He leaned into the exchange, prepared to divert his father's strike. He slashed at the chieftain, only to phase straight through mace and arm.

His father appeared on the other side, the mace impacting and hurling Hakon through the air once more. A sickening crunch followed as Hakon pushed himself to his feet, his left arm and right side flooding him with pain.

The chieftain allowed him to stand. He always did. He also never used his full strength. If he wanted to, he could have knocked his son out cold long before Hakon realized what happened. But he chose against it.

He injured Hakon badly all the same, such injuries healing overnight. The chieftain knew very well how quickly his son recovered. All Barbarians healed fast. However, his father remembered Hakon's natural regeneration all too well. Nothing escaped his notice.

Hakon circled his father, knuckles white from his tight grip.

The chieftain said nothing, yet he wanted his son to represent him in the tribal wars. It was an order, even if it was never spoken aloud. But why did he not say it?

He thinks I cannot do it.

Hakon gritted his teeth. Had he failed one more of his father's impossible tests? Again?

"Come at me," he growled, no longer ignoring the prodding in the back of his mind.

Hakon reached out to the weapon and grabbed it tightly. The chieftain blurred in the same instant and appeared to his right. This time, something was different. After thousands of beatings from his father, he too remembered his movements to a fault. Usually, that mattered little. He was too slow to respond and was hit, his blood fertilizing the sparring ring. That was no longer the case.

Hakon noticed a shift in his father's movement. Barely, yet clearly enough to know what he had to do next.

His father did not execute another feint. He swung the mace head-on at his son. Hakon was ready. The corner of his lips curled into a savage grin as he took a half-step back, sword raised in time to divert the incoming strike.

His sword vibrated heavily, his arms shuddered at the impact, and the mace failed to crack open bones this time around.

In response to his actions, the Ancient Scripture coalesced before Hakon.

[Skill [Combat Awareness] has been learned.]

Before he could check the letters etched on the tattered piece of leather that formed the Scripture, they dispersed. Hakon did not need to read the ancient text to know what was written. His instincts took over, telling him

all he needed to know; he didn’t need the old warriors’ teachings to wield the Ancient Scripture and learn new Skills.

A slight change in movement caught his attention. It was subtle and nearly slipped his notice, yet Hakon responded to it. He raised his sword, his stance shifting as his father struck again.

The second strike was averted, but something felt wrong. His father was all the same. Instead, it was him who was wrong. His stance, the way his feet shifted in response to the chieftain’s every action, how he carried his sword.

Hakon trusted his instincts and adapted. He leaned forward, sword coming down at his father.

[Sword Mastery has been recognized. Skill generated. Level adjusted to proficiency.]

He never even came close to actually hitting his father. The chieftain swatted the blade out of his face like an annoying Bloodmoth and kicked Hakon in the stomach.

Hakon gasped for air as he was pushed back, his heart racing wildly. Clutching the sword handle even tighter than before, he barely recognized the pulse of warmth coming from his stomach. The pain faded, leaving behind a sense of curiosity. He tried to reach out to Lifeblood, but it escaped effortlessly.

Multiple ideas formed in his mind, each weirder than the last, and he wanted to try all of them.

His father had different plans. The chieftain appeared beside Hakon, fist raised and ready to descend to crush his son.

Part of Hakon wanted to retreat, but the other part screamed at him, urging him to grasp the opportunity.

I need to be faster.

The last attack was too slow. It also felt wrong. That was new, but he didn’t question it. He leaned into the wrongness as if he had never done anything different.

If he was too slow, all he needed was to adapt. Find the problem and crush it!

Hakon leaned lower, heel pressing firmly into the ground right before he shot toward his father.

His adjustment was minuscule, but the result was as clear as day and night. He accumulated more speed in the short distance, and the sword surged toward the target faster as well. Sharper. Deadlier.

[Proficiency gained. [Sword Mastery Lv.16] improved to [Sword Mastery Lv.17]]

The more he listened to the sense of wrongness, the more flaws unraveled before his bare eyes. So much was wrong. Even now, his movement was flawed, his stance far from perfect. The sense of perfection he'd once felt when wielding a sword was nowhere to be found. It was like it never existed, as if it was a foolish dream to seek perfection.

His steps felt sluggish even as he reached his father, moving faster than before, and he tried to adapt once more, but the chieftain didn't remain idle. He twisted his upper body, his fist gathering momentum as it thundered against the side of Hakon's head.

It was as though someone ground his skull in a mortar. His head throbbed, his sight was blurry, and the rest of his body threatened to escape his grasp, but Hakon was not done. He was nowhere near done.

Lifeblood pulsed and spread through his stomach. It moved almost eagerly, like it wanted to aid him to victory. Its warmth filled Hakon with the strength needed to continue, so he charged once more. This time, something about his footwork caught his attention. He searched for the source of wrongness, only to realize it was everywhere.

Reading his sword's movement, Hakon stabbed at his father, trying to move between the chieftain's exposed openings, desperately seeking ways to improve and vanquish the sense of wrongness. If that was what it took to cut his father, so be it.

No matter how painfully obvious his father's intentionally exposed spots were, Hakon still failed to reach them. More warmth spread from his abdomen, but the strength it provided eluded him as a crimson hue oozed from the chieftain's skin.

"I expected worse," he grunted, their eyes meeting.

In the next instant, Hakon felt a heavy impact, and the world around him turned dark.

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CHAPTER 3

He woke up in his room as servants cleaned the hut and tended to him.

"Greetings, master," the servants said, bowing deeply, and left as soon as it was clear he didn't need anything.

"That was tough," Hakon muttered, looking up at the morning sun lighting up the room.

"Worse than usual," he grunted to no one in particular.

Getting knocked out in a father-son spar was nothing all that uncommon for him. Staying unconscious throughout the night, however, was new. The spar was tough, but that did not justify waking up this late.

At least, I'm well rested.

Hakon removed the cloth tied around his head with a groan. It still hurt a little, but a night's rest had been enough to fix most of his wounds. A strong earthen smell lingered in the air. Coupled with the herbal scents, and the revolting smell that followed shortly after, Hakon understood what happened.

Father hit me too hard.

His eyes widened slightly at that. The chieftain had perfect control of his strength. He was much stronger than Hakon, which made it much easier to knock him out cold. Yet, he had hit too hard and the Healer had to come.

Even then, his head still hurt like a war drum. Father only allowed the Healer to rub a paste on him. No Ancient Power or Runeskin had been applied.

"That would have been too easy, wouldn't it?" Hakon snorted, no longer trying to understand his father.

Barbarians were simple people. They did not fear death nor pain. Pain was no more than weakness leaving the body. That didn't mean a father had to leave his son to fend for himself after accidentally hitting him too hard. The stinky paste did what it was supposed to do, but even a weak Runeskin would have been several times more useful.

Swallowing the curses before they left his lips, Hakon thought of the last match. It had been different.

'*I expected worse.*' The chieftain's words rang through his mind.

Those words…

Did he praise me?

No, that made no sense. His father loathed him.

His physique packed a punch, yet it was smaller than other Barbarians. The chieftain hated that.

Hakon was interested in scrolls, just like his mother had been. The chieftain was disgusted.

The Rite… The Ancestors joined his father's judgment. They agreed with him and gave him an Ancient Power without history. Without known Saga to rely on. He had to tread his path alone with no guidance.

"No!" Hakon gnashed his teeth, scrambling to his feet, ignoring the pain in his body. He cast aside the war drum thundering in his head and focused on the Ancient Scripture; it unfurled before his eyes once more.

Hakon Taskur – Level 1
Race – Barbarian
Ancient Power – Enhanced Comprehension
Bloodline – Wildborne Lifeblood
Skills – [Combat Awareness Lv.1], [Sword Mastery Lv.17]

Hakon tilted his head. He still thought the Ancient Scripture was broken because his Bloodline made no sense at all, except the remaining sections appeared correct. Other than the fact he'd gained his first two Skills too fast.

"Father… No, *everyone* said it would take time to acquire a Skill." He rubbed his stubble in thought. Even the old texts mentioned that Skills could be difficult to acquire. Barbarians were great warriors. Their physique was perfectly suited toward combat, which only aided their progress, Skill acquisition included. Both scrolls and the older warriors said the same in

that regard; that the guidance of the old generation was needed to accelerate the progress.

But even after a decade of training, the Ancient Scriptures should not have recognized Hakon's [Sword Mastery] this easily.

It even Leveled up!

"Was I close to a breakthrough?" Hakon mused. If he'd been close to a breakthrough before the Rite, it would have made sense.

That had to be it! Though, it didn't explain [Combat Awareness].

"[Combat Awareness] feels like heightened senses. But my senses were always sharp." If awareness meant what he thought it meant, he'd always been aware, especially when he fought the Wind Wolves and Nightshade Panther.

Something was different, though. The Ancient Scripture considered it a new Skill rather than something the Ancestors recognized from his past achievements.

Confused, Hakon looked for his father, but he was nowhere to be found. Asking him about his Bloodline or the Skills was out of the question. And his Ancient Power…

His attention shifted to the shelf with the hide scrolls.

"The Mind," Hakon repeated the Shaman's words. Whatever Enhanced Comprehension meant, it had to do with the mind. The Shaman confirmed that much. Again, that meant the tribe wouldn't have much information for him to skim through.

"In that case–" His stomach growled, yet his eyes never diverted from the scrolls.

They ought to help. Somewhat. Maybe he could find out more about his Bloodline or Skills through the scrolls. Maybe… he could understand more big words with the Ancient Power!

A wave of eagerness overcame Hakon, and he fetched the first hide scrolls.

"Barbarian Lifeblood… might of a dozen… Bloodline of the Great Ones…" He read, lips curling into a smile as the words came slightly easier than the last time.

After going through the hide scrolls about a dozen times, Hakon should have understood a lot more, but the texts were difficult. Most Barbarians couldn't read and used their instincts to try and understand the Ancient Scriptures; that was the extent of their abilities. Physical might was all that

mattered to them. Hence, powers of the Mind were considered weak. They did not make sense to them, since the art of reading was not destined for warriors. It was a Shaman's art.

So his father and the other tribesmen said. The chieftain possessed scrolls, yet he did not read them. He loathed reading as much as others did, if not more. As little sense as that made, nobody dared question him. Or they couldn't be bothered.

It mattered little to Hakon. He came to like reading many cycles ago when his mother first taught him.

The memories of her were fragmented, the remnant of her scent fading after his father exiled her all those cycles ago. Hakon still did not know what happened, but the tribesmen stood behind the chieftain's actions. He must have acted rightfully, but… that did not change the way Hakon thought about his mother. She read him stories, taught him how to read himself, and even helped him with the Barbarians' ancient lettering. Alas, their lessons together were cut short. Many big words still eluded him even after he read the hide scrolls dozens of times.

As the war drums in his head made space for a different sensation, something changed. The words again came easier as he connected them to knowledge he already possessed, to events he had only heard about, and to other dots that had not made sense before. He relied on the new sensation to connect them, until the words swam before his eyes, coalescing into a steady stream that flowed into his head. And… he understood them. Not all of them, but some of the slightly bigger words, and all that he'd learned over cycles, flowed before him as he finished the first hide scroll in a morning rather than a day.

[Skill [Reading] has been learned.]

Hakon let out a hollow laugh. Reading was the art of Shamans, yet it came to him so easily. Was he destined to become a Shaman? The mere question dulled his excitement considerably. He was a warrior, the chieftain's son, not a Shaman.

He took a deep breath and went through the scroll's content once more. It mentioned the tribes' greatest era: when they were united, their blades pointed at the foes in the forest and the lands beyond.

Pride filled his chest at the image… The tribes uniting anew, promising the rise of an era even greater than the Sagas spoke about.

Hakon wanted to be part of the uprising. He wanted to be a pillar of strength in the unification of tribes and the conquest of the lands that had been taken from them.

“I am a warrior, and I will unite the tribes.” He clenched his fists tightly, desire pumping in his heart. “Just you wait, everyone! Watch me and see as the Saga of Hakon Taskur is written before your eyes!”

Only the servants were present to hear him, but they had turned a deaf ear to his antics a long time ago. That did not matter. His words were not directed at the servants. They were a promise to himself. The fuel needed to strive forward.

And to fulfill his promise, he needed strength. A lot of strength.

Hakon swallowed the excitement before it could consume the last of his focus. He rolled the scroll up and searched for one of the older scrolls his mother acquired from the Shaman a long time ago. It was his most valued possession: a memory of his mother, and the scroll that was the most difficult to understand.

As he sat down, the scroll unraveled before him, and something new occurred to him. The big words that had not made much sense before shifted before his eyes. It was almost as if they were pulled apart and reworded with smaller words. The same meaning was still written in the text; a Shaman’s tongue was different, difficult to understand, but it came easier to him.

He read faster, the effect of [Reading] coming in handy as he moved through the text with a smoothness and ease that should not have been possible.

Lifeblood was mentioned often in most scrolls, whereas the Shaman’s texts mentioned mana more frequently. It was the same thing, just a different name, but mana rang in Hakon’s ears like the truth. It had a better ring to it… but was that really important? It was the same, after all. He shook his head, the terms mana and Lifeblood swirling together as he combed painstakingly through the complex text.

“Mana… Heart of the world… Titan Might.” The war drum echoing in his skull had yet to disappear. It dulled momentarily, but the drums returned, their thunder louder than before. “The Warlord of the united tribes was unlike those who followed in his footsteps. Unlike those who came

before him. He wielded the power of the Titans, although he carried the blood of the Great Ones."

The thundering drums in his head brought forth problems. They did not help solve the confusion settled in Hakon's heart. Even though the text came easier to him, the larger words unraveled into smaller pieces of something greater. And the greater meaning escaped his grasp.

All he knew for sure was that the Shaman thought highly of mana, considered it a vital source of power.

Lifeblood was important to warriors. It powered their Skills and Runeskin. But as highly as Barbarians regarded Lifeblood, Ancient Powers that required it were not considered as highly, because they consumed Lifeblood, draining warriors, weakening them in battle if too much was used. And Barbarian warriors were not known for holding back. They fought all enemies to the death and honored their foes by going all out, no matter how superior they were.

"It's all the same," Hakon muttered to himself, head tilted. From the way he looked at it, the only difference between Lifeblood and mana was the way Shamans and warriors applied it, but how could he be so sure about that?

"Or is it different?"

Hakon tried and failed to read between the lines. The Shaman encouraged the use of mana, whereas warriors harnessed their Lifeblood and kept it within them. Even if the texts insinuated it was the same energy used differently, could they really be the same?

And if they were different, did he have to become like a Shaman because of his Ancient Power? No. That should not be it.

Trying another scroll, one that must have been written by a Shaman, judging by how similar it was, Hakon recognized a connection that made his heart flutter. The words *Warlord*, *Titan Might*, and *mana* appeared in similar places several times. Most of the time, they were not mentioned in the same sentences, yet the sentences belonged together in more than one sense.

There was a connection that had not been obvious before.

The heart of the world was mentioned a few times as well, along with the volatility of mana. At times, it was calm like a lake. At other times, it was a deadly force to be reckoned with.

At all times, it was powerful. Incredibly so.

But was it enough to become a warrior while wielding mana in ways that were frowned upon? Was it worth it?

Could his understanding of the scrolls be a mistake; a misunderstanding? Was he seeking connections where there were none? It was possible.

And there was only one way to find out.

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CHAPTER 4

The morning had passed, and the sun beginning its descent toward the horizon when Hakon finished the last of the hide scrolls. Certain unfamiliar words were still hard to understand, which led to more problems in a few larger and several smaller sections. Even so, he was satisfied.

The Ancestors were happy as well, their rewards filling his heart with joy.

[Proficiency gained. [Reading Lv.2] improved to [Reading Lv.3]]

His ability to read continued to improve as he learned more words. While reading the texts, Hakon also felt his focus sharpen, which allowed him to store the written content more easily.

Throughout the day, Hakon read many scrolls about topics he would have never understood before. Some he still failed to grasp. He did not know anything about the Divine Beasts and the foreign kingdoms that took land from their Ancestors through actions that could not have been more vile and honorless. All he learned was that Divine Beasts were unlike monsters from Fractures. The scrolls mentioned them to be intelligent and something about old treaties and alliances, except these parts contained more big words than others. What they also mentioned was that the Divine Beasts were no monsters of legends.

Divine Beasts walked the realm even now, and it was best to be careful. For the wrath of a Divine Beast promised a fate worse than death.

The ominous promise aside, Hakon returned to the scrolls again.

Divine Beasts were mentioned, so were the foreign kingdoms. Except some parts didn't make sense. The scrolls mentioned them either as a side note or… Hakon nodded as he read, coming to a part where the words felt more likely. Then his brow furrowed, unable to understand the deeper meaning written in barely comprehensible letters.

Hakon heard of beings beyond their lands. His father told Hakon about raids on the fertile lands beyond, but that was long before he was born. Since then, foreign beings visited their lands only rarely, and they did not survive long.

But neither Divine Beasts nor foreign kingdoms were important. Not to Hakon. At least, not now.

His interest was aimed at the Warlords, mana, and also the Fractures. Especially the Fractures the tribes had lost long ago. Not much was mentioned about them, considering they were lost and all. The oldest of scrolls in his father's possession spoke of the dangers and bounties that could be found within Fractures. Most of the texts were blurry and had lost their luster, but [Reading] and the prodding at the back of his mind helped him recognize a few words.

The texts mentioned monsters Hakon had encountered on his first hunt several cycles ago. A failed hunt, which turned into the first of many times he disappointed his father. But his failure and his father's disappointment were all the more reason to remember the day clearly.

I went too deep into the forest. I was young, foolish, and arrogant enough to think nothing could defeat me. Mother just left, and I was angry at Father… at the world… at everything.

A sensation pressed against the back of his mind. By now, he knew the sensation could only be his Ancient Power, working its wonders. Leaning into it, Hakon used age-old knowledge, his own experiences, and the tales spun by Barbarians who had lived long, combat-rich lives to learn, to comprehend, the most likely location of a lost Fracture.

Deep in the forest, passing through forbidden lands. The same lands Hakon roamed all those cycles ago.

Why again are they labeled that way? He tried, and failed, to remember. All Hakon recalled was that it was none other than the Shaman who could claim a land to be cursed and therefore forbidden.

As if to confirm all his suspicions about the Fracture and the forbidden lands, the Ancestors spoke to him. A Scripture coalesced before him.

[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]

A warm sensation joined the Scripture. It came from everywhere, pressed against Hakon's skin, and seeped into his body. It surged through his limbs, spread out to reach every part of his being, and settled in his abdomen, joining the mass of mana to expand upon it.

Hakon felt the warmth but did not reach out to it. He wanted to, yet he sat still and waited to feel the changes in his body.

Increasing his Level should not have been this easy. He should have had to kill monsters to earn the experience the Ancestors demanded for a Level up. Instead, Hakon earned a Level without leaving his hut. His vessel accepted the Lifeblood, mana, and grew from its nourishing nature. It strengthened his physique, courtesy of his Barbarian race and Bloodline.

All was owed to the Ancestors and their sacrifices. If not for them, the tribes would have long since lost their sole means to survive in those dangerous lands. Their physiques would have been much weaker, their Bloodlines unable to provide the power they needed to survive and strive.

And Hakon did not even have to hunt to gain experience.

His Ancient Power did that. Somehow.

"Physical powers fit Barbarians best," his father once said. "They work with our Bloodline and let us grow stronger than our Level should allow."

The thought made his head pound again as his Ancient Power stirred, as if it were pushing the idea into place.

Ancient Powers came from the Ancestors. Physical powers strengthened the body, as the name suggested, and they made a warrior deadlier in a fight. Stronger than any other kind of power. Experience gained from combat, mixed with Ancient Power, simply hit harder. A Barbarian with physical powers could earn far more Levels and accumulate more strength, while a less fortunate Rootkeeper struggled to earn a single Level in the same amount of time.

Hakon tried to wrap his head around the words. It was strange because they sounded smarter than he felt.

He wasn't sure he really understood any of it, but it was as if Enhanced Comprehension hummed in agreement.

The warmth of power was exhilarating. It was as addictive as the warriors mentioned, if not more. And by embracing it as it moved through his body to reach the mass in his abdomen, Hakon tried what he should

have attempted earlier. He reached for the mass of Lifeblood. No, he shook his head.

Mana.

The word rang true in his mind. It fit him better than Lifeblood.

Compared to the night before, reaching out to the mass within him was far more manageable. Then again, he was not beaten to a pulp this time around. That did not mean it was simple. Being easier than before meant little when he'd failed to grasp the mana at all the night before.

This time, he grasped it and savored the warmth, only to be disrupted as it resisted his will. It was like a calm, warm lake when he left it be, yet the moment Hakon tried to control it, the lake turned into a raging river. Mana was violent, possibly deadly, and it raged within him.

Hakon forced his will onto the raging river and redirected the mass of mana to his chest. As soon as he did that, strength left his body. His vision blurred, and he vomited blood. It reeked badly, like the entire tribe had dumped fortnight-old leftovers straight into his nose, but the exhaustion was worse.

"Weakness." He grunted, clenching his fists as he scrambled back to his feet. Ignoring the bloodied vomit before him, Hakon tried again. There was no way he'd stop there.

A few moments later, he vomited blood once more. This time, it was sprinkled with dark, almost black spots of sludge.

Pain of that level was nothing. It was insignificant compared to the hurt and pressure every Barbarian was raised under. Still, something did not feel right. Trusting that sense of wrongness, Hakon closed his eyes, his senses reaching deep into himself.

He did not know what to expect, but it was certainly not a tunnel filled with dark, murky spots. Warmth spread through the narrow tunnel only to be blocked, repelled, by the darkness. Confused, he did the only thing he could think of: forcing his way through the obstacles with brute force.

Hakon tried to remove the dark spots filling the tunnel, but the image faded as soon as mana touched it. He was pulled back, buckled over, and coughed up blood dotted with black sludge.

A sense of weakness overcame him, which irked him more than the loss of blood. He ground his teeth.

"You won't stop me."

It was already too dark to leave the hut to hunt. That did not stop Hakon from finding ways to improve. To gain strength where others could only see weakness and failure. If anything, the descending sun pushed him all the more to focus on his Ancient Power.

He willed his power to activate, yet nothing happened. The sensation of wrongness in the back of his head remained the same. It was like Enhanced Comprehension was trying to tell him something. Constantly. As if everything he did was wrong in some way.

“My power is like Giant Blood?” Hakon shook his head. “No, Giant Blood can burst.”

Bloodbearers could churn their Bloodline for bursts of power. The aftermath was often painful, sometimes deadly. However, the main force of a Bloodbearer’s Ancient Power was active at all times. Enhanced Comprehension appeared to work similarly. Bursts of power excluded.

“Reading?” He tilted his head. The hide scrolls concealed many big words he had yet to fully understand. Using Enhanced Comprehension to improve [Reading] might help, possibly in more than one way. Would that help him in the Battle of Generation? Would that make his father proud?

Hakon did not think so. None of his goals could be achieved by focusing solely on [Reading].

He collected food from the servants, told them to clean up, and fetched a few pyre torches before setting out. As he gobbled down the boar hind leg the servants had prepared for him, he reached the sparring ring behind the hut. He strode over, placed the pyre torches in a square around the ring, and ignited them, his fingers pressing against the yellow stone within the pyre. A familiar heat flushed through his fingers to urge flames into being as he’d done endless times before.

It’d become second nature, yet this time something was different. As his fingers glided above the yellow, glowing stone, his eyes narrowed and he stopped dead in his tracks. Something prickled his finger. Like a zap that barely reached his fingertips. Until the previous night, he would have never noticed anything amiss. Now he did.

The zap returned as he ignited the remaining pyre torches. His fingers brushed against a familiar sensation, so he touched them again and repeated the process. The pyre torches glowed brighter, but Hakon barely noticed. He was more invested in the movements of the mana mass within him.

It was no more than a trace, a trickle of warmth, one that moved through him and seeped into the pyre torch. The movement felt like the most natural thing in his life, yet it irked him. If he had ignited hundreds of pyre torches with mana, why did it not move at his will now that he knew it was within him? Why did the mass of mana not listen to him?

The sense of wrongness screamed at him as doubts formed in his mind, and it only seemed to die down when a particular thought surfaced.

The dark spots? Is that it?

It felt correct enough to try again. This time, he didn't grab the whole batch of mana. There was no violence involved and only a little force. He was more careful, thinking and acting more like a Shaman than a warrior. The mass of mana resisted him at first, but it moved, just a bit too much, which resulted in another failure, with sludge and blood spurting into the sparring ring.

At this point, Hakon felt miserable. Except, he hadn't vomited the boar leg he'd eaten earlier. That was… *something*.

"Pain is weakness leaving the body. No more, no less," he reminded himself before trying again, and again, and again.

Each attempt was different. Hakon incorporated adjustments into his method. They were barely noticeable at first glance, which only made it more difficult. Honestly, it was a pain in the hairy ass. Fighting, learning how to wield a sword, or just about every other weapon was a lot easier than this. Barbarians were known for growing rapidly. They were the epitome of warriors. It was in their very nature.

Hakon's [Sword Mastery] Skill was probably not even the highest Level among his peers. He knew that, but he'd been trained in multiple weapons, unlike some of those whose Skills were at a higher Level once the Ancestors acknowledged them.

Shaking his head, Hakon tried for the umpteenth time, ignoring the blood and pungent smell lingering in the air. He removed a tiny trace of energy from the mana mass and nearly lost focus when his attempt didn't fail right away.

He imagined one of those tunnels and traced the mana through it… then failed and coughed up more blood and sludge. But he was excited. His heart raced. He'd retained full control of mana, even if it lasted only two seconds. It was impressive, which the Ancestors seemed to think as well, as a Scripture from them manifested before him.

[Skill [Flow Control] has been learned.]

His lips curled into a predatory smile, all the pain and suffering forgotten. The warriors had been right: pain was weakness leaving the body! He prevailed and overcame the pain, earning him the Ancestors' favor.

The Ancestors' words were all Hakon needed to continue. It fueled his desire to keep improving.

Controlling mana was not easy. Not even [Flow Control] took away the challenge. It did help him, though, and he moved onward to remove traces from the mana mass and move them through his body.

His attempts usually failed, but the more he practiced, and the more sludge and blood he coughed up, the more he improved. Hakon noticed his body growing weaker as time went on, yet the sensation of mana moving more easily through the very same section it failed to move several attempts earlier filled him with pride and excitement.

[Proficiency gained. [Flow Control Lv.1] improved to [Flow Control Lv.2]]

His excitement skyrocketed with the message, and he kept going until the mana stored in his abdomen was fully drained.

Mana brushed against his skin, and a fraction of it seeped into his body to return to the mass in his abdomen, slowly filling it anew. It was no more than a faint, barely conspicuous trickle and far from enough to continue practicing.

"More. I need more!" He gasped, wanting to reach out to the mana brushing against his skin to absorb more. To make it all his.

The desire was only amplified by Enhanced Comprehension trying to show him with a sense of wrongness and vague intent, but Hakon got up and reached for his sword instead.

His mana was drained and his body weak, yet neither was reason enough to stop him from advancing.

Time was not on his side. It was against him, the silver moon gaining more mass every night, while its siblings, the moons of Beast, Blood, Harvest, Death, and Virility shrunk.

He had to use every moment to improve or Ulfar would crush him. Or his Bloodbearers would tear him apart. Hakon’s fall would disgrace his father, weakening his hold as the chieftain. That was unacceptable.

Even if I cannot make him proud, the least I can do is not be a burden.

His fingers coiled firmly around the sword handle, and practice began. This time, no one could interrupt him. He focused on the wrongness and the ideas forming in the back of his mind as he adapted his stance and sword angle. He slashed out with a frown, altered his movement by a tiny margin, and repeated the same motion.

Shifting between several sequences in quick succession, Hakon’s breathing changed. It was subtle, and he wouldn’t have noticed anything if not for his Ancient Power. It showed him all he missed before. All he considered inferior to the might of raw strength. And raw strength was not all there was. As odd as the realization made him feel, Hakon knew it was true. The truth rang in his ears and he embraced it, slowly shifting his footwork and all it entailed.

He failed countless times. He made mistakes and ended up doing more wrong than right. Yet whenever a certain instance or movement felt better than another, Hakon imprinted it into his mind by copying and repeating it until his body adapted.

Cold sweat poured down his back, his head felt like it was bursting apart, but he continued as the darkness of the night came forth. Even as the pyre torches flickered out, Hakon pushed through, the hues of the moons dimly illuminating the sparring ring. Then came the darkness.

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CHAPTER 5

Hakon woke up drenched in sweat. The pungent smell from the day before lingered, and it shot into his nose as if it knew he just woke up. Cursing and grimacing, Hakon got up, sore all over.

Several servants roaming the backyard, scurrying around to purge the backyard of the pungent smell he'd left behind shuddered at his sudden movements. One shrieked and inhaled too much air. The poor woman nearly choked on the smell and vomited a short distance from Hakon.

He raised an eyebrow at the woman, her complexion pale, her hands trembling. Like the other servants, she wore rags and was much smaller than the average Barbarian. She did not have any muscles, or any muscles of note, but that was expected. She was no Barbarian.

The servants were weak, fragile, and easily scared even when there was no reason to be. Her quivering eyes lingered on Hakon but quickly shifted to the side of the sparring ring.

"Father." Hakon turned to his father standing outside the ring, arms crossed, eyes locked on to the scene unfolding before him.

His father frowned deeply. "What did you do?"

The answer was obvious, but there was no better way to tell his father than to show it to him. Moving his muscles a little eased the soreness that clung to him even after a full night's rest. Actually, he did not know when he fell asleep. Regardless, the mana mass was mostly full again, which was all he needed for the demonstration.

Hakon bent down to pick up the sword at his feet and raised it at his father. The chieftain's frown faded, one brow lifted. No words were exchanged as the chieftain stepped into the ring, no weapon drawn.

There was no hesitation as Hakon burst into action. He shot toward his father and executed a swift horizontal slash. He couldn't hurt his father, not after a single day of training, but his steps were sharper and his sword flowed smoother. It was a slight difference, yet in a fight it could be a deciding factor between life and death.

There was only one problem. His body hurt in a way it never did before. Almost like he gained a second set of muscles, a set on the verge of being torn apart. Fortunately, those muscles did not restrict his momentum all too much. Hakon grit his teeth through the pain, unwilling to show his father anything but the best of himself.

The chieftain deflected the slash with a wrist flick, eyes trained on Hakon's every movement.

Mana oozed from the mass at Hakon's will. It seeped into his legs under his guidance. Blood gathered in his mouth and the pungent smell made him want to vomit, but his focus prevailed. So did the pain. If anything, the pain worsened as mana pushed into his legs. It bore down on him and nearly pushed him into giving up. Yet he did not.

Ignoring the loss of a portion of mana and the pain that accompanied the sensation, Hakon kicked the ground and propelled forward. His muscles screamed at him as mana burned through them, but the deed was done. He reached his father in an instant, sword thrust toward his chest.

The boost of mana faded as swiftly as it arrived, slowing him almost immediately. He was already where he wanted to be, blade ready to taste the chieftain's blood.

Hakon's father was not that easy to hit. His brow furrowed slightly when Hakon appeared before him, yet he did not allow anyone to draw his blood. The chieftain's muscles bulged, and a terrifying pressure descended upon his son. His hand blurred, and Hakon's sword snapped, its blade narrowly missing his face.

"You earned a Level." He noted his son's achievement with a tinge of surprise in his voice, but Hakon shook his head as mana surged toward him.

"Two," he corrected him, smiling despite the loss of his beloved sword. The Ancestors rewarded him with something far more precious, after all.

[Skill [Dash] has been learned.]
[Proficiency gained. [Flow Control Lv.2] improved to [Flow Control Lv.3]]

[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]

The chieftain stared at him. “What Level is your [Sword Mastery]?”

“19.”

His eyes widened, which was the biggest reaction Hakon could remember seeing from the chieftain in… forever.

“The Mind,” he muttered, regarding his son in a new light. “Is it an Ancient Power we haven’t heard about?”

The chieftain narrowed his eyes at Hakon. He was in deep thought, yet didn’t let his son into his thoughts, merely nodding slowly.

“Maybe the Ancestors have not forsaken you.”

Hakon straightened his back and failed to suppress the vibrant smile as it bloomed. He salivated as more and more mana entered his body. Even though the mana mass hadn’t been full before, earning another Level flooded the mass, filling it to the brim and beyond its previous limit. His physique changed as well, all owed to the Ancestors and their generosity.

His Ancient Scripture looked nothing like the night before.

Hakon Taskur – Level 3
Race – Barbarian
Ancient Power – Enhanced Comprehension
Bloodline – Wildborne Lifeblood
Skills – [Combat Awareness Lv.1], [Sword Mastery Lv.19], [Reading Lv.3], [Flow Control Lv.3], [Running Lv.3], [Dash Lv.1]

He learned [Running] in the attempt to use mana on his legs. It was nothing special, but the Skill could come in handy. Traveling through the forest with a movement Skill would surely accelerate his plans.

“Are you up for a spar? Or will you train alone? Hunt?” his father asked.

Hakon swallowed his surprise. He’d never seen the chieftain so interested in him. It was uncomfortable… yet pleasant at the same time. Weird and unfamiliar suited the situation the most. Regardless, his father’s questions brought up a good point. Since he could Level through training, he had more options than others.

“How strong are Ulfar and the other Bloodbearers?” Hakon asked.

“Giant Blood is raw power. It strengthens their Bloodline, their power grows with their Level,” the chieftain reiterated calmly. “Your generation has been blessed with many powerful warriors. They are talented and some may even earn their 1st Ascension before the Battle of Generation. Ulfar, however, is different. Behemoth Blood is a power of legends like Astrid’s Blood Fury.”

The darkness in his father’s eyes burned deep into Hakon’s. “Ulfar did not leave to hunt with the other Bloodbearers. His father took him to the mountains this morning.”

The mountains were dangerous. Most older warriors who hunted alone would avoid the monsters of the mountains. Barbarians did not fear death, but they needed to earn it first. Dying on a hunt that was destined to fail from the beginning earned no honor. It rewarded disgrace.

“The mountains?” Hakon grunted. That was bad.

Surviving in the mountains alone was already noteworthy. Being able to kill something as a newly awakened was a Saga-worthy Feat. The Ancestors would surely reward Ulfar with powerful Skills and plentiful Levels.

“The mountains are the best place to release the Behemoth Blood. For he has to learn to tame the power before it overwhelms him,” the chieftain said. “He will struggle to stay in control. It will take him seasons to gain full control. By then, he will wield the powers of legends. He will be the equivalent of a living Saga. You have to defeat him before that.”

Putting aside his father’s high opinion of Behemoth Blood, *this*, his last words, was the first mission Hakon received from his father.

“You think I can defeat him in the Battle of Generation?” Hakon asked, and continued when his father said nothing, “Because I will.”

Even if it kills me, I will defeat Ulfar. I have to… now more than ever.

“Train or hunt. What is it?”

“Eat,” he grunted, his stomach growling in anticipation, even as a grim smile formed. “Once I’m full, I will go hunt.”

“Where?” the chieftain asked, appearing more invested than he had been in cycles, but the only response he received was a smile.

He grunted, “Fine. Do as you please. You have half a fortnight.”

Seven nights. Hakon had to be ready to fight the Bloodbearers and Ulfar in seven nights.

That had to be enough. No. It would be enough.

He was ready to depart. His stomach was full yet not bursting and a large water skin and a bedroll had been prepared by the servants. He did not rush his departure and sharpened his blades.

The chieftain handed him a sword after breaking his old one. This one was even better maintained, its blade razor-sharp, its weight nearly perfectly balanced.

With the sword sheathed by his side, and both handaxes and bone daggers stashed away with smooth movements, Hakon was finally ready. After he double-checked the hide scrolls and the location on the old map his father claimed from the last chieftain. Once he was certain of his destination, he moved out of the hut.

Several tribesmen noticed him, but there was no sign of the awe and respect they displayed merely a few nights before. It was like Hakon's achievements no longer mattered now that he awakened a power of 'The Mind.' That was a shame. Just because he did not awaken a Barbarian's traditional Ancient Power, he was shunned and made fun of.

I was the same, wasn't I? Hakon reminded himself. He hadn't been much better than the other tribesmen. That didn't mean he couldn't be better from now onward. That he could, all while preparing to show the tribes that a power of the Mind was not all that bad. For all Hakon knew, it was much better than Giant Blood.

He walked past them, their nasty gazes ignored.

Once outside the tribe center, Hakon started to run. First without Skill, then he triggered [Running], loosening the tension spreading throughout his body. No longer resisting the sense of wrongness the Ancient Power displayed, he adjusted his speed, the way he carried his body, as well as his breathing. The Ancestors did not deem his adjustments noteworthy enough to increase his Skill's Level by the time he reached the edges of the Rootkeeper farms, but he could always impress the Ancestors later.

Densely grown undergrowth, lush and full of life, greeted him a short distance from the outermost farmland, which only grew thicker as shorter, younger trees joined the old towering trees that survived the rise and fall of thousands of warriors. Their bark was thick, their massive size telling as much of a tale as the Sagas. Every mark left on the old trees' bark was a story, each more interesting than the other.

The forest was a Saga in its own right. It was a legend, the endless greenery a sight of beauty and terror.

And it was finally time for him to return to the very place that birthed legends in ancient times. Hakon strode into the forest, this time alone. And awakened.

He did not rush into the forest for an early battle. His destination was the Fracture the Barbarian tribes lost several generations ago. He clearly recalled some of the monsters the Fracture was said to hold from a hunt several cycles ago. It was one of the few times he joined his father, and he'd forgotten all about the monsters. Until he read the hide scroll and unraveled more big words.

He did not thunder through the forest; he moved as quietly as he could. Alas, the bushes rustled, branches underfoot cracked seemingly without any stop, and the very earth appeared to scream with every step he took.

Hakon kept his guard up. His eyes flicked left and right, taking in all that happened around him. There he found plants that wiggled around as if they were monsters. Vibrant flowers and plants of the undergrowth merged in a myriad of colors that were rarely seen in the tribe. Recalling the danger of some, Hakon made a detour. He did not have the Skills needed to get poked by their thorns just yet.

His attention shifted to fruits hanging from a large, white tree with golden leaves. The fruits shimmered beautifully, and their alluring scent drew him closer, but he would rather bite his tongue than eat them. For now. Until he gained [Poison Resistance] and a few Levels to top it off. The most beautiful fruits were more often than not the most poisonous, after all.

As he continued to pave his way through the forest, he was faced with danger. Of course, he was.

It did not surprise him the slightest when the undergrowth split and a Wind Wolf pounced forward to rip him apart. Muscles tense beneath dark green fur, the Wind Wolf growled. While only as tall as a child, it was much faster and stronger than one. It had massive fangs and claws as long as fingers.

But as dangerous as a Wind Wolf was to the unawakened Hakon, he could not help the devious smile as it bloomed. The undergrowth behind the Wind Wolf rustled, telling Hakon all he needed to know. He unsheathed his bone dagger just as the Wind Wolf leaped at him.

The chaos of combat unfurled in an instance. Hakon used [Dash] and crossed the distance to the fast predator instantaneously. There was no chieftain to block the attack; all that remained was pain. It was not as bad as it had been during the spar with his father, but it was still there, trying to obstruct him. That didn't work out well, for Hakon considered it training. His body needed to adapt to pain, or the Ancestors would never grant him a very particular Skill.

The bone dagger dug into the Wind Wolf's neck with little resistance. The monster yelped, or tried to, when Hakon twisted the blade and ripped it downward, tearing the wound wide open.

Several ideas popped up in his head, which was followed up by the urge to hold his blade differently. To adjust his stance, increase the distance once more, and be fully prepared for the danger awaiting him.

Oddities related to the way he wielded the bone dagger surfaced on his mind, so he kept at it when more Wind Wolves leaped out of the undergrowth. Their brethren had already collapsed, leaving Hakon unscathed against all odds.

I am not weak! he told himself.

Also… there was no holding back. This was not a friendly spar. In a battle of life and death one always had to go all out. To survive and honor your enemy all the same, Hakon reminded himself, exhaling deeply as the monsters circled him.

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CHAPTER 6

Unable to focus on too many things simultaneously, Hakon discarded [Dash]. It was too complex and drained most of his concentration to maintain. A single mistake and the Skill would fail, he'd cough up blood, and the Wind Wolves would pounce on him from all sides.

He focused on his bone dagger and [Combat Awareness]. The Wind Wolves skulked around him, their snarls ringing in his ears, yet they didn't strike. The monsters took their sweet time, waiting for him to make the first move. Hakon did not oblige, he waited, head flicking left and right until a smaller Wind Wolf let out a deep growl.

It shot toward Hakon, moving like the wind, yet it was nowhere near as fast as he remembered the Wind Wolf he'd fought a few cycles ago. Even the mature one he'd just killed proved much slower than expected.

He took advantage of that, analyzed the monster's movement pattern, and struck out. The bone dagger carved a deep gash into the wolf's front leg and would have inflicted a more severe wound if the other Wind Wolves hadn't joined their brethren in time. Three monsters came to their brethren's aid, forcing Hakon to rush to the side.

Fangs and claws whipped past him as he made a berth around them. [Combat Awareness] flooded his senses with information, and the result was magical. The Wind Wolves failed to hit him, and he even managed to swipe the bone dagger across one of the larger wolves' snouts.

It yelped right as a message from the Ancestors materialized. Hakon willed the message to fade until the end of battle and hurled the bone dagger at the bleeding wolf. His free hand was already reaching for one of his handaxes, and his other hand followed as soon as the bone dagger struck

in the monster’s neck. It didn’t kill the wolf right away, the throw too weak, the angle not quite right, and his momentum off.

Recognizing the mistakes, Hakon’s handaxes raked across the closest Wind Wolf side and neck before he kicked it down, opening a path to the very same wolf he’d just used as a practice dummy. It had retreated to the back to lick its wounds but ended up with an axe lodged in its skull.

A satisfied grunt later, Hakon retrieved his sword. Wielding the sword in one hand and the remaining handaxe in the other, he was ready to dispatch the last threats.

They eyed him more vigilantly than before, the little intelligence they possessed finally recognized he was not the weak prey they thought he was. Carrying two weapons felt natural as Hakon closed the distance, yet the sense of wrongness thumbing in the back of his mind was stronger than before. He blocked an incoming claw swipe with his sword, twisted the blade, and created an opening for his axe, wounding the monster’s leg. It was no severe wound, the Wind Wolf left limping, its greatest strength taken away.

He adjusted to the aid granted by Enhanced Comprehension as much as he could afford, but it was too much for him to handle. [Combat Awareness] flared just in time as he twisted his upper body to escape the wolf he’d cut first, and rammed his sword into its chest. Swirling around, his arm cleaving down, splitting the second wolf’s skull with a sickening crunch. Most of the axeblade disappeared in the wolf’s skull and needed a good pull to retrieve.

Hakon didn’t bother with that and let go of the axe, his attention on the last wolf. It was already injured, its side torn open, blood gushing from the deep cut in its neck, but it was not yet dead. A swift approach and one slash later, that was no longer the case. The monster’s head thudded to the ground, the rest of its body following shortly.

The heated battle came to an end. His enemies died, their failure to claw and bite him following into their grave.

“I did it!” Hakon exclaimed, eyes lingering on the Wind Wolves. It was merely a small pack of five, but they were mature and would have easily preyed on him, or just about anyone else, before the Rite. Even right after the Rite, nobody would have escaped the Wind Wolves unscathed.

“Astrid excluded… and maybe Ulfar,” he relented with a grunt, pointedly ignoring that Björn and Bloodbearers would have won regardless.

They’d be wounded, but their wounds would have healed rapidly, their physical Ancient Powers enhancing their natural regeneration.

That does not matter. I survived. Although it was nowhere near a flawless fight, Hakon was satisfied. For now.

The next fight will be better, he thought as several messages popped up, confirming he did well enough.

[Dagger Mastery has been recognized. Skill generated. Level adjusted to proficiency.]
[Skill [Throwing] has been learned.]
[Axe Mastery has been recognized. Skill generated. Level adjusted to proficiency.]

He felt like [Combat Awareness] was close to the next Level and he’d soon have enough experience to Level up himself, but that did not diminish the excitement of his gains in the slightest.

If anything, his gains affirmed once more that the Ancestors hadn’t forgotten him.

“Please accept the flesh and blood of my foes as tribute, oh Great Ones,” he intoned, leaving the Wind Wolf carcasses for them to claim; after retrieving his weapons.

The bodies disintegrated as he departed, bringing a smile to his lips. Then he slowed, eyes narrowed, as something brushed past him.

What was that?

The sensation vanished, and he resumed his journey, smiling, feeling as though the Ancestors were watching.

His first hunt after awakening was a success. The result far surpassed Hakon’s expectations, but it only pushed him to expect more of himself.

[Combat Awareness]. A powerful Skill that contributed greatly to his overwhelming victory. His father never mentioned the Skill, which urged Hakon all the more to learn and understand it.

His fight with the chieftain rewarded the Skill, which now aided him to perceive the battlefield much easier. It was like his senses improved in battle now that he earned [Combat Awareness], but that was not enough for Hakon. He wanted, no, needed to understand the inner workings of the Skill.

“I read Father’s movements during the spar. Anticipated his attacks. Tried to strike the weak spots,” Hakon mused quietly, head drumming from all the thinking. “My movement was better, as well. Like I knew where I had to stand… or where I should not stand. The Wind Wolves were simple to dispatch. It was almost too simple. They attacked together, but I… I knew where they were and could react faster than normal. Their attacks were slow. Not too slow to evade easily…” Yet that was exactly what he did.

His ability to assess and adapt to the situation at hand increased rapidly in battle. Hakon’s perception was unlike anything he remembered, yet it only lasted until the end of battle.

The prodding in the back of his head grew more intense, and he expected the Ancestors to send a message. [Combat Awareness] did not reach the next Level just like that. It would have been too simple.

“One more fight.” Hakon calmed his excitement, his attention shifting to [Dash]. The movement Skill helped him in the battle as well, but it was too dangerous to use blindly. It was not like Hakon disliked the Skill, yet the dangers it carried in combat were not that simple to overlook; the Skill’s complexity and how easily it could fail.

His father and other Barbarians would beat him for thinking badly about the Ancestors’ gifts. Good thing they couldn’t read his mind. Unfortunately, Hakon could not stop reading his own thoughts either. They bothered him more and more as the big words he learned the night before carried ideas and thoughts he would have never dared to think. Not before he awakened Enhanced Comprehension, at least.

Now that he awakened his Ancient Power of the Mind, things had changed. Everything had changed. He was free to think and imagine. For the Ancestors rewarded him generously for his creativity.

Deep in thought, Hakon almost missed the rustling bushes to his right. His guard was up once more, and he prepared for yet another bloody battle, only to be faced with a mass of wiggling roots and vines.

“What even is that?” Hakon narrowed his eyes at the plant but didn’t close in on it. Moving plants were usually a sign of trouble. His father told him enough stories of plants that ate great warriors. Some poked the greatest of warriors, breaking their skin before depositing spores inside them… eating them inside out.

His father’s stories may have been used to scare children, and might as well not be true, but it was best to avoid amalgamations of the forest. After all, even the greatest warriors respected the dangers that lay within.

The venture carried the young Barbarian deeper into the trees. More unique plants met his eyes, and he took it upon himself to avoid all those that appeared like Barbarian-swallowing things. The tree-sized mushrooms he found were not all that dangerous but there were carcasses nearby, so he avoided them. Especially since those carcasses didn’t show any signs of physical wounds.

His mind rattled as he roamed the forest, making sure to avoid the territories of the strongest monsters he knew about, while also ensuring he’d avoid spots where monsters could strike him by surprise. The latter was not all that easy as the nature around him grew more alive and flourishing the deeper he ventured.

He was sure to have entered the forbidden lands when something wreathed around his heart. It became heavy all of a sudden, and the pain he’d experienced from using mana resurfaced. And that while he wasn’t even using mana. It was just there, pressuring him, making him feel like he had to turn around and leave.

The sensation was eerie, yet Hakon seemed to forget about the forest’s danger as he continued onward.

I don’t care. I need power, he repeated in his mind over and over again, like a mantra. His peers could be taught. They had methods and techniques to help the young awakened Level quickly and gain certain Skills. Skills tied to their Ancient Power. To regain the upper hand, he had to take a risk.

And that he did. Hakon ventured through the forbidden lands for what felt like an eternity before something caught his attention.

Skittering rang in his ears no sooner than a beetle the size of his torso emerged from the undergrowth. It had a dark-brown carapace and moved toward him in all its might. Alone.

Hakon’s ears perked up, his eyes sifting through the bushes, but no more monsters joined the beetle.

“You look a little familiar,” he mused, approaching the beetle with his handaxes in hand.

The first cleaved down in one swoop, ready to behead the monster when its head jerked up.

Hakon leaped back without thinking, his hair standing on end.

“Why did I ju–” The question was resolved as soon as the beetle spit a yellowish-green mass where he stood a moment ago.

Instead of hitting Hakon, the mass landed on a heap of leaves with a splash, and it ate through it within seconds.

Rot spit? he wondered, grimacing at the vivid picture forming in his mind. A picture of the beetle’s projectile spreading across his skin rather than the ground.

A message formed then faded even before it fully materialized. As small and weak as the beetle appeared to be, its spit was as deadly as the Wind Wolf pack, if not worse.

The beetle didn’t remain idle. It skittered toward Hakon, spit dripping from its small mouth. One moment, it stood there, and in the next another mass lobbed through the air. It was fast and would have hit its mark if Hakon hadn’t stepped to the side already. He closed the distance and hacked at the monster, only for it to shift just as fast as he struck.

He knew what was about to happen but finished his attack anyway. The axes struck the beetle, although they only left deep marks on its tough carapace rather than cleave through its neck. An instance later, more of the deadly mass shot toward Hakon.

He twisted his upper body until his muscles hurt dearly, leaning back and relying heavily on Enhanced Comprehension’s suggestion. That may as well have saved him from even more pain as a small blob whistled past his chest. He failed evading everything as a few droplets split from the projectile, sputtering in all directions.

The smell of burned skin and flesh came first, only then came the pain. Yet it was not the pain that caught Hakon unaware. There was more to the beetle than it let on. His abdomen, the spots he had been struck, hurt only for a moment. They grew numb after a second, which only worsened as the numbness spread.

Not rot spit. Poison! Hakon cursed, his perception sharpening as he escaped a few more deadly projectiles until an opening unraveled.

He used [Dash] to close the distance, handaxes overhead, and cleaved downward as the beetle’s head flicked up, aiming at him.

The monster stood no chance. Its head gave in almost too easily and the light of life faded.

“Soft head. Easy to kill if I move fast enough,” Hakon murmured as the beetle collapsed lifelessly to the ground.

[Proficiency earned. [Combat Awareness Lv.1] improved to [Combat Awareness. Lv.2]]

Still no Level up. There was something else, like the Ancestors should have rewarded him with another Skill… or improvement, but since he'd awakened Enhanced Comprehension that sensation became the new norm.

"There is always more." He smiled, then grimaced as he looked down at his bare body.

The poison splatters had been a little troublesome. The spots in questions were still numb. Luckily, the poison didn't seem very potent, nor lethal. It wouldn't kill him. Still, struck by too much of the numbing poison and he'd be eaten alive. That was a scenario Hakon would much rather avoid if possible. He *could* have avoided it in the first place. Alas, his thoughts had been too muddled.

The forest was a land as wondrous as it was deadly, and Hakon knew painfully little about this area. He hadn't been this deep in the forest in cycles. Never if one put aside the few trips he made with his father. And now he was actually in the forbidden lands. Unchartered land in a way.

Or… someone found it and kept it secret, and the Fracture was no longer.

No! Hakon shook his head. The Fracture had to be there.

Taking a deep breath, he refocused on the surroundings. He was on a hunt alone, trusting the Ancestors would acknowledge the danger he put himself in. They had to. If they didn't, his final attempt to make his father proud, to gain the tribe's honor, and to have the slightest chance of becoming the next chieftain would fail. That was unacceptable!

"Use your mind. Ignore the tribe's laughs. Trust Mother's words," Hakon muttered as his mother's words rang in his head.

'Survive. It doesn't matter how. Just know that survival comes before anything. Pride and honor mean nothing once you're dead. Your father won't agree. He may even loathe me if he knew I told you, but that man is a fool. Trust that little brain between your ears and ignore those muscleheads. Your body is important, but so is the spirit and the mind. Strengthen them with great care, refine them with your whole heart, and repay all those who make fun of you as you age in kind. Make sure the very same fools that made fun of you will bend their knees and bow their heads to you when you rise above them all!'

He could not recognize her voice any longer. It should be a familiar sound, a sonorous voice that soothed all the pain, but there was nothing. No familiarity. Even her face was blurry as he willed a memory of her to surface.

It was almost like she never existed. Like his memory of her was wrong. But he clearly remembered the time they spent together! There was no way their time together was like one of the Shaman's stomach-churning illusions. They were a disgrace, and his memories with his mother were nothing like that!

Calm down. Hakon grunted, shifting his stance. His mother was real and so were his memories of her. It was just that memories fleeted as the cycles passed.

Maybe he could find her in the future. Once he surpassed his father. He could bring her back to the tribe, overturning his father's decision to exile her. They could be together once more.

Memories of his mother stung as badly as ever. They were worse than the hunts that led to his worst scars. He held onto them anyway. They were all that was left from his mother.

Later. Surviving comes first. Then the Battle of Generation. After that…

Hakon cleared his mind and lowered his body, gaze flitting from the distant bushes and undergrowth to the nearest obstacles: leaves, roots, branches, flowers, and the like. They were troublesome, a single misstep promising trouble.

Moving slowly through the thicket with as little noise as possible was not something he had ever been taught. He could already imagine the warriors laughing at him. Some would probably be angry at him for avoiding honorable fights with monsters, but his method worked.

He was still loud, every noise ringing in his ears like thunder, but he adapted, each adjustment creating a little less noise. A pair of beetles greeted him as he moved as stealthily as a tall, bare-chested Barbarian could be. At least, they were as surprised to see him as he was when he emerged in the middle of a grotesque battlefield.

No. That was not a battlefield. It was raw, unfiltered carnage.

The beetles' surroundings were a mess of burned flesh and paralyzed monsters. A pack of Wind Wolves larger than the one Hakon defeated fell victim to them. And they were not alone. There were ants, their mandibles cutting easily through their prey. They too were the size of Hakon's torso.

“Found you.” He smiled, only to be ignored by the ants. The monster corpses were more interesting than he was. Not that it mattered. He found what he was looking for.

That’s them, isn’t it?

His doubts were soon replaced by certainty; those were the ants mentioned in the hide scroll.

The Fracture had to be near!

[Combat Awareness] flared to life, his perception heightening just in time to evade the beetles’ spit. He twisted his body, stepped to the side with measured movements, and prepared for battle when something clicked in the back of his mind.

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CHAPTER 7

“Finally!” Hakon grunted, attention flicking to the Ancient Scripture.

[Skill [Evasion] has been learned.]

The moment it clicked, evading the monsters’ spit became easier to manage. And, finally, after evading it several times in quick succession, the Ancestors rewarded him.

Dismissing the message, Hakon charged the beetles again with a savage smile.

The first beetle was brutally beaten. [Evasion] and [Combat Awareness] worked in tandem to avoid the beetles’ flying spit without losing too much momentum. Still, Hakon used [Dash] and crushed the first beetle with ease.

His perception screamed danger at him as a second beetle reached his leg, but his hand axes descended with certain death. The first strike split its carapace open and the second axe tore through soft flesh, killing the monster.

As soon as the second beetle met its timely end, Hakon was rewarded.

[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]

Mana pressed against his skin and seeped into his flesh, tempering his body naturally as it reached deeper to gather.

The more mana Hakon controlled, the stronger he felt. The gains of a single Level were not extensive, but they accumulated and formed his Saga

as he became more of a warrior from the legends. And he needed the power of legends as the ants turned to him, finally regarding him as more interesting than the corpses.

He wasted no time and propelled toward the closest target. Its mandibles clattered as it responded with a charge. The others followed through and skittered toward Hakon, his eyes flicking left and right to scan the situation.

[Throwing] activated as soon as he hurled the first axe at the intended target, but something felt wrong as soon as he released the handle. The axe whistled through the air and should have dug deep into the nearby ant's exoskeleton, only to clatter to the ground when it was repelled instead.

Hakon let out a dissatisfied grunt. Throwing weapons on the run had been a mistake. His stance was different, his momentum not quite right. He understood that now.

It was too late to complain, the course of actions already predetermined. His other handaxe whipped down, missing the ant's head as the monster lunged. Sensing the attack, Hakon pushed to the side, his axe lodged in the ant's exoskeleton.

"For the Ancestors," he growled, raising his foot to stomp on the handaxe's flat side, ramming it through the ant's exoskeleton and flesh.

A mace or great axe would have been better, but a Barbarian's body was a weapon of even greater lethality. The ant stood no chance as his foot descended. But not all was great. One ant was dead while three remained, their mandibles too close to crushing his legs and feet.

Hakon's hair stood on end as he reached for the handaxe, nearly losing a hand as a set of mandibles snapped shut. He pulled back in time, mind churning as the other ants arrived by his side.

A fraction of a moment was all he needed to come to a decision and use [Dash]. He used a trickle more mana than the Level 1 Skill required, increasing his acceleration. Enhanced Comprehension screamed, telling him he did something wrong. The Ancient Power could not have been more right. He escaped the encirclement, yet there was a price to pay.

Hakon's right leg cramped up. Something sticky oozed from the leg, and a mixture of blood and disgust struck the air. His pants felt sticky around his thighs, exactly where the cramp had begun to spread. The reason was painfully obvious. The tunnels his mana used to move were too narrow or filled with that sludge and couldn't take more mana than [Dash] used. Increasing the amount of mana without extensive practice or a proper

cleansing of the tunnels led to disaster. Hakon understood that much. He had known that could happen, but the situation forced him to respond, and his instincts pushed him to use more mana than before.

Or was it fear? No, Barbarians did not feel fear. He shook his head and slapped his cramped thigh firmly.

The ants skittered toward him, their legs moving more frantically than before. It was almost like he'd just become a tastier prey than he'd been a moment earlier. The reason eluded Hakon. It didn't matter, either way.

He removed his bone daggers, swirled them in his hands and pulled his right hand back. [Throwing] activated once more, but Hakon needed more than that. His stance shifted slightly, his fingers no longer held onto the dagger handle with an iron-tight grip, and he regulated his breathing.

While far from perfect, it felt better. Good enough to hurl the first bone dagger at the closest ant. The throw struck gold and precisely pierced the monster's eye. It didn't collapse, just merely slowed, a pained screech ringing in his ear.

Hakon silenced the screech with a second throw, ending the ant. That left two ants to crush, and one weapon to wield.

Unsheathing the sword, he executed a swift strike. It came true, but a scratch that stretched from one side of the ant's back to the other was all he inflicted. It didn't even look like the blade dug deep.

His fists would have done more damage than that but losing the advantage of range against an enemy with mandibles and tough defense sounded foolish.

Considering an idea he'd come up with the night before, Hakon shifted his attention and tried to pull mana into his arms. Since he could pull minuscule amounts into his legs to create [Dash], enhancing his arms or weapons should work just as fine. That was not the case. Blood gathered in his mouth as soon as he pulled traces of mana into one of the unchartered tunnels leading up to his chest. His skin felt like it was breaking apart as black sludge oozed from between his ribs. Surprised and confused by the pain, his concentration faltered.

"No testing in battle," he grunted, slapping his thigh once more before using [Dash].

His body complained and screamed as the tunnels within him turned and twisted, but they did as intended as he closed the distance, sword thrusting with deadly momentum. And deadly it was. The sword tip tore

through the monster’s maw before its mandibles clamped down. The ant was not dead right away, but it succumbed as soon as Hakon tore the blade to the side with Barbarian strength.

The last ant witnessed its brethren’s horrifying death from close-up, yet its charge continued. Hakon cursed and evaded the incoming attack. He sidestepped the monster and appeared by its side, empty hand pulled into a fist as it burst downward at full momentum. A pained screech came first, then followed the satisfied cracks.

Hakon’s knuckles burned in pain, but the excitement of a worthy fight surged through him, swallowing pain as the ant squashed beneath his fist.

[Proficiency gained. [Throwing Lv.1] improved to [Throwing Lv.2]]
[Proficiency gained. [Dash Lv.1] improved to [Dash Lv.2]]

His last thrown dagger had been different, but he didn’t expect such a quick Level up. [Dash] was a welcome surprise. However, it was the odd instinctive sensation he gained from [Flow Control] that caught his attention. If anything, his mastery of a weapon should have been closer to an improvement, but it was like [Flow Control] was nearing an improvement instead.

Controlling mana.

He wanted to use mana on his weapons. That was too hard for him. He failed to move mana through his upper body. It was much harder than moving mana into his legs, which had already been a tough challenge. Which was what the Ancestors were great at. They prepared challenges for the young generation to overcome. To grow stronger. To become warriors of legends!

A challenge was nothing to Hakon!

It would take time to cleanse the tunnels. Time he didn’t have. As for the pain… it didn’t matter. No matter how painful it was or how much he wanted to scream, the pain was beneficial. It was weakness leaving his body, after all.

But what if the Ancestors try to help me? The feeling he received from [Flow Control] could be a warning. Advice that could save his life.

Following his gut feeling, Hakon retrieved a trace of mana from his abdomen and moved it to his lower body. Freeing the tunnels in his legs from dirt and sludge should help him if he ever tried to use more mana for

[Dash] than intended. That was his hope as he used [Flow Control] to take control of more mana to push into his legs.

His thigh felt much better, but the pungent stench and blood sticking to his pants worsened. It was far from comfortable. After using [Dash] so often in quick succession, Hakon really had to give the mana tunnels some time to breathe and recover. But time was not something this environment offered. It was merciless, brutal, and exactly what he needed to surpass his limit.

As long as he did not allow the forest to swallow him, he would grow stronger.

Nonetheless… he took a break when no more beetles attacked him. Until the mana tunnels no longer hurt as much and his breathing stabilized. By then, he heard distant sounds and prepared for the worst.

Hakon retrieved his weapons, lowered his body, and disappeared in the undergrowth.

Even though he'd been forced into a fight, his initial tactic hadn't been too bad. Thus, he resumed the tactic and skulked silently as possible through the thicket, avoiding two beetle groups and a smaller batch of ants.

As soon as he was past the ants, he was detected. He was not sure how that happened. Hakon was confident he'd adjusted his every movement to move as silently as possible… yet they found him.

The monsters didn't care about his curses and rushed frantically at him, forcing Hakon into yet another fight.

The ants were simple monsters. Their pattern was easy to analyze, their strategy nonexistent. They were almost like most Barbarians… just weaker and even less intelligent. Dispatching them didn't take long once Hakon was aware of everything.

His achievements were not recognized. He earned no Level nor did any of his Skills improve, so he continued to practice [Flow Control]. Every step made him feel filthier than the last, but he was silent enough and avoided the ire of more monsters. Better even, practicing [Flow Control] eased the mana tunnels' irritation. Somewhat, at least.

Several groups of ants looked up as he passed by. After the last encounter, he'd learned to make a bigger detour around them.

No more monsters attacked him for the rest of the morning and midday. [Flow Control] improved to Level 4 when the sun reached its zenith, and it

Leveled up again just as a waft of freshness pierced through the disgust that encased him like leeches.

“Water…” He barged through a thorn-covered bush to a beautiful scene.

A lake filled with pristine water. While it was not what he was looking for, it was perfect to remove the filth clinging to him. All that separated him from the bliss of a cleansed body was a mixed up group of ants and beetles.

His mana mass was low on fuel from training, but Hakon couldn’t care less. He’d squash the monsters blocking his path with bare hands if necessary.

He had enough mana left to use [Dash] a few times, and that he did. The nearest monster was an ant that failed to respond to his speed in time. Its mandibles snapped shut on empty air before its head slid to the ground. Next was a beetle which got an axe to its head. Another ant’s eyes were adorned with a pair of razor-sharp bone daggers.

Three monsters died before the first barrage of beetle spit headed for him. None struck their mark. Hakon weaved around the projectiles right before he rammed his other axe into a second beetle’s back. Its carapace was as thick as before, but great defense had yet to stop a Barbarian’s brute force. Hakon gripped the blade’s flat backside and pushed the axe through the beetle’s back.

[Combat Awareness] triggered and he leaped to the side. Hakon shot to his feet after a quick roll, body twisted, arm pulled back. His arm shot forward with enough strength to split a torso-sized ant’s skull.

Taking a deep breath, Hakon unsheathed his sword and used [Dash] again.

“I just want to clean up.” He let out a pained grunt, eyes drifting to a small patch of land in the middle of the small lake. Larger monsters awaited him on the miniature island, yet it was the thing beyond the monsters that made him smile like a fool.

“And the Fracture. I want that too.”

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INTERLUDE

ULFAR

The Rite was a success. Of course, it was. Ulfar had always known he was destined for greatness, and the Ancestors' decision only confirmed that. It was inevitable.

He looked around, the corners of his lips curling into a smug smile as he bathed in the tribesmen's attention. Young warriors and old Barbarians gathered around to congratulate him on his firm connection to the Ancestors. They didn't understand that the Ancestors only awakened what had always been within him.

It might look like the Ancestors gifted him this legendary power, but he would have obtained it whether they favored him or not. That, if nothing else, was something Ulfar was certain about.

He savored the attention and the attempts of all those trying to get close to him, and he would be gracious enough to accept them. Even the fools who sided with Hakon before, were included. He was that magnanimous.

So long as Hakon suffers, Ulfar thought, glancing over at the pathetic excuse for the chieftain's son.

Hakon was a nuisance, and he'd always been. The Behemoth Blood responded, igniting his seething emotions and setting them ablaze. His rivalry with Hakon had lasted for as long as he could remember. Cycles of never-ending fights, some of which he lost because Hakon cheated, and others that resulted in his inevitable victory.

He was better than the chieftain's son, and he deserved Hakon's position more than anyone. It was his right to replace the old chieftain, and the Ancestors agreed wholeheartedly. So did his Ancient Power.

I passed their tests, Ulfar told himself, licking his lips at the thought of his next fight with Hakon. The next time they met, he would crush Hakon in front of Tribe Taskur and the Ancestors. He would rip him apart, demonstrating once and for all that he was the greatest. That he was the rightful leader of the next generation.

"The next Warlord," he muttered, clenching his fists until cracks rang in his ears.

Looking down, his muscles bulged and his arms had expanded. Power thundered throughout his entire body, filling him with might he never thought he would wield. Not this soon after the Rite.

He possessed a power of unknown potential, his rise to greatness confirmed, his future seemingly boundless.

A sense of relief filled Ulfar at the power coursing through his body. He had always been the greatest of his generation before the Rite, and now he was leagues above them. Now… now he could truly crush Hakon.

That simple thought filled him with excitement. Hakon had it all. Everyone looked up to him just because he was the chieftain's son. They praised him for hunting monsters, even though he was only this strong because his father wasted his time teaching that fool.

If he taught me… Ulfar's smile slipped and his mood dipped. If the chieftain had spent more time teaching him, Ulfar would have been much stronger. He was already a weapon master even before the Rite, yet he was overlooked.

He shook his head. Hakon got what he deserved. The Ancestors took everything away from him. He was nothing now.

"The Mind," he chortled, even more certain now that he would become the strongest.

Even though his destiny as the next chieftain was certain, just like his rise to become the next Warlord, Ulfar could not stop. Hakon would not stop either, not before he was crushed and his bones ground to powder, so how could he?

His father, one of the strongest warriors of Tribe Taskur, thought similarly. After his own failure to defeat the old chieftain, he wanted

nothing more than to help his son achieve what he never could. That was how they ended up leaving the tribehold for half a fortnight. They departed for the mountain range, its summit piercing through the distant clouds.

“We waste precious time,” Ulfar growled at his father after the first night of traveling. His father said little. He did not teach him anything after the Rite either, and they encountered no monsters.

Ulfar was certain his father had something to do with that last point, but he would not give an answer when asked.

“We are not,” was all he said, his bloodlust spreading far and wide through the eerie forest.

Anger bubbled up from deep inside Ulfar, and it festered the longer they traveled without a fight. He longed for battle, for growth, and to crush everyone. His Ancient Power erupted multiple times over the night. The intervals grew longer, and the breaks in between grew shorter with every outburst, but Ulfar did nothing about them. If anything, he embraced the surges of power, for they filled him with the strength he needed to dominate his peers and the entire tribe.

With Behemoth Blood, it was only a matter of time until Tribe Taskur would be his, and his father knew that.

He slowed as the second night approached.

“Are you angry?” his father asked, wearing an irritating smile.

Ulfar growled in response, his physique expanding as yet another uncontrolled burst of Behemoth Blood surged through him.

“Good.” The irritated smile grew even wider. “Embrace it. Crush Behemoth Blood’s influence and force it to obey. Wield the legendary power to survive, to grow, and to defeat the Taskurs. Son and father.”

As the words resounded, his father retracted his bloodlust. He retrieved a flower with rainbow-colored petals from his pouch and placed it on the ground.

“This will attract monsters,” he said, his voice steely and colder than Ulfar remembered. “Kill them all. Fail, lose the flower, and I will kill you.”

That was neither a request nor a command, Ulfar realized. It was a promise. The cold, detached eyes of his father made that much clear as day and night.

Ulfar did not panic. He knew his father would not send monsters strong enough to kill warriors at the 2nd or 3rd Ascension against him. He would crush them, protecting his son. That didn’t mean it would be easy. Even

monsters with the strength to kill Barbarians at the 1st Ascension were too much for someone who’d just undergone their Rite awakening, and Ulfar doubted his father would stop them. If anything, he felt like the rainbow flower would attract exactly those kinds of monsters.

And he would have to defeat them. Alone, with nothing more than his Ancient Power.

“I can do that,” he muttered to himself, courage and hatred burning deep within him, mingling in the deepest pits of his being. “I will do it.”

Behemoth Blood called out to him with the promise of power, and Ulfar pulled it closer. He embraced it tightly, giving in to its temptation.

Nothing could stop him anymore. Neither the forest’s deadly threats, nor someone as pathetic as Hakon.

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CHAPTER 8

It took a while to clean himself, but the cold water was a blessing in disguise. First and foremost, he did not have to fight a giant python in the lake. No monster attacked him after the beetles and ants were taken care of. Their bodies disintegrated, a tribute to thank the Ancestors for their generosity, and he was left all by himself… and the disfigured carcasses of the monsters the ants had feasted on previously.

Once Hakon was clean again, he focused on the patch of land in the middle of the small lake. The distance was not noteworthy, but swimming across would leave his back a prime target to beetle spit.

“The Fracture,” he grunted, shifting to the violet arc cutting through empty air. It resembled the tales Hakon heard; of the Colossus that sucked several Barbarians to the bottom of its lair. The Colossus had already been taken care of, the lake it called its lair no longer as dangerous as it used to be, but the tale of a vortex killing several mighty warriors was etched into his mind.

There he was, watching a violet vortex, stretching wider and taller than their hut back in the tribe. It was his target, and dozens of monsters obstructed his path. Several beetles eyed him and spat in his direction, the projectiles falling short. The ants, their bodies much larger than the brethren Hakon fought before, no longer minded his presence.

“They have to get across the lake somehow,” he mused, changing his tactic.

Time was of the essence, but rushing into certain death would not help him. Hence, he geared up again and returned to the forest’s undergrowth.

He squatted, his steps even quieter than before as he circled around the lake, taking in as many details as possible.

Hakon could vividly imagine Astrid praising him for ‘being different from the other fools,’ and Björn cursing him for being such a pipsqueak. Thinking of his friends brought a smile to his lips, but he soon refocused on the island.

It was even smaller than expected. Few plants survived getting trampled by the beetles and ants, but there was more to it. Some of the plants responded aggressively to the monsters coming too close. One less fortunate ant was entangled in a mess of roots and what appeared to be vines. Its exoskeleton was brittle and broken, and the rest of its body didn’t look much better.

It was hard to tell how long the monster had been caught in the entanglement, but none of its brethren seemed to care. They skittered past the ant, some heading to the island’s center where the Fracture was located, while others crossed the lake. Or tried to. Several ants and beetles sunk to the ground and did not resurface no matter how long Hakon waited. Others appeared to walk across the water without sinking. It looked like there was a path, maybe a set of larger stones or a bank of dirt and wood. Regardless, their ability to cross the lake carried its own set of problems.

These ants were stronger than the others. Fortunately, only a handful managed to reach the forest in the time he spent scouting the island and its inhabitants’ behavior. Even better, some of the beetles that would have made it across the path were shoved aside by ants and disappeared in the lake.

Slowly but steadily, Hakon grew impatient. Alas, his options were limited.

I could fight the ants and claim the path connecting the island to the forest.

That idea was discarded when he remembered the beetle’s spit. No matter how useful [Evasion] and [Combat Awareness] were, a narrow path offered too few options to escape deadly spit. He could leap into the lake, but then he would lose control over the path.

As he came up with ideas, Hakon trimmed a few trees. He cut a number of branches and worked on them, his axe moving smoothly as he sharpened them.

He could think of a few decent ideas to crush the ants, but most required more time than he could afford to waste. Hence, he finished the first set of wooden spears and closed the distance to the island path.

It didn’t take long before the next ant dared to cross the path.

Reaching for one of the spears, Hakon spun it in his hand, tested its balance and weight, and pulled back. He adjusted his stance instinctively as he emerged from a set of densely grown shrubs and threw the spear with all his might. It was far from perfect. He could have thrown the spear a fraction of a second earlier, and his grip hadn’t felt right either, but he hit the mark. Somewhat.

Instead of piercing the ant’s skull, it struck the monster’s abdomen. The spear didn’t even leave a scratch and landed in the water with a splash. Surprisingly enough, the ant was not unaffected. Although the monster was not injured, its balance was interrupted, urging Hakon to throw another spear.

The throw felt a lot better than the first even though he didn’t hit its skull again. If that had been his target, he would have been annoyed. Instead, he smiled as the ant fell into the lake.

“Yes!” he exclaimed-whispered and retreated into the forest to carve more spears.

Hakon went as far as to collect stones and rope to create a makeshift spear with a dull but heavy tip. Then again, it hardly looked like a spear at this point. If anything, it was an odd-looking hammer… Perhaps a mixture between hammer and mace? Regardless, Hakon returned to the bushes near the island path, skulking around the larger ants that made it to the forest, to kill a few more of their brethren.

One of the larger ants roaming the forest found him, but it was quickly dispatched. He used his makeshift weapon to crush its skull after closing the distance with [Dash]. [Dash] allowed him to move faster than before, its improved version granting many benefits. Using the Skill’s momentum, his crushing force worked wonders, though the weapon shattered. His grip was too hard, breaking the branch, whereas the ant skull cracked both stone and itself as they collided.

[Proficiency gained. [Throwing Lv.2] improved to [Lv.3]]
[Skill [Field Crafting] has been learned.]

[Blunt Weapon Mastery has been recognized. Skill generated. Level adjusted to proficiency.]
[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]

The timing was perfect. Mana flooded him, filling his reserves and expanding the mass. His strength increased and his strategy changed with a moment's thought. Locating a lone, large ant nearby, he dispatched it with three quick axe strikes. Hakon salivated at the pulse of power, his muscles bulging. He [Dash]ed to a second large ant near the island path and struck it with all his might… and he overextended, relying too much on his strength rather than Skill and combat experience.

His handaxe tore through the ant's exoskeleton and cut deep into its thorax, but the monster was far from dead. Its mandibles snapped at Hakon, his instincts screaming at him. He forced a trace of mana into his legs and leaped backward just in time. The mandibles snapped shut, missing his left leg by a hair's breadth, yet pain raced through his muscles, nonetheless.

The pain ought to be a lesson, but Hakon threw his axe at the target and charged fearlessly. He ignored the pain and unsheathed his sword. A few moments later, the monster succumbed to its wounds.

"That was stupid," he commented quietly and waited in silence until the proximity was clear. Not even the beetles on the island took note of him at this point.

His weapons retrieved and sword in one hand, Hakon approached the path. He felt as ready as he could be, yet he failed to recognize what the island path was until he stood before it.

His father taught him a lot about monsters and the dangers lurking in the forest, but the chieftain never prepared his son for *this*. Hakon's eyes widened and he froze in his tracks as he realized the island path was no natural occurrence. It was no creation of nature; the island path was a mountain range of corpses. Beetles, ants, and other monsters he hadn't seen before.

"That… How?" He gasped, dark carapaces, exoskeletons, and more stretched deep into the lake. There had to be hundreds, if not more. They should have disintegrated, yet they did not. Hakon thought about it and nodded as realization came to him.

Nature killed them. There had been no Barbarian who offered them to the Ancestors as a tribute. Hence the carcasses did not vanish.

His hair stood on end as he looked up to scan the depths of the lake. It was hard to tell at first but knowing what awaited him made it much easier. Monster corpses. Countless, and their numbers only grew the closer he inspected the island's surroundings.

"So many." Hakon swallowed hard, wondering how the tribe would have fared if all of them would have infested the forest. If they'd struck the tribe in unison rather than walking into certain death.

"Is that why you led me here, Ancestors?" he asked, looking up to the sky in search of the silver moon. Instead, the dark moon of Death stared down at him, as if to urge him.

It was hard to tell how long the mountain range of corpses connected to the forest, but it couldn't have been long. If it had, Hakon would have never made it this close to the Fracture. He would have been overwhelmed by hundreds of spitting beetles and snapping ants. Or maybe the forest protected itself against the Fracture's monsters. The Fracture had to be conquered. It was the Ancestors' will, and Hakon was their executioner. They chose him, guided him as they always did, and he finally understood it.

"The hunt with Father. The hide scrolls. Enhanced Comprehension," he murmured, a smile pulling on his lips.

Hakon stepped onto the mountain of corpses, his hesitation fading into nothingness.

If the Ancestors wished, he would survive and return with glory. Conquering the Fracture was fated to be just one of many Feats as long as the Ancestors did not forsake him.

He'd rise, his power soaring, his wishes coming true.

But a Fracture was not easy to conquer. It was not easy to survive. Death loomed over all those daring to enter one. Even the experienced died often enough, their corpses never to be found, their Feats forgotten, their Saga devoured.

With danger comes reward. Honor. Power.

It was worth it. All the pain and torture was bound to be worth it.

Should you survived to tell the tale.

To carve your Saga and join the Ancestors' feast.

Hakon's heart raced. He was excited. Overwhelmed.

How could he not?

This was the start of his Saga, after all!

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CHAPTER 9

Silently skulking across the lake was anything but easy. The corpses underfoot were not only slippery, they moved as his weight pressed down on them. Apparently, the mountain range of corpses was not made for a man of muscle.

The slipperiness only worsened as one of the carcasses cracked, his foot sinking into a mess of flesh and organs. Hakon lost balance and nearly fell, his arms windmilling to regain his footing. The surrounding water certainly did not help either. Every step on to the corpse path forced him half a foot deep into the water. It was especially difficult to maintain the silent part.

It was like the war drums in the tribe thundered in his ears, yet neither ants nor beetles took note of him… yet. That reassured him quite a bit. Enough to refocus on the silent part.

Every step Hakon made, he was quieter. Or maybe it just felt like that as his feet dipped gently into the water, his movements careful and calculated to keep the momentum and avoid slipping. Plunging into the lake would have been the worst.

He received a message, which he promptly ignored as he pressed on.

No one noticed his presence for the better part of the journey. He was three-fourths across the path when his senses perked up. His head flicked up to a beetle approaching the island path. It had yet to release its deadly spit his way, but Hakon didn’t plan to become its target. An empty hand shot toward one of his handaxes, which he threw as soon as the monster noticed him. By that time, the distance separating them wasn’t noteworthy. [Dash] would have been a much better solution, except his footing was a mess. The axe hit the mark, cutting into the beetle’s skull, but it didn’t stop moving.

Hakon accelerated, forsaking his stealthy approach to reach the beetle. He wasted no time and rammed his blade into the monster's skull. The handaxe must have done a great deal of damage because no spit came for him. The beetle didn't even let out a sound as it succumbed. Only blade hitting and piercing skull rang out.

Too loud.

Maybe it wasn't, but Hakon was unwilling to risk it. He stored the handaxe with a smooth move and sheathed his sword, bent down to pick up the dead beetle, and hurled it as far to the left as possible. It landed in the lake with a loud splash, attracting enough attention to rush to a small group of bushes and young trees.

His eyes sought suspicious behavior across the island but other than a few ants heading toward the splash there was little to note. Taking a deep breath once it was clear no one noticed his intrusion, Hakon's attention shifted to the latest message.

[Skill [Silent Steps] has been learned.]

A deep frown plastered his face as he realized what the Skill was all about. Traces of information coalesced in his mind, revealing all he did to acquire such a pathetic Skill. It was nothing a Barbarian would ever want. Neither was [Reading], though he was overjoyed with that Skill. But [Silent Steps]…

Hakon knew how much he'd adjusted his steps from all the skulking around the lake, but for the Ancestors to *reward* him with something like that… Was that really okay?

He froze when something pressed against his back. It was soft and most definitely not beetle spit or mandibles trying to snap him in half. Still, his danger sense screamed at him, and he spun around, bone dagger smoothly unsheathed, stabbing into the… creature? It continued to wiggle and something viscous ran down the blade, dripping onto his fingers. The effect was immediate. His fingers went numb. His hand wouldn't move or release the blade as the viscous liquid reached the rest of his hand and wrist.

Hakon cursed and struck out with his second bone dagger, severing the… leaf? It was much tougher and thicker than a regular leaf but was certainly a leaf. Even if it was large and appeared rather impressive. It thudded to the ground with a heavy sound, sap pouring from leaf and stem.

“Shit.” He hissed, taking a big stride away from the bushes and other plant life as multiple leaves stirred and moved toward him. The ground stirred as well, and roots emerged underfoot, forcing Hakon to step back once more.

The feeling in his right hand had yet to return. He pressed the back of his hand and blade against the ground to remove as much of the viscous liquid as possible, but that turned out harder than it should have with a completely numb hand.

Hakon didn’t use his remaining hand to help with cleaning either, not wanting to touch the liquid accidentally, hence losing his remaining hand. He could not afford that, not now. Not when he stepped out of the relative safety of the island’s sparse plant life and into a small beetle.

There was no additional strength as he stepped onto the beetle. He stumbled back, head swiveling across the island, [Combat Awareness] screaming at him to look back, and the beetle spat at his face.

Time seemed to come to a crawl. Hakon twisted his body until it felt like he was torn apart. [Evasion] helped him considerably, allowing him to shift a little farther than he thought possible, but it was far from enough. The projectile shot toward him from point-blank and splattered his shoulder.

The smell of burned skin and flesh hit Hakon hard, but the numbness that followed after seconds of pain was worse. Splatters of spit struck his neck and face, turning his right side numb. Worse even, the spit ran down his chest and arm, continuing its carnage. It feasted on his skin and flesh before numbing the rest of his right side.

“Little fucker,” Hakon cursed, stomping brutally on the beetle. It stood no chance and its carapace caved in easier than before, the physical boost of his increased Level doing its work.

His physical gains should have increased his natural regeneration, but the numbing in his right hand had yet to fade, let alone the rest of his right shoulder and chest.

The damage was done. Hakon used his left to unsheathe his sword and held it tightly, relying heavily on Enhanced Comprehension to adapt his [Sword Mastery] proficiency to his weak arm.

Even though his father taught him to wield weapons in both hands, his left remained a little weaker. Barbarians were forged to turn every part of their body into a weapon, though they all had their preferences. Hakon’s was his right arm, which dangled uselessly from his numb shoulder.

Dozens of heads turned to him, and a barrage of beetle spit whirled through the air. His full attention was aimed at avoiding the numbing projectiles, which did not stop the ants, small and large, as they skittered toward him. They avoided the bushes, which hardly helped Hakon. The small island's plant life was as deadly as the monsters. Worse, possibly.

He used [Dash], relying on [Combat Awareness] to decapitate one of the approaching ants, only for it to be replaced by two. The monsters closed in on all sides, leaving him little choice. The lake was an option, but his right side was numb, and he couldn't be certain if the entire lake was monster free. For all he knew, there could be a few powerful monsters at the bottom, each enjoying the snacks the ants and beetles provided. He'd be unguarded in the waters, offering a great target for the beetles as well.

The lake was not a good option. Neither was fighting dozens of ants with his strong arm out of commission.

Hence, he triggered [Dash] a second time. Hakon used more mana, ignoring the burn racing down his legs as he breached the encirclement with speed rather than brute force. He didn't stop there and activated [Dash] again, adjusting his running stance as much as possible. He felt faster than before, his movement smoother, his legs carrying him farther than before. Embracing the sensation, Hakon pointedly ignored the monsters as he neared the Fracture.

It crackled with immense power. Power unlike anything he'd read about in the hide scrolls. The Fracture was far more than the scrolls made it out to be, yet he plunged right into it, hoping the other side looked a little better than the island.

The space around him twisted and distorted as he rushed into the violet vortex, and the last things he saw before darkness consumed him were a large ant stepping out of the Fracture.

Hakon had no idea how much time had passed when he regained his senses, but his body's condition was still as bad as before, so it couldn't have been too long. He was lying on the ground surrounded by knee-high grass. The smell of nature was strong if one got past the scent of beetle spit and burned flesh.

Suppressing a groan, he raised his head and looked around, only to find himself in an open field. The Fracture's vortex hummed somewhere behind him as he was dragged away.

Dragged away?

Hakon looked ahead and found a large ant dragging him somewhere. It didn't kill him nor did it eat him. The monster just dragged him somewhere. He was about to come up with several plans to crush the ant when the scenario took a sharp turn. Something descended from the sky. It shot toward the ground with blinding speed and struck the ant.

Its skull burst apart, sending fragments of all sizes everywhere.

Hakon took a second to understand what just happened. A monster, a bird, dove to the ground, killing the ant. Its talons carved through the ant's exoskeleton with ease, its majestic wings flapping as it shot back into the sky, carrying the ant in its talons.

Yellowish-green masses whistled through the air from all directions, their velocity taking Hakon by surprise. The bird, an eagle now that he studied it, was not particularly surprised. It spun in the air and smoothly avoided most projectiles. Only one struck, barely hitting a talon.

A screech rang out and the ant carcass plummeted to the ground. Angry, the eagle dove once more, a series of cracking noises hinting at the terror unfurling in the distance

Now!

Hakon scrambled to his feet, [Silent Steps] used to its very limits. He searched for his sword in a hurry, grabbed it tightly when he found it, and left the battlefield as quickly as his worn-out body could move.

The surroundings were a mesmerizing field of flowers of hundreds of different shades. Their tips jutted from the knee-high grass that seemed to change color in accordance to the surroundings. Yet as beautiful as it was, the open field was also crowded with ants and beetles. Way too many for him to deal with in his current condition. It was a disgrace, and his father would be furious, but Hakon abandoned the battlefield. His hair stood on end as dozens of yellowish-green masses shot past him rather than hitting him, but fortune left him as soon as he skulked right into a beetle… for the second time. Or was it the third?

The monster was hidden within the knee-deep grass and invisible to Hakon until it was too late.

He reacted fast, shooting toward the monster. Hakon crushed it with a quick but impactful stomp… at least, he tried to. The beetle's carapace didn't budge in the slightest, its pitch-black eyes lingering on him, promising death.

That was when he realized the beetle was nothing like the ones outside the Fracture.

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CHAPTER 10

There was no thought in Hakon's mind as he stabbed his sword into the beetle's eye. It shifted, avoiding the brunt of the attack, leaving it with a shallow injury rather than certain death.

The monster's defense was tough. Incredibly so. Its quick reaction speed only helped the beetle, resulting in diminishing returns on Hakon's end.

He powered up [Combat Awareness] and scanned the monster as it attacked. It spat a glob, which he narrowly evaded. Having analyzed the beetles' movement pattern before helped a lot, but the monster of the Fracture was different. Its projectiles were faster, leaving little to no space to escape.

Predicting its movements and spit's trajectory was a challenge. It was also a necessity to survive. The beetle spat smaller globs in quick succession, making it near-impossible to evade them all. Hakon wasn't surprised when a few splatters joined the yellowish-green mass spread across his chest, but his body's reaction to the spit certainly caught him off guard.

The splatters worsened his condition. The numbness spread from where the Fracture's beetle struck him, burning deeper and stretching farther. His body quickly contained the spread, but it promised trouble. One proper hit and he'd be dead.

Scanning the beetle constantly, eyes focused on every little movement, Hakon struck again and again. And again.

He gained more momentum after the first few strikes, sword sizzling as it cut through the air. The blade whipped out, executing a series of quick

slashes and swift thrusts, yet the beetle prevailed. Most attacks failed to do any significant damage. Even those that carved small pieces out of its carapace. Though none of his attacks were deadly, Hakon was no longer worried. The longer the fight continued, the more he gained.

The beetle's tactic never changed. It was faster, tougher, and deadlier than its brethren on the island, but it moved all the same. And once [Combat Awareness] caught up to the changes, he repeatedly struck the same spot until something in his head clicked. In several spots, some appeared to be scars whereas others were more like seams connecting the beetle's carapace. All that mattered little as his sword plunged into the crack in the monster's carapace, piercing it and tasting its flesh.

A triumphant roar thrummed through his chest, and it urged him to be released into the wild, but Hakon kept it in. He twisted the blade, eyes growing wide as the monster dissolved into blue mist rather than collapsing dead to the ground. Most of the mist dispersed into the surroundings, sinking into the ground, but some seeped into him.

Mana joined the mist and flooded Hakon's body. It surged through his veins and the tunnels within him. And, for the first time since he awakened, the tunnels' depths and sheer infinite count made itself notable. The number of tunnels moving away from the mana mass in his abdomen was still countable, but they branched out rapidly until every corner of his body was covered in them.

Was that normal? Did everyone have so many tunnels within them? If so, nobody told him. A familiar pungent smell pierced his nose until he felt nausea. He brushed it aside with some effort, a smile playing on his lips. His chest no longer felt as numb as before. Pain replaced the numbing nothingness.

The numbness slowed to a trickle as soon as the surge of mana died down.

That was all he needed to know to make a decision. He departed in a hurry. A tactical retreat to recover the strength needed to crush his enemies. [Combat Awareness] went awry as several projectiles splashed the ground around him, disintegrating the knee-high grass. Without the grass's protection, Hakon barged into the nearest field of grass blades and made a run for it. From danger, certain death, and the Fracture vortex.

He only stopped running when he was completely spent, gasping for air, his chest heaving heavily.

The Fracture's violet vortex shimmered in the distance as he turned around, expecting ants and beetles to have followed him in the dozen. Alas, he was alone, if one ignored the birds chirping in the sky and the other monsters found in the Crawling Expanse. They did not notice him or simply didn't care about his existence, which was probably for the best. His whole body hurt, his heart hammered and complained, and his brain felt like it'd been struck one too many times by his father's mace.

"Just a little break," he sputtered, his wobbly legs caving in as he slumped to the ground. Then came the messages.

[Proficiency gained. [Evasion Lv.1] improved to [Evasion Lv.2]]
[Proficiency gained. [Combat Awareness Lv.2] improved to [Combat Awareness Lv.3]]
[Proficiency gained. [Running Lv.3] improved to [Running Lv.4]]

That was only the first batch of messages. The messages he received before he rushed into the Fracture. A lot more messages from the Ancestors were waiting for him.

[Fracture, Crawling Expanse, has been detected. Scan complete.]
[Incomplete Saga Trials discovered!]
[Overflow discovered! Generate additional Trials.]
[Lesser Deed – Slay 25 Giant Ants (0/25)]
[Lesser Deed – Slay 25 Acidic Beetles (1/25)]
[Major Deed – Defeat Colossal Terror (0/1)]
[Major Deed – Restore the Balance (1/500)]
[Feat – Shattering Core (0/1)]

Not even the exhaustion plaguing his body could stop him from grinning like a madman. He recognized the messages, knew what all this was about. Well, maybe not *everything*. The hide scrolls did not go into detail when mentioning Fractures, but the scrolls hid hints. The chieftain and elderly warriors had told him tales about their dives into Fractures many cycles ago as well.

Fractures were trials made for Barbarians. The Ancestors did not create them, or so the Shaman once mentioned, but used them to challenge the

tribes’ greatest warriors. They provided bountiful rewards, each Deed adding to the warrior’s Saga.

One Lesser Deed and one Major Deed was common. More than that was weird. A Feat was not unheard of either. His father once mentioned it, but Hakon couldn’t quite remember. Nor could he gather the energy needed to come up with a straight thought.

[Proficiency gained. [Sword Mastery Lv.19] improved to [Sword Mastery Lv.20]]
[Skill [Weakness Detection] has been learned.]
[Proficiency gained. [Combat Awareness Lv.3] improved to [Combat Awareness Lv.4]]
[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]
[Proficiency gained. [Running Lv.4] improved to [Running Lv.5]]

The Level was what had helped him, wasn’t it? It pushed the numbness away.

His eyes closed and reached out for the mana within him. Hakon grasped it with a clear intent; to move it through the tunnels nearest to his right shoulder and down his arm. Remove the numbness if possible.

Instead, he coughed up blood as pain raced across his chest. With the receding numbness, the pain of burned skin and flesh returned. The beetles’ spit was not done hurting him.

Hakon carved a chunk of soil out of the ground. It was wet and its earthen scent strong, though it failed to mask the stench of burned flesh.

He first scraped the blade with mud. He removed every last bit of the plant’s viscous liquid and moved down to his fingers, slowly uncurling them. The bone dagger clattered to the ground, his hand scrubbed with an intensity his skin wasn’t used to. Last but not least, Hakon rubbed soil all across his chest. The beetle spit remained tenacious. It stuck to burned skin and flesh, clinging even worse than the leeches from three cycles ago, but that only pushed him to work harder until most of his body was covered in soil, face and neck included.

Hakon’s solution was far from perfect, but it was the best he could come up with, his body worn out just as much as his mind. Yet, he followed through and guided more mana through his body. It felt good earlier, so it ought to help now. That didn’t stop his head from feeling heavier the more

time passed or his thoughts from growing sluggish, but was a necessity. His body had to recover faster to return to the battlefield.

He had Saga Trials to complete. A Fracture to conquer. Strength to acquire!

As darkness washed over him, Hakon didn't resist. Even Barbarians needed rest at times.

Still, he couldn't resist and continued to move some of the mana mass through his body, until body and mind failed him. Until the Ancestors forced him to sleep and recover.

The next day, Hakon woke up energized and pain free. Even better, no monster bothered to take a bite out of his sore body. He couldn't tell how late it was or how much time had passed in his sleep, but the sun was already high in the air. No, that wasn't quite right. The sun was nowhere to be seen. It was just as bright and warm as during noontime.

"Where are you?" He searched the sky but neither the faint hue of the silver moon nor the sun was anywhere.

Weird. Whatever.

Rather than continuing to search, Hakon checked on the Ancient Scripture.

Hakon Taskur – Level 6
Race – Barbarian
Ancient Power – Enhanced Comprehension
Bloodline – Wildborne Lifeblood
Skills – [Combat Awareness Lv.4], [Sword Mastery Lv.20], [Reading Lv.3], [Flow Control Lv.7], [Running Lv.5], [Dash Lv.2], [Dagger Mastery Lv. 14], [Throwing Lv.3], [Axe Mastery Lv.15], [Evasion Lv.2], [Field Crafting Lv.1], [Blunt Weapon Mastery Lv.10], [Silent Steps Lv.1], [Weakness Detection Lv.1]

He had many Skills. Too many for how little time had passed since the Rite. Some didn't feel particularly useful. They wouldn't help him in combat, so why did the Ancestors give them to him?

“They have their reasons. The Ancestors know everything,” Hakon reminded himself. He studied the list of Skills, hoping to find out what the Ancestors wanted from him. It was hard. The Ancestors were all-knowing. How was a mere warrior supposed to ever understand them in their grand wisdom? He was no Shaman, nor did he think the Shaman knew all about the Ancestors.

A pungent smell assaulted him as he got to his feet. It was disgusting, but he was used to it at this point. Paying some attention to his wounds and the numbness that must have fully receded when he was asleep, Hakon stored his weapons before he scrubbed himself with wet dirt once more.

The potent earthen smell of the soil was several times more pleasant than the pungent smell coming from his insides.

“Why do the Ancestors want me to smell?” he grunted, glancing at [Flow Control]’s entry in the Ancient Scripture. It Leveled up considerably since he last checked. Hakon couldn’t remember having received messages about their improvement. He did remember moving mana through the tunnels the night before.

Is that it? Did I forget I practiced [Flow Control]?

Regardless, the Skill’s Level improved, signifying great change. Activating [Flow Control], Hakon felt *more*.

Mana was coming to him easier. It moved with greater ease through the tunnels within him. His right shoulder and chest were particularly easy to circulate; precisely, the tunnels around the areas that had been numb and nearly burned the day before.

As a Barbarian, the loss of some flesh and skin mattered little. He regenerated fast enough to ignore it. What surprised him was that the mana in his right upper arm and lower arm was harder to control than his shoulder and hand specifically. Removing the dark sludge from his hand had also been the most difficult.

“Beetle spit,” he grumbled. Did he have to cover himself in their spit to remove the bad smell from his tunnels? Mana moved faster, *better* through the tunnels that were cleansed, and the events of the previous days led to a faster removal of the sludge within him.

Beetle spit and mana. The Level up. If he could cover himself in beetle spit right before he earned a Level, he could remove some of the sludge from all over his body. That sounded quite difficult. And it might be better if he tested the idea using a little spit to cover a small area first.

For that he needed a beetle. Acidic Beetle as the Saga Trial called them.

That reminded him of the Deeds and the Fracture he'd barged into. Just thinking about the message, the Scripture appeared again.

[Fracture – The Crawling Expanse (Miasma Overflow)
Rarity – Uncommon
Recommended Level – ~~9~~15 (Overflow detected)
Slots – 1/10]

Hakon wondered what Slots were, but when he got no answer, he moved on.

Uncommon was not a word he was familiar with. However, he'd once heard about 'rarity' and understood what Common meant. Common was when something was ordinary. Nothing special. Just… average. If Uncommon meant what Hakon thought it meant, the Fracture was not ordinary. It was something special.

That was good. Probably? Hakon certainly hoped so.

Level 15, on the other hand, was rough. It meant the Crawling Expanse Fracture was something for warriors at the 1st Ascension. Warriors with their first Runeskin power. Even then, the Miasma Overflow part unsettled him a little. It reminded him of something he heard in the past, something his mother told him many, many cycles ago.

Snippets of her words returned to Hakon. Words about the Fracture. That the Fracture released something that created more monsters. How it created them he couldn't remember. Putting all doubts aside, Hakon recalled that the Fracture did create monsters and released them through the very vortex he used to enter. That it sent Miasma outside to tarnish the world the Ancestors had built.

That was not exactly his mother's words, but it did fit the things he read about in the scrolls. Well… somewhat.

Unlike his mother, who did not like the Fractures, the Shamans wrote about them as if they were something great. They loved Fractures, as each and every one was seen as a challenge sent by the Ancestors. Yet, the Ancestors wished the Fractures destroyed.

The Feat mentioned something about shattering, and that reminded him of his father's Saga Trial. The story he'd heard most often from his father;

how he conquered a Fracture all by himself when he was but a young warrior.

His father's Deeds aside, Barbarians followed the paths that guided them to the most honor. Even if that meant they entered a Fracture and completed the Saga Trials, resulting in the destruction of most Fractures. All except those shaped by the Ancestors themselves.

The Deepshire Cavern, a Fracture made by the Ancestors, was used to guide the warriors that awakened powers of the legends. Astrid was probably inside there now, alongside all those using the Deepshire Cavern to honor the Ancestors and the Great Ones.

"What else did she say?" Hakon discarded his other thoughts in an attempt to reach for more snippets of his mother's words. He was certain she said more about the Miasma that infested the world, but the only response he got was an aching head.

It mattered little. Hakon knew what he had to do.

He had multiple Saga Trials to complete. The only problem? If every monster was as tough as the Acidic Beetle, then dealing with 25 of them was going to be a hassle. He was nowhere as weak as he had been only a few days before, but the monsters in the Fracture appeared to be on a whole different level. They were nothing like the beetles and ants on the other side of the Fracture's vortex.

A Giant Blood warrior at Hakon's current Level would have been a lot stronger than he was right now. That did not mean he was weak. He wasn't. He also knew he'd easily crush dozens of Giant Ants and Acidic Beetles if he had the power of a Bloodbearer.

But he had the Mind, wielding far more Skills than his peers should. Earning the Ancestors' favor by improving his Skills and acquiring more.

"How about I do this a little differently?"

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CHAPTER 11

So fucking stupid! Hakon cursed himself as a massive Acidic Beetle charged straight into him.

It was the size of a hut and had a pitch-black horn, which it used to try and impale him. Hakon was fortunate the monster was not as fast as the eagle monsters were. Unfortunately, that did not change how stupid his move had been.

In an attempt to impress the Ancestors, Hakon sought the Colossal Terror. That turned out as stupid as it sounded. He was too weak and suffered the consequences of unfounded arrogance.

The hut-sized Acidic Beetle failed to impale him, but its head snapped to the side and struck true. The sound of ribs breaking reverberated as the horn slammed his side with terrifying force.

Hurled backward, Hakon grit his teeth and scrambled to his feet. Then came a massive gob of Acidic Beetle spit. It hurled through the air in a beautiful arc, heading toward him with deadly precision.

Hakon cursed and yelped, using [Dash] with as much mana as he could muster before using [Running] in the same instance. Maybe the Skills did not overlap, but he certainly felt like they helped him survive as he leaped out of the gob's area of impact. It landed where he stood a moment ago and splattered, sending goblets everywhere. His back included.

The smell of burned flesh hit him at once, so did the numbness. The numbness was terrifying. It was incredibly potent, and only further affirmed he wasn't ready to fight the Colossal Terror.

So, he did something pathetic. The tribe may shun him for that, but Hakon had not yet earned the right to die. He fled with a promise in his

heart.

I will return to crush you! Just you wait! Hakon growled, the shame of defeat burning deep within.

Hakon appeared behind a beetle, hand clamped around its maw. He pulled it up and dragged the bone dagger across its neck before the monster could respond.

There was no hesitation as he stepped back into the knee-high grass, pulling the dying with him.

It took a while to return to his temporary base, if one could call it that. Hakon got to work once it was clear there were no more monsters to fight. He turned the beetle on its carapace and cut carefully into its soft belly.

The blade carved through flesh and organs with crafted precision, revealing a yellowish sac with some effort. It was important to keep the sac intact for a while longer, which meant he had to spend a little longer until the sac was finally in his hands.

“A big one,” he mused, inspecting the sac for damages.

It was as large as his hand and numbed it just by touching its stretchy surface. He wasn’t even touching the Acidic Beetle’s spit, yet its sac already numbed his palm and fingers. That was good.

Satisfied, Hakon placed the sac above a bowl, which was yet another carved-out carapace, and emptied the yellowish-green content into it.

“About time…” The carapace bowl was finally full. That took him long enough.

[Lesser Deed – Slay 25 Acidic Beetles (10/25)]

Several Skills improved during and after his hunts. [Combat Awareness] Leveled once. [Throwing], [Evasion], [Dash], and [Field Crafting] improved by two Levels, and [Silent Steps], [Weakness Detection], [Running], and [Dagger Mastery] went up by as much as three Levels!

Seeing his Skills improve so quickly was exhilarating. It was addictive. Almost more so than gaining two new Skills.

[Grappling Lv.6]
[Dismantling Lv.3]

The Ancient Scripture recognized the Skills from past experiences, which did make some sense. Although, he did not think his beetle hunts had a lot to do with [Grappling]. Other than locking the monsters in place, using some of the lessons his father and other old warriors taught him and his peers, little connected his hunts with [Grappling].

But who was he to judge the Ancestors' wisdom?

He was a nobody. A young warrior who had yet to gain his first Deed.

Ready to change that, Hakon dipped his numb fingers into the bowl. First his fingertips to analyze how quickly the numbness would spread, then the rest of his hand as his fingers went numb and the smell of burned skin and flesh pierced his nostrils.

There was no time for doubts as he utilized [Flow Control]. He moved mana through his body and embraced the sense of wrongness with his whole heart, all while the Skill granted him heightened control of mana. [Flow Control] made moving mana through the tunnels much easier. The Skill did not require his attention to do anything, but to use it at full capacity and to expand upon it, push it to new lengths, Hakon had to do more.

He had to fix all that was wrong about the Skill. After all, no Skill was perfect. If they had reached perfection, the Ancestors would have told him, and he would no longer be able to improve them. Since that was not the case, Hakon continued. He trusted the Ancestors and guided [Flow Control] until it reached his hand.

The numbness receded in a moment's instance, then returned just as quickly.

"That makes sense," Hakon mused, Enhanced Comprehension stirring, his hand lifting out of the carapace bowl. Droplets of viscous beetle spit dropped back into the bowl, yet its bright yellowish-green substance was joined with something else. Black, pungent sludge trickled down from his arm alongside the beetle spit.

The corner of his lips curled up, and he continued to guide mana through the hundreds of tunnels in his hand. They were small, too narrow for even the smallest trace of mana to move through… or so it felt like at

first. Which was his mistake. He was the one mistaken, it was not mana's fault. It was his control of mana that was lacking.

Hakon could successfully circulate mana through the thicker tunnel, and he did not have a problem with the smaller tunnels in his shoulder and upper arms, but that only included the main tunnels. The branches moving away from the main tunnel were too narrow for the amount of mana he could control.

So, he did what he was capable of, his mind churning as he tried to split the mana traces under his control. [Flow Control] guided him greatly, yet it was his Ancient Power that shoved a sense of wrongness into his face. That new sense bugged him. It was like Enhanced Comprehension, and through that the Ancestors, wanted to show him just how weak he was. How pathetic he'd been before the Rite, before they blessed him with the Ancient Power of the Mind.

It was as infuriating as it was mind-opening. *He* was nothing. A nobody. Yet, the way he felt about it was unlike anything his parents or the older Barbarians made him feel. Neither the Ancestors nor Enhanced Comprehension made him feel bad. They did not care if he was different than the rest. If anything, they supported his longing for knowledge and strength even if that meant they had to go against the paths the old Barbarians walked before him.

The Ancestors didn't care. All they desired was to help their descendants and watch them grow strong enough to claim a Saga. Just like they had been.

Their approval was all he needed. At least, he wished for that to be true.

Hakon still cared what his father thought of him. He still planned to make him proud. To win the Battle of Generation and show everyone he was more capable than they thought he would be. He would become the next chieftain, unite the tribes, and retrieve the lands that had been taken from them.

So what if he would not join the savage path most Barbarians walked? So what if he was not as bulky as them? None of that mattered for as long as he could crush all those standing before his goals.

Hakon continued his work with mana. It took a while, but he succeeded. [Flow Control] Leveled up as the numbness in his hand faded to be replaced with pain. Hence, he put his hand back into the carapace bowl and repeated

the process. Over and again, until mana moved smoothly through the tunnels.

A Barbarian's body was a well of tremendous power and great regeneration, which was exactly what Hakon needed. He used his natural regeneration to the fullest. It was unable to keep up with the damage done by the Acidic Beetle's spit, but it diminished the overall damage and allowed for more extended research.

Once his right hand was too badly damaged to continue without putting it in serious danger, Hakon moved up to his arm. But first his hand had to be cleansed. Most of the yellowish liquid had already dripped back into the bowl, yet some of it was tenaciously clinging to his burned skin. It took Hakon a while to clean his hand, in which he watched the burned flesh recover. His skin healed, which was further accelerated as [Flow Control] continued to move mana through all the tunnels in his hand.

"No scars?" Hakon grumbled as a speck of the least damaged skin recovered. It didn't look great, not in the slightest. If anything, his hand was grotesque. However, it felt like his skin would leave no mark of being burned after a few days. Unfortunately. It would have been a great tale to tell those doubting him.

Instead, he would have to demonstrate his power in different ways. That too was acceptable.

Back to the task at hand, Hakon picked up a smaller carapace piece to use like a large spoon. There were a lot of ways to use this, so he picked the simplest; he took a big scoop of spit and spread it across his forearm.

A bit of spit touched his fingertips. They instantly went numb, which spread down his fingers by the time his right forearm was covered.

The numbness in his right arm was worse than a few numb fingers, but Hakon was curious about something. He guided mana through his chest and left shoulder. That's when he noticed the first major difference. Guiding mana through his left shoulder and arm was completely unlike his right arm. It was nothing alike!

Comparing his memories, the sensation he got from either arm when he moved mana through them, and the potential differences, a deep frown plastered his face. He had a suspicion and it was high time for him to solve it!

Daytime passed slowly as research and practice continued. No one bothered Hakon as he worked in utter silence, all while the pungent smell

returned. At this point, it was part of him, and he didn’t hate it. Rather than hate, he liked it. Loved what the smell stood for. After all, the sludge was the very thing that obstructed his mana. The sludge were the obstacles in the tunnels within him, and by removing them from his body, he cleansed the tunnels!

[Proficiency gained. [Flow Control Lv.8] improved to [Flow Control Lv.9]]
[Proficiency gained. [Flow Control Lv.9] improved to [Flow Control Lv.10]]
[Proficiency gained. [Flow Control Lv.10] improved to [Flow Control Lv.11]]

By the time the late sun ought to descend beyond the horizon, Hakon’s right arm was cleansed. It was not perfect, but guiding mana through those tunnels was no longer a challenge. And that was just the beginning. It was merely a start. The first step of mana.

[Flow Control] remained active even as his mind begged for a break. His stomach grumbled, but there was no more to eat than some grilled beetle meat. It was gamey and one of the least tasty meals he ever had, yet it kept him full. And being full was all he needed to continue practicing, using Acidic Beetle spit to accelerate the cleansing process. Because that was exactly what it did. Hakon tested it thoroughly. He experimented enough throughout the day to know the beetle spit helped him greatly.

He focused on his limbs first. Smeared beetle spit all over his arms and legs. When that wasn’t enough, Hakon spread it across the rest of his body, and all at once, it was night. There was no sun that descended, no sign of darkness slowly creeping across the Crawling Expanse. Nothing. Yet, it was night, his campfire the only source of light. But even that extinguished shortly after, leaving Hakon in darkness. Alone with himself and his mind. And work. Lots of work.

Sleep eluded him. He had a mission to complete and never stopped using and improving on [Flow Control] until sunlight returned. This, too, was not like the sun returning as he was used to. It was like someone used a pyre torch. Sunlight returned just like that, replacing the darkness of the night in an instant.

A long time must have passed, not that Hakon would have noticed, but the switch between day and night was still odd. Ominous. The sun had to be somewhere, yet it was nowhere to be seen.

It made no sense, though his confusion was quickly replaced by yet another distraction. A series of messages and a welcome flood of mana.

[Proficiency gained. [Flow Control Lv.11] improved to [Flow Control Lv.12]]
…
[Proficiency gained. [Flow Control Lv.14] improved to [Flow Control Lv.15]]
[Skill [Poison Resistance] has been learned.]
[Skill [Pain Tolerance] has been learned.]
[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]

"I knew it!" Hakon let out a hollering laugh. He'd been right. Of course, he had! Not only were his Skills improving rapidly, he was even Leveling up. The best, by a long stretch, was gaining two new Skills. He had many Skills, but most were relatively common. [Dash], [Evasion], and some other Skills were not as common among his people, but the way he could use them reminded him of some of the lithe warriors like Astrid's mother. Their movement was the same.

[Poison Resistance] and [Pain Tolerance] were perfect for him. He may not need them often, but they would always be with him and help him survive. He'd also be able to use more of the beetle spit to improve both Skills while nurturing [Flow Control]. That left him with only one question. Was [Flow Control] as useful as his gut told him or was it a failure?

Testing the Skill's improvements, it turned out [Flow Control] was much more than he could have fathomed.

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CHAPTER 12

Mana awarded from his latest Level flowed through him smoothly. Much smoother than it did before. It was easier to control as well. Just like [Dash] could be regulated now.

Hakon could not be certain at first, but he could use more mana to activate [Dash] now that his legs were cleansed. The cleansing had not been perfect, which only pushed him to hunt more Acidic Beetles for their spit. To remove even more sludge and reach the limits of what was possible with [Flow Control]. It would grant him the means to do so much more!

Guiding mana to his arms was no longer a challenge. And if he could learn how to move mana through his fingers into his weapons…

Hakon licked his lips, memories of a red-crimson hue shrouding his father. His weapon, the massive Obsidianite mace, as it smashed through enemies, cracking skulls and bones like sapling twigs, the same hue shrouding the blunt weapon. The memories had once been a source of awe. They fueled him, made him desire to reach the same heights as his father. Now he wanted more.

He longed for power that didn't hail from Ancient Powers. His plan was simple, yet also incredibly complex. Use Enhanced Comprehension to surpass his father and learn enough about mana and the way it worked to strengthen his blade. Not through an Ancient Power. Not through a Runeskin. Through his mana, wielding it in ways no Barbarian thought of before!

As mana filled his frame, flooded the mass in his abdomen to expand and strengthen it, [Flow Control] activated to take rein of all surplus mana

before it could fade. It resisted at first, but Hakon's will clamped down, keeping it in place. What followed was yet another cleansing session.

At least, it was supposed to be a cleansing session. Instead, something changed as [Flow Control] guided large amounts of mana through his body. The tunnels throbbed and strained and his muscles bulged as power pumped through him. He exhaled deeply, the burst of power unlike anything he'd earned since the Rite.

Not even the power earned since Level 1 was comparable with this kind of power.

Yet, as it surged through every part of him, Hakon noticed a flaw. Or maybe it was not a flaw at all. The surplus mana evaporated. It was used up with every blink. Every time mana circled through the largest tunnels, mana was drained. Then mana flowed through the smaller tunnels and even more evaporated.

It felt right, yet wrong at the same time. Hakon relied on his Ancient Power, activated it, and tried to feel out what that wrongness was. Then he adjusted accordingly, his control over [Flow Control] increasing once more. Mana continued to evaporate but it was more controlled. The power remained even if it was no longer as mighty as it had been moments earlier. It was more in tune with the mana flow, enhancing his lower body when he focused on his legs, his right arm when he circulated mana through the tunnels in his right arm, and so on.

[Skill Upgrade has been discovered. First requirement to upgrade [Flow Control] has been met.]
[Upgrade Flow Control – Conditions have not been met.]
1) Pathway Purity exceeds threshold (21%/20%)
2) Level below minimum requirement (15/20)

"Is that what you want from me, Ancestors?" The corner of Hakon's lips curled into a blinding smile. After some rest, he was ready. His body had yet to recover, and his head felt like it was filled with rows of war drums. It throbbed worse than ever.

A short break. He smiled at that thought and fell asleep as soon as his eyes closed.

“Did I go overboard?” Hakon wondered aloud as he raked the bone dagger across the seventh beetle’s neck.

The monster would have provided the acidic spit necessary to coat his body twice and cleanse his body again. That should have been enough to accelerate [Flow Control]’s growth, but leaving was not an option.

Actually…

Actually, he could leave. His newest Skill would make that possible.

[Stealth Lv.1]

But it was a disgrace. Both the Skill… and himself by acquiring it. His only saving grace was the Ancestors’ acceptance. They didn’t care about [Stealth].

Skill aside, he could have escaped even if he didn’t have [Stealth].

Using [Dash] amplified with the new effect of [Flow Control], Hakon should have no problem leaving this place. Guiding mana through the cleansed tunnels, no, *pathways*, provided him the power needed to escape the current predicament. The encirclement of a few dozen Giant Ants and Acidic Beetles.

Except he didn’t want to leave. Retreating once was acceptable. Twice, if one included his ‘bout’ with the Colossal Terror, was already bad. His only saving grace was that the Ancestors had not frowned upon him. They acknowledged his decision. A third time? They would forsake him. He was sure of it.

Mana churned through the pathways at his behest. It surged into his legs as he used [Dash], sword resting in his hands. Several globs of acidic spit shot past him and sizzled where he stood a moment ago. But Hakon was no longer there. He towered above the eighth Acidic Beetle, his vision growing sharp as he found *the* spot.

The sword descended fast and deadly, casting certain death upon the Acidic Beetle.

[Proficiency gained. [Weakness Detection Lv.4] improved to [Weakness Detection Lv.5]]

The message disappeared with a thought. Hakon burst to the side, upper body twisting as more acidic globs headed toward him.

He didn't waste more mana than necessary, relying heavily on [Running]. His movement speed increased ever so slightly as he reached the next target. Mandibles snapped around him, yet a mixture of instincts granted by [Combat Awareness]'s effect and [Evasion] guided him as best as possible.

His blade sought the Giant Ant's weakness, only to scrape across its skull leaving no more than a scratch. Dismantling the Acidic Beetles taught him a lot. Finding their weak spots had been easy. It was why they no longer posed a threat.

The Giant Ants were more problematic. Their mandibles were razor-sharp, their exoskeleton tough. The segments connecting the ant's upper body with its head appeared tough, leaving no more than small seams to carve through. And their eyes, of course.

Which was not enough. He needed more, so he sought another solution. A solution that required him to sever their lower body from the rest.

That's their abdomen, isn't it?

Could they survive losing that? Hakon certainly doubted it. With that thought in mind, he moved around the Giant Ants trying to close in from all sides and severed its abdomen. The monster thrashed and continued to attack, but it slowed as strength seeped out of its weakening body.

Good enough.

A smile bloomed, quickly replaced by sharp pain. Shifting around, Hakon caught a set of mandibles clamped around his right leg. It chomped on him, trying to cut off his foot. And it nearly succeeded. Its mandibles easily cut through his toughened flesh and were only stopped by his bones.

If he hadn't earned so many Levels since the Rite, he would have lost that foot. Hakon blanched as searing pain shot through his mind. He thrust his sword into the monster's eyes over and over again, but the deed was done. It didn't release his leg, all while waiting for its brethren to finish him.

That was not how he'd expected to go out nor was he willing to leave it at that. He could not join the Ancestors if he died now!

[Flow Control] erupted with renewed power, burning through more mana to call upon even more strength. Strength that fed Hakon with the power he needed to leap back into action.

He cut through the ant’s neck and ripped his leg free; somewhat. The Giant Ant’s head was still attached to his leg, its mandibles tightly clamped right below his calf. It felt weird, hurt like hell, but Hakon could move again.

It was almost like the pain evaporated as his focus resharpened. Messages popped up in the back of his mind, fading until they could return once the battle concluded. Once he emerged victorious, his blades drenched in his enemies’ blood.

He swung around, his blade thrust straight through the eye and skull of the next ant. A handaxe appeared in his left, retrieved more instinctively than anything else, and he crashed down. Power surged through his upper body, amplifying not only raw strength but momentum as well.

A sickening crush rang in his ears as the axe blade tore through the ant’s skull. It was crude, far from perfect, but it was enough to kill. And death was all that mattered. The death of his enemies.

His vision grew blurry. Maybe it was the blood that spluttered in his face. Regardless, Hakon continued to fight. More mandibles reached him, yet none managed to hook him. They carved through flesh but only got a quick snap at him. In return, their skulls were crushed, their heads removed.

At some point, Hakon flowed around the battlefield, the wounds accumulating even as pain eluded him. He killed one Giant Ant after another, his handaxes performing much greater deeds than their maker could have wished for.

But the battle was still not over. Hakon’s senses heightened once more and details that escaped his grasp before became obvious. Then came the flood of mana, and everything changed. The mana influx changed everything. He burned it all. All the extra mana. It fueled his power, pushing his body in ways that should have only been possible for a Barbarian after the 1st Ascension.

Or maybe not?

Hakon did not know. He did not think. It didn’t matter. Only the blood of his foes did.

And he was covered in it.

He was done for. Pain was one of the few reasons he knew he wasn’t dead yet. He’d survived!

Yet, at the same time, Hakon certainly felt like his soul had a chat with death. A lengthy one. He shuddered, which only worsened the pain in his legs, arms… everywhere, really.

But it wasn’t all bad. If anything, life was great. Exhilarating, even!

He was getting stronger, his eyes drifting to the myriad Skill improvement messages that’d popped up when the fight ended.

[Proficiency gained. [Dash Lv.4] improved to [Dash Lv.5]]
[Proficiency gained. [Pain Tolerance Lv.1] improved to [Pain Tolerance Lv.2]]
…

Hakon’s head was throbbing again. He waved his hand and discarded the Skill messages, checking the Ancient Scripture for the final result.

Hakon Taskur – Level 9
Race – Barbarian
Ancient Power – Enhanced Comprehension
Bloodline – Wildborne Lifeblood
Skills – [Combat Awareness Lv.7], [Sword Mastery Lv.20], [Reading Lv.3], [Flow Control Lv.16], [Running Lv.8], [Dash Lv.5], [Dagger Mastery Lv. 18], [Throwing Lv.5], [Axe Mastery Lv.17], [Evasion Lv.6], [Field Crafting Lv.3], [Blunt Weapon Mastery Lv.10], [Silent Steps Lv.4], [Weakness Detection Lv.8], [Grappling Lv.6], [Dismantling Lv.3], [Poison Resistance Lv.2], [Pain Tolerance Lv.5], [Stealth Lv.1]

Most of his Skills Leveled up, many twice. [Pain Tolerance] improved by four Levels in one go. That… actually made sense. Hakon still felt like he was dying. It wouldn’t surprise him if he was to gain another Skill Level by the time he was back at full health.

“[Poison Resistance] improved?” Did one of the Acidic Beetles hit him? He didn’t think so, but his leg begged to differ. It was still covered in blood, and the burning sensation was familiar. So was the sight of skin and flesh struck and torn apart by acidic spit.

At least, there was no numbness. Only pain remained.

“What else’s there to see?” Hakon sought distraction from the pain, and he found it in the few messages that remained.

[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]
[25 Giant Ants have been slain. Lesser Deed acquired.]
[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]
[25 Acidic Beetles have been slain. Lesser Deed acquired.]
[Claim Deeds?]

He did it. Completed two of the Saga Trials the Ancestors gave him. And now he could reap the rewards they prepared for him. Before he did that, Hakon noticed something odd. He saw mist. Thick, densely grown, blue mist.

It looked familiar and made him stop in his tracks. He tilted his head, his mind trying to tell him something. Remind him what happened the first time he killed an Acidic Beetle.

“Oh no!” Gritting his teeth through the pain, Hakon shot to his feet. He reached for his bone daggers but couldn’t find them at first. Cursing, precious time was wasted in searching for the blades.

As soon as he found the first, Hakon limped to the closest Acidic Beetle and got to work, tearing through soft flesh and innards, dismantling the monster. It stopped dissipating as soon as [Dismantling] triggered, but that did not stop the other corpses from transforming into blue mist.

Hakon worked fast, yet he barely managed to remove five yellowish sacs before the monsters disintegrated, turning into the blue mist that spread everywhere.

[Proficiency gained. [Dismantling Lv.3] improved to [Dismantling Lv.4]]

“You could have waited a little longer, Ancestors!” Hakon grunted even as a portion of the mist seeped into him, doing… something.

It didn’t hurt. If anything, the mist healed him, washing away the pain and strain his body and mind suffered. Regardless, he’d much rather have kept the Acidic Beetle corpses. More of their acidic spit sacs would have

made the next step a lot easier. The Giant Ant's mandibles would have made great weapons as well.

Why did the Ancestors take it upon themselves to take his hunting spoils from him? They took everything he'd killed even before he was ready to make a tribute for them.

"Maybe the Fracture does something?" It might force the Ancestors to act prematurely. Using [Dismantling] on the corpses stopped the mist from forming. Temporarily. The only permanent solution was [Field Crafting]. The carapace bowl and the makeshift spoon hadn't dissipated even as the empty beetle sacs and dismantled beetle parts faded after half a day.

He didn't know if the Fracture was at fault or if his Ancestors were just impatient with him.

There was so much Hakon didn't know, but he was willing to learn. And learning required testing, both with his Ancient Power and his path. The path of the Barbarian. It was straightforward, yet the same could not be said about Enhanced Comprehension. It separated him from the Barbarian path he knew. And while it did so, the Ancestors did not judge him. They continued to guide him.

Would they do that even if he were to do something no Barbarian would? If he fought the Fracture's monsters in ways they deemed honorless.

"If the Ancestors can accept it, so can I," Hakon told himself, though doubts crept up the back of his mind as soon as he started devising plans to fight the Fracture's monsters more efficiently.

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CHAPTER 13

It felt wrong. Something about watching the beetles die before his eyes, too weak to do anything against the raging fire that engulfed them, didn't feel right.

Hakon went against his father's teachings as he came up with the plan. It was simple and didn't require much muscle. All he needed was a fire and to find the beetle's nest. Once he did both, it was only a matter of time. Hakon ignited branches and threw them into the anthill that was home to a small group of beetles and ants. He fueled the fire with the beetle's acidic spit, which lit up even better than rendered fat.

Hakon spread their spit and waited for the beetles and ants to emerge from the hell. And they did, some of them, but fighting them barely posed a threat. It was easy. Simple, and Hakon felt something stir within him. Enhanced Comprehension prodded him, tried to tell him what he could have done better to acquire one, if not multiple, Skills, but he was not sure if he liked that.

It just felt wrong. Like… where was the honor in all this? Was there any honor in fighting monsters in such a pathetic way in the first place?

Disgusting. That it was.

Strategy was not necessarily a bad thing, but *this* certainly was. Hakon hated it, himself, for even trying.

This was not the way of the Barbarians. And while he may be different from other Barbarians, the least he wanted was to be true to himself.

As much as he wanted to continue fighting in the normal way, he had to recover. He *should* recover. It was necessary. His body screamed and threatened to escape his control.

But with the Level he gained in [Flow Control], Hakon was unwilling to rest. The Skill Upgrade was so close, so… he might as well continue to use it. Right? Maybe it was not the smartest decision, but guiding mana through the pathways came with a soothing effect. The warmth made his wounds itch. That part was not particularly enjoyable, which could only mean that they healed faster.

That was what it was, wasn't it? It was not the first time his wounds itched after his father beat him up in a 'spar.' His bruises, and especially the cuts and other open wounds, would often keep him awake when he wanted nothing more than to rest. Guiding mana through the pathways near some of the less grievous cuts made them itch badly. Like, really badly. More than once, Hakon was compelled to scratch the cuts open and gouge out the itch deep within the wound.

It was a good thing he had enough willpower to keep his hands away.

Hakon watched the faint wounds heal as he used [Flow Control], a smile creeping up his face. *That* was much better than resting. He was recovering, all while doing something useful.

Time passed slowly. The itches kept him awake even as bright daylight was suddenly replaced by darkness, his smile growing wide as more and more messages flooded in. One of which made him use the Acidic Beetle's sacs.

It was probably not the smartest of his choices, but it worked as well as he'd hoped for, if not better. More messages trickled in as the darkness around him grew denser, the howls and hollering screeches of nocturnal monsters echoing in the distance.

Only when his mana mass was empty did Hakon finally cave in to exhaustion.

His mana had still not recovered when he woke up. The mana mass was empty, which made no sense. It should be full already. At least most of it should have recovered by now. Daylight had returned to the Fracture, which

could only mean he'd slept for a while. And considering how great his body felt, he slept a lot longer than he should have.

Glancing down at his body, the smaller cuts he sustained in the previous battle were no longer visible. Not even scars remained. The burn marks on his leg were also healed, so were the burns he inflicted on himself with beetle spit. What surprised him the most was his ankle. After nearly losing his foot, Hakon had been threatening its recovery. Even as a Barbarian, it would, or should, have taken a young warrior several days of rest to recover.

As much as he wanted to win the Battle of Generation, he needed to be at his peak to conquer the Fracture and earn the Levels needed to defeat Ulfar and other Bloodbearers.

He came up with several plans to use and improve his Skills to potentially earn the 10th Level and reach the 1st Ascension to heal faster. But looking at his leg and the wound that had been severe the day before, Hakon could only smile. The bone was no longer visible.

His red flesh, on the other hand, still was visible but a lot had regrown and knitted itself together, turning a grievous wound into something far more mundane. He got up to his feet and put some weight on both sides and barely felt some minor discomfort. And even that was overwhelmed by the itching sensation coming from a rapidly healing body.

That left him with yet another mystery. His body was absorbing mana at this very moment, yet it never reached the mana mass. The answer came in a flood. Not of power or vitality but messages.

[Proficiency gained. [Flow Control Lv.16] improved to [Flow Control Lv.17]]
[Proficiency gained. [Pain Tolerance Lv.5] improved to [Pain Tolerance Lv.6]]
[Proficiency gained. [Poison Resistance Lv.2] improved to [Poison Resistance Lv.3]]
…
[Proficiency gained. [Flow Control Lv.19] improved to [Flow Control Lv.20]]
[Upgrade Flow Control – Conditions have been met.]
1) Pathway Purity exceeds threshold (22.1%/20%)
2) Level requirement met (20/20)

[Upgrade initiated. [Flow Control Lv.20] upgraded to [Circulation Lv.1]]
[Skill [Natural Regeneration] has been learned.]
[Proficiency gained. [Natural Regeneration Lv.1] improved to [Natural Regeneration Lv.2]]
[Proficiency gained. [Natural Regeneration Lv.2] improved to [Natural Regeneration Lv.3]]

Hakon sorted through the messages and located the culprit. [Natural Regeneration]. He heard of similar powers before. Most means of superior healing come from Runeskins or Ancient Powers. However, it was also possible to acquire powerful Skills. The majority of times those Skills belonged to Bloodbearers. Their bodies were tough and they healed quickly. For warriors like them, claiming a Skill that allowed them to heal faster was only a matter of time. Others… had it a lot harder.

[Natural Regeneration] was not something he'd heard of before. Not as a natural Skill. It was not very powerful either. From the way it looked like, [Natural Regeneration] used the mana circulating through his body to repair him at all times, but it could be overcharged to heal him faster. At the expense of mana. The mana he was now missing.

But as much as the empty mass in his abdomen bothered him, Hakon smiled. He was happy. How could he not be? His leg was mostly healed, the soreness of the past few days had faded, and he'd acquired a Skill with the potential to become as powerful as the Bloodbearer's healing as it improved.

Two powerful Skills, he corrected himself.

"Circulation."

An upgraded Skill.

It was definitely not what Hakon expected his first upgraded Skill to be, or that he'd acquire a Skill Upgrade anytime soon. Considering his Skills, it didn't look like it would take long before he'd perform his first Skill Fusion either.

He only knew the Skills necessary for two Skill Fusions, one of which was rather common among Barbarians. Although only a minority bothered with them. It was also what his father had trained him for, knowing it would strengthen him greatly.

Skill Fusion, huh? Should I give it a try? Hakon shook his head.

Before that, he'd have to test [Circulation].

Activating the upgraded Skill, Hakon noticed a stark contrast to [Flow Control]. Activating the Skill was enough to sense something around him. It was somewhat familiar, yet the sensation was different from what he first thought… Until it brushed against his skin.

Mana!

He didn't realize it before, but there was mana in the air. *Everywhere*. It was almost like mana was ever-present in the Fracture.

"Is that it? Is mana everywhere?"

Was the ambient mana outside the Fracture as easily perceived as it was here? Hakon didn't know, but he knew that he was in pain.

Mana flowed toward him as he used his newest Skill, only to be burned through at once. [Circulation] churned through a large amount of mana, or tried to, and it feasted on something much deeper within Hakon when it had no more mana to use. Confused and a little startled, he deactivated the upgraded Skill the moment it feasted on the energy he didn't know was there. No… he knew that it was there. He even knew what it was. His life.

[Circulation] feasted on the very energy that allowed him to stand tall and fight his foes vigorously when it did not receive the mana needed to maintain its weakest form. As scary as that was, the new Skill made him curious.

It helps me perceive the mana around me. But that is not its main function. He shook his head. *It can help me recover more mana. Absorb the mana around me to recover mana. But it uses mana at the same time to empower me.*

As curious as it was, the Skill was not easy to control. It would take him quite a while to figure out how to make it work efficiently. To use [Circulation] to strengthen him like [Flow Control] strengthened him, and what he could possibly do to shape [Circulation] into a Skill that could help him recover mana efficiently at the same time. To use it to recover more mana than the Skill required to be maintained. There had to be a way, and Hakon wanted it. Needed it.

But to start experimenting, he had to fill his mana mass first.

How do I do that? There was mana around me. Even now there is, but I cannot even sense it without using [Circulation].

That was the first problem he would have to solve, and it probably required him to use his new Skill a few times.

He chuckled at the prospect and got started.

As he bounded around, his every move adjusted to the feeling that lingered in the back of his mind, Hakon could not help but think about his growth.

The Rite had only been a few nights ago. Nights filled with less sleep than he had since forever. But he did not feel all that bad. If anything, it was almost like he could go several nights without sleep before he'd collapse. As long as his mind and body weren't dead-tired or severely wounded, that is.

That aside, Hakon felt great, and he was already close to the 1st Ascension. That was phenomenal.

Continuing to grow like that would ensure he'd perform exceptionally in the Battle of Generation. That made him wonder how the others were doing. Björn and Astrid, but also Ulfar and the Bloodbearers.

Astrid might be close to her 1st Ascension.

The rest… Hakon doubted it. The 1st Ascension was the easiest to reach, yet it took most warriors a fortnight. The average warriors might even take a little longer. They only had half a fortnight between the Rite and the Battle of Generation. It was a feat to reach the 1st Ascension in that time. Something only the strongest Barbarians could do. Even then, it was hard. After all, not every power was as easy to wield as Enhanced Comprehension.

But our generation is nothing like those before us. The current generation was strong. Some of it was owed to the cycles the young warriors spent training, waiting for the Rite. They'd been ready for cycles, only to wait and train… and fight among each other.

Rivalry was yet another reason Tribe Taskur's youngest generation was greater than others.

Still, Bloodbearers needed time to get used to their Ancient Power. To tame their Bloodline as it merged with their Ancient Power. The stronger the Blood they awakened, the harder it would be to control, to tame. Ulfar was a prime example. He was bound to have the most difficulties managing his power. Behemoth Blood. As mighty as it was, it was ferocious.

As soon as he subdued the beast within him, Ulfar would be the strongest. And, knowing him, Hakon was sure Ulfar would tame his Bloodline before the Battle of Generation. There was no doubt about it. The

only question was how long Ulfar would take. The longer taking full rein of his Bloodline took, the fewer Levels and Skills he'd earn.

He won't reach the 1st Ascension. That was something Hakon was sure of. Even if Ulfar would be getting close to the 1st Ascension, Ulfar's father would stop him. Not because he wanted his son to lose but because the 1st Ascension would strengthen Ulfar's Behemoth Blood once more. Ancient Powers grew stronger through the Ascension. For Bloodbearers that was as precious as it was dangerous. Failure to remain in charge of their Bloodline would result in death. Precisely, a loss of control, the birth of a monster, and a merciful end by decapitation.

Losing control was not something Hakon had to fear. If anything, he looked forward to Enhanced Comprehension's growth. It excited him, for he needed as much power as possible to deal with his enemies.

For every Level Ulfar earned, he'd be twice as strong as others. In terms of physical strength, Hakon stood no chance. He had too much of a head start, his physical prowess likely surpassing those of regular non-combatant Barbarians at Level 10, possibly even 15 depending on the Behemoth Blood's potency… all while he was Level 1.

The other Bloodbearers would be less of an issue. Hakon was confident in his strength. As long as he reached the 1st Ascension and learned how to properly wield [Circulation], he'd be strong enough to face the Giant Blood warriors head-on. Ulfar was experienced, and so were the others, but there was a drastic difference. Hakon had always been stronger than all of them. Ulfar was the closest, and he'd managed to beat Hakon a few times. The others? *Never*.

He knew them all. The strength of every single one of them. Their prowess with every weapon and their antics. Hakon had sparred with all of them dozens of times. Even if they improved their Skills by a few Levels, would that and a few new Skills really be enough to change the hierarchy they established many cycles ago?

Hakon did not think so. But even if it did make a change, he still had three nights before he had to be back.

[Proficiency gained. [Running Lv.8] improved to [Running Lv.9]]

He smiled at the message. Even deep in thought, Enhanced Comprehension was at work.

Discarding doubts and plans, Hakon followed his gut feeling. He continued to run around, his posture adapting accordingly. The Crawling Expanse was massive. It extended much farther than the eye could see, yet he didn't find any more Giant Ants or Acidic Beetles.

Instead, he found a few other monsters. A bunch of eagles that attacked him the moment they sighted him and other monsters that seemed as mindless as the birds. They attacked and suffered the consequences, Hakon's blades drinking in their blood.

Compared to the Giant Ants and Acidic Beetles, these other monsters were odd. They were not much stronger. If anything, they were only a little faster and equipped with razor-sharp talons and claws. As dangerous as they would have been outside the Fracture, inside here they were among the weaker monsters.

[Evasion] and [Combat Awareness] was all Hakon needed to avoid their initial strike before a blade weaved its way to the monster's heart or neck. Some were beheaded, others were simply stabbed to death. [Weakness Detection] also worked excellently on those with weaker defenses.

Overextending on his Skills ought to have pushed them to the next Level. Alas, it didn't.

"Sensing mana in combat does not work," Hakon noted, wiping the blood splatters from his cheek. "Or maybe it is possible, and I am just too insensitive to it."

He tilted his head to the side and activated [Circulation]. For a handful of moments only. Doing so allowed him to feel the mana around him without burning too much mana. As soon as [Circulation]'s effect ended, his senses toned down. It was almost like his senses were a dull blade when [Circulation] wasn't active. That resembled [Combat Awareness]'s effect, only that different senses were enhanced by the respective Skills.

Hakon did not return to running right away. He bent down and studied the monster carcasses. As useless as it may look at first glance, Hakon felt it was the right thing. He needed to know more, nurture his mind, train it, to make use of the Mind. The Ancestors gave him this power for a reason. They knew the Mind was the right power for him.

That he and Enhanced Comprehension were made for each other.

So, he studied the corpses. First from outside. Then he used [Dismantling] to remove all the parts that could be turned into weapons. Hakon used [Field Crafting] and carved a tiny scratch in the talons, claws,

and other parts, hoping the Ancestors would understand him. He wanted to keep the body parts and maybe use them later. He then moved them into a fur bag, which he made out of some wolf fur. It was not the best, and it would stink unbearably in a few days, but it would do for a bit. It would last until he was back in the tribe, which was more than enough.

[Field Crafting] and [Dismantling] improved twice as he worked on the bodies and crafted a makeshift bag. While not crucial for combat, the extra Levels would make work easier in the future.

He used [Circulation] several times whenever he was done with a carcass and waited until he felt the mana all around him before releasing the Skill. It was a waste of time and precious mana. Mana that could have been used to practice [Dash] or other tests, and Hakon gradually lost confidence in himself when he realized something.

The first time he used [Circulation], he sensed the surrounding mana for four moments. The next few times were all the same. By the time he used it ten times, the mana around him remained for five moments. It either lasted longer… or he got used to sensing it. Learned how the mana outside him was supposed to feel like.

“I thought it would feel the same, but it’s different. So different.” Hakon rubbed his chin, discarding all other thoughts to zone in on his newest findings.

The mana that entered his body was different from the rest. No! It was not the mana that entered his body, but the mana that was already inside him. The mana he could freely control was unlike the mana around him. It was a simple realization, yet it had taken him a while to fully understand it. The difference of mana reminded him of the flood of mana he received with every Level. Taking full reins of the mana was difficult. Almost like the flood’s mana did not belong to him. It had been inside him, yet it had not been his yet.

The more he thought about the mana flood, the more he compared it with the mana around him. Hakon had to use [Circulation] another dozen times, burning through his reserves, to preserve the sensation for eight seconds. He stopped searching for *his* mana and tuned his senses to the surrounding mana.

By the time Hakon adjusted both mind and body enough to sense mana for ten seconds after activating [Circulation], something shifted. It was almost like his body accepted the change his mind had undergone. The

mind adapted, it comprehended a lingering trace, and his body molded and took upon a form that accommodated the change. Last but not least, he sensed a minute amount of mana as it brushed across his skin, without [Circulation] enhancing his perception.

[Skill [Mana Sense] has been learned.]

Hakon leaped to his feet, fist pumping into the air. Overwhelmed by euphoria and anticipation, he roared aloud.

Now that he'd acquired [Mana Sense], it was only a matter of time before he could sense all the mana around him. That left him with two important tasks.

First, he had to figure out how to use [Mana Sense] to improve [Circulation]'s efficiency to replenish more mana than the Skill used. Doing so would help him find out his upgraded Skill's limit.

Second, he could use [Mana Sense] to project his own mana outside his body. To use mana to strengthen his weapons like it strengthened his body via [Circulation]. Hakon had no idea how to do that, but he was sure it was possible. It had to be. Somehow.

Then there were his Deeds. Hakon forgot to claim them in all the trouble he'd gone through.

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CHAPTER 14

D*eeds. Right, I forgot.*

Upgrading and testing his Skill had occupied him entirely. So much he almost forgot about his Deeds.

“Claim Deeds!” Hakon called out.

At first, nothing happened. He stood in silence for several seconds, waiting for a message or a change to occur, but nothing came. Until the mist returned. It surged toward him from all directions, gathered before Hakon, and coalesced into… something. *Two* things.

One shape resembled a large, gnarly pole. Possibly a branch or root. One end was wider than the other, the dense mist concealing it as if uncertain whether Hakon would like it or not.

The second shape was much easier to depict. It appeared to be a small figurine. It was the size of Hakon’s fist and radiated power that seeped through the mist, dispersing it prematurely. Small spiraling symbols and crude shapes resembling Acidic Beetles were etched on the weathered wood unraveling before his eyes as the mist faded.

Hakon gasped, his eyes growing wide as he took in the beauty of the hand-sized object resting on the ground before him. He kneeled down, throat tight as he inspected the sacred object that just manifested. The grains followed the carvings of symbols and creatures like frozen smoke. Faint cracks that ran along its edges fell into his sight, like the weathered wood had survived countless fires and storms. The curse of time.

Bits of bone and bead fragments tied into shallow grooves while fine lines of silvery metal traced its surface, joining the colorful carvings,

elevating them. And all guided to the center, circling an image that felt familiar, yet not.

“A Totem,” he breathed out heavily. It was not supposed to be possible, yet here one was.

Hakon reached for the Totem, hands trembling. His fingers coiled tenderly around it, half-expecting the Ancestors to fool him. To make fun of him. Yet, they did not.

[Totem has been detected and examined. Acidic Beetle Runeskin has been discovered.]
[Do you wish to bind Acidic Beetle Runeskin?]

His first instinct was to scream, ‘Yes.’ Alas, the Ancestors did not allow such a thing.

[Warrior’s soul is not ready. Reach the 1st Ascension to bind your first Runeskin.]

The Totem contained a Runeskin! Hakon swallowed hard. It was an unexpected gain for a Lesser Deed. But considering its condition, it may not be as useful as he thought.

His initial excitement diminished greatly as he inspected the Totem from up close. Nature’s wrath and the curse of time had worn the Totem out.

“The Totem is small, and so is the Runeskin,” he mused, fingers tracing the silvery metal and symbols that circled around the image of the Acidic Beetle’s spit. Or whatever the yellowish mass was supposed to represent.

The image was small and not as detailed as the Runeskins of his father and the stronger Barbarians he’d seen fight.

“A Minor Runeskin, at most. Probably Lesser.”

Now that Hakon’s excitement was replaced by reverence for the Ancestors’ gift, but mostly curiosity and deep thoughts, he appraised the Totem from another perspective.

It was made of wood. Wood that contained no Lifeblood.

Mana, he corrected himself before using [Mana Sense].

“It has some mana. Not a lot, though.”

The etchings were also not as beautiful. Hakon had seen a few Totems before. How could he not have with a chieftain as father? One way or another, it was not rare for Totems to be the size of a hand. Many powerful Totems were larger, but some of the mightiest Totems were even smaller, their etchings of terrifying detail.

This Totem had none of that. It was small, damaged, and didn't look all that impressive.

"A Lesser Runeskin." He grimaced and froze as another message popped up.

[Skill [Inspection] has been learned.]

A laugh filled the vicinity.

"I knew it!" Hakon hollered. "That is the path you have chosen for me, have you not, Ancestors?"

Studying the corpses had been more than worth it!

Curious, he used the new Skill on the Totem.

[Acidic Beetle Totem
Runeskin – Acid Shot (Lesser)]

While better than nothing, it was not his first choice. Many would beg to differ, but a Runeskin's image carried clues to the powers it grafted on to the body. A glob of beetle spit did not hold a promise of gargantuan power.

"Is Acid Shot as potent as the beetle's spit in the Fracture or as weak as the ones from outside?" he wondered, unable to hide his curiosity.

Alas, curiosity would not feed him. Even if the Runeskin was as potent as the Fracture's beetle, it would only be slightly useful. Runeskins were permanent, and while legends say Runeskins could be improved, not even the chieftain managed to upgrade his Runeskins. It was only a legend, after all.

Hakon hadn't expected the Ancestors to reward him with a Totem, so he should not be disappointed. Except, how could he not? He was rewarded with a Totem he couldn't use. Not if he planned to bind a better Runeskin for his 1st Ascension.

The tribes were not allowed to help young warriors acquire their first Runeskins. Fair trades were acceptable so long as they were acknowledged, but even that was frowned upon in many tribes. Taskur was strict but the chieftain acknowledged that the Ancestors would sometimes fool young warriors with Runeskins that were of little use. Or maybe it was just that the warriors could not comprehend the Ancestors' will. That they did not want to follow the guidance the Ancestors offered.

Regardless, Acid Shot was not something Hakon desired. Although it would surely help him in the Battle of Generation. He was likely to be the only one with a Runeskin if he bound Acid Shot for his 1st Ascension.

Putting the Totem safely away in his makeshift bag, Hakon turned to the other reward. He already had his suspicions when it coalesced before him, and now that the mist dispersed, he was certain.

A weapon. Or… monster part. Depending on how one looked at it, it could be both.

The gnarly pole didn't look much different than he'd expected. It was a little thinner, maybe. And it was unexpected to see a two-meter-long pole made out of a mishmash of a dozen or more exoskeletons. The black exoskeletons of the Giant Ants he'd slaughtered earlier. It had a good grip and was suitably heavy for a mighty weapon. Because that was what it was: mighty. And terrifying.

The pole's upper end was also a mixture of Giant Ant parts. But it was no spear. There was no pointed end made of mandibles like he first thought. No, the upper end was massive, one side flat like a hammer head the size of a thick-headed Barbarian's skull, and the other was the blade of a greataxe made from mandibles.

No matter how he looked at it, this weapon had been made with Giant Ant corpses for one purpose. To crush and cleave through more ants and beetles. To tear them apart and cause carnage across the Fracture.

"A hammer of war and a greataxe in one," Hakon mused, feeling like a child who received his first weapon.

His new Skill activated as he studied his new toy.

[Maulaxe Crusher – Refined]
[Proficiency earned. Skill [Inspection Lv.1] improved to [Inspection Lv.2]]

That wasn’t much information. However, as he continued to use [Inspection] on Crusher, Hakon learned more about the weapon. He triggered [Mana Sense] when he felt something and recognized small strands of mana moving through the weapon. Taking one step further, Hakon used [Mana Sense] and [Inspection] together.

The combination worked surprisingly well, and while none of his Skills improved, he learned a lot about his maulaxe. One being that his new weapon contained tunnels, pathways, just like he did. Even better, his connection to the pathways was intimate. The weapon’s pathways were not part of his body, yet when he grasped Crusher tightly and circulated mana through the pathways in his hands it was almost like they were. Like he could push further and infuse his mana into the weapon.

He tried to follow through and do just that. Unfortunately, he failed. The mana within him followed his will and pushed to the outermost edge of his fingertips, yet it didn’t travel farther than his pathways reached.

“Do I have to stretch my pathways further? Maybe I can move them.” A picture full of pain formed in his mind. It was grotesque, but if it worked, it would be worth it. And if it didn’t work…

Hakon shook his head. He acquired [Mana Sense] to help not only with [Circulation] but also guide him. To learn how to put mana into his weapons. Maybe acquiring Crusher and its pathways would make that easier.

Even if it did not, Crusher was useful. Obtaining the maulaxe changed his plans. It changed everything.

Hefting the heavy weapon, Hakon stopped training his Skills at the Fracture’s outskirts. The new plans forming in his head pulled him right back to its center. To the Fracture vortex and hundreds of monsters that were just waiting to get a taste of his new weapon.

“Should I leave?” He tilted his head as the Fracture vortex came into view.

Temporarily leaving the Fracture to squash the ants and beetles on the island would be worthwhile. Would certainly help his plan greatly.

“No. The best rewards are granted from the greatest challenges.” Hakon clutched Crusher tighter and approached the crowded vicinity, searching for

prey.

The entire field around the Fracture was crowded with monsters. Giant Ants and Acidic Beetles herded around the violet vortex.

There are more monsters than before. He scrunched his eyes at the dozens of monster groups. They were huddled together and would come rushing at him the moment he exposed himself. Eliminating a few groups in silence was possible, but he'd have to leave Crusher behind. The weapon was too long to be hidden and too heavy for swift maneuvers.

A head-on charge could work. The Ancestors would drink the blood he spilled and feast on the death his carnage would cause. He'd be generously rewarded. Several Skills would improve greatly if he fought all the monsters head-on. Maybe, their deaths would be a feat worthy enough to undergo his 1st Ascension.

Level 10 was not far.

"It won't be enough." Hakon shook his head, attention snapping to the Major Deeds.

[Major Deed – Defeat Colossal Terror (0/1)]
[Major Deed – Restore the Balance (63/500)]

For every Giant Ant and Acidic Beetle he killed, the number of the second Major Deed increased by one. Predators like the wolf packs and eagles slain in the Fracture did not count, on the other hand.

"The crawlers need to be killed," he muttered, gripping Crusher even tighter.

Killing 500 ants and beetles would be difficult. The number was high. So high, it took him a moment to comprehend what it truly meant.

"I would have to complete the Lesser Deeds ten times over to complete the Major Deed." He tilted his head, going through the numbers in his head once more. Numbers were difficult. Complex, even. But they spoke nothing but the truth.

Three nights did not offer much leeway if he wanted to complete both Major Deeds. Pushing the fifth and final Saga Trial for the moment, Hakon focused on the Major Deeds. He knew how to solve them, with a fair guess regarding the Colossal Terror, and the answer crawled before him. There was no reason not to strike.

Except… if he was afraid.

“Afraid?” he snarled. The thought alone made him angry. He was not afraid!

Fear was something for the weak. In the past, he felt fear. That was a ghost of the past. He was no longer the same man he used to be. The Rite awakened him, and the Fracture forged him. They showed him who he was always supposed to be.

Pressing his feet deep into the ground, Hakon charged ahead. [Dash] carried him to the first group, and [Circulation] pumped him full of power as Crusher’s bladed sideswept through the air, effortlessly splitting five Giant Ants in two.

The sight of death and blood stirred something within Hakon. A thunderous roar tore through his very being and he let it all out, challenging the Fracture’s very existence for a battle of life and death.

And it listened. As if it was alive, the Fracture answered in kind. Mist poured out of the ground and thin air. It surged everywhere and coalesced into Giant Ants and Acidic Beetles.

A defiant screech rang out from all across the Crawling Expanse.

Hakon grimaced. He knew where the screech was coming from. He even knew what made that sound.

The Colossal Terror.

It was coming for him. So were hundreds of monsters that formed from thin air. From Miasma.

“For the Ancestors,” he growled, instincts taking over as he stormed at the monstrous army waiting for him.

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CHAPTER 15

The first charge was a deadly success. Hakon headed toward the largest ants first, Crusher raised above his head right before it rocketed to the ground. The ants stood no chance. They were slower and not even their tough exoskeleton protected from the impacting force. Their bodies were mashed and even the ground started to shake.

No message popped up, but Hakon felt a pull from [Blunt Weapon Mastery]. Yet, rather than leaning into the Skill's augmentation, he pushed forward and struck down again. His mind was filled with a sense of wrongness as [Blunt Weapon Mastery] tried to guide him. Hakon ignored it and tried something else. He forced his mind to adjust, to think of his new weapon as something unique instead of a regular blunt weapon.

His thinking shifted as he crushed the fifth ant, and his mind, or was it his Ancient Power, adapted after the tenth collapsed.

He escaped several globs of acid and stomped on an Acidic Beetle's head with a burst of [Circulation] before the message he'd been waiting for appeared among others.

[Skill [Poleaxe Mastery] has been learned.]

Hakon snorted. It was not recognized as an existing Skill. Nonetheless, he pushed further, his mind zoning in on [Poleaxe Mastery] with Enhanced Comprehension. His stance improved almost instantly, transforming him into a monstrosity on the battlefield. Alas, he could not escape the masses of enemies surrounding him for long.

[Poleaxe Mastery] improved by two Levels in quick succession, the encroaching danger pushing body and mind to new heights. Then came the first injury. A Giant Ant's mandibles snapped shut around his leg. It only cut him as he pulled away at the last second, but the distraction was enough. Two globs of acid splashed on his chest and thigh.

Hakon avoided grievous injuries but that was the limit of his capabilities. Too many ants attacked from all directions to escape the downpour of acid. Then there was Crusher. It was cumbersome and restricted his movement almost as much as the masses of Giant Ants did.

Hakon repaid every injury he sustained in kind. Crusher shifted in his hand as he spun around his axis, cleaving several enemies in two. It required a push of [Circulation] to repel the surrounding monsters, which was followed by a barrage of strikes, shattering exoskeleton, and [Dash]. He escaped the encirclement, his eyes growing wide as he realized just how many monsters flooded the Crawling Expanse.

Ants and beetles alike materialized out of thin air, out of the blue mist that seemed to be everywhere. Even the carnage he left behind was overflowing with the same mist. Some of which dispersed into the ground, while another portion seeped into Hakon, but the rest remained and appeared to form new monsters.

They're smaller.

His eyes narrowed. The monsters that appeared out of nowhere were small. Smaller than the Giant Ants and Acidic Beetles outside the Fracture.

He groaned and grit his teeth as something wet struck his back. It burned at first and went numb in the next moment. A burst of [Circulation], and two circles through the body were all he needed to remove the worst of the numbness at this point, but it accumulated, nonetheless. The more acid globs that hit him, the worse his condition became.

Even worse, removing the numbness was more like replacing one evil with another. Instead of feeling nothing, Hakon had to feel how the acid burned through his skin and flesh.

[Proficiency gained. [Poison Resistance Lv.3] improved to [Poison Resistance Lv.4]]
[Proficiency gained. [Pain Tolerance Lv.6] improved to [Pain Tolerance Lv.7]]

The messages were pleasant, but their cause wasn't. They only told him what he had to go through to improve them further. The best? This wouldn't be the last time those Skills improved. It was only the beginning.

His hair stood up on end, and he shot to the side. Several shots of acid splattered the ground where he stood a moment ago, and two more messages popped up.

[Proficiency gained. [Combat Awareness Lv.7] improved to [Combat Awareness Lv.8]]
[Proficiency gained. [Evasion Lv.6] improved to [Lv.7]]

"That's more like it!" Hakon rumbled right before Crusher descended once more, mashing yet another Giant Ant.

Carnage continued, yet no matter how many monsters he killed, the flood never ended. It was like the Fracture had countless monsters to offer him. And that was not a problem. Or… it wouldn't have been if he wasn't forced to use [Circulation] more often than he wanted.

The Skill's empowerment was powerful. It was useful and allowed him to kill more enemies in quick succession. But the price was a heavy one to pay. It cost a considerable amount of mana to maintain. Activating it in bursts alongside [Mana Sense] was fine. It worked decently enough to improve the Skills, but Hakon still recovered less mana than he had to use.

Still, every use felt less like a waste. Which left him with yet another issue: He had too many projects to work on.

First and foremost, he had to make sure he didn't sustain any bad injuries. That was already challenging enough, and he had to defeat his enemies simultaneously. In the same instance, it was obvious he was simply too weak to fight the entire Fracture alone. He would never say so openly, yet everyone with healthy eyes and a somewhat intact head could tell that much.

He was crushing it. By now, he'd already killed dozens of ants and beetles, the Level of several Skills improved, yet he had so much more to do. His mana mass was nowhere near full, his reserves were being drained rapidly, and he had no way to refill them. Yet, he could not preserve his mana too much because more Giant Ants and Acidic Beetles came rushing at him. They attacked him from all sides, until he was forced to break out using the few Skills that drained his mana drastically.

[Mana Sense] improved rapidly as his attention shifted to the one plan that came to his mind, but he couldn't commit to it. The battle did not allow him to move his mana into Crusher. He felt like he was getting closer, yet there was something that stopped him. An obstacle he had yet to cross.

Was it his mind? His Skill Levels?

Then a new message popped up above all the others. A new Skill!

[Skill [Acid Resistance] has been learned.]

The moment the Ancestors rewarded him, the accruing numbness diminished.

[Proficiency gained. [Acid Resistance Lv.1] improved to [Acid Resistance Lv.2]]

Huh! That's not…

Even if it wasn't what Hakon expected, or even wanted, he accepted it with an open heart. Then he returned to the battle, with one less worry on his mind.

There was no longer a rush to remove the numbness as soon as a glob of acid hit him. The burns were no longer as bad either, the Acidic Beetles' only advantage taken away.

The new Skill was a great boon, even more so as it improved again… and again as he tore through his enemies.

His muscles burned and his mind shrieked from all the Skills that required his attention. He eyed [Poleaxe Mastery]'s Level impatiently while the rest of his mind locked in on the sensation he'd been waiting for. Something in the back of his mind clicked. There was no message, but he didn't need one, as mana flowed through his fingers and out of the pathways.

It was almost like his weapon reached out to him. Its pathways connected to his as his fingers coiled around Crusher with an iron-tight grip, but it was not supposed to be.

Crusher tore through a group of Giant Ants, cracking exoskeletons open. But something was different. Hakon felt resistance as soon as he tried to raise Crusher. His fingers, covered in grime, blood, and acid lost grip.

His eyes widened, and he could have sworn smoke was coming from his mind as the aggressive snapping mandibles and obtrusive clattering echoed in his ears.

Several Giant Ants were upon him. A pair lunged at his arms just as he felt a trace of mana seep into Crusher.

“No!” He cursed, releasing Crusher before the ants could sever his hands.

“So close,” Hakon growled in between two ragged breaths. He wiped his hands on his pants and reached for his handaxes before striking again.

[Proficiency gained. [Combat Awareness Lv.8] improved to [Combat Awareness Lv.9]]
[Proficiency gained. [Circulation Lv.2] improved to [Circulation Lv.3]]
[Proficiency gained. [Evasion Lv.8] improved to [Evasion Lv.9]]
[Proficiency gained. [Weakness Detection Lv.8] improved to [Weakness Detection Lv.9]]

Killing the Giant Ants required less effort with Crusher. Raw power was all it took to kill those troublesome creatures with a large weapon. Yet, as soon as he released the warhammer, Hakon regained more freedom. He moved nimbler, escaped the Giant Ants’ mandibles with more ease, and swiftly pinpointed the ant’s weakness. Once their weak points were located, it took no more than a moment and a mighty strike to kill them.

Adjusting his rhythm once again, he didn’t feel all too bad. More acid hit him, but his priority was no longer to avoid them. The Giant Ants were a higher priority now, so he gave them the attention they deserved.

As his rhythm improved, the numerical disadvantage was no longer as troublesome. Occasionally using [Circulation] helped keep the monsters at bay, whereas [Dash] came in handy whenever the Giant Ants tried to shift the scales. The battlefield remained under his control. He was in charge and exploited every little thing to his advantage.

Hence, he tried to replicate the sensation from earlier. To move mana through the pathways in his fingers and force it beyond to pour into his handaxes. Instead of gaining the Skill he expected to receive with Enhanced Comprehension’s guidance, the Ancestors rewarded him with something else.

[Skill [Split Focus] has been learned.]
[Skill [Two Weapon Fighting] has been learned.]

The latter ought to be a recognized Skill rather than a new one. He often fought with two weapons, be it two handaxes, a sword with an axe, or a sword and dagger. His father taught him to learn that Skill long before the Rite, though he also told him it was hard to earn. Something about pressure and spending moons adjusting to the rhythm of two-weapon combat. It came in handy and improved his fighting capacity enough to keep the growing masses of monsters at bay.

[Split Focus] was a little different. The Skill helped him focus on several things at the same time, which was exactly what he needed if he wanted to come out of this fight alive. He needed more. To be *better*. His mana was almost entirely drained at this point. Bursts of [Circulation] recovered a fraction of mana at this point, but he couldn't maintain the Skill.

Maintaining [Circulation] meant he'd have to use a lot more mana than he could recover in a short while.

More messages popped up, which Hakon discarded as he focused on combat and a combination of [Circulation] and [Mana Sense] once more. Three ants collapsed before him, their heads thudding to the ground before the rest of their bodies followed, but the cost was a heavy one. He had to use [Dash] to escape the encirclement, lowering his reserves even more.

He stubbornly maintained [Circulation] as ants clung to his legs, their mandibles digging into his calf, and he killed them before they could reach the bone, but the damage was done.

"It's not over yet," he growled as several events happened simultaneously.

Hundreds of monsters were still waiting to be killed, the cacophony of their legs clattering across the ground ringing in his ears.

A defiant screech reverberated throughout the Crawling Expanse.

A flood of mana tore through him as his handaxes cleaved through yet another monster's neck. The 200th of 500 monsters he had to eliminate to restore balance.

"That was about time." Hakon grimaced as mana spread through his dried up channels, and the pain of his flesh wounds all forgotten as one of the messages he had been waiting for materialized.

[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]

Now he only needed to perform a Feat worthy of the Ancestors' attention, and he'd ascend for the first of many times.

All he needed was to slay the Colossal Terror.

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CHAPTER 16

Mana was all Hakon had. It was all he needed. But there was so much of it. Too much to handle.

His strength and speed increased in tune to his earned Level, allowing him to push to the side without getting bitten. [Natural Regeneration] increased to the fullest even as the handaxes ripped through a pair of skulls, and a message popped up informing him that the Skill had improved.

“Not now!” he snarled, focusing on the abundance of mana.

Some was consumed through [Natural Regeneration], and both [Circulation] and [Dash] as he used the Skills in quick succession, but there was more to it. A chime rang in his ears, replacing the messages that would have materialized before him, yet Hakon paid no heed.

He swallowed through a burning sensation that raced through his pathways and recalled the earlier sensation.

Push it gently out of the pathways. The tip of the finger. Carefully. Do not force it, guide it, he told himself, gritting his teeth as the burning sensation surged toward his fingertips. Mana trickled out of the pathways around the same area, which would have made him jump up in excitement if it wouldn’t have killed him.

He kicked an ant in the side, propelling it into its brethren, and carved deep gashes into their thoraxes. They didn’t die right away. Hakon twisted the axes in their exoskeletons and pushed them deeper before ripping downward, tearing their thoraxes wide open.

A faint glow shrouded his fingers. He barely noticed as it traveled from his fingers into the axes.

The blades seemed to hum as mana seeped into them. Hakon's lips parted to a predatory smile as a sheen oozed from the handaxes, and he willed the latest message to materialize just as a chime rang in his ears.

[Skill [Mana Infusion] has been learned.]

More messages popped up a moment later, but they dispersed once more as Hakon leaped back into the battle, his axes tearing through the Giant Ants much easier than before. No longer did he have to pay attention to their exoskeletons. His strikes tore through the monsters' defenses with ease.

Hakon pushed farther, transforming into a walking blood beast as he wreaked havoc on the battlefield. He weaved around his enemies, superior speed and flexibility taken to full advantage, his awareness reaching an all-time high.

The corpses of the fallen transformed into mist in every direction, obscuring his vision shortly after the slaughter ensued, yet it was like Hakon could feel the monsters' movements. He knew where they were, what was about to happen, and he responded accordingly.

Until the handaxes cracked. Spiderweb-like patterns sprang to life all over them, interrupting his rhythm until his blades shattered.

The interruption didn't last long, and the dance of death resumed as he reached for the bone daggers. There was no thought in his head as he infused mana into the blades. The flow of mana had died down, the abundance no longer present. Instead, he used his replenished reserves to pump the bone daggers full of mana.

Then, carnage started anew. Until the bone daggers fell apart and thousands of pieces clattered to the ground.

Hakon's hand shot toward his sword next, and he hesitated. The sword would break just as fast as his other weapons did.

Crusher won't break, he thought, diving to the side to escape a stream of acid. As surprising as the stream was, or the pained screeches of the Giant Ants the acid stream struck in his stead, his eyes flicked across the battlefield, [Inspection] active.

[Giant Ant – Low Threat]

[Acidic Beetle – Low Threat]
[Maulaxe Crusher – Refined]
[Giant Ant – Low Threat]
[Colossal Terror – High Threat (Boss/Overflow)]
[Acidic Beetle – Low Threat]

Brushing aside how useful [Inspection] was, Hakon shot toward Crusher as soon as he located the weapon.

The back of his mind prickled, screamed at him, and his attention snapped back to a particular message as he reached his weapon.

[Colossal Terror – High Threat (Boss/Overflow)]

“Right…” He let out a series of curses in his mind, gripped Crusher, and activated [Dash].

His speed momentarily increased drastically, which was just barely enough to escape a second stream of acid.

Hakon spun around, ground shaking as something heavy crashed into him. It yanked him off ground and sent him flying.

He crash-landed in a group of Acidic Beetles, his senses sending multiple warnings as they released their acidic spit at him.

Hakon was drenched, skin burning, until the numbness took over.

A burst of [Circulation] slowed the numbness, while his resistances took care of the rest.

“What was that?” he groaned, scrambling to his feet, Crusher lying to the side. It must have slipped out of his hands once more.

Hakon locked eyes with an Acidic Beetle, its mouth wide open as it gathered spit. His hand shot forward and into the beetle’s mouth, [Circulation] still active as he pushed deeper. His other hand shot toward its maw, holding it with an iron-tight grip, and pulled downward with Barbarian strength.

He tore the Acidic Beetle apart like a brute and shot forward, dispatching the other beetles in a similar manner. As soon as he located their weak spots, his eyes taking in all the details unfurling before him, Hakon tore through these weak creatures.

[Unarmed Weapon Mastery has been recognized. Skill generated. Level adjusted to proficiency.]
[Proficiency gained. [Unarmed Weapon Mastery Lv.12] improved to [Unarmed Weapon Mastery Lv.13]]
[Proficiency gained. [Unarmed Weapon Mastery Lv.13] improved to [Unarmed Weapon Mastery Lv.14]]
[Compatible Skills have been detected. Initiate Skill Fusion?]

That was not what he planned to happen, but he wouldn't turn down an unexpected gift of the Ancestors. However, Hakon failed to trigger the Skill Fusion before everything turned yellow.

A stream of acid barreled his way, drenched him from head to toe, and burned through skin and flesh in an instant. The numbness came next. Hakon lost control of his body from one moment to the next. Then came the messages that forced their way through.

[Proficiency gained. [Poison Resistance Lv.6] improved to [Poison Resistance Lv.7]]
[Proficiency gained. [Pain Tolerance Lv.9] improved to [Pain Tolerance Lv.10]]
[Proficiency gained. [Acid Resistance Lv.5] improved to [Acid Resistance Lv.6]]

More messages emerged before him, each one disappearing as he flew through the air. He had no idea what was happening, but his vision cleared as the world turned upside down. He smashed against something hard, not that he could feel it. All he felt was a crack as one, maybe multiple, bones in his body shattered.

[Pain Tolerance] increased further, though Hakon doubted it would be the last time. Except if he died here, now, though that was not his plan.

His finger was the first to move. It twitched as his Skills increased once more, and it was not long before the numbness faded to pain. So much pain. Hakon wanted to scream but his mouth refused to open. His lips wouldn't move either, yet his head snapped to a massive creature. A hut-sized Acidic Beetle.

The Colossal Terror.

That same horn that reminded him of pitch-black antlers was on its nose, and it used it to hurl him through the air when it could have stomped him to death.

It's playing with me.

That hurt almost more than the acid burning through him. It was humiliating. A disgrace for all his father had sacrificed to shape him into the warrior he ought to be.

And here I am, treated like a plaything. Hakon gritted his teeth, arms raised to stop the charging Terror.

It slowed, regarded him like he was a curiosity, and released a stream of acid to numb him once more.

Then he was played with again, his ribs broken as the Terror hurled him around. Over and again.

Hakon felt pathetic. Weak. Insignificant. Yet he never stopped circulating mana through the pathways.

He swore he was about to die at any moment, certain his heart would stop beating, his organs would cease, though that never happened. [Circulation] kept certain death away even as the rest of his body fell apart. And all that time, his Skills were growing stronger. The Terror's attack pattern, its antics, were engraved in Hakon's head, and his resistances grew stronger, transforming the deadly stream of acid into a nuisance.

[Natural Regeneration] could not keep up healing him, but that didn't mean it wasn't trying. It worked in tandem with his other Skills and healed him while his body incrementally adjusted to the Terror's acid's potency. And, while doing so, it improved greatly.

It hurts. He groaned, his flesh raw, unprotected.

Death hovered above him, but his soul had not yet been reaped. He was not yet with the Ancestors. He was alive and didn't plan to die anytime soon. His Saga had not been written yet.

The Terror had something else planned for him. It screeched aloud, the sound ripping through the battlefield, its patience used up.

Done playing, the ginormous beetle came charging at him. Hakon grunted and responded in kind. He had been hoping for a little more time to come up with a better plan, but it would do. It had to.

Hakon released a burst of mana outside his body with [Mana Infusion]. Assigning no particular target, the Skill failed to perform its designated task and erupted just outside his body, sending the acid burning through skin and

flesh flying. Specks of acid clung to him while the majority shot in all directions, and for the first time in what felt like an eternity, Hakon could see again.

His gaze locked in the direction he presumed Crusher to be, and he kicked the ground. [Dash] carried him across the battlefield, the cold wind splashing painfully against his raw body. Giant Ants and Acidic Beetles were everywhere, but there were fewer than before. A lot fewer, actually. In the place of the army was now a flattened field of monster remains and thick mist that clung almost lovingly to the Colossal Terror.

Killed its own brethren, huh?

It mattered little. The Terror would soon join those it killed.

"Initiate Skill Fusion," Hakon growled, his voice raw and unbidden.

[One suitable Skill Fusion has been detected. Fuse [Sword Mastery Lv.20], [Dagger Mastery Lv.19], [Axe Mastery Lv.20], [Blunt Weapon Mastery Lv.15], [Unarmed Weapon Mastery Lv.14]?]

"What about Poleaxe Mastery?" He grunted, his body slowly failing him. Strength faded from his limbs, and he knew better than anyone that time was of the essence.

[Skill [Poleaxe Mastery Lv.7] has been detected. Skill Level deemed too low.
Improve the Skill's Level to avoid potential diminishing returns.
Do you still wish to add the Skill to the fusion?]

"Yes!" he roared, shooting toward Crusher.

[Skill Fusion initiated. Skills [Sword Mastery Lv.20], [Dagger Mastery Lv.19], [Axe Mastery Lv.20], [Blunt Weapon Mastery Lv.15], [Unarmed Weapon Mastery Lv.14], and [Poleaxe Mastery Lv.7] have been fused and removed from the Ancient Scripture.]
[Skill [Weapon Mastery Lv.6] has been learned.]

The moment the Skill settled in, Hakon's stance adjusted until it felt right, *better*. He corrected his breathing, fixed his grip on Crusher's handle,

and even the way mana circulated through him changed. It was like he was an entirely different being. Like he had become more than he was a moment before.

Even the strength that had faded returned. Not only that, there was simply… *more*. A burst of [Circulation] mixed with [Dash] as he shot toward the charging Terror, the fight playing out before his eyes. Then came the stream of acid.

Hakon barreled through it, Crusher raised high above as he cleaved down, his every move perfectly adjusted to the Terror's attack pattern. He knew all there was to know about the oversized beetle. The little tilt of its head as it tried to scoop him up, and the small seam that connected carapace to neck. Hakon knew all about it. How? He had seen it all. Felt it. And etched it into the back of his head as the Colossal Terror played with his body, treating it like a straw doll.

But he was much more than that. [Mana Infusion] worked wonders, connecting Hakon to the very essence of his grotesque weapon. It hummed, not unlike his other weapons, but it didn't feel like he overwhelmed this one. If anything, Hakon believed he could pour even more mana into it. So, he did just that, until Crusher's flat side impacted and all the mana stored within the maulaxe was released at once.

A satisfying crack echoed in his ears, bringing a smile to his lips, but the Colossal Terror was not yet done. It met Hakon's eyes and erupted in power. More instinct than anything else had him release Crusher and burn through his mana to empower [Circulation] and [Dash] at full power. He went as far as to pump most of his mana reserves into his legs until they hurt as he increased the distance to the massive beetle in a fraction of a second.

But he was too late. No more than a heartbeat after the Terror erupted in power, Hakon was yanked off his feet. He was hurled through the air, feeling like he had been struck by Crusher instead.

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CHAPTER 17

What was that?

Hakon scrambled to his feet, gasping for air. Blood dripped in his eyes and his legs caved in more often than he was willing to acknowledge. His chest hurt worse than any training with his father.

Still, he was alive. Somewhat.

His body barely listened to his commands. Hakon couldn't feel much of his lower legs, other than pain and that something was wrong. It felt like something in his leg had snapped but he couldn't quite tell what it was or if it actually happened.

His arms didn't feel much better, neither did his head or his caved-in chest. Almost like his rib cage was no more, replaced by a mess of fragments. Yet, here he was, gasping for air, scrambling to his feet.

Traces of mana swirled through his pathways, signifying the last remains of all the energy he possessed merely a few heartbeats ago. Then there was the Colossal Terror. It was still alive, and so were enough Giant Ants and Acidic Beetles to kill him. But something had changed.

The Colossal Terror no longer charged him. It approached, but its steps were groggy, its head no longer looking the same. The antler-like horn tilted to the side and its skull was caved inward. The monster was on the verge of death.

Giant Ants and Acidic Beetles rushed at Hakon, but his bloodied eyes remained on the beast.

Only a little. Give me a little strength, Ancestors. Just a little, and I will survive. Strive and shed more blood for you, he prayed to the Ancestors, dragging his worn body across the battlefield.

[Proficiency gained. [Pain Tolerance Lv.14] improved to [Pain Tolerance Lv.15]]

The pain lessened only a little, but the intent was clear. The Ancestors were watching, and they wanted him to survive.

A small smile played on his lips as he pushed forward. Taking a deep breath through the pain that assaulted his lungs, Hakon gathered his remaining strength. His trembling hand reached toward his sword. Keeping ahold of the weapon was harder than it used to be. His fingers were stiff and struggled to coil around the blade's handle, yet he succeeded.

[Weapon Mastery] helped him, and so did [Combat Awareness], [Split Focus], and all his other Skills.

Reaching for the mana mass within, Hakon used [Dash]. He added a burst of [Circulation], dragging his half-dead body across the battlefield in a final attack. He appeared before the Colossal Terror, feet digging deep into the ground, and he let the last bit of strength in his legs loose to leap into the air. A snapping sound rang in his ears, but his mind was fully focused on the creature before him.

[Mana Infusion] filled his blade with all the mana he had left to spare. A faint shimmer coating the sword caught his attention, yet it only lasted a moment. And that was all Hakon needed to ram the blade through the Terror's cracked skull.

Darkness threatened to consume him. Then came reignited pain. Unbearable. Unbidden.

Hakon looked down to the broken antler horn jutting from his chest, and a grim smile bloomed. At last, he twisted the sword in the Terror's skull and shoved it deeper.

"You will join me!" he croaked, coughing up blood.

Then came the mist. Faint at first, expanding rapidly. Growing denser, heavier.

The Terror faded from his view, replaced by nothing but dense mist that seemed everywhere yet nowhere. It poured into him even as he bled to death.

Am I bleeding? He looked down at his chest once more to see gaping holes where the antler horn had been. Blood poured out of him like a fountain, grim reality filling his head.

Hakon knew what was about to happen. He was about to die. He should have died, which was not acceptable. His tale had not yet been recorded.

[Major Deed – Defeat Colossal Terror (1/1)]

“That should have been enough, don’t you think?” He coughed up even more blood, trying hard to ignore the coldness that replaced the strength of his body. “Did I not do enough to satisfy you?”

No, he did. He did far more than any of his peers were able to. He surpassed them all.

Hakon performed a Feat worthy of Ascension.

[You have shattered the Wall. Ascension permitted.
Ascend, young warrior. For your Saga does not end here.]

Power filled his being. It dispersed the coldness that had taken hold of him and returned the strength it sapped. Then, came *more*. The dying wick of his life reignited, transforming into a raging inferno.

A laugh escaped his lips. This time, he didn’t cough up blood.

[First Ascension initiated. Body, mind, and soul reinforced. Ancient Power strengthened.]

Following the power that surged through his body came the mana. A familiar flood, yet it was stronger and so much greater than it used to be.

The mass within Hakon expanded as his worn body changed and shifted. His muscles grew denser and it almost felt like his bones were heavier than they once were. He was tougher, and most importantly, Hakon healed faster. His regeneration accelerated greatly as his body accustomed to the 1st Ascension. His mind worked faster and his focus sharpened.

Then came the messages.

[The Well of Experience has been unsealed. Accumulated Experience distributed.]
[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]
[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]

[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]

Warmth filled every corner of his body, and it only spread as he poured all the excessive mana into [Natural Regeneration]. As weak as the healing Skill ought to be, it eased the pain and did what Hakon did not believe was possible. He stopped bleeding. His wounds were still there, hurting, throbbing, yet the fountains of blood diminished until they ceased entirely.

As quick and surprising as his recovery was, Hakon was too tired to care. He accepted it as is.

Exhaustion had him tightly in its grasp. It wanted him to close his eyes and fall asleep, rest until the end of times, but the Crawling Expanse was not yet cleansed of its scourge. Giant Ants crawled through the densely packed mist. They could not fight him, neither could the Acidic Beetles as their acidic spit whistled through the air. At some point, they would fight him. The mist would not last forever. It would disperse, revealing his position to all the monsters.

Unless he killed them first.

His body screeched and screamed as he struggled to get to his feet. His bones were still broken, his ribs shattered, but pain was no more than weakness leaving the body. The chieftain had been correct. This pain was fleeting, while the strength it brought stayed. It never diminished and would only grow further as he pushed through, embracing pain and suffering as much as the gains they brought.

Hakon did the only thing he could think of. He eliminated his enemies while he could still move. The mana that fed his pathways allowed him to move. Utilizing [Circulation] to drag his limbs toward the nearest enemy, [Silent Step] and [Stealth] activating themselves; or did he activate the Skills without realizing? The truth mattered little.

Hakon’s survival and the death of his enemies were all that was left in his mind.

[Major Deed – Restore the Balance (500/500)]

The second Major Deed was finally completed. Hakon couldn’t remember everything that happened, or how much time had passed since. However, he did remember the Terror’s death and the Ancestors’ messages.

“I did it. I ascended.” It sounded unreal and felt just the same. Like it was one big dream.

The memories of the Ascension eluded him. It was supposed to be something special, yet he could recall little. Other than the power he felt as his blade carved through his enemies. Until it shattered and his body became the weapon.

And now he sat beside the Fracture vortex, no sight of a single Giant Ant or Acidic Beetle. Nothing. Nowhere. He was alone with his healing wounds, exhaustion that didn’t want to leave his side, and weird messages.

[Miasma Overflow has been successfully eradicated. Alone.]
[A unique circumstance worthy of a Feat has been recorded.]
[A rare opportunity has been granted. Do you wish to combine your Major Deeds to claim a boon greater than the individual?]

“Greater? Is that a Skill Fusion… of Deeds?” There was no reason to deny the offer. If anything, he ought to accept it.

So, he did just that before collapsing, having succumbed to his injuries.

The next time he woke up, Hakon felt much better. The gaping holes in his chest were almost fully healed. The broken bones bothered him no longer. He was covered in freshly grown skin as well. It was pink and raw, almost like that of a newborn, but it was tougher than it appeared. That was the kind of regeneration worthy of a Barbarian!

Hakon pulled at his skin and pinched it with widening eyes. It hurt, but he had to put in quite a bit of strength.

“That is amazing. Is that how Father and the others feel?” he wondered, leaping to his feet with newfound ease.

He punched the air, which distorted from the impact, and kicked the ground with enough force to crack it open. Too excited about his rising strength, Hakon ran toward the only mark left behind on the battlefield:

Crusher. It stood there, surrounded by the carnage left behind by combat. As for the corpses, they were no more. Not even the Terror's carcass remained.

"It would have made great armor," he mused to himself, lifting the Maulaxe Crusher with one hand. It was lighter than before. There was still some weight to the weapon, but it was no longer as noteworthy. Maybe he'd be able to wield Crusher with one hand with some practice. Considering it was the only weapon that survived his [Mana Infusion], he might have to learn how to wield the cumbersome weapon sooner rather than later.

The Terror's acid sac would have been great too. The thought made him grimace.

He was no particular fan of self-torture, though doing exactly that gave him the strength to upgrade [Flow Control]. To cleanse his pathways faster and acquire more useful Skills.

As much as he disliked the thought of hurting himself, the gains he made with such a sacrifice were the very reason he was alive.

"Luck, too," he added before closing his eyes. "And, of course, the Ancestors' gifts. Without your gifts, I would have never survived."

Without Enhanced Comprehension, he would have never conquered the Fracture.

I haven't conquered anything yet. There is still one Saga Trial left, he corrected himself inwardly but failed to materialize the message.

The final Saga Trial wouldn't come to him.

"Why? I want to accomplish a Feat!" Hakon grumbled, then reminded himself that he had just done that. The Scriptures said so. Because he cleared the Miasma Overflow alone.

That brought a smile to his lips, and he returned to the Fracture vortex, his eyes shifting to a pole that hadn't been there before. His reward. A… Totem.

It was ancient, its presence heavy, overbearing.

Unlike the other Totem, this one was a relic more than a simple carving.

The Totem appeared as a broad pole crowned with a smaller version of the Colossal Terror. It was still large, yet it was unlike anything the Colossal Terror represented. *This* was different.

The Terror was carved from dark material that resembled steel, yet wasn't. Its shell was layered in thick plates of the same unknown dark material and faintly traced with what appeared to be azure glowing veins.

Gemlike eyes caught the light of the sunless Crawling Expanse, its firm legs tightly clutching the pole beneath.

It was beautiful. Magnificent, even.

Almost lifelike, just like the pole, which was etched with spiraling patterns that coiled around the image of a large glowing mass. Unfamiliar, strange runes highlighted the mass, surrounding it, yet it was the glowing mass and what it resembled that gave the Totem a brutal presence.

After all, Hakon knew what it stood for.

“The Terror’s power.”

A memory of the Terror erupting in power that hurled Hakon through the air, nearly killing him when it should have been the massive monster that died. It did die at the end, severely injured from Crusher’s blow, but the explosion of power had nearly been enough to tip the scale. Luck and the Ancestors’ will were the only reason he survived.

And now the very power that nearly killed him was offered to him as a Runeskin.

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CHAPTER 18

Countless messages materialized all around him, each signifying a boost of power, painting a picture of the pain and effort he'd gone through.

Some messages Hakon had already seen before. His 1st Ascension, the Levels he'd earned, and some of the Skill improvements he knew about. Dismissing the messages after a quick glance, he focused back on the Totem. His trembling fingers caressed it with the care of a gentle lover, prompting yet another pair of messages.

[Totem has been detected and examined. Colossal Terror Runeskin has been discovered.]
[Do you wish to bind Colossal Terror Runeskin?]

Nothing blocked him from binding the Runeskin this time, for he'd reached the 1st Ascension. And he saw no reason not to do so. The Terror's Totem was exquisite. It was marvelous unlike the weathered wooden Acidic Beetle Totem. Still, Hakon didn't bind it right away. He inspected it first.

[Colossal Terror Totem
Runeskin – Hoard Impact (Major)]

"What!" Hakon exclaimed, hair standing on end.

A Major Runeskin was extraordinary, only second to Greater Runeskins.

The name explained little. 'Hoard' was not a word he heard about before. But that was not necessary given the image etched on the Totem.

The explosion of power that nearly killed him when the battle shifted to his favor.

It was a power that allowed warriors to turn the tides of battle!

“Bind it!” Hakon urged, closing his eyes as the power within the Totem erupted. His iron-tight grip around the Totem pole was forcefully broken, his fingers repelled. Yet, even as he felt a brush with the power that oozed out of the Totem, Hakon never opened his eyes.

His skin crawled, his chest heaved heavily, and his throat tightened as the Totem’s presence intensified. It pressed hard against his chest and sunk deeper and deeper. Then, the presence surrounding him faded. All that remained was a heavy weight on his chest.

Hakon’s eyes fluttered open after hundreds of quick heartbeats, hand pressed against his chest. The weight faded, yet it never fully disappeared even as he looked down to see nothing clinging to his chest. Nothing had changed, if one excluded the engraving that stretched across his chest.

Magnificent azure lines crawled across his skin forming an intricate pattern that rivaled the engravings he’d seen on the older warrior’s arms and back. It did not depict the Colossal Terror nor did the engraving look like any other beetle or ant he had seen before. It was just a beautiful-looking pattern that shimmered faintly.

It was dim and did not appear particularly impressive if one ignored the Runeskin’s size, yet Hakon instinctively knew it was his greatest weapon. Knowledge, snippets that revealed the secrets of his Runeskin, had been shared by the Ancestors. They planted it in his mind, gracing him with the means needed to use the Runeskin in combat.

“Is that what ‘Hoard’ means?” Hakon tilted his head, trying to understand the snippets of wisdom the Ancestors shared.

It was a little confusing, but a few minutes were all he needed to get the gist. Hoard Impact absorbed a portion of the impacting attacks. It triggered naturally and would not require Hakon’s assistance.

By absorbing part of the incoming attacks, the azure engraving on his chest would shine brighter. While not important in the theory, it was a great visual component to indicate when he’d ‘hoarded’ enough to unleash great power. To erupt with the power Hoard Impact had accumulated in one mighty blow.

Hakon squinted at that part. When he fought the Colossal Terror, it felt more like the monster erupted in power. Now it looked like Hoard Impact

could be used not only as a counterattack but to overwhelm the enemy while remaining on the offensive.

Learning more about Hoard Impact would take some time. Fully understanding the Runeskin was not easy. It was never supposed to be.

Fact was, Hoard Impact was a curious power. What if he charged the unleashed power through his warhammer? Would that work or could the Runeskin only release the hoarded power straight through the etchings on his chest?

So many questions. He licked his lips in anticipation and checked the Ancient Scripture. It was a bundled mess. He had many Skills. So many it was hard to keep focus on them.

“Can I change that somehow?” Hakon rubbed the back of his head and froze when the Ancient Scripture changed before his eyes.

The Skill section moved. The letters shifted across the age-old parchment like they had a free will.

Skills
Resistances – [Poison Resistance Lv.12], [Pain Tolerance Lv.15], [Acid Resistance Lv.10]
Utility – [Reading Lv.3], [Circulation Lv.8], [Running Lv.9], [Dash Lv.7]…
Combat – [Combat Awareness Lv.13], [Weakness Detection Lv.11], [Grappling Lv.6]…

The new addition of categories was helpful. It still didn’t feel perfect, though. Something did not fit quite right.

“[Circulation] and [Dash] are Utility Skills?” he mused.

While that was not necessarily wrong, Hakon didn’t like it. Wasn’t there another category he could add?

As if it was reading his mind, the Ancient Scripture changed again.

Mana – [Circulation Lv.8], [Dash Lv.7], [Mana Sense Lv.10], [Mana Infusion Lv.5]

[Dash] didn’t feel quite right in the mana category either, so Hakon pulled it back to Combat. It was much better in the combat section.

“Or should I keep it there?” He studied the Ancient Scripture with squinted eyes, a heavy sigh escaping his lips.

“Since I’ve already started, I may as well change a few more things.”

Maybe the Ancestors made a mistake by allowing him to change the Ancient Scripture at his will. It was probably not the best way to waste precious time either. Still, it was important to keep his Ancient Scripture organized if he was to add a lot more Skills.

It took a while to learn how to move the Ancient Scripture, to prompt it into changing categories and other aspects to his will, but it worked. By the time he was done, Hakon was more or less satisfied. Even if it was still not perfect, he could always adjust things later.

The Rite wasn’t that long ago and it was already such a mess. How bad will it look once–

Hakon froze.

“What day is today?”

He had been unconscious so often since the Rite, it was hard to keep track of day and night. The absence of the sun and moons in the Fracture certainly did not help.

“I am not too late,” he told himself, but doubt nibbled at him.

His heart was racing as he pocketed the Colossal Terror Totem’s remains in his makeshift bag. Or he would have, if the makeshift bag survived the last battle. Alas, it looked like the beetles’ acid had been too much for the material.

His eyes drifted across the battlefield, lips pressed into a thin line as he searched for the Acidic Beetle Totem, which should have been safely stored in the bag. The same makeshift bag that was no longer with him.

As it turned out, fortune was still upon him. Hakon found the Acidic Beetle Totem after a few heartbeats using [Inspection]. But there was yet another issue. Just as he was about to leave, he realized he didn’t have Crusher with him.

He slapped his forehead for almost forgetting his most valuable possession, lying on the ground beside him as he rushed to the Fracture vortex. Turning back in a hurry, Hakon grabbed Crusher. He leaped out of the Fracture in a hurry, his head flicking up to the sky.

“No!” he growled, watching the ripe silver moon gliding high above him.

The last rays of sunlight had yet to fade, but it wouldn’t be long until the night of the silver moon was to start.

Even if he ran back, he would be too late. He wouldn’t make it to the Battle of Generation.

“Why? Just why am I so stupid?” Hakon cursed himself as he caught something from the corner of his eyes.

A group of Giant Ants crawled toward him, their mandibles snapping dangerously.

“Don’t bother me,” he growled in anger, stomping them to death without a second thought.

The monsters stood no chance. Their exoskeletons were as much of a defense as a worn-out wooden shield would be. Hakon’s stomp transformed the torso-sized Giant Ant into a gory mess.

That… was easy. Right, the ants outside the Fracture were weaker. Smaller. Memories of how much he struggled against those beasts before resurfaced. He’d grown a lot in the last few days. His power was greater than ever. So was his physique.

His physique.

“I am faster than I used to be…”

The tribe was far away. He had to make a detour around to avoid the predators and… No. Did he really have to avoid them at this point? Hakon’s eyes furrowed.

“Can I make it?” he wondered, then slapped himself with enough force to rattle his mind. “I have to make it! There is no time for ifs and buts. I *will* make it!”

Hakon did not force his way to a Fracture his people deemed lost just to give up. He did *NOT* torture himself, fight hundreds of monsters, and have a face-off with death itself more than half a dozen times since he awakened just to give up now.

Time may not be on his side, but he was stronger than ever. Faster than he thought he would ever become. He could make it, would make it, as long as he kept running.

Orienting himself in the fading sunlight, Hakon started. He charged across the path of corpses connecting the island with the forest and turned in the direction of the tribe.

His posture adjusted naturally. He barely even noticed the light of the Fracture vortex fade as it closed.

“Faster. I need to be faster!” Hakon growled, pumping mana into his lower body, but not yet using [Dash]. The Skill consumed too much mana. Instead, [Running] was activated and improved as soon as he settled into his new stance.

The chime of incoming messages rang in his ears as he paved his way through the forest, his eyes studying every detail. He leaped across an uprooted tree, burst through densely grown bushes, and interrupted a group of Frenzy Boars rolling around in the dirt. After he surprised the monsters, they were no longer as peaceful as they first appeared. They charged after Hakon, who disappeared in the next bushes, his full attention on landmarks.

It was difficult at first, and the fleeting sunlight was of no help, but that changed as soon as he pinpointed the first familiar landmark. From then onward, it was only a matter of a lot of running. More and more familiar landmarks emerged all around him, a brilliant smile plastered his face as the hollering laughter of his drunk people reached him.

Pyre torches illuminated the distant horizon, guiding him back home.

Then, just as he reached the edges of the forest, thunderous drums roared across the tribe.

“I did it.” He laughed, shoulders rolled back and chest puffed out as he stepped out of the forest and into the tribehold.

He was back home and ready for a fight. To make his father proud and show the others that he was greater than the Bloodbearers.

But Hakon did not only fight for others. He would fight for himself. And he would win.

Ancient Scripture 1.0

The Ancient Scripture will only be shown a few times throughout the book. While it has been revealed before this chapter, the full glory of the Ancient Scripture will only be shown in chapters of the same name from here on out.

The Ancestors do not wish to overwhelm readers by adding them in the middle of chapters. You may skip them.

Hakon Taskur – Level 13
Race – Barbarian

Ancient Power – Enhanced Comprehension
Bloodline – Wildborne Lifeblood
Runeskin – Hoard Impact (Major)

Skills

Resistances – [Poison Resistance Lv.12], [Pain Tolerance Lv.15], [Acid Resistance Lv.10]
Utility – [Reading Lv.3], [Running Lv.13], [Field Crafting Lv.5], [Silent Steps Lv.7], [Dismantling Lv.6], [Stealth Lv.3], [Natural Regeneration Lv.11], [Inspection Lv.5]
Combat – [Combat Awareness Lv.13], [Dash Lv.7], [Throwing Lv.5], [Evasion Lv.10], [Grappling Lv.6], [Weakness Detection Lv.11], [Two Weapon Fighting Lv.5], [Weapon Mastery Lv.6]
Mana – [Circulation Lv.8], [Mana Sense Lv.10], [Split Focus Lv.3], [Mana Infusion Lv.5]

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CHAPTER 19

[Skill [Tracking] has been learned.]
[Proficiency earned. [Tracking Lv.1] improved to [Tracking Lv.2]]
…

Hakon noticed several follow-up messages, which explained quite a lot. [Tracking] helped him find his way back home.

Learning the Skill would have come without his Ancient Power, at some point, but he would have never improved it this quickly. Enhanced Comprehension helped him out of the mess… *again*.

To think I disliked awakening the Mind not too long ago. He chuckled, hefting Crusher with one hand.

It slammed on his shoulder, its grotesque appearance visible for everyone to see. Then he strode through the tribehold, following excited voices and engaged growls and roars.

The outskirts were empty and dimly lit. No one stayed behind, unwilling to miss the events of the full silver moon night. Hakon's heart beat rapidly, but the hesitation that plagued him after the Rite was no longer there. He had done everything in his might to grow stronger since the Rite and it showed.

The crack in his confidence had long since mended, and the laughs of his fellow brethren were no more than a whisper in the back of his mind.

As he walked down the path to the Monolith, he faced several men and women of the past. They'd regarded him highly even though his physique had not been as wide as the others. They'd respected him for his strength

rather than his unlikely appearance. But even that was taken from him after the Rite.

The way the tribesmen looked at him that day carried a deeper meaning than a thousand words. And now that he met them again, their respect mattered no longer. He ignored them even as their eyes widened, trudging into the brightly lit center of the tribehold, his gaze lingering on the Monolith. The very structure that channeled the Ancestors' will inside him. It awakened the power that shaped him into a new person ever since *that* night.

Murmurs reached his ears, but Hakon tuned them out. His gaze flitted from the Monolith to the Shaman, whose ink-covered body carried an entirely new meaning now that he reached the 1st Ascension. The Shaman was covered in Runeskins, yet they too were engraved and interconnected with ink, concealing their identity. Though something was odd.

Hakon tried to use [Inspection] on the Shaman as he approached the stage before the Monolith. He failed. Instead of information, he encountered a firm wall that not only repelled him but counterattacked, assaulting his mind.

He suppressed a pained groan and grimaced, the Shaman's head flicking toward him, the faintest hint of a smile playing his lips.

Several tribesmen turned as the Shaman looked past them. Their brows furrowed when they saw him, but they parted ways for Hakon. Their grunts and curses reached his ears, yet they did not prevail for long. He consumed them, their words of ridicule no more than fuel that pushed him further.

The stage, carved from stone and adorned with gemstones and a plethora of engravings Hakon had never seen before caught his attention. Half a fortnight ago, the stage had not been there, but he didn't doubt that the tribesmen did everything possible to honor the Ancestors' wish for the Battle of Generation.

The scenery unfurling before him was mesmerizing. The engravings glowed and illuminated the tribehold center dimly, which was only further highlighted as the golden lining spread throughout the Monolith sparked to life.

"The Ancestors are watching," the Shaman intoned, his attention flicking back to the Monolith. He knelt, his voice thrumming with otherworldly power. "May the Great One shine upon us. Let him judge the Battle of Generation, welcome the rise of the next Warlord."

The warriors roared in tune to the Shaman's words, the cacophony of overlapping voices carrying their excitement and thirst for blood, their fists hammering against their chest. They all welcomed the rise of the next Warlord.

Hakon joined the roar and only resumed heading to the stage when the excited shouts and thunderous roars of the others died down.

More warriors parted ways for him, but some wouldn't move. Their wide frames blocked him from his rightful place beside the stage, where all the other young warriors waited their turn to present themselves in front of the Ancestors.

The warriors' faces scrunched up at first, but the corner of their lips curled into mocking smiles shortly after.

Seriously? Hakon was no fan of their nonsense. He let out a growl and pumped mana through his pathways, his grip around Crusher tightening. His knuckles crackled, and he was ready to smash their heads for obstructing his path. How dare they stop him from joining the sacred ritual!

"Let him through," his father's voice boomed across the tribehold.

The warriors blocking Hakon tensed and turned, yet they did not open a path. Not right away, at least.

Driven by impatience, Hakon used [Dash] and leaped across the warriors in a moment of carelessness.

"Father." He approached the chieftain after a smooth landing, his frame as massive as ever. Yet, something had changed since they last met.

His father felt as powerful as ever, but he was no longer as imposing as he used to be. He felt more like a Barbarian than a legendary warrior.

"Son," the chieftain said, his steely eyes regarding him from head to toe.

"Did you come here to desecrate the Ancestors' sacred ritual?" he growled deeply, his presence crushing down on Hakon.

Resisting the pressure his father emitted was no easy feat. His legs threatened to cave in, yet he prevailed, his eyes meeting his father's.

"You are late." The presence retracted. "But not too late."

His father snapped his fingers at someone. "Bring my son some clothes. Clothes worthy enough to stand before the Ancestors."

That was… odd. Was his father angry at him or was he happy to see his son again? And how were his clothes important? It was not like anyone wore multiple layers of clothes. It was the opposite, if anything.

Hakon glanced at the other young warriors to see that most Bloodbearers were only lightly clothed. The men barely covered their lower bodies, whereas the women's chests were wrapped in cloth or leather.

Looking down at his own body did explain what his father had been about. He was naked. Completely, utterly naked. His clothes did not heal when flesh and skin did. They likely suffered greatly from the Acidic Beetles' constant bombardment. Or was it against the Colossal Terror? It had covered his entire body in its acidic spit.

Hakon shrugged lightly. It didn't really matter all that much.

A young man no more than a few cycles away from undergoing the Rite himself rushed up to the chieftain and placed a set of trousers made of tempered bear hide. The stitches were not as crude as Hakon was used to. They were symmetrical and almost too valuable to be worn for ordinary occasions. Alas, the Battle of Generation was no ordinary occasion. It was an event that changed the lives of many.

"You know what that means?" The chieftain pointed at the trousers.

"Yes, Father," Hakon answered before smoothly slipping into his new trousers. They were comfortable and fit perfectly; like they had been customized for him, yet their true value was hidden. It was in the expectations behind the gift.

His father had decided to support him for the Battle of Generation. He gifted the warrior he expected to win something in front of everyone. Not Astrid. Not Ulfar. *Him!*

Hakon swallowed hard at the expectations, but it only further fueled the fire burning in his chest.

"Take care of this." He held out his hand carrying the Acidic Beetle Totem and handed it over. "Don't throw it away. We don't want anyone earning the Ancestors' wrath."

The corner of his lip curled upward, prompting his father to study the Totem with deeply furrowed brows.

"Take a look at it."

The chieftain didn't have to hear that twice, but his brows furrowed even deeper as he glanced down at the small Totem resting in his massive palm. A moment later, they rose slightly, and he looked back at his son, his eyes tracing the azure etching on his chest.

"Bloody days?" he inquired, lips curling up.

“Carnage.” Hakon smiled, approaching the front row where the others were already waiting. “Conquered a lost Fracture.”

His words weren’t loud. His voice was quiet, yet it carried a long way and reached the front line.

“Sure. And I kill a dragon!” a broad-shouldered warrior grumbled.

Hakon stared at the man, a young warrior, one of Ulfar’s Bloodbearer ‘friends.’

“Call me a liar again and you will meet the Ancestors tonight,” he said evenly, his expression cold as ice.

The Bloodbearer warrior’s lips parted but something made him stop. That something was none other than Astrid’s bloody presence as she emerged between them. Hakon hadn’t seen her move, nor did he sense her presence earlier, and clearly the Bloodbearer thought similarly. His eyes widened in terror, his body frozen in place.

“Weak,” Astrid spat in disgust, her expression shifting to one of utter happiness as she spun toward Hakon. “You made it.”

Her smile was the brightest he had ever seen. It was captivating and promised to turn the heads of many men around. Hakon did not exclude himself, and his ears felt oddly hot as she glanced down at his waist, her cheeks burning red.

Did she see me naked? Hakon wondered, not quite sure if he should be happy about that or not.

He had nothing to hide, but that was not exactly the way he expected Astrid to see him naked for the first time.

And now everyone had seen him naked. That thought made him smile. There was nothing to be embarrassed about, after all. If anything, many men were bound to be jealous of him.

“Great entrance.” Björn emerged from the crowd with a toothy smile.

He slapped Hakon on the back, his eyes focused on his friend’s chest.

“Good. You did it.” Björn pumped his biceps, revealing an intricate etching spread across his upper arm.

“You reached the 1st Ascension?” Hakon sighed exaggeratedly and put on a sad farce. “That means everyone else reached the 1st Ascension as well? If *you* made it, the others–”

Björn growled at him and pulled Hakon into a light chokehold. “What did you say? You did not say what I think you did, right?”

“I think your ears are fine.” Hakon infused mana into his fingers and stabbed Björn in the side.

The bear-like man groaned in pain and released his friend, eyes filled with betrayal.

Ignoring Björn the Bear’s antics, Hakon glanced at Astrid, his ears still hot as fire. “How about you?”

She just smiled, her blush receding slowly.

“Astrid won’t tell me. She did ascend, though,” Björn grumbled in between two groans.

Hakon expected as much.

“The others?” he asked while using [Inspection] on the gathered youth.

What he saw was not particularly impressive. Most Barbarians participating in the Battle of Generation weren’t much of a threat. Even [Inspection] said as much. It was nothing, really. Except for the information he received from using [Inspection] on two Barbarians.

[Barbarian – High Threat (1st Ascension)]

The first was Astrid. He anticipated she would be powerful. Her presence screamed danger, which brought a smile to his lips.

The second information was not as great. It was the message he received when he inspected Ulfar. He, too, was a High Threat, but that was not the problem.

[Barbarian – High Threat (1st Ascension)]

How he reached the 1st Ascension without losing control to the Behemoth Blood, Hakon couldn’t tell. It made no sense. Yet, that was exactly what happened. Hakon doubted [Inspection]’s information not even for a fraction of a second.

It was true, and it was the worst possible case.

Ulfar turned to Hakon, his lips parting to a vicious smile. One that smelled of death and blood.

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CHAPTER 20

“Children of our blood, the Ancestors see you, and they remember every name that shaped our kind,” the Shaman intoned, voice heavy with implication. “Today you fight not for yourself but for the Ancestors and the Great One.”

He spread his arms wide, his etchings glowing ever so faintly as a heavy pressure descended upon all of them. “Show them what our people are made of. What they died for. Make them proud. Shed the blood of your enemies in their names!”

The Shaman didn’t stop there. However, his voice changed tune, the words coming out of his mouth could no longer be understood. They were a gibberish mess to the ears of all those around Hakon, yet they made his hair stand on end. His heart raced, his excitement rising, and he was not the only one.

Hakon felt something brush against his skin and activated [Mana Sense]. Mana, pure and wild, flowed past him. It surged in all directions, its presence affecting all those it reached, yet it never stopped, continuing to move outward. Seeking the source of the wild mana, Hakon redirected his focus to the Shaman. But while the Shaman was shrouded in wild mana, he was not its source. The origin of the wild mana was behind the Shaman, towering high and mighty.

The Monolith.

Lost in the beauty of pureness and the danger of the wild, he couldn’t cast his gaze aside. He was bewitched, wild mana pumping all over the Monolith’s golden etchings like life itself.

“Boring,” Björn’s voice came from the side, pulling Hakon back to his senses.

Only then did he realize that the Battle of Generation had already started. Two young warriors were already called on to the stage, their bare chests pushed out in an imposing manner. Or so it should have been. Instead, they looked weird as they pumped their chests out way too much.

“What are they? Birds trying to impress potential mates?” Astrid shook her head in disgust.

Hakon remained silent, trying to analyze the young warriors for telltales of the 1st Ascension, Bloodbearer powers, as well as changes induced by newly acquired Skills. While it was difficult at first, he used [Combat Awareness] and [Inspection] when combat started. [Weakness Detection] triggered on its own, pinpointing a dozen areas both warriors didn’t bother guarding. Instead, they charged at each other.

They wielded swords of similar size, height, and quality, and neither bothered with protective gear. No warrior wore more than one piece of armor. Even that was oftentimes frowned upon.

Regardless, the warriors were not particularly powerful. Neither had reached the 1st Ascension. Their physical might was still admirable, though considering both were Bloodbearers of Giant Blood, it was mediocre at best.

“Low Bloodline potency,” Hakon muttered to himself before circulating mana into his eyes. He didn’t bother with [Circulation] but the traces of mana that lingered in his eyes improved his vision anyway.

A Skill to improve my vision would be useful, he mused and made a mental note.

“They’re still Bloodbearers. Unlike *you*, boarface!” someone behind him grunted.

“So?” Hakon asked, not even bothering to turn around. He knew the voice’s owner, and it did not surprise him in the slightest. Ulfar’s friends. One of the clingy ones. His name was of no importance. ‘Fool 1’ was probably more fitting anyway.

“Their might is greater than yours, boarface!” Fool 1 growled. “They are stronger than you ever will be!”

Neither Astrid nor Björn liked what they heard. Björn turned around with a red face, his large hands reaching for the oversized handaxes hanging by his side, but Astrid was faster. She was a flash, a river of blood and pain

as she lunged, her fist connecting with Fool 1’s face. A sickening crack rang out, followed by a pained yelp.

Meanwhile, the battle on the stage continued as the two brutes struck each other head-on. There was little tactic involved in their movements. They relied on their physical strength and the power granted by Levels to overpower their foe. Alas, it looked like they were both at the same Level. Even their [Sword Mastery] didn’t appear much different.

It was almost ridiculous to watch as the warriors exchanged one cut with another. They wounded each other, though neither seemed to mind as their Bloodline attuned bodies regenerated rapidly.

“Did they only acquire [Sword Mastery]?” Hakon muttered, while the chaos behind him continued. Astrid had already returned to his side, but Björn wasn’t done yet.

“You are not a boarface. I think you look good. Great. Much better than those brutes.” Her voice rang in his ears, low and… hesitant?

He turned to Astrid’s beet-red face, their eyes meeting for the faintest fraction of a second before she turned back to the battle, turning even redder than before.

“I’m happy to hear that.” Hakon’s waist bumped into Astrid’s. “But you look even better.”

Normally, he would have returned to watch the battle. Leave the situation as is. There were more important matters to take care of, after all. But somehow, Hakon couldn’t be bothered. His gaze lingered on Astrid, her abashed face stirring something that had been sealed deep in his heart for as long as he could remember.

He leaned closer to her face, his heartbeat loud enough to swallow the world’s sounds and whispered gently into her ear, “You are the most beautiful woman in the tribe.”

Astrid froze. Then the corner of her lip curled up.

“Only beautiful?” She turned her face to meet his eyes before he could fully back up, a hint of temptation sparking within them.

“Of course, not.” Hakon laughed. “You are the strongest as well. Or you will be once you beat your mother.”

Astrid grunted something incomprehensible and flicked Hakon’s forehead, yet she looked mostly satisfied with the answer. Her waist brushed Hakon’s and she didn’t separate right away. Astrid leaned into him for a moment.

“You guys can mate later. Not now.” Björn appeared beside them, his fists covered in blood. A glimpse back showed Fool 1 on the ground, his face resembling a boar’s after one too many run-ins with massive trees.

His eyes were shining from his clash with Fool 1, but he tried, and failed, to look gruff. Like he hadn’t been rooting for Astrid and Hakon for cycles.

Turning back to the stage, the winner of the first battle left with a limp. He was covered in cuts and deeper gashes that were slowly healing, but the amount of blood spurting all around him was staggering. The Bloodbearer’s improved regeneration was likely the only reason he was still standing.

His foe had to be carried to a younger Barbarian waiting beside the Shaman. Emerald light came from the Healer’s hands, mending the fallen warrior’s wounds.

“Looks like he will make it,” Hakon said evenly as blood spurted from the wide-open wound on the warrior’s neck.

“Even if he does, he lost the Battle of Generation.” Astrid shrugged, not even gracing the fallen warrior with a second glance.

No matter what happened next, those who lost the Battle of Generation, the first round specifically, had disgraced themselves in front of the Ancestors. From this night onward, they would be seen as the weakest of their generation. To change that, they would have to accomplish a great Feat. Conquer Fractures and hunt the greatest horrors. All that just to erase the disgrace. Remove it from their Saga.

“What if I lose?” Hakon asked, which earned him a glare.

“You won’t lose,” she stated matter-of-factly.

“I’m no Bloodbearer,” he said calmly.

“So what?” Astrid narrowed her eyes at him, irritation seeping into her voice. “You are you. The Ancestors know that too.”

“The Mind,” Björn muttered beside them, his expression grim.

“Do you have a problem with that?” Astrid snapped, her eyes taking on a crimson touch. Bloodlust oozed from her eyes, prompting Björn to raise his hands.

“How about you rein your tigress?” He looked at Hakon, who only shrugged.

“She is not my tigress…” Hakon said, while Astrid’s crimson eyes flicked to him, making him smile, “…yet. Also, I don’t think I can or want

to control her. If you annoy her enough to get attacked, I would probably cheer for her rather than trying to stop her. I do not want to die just yet."

That seemed to satisfy Astrid. It was also enough to push Björn into letting out a few curses. He mentioned mating a lot more often than necessary, the mischievousness in his gaze as obvious as always, but that was all there was.

Until he was called to the stage alongside the young warrior who'd awakened as a Rootkeeper.

"I will be back in a minute." Björn smiled predatorily and cracked his knuckles in anticipation.

"Don't make fun of him," Hakon said, slowing his friend. "I am serious. Even if the Ancestors have chosen a different path for him, he is still useful to the tribe. If you disgrace him, he may leave the tribe, leaving us with one less Rootkeeper to tend our fields."

While Barbarians rarely left the tribe they were born in, it had happened in the past. More times than not, their departure stirred trouble. Caused problems that could have been easily avoided if the Bloodbearers and Blessed warriors hadn't acted on their superiority.

They were a tribe of fighters, but he clearly remembered his mother saying that all tribesmen were important. That they required a tight-knit community to grow even more powerful.

Every tribesman was important, whether they fought to shed blood for the Ancestors or not. It was just that the Taskur tribe seemed to have forgotten that. Or maybe it was just the younger generation.

I will make sure they understand.

The Mind was ridiculed. It was not a power worthy of the Barbarians' recognition. That was foolish. Maybe even beyond foolish.

Enhanced Comprehension was powerful. Incredibly so, yet his own people made fun of him for that. They thought lightly of him. Even Björn wasn't taking him seriously. Hakon could tell the bear-like man was disappointed. He couldn't understand how the Ancestors could have picked the Mind for his friend.

He didn't understand that Enhanced Comprehension was the best Hakon could have wished for.

"I see." Björn scowled, clearly unable to understand what Hakon just said, and walked on to the stage.

The Rootkeeper was ready, spear brandished. He, too, had trained to fight monsters and beasts for cycles. Alas, the Ancestors had a different path in mind. Be that as it may, the Rootkeeper did not suddenly lose the strength he'd acquired from cycles of hard work.

Unfortunately, acquiring combat-based Skills with a Rootkeeper power was difficult. Not impossible, but it was at least twice as difficult for a Rootkeeper. In the same instance, he could learn how to tend to a field or take care of livestock with ease, depending on the nature of his Rootkeeper power.

As for those with Blessed powers or Bloodlines, their bodies were treasures. They'd easily learn Skills closely related to their powers. The Blessing of the Bear enhanced Björn's endurance and power greatly. He let out a roar that reverberated throughout the tribehold center, forcing all eyes toward him as soon as the fight began. Then he charged, the ground beneath him shaking.

The Rootkeeper stood no chance. Not that it surprised Hakon. It would have been more surprising if the Rootkeeper earned more than two or three Levels since the Rite. And only that because he tended to a field or hunted a few weaker beasts without the help of the Ancestors' Skills.

As for Björn, he was a deadly weapon in every possible way. He was a ginormous bear, his massive handaxes tearing through the Rootkeeper's spear first and the Rootkeeper's chest next.

"Too much, Björn. Too much," Hakon grumbled, rubbing his nose bridge in frustration.

If he was to become the next chieftain, something had to change. And he was given the perfect opportunity to do so with the Battle of Generation.

All he had to do was to crush everyone.

Simple, right?

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CHAPTER 21

Hakon's foe was another of Ulfar's friends. A Giant Blood warrior, his frame as wide as it was tall.

He was shorter than the average Barbarian, but his muscles were all the more tougher.

Fool 2 was his name, simply because he made fun of Hakon when he hadn't even reached the 1st Ascension yet.

"I crush you, Hakon!" He growled, his muscles bulging as he triggered a Skill. It was hard to tell the details, but [Mana Sense] revealed a shift in the ambient mana. It was subtle and interested Hakon a lot more than his enemy.

He's using Lifeblood, is he not? After all he'd experienced, Hakon was confident that Lifeblood and mana were the same. Only the application was different. One was internal and used a warrior's Ancient Power, the other was something everyone could use. Or should.

Fool 2 must have noticed something because he grew angrier than before. His fingers cracked as his grip around his massive mace tightened. Then he charged, starting the battle in front of the Ancestors.

Hakon hefted Crusher on his shoulder and kept it on him. He sidestepped the Giant Blood warrior's charge, twisted his upper body slightly to the side, and burst into action only when the mace barreled past him. [Weakness Detection] flooded his mind with information, pinpointing more than a dozen weak spots, and Hakon focused on one. His free hand shot toward the warrior's neck, mana pumping through his fingers as he chopped Fool 2's neck.

Fool 2’s eyes rolled up until only the white could be seen and his body stiffened. The Giant Blood warrior collapsed, ending the battle before it even started.

Resounding silence was all that followed. There was no thunderous applause, no excited roars. Only utter silence that stretched far beyond the stage.

“What?” one of the warriors whisper-shouted, his voice traveling far and wide.

“Strong! I knew you had it in you, Hakon!” Björn’s thunderous shout shattered the silence, and silent murmurs filled the tribehold.

Hakon smiled at his friends, eyes lingering on Astrid’s calm figure a little longer. She didn’t appear surprised, unlike Björn who looked like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

Astrid gestured with her head toward the other side of the stage, her lips curling into a mesmerizing smile.

Hakon walked to the edge of the stage to rejoin his friends but came to a halt when he met Ulfar’s gaze. What he saw was raw anger and unfiltered hatred. He wasn’t even trying to hide his pure hate for Hakon at this point. That was new, so was the presence he emitted. It was heavy even from a distance, and it was almost certainly not Ulfar’s doing.

“He’s not in full control of his Bloodline, is he?” Hakon mused quietly to himself, the corner of his lips curling upward.

It was not a massive smile, but it was enough to further infuriate Ulfar. The Bloodbearer leaped onto the stage, the impact cracking the stage open.

“Fight me, Hakon!” Ulfar half-snarled, half-slurred. “Let us end the rivalry of our parents once and for all! SHOW ME that strength of yours and let me crush you to reveal to everyone that I am the better of the two of us!”

“We will fight.” Hakon nodded, batting off the presence as it embraced him. “But not now. The Shaman will decide when it’s our time to fight under the Ancestors’ watch.”

This was not Ulfar’s decision. It was not his call. Not even the chieftain had the authority to do such a thing.

“Move or I will remove you,” Hakon’s father growled, taking a step toward the stage. A crimson hue oozed from his body, rage amplifying the Runeskin’s power.

Ulfar snorted and didn’t back off. Instead, he turned to the chieftain and took a stride toward him, lips curling into a predatory smile.

“Or you will do what exactly?” He let out a guttural growl.

“He’s lost his mind.” Björn shook his head like many others.

It didn’t look like that to Hakon. If anything, it felt like Ulfar was fighting himself. The Behemoth Blood, to be precise. He hadn’t lost it yet, although it was obvious the Behemoth Blood was getting to him. It feasted on Ulfar’s insecurities and his desire to beat Hakon, pushing him to let loose and crush his competition. And it was all for one reason: To show that his family deserved to rule the tribe. To resolve the issue his family had with the line of Taskur warriors.

Beating Hakon was only the first step; a necessary step to display their family line’s superiority. *If* they really were superior. The chieftain, for one, was much stronger than Ulfar’s father.

Regardless–

A cacophony of disappointed grunts and angry curses swept across the tribehold center as multiple events occurred at the same time.

First, Ulfar’s reckless, uncontrolled actions tarnished the sacred ritual performed for the Ancestors and the Great One. His foolishness would not yet attract the Ancestors’ ire, but it was sure to come back biting Ulfar and the rest of the tribe.

If they were unlucky, their youngest would have to wait several cycles for their Rite. *Again*.

Nobody wished for that, yet Ulfar’s behavior was only part of the reason the Barbarians acted like they did.

The disrespect was one thing. Ulfar’s loss of control of his power was another. The Ancestors rewarded him with a generous gift. A legendary Ancient Power that awakened only once in many generations. Ulfar was destined to become a powerful warrior, yet he wasted his Ancient Power by allowing it to take control.

Last but not least, Ulfar was as good as dead. Legendary powers were rare. Some would never encounter anyone possessing one. Watching such a person disrespect the chieftain, the challenge issued clear for everyone to hear, was painful.

“No matter how strong Ulfar is, challenging the chieftain? Really?” Björn grunted.

Hakon’s father had reached the 5th Ascension a long time ago. He was the strongest of all warriors of Tribe Taskur. He was seen as an epitome of power even among the other tribes. His presence in the tribe might as well have been the only reason they hadn’t been attacked by enemy tribes as often as their neighbors.

Where’s his father? Hakon searched for Ulfar’s father to rein in his son but failed to find him.

That was odd. Ulfar’s father would never leave his son alone. Not if he knew Ulfar couldn’t control his Ancient Power. Even if Ulfar had full control of the Behemoth Blood, his father would want to watch the Battle of Generation. He’d want nothing more than to see the chieftain’s son lose to his blood. The Mind crushed by Behemoth Blood.

“He may stay on the stage,” the Shaman’s voice cut through the tension.

The chieftain narrowed his eyes at the Shaman but stepped back when their gazes met. This was not the time to further tarnish the sacred ritual. Killing Ulfar would only shift the Ancestors’ wrath toward the chieftain. That he did not want.

Hakon’s father gave way to the Shaman, but Hakon saw the fire in the chieftain’s eyes. This was not yet over. Ulfar would be punished. Later. After the Battle of Generation ended. He’d be lucky to survive the day.

“Control your Blood.” The Shaman turned to Ulfar. “Interrupt the ritual once more, and your blood will be shed to appease the Ancestors’ wrath.”

There was something about his voice that reached Ulfar. His presence retracted and he appeared calmer than before, even if only a little. That was enough for the Shaman, who gestured to yet another Bloodbearer.

A Stone Giant Blood warrior, if the pebbles and soil covering the towering warrior’s skin could be trusted.

He had already reached the 1st Ascension, and he stood taller than any other Barbarian. Not even Ulfar was that tall.

“Do you think Flose has a–” Björn’s question was cut short as Astrid shook her head.

“He’s as good as dead. Ulfar is no longer in control,” she said as Hakon joined them.

She smiled calmly at him, treating the Battle of Generation like it didn’t decide their future, and looked back to the stage in a way that suggested she knew how it would end.

Hakon watched as well, but only after checking out the messages he'd received after his first battle.

[Proficiency gained. [Evasion Lv.10] improved to [Evasion Lv.11]]
[Proficiency gained. [Weakness Detection Lv.11] improved to [Weakness Detection Lv.12]]

At this point, it would surprise him more if his Skills stopped improving. Enhanced Comprehension was active, fueling him with new intents, ideas, and potential ways to test his Skills. To push them in new directions.

He was sure Enhanced Comprehension was also the reason his mana control was so high even if it wasn't quantified in a Skill and Level.

In a way, the Ancient Power did exactly what the Shaman mentioned during the Rite. It was the power of the Mind. It strengthened his mind when all Barbarians knew about was the might of physical strength.

But how exactly did Enhanced Comprehension affect his mind? He now understood that 'Comprehension' was related to his understanding of something. Some details were hard to grasp, but 'Enhanced' in connection to the understanding of a particular topic would only mean that he had an enhanced understanding of something that would have been harder to grasp normally. Or to understand something he already understood more in-depth.

Hakon had used the Mind day and night ever since the Rite, and he planned to keep using it. Mana pumped into his head at his command. Smaller traces swirled through his eyes, further refining his vision momentarily, but most moved through the rest of his head, trying to find the home of the Mind.

But how was he supposed to find that? All he could think of was to try, so he did just that. He tried. He focused on the strands of mana swirling through his head as well as the fight unfurling before him; if one could call it such.

Ulfar massacred his foe. The Stone Giant warrior was tough, his skin firm and his regeneration high, but Ulfar's punches shattered the warrior's skin even as it solidified into thick stone plates.

Ulfar snarled at his opponent, his fists disappearing in a blur until Hakon willed enough mana into his eyes to fill them. From that point

onward, it was much easier to follow the happenings on the stage, and he had no idea whether he liked what he saw or not.

Wet snaps and sickening crunches filtered through muffled murmurs. While quiet at first, the sounds soon overshadowed all the noise around them. It flooded the tribehold center as the Stone Giant's execution continued. Because that is what it was.

Ulfar's fists soon pierced through, digging deep into flesh. But that was only the start. Ulfar pulled the Stone Giant warrior's intestines out of his stomach, their fight continuing as if nothing happened.

"A tenacious fucker," Björn muttered, smiling as he watched the Stone Giant prevail. He recovered rapidly, snatched his intestines out of Ulfar's hands and rammed them back into his body. Then came the headbutt.

The warrior headbutted Ulfar with enough strength to crack his skull. His own skull. Ulfar bled from the impact, his expression feral, but it was the Stone Giant that suffered the most. He stumbled, cursing and groaning, yet his leg swept forward and pulled Ulfar's successfully away.

Feral and once again out of control, Ulfar attacked the warrior more like a beast than a Barbarian. He clawed the warrior, fingers like talons digging into skin as tough as stone. The warrior performed great. Much better than Hakon expected. Alas, he was weaker.

The battle lasted for several minutes and only ended when Ulfar's claws dug into the warrior's chest, digging his heart out. At the same time, feral Ulfar's head snapped down around his opponent's neck and ripped out a chunk of flesh.

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CHAPTER 22

“What do you think?” Astrid asked, utterly calm at the grotesque sight before her. The Stone Giant warrior had been torn apart, his chest ripped wide open and blood spurting from his neck. Ulfar had thrown his heart to the side, his body drenched in the warrior’s blood.

Meanwhile, Astrid’s eyes shimmered, a trace of blood touching her mesmerizing eyes.

“About what?” Hakon responded.

She turned to him with furrowed brows. “You cannot fool me, Hakon. I know you studied him.”

A faint smile tugged at his lips.

“He’s slow.”

“Slow?” Astrid asked.

“Maybe slow is wrong. But Ulfar is tougher than he is strong and stronger than he is fast,” Hakon corrected with a shrug. “His perception is somewhere between his strength and speed, and his fighting style is nothing like it used to be. Wild, impossible to predict. Or so it appears at first glance.”

He wanted to leave it at that, but those mesmerizing eyes never left his side. Astrid didn’t beg for more information, but she was interested. Curiosity got the better of her when Hakon remained silent, and she leaned close enough to feel each other’s breath on another. The air was tense and the world around them lost its importance. All that remained were Astrid and Hakon, their eyes meeting, the wordless exchange saying more than a thousand words could.

Then she pinched him in the side.

“Sneaky.” Hakon snickered, holding Astrid’s gaze for another moment before turning back to Ulfar. Even his friends eyed him with vigilance after what happened on stage. The respect they carried for the man was replaced with fear, and they were not the only ones. Even some of the older warriors turned their attention to Ulfar, his demonstration of power rippling through Tribe Taskur, affecting old and young.

“There is a pattern to his ‘unpredictable’ attacks. It is hard to grasp, but I know it is there,” he explained. “All combined means he is a powerful foe. *And* that he is easier to control than those in tune with their power. Enrage him and his pattern will be much easier to detect. His strength should increase when he loses himself to rage, but being able to predict him in exchange should be more than worth it.”

That was even more important since Ulfar gave up on his weapons. Unarmed combat was powerful. Especially for someone like Ulfar, whose whole body was a weapon of mass destruction. His bones were likely tough enough to shatter regular weapons.

That was probably why his old fighting style no longer worked. Regular weapons were weaker than his body and would likely break before Ulfar could go all out.

Astrid stared at him, digesting what he’d just said, and so did Björn, eyebrows scrunched in obvious confusion.

“You have changed,” Astrid murmured, voice sultry, eyes longing.

Björn only grunted, but he too looked at his friend anew.

Hakon just smiled in response, his attention pulled aside by a series of messages he’d ignored earlier.

[Proficiency gained. [Split Focus Lv.3] improved to [Split Focus Lv.4]]

…

[Proficiency gained. [Split Focus Lv.6] improved to [Split Focus Lv.7]]

The first batch of messages was expected, but it was the next he didn’t anticipate.

[Skill [Sensory Expansion] has been learned.]

It wasn’t even a Skill he wanted to acquire, yet Hakon acquired it anyway as he watched the battle. The first from searching his mind. As for the second, he acquired and improved it as he scrutinized every little detail of Ulfar’s battle.

[Skill [Flow Observation] has been learned.]
[Proficiency gained. [Flow Observation Lv.1] improved to [Flow Observation Lv.2]]

Both Skills cost mana, which he had to pay more attention to now that his reserves were quickly dwindling. He triggered [Sensory Expansion] and used it alongside [Mana Sense] in an attempt to sense the surrounding ambient mana. That turned out to be more difficult than it should have been.

The Monolith’s raw mana was everywhere and overshadowed everything. It consumed all the ambient mana and transferred it into the stage, which resembled the mana mass in his stomach quite a bit. Except that the stage was filled with pure mana and much larger.

Hakon perceived a lot more, but it was hard to dismantle all the information. His head throbbed after a few seconds, and he stopped his Skills even before he could use bursts of [Circulation].

Recovering mana is going to be difficult. But… it should work. He tilted his head, trying to come up with a solution even though his head felt like splitting apart. Alas, what did not kill him only made him stronger. The headache would make his head stronger, all the same.

Ulfar stomped on the Stone Giant warrior’s heart, squashing it before finally stepping off the stage. What an unfortunate soul, the Stone Giant warrior. He had been strong and would have achieved greatness if not for his untimely meeting with Ulfar. The Ancestors had chosen his fate. It had been their decision, and nobody dared to question it.

The stage rumbled as soon as Ulfar left. A blinding light filled to the brim with mana burst into the air, dispelling the darkness of the night, before retracting after a few moments, the corpse of the Stone Giant warrior nowhere to be seen. The stage was clean once more, the cracks repaired.

How? Hakon’s eyes widened, raking his mind to understand what happened, yet all he found were specks of mana that felt unlike anything he’d sensed before. It was almost like they contained light. Like they should

have been shining brightly, only to be invisible to all those around him. All except for himself.

[Proficiency gained. [Mana Sense Lv.10] improved to [Mana Sense Lv.11]]

He released a burst of [Circulation] with as little mana as he could use and reached for the mana specks. His fingers coiled around them easily enough, yet his body wouldn't absorb them as easily. A fraction entered through his palm only to be repelled.

"How weird." Hakon smiled and moved mana through the pathways in his hand. He reached out, releasing mana outside the pathways with some effort, but didn't trigger [Mana Infusion]. The mana specks were his target. He first tried to absorb them, which worked partially when his mana engulfed a portion and dragged back into his body.

This attempt was less efficient than Hakon hoped for, as the majority of his mana poured into the speck, creating a light not unlike the pyre torches.

"What are you doing?" Björn's shoulder rammed into Hakon with enough strength to shatter his concentration.

"What!" he snapped at his friend, who pointed back at the stage.

"Astrid is up there."

Hakon looked to his right where Astrid should have been, but she was no longer by his side. She stood on the stage with the same calm, endearing smile he learned to love all those cycles ago.

Love? He grunted, shaking his head. Did he love Astrid? What even was love?

What his parents had couldn't have been love. If it was, then Hakon would never want to love anyone. No, what he felt for Astrid was different. She was a great partner. A good friend. Trustworthy. Beautiful. *Powerful*.

And that was only part of her. The best, among other things, was that she believed in him. Astrid never looked down on him. Quite the contrary, she watched him train every day for cycles without taking a break. Even when he was wounded from his hunt, Hakon never stopped training. He moved forward, his will as firm as steel even though they couldn't be certain when the Ancestors would favor their tribe once more.

His tenacity inspired others to spend the cycles before their Rite training.

He knew Astrid respected him, yet her trust in him weighted more heavily than everything else.

And… he longed for her. Was that what love meant? Hakon didn't know, but he did not want to lose her. Not that any of that would happen. She was going to win. Even Ulfar would struggle in a fight against Astrid if she played her cards right. She, too, awakened a legendary power, after all!

It didn't surprise Hakon when Astrid charged straight at her opponent, Eren. She was faster, probably even faster than Ulfar, and reached the Lightcaller in a moment. Eren stepped forward, weapons clutched tightly, but his physical strength alone was nowhere near enough to clash with Astrid head-on.

Why isn't he using his power? Hakon narrowed his eyes as Astrid ran her daggers across the Lightcaller's neck. There was no hesitation in her action, and Eren fell victim to it. His eyes widened as a fountain of blood spurted from his neck, yet he did not collapse right away.

He tried to push forward, relying solely on his physical strength, but he was nowhere near the Level of a warrior at the 1st Ascension. Astrid stepped aside when his sword came down at her and stabbed him in the side multiple times.

No more than a few heartbeats later, Eren collapsed to the ground without ever using his Ancient Power. It was disappointing to say the least.

Is he even trying? Hakon grimaced, certain the Lightcaller could have done a lot better. Sure, he wouldn't have won against Astrid being not even at the 1st Ascension. Still…

Astrid turned back to them, her eyes flashing crimson, and walked off the stage as soon as the Shaman ended the battle. A Healer rushed up to the severely bleeding Lightcaller to tend to his wound, emerald light coalescing around him, but whether he'd survive or not was for the Ancestors to decide.

"Good job." Hakon turned away from Eren and smiled at Astrid.

She shrugged lightheartedly. "That was nothing."

The night went on in a similar rhythm. Björn, Astrid, and Ulfar won their next fight as well. Ulfar killed his opponent again; one of his Bloodbearer friends who hadn't even reached his 1st Ascension yet. Björn beat his opponent badly, nearly cutting off an arm, whereas Astrid's battle ended in a heartbeat. She shed less blood this time around.

As for Hakon, his second opponent was at the 1st Ascension. He was no Bloodbearer. Instead, the Barbarian awakened the Ancient Power to conjure one of the weapons forged in the Great One's fire. It was wreathed in flame, its power growing alongside its new owner.

Hefting his own weapon, Hakon couldn't help but wonder how this was going to end.

They charged as soon as the battle started, their roars resounding. The wreathed broadsword was searing hot and left behind a trail of fire as it arced through the air. Hakon activated [Mana Infusion] and Crusher's flat side impacted with tremendous force. That was when he noticed that he was stronger than the Barbarian.

Be it because of [Circulation] or his Level didn't matter much. Hakon spun around, his movement smooth like a running stream and as fast as a raging river. He was in full control of everything occurring around him, his senses stretching farther than ever. Crusher impacted, the rhythm of his movements near perfect.

The Barbarian hurtled across the stage, his sword clattering to the ground. Hakon used [Dash] to catch up to his foe in an instant when [Combat Awareness] spiked. The hair on his neck burned, and he turned to smash Crusher into the flat side of the blazing sword shooting through the air.

The weapon dissipated upon impact, but Hakon was not done. He twisted his body, turned once again, and spun Crusher around and over his head. Then it came down crashing hard, crushing the Barbarian's left leg.

A pained scream echoed across the stage, which Hakon ignored, his eyes as cold as ice.

"Your skull will be next if you don't surrender."

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CHAPTER 23

The warrior screamed at the top of his lungs, his leg crushed to smithereens.

Was that too much? Hakon didn't think so. Barbarians healed fast enough. If anything, the warrior should thank him for granting such a great opportunity to learn [Natural Regeneration] or a similar Skill. He may as well acquire something far greater in a Healer's presence.

Cheers and excited roars pulled him out of his train of thought. He was not yet rewarded with a thunderous commotion following his victory, but more and more Barbarians cheered for him. It was almost like they finally understood there was more to combat than raw strength. That his Ancient Power was not useless!

The Ancestors were satisfied with his fight, so was Astrid and the others.

[Dash] improved by one, while [Sensory Expansion] improved twice in quick succession. A welcome surprise.

Several other Skills felt like they were close to improving. Just thinking about it made Hakon's heart beat faster.

Satisfied, he glanced back to the Healer tending to the squashed leg. The emerald light coming from the Healer's hand caught his attention. Was that mana? The light coming from the stage had also been mana. Even as it dispersed, glowing motes of mana lingered in the air. They grew dimmer and were only visible through [Mana Sense], but that only made them more interesting.

Hakon wanted to reach for the motes and capture them. Maybe even dismantle them to find out what made those motes so different from the

Monolith’s raw mana and regular ambient mana.

The difference between regular mana and the Monolith’s mana was not much different. It interested him how it came to be and how to replicate it. The Monolith’s mana was much purer than regular mana. More potent, like a trace of the Monolith’s mana was worth a handful of the ambient mana. If it was really that powerful, Hakon wanted to wield it as well. But it eluded him. Resisted him and slithered through his fingers and around his body even as he triggered [Circulation] to pull it within him.

Trying the same with more motes of light produced more substantial results. He could only absorb a few motes, whereas the rest glowed brighter as his mana seeped into them.

“What do you have there?” Astrid cocked an eyebrow at him.

Björn looked at the glowing motes with a deep frown and spat on the ground. “He is acting like the Lightcaller!”

Hakon ignored his friends and focused on the motes, both the motes entering his pathways and those resting in his palm. They were quite different, yet all the same, and [Split Focus] triggered to scrutinize the movements of both. Then he dismantled them. At least, he tried to before realizing it required mana.

It was not that he couldn’t dismantle the motes, but it cost mana. A lot of mana from the way it felt. Too much to waste during the Battle of Generation.

Rather than wasting more mana, Hakon reined it in and focused on recovering. That did not stop the heavy sigh escaping his lips.

Slowly, the Battle of Generation headed toward closure. The number of warriors dwindled with every victor. Another round of bloody carnage ended with the untimely death of two young warriors. And once again, one of them fell victim to Ulfar’s brutal fighting style.

It was a mess, and Hakon wondered for the umpteenth time if the Ancestors really wanted all this. To swim in the blood of their descendants, slain by their very own people, but who was he to question the oldest forces? Instead, he studied Ulfar. He watched the man who thirsted for his blood. Hakon went as far as to use some of his replenished mana to use [Sensory Expansion], [Flow Observation], and [Split Focus] while also maintaining [Mana Sense], [Combat Awareness], and [Weakness Detection].

It was the first time he'd used so many Skills simultaneously. It was also the first time his mana split up to empower three Skills at the same time.

He half-expected his head to throb, to be in unbearable pain as he analyzed Ulfar's short, yet all the more brutal, fight. But that did not happen. Hakon felt the pressure of every Skill used, adding up and transforming into a constant stream of pressure. That was all. The pressure did not worsen, nor did it lighten even as they improved. All he noticed was a stark improvement in the information he received… and his mana reserve dropping a little too fast for his liking.

Alas, the fight ended quickly, and Hakon deactivated most Skills. He only left [Mana Sense] and [Combat Awareness] active, his attention on Ulfar. His feral state didn't abate. If anything, it felt like Ulfar leaned more heavily into it, greedily absorbing the power Behemoth Blood provided.

Only eight warriors remained when the next round started. Three more fights, three wins, and the greatest warrior of the youngest generation would be decided.

Hakon's goal was so close. It was within reach, his progress far surpassing what the others thought he would achieve. Even his father looked at him differently. He was calm, his expression the same as always, but something deep within his dark eyes had changed.

He finally saw his son. Recognized him.

"The final spurt may commence," the Shaman intoned, his voice booming across the tribehold center. "The Ancestors are excited. They praise the power the youngest warriors earned in such a short time. In half a fortnight, two dozen warriors acquired the Ancestors' favor through challenges lethal and awe-inspiring. But they want more. They wish to witness the rise of the next Warlord on this very stage."

The Monolith's golden etching glowed vibrantly, illuminating the stage in a golden hue. It shimmered with more potent mana than Hakon had ever seen.

He let out a burst of [Circulation] without a second thought, his mind reaching out to the feast. And it caved in. The golden hue bent and shot toward him. It embraced him and flooded his pathways with more mana than the mana mass near his stomach could hoard.

He didn't waste a second and erupted with [Circulation]'s full power. Several other mana-based Skills triggered at his behest, yet it was still not

enough. His pathways were flooded with mana, so he used [Mana Infusion] and pumped all excess mana into Crusher.

Next up was a defiant roar from the other side of the stage. Ulfar growled, his hand shooting toward the golden hue. It resisted the invasive force, but only momentarily. The hue embraced Ulfar next. Then came Astrid and Björn. The golden hue coated them gently, followed by the remaining warriors.

“The Ancestors have spoken.” The Shaman’s lips parted into a brilliant smile. “The Battle of Generation will end with a final battle. A desperate struggle to determine the aspirant to the Warlord title.”

The last part was different than before, but nobody seemed to notice. All the Barbarians could hear was the next part.

“Step onto the stage and fight for your right to become the next Warlord.” The Shaman’s gaze drifted across the remaining warriors, his smile almost blinding.

Ulfar was the first to move. He cracked the stone floor as he leaped onto the stage. Looking back at his lackeys, he watched them hesitate and snarled. His figure blurred and he appeared before one of the Bloodbearers, piercing his throat with a flat hand… covered in scales?

Hakon frowned, and he was not the only one. The Bloodbearer reached for his throat. His eyes grew wide and he clung onto Ulfar’s hand. Ulfar didn’t care. He stared the warrior deep in the eyes and ripped his throat out.

“On the stage. Now!” He growled as his lackey collapsed to the ground, dying. The Healer appeared within a few heartbeats, but the emerald hue coating his hand dispersed shortly after. The Healer looked back up at the Shaman and shook his head. The Bloodbearer was dead.

Ulfar returned to the stage, his lackeys following unwillingly. They stayed as far as possible from him, yet close enough to escape his wrath. They stared at him in confusion, betrayal, but also disappointment and disgust. Ulfar was no longer the same man they once sworn to follow. He was a monster in Barbarian skin.

Others looked like they thought similarly. Ulfar had to be stopped. He couldn’t become the Warlord promised by the Ancestors. If he was, their tribe would be lost.

“Are you worried?” Astrid asked almost accusingly.

“Worried? That is not the right word.” Hakon shook his head. “I’m just wondering what the Ancestors were thinking when they gave Ulfar his

power.”

“Do not think badly of the Ancestors,” Björn grunted, tightly gripping his large axes. “Their actions may be confusing at times, but they always make sense.”

Did they? Hakon shrugged with a smile.

“Can you kill him?” Björn added.

“Can you?”

“No.” As bitter as it sounded at times, Björn the Bear spoke his mind. His words rang sincere, but the confidence and overwhelming determination never left his face. “But I can injure him. My axes will drink in his blood.”

Björn glanced back at them. “I will fight him first. You take care of the other idiots.”

“Of course, you take the big fish while we have to get rid of the nasty ones.” Astrid snorted, yet a faint smile tugged at her lips.

“Sounds good to me. Four versus three.” Hakon nodded. “Ulfar shouldn’t have killed Teca. Then again, five versus three doesn’t improve his chances a lot.”

Astrid chuckled. “He should have brought an army to the Battle of Generation to win.”

“He *is* an army,” Björn grunted, not quite liking Hakon and Astrid’s light banter.

That was true. Ulfar was a problem. He was more than willing to kill everyone to achieve his goal, and he had the power to do so.

But something had changed in the final spurt of the Battle of Generation. Two forces formed to clash in front of the Ancestors, and Hakon did not think about the possibility of losing. It didn’t even cross his mind.

Victory was all he could think of.

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CHAPTER 24

The grand final of the Battle of Generation started with booming roars and excitement that reached every corner of the tribehold. Ulfar and his friends expanded as their Ancient Power triggered. A cacophony of cracking bones echoed, followed by the sight of massively bulging muscles.

Then came their presence. Ulfar's presence engulfed the entire stage and pressed down on everyone, allies included.

The Giant Blood warriors grunted and stepped to the side until their presence blocked Ulfar's. Hakon couldn't sense the Giant Blood warriors' presence as easily as Ulfar's, but by using [Inspection] and [Sensory Expansion], he discerned ripples of energy. 'Lifeblood' erupted from within and clashed with one another.

He topped up on his discovery with [Flow Observation] and [Weakness Detection], which also triggered [Split Focus]. His mana reserves trickled down quickly, but the things Hakon learned were worth it.

Ulfar stirred first. He leaped into action the moment the Shaman started the battle. The stone stage cracked underfoot as Ulfar charged ahead. Eyes narrowed, Hakon studied his rival, Crusher hefted, not an ounce of worry emitting from his body.

Björn barreled past him and Astrid, his axes clutched with iron-tight grips.

Hair grew from Björn's massive body at a visible pace, and it did not take long before a wild, seemingly uncontrollable presence shrouded him.

A Skill that uses his Blessing, Hakon recognized, all while maintaining his Skills for a few more seconds. Barely long enough to witness Ulfar and Björn's first clash.

Ulfar punched out in a casual manner. The air around his fist rippled and distorted as it burst out. Björn didn't slow. He executed a quick cross-slash aimed at Ulfar's fist. That turned out to do a lot less damage than Björn expected.

The Blessed Barbarian's brows furrowed when Ulfar's fist did not turn into a mass of blood and bones. The only damage his axes inflicted was a pair of scratches that barely bled. And the bleeding stopped after a droplet of blood trickled onto the stage.

Instead, Björn's axes suffered greatly. One of them was chipped in the collision. While not rendered useless, one more punch aimed at the right spot would certainly destroy the axe. Björn's tactic changed immediately. He shifted to a more defensive stance when he realized just how tough Ulfar was.

Tougher than he is strong, stronger than he is fast, Hakon repeated in his head as a familiar sense of wrongness embedded itself into his mind.

[Proficiency gained. [Flow Observation Lv.2] improved to [Flow Observation Lv.3]]

He discarded the notification and deactivated most Skills. He only maintained [Weakness Detection] and [Split Focus] as his attention shifted away from Björn.

Hakon trusted that Björn the Bear would stall Ulfar no matter what. Even if it meant he would lose, Björn would fight Ulfar and his legendary Ancient Power with all he had. And he would add it to his wall of achievements. That much was clear as day.

Astrid was already amidst the Giant Blood warriors. She engaged with two simultaneously, twisting and turning her body in angles Hakon didn't think were possible for a Barbarian. Astrid evaded most lethal attacks but allowed the Giant Blood warriors to cut into her. Though whenever they did, the attacks never caused more than light to mild injuries.

Astrid was in full control of her fight. She sustained wounds, but her counterattacks inflicted far more pain and suffering. And for every drop of blood she or her enemies spilled, Astrid grew faster. A crimson hue oozed from her, and it only grew denser as her fight with the two Giant Blood warriors intensified.

[Split Focus] helped him keep tabs on the third and last Giant Blood warrior. [Inspection] determined him to be the strongest of all warriors earlier. Except for Astrid and Ulfar, of course. Björn had received the same danger rating as the third Giant Blood warrior, which was good enough for Hakon.

He watched the warrior's body expand and caught him glancing at Astrid in a way he did not like at all. The warrior readied his broadsword and charged at Astrid, ready to break her rhythm.

"No, you won't," Hakon growled, triggering [Circulation] and [Dash].

He burst into action, his movements smooth and his mana flowing without restraint, and crossed the distance to his opponent in a moment.

[Combat Awareness] flared as the Giant Blood warrior changed his target to Hakon. His sword swung down, and Hakon had to use [Evasion] to leap to the side. Rolling over the ground, he nearly lost his grasp on the Maulaxe Crusher. He leaped to his feet and swung Crusher upward, the weapon thrumming with mana.

[Weapon Mastery] and [Mana Infusion] triggered seamlessly, and the flat maul-side of Crusher impacted. The sound of cracking bones echoed as Crusher crushed the warrior's hand. The Giant Blood warrior roared in pain and anger and instinctively closed the distance, blocking Hakon's use of Crusher, and even his own weapon.

The broadsword clattered to the ground, but Hakon did not follow. He didn't release Crusher. He found something curious with [Weakness Detection], shifted Crusher to face the opponent with the bladed side, and released one hand from the handle to hold the flat back. Adjusting his stance and grip only took a second, and he rammed Crusher's mana-infused blade into the approaching Giant Blood warrior.

His foe was faster, stronger, and tougher when it came to raw physical power, but the Battle of Generation was not that mindless. Not when a Barbarian with an Ancient Power of the Mind was part of it.

Hakon seized the opportunity and watched his opponent try to grapple him. It looked almost like he didn't even notice the blade in his chest at first. The excitement of battle and the integrated pain resistance of his Ancient Power blocked it all out. It might even strengthen him as the warrior grew more powerful.

His muscles bulged, and he almost grabbed Hakon by the shoulders when Hakon let out a burst of [Circulation] alongside [Evasion].

I’m using too much mana, he told himself as his reserves trickled down.

Thus, he twisted Crusher’s bladed side and pulled downward.

Hakon never intended to kill an opponent in the Battle of Generation. They needed as many warriors as possible in the upcoming cycles, but victory was more important.

“The Healer will take good care of you,” Hakon muttered, falling back when the Giant Blood warrior pushed forward, roaring at the top of his lungs.

He allowed the opponent to hit him once, and then a second time when the Runeskin etchings on his chest began to glow, then ended the fight by piercing the warrior’s side with his flat hand; another combination of [Circulation] and [Mana Infusion].

The warrior collapsed when Hakon struck yet another weak point his other Skill discovered, yet he did not stop moving until Hakon ripped Crusher out of his chest.

It was not until he hurled the warrior from the stage that the Healer rushed to tend to him, emerald light oozing from his palms.

“That leaves two… One more warrior,” Hakon muttered to himself as he turned back to the others.

He licked his lower lip, seeing Astrid demolish the Giant Blood warriors. One of them was already on the ground, writhing in his own blood, while the other was being played with. Astrid was truly terrifying. She was a monster in Barbarian skin. Beautiful and terrifying at the same time. Truly mesmerizing.

Hakon smiled, but it cracked as soon as he looked over to Björn and Ulfar fighting on the other side of the stage. Remains of Björn’s axes were strewn across the stage, leaving him with no more than handles to fight with. He’d released them and fought with his fists, but for every punch that hit the mark, Björn received one in return. And while Björn was one of the strongest young warriors of Tribe Taskur, Ulfar’s physical attributes were much greater.

Björn’s chest had been caved inward, and his upper body was black and blue rather than tan. Yet he kept smiling even when Ulfar’s rapid punches broke his nose and cheekbone, which only seemed to infuriate the wielder of Behemoth Blood.

Ulfar was frantic. He’d pushed Björn to the edge of the stage but didn’t want him to fall down and lose. Ulfar wanted to see Björn dead and tried to

grab him, but that failed several times in a row. His punches grew even more destructive.

“You did well,” Hakon called out, emerging behind Ulfar with Crusher raised to strike.

Maintaining most of his Skills at the expense of his mental energy and mana, his weapon vibrating with tremendous force, Crusher barreled downward, its bladed side aimed at Ulfar’s neck.

After tarnishing the Ancestors’ sacred ritual, his blood had to be spilled. Either Hakon would do it, or the chieftain would punish him. One way or another, Ulfar was not allowed to win.

But nobody told him that.

Ulfar was mid-strike when Hakon’s voice rang out. He whipped around, eyes filled with wrath when they met Hakon’s. His hair stood on end, which seemed to surprise Ulfar more than anyone present. Then came the scales.

Scales covered his arms as he whipped them upward to block the incoming blow.

Blood spilled, but it was too little. Hakon had hoped for more. Maybe even to sever an arm.

Instead, Crusher penetrated the scales on Ulfar’s arm and slowed. It dug only a few centimeters before the attack came to a halt.

“Too weak,” Ulfar grunted, the corner of his lip curling up into a snarl. “Someone like you is never going to become the next chieftain!”

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CHAPTER 25

Hakon tried to twist Crusher's blade and pull it out, but Ulfar's muscles went stiff as steel and held on to it. The corner of his lips curled upward as he loosened one of his arms and shot forward.

A prodding in the back of his mind warned Hakon. He barely managed to let go of Crusher's flat side when Ulfar's scaled arm shot past him.

Ulfar clicked his tongue before moving on to grab Crusher's handle instead. His grip was iron-tight, and it only grew firmer as he applied force to the Maulaxe Crusher, enough to crack the scales covering his knuckles.

But rather than breaking, Crusher prevailed. Ulfar's smug smile cracked.

In the next moment, Astrid appeared beside them, her clothes drenched in blood, her body covered in cuts.

"Don't intervene," Ulfar growled, yanking Crusher to the side and punching Astrid. She twisted her body in ways that shouldn't have been possible, and evaded the punch, only to leave two deep marks on his forearm in return.

Her blades flashed dangerously, which was only augmented by the crimson hue pouring out of her.

Astrid moved fast. She swirled around Ulfar like a threat, her blade thirsting for Behemoth Blood.

Blood Fury, her Ancient Power, clearly augmented her physical characteristics greatly, yet it was the way she moved that allowed the execution of movements that shouldn't have been possible. [Flow Observation] triggered momentarily as the prodding in the back of Hakon's mind resurfaced, and he learned something new.

Astrid’s Runeskin. He didn’t know what exactly her Runeskin did, but he had no doubt she possessed one. Hakon also noticed that her Runeskin absorbed the crimson hue around her.

As to how she acquired a Runeskin compatible with Blood Fury, he didn’t know. Symbiotic relationships between Runeskins and Ancient Powers were not unheard of, though they were rare. They were certainly not something one would find in half a fortnight, not if they weren’t blessed by the Ancestors’ fortune.

Good job, Hakon called out, even when Ulfar tore Crusher out of his arm. The mana within the weapon erupted and seemed to bother Ulfar more than Astrid’s attacks. He went so far as to hurl the Maulaxe Crusher out of the stage, nearly hitting an older Barbarian in the process, then blocked Astrid.

Her eyes narrowed at him, displeasure crossing her features. A portion of the crimson hue around her was sucked into the Runeskin concealed by the hair cascading down her back. A moment later, she accelerated. Her blades turned into a blur that promised death, her limbs twisting and turning in ways neither [Flow Observation] nor [Sensory Expansion] could fathom.

More cuts covered Ulfar’s arms and chest, but his skin was tough and his regeneration greater than a Giant Blood warrior’s. His lips curled upward once more, and he attacked Astrid with a punch that cracked the air around him.

It was just that he never struck Astrid. Hakon erupted with [Dash] and rejoined the battle. Ulfar struck Hakon’s arms instead of Astrid, and it didn’t take long before the sound of cracking bones resounded.

Hakon groaned and grimaced. Not even [Circulation] was enough to augment his arms to be able to block the impacting force. He activated [Natural Regeneration] and refocused on a burst of [Circulation] as he kicked out with [Weapon Mastery]’s aid.

Ulfar didn’t bother blocking Hakon’s attacks. The kick came through without issue, and it caused no damage. Ulfar just smiled and punched back.

Enhanced Comprehension helped him use and improve on [Combat Awareness] and [Flow Observation] to dictate what his opponent was going to do, but Hakon didn’t evade the attack even when he saw it coming. He used [Evasion] and twisted his body to the side, leaving Ulfar just enough space to strike his chest. Barely.

It was painful, and Hakon could have sworn something broke again, but his movement wasn't restricted. The pain faded quickly as soothing mana swirled through his chest. Even his arms felt much better.

Feels fine to me.

It probably wasn't fine at all, but Hakon moved onward either way. He felt for his Runeskin and nodded inwardly when everything worked as it should. Ulfar struck him twice more after that, only to grow increasingly irritated. After all, his attacks weren't aimed at Hakon. His attention lingered on Astrid now that she was the bigger threat.

As for Björn, the warrior with the Bear Blessing, he was forgotten until he returned in wild fashion. Hakon couldn't quite tell what happened to his friend, because he was busy blocking Ulfar and enraging him, but Björn was furious. He jumped on Ulfar's back, put him in a chokehold, and bit his ear off.

That was Ulfar's last straw. He threw Björn over his shoulder and onto Astrid, who nearly stabbed her friend to get to Ulfar. But she hesitated and twisted out of Björn's way, only to be struck by Björn's foot. It was an accident, but it cost them dearly.

Björn crashed hard into the stone stage, his features feral, his bloodlust unlike the warrior Hakon remembered. Ulfar snarled at Björn, his eyes shifting golden and serpentine. Then came Ulfar's bloodlust. It overwhelmed Björn's by leagues and crushed it. Björn regained his composure, but only for a moment. In the next, Ulfar kicked his head, snapping it to the side.

A crack echoed across the stage, telling a tale yet to be told.

"Nooo!" Hakon roared aloud, leaping at Ulfar, pulling him away from Björn, unable to tell whether his friend was unconscious or dead.

The next few heartbeats were a sprawling mess. Hakon kicked and punched Ulfar, who returned the violence in kind. Bones cracked and shattered, and it didn't take long to understand whose bones suffered the most.

Hakon's. He was the only one suffering. Ulfar kicked him off his chest after landing enough blows to render most young warriors unable to keep fighting.

Hakon fell onto his backside but leaped to his feet right away. [Natural Regeneration] was at its limits. The Skill tried to hold Hakon together,

which grew more and more difficult as the wounds across his body became more numerous. But Hakon did not surrender.

He glanced to the side to see Astrid pull Björn from the stage.

So he's alive. Hakon nodded to himself.

Astrid would be back shortly. She'd rejoin the battle and ensure their victory. But was that really what he wanted?

Ulfar was his opponent. They had been rivals for as long as Hakon could remember. Defeating him in the Battle of Generation would put their rivalry aside once and for all. It would decide who had the most potential. But all of that would be for naught if he could only win with Astrid's help.

Yet, alone… he was not strong enough to deal with Ulfar. It was too hard to injure him and the injuries he did suffer healed much faster than [Natural Regeneration] at Level 11 could. His Ancient Power was simply too powerful. It wasn't something Enhanced Comprehension could keep up with.

Not when he had only half a fortnight to learn more about the Ancient Power. He needed more time to work against the massive advantage Bloodbearers gained from awakening their Ancient Power.

Glancing down at his chest, Hakon grimaced. As much as he disliked testing new things on such important occasions, it may be the only thing he could do.

His Runeskin glowed brilliantly. Part of it did, to be precise. It was charging, using the very power that had impacted Hakon's body, breaking his bones.

It absorbed the impact generated by Ulfar's punches and hoarded it. Just like the Colossal Terror did when Hakon cracked its skull with Crusher.

And now, Hakon needed to figure out how to use it to crush Ulfar.

Do I need more… He shrugged inwardly.

More sounds good. The more the better.

Several Scriptures popped up, but there was no time to study them. Ulfar's muscles bulged and he barreled ahead, closing the distance near-instantaneously. The Behemoth Blood warrior expanded before Hakon's eyes, yet he only twisted to the side with [Evasion], while [Combat Awareness] and [Sensory Expansion] warned him preemptively of the deadly force coming at him.

Ulfar punched him first, then lunged and grasped him next. He pulled Hakon closer before he could do anything and grappled him. Hakon twisted

and turned but failed to escape Ulfar's iron-tight grapple.

Forced to do something before Ulfar crushed him to death, Hakon was about to release Hoard Impact when [Weakness Detection] triggered.

Ulfar was no longer in full control of his senses. His composure was lost, exchanged for raw power and an instinctive drive to eliminate his foes. As terrifying as that should have been, it also opened up several weak spots. Spots someone like Ulfar would have never exposed normally.

That was the sign Hakon had been waiting for.

"Losing your ear really did it for you," he grunted, channeling mana into his hands. As painful as it was, Hakon twisted his wrists and stabbed Ulfar.

Rather than keeping the mana infused in his hand, he went one step further. He released the mana through his fingertips and deposited it in Ulfar's left arm and abdomen.

A sense of weakness caught Hakon raw and unbidden as the mana left his body. Pain raced down his fingers as the skin at the tips of his fingers split. But Ulfar was worse off. He roared at the top of his lungs, his grip tightening just before his left arm hung down from his shoulder uselessly.

His right arm held on tight, but Hakon stabbed it as well, rendering it useless; even if only for a moment.

[Skill [Discharge] has been learned.]

The Scripture faded, and so did the effect the new Skill had on Ulfar. He regained full control of his limbs.

That, however, did not resolve the shame inflicted upon him.

It was nothing to worry about, but Ulfar was proud. And he had been certain Hakon wouldn't amount to anything after the Rite.

But now, the very same man he frowned upon successfully managed to fight him much longer than their generation's greatest of warriors.

Even if Hakon were to lose today, he would have shown everyone that he was greater than them all. After all, he'd managed to fight an Ancient Power of the Legends with nothing more than 'The Mind.'

How could Ulfar not feel ridiculed? Embarrassed. *Angry*.

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CHAPTER 26

Hakon was as good as dead. He certainly didn't feel very alive. His breathing was labored and painful, and the mana mass within him was almost empty. The most he could do was use a few mana-based Skills, but nothing as expensive as [Discharge].

Not even [Circulation] appeared to be a viable option.

Hakon pulled back, adjusting his stance, and saw a glimmer to the side. Astrid. She was there, probably had been there for a while now. How long, Hakon couldn't tell. He just knew she was there, watching, waiting. But she would not join the battle. Astrid knew him better than anyone, and she trusted he would defeat Ulfar.

But even if I lose… Worst-case, Astrid would crush Ulfar. That was the best part.

Hakon could focus on himself and weaken Ulfar if push came to shove. Even if he didn't win the Battle of Generation…

What am I thinking about? I have to show Father. The tribe. EVERYONE. Hakon let out a guttural growl and kicked the ground to propel his body forward.

The pain meant nothing. Not if it allowed him to emerge victorious. Pain was temporary. Winning the Battle of Generation… eternal.

[Natural Regeneration]'s effect diminished to the lowest possible level. All it needed to do was make sure Hakon could keep fighting. As for the rest, he could figure it out on the go.

Then the fight resumed. Ulfar was still as angry as before. He roared and thrashed, yet he hadn't lost his reasoning entirely. The Behemoth Blood warrior tried to hold onto Hakon and grapple him. That failed as Hakon

shifted and twisted, constantly using and refreshing [Combat Awareness] and [Evasion]. He added [Running] in bursts since he could no longer waste mana on repetitive uses of [Dash] and executed a few kicks and punches whenever he located a weak point.

More and more flaws revealed themselves before Hakon's eyes, but only some were owed to Enhanced Comprehension. He noticed Ulfar falling victim to his Ancient Power the longer the fight continued. And the more it did, the fewer times he tried to grapple Hakon. Ulfar punched him more often instead.

Alas, the Behemoth Blood warrior was not yet completely lost. Even his Ancient Power was cautious after what happened with [Discharge]. That was not what Hakon expected, but it played into his plan.

As yet another punch landed on him, Hakon could no longer suppress his pained groans. He was beaten black and blue, more bones than he could count had cracked or broken, yet it was his chest that hurt the most. It felt like he was on the verge of exploding. As if something was about to erupt at any moment.

His Runeskin was waiting.

But Ulfar used his first. A confident, smug smile crossed his features as he snapped yet another bone. It grew wider when Hakon punched him only to see blood splatter everywhere. Hakon's blood.

His skin burst when his fists came into contact with thick, rough scales. Scales that spread across Ulfar's chest and arms. And Ulfar just stood there, unmoving, as Hakon repeatedly punched him. Towering like the gargantuan figure he was. Instead of getting hurt, it was Hakon who hurt himself, his knuckles exposed, and the strength of his body fading slowly.

"Spikescale is not a meager Minor Runeskin like yours, weakling," Ulfar snarled, excitement glimmering in his eyes. "No matter how flashy your Runeskin looks, it can only absorb so much of my attacks. It is at its limit; you are."

Hakon immediately realized what his rival was trying to do. The Battle of Generation was nothing more than a show to him. A demonstration of his superiority. Because that was what he was: superior. Or so he felt.

The worst was that he wasn't even wrong. Not entirely. His assumption was partially correct. Hoard Impact did absorb some of the impacting force. It was not an exceptional amount, yet it was enough to keep fighting when others would have collapsed or died. But Ulfar was also wrong, thinking

Hoard Impact could only absorb his impact. And that the Runeskin was at its limit.

More! Hakon roared inwardly, pushing the Major Runeskin further. His chest was set ablaze.

“Minor?” Hakon tilted his head, blood flowing down the lacerations on his forehead and skull.

He could barely see Ulfar at this point, but he swore to himself to wipe that smug smile off his face.

Moving was a struggle. It was worse than his experience with the Colossal Terror, yet something other than his Runeskin burned in his chest… anticipation.

Who said it’s a Minor Runeskin? Hakon thought but didn’t say it out loud when [Weakness Detection] finally found what he’d been searching for. The prodding in the back of his head diminished ever so slightly and a Scripture popped open before his eyes. It disappeared almost as fast as the last of his mana reserves were spent on [Dash] and [Circulation].

The distance to Ulfar was only a few steps. He crossed it instantly, weaving around Ulfar’s fist by a hair’s breadth as the Behemoth Blood warrior attacked instinctively, and… erupted.

For the first time since he acquired Hoard Impact, Hakon released it. Fully charged and prepared to take the recoil.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as his chest burst. It certainly felt like it did as the pain grew worse with every heartbeat. And his heart was racing as a blinding light erupted. It surged from the majestic etchings on his chest, gathered at its center, and compressed before going off.

A beam, not unlike the Colossal Terror’s, shot out of Hakon. And this one felt much stronger. It struck Ulfar square in the chest. There was no time to react, no amount of bestial instincts rescuing anyone. Ulfar’s smug smile cracked. His eyes widened, and a guttural roar escaped his lips.

Ulfar’s scales stood no chance. The beam burned through them on impact, and his chest followed shortly. Then came the force. The beam, shot at point-blank, was not to be taken lightly. Not even the wielder of a legendary Bloodbearer power could absorb it easily.

His body was pushed back, and his feet no longer touched the stone stage. Then Ulfar barreled across the stage and crashed into the crowd of spectating Barbarians.

Is he…? Of course, he isn't… Hakon grimaced when Ulfar twitched among the spectators.

He scrambled to his feet, eyes bloodshot, smoke drifting from his body.

Last but not least, there was a hole. A tunneling wound resembling a sinkhole spread across Ulfar's chest, cauterized and not bleeding. It was deep but didn't go all the way through, yet Ulfar still stood.

"You pathetic cretin!" he roared at the top of his lungs, blood trickling from the corner of his eye.

Ulfar's muscles bulged and his body expanded once more, cracking the conjuration of his Runeskin. The scales covering his body crumbled as he stepped forward, ready to return to the stage.

But the chieftain emerged before him in a flash, blocking Ulfar's path.

"You lost," he rumbled.

"Get out of my way, old man. You can no longer protect your wimpy child!" Ulfar roared as he dragged his feet across the ground.

His chest heaved heavily, and there was no doubt in Hakon's heart that Ulfar was hurt and struggling, but that did not matter.

"The Ancestors watched you lose. Do not tarnish the sacred ritual further or–" The chieftain glanced back at the Shaman.

Their eyes met, and the Shaman muttered something incomprehensible before speaking out loud, "The Ancestors do not wish for his death."

Ulfar smiled smugly and stepped forward. His hand shot out in an attempt to shove the chieftain aside, but Hakon's father was faster.

"Do I really have to say this three times? You lost." The chieftain's growl reverberated across the arena, followed by the sound of a sword leaving its scabbard.

Ulfar didn't even look at the chieftain. His eyes were locked on Hakon, the hatred burning in them even more vibrant than before.

"For putting the tribe in danger before the Battle of Generation, you shall be punished," the chieftain growled. "But I wanted to forgive you. The Ancestors saw something in you when they gave you your Ancient Power, but…"

"Shut it!" Ulfar snapped, his fist lunging forward, but a flash was all that followed. Ulfar's fist never struck its target. Yet blood spurted, and something flung through the air. An arm.

"Your punishment has been delivered. Tarnish the tribe's reputation in front of the Ancestors once more and you will die. I promise you that

much," the chieftain said, his voice cold and detached, his sword sheathed once more.

Then he turned back, his steely eyes meeting Hakon's. As for what happened behind him, the chieftain couldn't care less.

Ulfar roared at the top of his lungs, the disbelief in his eyes genuine as he stared at all that was left of his arm. A stump that didn't stop bleeding even when the Behemoth Blood activated.

"Bring him away," was all the chieftain said about Ulfar. "As for the two of you, continue."

Ulfar was not dead, yet he'd lost. And the Battle of Generation… it was not over yet. Astrid and Hakon were still on the stage, the Ancestors watching them eagerly.

"Good job." Astrid smiled across the stage, her grip on the daggers loosening. Her weapons clattered to the ground, her lips parting. "I surrender."

The shouting started almost immediately. Roars of anger and disappointment rang across the stage, led by none other than Astrid's mother. She was fuming, waving her hands around, and if Hakon didn't know any better, he would have been sure she was about to leap onto the stage to shake her daughter until she regained her senses.

The outrage was intense, and understandable. Even Hakon could not help but frown at Astrid.

"What is your problem?" she asked, first eyeing Hakon then the rest of the Tribe Taskur. "I am not going to fight him."

"Not when he looks like that." She pointed across the stage, now frowning herself as she added, "Where is the honor in fighting someone who can barely stand on his feet? There is none! No honor can be gained here. If anything, the Ancestors would frown upon me. They would ridicule me for thinking I deserve to win the Battle of Generation against someone who just fought and won against one of their legendary powers!"

The rage simmered down as Astrid's anger swept across the tribehold. Even her mother calmed, a hint of a smile crossing her features.

Astrid turned to the Shaman and asked, "What do the Ancestors want? Do they desire an honorless fight or–"

The Shaman raised his hand, silencing both Astrid and the crowd. Everyone's attention pulled naturally to the Shaman as the tattoos all over

his body burst into motion. They snaked across his skin, moved erratically and erupted in a feast of light and power.

For a dozen heartbeats, nobody said anything. They just stared at the Shaman as he walked away from the stage. He trod toward the Monolith and pressed his palms firmly against it. The Shaman's tattoos seemed to disappear within the Monolith, which responded in kind.

For the first time since Hakon could remember, the Monolith stirred. It almost felt like the statues of Zeldron moved aside. Then came the power. The energy.

Hakon didn't know what was happening to him, but he felt good. The pain subsided, replaced with raw and unfiltered energy.

It took him a moment to understand what was going on, and when he did, Hakon caved in. Golden light surged toward him from the Monolith, coating him, making him use [Natural Regeneration] in ways he didn't know were possible at his current Level. Then came the mana.

His body recovered at a rapid pace, the sound of realigning bones ringing in his head as his attention shifted to the dozens of messages he had discarded earlier.

[Proficiency gained. [Weapon Mastery Lv.6] improved to [Weapon Mastery Lv.7]]
[Proficiency gained. [Circulation Lv.8] improved to [Circulation Lv.9]]
[Proficiency gained. [Mana Infusion Lv.5] improved to [Mana Infusion Lv.6]]
[Proficiency gained. [Combat Awareness Lv.13] improved to [Combat Awareness Lv.14]]
[Proficiency gained. [Combat Awareness Lv.14] improved to [Combat Awareness Lv.15]]
[Proficiency gained. [Dash Lv.8] improved to [Dash Lv.9]]
…

He noticed a lot more messages, each better than the last.

[Circulation], [Mana Infusion], [Flow Observation], and [Dash] went up by a grand total of one Level.

[Weapon Mastery] increased by another Level in one of the later messages. It Leveled twice in one battle, just like [Weakness Detection],

[Split Focus], [Pain Tolerance], [Sensory Expansion], [Evasion] and [Natural Regeneration].

Then there was [Discharge], an entirely new Skill. It was powerful yet all the more mana-consuming.

But that was not where Hakon's gains ended. The Ancestors were not yet done rewarding him.

[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]
[Proficiency gained. [Natural Regeneration Lv.13] improved to [Natural Regeneration Lv.14]]
[Proficiency gained. [Natural Regeneration Lv.14] improved to [Natural Regeneration Lv.15]]

Mana pulsed through his mana pathways in abundance. It flooded toward the mana mass filling Hakon's reserves, all while [Natural Regeneration] throbbed, continuously healing his body until the last of his injuries healed. Only then did the golden light of the Monolith recede. And with it receded [Natural Regeneration]'s massive healing, returning to its old ways.

Hakon took a deep breath, his attention lingering on the Monolith. It no longer stirred and stopped emitting the golden energy that permeated its massive structure. His eyes flicked to the right when something caught his attention. [Mana Sense], to be precise. It was no more than an insignificant burst, but it was enough to make him turn to the right and see a familiar object whistle through the air.

It crashed into the ground beside him, breaking the stage's floor open. Crusher.

"The Ancestors have spoken," the Shaman's voice thundered across the tribehold. "The Battle of Generation shall continue."

Reaching for Crusher's handle, Hakon couldn't help but smile. Astrid bent down to pick up her weapons as well, her smile even more brilliant than before.

Then they charged, ready to end the Battle of Generation once and for all.

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INTERLUDE

ROGARTH PEAROT

Ash drifted through the air like blackened snow. It swirled across the battlefield, carried by the heat of burning structures and chaotic movement. Fire spread far and wide, devouring the nearby forest as well as clothes, flesh, and most importantly, pride.

Thunderous roars of warriors reverberated across the blazing tribe, creating a cacophony of terror and raw, unfiltered battle lust. The clash of ringing steel, whistling arrows that found purchase in their targets' flesh, and the rumbling of myriad Ancient Powers as they collided joined the chaos and echoed in every direction.

No matter where one looked, death and destruction were ever-present. Blood was shed, and lives were reaped. It all made Chieftain Rogarth smile.

Combat raged around him as his warriors tore through the masses of defending fighters. Tribe Onyr was small, but the tribe was certainly not weak. They'd never been, though that didn't stop Rogarth Pearot and his people from clashing with them. If anything, it was a challenge that let their Sagas burn more brightly.

The Elders at the 4th Ascension clashed with some of the strongest of Onyr's warriors, their power filling the surrounding Barbarians with awe. Buildings crumpled beneath their might, and the ground split apart from a mere charge.

Both sides were powerful, most of whom were at a higher Level than Chieftain Rogarth, but that hadn't changed anything. The Elders, once loyal to the old chieftain, stood no chance against his power. Their pride had been crushed to smithereens, and their Sagas nearly followed, but Rogarth spared

them. Unlike the old chieftain, he allowed them to live to fight alongside him and dominate the dark forest as his subordinates.

And dominate he did, as his Blessing dictated.

A roar laced with pure hatred rang in his ears, and he turned to a familiar face with a savage smile. Bloodlust fused with uncontrollable killing intent as the figure expanded. His body radiated silver light that merged with his skin, turning the Barbarian into a silvery figure of mass destruction.

The figure towered high above Rogarth. He was twice his size, but that didn’t change anything.

Kaer Onyr, chieftain of Tribe Onyr and a warrior at the 4th Ascension, was not strong enough to defend against Tribe Pearot.

Pearot’s Elders shifted their focus and attacked the towering silver man, who retaliated with destructive force. Kaer Onyr was strong enough to fight them head-on. Even together, the Elders struggled to deal with Onyr’s chieftain.

But Tribe Onyr had forgotten to account for Rogarth Pearot. They forgot about the legendary power that awakened five cycles ago. About the Warlord the Shaman had prophesied would rise.

Blood soaked Kaer’s body as he charged forward, a pair of massive broadswords carving through the air with unstoppable force. The Elders were nothing to scoff at, but a set of four Runeskins flared to life around Kaer. One moment, he was covered in wounds, and in the next, they vanished, only to reappear across the body of the nearest Pearot Elder and burst open just before a broadsword cleaved through him.

Kaer did not stop. He thundered ahead, each step crushing the ground beneath him and sending shockwaves through the battlefield.

Raw, unbidden excitement joined Rogarth’s savage smile.

This was exactly what he needed. A powerful opponent, a true challenge, to reach the 4th Ascension at last. After being stuck at the 3rd Ascension, battling and crushing dozens of monsters that most of Pearot’s Elders would struggle with, Rogarth had finally found his target. A prey worthy enough to complete his Ascension.

There was no fear in his heart as he stepped forward, for the Ancestors had already decided the outcome of this battle. There was no uncertainty, no doubt. Rogarth would win, and soon he would grow strong enough to challenge the mightiest of Barbarians, Ragna Taskur.

That was the Blessing of the Onyx Dragon’s decree.

The Elders couldn’t stop Kaer Onyr as he closed the distance to Rogarth within heartbeats, his rage nearly potent enough to manifest on the battlefield. His weapons cleaved through the air, his strikes aiming to crush everything in their path.

Yet Rogarth did not move right away.

Power surged through his body in waves, and he expanded, though not as much as Kaer Onyr. His bones cracked and his muscles swelled before, in an eruption of force, a set of dark wings tore free. Black scales spread across his skin, hard and unyielding, each one pulsing with overwhelming power.

The air around him distorted, and as Chieftain Rogarth willed it, a dominating force descended upon the battlefield.

For a moment, everything fell into stunned silence. Even Kaer Onyr could only stare at the scene unfolding before him in utter shock. Yet as the moment passed, sound returned and the battle resumed. However, now, the outcome was obvious to everyone.

Tribe Onyr would fall, crushed by the youngest chieftain in history, slain by the legendary warrior who sought to claim everything.

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CHAPTER 27

The stage was broken, its cracks filled with blood. Hakon was lying on the ground, his chest heaving heavily. Each breath drew on his strength, sending waves of searing pain through his lungs.

He was exhausted but happy. Happy, because Astrid was lying beside him, looking no better than he did. She lost the Battle of Generation… if one could really call it a loss.

Astrid momentarily lost consciousness. It was only a fraction of a second, but that would have been long enough to end her life. Everyone witnessed it, yet it didn't feel real. Of course, it didn't. Hakon would have died if not for [Natural Regeneration] or… just about every other Skill.

Blood Fury was a legendary Ancient Power, yet it was not well-suited for a battle against a single person. Behemoth Blood was far more compatible for one-on-one combat. Astrid's power had already ebbed when the finale resumed.

Still, Hakon won. He defeated a legendary power. His position may have been advantageous, but he also made sure Astrid wouldn't be able to shed too much of his blood. He avoided her swift and deadly attacks often enough to Level [Evasion] twice and [Combat Awareness] once.

In return, Hakon also failed to hit her often. It took [Dash] combined with [Circulation] and a lot of patience to find the slightest hint of a pattern in Astrid's movements. It was hard, but he struck Astrid twice with Crusher, [Mana Infusion] amplifying his weapon, to crush her.

At some point in combat, Hakon had to consider using the bladed side of Crusher, but he decided against it once the flat side struck Astrid's thigh. After that, keeping tabs on her movements grew considerably easier. Even

if it took another strike to the head to knock her unconscious for that precious second.

Hakon knew his evasive tactic wasn't particularly favored by the tribesmen or any Barbarian for that matter, yet Tribe Taskur celebrated him.

Their roars echoed in his ears, bringing a smile to his lips. They gave him the fuel needed to scramble to his feet and look around.

The faces of those who ignored him as soon as the Rite ended were now beaming at him, celebrating his victory. But it was the faces of the Rootkeeper and other non-combatants that really caught his attention. Surprise was written all over their faces, followed by something else; something Hakon could not quite discern. Was that regret, confusion, or just a ray of hope? Hope that they could become true warriors just like Hakon did.

He embraced the thundering roars and cheers aimed at him and turned to the Shaman. His father stood beside the Shaman, his eyes as steely as ever. Yet the corner of his lip curled ever so slightly.

Look at me, Father! Is this enough for you? Can you see me now! Hakon roared in his head, all while pumping more mana into [Natural Regeneration].

He stepped closer, Crusher lying somewhere on the battlefield, blood dripping to the ground.

"Welcome the victor of the Battle of Generation!" the Shaman said euphorically. His voice was not loud, yet it spread far and wide, easily reaching every corner of the tribehold.

The cheers only grew more fervent, filling Hakon with pride and satisfaction. Yet, his attention remained on the Shaman and the chieftain.

"The Ancestors acknowledge your Feat. It has been noted and shall be used as the Feat that initiates your Saga. Embrace the Feat and let it guide you to a Saga worth remembering," the Shaman intoned. He was about to continue when his tattoos stirred. His eyes shifted and momentarily turned white.

"I must have been mistaken," he said quietly, his eyes locking onto him once they turned back to normal. "This is not your first Feat. It is your second Feat, is it not?"

Hakon nodded. He had nothing to hide before his tribe, let alone the Ancestors. Voices rang out from behind and beside him, filling him with pride as his tribe wondered aloud how he'd acquired another Feat. He

smiled, sensing the blazing gazes on him, yet the Shaman was all he saw at this moment.

“How curious,” the Shaman murmured and continued a little louder for everyone to hear, “The Ancestors praise you for your Feats. They are curious about your journey and will welcome you with open arms once your Saga concludes. Before that, you shall shed more blood in their names. Embrace their gift and use it wisely, for if you do, a Warlord will rise when the stars fall into their fated path.”

Enhanced Comprehension stirred in the back of his mind. It prodded him even though he had no Skill to use or a Skill he currently wanted to learn. He was just listening, yet Enhanced Comprehension wanted something from him. And if there was one thing he had learned ever since the Rite, it was to listen to the Ancient Power.

He repeated the Shaman’s words in his head over and again, until it clicked.

The Shaman is connected to the Ancestors, and they know what I have been up to. That much was obvious to him. Their people always told them that the Ancestors saw everything. That they knew their descendants better than everyone else; including oneself. The Shaman’s bond with the Ancestors was also common knowledge.

Embrace their gift. I am doing that already, am I not? And what is this about ‘a’ Warlord will rise when the stars fall into their fated path?

Maybe he interpreted too much into the Shaman’s words, but they suggested that Hakon was not necessarily the Warlord who would reunite the tribes and reclaim the lands that had been taken all those cycles ago. It just meant that there would be ‘a’ Warlord as long as he leaned into his gift. And that gift had to be Enhanced Comprehension.

“I understand now,” Hakon muttered, earning the Shaman’s interest. The tattooed Barbarian looked at him expectantly.

“This is not the first Battle of Generation,” he said, now earning the chieftain’s interest.

Even the bright and excited cheers and roars simmered down a little.

“You are correct. This is the fourth and last Battle of Generation.” The Shaman nodded calmly, the smile on his lips giving Hakon the chills. “Tribe Pearot, Katus, and Loush have already completed their Battle of Generation. Pearot was the first five cycles ago. The victor of their Battle of Generation did awaken a legendary Ancient Power during the Rite as well.”

“Loush?” the chieftain spoke up for the first time. “Loush was defeated and forced into submission two cycles ago.”

The Shaman narrowed his eyes at the chieftain but nodded anyway. “By Tribe Pearot. That is correct.”

That wasn’t good. Tribe Pearot had grown more active in recent cycles, but that hadn’t been anything out of the ordinary. Every few cycles, a tribe would awaken enough hot-headed warriors with powers that led them to believe they could crush the neighboring tribes. More often than not, their first attack succeeded. But by the time the other tribes heard about it, preparations to retaliate and crush the aggressor were made.

Tribe Pearot survived long enough for the chieftain to tell Hakon about it. He did not go into detail, but the fact that his father had told him about Pearot in the first place was enough of a surprise.

And now it all made sense. Tribe Pearot completed their Battle of Generation and believed they would rise to give birth to the next Warlord. That it would be their tribe to reunite them like their Ancestors had done all those cycles ago. And to do so, they crushed the other tribes to demonstrate their superiority. That was the way of the Barbarian. The path the Ancestors desired; submission through bloodshed.

The strong were fated to fight and rule, building Sagas worth remembering. The weak… nobody remembered them either way.

“Your guidance was appreciated,” the chieftain said to the Shaman and hinted at a bow. “We welcome your return next cycle. But for now, we will have to prepare for war.”

“I will return in the next cycle.” The Shaman nodded, looking like he expected as much. “If your tribe is still standing.

“Fill the Ancestors with pride.” Was the last thing he said before retreating.

One moment he stepped into the crowd of Barbarians who were no longer cheering and roaring, and in the next, the Shaman’s frame blurred. Hakon’s eyes were locked on the Shaman’s figure, yet it was almost like the older Barbarians faded from existence. He was there, then, just like that, he was nowhere to be seen.

“Why are you leaving? I have so many questions,” Hakon grumbled quietly to himself. There was so much he would have loved to know.

He may have won the Battle of Generation, but that didn’t change one particular fact. It had only been half a fortnight since the Rite. Hakon was

still far from knowing everything about Enhanced Comprehension. If anything, it felt like he'd only unraveled a snippet of its potential.

When he played with the Monolith's mana earlier, it was almost like he was about to discover something big, but the Monolith no longer emitted mana, nor did anyone in Tribe Taskur know much about it. They called it Lifeblood and used it internally more than anything.

[Natural Regeneration] and some other Skills worked like that, but Hakon never heard about anyone learning [Flow Control], let alone its upgrade.

I could learn more about Lifeblood Skills from other warriors. That was a viable option, so why did it feel like talking to the Shaman would produce much better results?

Hakon let out a sigh. He was still happy to have won the Battle of Generation, but recent news made it hard to celebrate. If anything, the Shaman's last words showed it was time to train even harder. And to use the 'gift' wisely.

That was his plan, anyway, but he had yet to figure out how to do so.

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CHAPTER 28

The next morning, Hakon woke up refreshed. Rays of sunlight slipped through the cracks in the hut's roof, bathing his face in warmth.

He got up from the bed and stretched his body with a calmness he didn't know he possessed. Not after spending half a fortnight in the wild and a Fracture.

"The Crawling Expanse," Hakon mused to himself.

It had been a painful few nights, but the Fracture was one of the few reasons he reached the 1st Ascension. The other reason was his Ancient Power.

Maybe his endurance also played a role.

"I did it." He stepped out of his room, his gaze drifting across the hut's interior. Nothing had changed in his absence. The shelf and its scrolls were still there, and so was just about everything. The only new addition, if one could call it that, was the Maulaxe Crusher. It rested against the wall at his room's entrance.

"You are awake." His father's looming presence reached Hakon before his voice did.

He turned to the chieftain. "Father."

The chieftain motioned to his son. "Follow me."

"A spar?" Hakon asked, but his father shook his head.

"A demonstration."

They reached the back of the hut. Several servants could be seen tending to the greenery, pulling weeds from the training grounds and polishing the weapon stands.

“You wield uncommon Skills. Some I am unfamiliar with,” the chieftain started. “Even the Shaman appeared surprised about your Runeskin, as well as the Ancestors’ decision to aid your recovery, but also some of your Skills. Show them to me.”

Hakon narrowed his eyes at his father but proceeded. He retrieved the first weapon and triggered [Weapon Mastery]. In the next few minutes, he demonstrated his proficiency at wielding a wide variety of weapons. The chieftain remained unmoving as he watched. Even when Hakon revealed a proficiency with certain weapons his father did not train him with all that much, he remained silent.

Hakon added a second weapon to the demonstration, triggering [Two Weapon Fighting]. Another minute passed before something in the corner of his eye flashed. [Combat Awareness] activated instinctively, and he twisted to the side. A stone barreled past him, missing him by a hair’s breadth. [Combat Awareness] remained active, warning him.

Mana pumped into his legs as he burst to the side, escaping a barrage of pebbles thrown at him with the force to crush a Barbarian’s skull. Evading them was only the beginning.

Using [Evasion] to guide him, Hakon evaded more projectiles. He skidded to the side, twisted his body until it felt like he was falling apart, yet it was to no avail. The more he evaded, the faster the incoming attacks grew, and it wasn’t long before Hakon could no longer escape them. Once [Evasion] alone was no longer enough, he combined [Two Weapon Fighting] and [Weapon Mastery], his weapons flashing around him in quick and precise movements to block several strikes. At last, he accelerated with [Circulation], once more strength, speed, and flexibility were required.

[Combat Awareness] screamed at him when a pebble coated in a crimson hue cut through the air too fast to be evaded. [Mana Sense] activated, and he felt a sudden rise of danger. The mana within the pebble was of a destructive nature and would cause serious harm, so Hakon poured mana into his blades.

Activating [Mana Infusion] to guide the process, he forced mana into the blades. They vibrated, seemingly resisting the process, but a faint hue of mana oozed from them as the blades cut through the air and the pebble.

A crack echoed in Hakon’s ears as the first blade crumbled and clattered to the ground, which was quickly followed by another crack. A second

mana-imbued pebble came barreling at him, and he carved through it as well, his second blade paying the price. It too fell apart.

Spinning around, Hakon faced the chieftain, his body lowered, [Sensory Expansion] and [Flow Observation] activating to analyze his movements.

However, the chieftain was done. He stood opposite him with a calm expression, looking like he had never left his position.

“You already fused your weapon Skills,” he noted rather than asking.

“I did.” Hakon had no reason to lie to his father. “I also acquired [Two Weapon Fighting] and a lot more useful Skills.”

“I can see that. How many Skills do you have?” The chieftain tilted his head. “From what I can tell, you have more than ten Skills already. You have [Pain Tolerance] and Skills resembling [A Giant’s Recovery], [Battle Spirit], [Lifeblood Augmentation], and one of my Runeskins.”

Hakon certainly had more than ten Skills. Checking the Ancient Scripture, he counted a total of 27, which included the fused Skill. If not for fusing his Skills, he would have 32 Skills, and that sounded ridiculous.

“I have more than 20 Skills already,” he revealed, earning a raised eyebrow in response.

“That’s a lot. [Weapon Mastery] and [Two Weapon Fighting] take time to acquire. Half a fortnight is nowhere near enough under normal circumstances.” The chieftain rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Even if you entered a Fracture, you should not have been this fast.

“Could it be his Bloodline?” his father muttered to himself, either not realizing Hakon could hear him or simply not caring.

The chieftain looked at him once more. “Your Ancient Power?”

Hakon nodded slowly, bringing the faintest hint of a smile to his father’s lips. “Tell me your Saga, son. Don’t leave anything out, starting from the Rite. Even if you believe I know what happened, tell me everything!”

That was not a request. It was an order, and Hakon complied with a racing heart.

It was the first time someone asked him about his Saga, and he would be a fool not to share it.

May the Ancestors be listening, he intoned in his heart before reciting all that had happened since the Rite. Not even a moon had passed since then, but he had a lot to tell. And he did so pridefully.

Retelling his Saga took longer than expected. Morning gave way to noon by the time he finished telling his father about the Battle of Generation from his point of view. Hakon was not particularly proud of his storytelling ability, but it improved considerably as he leaned into the prodding in the back of his mind.

Enhanced Comprehension helped him reduce the redundancy in his Saga. It guided him through the tale, making sure it stayed engaging and action-packed, while emphasizing the importance of his Ancient Power. For Enhanced Comprehension does not require combat and bloodshed to earn the Ancestors' grace.

The chieftain listened intently. He interrupted Hakon only when his son struggled, asking about his gains, how they came to be, and to show him all the other things he acquired.

He returned the Acidic Beetle Totem to Hakon and inquired about his Runeskin, which led to yet another quick demonstration. The chieftain had to punch Hakon a few times to charge Hoard Impact. He did so without hesitation, which led to a Level increase of [Pain Tolerance].

They didn't charge Hoard Impact to the fullest, just enough to trigger the Runeskin. Hakon unleashed a beam the width of his pinky at the chieftain. The damage it dealt was not worth mentioning when used against a Barbarian at the 5th Ascension, but the chieftain was impressed anyway.

"Ulfar survived a fully charged blow of that?" he mused to himself. "His Behemoth Blood is strong."

To say that after watching the Battle of Generation and severing Ulfar's arm did not sit quite right in Hakon's mind, but he listened to his father anyway.

"I don't believe Ulfar will do anything stupid. Not if honor and the Ancestors' guidance still carry meaning in his heart. But if they no longer mean anything to him…" The chieftain stared Hakon deep in the eyes. "Kill him. If he dares to attack you, you need to be strong enough to end him. In one strike, before he can harm the tribe or burn through his Ancient Power. Because if he does… this, all of it, will be as problematic as Pearot's aggression."

Hakon raised a brow at his father. He did not think Ulfar would attack him openly. Ulfar may be a problem, but the Ancestors watched the Battle of Generation. Going against their will would result in a worse punishment than death. He would no longer be allowed to feast with the Ancestors. His

Saga would be forfeited, and all that is promised to their greatest warriors would be stripped away.

No matter how ambitious and angry Ulfar was, Hakon did not think he was in any danger. Not while he was in the tribe. In the wild… that might be different.

“I think he’s more likely to leave the tribe. Join Tribe Pearot.” Hakon shrugged, then guided the conversation to a more interesting topic. “Tribe Pearot… how much of a problem are they?”

It was the first time the chieftain talked this much with Hakon. Before the Rite, their conversations had been short and one-sided. He had never been good enough in his father’s eyes. But that changed. His rapid growth made his father curious. His victory in the Battle of Generation earned him praise and attention.

He was no longer the same man he used to be. He was a warrior, one worthy of the older generation’s respect. His father understood that, and he treated him in kind.

So, he told Hakon all he needed to know. About the past, the present, and the future that awaited him.

And when he was done, everything had changed once more. Life no longer felt the same, yet his father behaved like he always did. Almost.

“Now, go read, or whatever you have to do to grow stronger,” he said with utter calmness.

It was far from perfect, but hearing his father say that meant the world to Hakon.

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CHAPTER 29

Tribe Pearot promised trouble. Their actions would soon cause bloodshed. Be it the Ancestors' wishes or not, blood would flow. Tribe Taskur had to prepare for the inevitable, or they would fall like the others.

The news of Tribe Pearot being yet another tribe that was given the opportunity of the Battle of Generation five cycles ago changed a lot. So did the fact that Pearot had awakened a legendary power at that time. Now that five cycles had passed, their legendary warrior was bound to be much stronger and more dangerous.

Tribe Taskur was at an advantage, or it would have been if they could utilize their own legendary powers. But what should have been an opportunity turned into a problem. Several young warriors died in the Battle of Generation, killed by one of their own wielding a legendary power. For what? There was no reason. Bloodshed was something the Ancestors wished for, and Barbarians were the last to deny them such a beautiful sight, but Hakon could not help but feel that so many lives were wasted.

Lives that could have been nurtured to turn into promising warriors, wielding the power needed to charge their enemies and shed their blood instead, had been ripped apart. Fewer died than Hakon initially thought would die, but each of them would have turned into a valuable warrior. Now they needed time to grow stronger.

As for Ulfar, he was yet another problem. As powerful as he was, he was too dangerous to be around. Nobody would trust Ulfar to watch their back, which made fighting alongside him impossible. It was much better to have other Bloodbearers with full control of their Ancient Power around, even if they were weaker.

There has to be a way to make them stronger. Strong enough to fight those who experienced their Rite cycles before we did, Hakon mused to himself.

Tribe Taskur had only one advantage; an advantage born from a disadvantage. They had many warriors this cycle. All those whose awakening had been postponed for cycles had finally completed their Rite. The vast majority continued to train relentlessly, believing the Ancestors would never abandon them.

As far as Hakon was concerned, he was confident his peers had gained more Skills and Levels than others would earn this quickly after the Rite. The cycles of training resulted in the Ancestors recognizing more Skills. That also explained why so many young warriors reached the 1st Ascension in half a fortnight, a feat he thought only a few warriors would achieve before the Battle of Generation.

Others might have been given a head start, but they could catch up. They had to.

Astrid can probably fuse her weapon Skills into [Weapon Mastery] soon. Björn might upgrade [Axe Mastery] in a moon or two as well. Hakon nodded slowly. Skill Fusion or Skill upgrading sounded like useful tools to deal with their disadvantages. Was either of those easy? Definitely not. But would it help the tribe? Yes.

Hakon took that into consideration as he stayed in the backyard, his father nowhere to be seen. He approached the weapon stand and retrieved a set of daggers. [Mana Sense] activated, he reached out for the pathways within the weapons, only to find that there were none. The steel was nothing like the Maulaxe Crusher. It was dead and would shatter if infused with too much mana. But why?

Leaning into the prodding in the back of his mind, Hakon willed traces of mana through his body. They soon reached the tips of his fingers and oozed out of the pathways with some difficulty. Using [Mana Infusion] would help him complete the process smoothly, but he did not want a smooth transfer. Hakon wanted to sense it all.

[Mana Sense] was still active as he closed his eyes. The energy around him was nowhere near as intense as during the Battle of Generation, but it was there, nonetheless. Yet, instead of reaching out to the ambient energy, he used mana to activate [Sensory Expansion] and [Flow Observation].

The former amplified his senses, which did seem to include [Mana Sense] as long as it was actively used, while [Flow Observation] was mostly used to observe an opponent's movement patterns. That was how Hakon used it before. Now, leaning deep into his instincts and the sensation of wrongness offered by Enhanced Comprehension, he tried a different aspect.

He observed the flow of mana as it moved through his pathways, but also when it trickled out of the pathways' ends and into the blade. The entire process was etched in Hakon's mind, showing him things he hadn't realized before.

The pressure is too much. Even a trace of mana is too much for it. He changed his strategy and distributed the mana as soon as it seeped into the daggers. Alas, mana was harder to control once it left his body. Crusher was tame and malleable. Infusing mana into it and controlling it was much more simplistic. The daggers… the first cracked faster than the servants could prepare breakfast, and it shattered not long after.

The other dagger prevailed much longer. Hakon was bathed in sweat, his attention lingering on the minuscule traces of mana moving through the dagger. But even when he used [Split Focus], there were simply too many traces to keep track of to reinforce the dagger without breaking it. It shattered after a momentary lapse in focus, after he had maintained it for a considerable time.

His mana reserves shrank considerably, and his head hurt more than it should have, but the Ancestors rewarded his creativity.

[Proficiency gained. [Mana Sense Lv.11] improved to [Mana Sense Lv.12]]
[Proficiency gained. [Mana Sense Lv.12] improved to [Mana Sense Lv.13]]
[Proficiency gained. [Split Focus Lv.9] improved to [Split Focus Lv.10]]
[Proficiency gained. [Sensory Expansion Lv.5] improved to [Sensory Expansion Lv.6]]
[Proficiency gained. [Flow Observation Lv.4] improved to [Flow Observation Lv.5]]

The Ancestors were truly generous. It was not even night yet, and they graced him with the benefit of having several of his Skills improve. It was

all due to Enhanced Comprehension pushing him to try out different things and use his Skills ‘properly.’ As weird as it felt to think of his use of Skills as wrong, Hakon learned to trust his instincts and the prodding in the back of his mind.

He leaned deeper into it than before. After all, the Ancestors told him to trust his gift. Even his father considered his Ancient Power something powerful now that he had seen its true power during the Battle of Generation. He conquered a Fracture, an *Overflowing* Fracture, all by himself and acquired a Major Runeskin without any help. That was not an Ancient Power that should be hidden away. It had to be used in every possible way to make full use of it, no matter what others would think of him.

It may attract some ire from the oldest of Barbarians, but as long as the Ancestors were on his side, they could say all they wanted.

I should talk to the Rootkeepers and the Lightcaller soon. If Eren lives that long, that is. Hakon rubbed his chin, the corner of his lips tugging into a faint smile.

He talked with his father more than ever, but he did not tell him everything he had planned. Sure, their relationship had changed and was improving, but Hakon had not forgotten that his mother was still away. It would have been great if she’d been there. However, that was only a matter of time.

Now, he was the leader of the young generation. He would fight, practice, and grow strong enough to replace his father as the chieftain. Uniting the tribes would follow, but before that…

Hakon had to reach the 5th Ascension. To replace his father as the chieftain and overthrow his father’s decision to exile his mother. Only then could he search for her and make sure she returned without accruing the Ancestors’ anger.

The 5th Ascension. Level 75. He grimaced.

His father had advanced to the 5th Ascension before Hakon was born. Even then, he had been at the 5th Ascension for a while. That meant one simple thing: the chieftain was strong.

The first three Ascensions were the easiest to reach, if one could call it that. A warrior had to reach Level 10, 20, and 30 respectively to meet the requirements given by the Ancestors. To achieve something great enough, something worthy of ascending, was yet another issue. Following the 3rd

Ascension, the Level requirement increased. To reach the 4th Ascension, one would have to reach Level 50, which was something only a select few of Tribe Taskur had achieved. Ulfar's father and Astrid's mother were warriors of the 4th Ascension. Yet, they could not compare to the chieftain.

He was beyond Level 75 and achieved something great enough to impress the Ancestors. He was likely the sole reason Tribe Pearot had yet to attack Tribe Taskur, because his father was the strongest. Other than him, nobody had been at the 5th Ascension that long and lived to tell the tale. His Saga was bound to be one of the greatest. He was truly powerful, and for all Hakon knew, the only warrior at the 5th Ascension among all Barbarians.

And so will I… once I figure out how this works. He grunted and grumbled as he inspected the flow of mana once more. Not within a weapon made of dead steel, but within his palm and outside of it. Not to create a hue like Astrid or his father did, but in an attempt to replicate the glowing particles he'd felt at the Battle of Generation.

They attracted his attention more than the crimson hues, for those glowing particles had been in his clutches. He was close to discovering something, and he was certain it was something grand. Hakon just had to figure out how to replicate them. Somehow.

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CHAPTER 30

Mana gathered in his palm. Hakon could feel it swirl through the pathways and gather. Moving it outside the pathways worked with some effort, yet the difficulty increased as the distance from the pathways increased.

It was not all that dissimilar to moving mana through the steel swords, yet it wasn't the same. He was still touching the object as he moved mana through the weapons. Now he had it gathered in his palm with the intent to remove it from his body.

His Ancient Power confirmed he was doing something, and that what he was doing was wrong, which only confirmed it was possible. It was just that he didn't do it correctly.

How? Hakon's eyes snapped open to a ripple in the air around his palm. It was not noteworthy to most, but it was something, and that was enough of a starting point.

He shifted his Skills around until he broke into a cold sweat. As simple as it appeared to be at first glance, the procedure was cumbersome and complex. A single mistake and everything would be over. But how could he improve without knowing what was wrong? Enhanced Comprehension guided him, though Hakon needed more than that. He had to feel what failure felt like.

He tried to remove the translucent mana traces gathered in his hand from his palm even when Enhanced Comprehension told him he wasn't doing it right yet. It felt like someone had struck the back of his head with a hammer as the mana in his palm loosened ever so slightly, and it was not

long before his concentration slipped, turning his attempt into an unsurprising failure.

And that was fine. Hakon tried again, first without changing much to observe everything, then he leaned more and more into Enhanced Comprehension to adjust his already existing Skills.

The adjustments didn’t improve the process much, but they changed something.

It took Hakon a while, but a Scripture appeared before him.

[Proficiency gained. [Mana Sense Lv.13] improved to [Mana Sense Lv.14]]

As soon as the Skill improved, the difficulty decreased drastically. It was almost like he was trying to do something he wasn’t supposed to at his current Level. As if a few more Levels in [Mana Sense] would make everything easier. And it probably would. The Ancestors’ Skills worked like that. Hakon could wield and circulate mana through his body without a Skill, while [Circulation] made everything easier. The Skill even provided additional benefits in exchange for consuming some mana.

It was the same with [Mana Infusion]. At this point, Hakon could use the Skill to infuse just about everything. But that didn’t mean it would help him here, no matter how useful it could be in other situations. For now, Hakon needed something else entirely. A new Skill to form the foundation of what he actually wanted to achieve.

“That’s it. I am trying to leap at a monster when I can barely stand,” he mused to himself and discarded all thoughts of replicating the Monolith’s glistening mana. It was powerful in its raw form, but at the end of the day, it was not what he was after.

Hakon reached out to his Ancient Power as he closed his eyes once more. His lips curled into a smile when the thunder of wrongness shrank into a small rainstorm. It was still on his mind and occupied nearly every part of it, but he could separate the wrongness and work on them one by one.

That was how he earned another Level in [Mana Sense] fairly quickly. He focused on the Skill and the tale Enhanced Comprehension spewed and modified it ever so slightly. Getting used to the changes took a little longer, as they were more substantial than before, but that was more than

acceptable. Modifications to Skills were bound to become more troublesome as he progressed. At some point, he might not even earn a Level after working on a Skill for moons.

Fortunately, he was still far away from such atrocious work.

With [Mana Sense] at Level 15, Hakon returned to the traces of mana gathered in his palm. He didn't separate the traces' properties like he had done in the Battle of Generation, but moved them away from his palm. That much hadn't changed, so the challenge did not suddenly disappear either. It was just that Hakon had more tools to rely on now. *Better* tools.

He activated [Mana Sense] and even went as far as to use [Sensory Expansion] the moment he realized he was getting close to his goal. Then… Then Hakon did it. Just like that, he removed the trace of mana from his body. No part of his body stayed in contact with the traces, yet Hakon retained full control.

"Yes!" he exclaimed, shattering his focus. The mana traces fizzled out and dispersed, and the throbbing in his head grew worse.

Right. That… was stupid, he thought, but the smile on his lips never faded. It only grew wider when he tried again.

Enhanced Comprehension told Hakon that he did something wrong, but when did his Ancient Power ever say that he did something perfect? What even was perfection? Hakon certainly forgot the meaning of the word after the Rite.

He succeeded the second time, failed the third, and succeeded in separating his mana from the rest of his body on the fourth, fifth, and sixth tries. By the seventh try, it worked without [Sensory Expansion], and a few dozen times later, Hakon didn't even need [Mana Sense] to make it work. Even though it worked better with the Skills, Hakon could experiment more without them. They drained his mana reserves, for one, forcing him to rest and recover mana in between, and they guided him. But what if he did not want to be guided all the time? Just how powerful would he grow if he could use mana in ways most could only achieve with their Skills?

Hakon thought about it deeply, and he had no idea what the answer would be. Most Barbarians did not have the patience to acquire [Mana Sense], let alone practice it as much as he did. To push further and improve his mana control to reach the same Level as [Mana Sense] helped him reach was foolish. But was it, really? If he improved his control without the

Ancestors' help, wouldn't his Skills be far more potent once he used them on top of his high proficiency at wielding mana?

And what if there was more? If the Ancestors were hiding Skills for those willing to do what Hakon was doing? How was he supposed to find out if he wasn't trying?

Hakon didn't want to miss out on anything. He could not afford to, especially with an Ancient Power that helped him so much. After all, it guided him even when he did not use Skills. Maybe Enhanced Comprehension worked even better when he wasn't using a Skill.

No, that makes no sense, Hakon chided himself before resuming practice. Night came and faded, but he did not stop. Exhaustion was yet another weakness he had to endure to grow stronger, after all.

His full attention remained on the task at hand. First, without any Skills, and then with his Skills to understand his new limits. And when he pushed past the previous limit, Hakon simply continued. He went on and on, not even realizing that the morning was replaced by noon, which quickly turned into yet another evening.

By the time he stopped practicing, the new day had already ended. And, in all likelihood, yet another day would have passed if his eyelids hadn't been so heavy, or if his stomach hadn't started to growl like a starving wolf pack earlier that night.

But neither exhaustion nor hunger could take away Hakon's sense of satisfaction as his attention returned to the newest Scriptures around him.

[Proficiency gained. [Mana Sense Lv.18] improved to [Mana Sense Lv.19]]
[Proficiency gained. [Sensory Expansion Lv.9] improved to [Sensory Expansion Lv.10]]
[Proficiency gained. [Split Focus Lv.11] improved to [Split Focus Lv.12]]
[Skill [Fatigue Resistance] has been learned.]
[Skill [Mana Manipulation] has been learned.]
[Skill [Mana Shaping] has been learned.]

He may not have earned a Level just yet, but the Skill improvements and new Skills were just as valuable, if not better. [Fatigue Resistance] kept

him awake all this time, while [Mana Manipulation] and [Mana Shaping] represented the Skills he wanted to move forward with.

By now, Hakon could effortlessly move mana through his body and emit it from his palm. With his new Skills, it was no longer problematic to change the shape of the mana outside his body either. He had yet to figure out how to turn mana into a weapon, or how to further utilize it, but he could shape small translucent balls of mana and rotate them around him.

Then again, the mana shapes did not have much weight to them. Even if he wanted to, he couldn't throw the mana balls at anyone.

Yet.

"One step at a time," he mused to himself before collapsing to the ground just as the first ray of sunlight rose from the horizon.

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CHAPTER 31

An empty stomach was more painful than a broken rib cage. It may not be like that for everyone, but it was the case for Hakon.

The sun was already at its zenith when he woke up to ferocious growls. His stomach was done waiting, its demands growing louder and more intense with every second. It twisted and cramped in ways Hakon never experienced.

Being hungry was not new. If anything, every Barbarian knew what hunger felt like, because it was something they'd been taught. To experience the weakness that came with hunger and then to fight through that weakness. To never allow hunger or any other kind of weakness to affect a warrior's power.

The servants noticed Hakon when he woke up. Some tended to the training ground as always, whereas others moved around hastily. They prepared food for when he returned to the hut, though Hakon did not rush. He checked the Ancient Scripture, went through the changes and additions of new Skills, and mused about what to improve next. He had a lot to do, but filling his stomach came first.

Sitting down at the table as the servants placed several plates filled with meats, bread, and other side dishes before him, Hakon grumbled. Neither of the dishes survived for long as he gobbled them down. His stomach was still rumbling when he finished three-fourths of the meal, which made the servants panic.

They left in a hurry and returned with more bread and baked potatoes, informing him that more meat was being prepared. Tears welled in their eyes as they spoke, which was… not all that unfamiliar. The servants feared

them, for they were not Barbarians. Most were humans, their skin color unlike that of the Barbarians. But that was all that separated humans from Barbarians. Other than their behavior toward the Ancestors.

“You don’t believe in the Ancestors, do you?” Hakon diverted his attention from the stone plates, scrutinizing the servants for the first time since…

Honestly, he did not think he had ever paid much attention to them. The servants were just there.

Skinny. Vulnerable. Fragile.

That was what they were. They had no muscles, their belief was laughable, and they could not even stand up for themselves. Not all humans were like that, as the chieftain had mentioned in the past, but those that lost against his father in battle certainly were. If not, they wouldn’t act this way. They wouldn’t lower their heads and stare straight at the ground, trembling like shrubs in a storm while shedding more tears than a heavy downpour.

Hakon let out a heavy sigh.

“Come closer,” he grunted, motioning to the nearest servant.

She trembled even worse than before. Her sobs filled the hut, but Hakon remained emotionless.

There was no reason to feel sorry for the servant. He did not mistreat her, and he knew his father would not do anything to her either. She was not malnourished and was well taken care of in every other aspect, but that was to be expected of the chieftain’s belongings.

Barbarians treated their spoils of war with respect. They were part of their Saga and ought to be treated like that. Like an extension of the Ancestors’ blessings. Hence, their fear meant little to him, other than nurturing the dissatisfaction in his heart.

Humans really were weak. It was no surprise to him that their invasion of the Barbarians’ lands failed.

This time, Hakon corrected himself. He hadn’t heard much about humans, but the few things he did know were that they were numerous. Their numbers were much greater than all of the tribes combined. Not all of them were weak either. If not for that, humans would have never managed to destroy several tribes all those cycles ago.

That was before Hakon’s father reached the 5th Ascension. It was even before the chieftain was born and long before the change. It was the Warlord’s era. Cycles filled with bloodshed. The Sagas of that era’s legends

spoke of rivers of blood and palaces made of bones. Mountains of corpses, all offered as tribute to the Ancestors.

And some time ago, only a few cycles before Hakon was born, the humans returned. Their reasoning was unknown, or maybe the chieftain simply did not care, but the result was obvious. The Barbarians had grown stronger ever since the rise of the first Warlord. And it was all owed to the Ancestors.

“H-How may I h-help you?” The servant shook as she bowed.

She was small and barely reached Hakon’s nose even though he was seated.

She was nothing like the women of Tribe Taskur. Frail and too easy to break. Compared to Barbarians, she wore too much clothing, which would only hinder her in battle. But all that clothing had been one of her wishes. It was the wish of almost all servants to wear several layers of clothing. As little sense as that made, the Barbarians who owned them complied with their wishes.

Combat was none of the servants’ concern in the first place.

“Look at me.” Hakon lifted the servant’s trembling head, forcing eye contact with quivering blue eyes that were as bright as the cloudless sky. “And be honest with me. Do you believe in the Ancestors?”

He turned to the other servants when the young woman said nothing. She just stood there like prey caught by a predator.

“You do not believe in the Ancestors,” he said to the others. “Why not? Who do humans believe in? Do they even believe in anything?”

One of the other servants shook his head when Hakon mentioned the first part. That confirmed what he already knew: that humans, or this group in particular, did not believe in the Ancestors. As for the rest… they never responded. The male servant who had shaken his head stirred, his lips parting, but it looked like he decided against answering.

“I see,” Hakon sighed in disappointment. “You don’t want to answer. That is unfortunate.”

He dismissed the female servant standing before him. “If you feel like telling me about your old home or your beliefs, I will listen.”

They looked confused rather than shaken. The chieftain did not care about them, and Hakon was fairly certain the other Barbarians with servants mostly ignored them as well. Not that there were many servants in the first place. Few survived the battle, and even fewer adjusted to the Barbarians’

livelihood. Some tried to flee, but the rest never tried. Not after Hakon's father caught and returned with those who managed to get out of the tribehold.

He still remembered that day. Several servants tried to escape, only to be carried back by the chieftain. Dead or alive, they did not survive for long. Cleaved in half, body parts severed, or imbued with the chieftain's crimson hue, they all suffered the same fate. Examples were made.

The servants scattered when Hakon dismissed them with a wave. They collected the plates in a hurry and nearly fell over each other in an attempt to leave the hut as fast as possible. Their whispering voices rang in Hakon's ears as they discussed who would bring him the food. As pitiful as they were, the servants' behavior was also amusing in a way.

Enhanced Comprehension prodded him when he talked to the servants. The wrongness he felt was multidirectional, which was quite confusing, but it only confirmed that he could have acquired a Skill if he tried harder.

The Ancestors' actions confused him at times. What Skill was useful enough in their eyes to reward him for talking to the servants? Skills granted by the Ancestors were always useful. That was why they were granted in the first place. So how could that help him?

[Reading] is neither about combat nor survival, he had to remind himself. As little as he had used the Skill since the Rite, it did help him. Maybe it would help him further if he focused more on it.

His attention drifted to the shelf and its scrolls, but before he could get up to inspect them, the young female servant arrived, carrying four stone plates that were filled to the brim with food.

First came his stomach, then training.

By the time Hakon was done eating, the chaos in the hut had subsided. The servants avoided him. Why, they did not say, but that was their issue to resolve. He collected several scrolls from the shelf and returned, his plan just as simple as before.

Practice. That was the core component. It was also the most important. As for the details, Hakon wanted to focus more on [Split Focus]. It was not the best Skill, as it consumed a considerable amount of mana every few

heartbeats, but it helped him greatly. If not for [Split Focus], Skills like [Mana Shaping] would never have come to him.

Being able to split his attention between several tasks was essential. In combat, it would help him analyze the enemy, use several Skills that required constant attention, and focus on attacking. But even outside combat, learning more Skills alongside improving them had been a lot easier with [Split Focus].

Keeping the Maulaxe Crusher by his side, Hakon left the hut. He returned to the backyard, prepared to spend the day unraveling the scrolls until all the big words made sense. Then he saw Astrid and Björn standing in the sparring ring. They were not engaged in combat but were grumbling to one another when Hakon stepped forward.

“Finally!” Björn the Bear groaned. “We thought you were dead!”

“*You* thought that. I did not!” Astrid’s hand shot forward, stabbing Björn in the side.

She turned back to him with a smile, while Björn gasped for air beside her. “Where have you been? We expected you to join the others on the training grounds after the Battle of Generation, but you never came.”

“You were supposed to show off to Ulfar and his idiot friends,” Björn groaned, still rubbing the spot Astrid had stabbed. “If he can still call them friends after killing them.”

“That was not a smart decision.” Hakon nodded. “The tribe needs as many combat-capable warriors if it wants to survive.”

“Pearot?” Astrid asked, which he confirmed with a nod. “I expected as much after what the Shaman said. Does that mean we’re going to have to fight all the other tribes who’ve completed their Battle of Generation before us?”

“Not necessarily. We can unite our forces with the other tribes. Loush was already defeated, and Katus is far enough away to survive a few more cycles even if Pearot were to try something. As for us–”

“We have the chieftain,” Björn completed, which was again confirmed with a nod.

“Yes, we have the chieftain, but we don’t know how much longer that’s going to protect us. If Pearot awakened a legendary power five cycles ago and has been in constant battle ever since, which may as well be the case, their legendary warriors might already be closing in on the 4th Ascension,” Hakon stated, inviting his friends into his thoughts.

“That makes sense. And even if it’s not the case, expecting the worst means we’re going to be prepared for everything,” Astrid agreed wholeheartedly. But her smile cracked, and she stared at Hakon. “Which is all the more reason to join us on the training ground. Training alone out here won’t help anyone. It won’t form a community of warriors that are willing to die alongside you.”

She had a good point. Hakon knew that much. But the training he had in mind was unlike anything the young warriors had seen. Even if they acknowledged him, they would never acknowledge his training. Especially not if he started reading now, acting like a Shaman.

Rather than the next chieftain, let alone the rising Warlord, they would come to think of him as a Shaman rather than a warrior. And that he did not want. Hakon was a warrior. He would become a chieftain and unite the tribes, not only to show his father or to bring his mother back, but to attain his own goals as well.

It was what he wanted, and he could not have anyone doubt him.

That’s what got him thinking. He was not like the other Barbarians. He had learned Skills not even his father had heard about. And maybe, maybe that was something he could make use of.

What if… Is that possible? Hakon tilted his head. He didn’t know, but he was willing to give it a try.

“Astrid. Björn,” he called out to his friends. “Do you want to learn a new Skill?”

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CHAPTER 32

Usually, warriors of the older generation used combat to teach the young about Skills and how the Ancestors rewarded them. Combat was the best way to do so, especially with the Barbarian Physique. Every Barbarian was born with the same physique, but it wasn't displayed in the same way by each of them. The chieftain once mentioned that those born with the Bloodline of Zeldron had the greatest of all synergies with the Barbarian Physique.

That had been one of the reasons Tribe Taskur survived this long. They were the Blood of Zeldron and thus the strongest of all Barbarians. The synergy of the Barbarian Physique and the Bloodline of Zeldron helped them acquire combat-related Skills. At the very least, the synergy further amplified a warrior's instincts, size, and muscle mass.

That would also explain why Hakon had always been different. His Bloodline was not the same as most of Tribe Taskur. Still, he was one of the strongest before the Rite, and he prevailed to retain his position at the top.

Be that as it may, Hakon was not necessarily a giant. He wasn't small, but compared to the greatest of warriors, he couldn't be considered tall or particularly broad.

Teaching Astrid and Björn through combat sounded right. Björn's Blessing of the Bear would guide him toward a more bestial combat style. That made it all the more difficult to teach him something that required him to maintain full focus in combat.

Through the Ascensions, his Blessing would further enhance him, and, with the Ancestors' support, he would eventually be able to transform into a Divine Bear. Such a transformation, among other things, was the greatest of

all rewards a Blessed warrior could acquire, as it would elevate their strength to an entirely new level.

Once again, that was something the Sagas of Barbarians who had long since joined the Ancestors' feast said.

He probably has a Skill like [Natural Regeneration] already. His version is probably better than mine. Hakon grimaced.

He considered teaching Björn [Dash], but he'd have to cleanse his pathways for that first. Teaching him that sounded more difficult than it had any right to.

"What are you doing?" Björn shouted, standing in the center of the sparring grounds, ready to spar, to 'learn.' "Or do you not want to show me that Skill of yours?"

"How good is your control of mana?" Hakon had to suppress a heavy sigh when Björn looked at him like he didn't understand a single word he had just said.

"Mana? What's that?" He tilted his head, only for Astrid to step in.

"The Shaman wields mana." She turned to Hakon, one eyebrow raised. "You know we're not Shamans. We wield Lifeblood, not mana."

"Lifeblood and mana are the same. At least, I think it is." Hakon waved dismissively and eyed his friends. "How good is your control of Lifeblood?"

"Good," Björn grunted in satisfaction, pushing his chest out. "The old hag said I learned [Crushing Advance] fast."

With that, he activated the Skill and burst forward. The ground beneath him cracked as he barreled toward the closest tree with surprising speed. A sheen caught Hakon's attention as his friend crashed right into the tree, snapping it in two. Björn's hair did not change color, but it shimmered before the impact, absorbing most of the damage and leaving him unscathed even when the tree collapsed.

Astrid could only shake her head at their friend's stupidity.

"Mother is satisfied with my power, but she said I have to grow a lot more," she said, completely ignoring Björn as he turned back with a smug smile. If he expected to be praised for destroying the chieftain's home, he'd have to go elsewhere.

Astrid hesitated, then continued, "Mother told me to learn from you."

"What exactly did she say?" Hakon grinned at his friend as she grimaced. He had been around Astrid's mother long enough to know that

she was not one to take her daughter's loss in the Battle of Generation lightly. She couldn't accept it, yet she would never openly say so out of respect for the Ancestors rather than anything else.

"She told me to squeeze you dry. To learn your secrets and make them mine." Every word Astrid said seemed to physically hurt her.

"What an annoying woman." Björn walked up to them and spat on the ground, trying to look like getting ignored didn't bother him, even when it did.

"Say that to her. I want to see how you survive that," Astrid dared Björn, making him grimace.

Hakon stepped between his friends with a soothing smile. "I don't know how much you have advanced already, but you need to cleanse your pathways to learn some of the Skills I learned." When his friends looked confused at the mention of 'pathways,' he added, "The tunnels inside your body."

Björn was still confused, which was yet another issue, but Astrid seemed to understand.

"I will teach you [Flow Control] first. It might not help you too much, but it will help you improve your control of ma… Lifeblood," Hakon explained to Astrid. "[Flow Control] will help you cleanse your pathways faster as well. Using and improving the Skill will then help me teach you [Dash]."

He demonstrated [Dash] once, which was rewarded with a grunt from Björn.

"[Crushing Advance] is much better."

"Better or just different?" Hakon asked, silencing Björn. It was obvious he wanted to say [Crushing Advance] was better, but the way his friend looked at him told him there was more to it.

"You control [Dash]. It does not control you." Björn looked up at Hakon. "I saw you use that Skill in the Battle of Generation. It did not force you to move in the way the Skill wants you to. The Skill let you move how you wanted to."

That was a crude way to explain [Dash]. It wasn't entirely true in all its specifics, but it was good enough to make Björn think. And thinking was a good way to get started. After all, it was something new.

"Let me teach you what pathways are first. If you want to learn more after that, I can teach you [Flow Control] as well. If not, I could show you

[Combat Awareness] or [Weakness Detection] in combat later," Hakon proposed to his towering friend.

Björn did not seem fully convinced. It took him over a minute to finally agree, with a stipulation, "Okay, but I want to fight you no matter what."

"That's fine with me."

Astrid didn't object to the plan, so they started right away.

Following the prodding in his mind, Hakon used [Sensory Expansion] and [Split Focus]. Since he had gotten used to the Skills and the sensations they caused, it didn't take him long before activating [Mana Sense], [Mana Manipulation], and [Mana Shaping] as well.

That was a lot of Skills he planned to use while following his Ancient Power's sense of wrongness to teach his friends, but it felt like the right thing to do. Somewhat.

Hakon's head threatened to burst the moment he released mana out of his body to form different shapes. Small spheres hadn't been too difficult, yet even they hadn't been all that stable. Tweaking and twisting his control over his mana-based Skills, Hakon created a small semitranslucent mass.

His head throbbed and thundered, but the result was not all too bad: his creation looked like the mana mass inside him. There was only one problem. Neither Björn nor Astrid could see it. They stared at him, expecting greatness, only to see their friend struggling to do… *something*.

I can do this. Hakon closed his eyes, putting his mind into his creation and what he wanted it to be like.

The first idea that popped up in his mind was the Healer's emerald light. He had touched it before and knew that it was mana, but replicating the emerald light of the Shaman's Healer sounded too difficult. After all, the emerald light was not just a Lightcaller's glow or a pyre torch's shimmer. It contained what Healers required to tend to a Barbarian's wounds.

Following his train of thought, Hakon thought about the Lightcaller and pyre torches. He discarded the thought after a moment since he did not want to blind anyone, which led him toward his father's crimson hue and Astrid's Blood Fury. Replicating their powers was not feasible, but what if…

"Are you okay, dude?" Björn asked into the silence, only to let out a groan.

Astrid hissed at him, silencing their friend while Hakon leaned deeper into the power of Enhanced Comprehension.

Focusing on [Mana Manipulation], Hakon started to work, his approach as simple as it could be. He called out to Enhanced Comprehension, telling it what he wanted, and adjusted his Skills until the sense of wrongness no longer tried to consume him.

The wrongness may never truly disappear, but the voices grew quieter as he crawled closer to his desired goal.

Hakon didn't know how much time passed. It could have been enough to extinguish a pyre torch, or only a few heartbeats, but he was getting somewhere. His head felt like it was bursting apart, which only fed into [Pain Tolerance] as he adjusted his Skills, yet it was Björn's voice that caught his attention.

Enhanced Comprehension urged him to keep going and work on the wrongness, even if it was no longer necessary. Hakon's eyes snapped open to the manifestation of the mana mass glowing in a dim blue light. It was barely perceptible, though that was all he needed to teach his friends.

The blood dripping to the ground beside him was pointedly ignored as he smiled at Astrid and Björn.

"Can you see the mana shape now?" Hakon asked, even though he knew the answer.

Astrid stared at the conjuration like she couldn't believe what she was seeing and then at him. "Did you just improve a Skill?"

[Proficiency gained. [Mana Manipulation Lv.1] improved to [Mana Manipulation Lv.2]]
[Proficiency gained. [Mana Manipulation Lv.2] improved to [Mana Manipulation Lv.3]]
[Proficiency gained. [Mana Shaping Lv.1] improved to [Mana Shaping Lv.2]]

"Two, actually." Hakon laughed, which was a mistake. His concentration faltered, and he struggled to regain full control of the mana shape before him.

Improving one Skill would not have nearly been enough to make this work. Even better would have been several more Levels in both Skills, but that was something he could work on in the next few nights. That, and earning yet another Level.

Working with Enhanced Comprehension was truly a blessing of the Ancestors. It guided his Skill growth greatly and pushed him to think in ways he never thought would help him. Now, he was still a little doubtful of the path he was supposed to take to make use of the Ancestors' gift in the best way, but he was confident he was walking in the right direction.

All he needed was to test more, be it through combat or in the chieftain's backyard.

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CHAPTER 33

Once he learned how to visualize mana, Hakon showed Astrid and Björn what his mana mass looked like. Theirs might be different for all he knew, but considering the looks he received, that didn't seem to be the case.

Following the creation of his mana mass, Hakon materialized the pathways leading from it. Only a few pathways were connected directly to the mass but creating them was far from easy. Maintaining the existing structures while adding more was strenuous and worsened the headache brewing in Hakon's head, yet it felt like it helped him grow at the same time.

With a goal at hand, Hakon created a series of four pathways leading from the mana mass. Then came the hard part: demonstrating how mana was supposed to be moved through the pathways. Showing that through his conjurations was a little too difficult for the time being, which was why he picked the easier solution. Hakon verbally explained what he did and how he practiced it.

Following that, he tried to explain everything he knew about pathways to Björn while giving visual examples with his conjurations, all while ensuring Astrid heard and understood him as well.

Björn's face scrunched up. He still looked confused even when Astrid nodded slowly. "The pathways. Lifeblood flows around them when I use my Skills."

That was news to Hakon. He was about to ask more when Björn exclaimed, "Yeah. I… I think that's it! Lifeblood flows out of that thing you're talking about. Sometimes around these tunnels, sometimes not. It hurts a little, but…" He shrugged.

“Pain is weakness leaving the body,” Hakon completed.

“Yes.”

Listening to what his friends had to say about Lifeblood was curious. Clearly, neither Astrid nor Björn used their pathways as intended. Maybe it was too difficult for them, or they simply didn’t know how.

Or they were taught something else. To pick the less complicated path even if it causes pain, he thought, eyes narrowed. The conjured mana construction fell apart, and he only maintained [Mana Sense] to watch his friends demonstrate some of their Skills.

First of all, they did not have many Skills. Most of the Skills they acquired were either ones the Ancestors recognized or those created with the guidance of their Ancient Powers. That was not necessarily bad, but it showed Hakon enough to fall deep in thought.

Cleansing his pathways hadn’t been easy. It was disgusting and took a considerably long time before the Ancestors rewarded him with a Skill. Then, even when they recognized [Flow Control], the Skill hadn’t been particularly useful. One of the only reasons he continued to cleanse his pathways was due to Enhanced Comprehension, and another had been [Dash]. And even [Dash] was only awarded because he followed his instincts and his Ancient Power’s insistence to keep going.

That made him wonder what most Barbarians would do if they did not have Enhanced Comprehension. They wouldn’t learn Skills as quickly as Hakon, leaving them with nothing but black sludge and Skills they might not even learn. Cleansing their pathways enough to earn [Flow Control], let alone [Dash], would take a fortnight. Maybe a little less if they were fortunate.

I am just fortunate enough to awaken the Mind. he mused quietly, reminding himself that regular warriors learned from the older generation. They didn’t have to figure everything out on their own and learned all that was important straight from those who fought and survived hundreds of great battles.

If they moved Lifeblood around their pathways instead of cleansing them for moons to circulate it through their bodies, then neither would the younger generation.

This was a generational problem, one that had existed for a long time. Worse still, their reasoning made sense. To those too impatient to cleanse their pathways, to those who desired bloodshed and earned most of their

rewards from the Ancestors through intense combat, ‘wasting’ moons on cleansing pathways when they could just move their energy alongside them made no sense. Especially when the latter provided results much faster than the former.

“That is going to take a while.” Hakon scratched the back of his head, wondering if he had made a mistake.

What did the Ancestors plan for him? The Shaman was adamant about him using his gift, but did that mean they wanted Hakon to keep it all to himself or to share his knowledge? Denying the teachings of the older generations by making his peers cleanse their pathways and learn Skills in ways Barbarians usually frowned upon would most definitely stir trouble. The entire tribe might descend into chaos if he did that. But did they really have a choice?

The neighboring tribes had grown more aggressive over the cycles. Cycles in which Tribe Taskur’s younger generation was unable to awaken. Then there was Tribe Pearot and the Ancestors’ wishes for a new Warlord. War was inevitable, and Tribe Taskur was at a severe disadvantage. They had to make up for cycles of missed Rites. One way to do so was to teach the young warriors. Another was to force the old generation to grow stronger.

That won’t work. They won’t listen to me until I am strong enough to defeat them. Hakon shook his head and only now realized that Astrid was staring at him, waiting.

Even if others, including Björn, were more likely to resist his teachings, Astrid was different. She wanted to learn. And her wishes were not only based on her mother’s order. Astrid appeared genuinely interested in the power he acquired with the Mind. She, too, wanted to grow stronger, and she was willing to try unconventional methods to do so.

Hakon had Astrid move mana through her pathways. That, as it turned out, was far more difficult than he suspected. Astrid knew what she was supposed to do after the earlier demonstration, but she simply couldn’t do it. She couldn’t even tell him why it didn’t work.

“Lifeblood won’t enter the pathways. It wants to move around them,” was all she grumbled and groaned about.

Since that was not particularly helpful, Hakon stepped in to help using yet another tactic. With [Mana Sense] active, he stepped behind Astrid. Placing his hand firmly against the midsection of her back, he sensed

something. It was barely perceptible, but that was more than enough to adjust his hand's position until he was sure he was as close to Astrid's mana mass as he could get without carving her open.

[Sensory Expansion] helped him sense more of her mana mass and the mana oozing from it. Teaching her what she was supposed to do remained just as difficult as before. Sure, Hakon could sense what Astrid was doing, but by the time he tried to correct her, it was already too late. Instead of forcing a quick success, they slowed down, taking no more than one step at a time.

Which carried yet another set of problems. As patient as Astrid was usually, she grew frustrated every time she failed to follow his orders. Having a legendary power made her think that she would learn [Dash] and maybe even [Circulation] in no time. That couldn't have been further from the truth, which agitated Astrid more and more.

Hakon felt her slip away more easily every time she failed to follow his orders, and so he switched to yet another plan he'd come up with.

"I want to try something," he called out.

Astrid nodded firmly but let out a high-pitched shriek when Hakon used [Mana Infusion] on her. The Skill did exactly what it was supposed to do, infusing mana into the target, yet the target was not a weapon but a fellow Barbarian.

Astrid stiffened, and her body purged the foreign mana in an instant. She seemed more concerned with her shriek than the [Mana Infusion]. It only hurt her pride, leaving her ashamed, her cheeks burning bright red.

Björn did not hesitate to tease her with verbal jabs and knowing looks, which Hakon ignored as he mused the situation.

"Can we try that again? Try not to block me out this time," he commented.

It took his friends a while to regain their demeanor, and Astrid's ears were still bright red when she told him to try again, but that was probably fine. Hakon used [Mana Infusion] once more through his palm, infusing less mana than before right into Astrid's back.

She didn't shriek this time but flinched and pulled away, severing Hakon's contact with his mana.

"One more time," Astrid mouthed, without looking back.

A few seconds later, hand pressed against her back's midsection, they tried for the third time. Astrid didn't flinch or pull away. She leaned into

Hakon, his hand all that prevented her from falling to the ground.

[Mana Infusion] worked as intended. Hakon held tightly onto the mana entering her body and retained full control. But while he could will mana through Astrid's body, the entire situation was… complicated.

Astrid had to lower her guard for him to successfully infuse her with his mana and to retain control. She was completely exposed to him, creating an intimate moment that neither knew quite how to deal with. Heat rose to Hakon's cheeks, and he nearly lost control of the mana within Astrid, while her ears and face turned several shades redder.

It took a moment to regain his calm and curse his racing heart, but he continued and started to move mana through her body, which admittedly worsened the situation. Moving mana through Astrid while she leaned against him, trusting him wholeheartedly, made him feel like they were becoming one. The sensation did not fade while his mana was within her. Instead, it grew more intense as he closed in on her mana mass, and, once her mana reached out to his, Astrid gasped. She jerked away, her face burning bright red.

"I-I think we should try that other thing again. This… This doesn't work," she stammered.

Hakon nodded and took a moment to calm his racing heart. Only after a while did they resume their initial strategy, palm pressed against her back with [Mana Sense] and [Sensory Expansion] active. But the tension around them prevailed. Astrid squirmed when Hakon touched her then calmed down after a few deep breaths.

Hakon guided her with words rather than infused mana, and Astrid listened. She did not succeed right away, yet there was progress once Astrid no longer tried to force her way. She complied meekly, which accelerated their progress.

Unsure how much time had passed, Hakon knew they succeeded when a familiar smell reached him. He watched Astrid, blood flowing from her nose, and was about to congratulate her when her concentration slipped.

"What is that?" she screamed, gagging as soon as the pungent smell reached her.

"That? I don't know the details, but the black sludge that's blocking the pathways has to go somewhere, and that–"

"You knew this was going to happen!" Astrid interrupted, her voice shrill and eyes filled with terror.

She gagged, looking like she was about to vomit when she found the culprit. A droplet of black sludge oozing from her abdomen.

“Urgh.” Björn grimaced and gagged, which was quite the exaggeration.

Hakon was about to chide his friend when Astrid cursed something. She didn’t look at Hakon once and rushed to the hut, shouting for the servants to help her clean up.

“She’s a stinky little one,” Björn chuckled loud enough for everyone to hear. That comment earned him a stab in the side.

Hakon grunted. “Be nice to her or she’ll kill you.”

“You started it,” Björn grunted, rubbing his side. “She wouldn’t dare kill me either. Before she can kill me, I would tell you her deepest secrets.”

That caught Hakon’s attention. “You know her secrets? Something I don’t know?”

That hurt. He had always thought Astrid was closer to him than to Björn. Had he been wrong all along?

“Of course.” Björn laughed through the pain, throwing his friend a knowing look.

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CHAPTER 34

Astrid did not return to the backyard for a while, but her curses were loud and clear. Björn chuckled and said something, but Hakon tuned him out to focus on the Scriptures he received. The first thing he noticed when he willed the Scriptures to manifest was their number. There were a lot more than expected, which was why he only checked the most important ones.

[Skill [Teaching] has been learned.]
…
[Proficiency gained. [Teaching Lv.4] improved to [Teaching Lv.5]]
[Proficiency gained. [Mana Sense Lv.19] improved to [Mana Sense Lv.20]]
[Proficiency gained. [Mana Manipulation Lv.3] improved to [Mana Manipulation Lv.4]]
[Proficiency gained. [Mana Shaping Lv.2] improved to [Mana Shaping Lv.3]]

Hakon still hadn’t earned another Level, but it was only a matter of time. He felt it; his next Level was close.

The sheer number of Scriptures was unusually high for what had been a rather simple task. [Mana Sense]’s improvements had slowed considerably ever since the Skill neared Level 20, and it looked like the Skill’s growth would slow down even further. The mana structures had been the most complicated part, yet the gains he made were not owed to them. Mostly.

It was [Teaching] Hakon had to thank, even if it was hard to tell why. His gut told him that he too learned something from using the Skill. That improving [Teaching] helped him understand the underlying mechanisms behind the Skills he used to teach, as well as the Skills he wanted to teach. That, for one, would explain why he was staring down at a Scripture that would not make any sense otherwise.

[Proficiency gained. [Circulation Lv.9] improved to [Circulation Lv.10]]

“Interesting,” Hakon mused quietly, racking his mind to think about ways to use [Teaching] to improve his Skills while helping Björn and Astrid learn new Skills and improve existing ones more efficiently.

If this works out, we can catch up to the other tribes, he told himself, his thoughts interrupted when a heavy presence weighed down on him.

Astrid emerged from the hut, wet hair cascading down her back, her eyes speaking death.

“S-Sorry?” he quickly said, although he did not quite understand what he was supposed to apologize for.

Astrid’s lips parted and sealed shut. She clicked her tongue but calmed down.

“Feeling better?” Hakon asked. “That’s good, but you won’t be able to avoid the pungent smell if you want to continue. Since you don’t have my Ancient Power, it might take you a little longer to learn [Flow Control] or [Dash], but as long as you practice in my presence, we can–”

“No!” Astrid shook her head vehemently.

“What?”

“That won’t happen!” She shook her head even harder. “You helped me move Lifeblood into my pathways, and that is great, but I will learn those Skills without you.”

That didn’t make any sense. Hakon tried to tell her he’d just acquired a Skill that would help her cleanse her pathways even faster. He had yet to learn more about [Teaching]’s specifics, though he was sure the Skill could help them both. As long as he improved it, he might even help Astrid upgrade [Flow Control] to [Circulation] in a fortnight. If possible, Hakon could improve [Circulation] as well, further cleansing his own pathways in the process. That would be amazing.

They could use their time much better. Still, Astrid rejected his reasoning, saying something about the smell being too much.

Hakon didn’t get it. The black sludge smelled bad, sure, but it was just that, a nasty smell. It wouldn’t last forever either.

“She doesn’t want to smell bad or look ugly in your presence. She’s always ugly, so she’s failing at that either way,” Björn said cheekily while backing away. Astrid glared daggers at him but didn’t move to rip her friend a new one. She did not lift her gaze to look in Hakon’s direction either.

“First of all,” Hakon turned to Björn, “Astrid is not ugly. She’s beautiful, and you know that as well as I and everyone else in the tribe.”

The Blessed warrior grinned broadly at Astrid as the words echoed through the backyard.

“Second, I don’t mind the smell. When I cleansed my pathways, it was much worse.” Furthermore, getting used to pungent smells was good training. It helped him and everyone present get used to the atrocious smells of some truly terrifying monstrosities. Not all monsters were as simple as the Acidic Beetles, and even their acid had been a nuisance.

Turning back to Astrid, Hakon continued, “It would mean a lot if we could work on this together.”

As unwilling as she appeared at first glance, Astrid didn’t reject his approach immediately.

“It really means a lot to you, doesn’t it?” she asked, to which Hakon agreed with a nod.

“We could both improve a lot. The Ancestors would be happy and reward you with a few Skills and help me increase the Levels of mine.” The more he said, the darker Astrid’s expression got. Clearly, she’d expected a better answer, which Hakon understood. But… did he really want to say that out loud?

Am I rea… You know what? Fuck it. Life was precious, and it was better off not wasted. He’d known for cycles how he felt, and it was stupid not to say anything. He could fight hundreds of monsters, crush the Colossal Terror, and defeat a legendary warrior, yet he couldn’t even be true to himself?

Just how pathetic was he?

“And I want to spend more time with you. Growing stronger together does sound nice… doesn’t it?” Hakon asked wryly.

Björn let out a happy sound. “Finally!”

Astrid’s doomlike expression lit up. She didn’t seem convinced about the black sludge, but she agreed nonetheless.

“It does,” she mouthed. “As long as we keep something close by to get rid of that disgusting black sludge.”

That was good enough for Hakon. He didn’t know what his relationship with Astrid would look like in the future, but he was looking forward to it. Just like the future. Even Tribe Pearot’s attack had something to look forward to. Bloodshed, for one, as well as the opportunity to grow even stronger. To fortify one’s Saga and witness the rise of the Warlord that had been prophesied.

The future was unknown, yet all that awaited him in the next few cycles was exciting. And that included spending more time with Astrid.

What Hakon did not expect when he mentioned being around Astrid more often was to get cut open, but it was not all that bad. Not even when Astrid carved a massive X into his chest with two quick slashes could he complain. After all, he asked her to do it.

After teaching Astrid a few more things, their roles switched. He asked Astrid to show him a few Skills. [Flow Observation] improved as he studied her every move in the light of the descending sun, but it was not until she revealed the latest of the Skills she acquired that she caught Hakon’s interest.

“You want to learn [River of Blood]?” She narrowed her eyes at Hakon. “You know that you can’t learn that Skill, right?”

Of course, she was right. [River of Blood] was a Skill that used part of her Ancient Power to function. Blood Fury, being a legendary Ancient Power, carried a mystery nobody really understood. The Sagas surrounding the previous wielder of Blood Fury only mentioned that he was a force to be reckoned with. He transformed the entire battlefield into a domain of great power, using all the shed blood to grow ever stronger.

There had almost been mentions of madness, but that was of no importance for the time being.

“I know. I still want to see if I can learn it.” That was how Hakon ended up torn into shreds, lying on the ground, bleeding to death. At least, that

was what the amount of blood pooling around him suggested.

[Natural Regeneration] and [Circulation] were active at full power, consuming swaths of mana and stabilizing his condition.

“Do you need me to fetch the Healer?” Björn asked, looking grimly at Hakon’s bust-open chest and arms. It didn’t look like his skin had been cut at all. If he was honest with himself, Hakon didn’t feel like that either, and it was true. He was not merely cut. His skin had burst open where Astrid’s blade struck him. His blood flow was also accelerated, and Skills like [Natural Regeneration] struggled to tend to the wound.

As prickly as the situation was, Hakon kept his cool and focused on the effect of Astrid’s Skill.

Simplified, [River of Blood] used some of the crimson aura created by Blood Fury to worsen the injury Astrid would have inflicted regardless. He sensed her power coating the blade’s edge, doing… something. That *something* had to be studied later, after he figured out more about how [River of Blood] affected his body.

The energy is still there. It’s clinging to the wound’s edges, slowing the healing process. Preventing it until the energy fades, Hakon theorized as he lay there, willing mana toward his wounds in an attempt to dispel Astrid’s power.

“He will be fine,” Astrid told Björn, who didn’t look too convinced.

As if to offer confirmation, the Ancestors rewarded Hakon for his suffering.

[Proficiency gained. [Pain Tolerance Lv.18] improved to [Pain Tolerance Lv.19]]

While the improvement was not what he wanted, it lessened the pain weighing on his mind. Freeing his mind ever so slightly was all it took to focus even harder on his body.

He used [Inspection] to analyze his wounds, not quite sure if that would help. But even if it wouldn’t help him understand Astrid’s Skill, it was worth a try. He was walking blind through uncharted territory, after all.

I can do it! Hakon told himself. All he needed was time, effort, and a little bit of luck. Maybe a lot of it.

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CHAPTER 35

He couldn't do it.

Enhanced Comprehension tried to guide Hakon down the wrong path, but no matter how much he followed the prodding, it didn't work. With the combination of [Mana Sense], [Sensory Expansion], and [Flow Observation], it was possible to perceive and study Astrid's movements when she used her Power-based Skills, but replicating them was a problem.

Deactivating the Skill combination as he completed his analysis of Astrid's movements, Hakon tried to copy her using mana. But mana alone was clearly not enough. Or, if it was, he had to use it differently to create a Skill resembling [River of Blood]. Nothing came to be no matter how hard Hakon tried, which was a first.

Ever since the Rite, everything had worked out somehow. Enhanced Comprehension made sure to point out that he did something wrong, and he adjusted his movements and mana flow until whatever he was doing felt less wrong. Now, everything felt wrong, and the prodding thundered louder in his head than ever. It didn't fade or diminish in any way until he stopped trying to replicate Astrid, leaving him at a loss.

Nothing came to be, except for [Natural Regeneration] Leveling up once. His other Skills were gradually improving as well, but the Ancestors did not deem them valuable enough to increase the Skill Level. That was fine, although Hakon found himself grumbling, seeking the gratification rewarded by the Ancient Scripture changes and the Ancestors' attention.

What if I do it this way? Copying Astrid's Skills won't work. I don't have Blood Fury, so I cannot recreate the Skill perfectly. Replicating, however…

That should be possible, but it means I need to find ways to use mana to replace her energy, to do what she does.

Coating his weapon's edge with mana was the least of his problems. [Mana Infusion] didn't help much, but Hakon still had [Mana Manipulation], which felt like it was the perfect Skill to make it work. [Mana Manipulation] enhanced Hakon's control of mana, yet that was only part of the Skill's functions. It also allowed him to change mana's characteristics, such as its color. Altering mana was difficult and mentally draining; however, it was a necessity. Furthermore, altering mana accelerated the Skill's growth, even if the Ancestors didn't reward Hakon with many Level ups for it.

Some Skills were just harder to Level than others, and that was fine.

"Fight me, Hakon!" Björn grunted and cursed beside him. "Since when are you this boring? Sitting around all day, doing nothing? Fight me!"

"You can leave if you're bored." Astrid dismissed him with a wave.

"Hakon," he grumbled, acting like Astrid didn't exist. "Fight me!"

Hakon wanted to continue practicing, but he was also starting to get frustrated. Failing to create a weaker version of [River of Blood] was starting to get to him. It made his fingers itch, urging him to de-stress in the best way known to Barbarians.

"Okay." He walked over to the weapon stand and picked a simple longsword before stepping into the ring. "But you better show me some of your Skills. If you don't, bones will be broken."

Björn exclaimed excitedly and rushed to the weapon stand to retrieve a set of axes. He could have waited, yet he didn't, rushing straight at Hakon.

The ground beneath him crackled, and his hair grew thicker the moment he barreled forward.

[Crushing Advance], huh, Hakon mused as he stepped aside.

The first time Björn used the Skill, its greatest weakness had already been exposed. It was so obvious that it was almost embarrassing. Almost.

[Crushing Advance] was a fast Power-based Skill. Björn accelerated to top speed before he reached his target, and he would have crushed it if nothing went wrong. The impact would shatter bones and break even the greatest natural defenses. It would work against most monsters and Barbarians who hadn't experienced his Skill. Maybe it would work against them even if they had seen the Skill already, yet it was foolish to use against someone who didn't shy away from evading his opponent.

Hakon identified the Skill immediately. That, combined with knowing what the Skill did and how it forced Björn to move, led him to pick the easiest solution and step aside.

Björn barreled past him, his axes swinging, missing him by a hair's breadth. Then, more instinctive than anything, Hakon tried to recreate the Skill. He did something else this time around rather than repeating what he attempted with [River of Blood].

He used [Circulation] first to empower his entire body. Once reinforced, Hakon pumped mana into his lower legs and unleashed [Dash] at full power. Björn was already past him, struggling to slow down as he cancelled [Crushing Advance]. Catching up to the Blessed warrior, Hakon did not slash at his friend but crashed right into him. And as he crashed into Björn like a fully charged Behemoth, Hakon poured mana into [Discharge].

As expensive as the Skill was, it was powerful. And painful.

Mana burst through the pathways a little more sluggishly than Hakon had hoped for. Nevertheless, it did what it was supposed to do and shot straight into Björn. While it was hard to tell what exactly happened to the Blessed warrior, his body froze up. Only then did the full force of the impact hit Björn, pushing him backward.

Not enough. I could have forced him to the ground if the impact was…

Hakon shook his head, his blade pressed against Björn's neck.

The Blessed warrior regained full control of his body after a moment, but he did not move. He stared at Hakon with wide eyes.

"Did you just steal [Crushing Advance]?"

"No." Hakon shook his head. As similar as the sequence of events had been, [Crushing Advance] was not something he could take. It was a Power-based Skill and therefore not an option. What he could do, though, was use his existing Skills to recreate the effect of [Crushing Advance].

The only downside? It was expensive. While Björn could not have used more than a small portion of his energy, Hakon's reserves were drained by no less than one-third. [Discharge] was, by far, the most demanding, but it was also the only Skill that could replicate the destructive power Björn created upon impact.

Although it wasn't the same, Hakon liked the effect quite a bit.

"I need to try this again. Get up and don't move." He motioned for his friend to get up.

Björn groaned as he scrambled to his feet, rubbing his chest where [Discharge] hit him. “That was not what I meant when I said I want to fight you.”

“Snap out of it and stay still,” Astrid chided him. “Hakon is about to learn a new Skill, aren’t you?”

The last bit was directed at Hakon, who could only shrug. There was a lot left to learn, yet Enhanced Comprehension seemed to agree with Astrid’s comment.

Now it was on the Ancestors to decide whether he had earned the right to learn a new Skill or not.

I need to use less mana. Control it more precisely. Use it more efficiently, he told himself before charging at Björn again… and again.

[Dash] had to be used as a base, to a certain extent. But instead of using the Skill at its highest level, or even at its lowest, less mana was used, with a lesser focus on speed and a greater focus on the lower body’s toughness and stability. Figuring out how to do that had been a rather troublesome ordeal, one that only succeeded through pain and dozens of charges at Björn.

Enhanced Comprehension helped a lot, but the far more potent solution had been Hakon’s instincts. Even if he was not born with the Bloodline, Blood of Zeldron, he was still a Barbarian. He had the Barbarian Physique and could rely on it.

It may not have been the first time Hakon felt what it meant to be a Barbarian, yet it was the most intense since he could remember. His mana control was not all that great even after all his practice, and it didn’t need to be any better to work with his body. For his body did a colossal amount of the work.

His lower body reinforced, he crashed into the target, mana bursting outward. While it was not nearly as much as [Discharge] demanded, the amount was still considerable, and too much to satisfy Hakon. That was yet another issue he had to work on in the future.

Mana burst outward and into the target’s muscles. Not the pathways, which was what [Discharge] focused on, but their bulging muscles, making them stiff and stunning the target temporarily. The extent of the stunning

effect depended heavily on the target, their Level, and their general toughness. A few more unknowns had yet to be identified, but it was more effective on Astrid than Björn, although the effect faded faster on Astrid than on the Blessed warrior.

It worked more or less fine, which was not enough considering the effect was less pronounced on stronger opponents. That only meant Hakon had to improve the Skill to make it more efficient and expand its repertoire of functions.

[Skill [Bash] has been learned.]

…

[Proficiency gained. [Bash Lv.3] improved to [Bash Lv.4]]
[Proficiency gained. [Teaching Lv.5] improved to [Teaching Lv.6]]
[Proficiency gained. [Teaching Lv.6] improved to [Teaching Lv.7]]

[Bash] was nowhere near as powerful as [Crushing Advance], and it consumed more energy than Björn's Skill, but it was something everyone could learn. It improved fast enough to enhance the Skill's effect and efficiency considerably, transforming it into a powerful weapon. As long as it was nourished, [Bash] could become truly terrifying.

Regarding [Teaching], Hakon was satisfied. He didn't expect that to happen, but Björn learned a lot from the dozens of times Hakon charged the Blessed warrior, allowing him to learn and improve [Bash].

That only left Astrid, who hadn't gained anything from training together. She didn't seem all that bothered, but Hakon promised to teach her [Flow Control] and [Dash].

"[Bash] as well," she demanded with a mischievous smile.

"Of course."

"And you need to come to the training ground tomorrow," Astrid said, and before Hakon could respond, she added, "The others are waiting for you. They're ready to challenge you."

She threw him a knowing look. The other warriors were waiting for him to fail. They may have acknowledged him and might even respect him; nonetheless, they planned to surpass him. To crush him and show everyone that their loss had been a stroke of misfortune.

So Hakon had to show them and make sure they understood he was their leader now. The head of the new generation.

He licked his lips, more than ready to bash a few heads.

Ancient Scripture 1.1

Hakon Taskur – Level 14
Race – Barbarian
Ancient Power – Enhanced Comprehension
Bloodline – Wildborne Lifeblood
Runeskin – Hoard Impact (Major)

Skills
Resistances – [Poison Resistance Lv.12], [Pain Tolerance Lv.19], [Acid Resistance Lv.10], [Fatigue Resistance Lv.1]
Utility – [Reading Lv.3], [Running Lv.14], [Field Crafting Lv.5], [Silent Steps Lv.7], [Dismantling Lv.6], [Stealth Lv.3], [Natural Regeneration Lv.16], [Inspection Lv.5], [Tracking Lv.4], [Teaching Lv.7]
Combat – [Combat Awareness Lv.16], [Dash Lv.9], [Throwing Lv.5], [Evasion Lv.15], [Grappling Lv.6], [Weakness Detection Lv.14], [Two Weapon Fighting Lv.5], [Weapon Mastery Lv.8], [Bash Lv.4]
Mana – [Circulation Lv.10], [Mana Sense Lv.20], [Split Focus Lv.12], [Mana Infusion Lv.6], [Sensory Expansion Lv.10]], [Flow Observation Lv.6], [Discharge Lv.1], [Mana Manipulation Lv.4], [Mana Shaping Lv.3]

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CHAPTER 36

The next morning, Hakon left his home for the first time since the Battle of Generation. He spent the night reading the old scrolls, which rewarded him with several Levels in [Reading] and a more in-depth understanding of several complex words.

[Fatigue Resistance] worked excellently. While it did not decrease the amount of sleep he needed, the Skill ensured he was not as quickly exhausted. This applied both mentally and physically, which helped him recover from physical training without affecting his studies too much.

Tales of the first Warlord, the Ancestors, and the Zeldron were cryptic at best. A Shaman had to have written them, since Barbarians rarely learned to write. Hakon could not write either. His mother wanted to teach him, but he was more interested in training and reading.

I could learn how to write, he mused to himself, even though his time would be better spent elsewhere. It wouldn't help anyone if he learned how to write. Reading, on the other hand, allowed him to understand the Sagas the chieftain had told him about. The scrolls depicted the greatest era of the Barbarians, the Divine Beasts' wrath, and the other races' greed, even if it was fragmented.

The only notable details were about the war from before the current chieftain was born. It was a great era, one of bloodshed and chaos, yet not all was as pleasant as the chieftain and the Shaman always said. As much blood as the Barbarians shed for the Ancestors, the war was still coming to an end with their side losing.

Hakon had to make a lot of guesses because many details were missing, but the rise of the Warlord was likely the only, possibly one of multiple,

reasons they were still alive and not enslaved as of today.

The old scrolls never mentioned who started the war or when it started. They primarily focused on bloodshed. At least, that was how it read, until the Divine Beasts and humans combined their forces. A gargantuan silver terror was mentioned, one that was said to live in the dark forest's mountains even now, though Hakon highly doubted that. The older Barbarians hadn't mentioned anything about a silver Divine Beast, let alone its wrath.

Whatever. Hakon's attention returned to the old scrolls.

After the Divine Beasts and humans combined their forces, a war that had once been led by multiple forces changed forever. The tribes were either removed from existence or pushed into retreat, and it would have continued until the last of the Barbarians had been killed if the Ancestors hadn't intervened.

The intervention part, the details revolving around it, were not described in the scrolls. A gaping hole adorned the scroll where the author must have spoken about the Ancestors and all they did to protect their descendants. Regardless, the result never changed; the Warlord emerged from the Ancestors' wombs and united the eight tribes that survived the longest to fight back as one. And that they did.

What happened next? Hakon had the exact same thought the night before, but he couldn't find the answer no matter how hard he searched.

The Barbarians were not united anymore, and the reason for that was as obvious as the rise of the sun and the brilliant light of the moons. Hakon gazed up at the moons. Silver no longer shone as brightly as before. It shrunk and made space for the moon of Beast, a halo hovering above, basking it in a more vibrant light than the other moons.

Once the Warlord, the strongest of all Barbarians, joined the Ancestors to feast with them, many tried to lay claim of his status. Following the path of the Barbarians, they fought and shed blood to determine the strongest living Barbarian.

They failed.

Hakon combed through the scrolls in his father's possession throughout the night, but he only found the Saga of the chieftain's predecessor. And even that told him little about the past. All he learned was that the united tribe split up into its eight original tribes after cycles of conflict.

It did not directly mention it, though it was clear to him that the inability to declare a new Warlord was the crux of the problem. What did not help in that situation was the Divine Beasts, humans, and other races fled into their own land. They avoided the united Barbarians, too afraid to keep fighting.

Their disappearance was a disaster laying in wait, as the lack of a united enemy created space for ‘new’ enemies to rise. The tribes began to fight amongst each other once more, eager to show the Ancestors that they were worthy enough to rise to become the next Warlords.

But did they really flee? Hakon wondered about the Divine Beasts and other races as he left the hut. Divine Beasts hadn’t been sighted for dozens of cycles, and it had been many cycles since the last humans dared to step into the Barbarians’ territory, but did that really mean they were afraid of them?

The scrolls depicting Sagas, tales, and things he didn’t quite understand yet told Hakon enough to know that they lost the war. No matter what others said, dozens of tribes, each numbering in the thousands, had been eradicated. And even if those clans wouldn’t have claimed more land than Tribe Taskur’s current territory, the united clans would have covered the entirety of the forest and spread even farther, enclosing the distant mountain range as well.

The mountain range… was one of *them* really there?

“Is there really a Divine Beast near the mountain range?” he muttered to himself and froze when the air around him changed. It trembled and weighed on Hakon as he called out ‘Divine Beast,’ and the feeling did not disperse for many heartbeats.

The dark forest as well as the mountain range must have once belonged to the Barbarians but that was no longer the case. Now it was a place filled with danger and death. The farther one ventured, the greater the threats awaiting. And, within the mountain range, somewhere, a terror was laying in wait. He did not want to believe it, yet he did. It was there, whether he wanted it to be or not.

We are pathetic, Hakon cursed, his fingers itching.

He wanted to forget all that he had pieced together the night before, but it wouldn’t leave his mind. It was etched deep into his head, reminding him that he, just like everyone else, thought they were the strongest even when they weren’t.

Is that why humans have not come to raid us anymore? Because we're too weak for them? He grumbled, stepping through the tribehold.

Hakon headed slowly to the training ground, his mind not yet focused on training. It was dragged down a spiral of thoughts that wrecked his mind.

"No!" He shook his head. "If we were too weak for humans, they would have come to us already. Are they afraid?"

That sentiment didn't sit right with him. The chieftain never labeled the human attackers as 'frightened chickens.' He even respected them, as much as a Barbarian could respect those he crushed effortlessly.

The prodding in the back of Hakon's mind grew stronger the more he thought about the past. Enhanced Comprehension was trying to tell him something, but even though he knew that was the case, it was impossible to tell what the humans wanted or why they had returned once before he was born.

The truth eluded him no matter how much he thought about it. He needed more information to find out the entire truth, and he would get the answers soon enough. Now, however, a few idiots were waiting to get their skulls caved in.

Neither Björn nor Astrid were at the training ground. Hakon expected them to be there when he arrived, but it appeared most young warriors were not particularly interested in training early in the morning. The sun hadn't risen high above the horizon when Hakon arrived at the training ground. Despite that, it was late enough for everyone to be focused on training.

"Are the others in the wild?" Hakon asked the first warrior who looked up to him.

"You come. Are you not afraid?" the Barbarian chuckled, putting his massive two-handed axe aside.

"Do you think I should be afraid, Teraq?" Hakon narrowed his eyes. "You didn't answer my first question."

Teraq flashed a toothy smile, revealing several gaps where teeth had once been. "Don't know. You awakened the Mind. The Mind is weak."

"Is that what you saw during the Battle of Generation? If so, what does that say about you and all the others? Did you even win one fight?"

Teraq's smile cracked, and his hands clenched into fists. "Astrid was strong. Too strong. But you, you look weak."

Anger bubbled in his chest. It was still under his control, but Hakon thought the Battle of Generation changed everyone's impression of him.

Letting his gaze drift across the training ground, he realized that was not the case. Some, those he fought directly a few days ago, diverted their gaze or even lowered their heads a little. That was about it.

No more than eight young warriors were present at the training ground, and he fought two of them. The others had varied reactions to his appearance. Two warriors, Teraq included, wore mocking expressions, clearly not believing someone wielding a power of the Mind was strong enough to defeat them. How they came to that conclusion after he defeated Ulfar, Hakon couldn't tell, but he never really understood how their minds worked.

To show them, he had to fight them. And that was fine. He was ready to beat them, after he figured out what the others wanted.

Inspecting everyone present, including their strength, Hakon wasn't sure whether he was supposed to be happy or insulted.

Some of the young warriors looking at him like predators weren't even at the 1st Ascension. Even the Scripture of Teraq was nothing short of insulting.

[Barbarian – Low Threat (1st Ascension)]

Putting aside the stark difference in strength, Hakon couldn't help but be curious.

"Do you, either of you, really think you can defeat me? Was the Battle of Generation truly not enough for you?" he asked the group, his eyes never landing on Teraq, which infuriated him. Just like he wanted.

"You can talk, but can you fight? I don't believe it!" Teraq grunted. "I challenge you!"

Hakon raised an eyebrow at the Barbarian, only to turn around when the sound of light footsteps rang out from behind. Astrid stepped into the training ground, her gaze never leaving his side.

"I might have hit Teraq too hard on the head," she said evenly. "He missed most of the Battle of Generation, maybe all of it."

That did not excuse the Barbarian's disrespect before the Ancestors. Not only was he tarnishing Hakon's honor, but he openly disregarded the Ancestors' decision to crown him the Battle of Generation's victor, and Astrid knew that. She did not seek an excuse for Teraq either. It was more of an apology for the trouble she caused him; if only barely.

“Will you kill them, or do you want me to call for a Healer?” Astrid asked without an ounce of emotion.

“Neither.” Hakon snorted. “I think they forgot what it feels like to feel pain.”

“And pain is weakness leaving the body,” Astrid completed, rolling her eyes.

Exactly, and they were weak. Hence, they had to hurt a lot.

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INTERLUDE

TERAQ

Teraq knew he was nowhere near the strongest warriors of his generation. Ulfar, Astrid, Björn, and others were stronger than him. And while he did not like that, Teraq could accept it. However, as someone who followed the path of combat and bloodshed like every true Barbarian should, he couldn't understand Hakon.

The Ancestors punished him with the Mind, an Ancient Power that should have made it impossible to keep up with the strongest of their generation, yet that was not the case. If anything, Hakon was stronger than ever. He won the Battle of Generation when his first opponent should have crushed him.

Did that mean the Ancestors were wrong? Or… that they did not punish him with his Ancient Power? That could not be. It made no sense. There was no way the Ancestors acknowledged and accepted Hakon. Hakon was a failure who awakened the Mind. Thus, Teraq challenged the chieftain's son to see for himself.

"I will crush you," Teraq growled, lowering his body in impatience. He dug his feet deep into the ground and propelled himself forward without hesitation.

Teraq watched Hakon narrow his eyes at him, but there was no way he could escape [Herculean Sprint]. The Skill channeled his Ancient Power, Herculean Strength, into his lower body, allowing him to close the distance between them swiftly.

But while Teraq was fast and confident, his charge was filled with the intent of destruction, Hakon simply watched him. The chieftain's son regarded him from head to toe, a flash of scheming intelligence glinting in

his eyes, yet he didn’t move. Not until Teraq reached him, his fist shooting forward and aiming for the head.

Teraq had yet to acquire [Unarmed Weapon Mastery], but it was not like that mattered. He was confident in his strength and speed. A weakling with the Mind wouldn’t pose a threat to him.

Yet even as he was certain of his superiority, Hakon’s fight against Ulfar and the others flashed before his eyes. The chieftain’s son was not weak and deserved to be treated with the respect of every Barbarian. Even if his Ancient Power was lackluster, he still followed the path of the Barbarians. Letting out a growl, Teraq channeled his Ancient Power, Herculean Strength, into his arms. He empowered most of his body in an instant and struck out, only to watch Hakon twist out of the attack.

Teraq followed up with several more strikes, frustration building as none of his attacks hit the mark. Agitated, his punches ripped through the air with ever-increasing ferocity.

Stop escaping, weasel! he roared in his head, cursing Hakon but also himself for failing to hit his foe even once. One time. That was all he needed to win the battle. To crush Hakon and show everyone that he was stronger than most and that Hakon was not as powerful as everyone made him out to be.

But no matter how strong Teraq was, Herculean Strength was useless if he couldn’t even hit his target. And that was exactly what was happening. Hakon wasn’t even that fast, yet hitting him seemed like an impossibility. Not even an ounce of power radiated from him. The corner of his lips curled up, his body was neither tense nor showing signs of exhaustion.

Hakon was playing around. He wasn’t even trying.

Teraq couldn’t do anything, yet he rejected his foe’s superiority and hurled one insult after another at him.

“Coward!” he roared, only to be ignored.

Hakon simply watched him, his eyes betraying no emotion as he stepped to the side, evading yet another barrage of strikes. He even glanced aside, as if their spar wasn’t worth his attention. Teraq followed his gaze and saw that more young warriors had arrived at the training ground. As for Astrid and the others who had already been present, they watched in silence. Some looked at Teraq with disdain, because he was too weak to fight Hakon head-on, because he, wielding Herculean Strength, couldn’t even hit the wielder of the Mind.

But they also frowned upon Hakon. Warriors were not supposed to flee from combat. They ought to face their foes head-on, yet he couldn't be bothered. And that only fanned the irritation burning in Teraq's heart.

He couldn't understand what the Ancestors were doing or how they could accept Hakon's actions, yet they did. Not only did they acknowledge him, they even seemed to reward him. Hakon flowed around the battlefield with grace and surprising ease. He did not attack for quite a while, but the situation was clear enough: the Ancestors were rewarding him with Skills… Skills he was improving on the go.

Teraq could feel it, the understanding eluding him.

And just as the first bead of sweat poured down his temples, Hakon's strategy changed drastically. He evaded the incoming blows even more easily than before, twisting out of one punch only to retaliate with a rapid sequence of three strikes right beneath Teraq's rib cage.

Teraq gasped as a single punch forced the air out of his lungs. Hakon barely hit him, yet he felt like collapsing.

"Take a breath. Then come at me again," Hakon said without an ounce of emotion in his voice.

Teraq's eyes widened, yet he kept moving, until another punch landed. The force of the impact was almost identical to the first strike, perfectly controlled and aimed with a precision that rivaled the oldest warriors of Tribe Taskur. It struck the exact same spot, nearly bringing Teraq to his knees.

That was when he realized Hakon was not weak, and that he could have ended the spar at any point, yet chose not to. Because he wanted to make an example. And Teraq had fallen victim to him.

What a fool I am. He gritted his teeth as he continued the fight. This time, he did not attack mindlessly. He adjusted his stance and studied his opponent more seriously, yet he still failed to block the next few attacks. However, the more he was hit, the more apparent his own weaknesses became. Realizing his mistakes, Teraq adjusted until, finally, he blocked an incoming punch with precise movements and a proper stance.

[Unarmed Combat Mastery has been recognized. Skill generated. Level adjusted to proficiency.]

The corner of his lips curled upward, but it was too early to celebrate, as Hakon's fist found purchase in yet another weak spot Teraq failed to block.

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CHAPTER 37

Hakon changed his strategy drastically. Once Teraq was enraged, it was time to use his Skills more extensively. First, Hakon activated [Teaching] before following up with [Evasion]. As soon as the latter triggered, escaping Teraq's punches was as simple as walking through the tribehold. Superior speed and flexibility helped him, but neither was necessary.

Then, as soon as he found an opening with [Weakness Detection], Hakon used [Weapon Mastery]. He closed the distance to Teraq, weaving beneath his incoming fist, and punched him in the side. As soon as the punch landed, more weak points unraveled, and Hakon used them all.

He could have used [Bash], [Circulation], or even infused his hands with mana to end the fight quickly, but that was never his intention. This was not a normal spar. It was a demonstration.

Hakon executed a series of three quick punches in the same area right beneath Teraq's rib cage. He backed away, pushing the Barbarian's fist to the side with his palm, and watched Teraq gasp for air.

"Take a breath. Then come at me again," Hakon said without an ounce of emotion.

Teraq glared at him, but even when his lips parted, no words came out. He gasped and was forced to struggle for breath for a dozen heartbeats before he could speak once more. Still, Teraq met Hakon's steely eyes.

"Come."

Teraq did as ordered. He charged and threw a punch, only to miss the target. Hakon flowed around the incoming attack and punched him again, hitting another spot thrice in quick succession.

Teraq was given just enough time to regain his breath before the next order echoed across the training ground.

“Again.”

Once more, the young warrior attacked. This time, the anger in Teraq’s eyes had faded. A mixture of pain and confusion replaced the uncontrollable fury, and it only grew stronger when Hakon’s attacks became more and more violent.

He forced Teraq to charge him ten times. Ten times in which the young warrior failed to hit him even once. Ten times in which a few quick punches forced the towering Barbarian to the ground. And each time Teraq went down, Hakon made sure to crush him a little bit more.

While he focused on [Weapon Mastery] mixed with [Weakness Detection] at first, he did not shy away from showing the warriors on the training ground why he was the victor of the Battle of Generation. He used [Combat Awareness] after the fifth charge, when Teraq tried something new, and by the eighth charge, Hakon exerted [Circulation].

However, it was only by the eleventh and final charge that Teraq’s fist found purchase. It crashed right into Hakon’s fist, creating a clash befitting the traditional path of Barbarians. But when everyone expected the warrior with Herculean Strength to emerge victorious for the first time, the cracking of his knuckles suggested otherwise.

Hakon, creating this situation intentionally, realized quickly enough that he was not much weaker than Teraq when he used [Circulation], but being ‘nearly’ as strong as someone several Levels beneath him hadn’t been enough. That was why he infused his entire arm with an abundance of mana, with the most potent [Mana Infusion] surging into his fist right before the impact.

The clash was painful, but one of the two parties suffered a far worse fate.

Hakon had a hard time believing his punch was enough to break Teraq’s hand, but the cracking cacophony echoing throughout the training ground proved it.

Teraq’s eyes widened, and the doubts he previously had were replaced by flickers of terror. A leg sweep later, the young warrior was lying on the ground, his knuckles broken, while [Natural Regeneration] was already tending to Hakon’s numb fist. By the time Astrid walked up to him, the numbness had already receded.

“Maybe we need the Healer,” he sighed. “Just make sure the Healer doesn’t heal him entirely. He really needs to improve [Pain Tolerance].”

Astrid nodded in agreement, not even trying to hide her disdain for Teraq’s pained grunts and groans before departing.

“Did you learn [Unarmed Weapon Mastery]?” Hakon squatted down beside the warrior as he scrambled to sit up.

“What?” Teraq shook his head, his mind clearly in as much turmoil as his emotions.

“[Unarmed Weapon Mastery]. Did the Ancestors recognize the Skill?” Hakon asked, suppressing a heavy sigh. “During the last charges, your stance was a little better and your movements were sharper.”

Pointing out your enemy’s greatest flaws was not easy. Punching them where it hurt the most was probably not the best way to teach anyone either, yet it worked. Because they were Barbarians and endured more pain than others. There was a limit to everything, but by treading that very line, abusing a Barbarian’s swift recovery and pain tolerance to the fullest, it worked.

Teraq was the perfect example.

“The Ancestors did. That… you did that.” Teraq’s eyes grew wide. “The Ancestors favor you, Hakon.”

He had to put his entire mind into maintaining a neutral expression at the young warrior’s exclamation, yet he neither denied nor acknowledged Teraq’s words. Instead, he checked the most recent Scriptures.

[Teaching] went up by two Levels. [Weapon Mastery], [Weakness Detection], and [Evasion] improved by one. Neither [Circulation] nor [Mana Infusion] Leveled up, but he felt like he was getting close. And that was a great win in its own right. [Circulation], being an upgraded Skill, was hard to improve. Even the prodding of Enhanced Comprehension could only help him so much.

Fortunately, his gaze drifting across the training ground, he found a great way to use his Skills in a way befitting a true Barbarian.

“I know my Ancient Power is not what everyone, or any Barbarian, would consider powerful, but it’s useful if you know how to use it.” Hakon’s voice hollered across the training ground, capturing everyone’s attention. “And I want to show everyone just how useful it can be. Not only for me, but for the entire tribe.”

Even as his words faded from existence, nobody said anything.

“That’s why I’m here today. To show you not only that I deserve to lead us into war in the future, but also your greatest weaknesses.” The corner of his lips curled into a blinding smile. “So… who’s next?”

As eager as the young warriors had been to challenge him, nobody approached Hakon now that he’d crushed Teraq. Although Teraq hadn’t been the strongest, he was one of the Barbarians who reached the 1st Ascension in half a fortnight. Some of the warriors present were strong enough to fight him, but they could not be certain of their victory, nor could they defeat Teraq as easily.

“Nobody wants to spar with me?” Hakon clicked his tongue. “Then fight each other first.”

While he dismissed their hesitance as if it didn’t matter, pushing hot-headed, bloodthirsty Barbarians this far was not a light matter. Whether it was fear or their respect for his power, the warriors at the training ground no longer dared to challenge him. As far as Hakon was concerned, they did not want to be humiliated in front of their peers like Teraq, but that might as well be his imagination.

Since it was still early in the morning, he did not have to rush anything. Instead, he watched the young Barbarians spar with each other. Some stayed to the side and practiced alone, but those were few and sparse, and usually younger than the others.

After Tribe Taskur had to wait several cycles for the Shaman’s return, it was no surprise to see a wide range of warriors at the training ground. That included not only their Ancient Powers but also their age.

Barbarians were allowed to undergo the Rite and unlock the Ancient Scripture after no less than sixteen cycles. A long time ago, most Barbarians trained relentlessly to complete the Rite after eighteen cycles, but that tradition was abolished when the Ancestors rejected the tribe’s request for a Rite for the first time.

Now that Tribe Taskur completed their first Rite in several cycles, the oldest among the recently awakened were already twenty-two cycles old, while the youngest barely reached their sixteenth cycle.

Teraq and most warriors who reached the 1st Ascension before the Battle of Generation were among the oldest of the recently awakened. They spent several cycles training with the Ancestors' guidance and were only now given Skills and the means to imbue their Ancient Powers into their already existing fighting style.

But not all was well. Hakon noticed that a fortnight ago already. Spending cycles waiting for the Rite, waiting to finally gain the strength needed to fight and become real warriors, did not only strengthen their foundation. It also imprinted flaws deep into their minds. Some were not directly noteworthy and would eventually be removed as the Ancestors guided the warriors to improve their Skills, but others stopped them from improving.

Even if their Skills were recognized by the Ancestors, improving them would be difficult. Because the flaw that slowed or stagnated their growth had become a habit. And habits were painstakingly difficult to remove.

Is that why Father pushed me so hard? Hakon frowned, thinking back to the endless drills the chieftain pushed him through.

It had been painful and exhausting enough to make him want to quit, but the results were apparent. Even though he hadn't been the strongest or the toughest, his father made sure he was always one of the strongest.

Not everyone had been that lucky, and Hakon started to notice that as he used [Flow Observation] and [Sensory Expansion] to watch the others. First the young warriors, whose Skills were not as advanced on average, then the oldest among the newly awakened.

"Where are all the bloody puddles?" Astrid appeared beside him with a small, middle-aged Barbarian, looking almost disappointed to see him standing at the side, watching.

Hakon offered her a faint smile but focused on the Healer. "Teraq's knuckles shattered. Tend to him, but don't fully heal him. Recovering is part of his training."

The Healer looked at him for a moment, then at his patient, whose hand was deformed and a mixture of black and blue. "I will take care of him, Successor. Do you need me for anything else?"

Successor?

Hakon didn't dislike that title. It was nice, but that still left a question. Did the Healer call him that because he won the Battle of Generation, or did his father mention something among his closest?

At the end of the day, the real reason was probably not all that important.

“You can stay and tend to everyone who looks like they will die. Close the most severe wounds but make sure the pain stays. They need to feel the pain and get more used to recovering.” Hakon thought about it for a moment, then added, “If you can accelerate their natural regeneration, you may do so, but don’t overdo it. It is important that they impress the Ancestors to improve their Skills.”

The Healer excused himself with a nod and left to tend to Teraq.

“‘Successor,’ huh?” Astrid flashed him a teasing smile.

“For now. In a few cycles, I will be the next chieftain,” Hakon said seriously. He looked back at the sparring warriors and grimaced as he added, “And to achieve that, I need to strengthen the young generation. Defeat Tribe Pearot and gain the Ancestors’ approval. That’s not possible currently.”

Astrid’s joking nature faded, and she nodded in agreement. “We will help you fight Tribe Pearot. You are not alone.”

He knew that, but the longer he stayed at the training ground, watching his peers, the angrier he got.

“You don’t like what you see?”

“*Like*? This is atrocious.” Hakon spat loudly enough for several warriors to hear. Enhanced Comprehension did little to alleviate his frustration. Quite the contrary, it only augmented his frustration by flooding him with bursts of wrongness.

Using [Weakness Detection] worsened the sensation as he pinpointed dozens of weak points the sparring warriors could have used to disarm their opponents.

Neither their instincts nor their talent or physique posed any problems. It was just that…

Hakon didn’t actually know what exactly the problem was, except that he felt like he could crush most warriors at the training ground easily. It could barely be considered an effort.

A few things caught his attention: the movement pattern of a Blessed warrior, for one, and the execution of several Power-based Skills from a Bloodbearer. The muscles in the Bloodbearer’s right arm bulged as he attacked his sparring partner. He accelerated and disarmed his opponent the

moment their weapons came into contact. In the same instant, his skin ruptured and blood burst free.

With bloodshot eyes, the Barbarian closed the distance and crushed his foe, smashing the sword pommel into the sparring partner's face. Once, twice, and by the time he was about to hit him the third time, Hakon crossed the distance with [Dash]. He didn't shy away and [Bash]ed into the Barbarian.

Albeit physically stronger than many young warriors, the Bloodbearer hadn't ascended yet. He took the brunt of the impact, but his attack was forcefully cut short. He froze up as [Bash]'s stunning effect spread through him. That appeared to be enough to pull the Bloodbearer out of berserk.

He looked past Hakon at his sparring partner sprawled unconscious on the ground and grunted, but there was no time to relax; Hakon was already upon him.

"You need to take charge of the Minotaur Blood," he grunted, chopping the warrior's wrist hard enough to loosen his grip. His sword clattered to the ground. A moment later, his arm twisted behind his back, and Hakon kicked him in the butt.

"Stay in control."

The young warrior stumbled to the ground from the kick, then leaped to his feet in a hurry. Spinning around, his eyes were bloodshot once more. Smoke oozed from his nostrils as he growled, and it wasn't long before he charged.

Hakon considered his options and decided to end it quickly. He faced the Minotaur Blood warrior head-on, rooted his feet in the ground, and pumped as much mana into [Circulation] as possible. It almost felt like his muscles were screaming at him as power rolled out from the pathways, but focusing on [Combat Awareness] and [Sensory Expansion], Hakon remained exactly where he was.

Until his opponent was right before him, Hakon didn't move. Even then, he remained focused on his opponent. His arms shot forward faster than the Minotaur Blood warrior could react. One of his hands clasped around the warrior's wrist, pushing it aside, while the other arm reached for his head. One moment, time seemed to slow to a crawl, and in the next, Hakon's lower body twisted. His opponent stumbled in his rage when Hakon's leg swept beneath him. A fraction of a second later, Hakon exerted his full strength and shoved the Minotaur Blood warrior into the ground, face-first.

“Calm down,” he said coldly while elevating the pressure he applied, pushing his opponent deeper into the ground.

The Minotaur Blood warrior tried to resist but failed and calmed down when Hakon’s mana erupted outward. And as Hakon did that, he felt something odd. A tingle rather than the prodding he’d grown accustomed to.

Only one Scripture popped up this time, which he ignored, his attention lingering on the tingling sensation.

Was this the right way? He… believed it to be.

With that in mind, he released the Minotaur Blood warrior from his grasp and stepped back. Shortly after, the Bloodbearer was back on his feet, looking around, confused.

“I lost control,” he mouthed, spitting out blood.

“You did,” Hakon agreed. “And we’re going to fix that.”

Teraq may not have understood the lesson he’d received, but Hakon was sure the young Bloodbearer would, just like the others present at the training ground.

“Good.” The young Bloodbearer nodded. “Help me, Successor.”

So, he did. He sparred with everyone willing to learn. Following the way of the Barbarians, Hakon fought them mercilessly, attacking their weak spots with deadly precision. He thrashed them one by one, all while focusing on their greatest weaknesses.

Once he was done with the first group, the second was ready. And by the time the second had been defeated, the first scrambled back to their feet.

Hakon went at it again, but he did not give his peers the opportunity to adapt to his fighting style. He used a different method to crush them than before, training his own Skills, all while showing his opponents what they could do better. [Teaching] did not activate right away, and it took Hakon a short while to make it work, but once he could use and maintain the Skill across the different spars, everyone improved greatly.

And that was exactly what he needed. What the entire tribe needed. To grow together.

The Ancestors certainly agreed. Hakon took a moment to celebrate his gains, smiling at the tattered parchment.

[Scripture of Improvement
Bleeding (New) Lv.1
Pack Coordination (New) Lv.1]

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CHAPTER 38

At some point, more Barbarians stopped at the training ground. This included not only most of the remaining younger warriors but also the older Barbarians. They did not join the training and simply watched from the sidelines.

Hakon was sure they would complain and challenge him for highlighting the value of [Evasion] as he used the Skill to demonstrate to everyone that great power was useless in the face of an opponent who couldn't be hit easily. No words were exchanged in the end. Hakon could feel their approval, and that was all he needed.

Training ended as the sun dipped below the summit of the greatest mountain in the distance, but not before Ulfar popped up. Hakon hadn't seen him for a while, and he'd almost forgotten about the Behemoth Blood warrior's punishment. However, the sight of the one-armed warrior stirred his memories.

Ulfar didn't utter a word. He did not join his peers at the training ground either. He watched them until those who followed him in the past cussed him out. They shunned him, cursed him, and were more than ready to fight him, which was more than understandable.

Before the Battle of Generation, they submitted to him, promised to fight with him to claim his 'rightful' spot as the chieftain and maybe even reunite the tribes as the next Warlord. In exchange, they only wanted to grow with him and become a part of his Saga so that they would forever be remembered by the Ancestors. Sure, they would never rise to the greatness of the next Warlord, but prevailing through the course of time in the Saga of the legendary Behemoth Blood Warlord was worth it.

Except they were betrayed. The man they trusted the most did not only cast them aside, he treated them like livestock. Ulfar even went as far as to kill his own people. How could they trust someone like that? The deaths caused by Ulfar did not help him in any way. He still lost, scarring his Saga forever.

As for those who died to the Behemoth Blood warrior, they were forgotten, their tale never to be told. Their forced sacrifices carried no weight, no honor. This not only enraged the young warriors who would have died Sagaless if Ulfar had sacrificed them, it earned the wrath of the older generation as well. For they did not only witness Ulfar's disrespect in the face of the Ancestors, they lost their children to a man who would never grow up to be a Warlord.

While he may have been graced with a legendary power, his tale was bound to be that of the one-armed Barbarian. Nothing more, nothing less.

Ulfar snarled at the young men and women shouting and cursing at him. Bloodlust erupted, and the presence of Behemoth Blood flooded the training ground. Yet he did not pounce on anyone when Astrid stepped forward, her power restraining Ulfar's power.

She may not yet be stronger than Ulfar, but the Behemoth Blood warrior had only one arm to fight. He was at a severe disadvantage, which he understood even when the Behemoth Blood tried to take control of him once again.

Hakon felt like intervening, but he stayed in the back and watched the scene unfold. Ulfar snapped at Astrid and the others, anger burning deep within him. Then he turned and walked away, once again humiliated in front of the entire tribe.

Humiliation. Anger, Hakon mused to himself. A bad combination of emotions to burn into the heart of a man who was once destined for greatness. But as bad as it could be, Hakon doubted Ulfar would do anything about it. As long as Ulfar wasn't ready to forsake his Saga, he wouldn't act on it.

As for Ulfar's father, he was nowhere to be seen. He hadn't been seen ever since the Rite. Astrid didn't know much either, and Hakon cared too little to ask the tribesmen if they'd seen him. Nonetheless, he made a note in the back of his mind.

The other young men and women of Tribe Taskur dispersed, some limping, others rubbing their bruised bodies. Despite the pain they endured,

smiles ranging from faint to brilliant crossed their pain-ridden faces.

“Today’s training was very… interesting, Successor,” the Healer said, beads of sweat trickling down his temples.

A tribe’s Healer was never idle. Several Barbarians would sustain severe enough wounds from their daily hunts to force them to seek the Healer, whose Ancient Power would be drained to ensure their survival. Adding more work to the Healer’s already busy life was not the greatest of ideas, yet it was a necessity.

“Can you come again tomorrow and the day after?” Hakon asked, ignoring the Healer’s twitching lip. “How about moving your station near the training ground? That would surely help you grow your power, the Ancestors would surely reward you generously, and our warriors wouldn’t have to worry about killing their partners in battle.”

The Healer didn’t say anything for a while, regarding Hakon before grumbling something to himself.

“Of course, Successor. As long as the Ancestors bless me with the power needed to help you, I will heal your people.” He tried to hide his grimace but failed miserably.

Astrid didn’t even try to hide her grin as she watched the exchange.

The Healer excused himself and departed, which Astrid used as an opportunity to turn to Hakon with an inquisitive look.

“You will spar with me tomorrow, won’t you?” she asked, smiling brightly, making it increasingly difficult to reject her. Although he did have other plans, Hakon nodded, nonetheless.

His mind was filled with ideas to incorporate new Skills into his fighting style, just like he did with Björn’s [Crushing Advance]. Since Astrid and [River of Blood] were included in the repertoire of Skills he wanted to recreate with mana, he might as well spar with her. Maybe that would help. If not, the pressure of fighting someone with Astrid’s prowess was sure to earn the Ancestors’ attention. All it took was some time and a lot of blood to be shed.

With that in mind, Hakon spent the next few days at the training ground, thrashing others until they were strong enough to engage in proper spars.

Finally, after several nights alone in the hut, focusing on reading and trying to remove more impurities from his pathways, something that had grown increasingly difficult ever since he’d reached [Flow Control]’s

requirement and upgraded the Skill to [Circulation], Hakon Leveled [Fatigue Resistance] for the first time.

It was a minor achievement at best, but it helped him stay up even longer without feeling like his brain had been beaten to a pulp. Then again, it still felt like his brain was ripped out of his skull and ground in a mortar. The only difference was that it took a little longer until he felt that way.

After using [Enhanced Comprehension] almost constantly for several days, Hakon learned a lot, not only about the prodding of wrongness but also the tingle he'd sensed a few times ever since he shoved the Minotaur Blood warrior into the ground. The tingle was not a guide of any kind. It signified something he had yet to really understand. The terminology needed to explain the phenomenon eluded him, leaving Hakon alone with the tingle, his instincts, and an entirely new Skill.

[Intimidation Lv.3]

[Intimidation] was incredibly useful when it came to dealing with Bloodbearers. He didn't even have to crash into them, shove them into the ground, or break their bones to forcefully restrain their awakened Blood. [Intimidation] may not necessarily be the equivalent of bloodlust, which never converted into a Skill, but it was not all that different.

Rather than releasing the desire to kill his enemy and shed their blood, the weight of Hakon's will descended upon his enemies. And after beating everyone but Astrid several times to a pulp, the weight of his presence was all the young warriors had to feel to back off and regain their senses. Fortunately, that kind of involvement was not required very often at this point.

Most Bloodbearers were now in full control of their Blood. That may change as they crossed the threshold to the 1st or 2nd Ascension, but Hakon was confident in his teachings.

Hence, they were left alone to spar with each other after days of torture, while he visited someone else. If possible, Hakon would have met up with the Shaman, but he left with his personal Healer shortly after the Battle of Generation ended.

It was difficult to find the chieftain, though that wasn't where he planned to go.

Hakon planned to meet up with the newly awakened Rootkeeper and Lightcaller.

If Eren is still alive, he reminded himself, which, to his greatest surprise, was actually the case.

Not only was Eren alive, he no longer lived in his parents' hut. Eren moved in with Zask, the butcher. After sleeping with Zask's wife, Eren not only survived, but also managed to move in with the butcher. That… Hakon had no idea what was happening, but when Zask invited him into the hut to see the three Barbarians together, they seemed… happy.

What in the Ancestors' glory is going on here! he wanted to ask, but his lips were tightly sealed.

This, whatever this was, was none of his business. Hakon was not here to judge Zask for being generous enough to spare the lives of Eren and his wife, but also to let Eren live with them. He was here for the Lightcaller, to learn more about Eren's Ancient Power and get to the root of an even bigger problem.

Before the Rite, Eren had been impossible to ignore. A towering figure carved from muscle, every movement sharp with intent, his very breath filled with the restless hunger of a Barbarian. He'd been charismatic and the very incarnation of a man who knew how to get what he wanted. Now, the same strength felt misplaced, like armor worn by a man who'd forgotten the Barbarians' path.

His shoulders were still broad, but they sagged, as if weighed down by something. His hands, calloused, scarred, made for battle, rested loosely against his thighs, fingers slack instead of ready. Even his breathing lacked rhythm, shallow and absent, as though his body continued out of habit rather than will.

It was his eyes that betrayed him most.

Even though Eren smiled like he used to, the smile never reached his eyes.

They used to burn fiercely, always searching for the next challenge, the next enemy, the next step forward. Now, they stared at nothing in particular. Not empty, not quite… but distant.

"Did you forsake the Ancestors, Eren?" Hakon growled, ice-cold eyes staring deep into the soul of the young warrior. "If you did, I will judge you myself. If not… you will join us tomorrow at the training ground. Or you will hunt, do something to appease the Ancestors."

While he did not know what Eren had been doing ever since the Rite, Eren's performance at the Battle of Generation was pathetic. It wouldn't surprise Hakon if the Lightcaller had yet to reach Level 5, and that was unacceptable. Even if he did not have a combat-based Ancient Power, Eren could have done something to show everyone that his power was not as weak as they said.

Instead, he seemed to have given up on himself.

"Do you want Zask to kill you?" Hakon couldn't help but blurt out, his voice growing colder with every word. "Is that why you're here? Or is lust all you care about now that you awakened as a Lightcaller?"

Zask's decision to accept Eren into his hut aside, this was something Hakon had to take care of. Either through words or force, if need be.

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Eren leaped up in anger, at first. He stared daggers at Hakon, regarding him like a predator regarded a hare he was about to tear into shreds. But as promising as his outburst was, it didn't last long.

He deflated, shoulders slumped, and sat back down on the creaky, wooden chair.

"Lightcaller," he scoffed. "My family exiled me. My brothers and sisters still laugh at me when I see them."

The blazing fire that used to burn in Eren's eyes was replaced by a wick of sadness.

"Even Rootkeepers deserve more honor," he spat, which was yet another issue Hakon would have to resolve.

Rootkeepers were indispensable, yet the tribes did not consider them nearly as well as they should. Because they could not learn as powerful Power-based Skills that would allow them to fight monsters. Still, without them, Tribe Taskur would never have survived the winter ten cycles ago. They would have died of starvation.

As for Lightcallers, they were… unfortunate. Hakon conceded on that. Pyrocaller or Earthcaller were not praiseworthy Ancient Powers either, yet young warriors would have an easier time gaining recognition for it. Pyrocaller, wielders of fire, could wreak havoc and burn entire stripes of land to the ground if necessary. The Barbarians would have a hard time ignoring such power.

But Lightcaller… Hakon watched Eren, who stared down at the sparkling lights materializing in his hand in pure, unfiltered hatred.

“Did the Ancestors recognize your [Spear Mastery]?” Hakon rubbed his chin.

“Yes, and I went out to hunt. It worked, but [Spear Mastery] did not improve. I tried. Hard.” Eren sighed, the hatred in his eyes intensifying. “*This* is what I got for trying hard.”

The sparks in his hand glowed brighter and began to move, slithering around his fingers in an oddly intimate manner. He didn’t even notice the pair of curious eyes studying the conjured light intensely.

“How much can you control them?” Hakon asked, the back of his mind stirring.

Thinking back to the Battle of Generation where Astrid had called him Lightcaller for playing with the lights, a smile touched his lips. A smile that grew wider as Enhanced Comprehension filled him with a sense of wrongness.

It was the first time Enhanced Comprehension activated to fill him with wrongness about things he’d done in the past, and using [Sensory Expansion] and [Flow Observation] as he studied the conjured lights intensified the sensation.

Hakon could not help but feel like the sense of wrongness was screaming at him as Eren’s lights glowed brighter before dimming. More sparks popped up, joining the small stream revolving around his hands.

Interesting.

“Keep up your Skill,” Hakon ordered, ignoring the looks thrown his way as he reached out to the stream of glowing sparks.

His hand phased through the sparks, which rippled and nearly collapsed. Several sparks faded and Eren cursed under his breath, but that too was pointedly ignored. Hakon’s hand glided through the lights, his Skills maintained while [Mana Sense] and [Circulation] followed.

[Circulation] may not have been necessary but by empowering his body, it augmented his senses as well, albeit only a little.

As soon as [Mana Sense] activated, Hakon sensed so much more than he did before. He hadn’t been sure earlier, yet as his mana was being rapidly consumed, clarity flooded him. Mana flooded the sparks.

No. He shook his head. The sparks *were* mana; mana Eren somehow altered to create and emit warmth and light at the same time.

The warmth was comfortable, but that was not what Hakon was after when he followed up with [Mana Manipulation] and [Mana Shaping].

A small azure ball of mana conjured in his empty hand. Someone beside him exclaimed, while another groaned, but Hakon was too focused on his practice to care about either.

Beads of sweat poured down his temples from all the Skills he was forced to maintain. [Split Focus] guided his research of Eren's sparks while maintaining the small ball hovering above his palm, yet even [Split Focus] had its limits. The bad headache creeping up the back of his mind was no surprise, but Hakon considered it a boon. Pain only meant he was going somewhere. That he was moving in the right direction; probably.

Eyes squinted, he tried to etch the sensation he got from the glowing sparks into his mind, to imprint it into his own conjuration. That turned out more difficult than he could have hoped for. Still, after what felt like an eternity of sweating buckets and draining his mana reserves, Hakon made progress. Until Eren's sparks dispersed.

"What are you doing? Keep them up," Hakon grunted, his head snapping up to see the Lightcaller pale as chalk.

[Mana Sense] showed what Hakon suspected. Eren was completely spent.

Zask stepped toward the young Barbarian and lifted him. Watching the butcher carry Eren to his bed without a word was not exactly what anyone would expect from them. If anyone, Hakon would have expected Zask's wife to tend to Eren and tuck him in. Yet it was Zask who wiped the young Barbarian's sweat-drenched face tenderly.

Truthfully, everything about their relationship felt twisted. The more Hakon thought about it, the more confused he became. The most confusing, by a stretch, was that neither of the involved parties held the upper hand in their relationship. It would have made sense if Zask was at the lead, since he did not kill Eren for bonding with his wife, but that didn't happen.

Studying the trio and how they looked at each other, longingly or with worry, Hakon's understanding of the situation dropped further.

As long as… No, that's their own problem to take care of, he thought, ready to leave.

"H-Hakon," Eren called out, making him stop. "You… How did you win the Battle of Generation?"

Hakon raised an eyebrow. Right, how did he win the Battle of Generation? If everyone's words were to be trusted, he should have never won. He wouldn't even have made it past the first fight, yet he did.

“I tried hard,” he shrugged, “and I didn’t allow anyone to judge me for my Ancient Power. The Ancestors chose the Mind for me for a reason, just like they chose Lightcaller for you. I trust them, and I believe they planned something big for me. That the Mind is a gift, one I need to master fully to help myself and my tribe.”

“‘Your’ tribe?” Eren scrambled to sit upright.

“It might not be mine yet, but it will be,” Hakon said, his voice laced with determination.

These weren’t empty words. They were a promise. Eren could sense that as much as Zask and his wife could.

“You really believe that,” Eren mouthed.

“I do, because I know it will happen.” Hakon thought about it for a second and spoke his mind. “And to do so, I need a Lightcaller’s power as well. I might not be a Bloodbearer, Blessed, or the wielder of a legendary Ancient Power, but I don’t have to be. The Battle of Generation showed that much, and I’d be a fool to give up now. This is but the start of my Saga.”

Even if his words weren’t enough to convince Eren that his Ancient Power was useful, Hakon caught a glimmer of something in his eyes.

“I don’t know much about your power, and it would be a lie if I were to promise you that you can grow strong enough to defeat legendary warriors as long as you try hard enough, but you can become a warrior. You can ascend like everyone else. However, your path will be hard. Probably harder than others, because you are alone with your Ancient Power. The Ancestors can guide you, and maybe I can as well in the future, but you have to tread your own path. One that does not necessarily involve constant hunting or sparring to improve your combat Skills.”

“You… You really think I can fight Bloodbearers? That I can be strong enough to defeat them?” The fire in Eren’s eyes burned a little brighter, but it was not yet set ablaze.

“Maybe,” Hakon said, for he couldn’t be certain. “But you will never find out if you don’t try. If you give up now, everyone will remember you as a failure. Do you want that? To be remembered as a failure, to loathe the Ancestors for the power they granted you, to never feast with them, to wither away in the tribe without ever trying to take hold of your destiny and change it. Is that what you want?”

“No,” Eren grunted, clenching his fists tightly.

He was still pale, his mana reserves empty, but he got up, the fire burning in his eyes just like Hakon remembered it.

“I need to grow stronger.” Eren let out a deep growl, looking up to meet Hakon’s eyes. “Help me.”

While Eren recovered, he told Hakon all he could do. That, as it turned out, was not all that much. Eren hadn’t wanted to divert too much from the Barbarians’ image, so he learned [Spear Mastery], [Natural Regeneration], [Running], [Slash], and [Stab]. The last two were Skills Hakon had yet to learn, but he wasn’t sure if he even wanted to learn them.

Enhanced Comprehension didn’t apply to them. Instead, the Ancient Power wanted him to incorporate mana when fighting. Maybe acquiring and upgrading [Slash] or [Stab] would produce whatever Enhanced Comprehension was trying to guide him toward. Either way, Eren needed more than those Skills. He had to learn more about the Skills his Ancient Power could grant him.

“Make a light that resembles a pyre torch’s glow,” he ordered. “A light without any heat. A bright, stable glow.”

He did, or tried to. Conjuring and maintaining a single glowing spark was not difficult, but the same could not be said about modifying it. Creating more sparks greatly increased Eren’s mana expenditure, which was why he did not conjure more than one.

“There’s still some heat to it,” Hakon said sharply when Eren successfully created a bright, stable glow resembling a pyre torch.

The Lightcaller let out a groan but went back to work. In the meantime, Enhanced Comprehension helped Hakon understand more about the glowing spark. With every passing heartbeat, his understanding increased slightly, and it was only a matter of time before he, too, conjured a speck of dimly glowing mana.

It was nothing special. The mana was unstable, the glow dull and fading even though he could recreate it successfully, and it consumed a horrendous amount of mana. But it worked, and Hakon could replicate it.

As expected, the Ancestors rewarded him.

[Skill [Mote of Light] has been learned.]

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[Mote of Light] was not yet worth the effort or the mana it consumed. To create the Skill, Hakon had to compress a head-sized ball of mana into a tiny mote, all while altering mana's properties, because it did not work as intended until the sphere of mana he held contained enough energy.

The result was nowhere near as useful as he'd hoped, but it worked out well enough for what he'd planned. Hakon cast [Mote of Light] at the tip of his weapon, conjuring a volatile, flickering light. Emptying his mana reserves in an instant, he transformed the dimly glowing mote into a glistening flare.

"You can do that, and much more, to distract or blind your opponent. You'd waste a lot less energy and do a lot more than I can," Hakon said.

While his glistening flare hadn't been enough to daze, let alone blind anyone, it was good enough to show Eren what was theoretically possible.

Eren didn't seem quite sure, but he no longer looked as defeated as before.

"I know you can do well."

While Lightcaller was not nearly as versatile as Enhanced Comprehension, the Skills Eren acquired through his Ancient Power would improve rapidly. Clearly, they didn't cost nearly as much mana as Hakon's Skills.

"Join training," Zask's deep, husky voice rang through the hut.

Eren looked up to the older Barbarian but said nothing.

"The Mind is weak," Zask continued, glancing at Hakon. "But he is strong. You can be strong too."

Even if Eren wouldn’t be the strongest among the young warriors, he could improve greatly and learn interesting Power-based Skills. And with the heat in the light he generated, he could probably do many interesting things. Hakon was sure of it. All Eren needed was guidance and the desire to grow.

“Join us tomorrow. Train with us,” Hakon said. “And, after a few nights, we will go hunting.”

With that said, he departed.

The next morning, Eren was at the training ground before anyone else. Some of the others teased him on the first day, but their joking nature faded as soon as Eren emerged victorious in a spar against a Blessed warrior. The Barbarian was one of the youngest and hadn’t reached the 1st Ascension, nor did he take his opponent seriously, but none of that meant anything. Barbarians were supposed to honor the battle, and the young warrior hadn’t done that.

In the wild, that would have killed him. At the training ground, he was lucky it only cost him a deep gash at the collarbone and his friends’ ridicule.

Eren’s standing improved greatly, but a single victory was not enough to change everything. He trained hard over the days, used his Ancient Power more each day than he had since the Rite, and improved. A lot.

But Eren was not the only young warrior improving. Everyone worked hard, be it through Hakon’s tortuous teachings or their ambition. They may not shed the blood of the monsters roaming the wilds as they stayed in the tribehold most days, yet their power increased greatly. Enough to fill them with endless excitement when Hakon finally decided it was time to hunt.

“Are you ready?” Astrid asked, a smile playing on her lips as she sized up Hakon from head to toe.

He was loaded. A set of bone daggers was neatly stored in his new, makeshift sheaths dangling from his belt. His shortsword was also secured at a small loop, and so were the two handaxes. Yet, that was not all. Several pouches were secured to his belt, and Maulaxe Crusher rested calmly in his hand.

Raising Crusher, he placed it on his shoulder and met Astrid with a smile. “Sure. You?”

“What do you think?” She swirled around, showing off the plethora of daggers and shortswords she kept on her body.

As usual, Astrid didn’t carry any axes or blunt weapons, as they were too crude for her style and power. She winked at Hakon, stirring his heart, but he crushed the notion to focus on the matters at hand.

“Björn is waiting,” he mouthed, cracking his neck to ease the tension racing down his body. Since the Battle of Generation, Hakon hadn’t left the tribehold. Thinking about it, that had been quite a while ago.

Even then, I’ve been longer in the Fracture than the wild.

Fractures ought to be more dangerous than the wild, but Hakon couldn’t agree. As far as he could tell, Fractures were more predictable. They may hide more dangers in some cases, but it was highly unlikely, if not outright impossible, to find a powerful monster at the equivalent of the 2nd Ascension in a Fracture like the Crawling Expanse. Even when Overflowing, the Crawling Expanse had been mostly predictable. In the wild, on the other hand, anything could happen.

And now it was time to scout a powerful monster. A creature strong enough to fight the young warriors head-on. A fight worthy to be added in their Sagas.

“Are you afraid?” Astrid teased lightly.

Hakon responded with a smile rather than words.

“That’s what I thought.” She chuckled and walked off to the gathering spot.

As terrifying as the wilds ought to be, Hakon knew more about them than most Barbarians. He studied the only map in all of Tribe Taskur and compared the information with some of the old scrolls. Some information, most of it, actually, no longer fit what he had learned from asking the tribe’s greatest hunters, but enough was correct to devise a plan for all the hunting parties that were set to leave.

Seven groups in total, some smaller, others larger, depending on how well they worked together. Spending several days and nights with his people, Hakon understood them well enough to know who to put together and what to expect from them. Hence, he planned their hunting trips, starting with the groups, but also deciding what places and monsters they were supposed to hunt.

Whether they accepted his ‘advice’ was up to them. Either way, Hakon met up with the young warriors of Tribe Taskur, divided them, and told them where to go. No one openly objected, but he could see dissatisfaction burning deep in some of their eyes. Not everyone was happy with his plans, but they would quickly learn that he meant well. Either by following his command, leading to suffering and forced growth, or by doing their own thing.

One way or another, the Ancestors would be happy about the blood Taskur was about to shed.

Hakon was happy as well. His Skills had grown, and he’d helped everyone find a way to grow much stronger outside combat, but he was itching for some bloodshed. Managing the young warriors this long had been torturous enough. Then again, he learned some useful Skills and gained some insights for even more Skills.

Nonetheless, Hakon was more than ready to shed blood. So was everyone else.

He followed Astrid to Björn and Eren once everyone was informed of their task, and they left the tribehold together.

“Why so tense, Eren?” Björn poked the Lightcaller in the side, his lips curled up to a savage smile. “Are you afraid?”

Eren only scoffed. His head flicked left and right as soon as their group entered the wild, and he had to suppress a flinch as the atmosphere changed.

Was it like this last time as well? Hakon wondered, glancing at the others as he walked deeper into the wild beside Astrid.

The atmosphere was heavier than he remembered. Mana hung thick in the air, and it was much colder than it should have been. Last time he went out, he’d been in a rush, but the drastic difference in temperature surprised him.

Gesturing to the others to slow down, Hakon activated [Sensory Expansion] in its lowest form. He followed up with [Mana Sense] and [Combat Awareness] when the strange sensation intensified.

As it turned out, the wild was flooded with more mana than the tribehold. It wasn’t much, not when compared with the Fracture’s ambient mana, but the foreign mana was everywhere. Using [Circulation] in bursts, Hakon spread his senses outward and pulled the ambient mana inside, filling his mana reserves faster than his other Skills could use it.

He could not remember the wild being this full of mana, but he guessed that it made sense. Hakon had rushed into the Fracture after the Rite. He'd been at a much lower Level, his senses duller, and there hadn't been anything like [Mana Sense] in his list of Skills. Now that had changed. Everything had.

Glancing to the side, where a set of flowers with fiery red petals had grown, he sensed a diversion in the ambient mana. It wasn't much, but the ambient mana shifted ever so slightly around the flowers. As for the flowers, Hakon plucked one to study it, discovering that it contained a different type of mana.

And while it did resemble the ambient mana a little, it wasn't the same.

[Mana Infusion] flushed the plucked flower with mana, destroying it. Some of the flower's unique energy poured out as its petals lost their bright color, but other than a warm tingle, Hakon couldn't feel anything.

"Rootkeeper, how long do you want to play with that flower?" Björn called out loudly, his grin as punchable as always.

Ignoring Björn, Hakon plucked a few different types of flowers and stuffed them into his pouches. Once that was done, he joined the others and traveled deeper into the forest, avoiding carnivorous plants and dragging both Eren and Björn out of poison-laced shrubs.

"Sometimes, I wonder how you're still alive." Astrid shook her head at the Blessed warrior, whose skin had turned violet after he'd used [Crushing Advance] on a Killer Moth. Well, what had looked like a Killer Moth at first glance. Instead of crashing right into a monster, Björn barreled into a set of intertwined branches and leaves that resembled a Killer Moth. Doing so, Björn 'killed the ferocious monster' and collapsed to the ground.

Falling victim to a mindless plant was fun to watch at first, but the shrub's severe toxin slowed the group tremendously. The fact that Eren ate a rainbow-colored mushroom certainly did not help in that regard either.

"I am more surprised that he reached the 1st Ascension." Hakon slid his gaze over the duo. He didn't expect much from Björn, but his simple-minded friend was trying really hard to get on his nerves. As for Eren, Hakon thought the Lightcaller would be more careful, knowing that everything in the forest could kill him.

"They might as well learn [Poison Resistance] that way." He sighed and let out a soft, resentful curse when Astrid's eyes lit up. She reached out for the shrub that forced Björn to his knees and ate it.

“Protect us, will you?” She winked at Hakon and munched on the poisonous plant until her mouth went numb. The rest of her body followed shortly, effectively leaving Hakon alone in the forest.

Do I really have to teach them to stay away from poisonous plants as well? He cursed to himself, hoping the other groups fared better than theirs. Then again, that was highly unlikely.

Fortunately, a little bit of poison wouldn’t kill a Barbarian. Being poisoned and under attack, on the other hand…

This was not the time to think about something like that. For now, he had to make sure his group survived. The other groups could come later.

Ancient Scripture 1.2

Hakon Taskur – Level 14
Race – Barbarian
Ancient Power – Enhanced Comprehension
Bloodline – Wildborne Lifeblood
Runeskin – Hoard Impact (Major)

Skills

Resistances – [Poison Resistance Lv.12], [Pain Tolerance Lv.19], [Acid Resistance Lv.10], [Fatigue Resistance Lv.2]
Utility – [Reading Lv.9], [Running Lv.17], [Field Crafting Lv.5], [Silent Steps Lv.7], [Dismantling Lv.6], [Stealth Lv.3], [Natural Regeneration Lv.16], [Inspection Lv.6], [Tracking Lv.4], [Teaching Lv.15]
Combat – [Combat Awareness Lv.18], [Dash Lv.12], [Throwing Lv.5], [Evasion Lv.18], [Grappling Lv.11], [Weakness Detection Lv.22], [Two Weapon Fighting Lv.7], [Weapon Mastery Lv.13], [Bash Lv.4], [Bleeding Lv.2], [Intimidation Lv.3], [Pack Coordination Lv.3]
Mana – [Circulation Lv.12], [Mana Sense Lv.20], [Split Focus Lv.12], [Mana Infusion Lv.6], [Sensory Expansion Lv.11], [Flow Observation Lv.9], [Discharge Lv.3], [Mana Manipulation Lv.6], [Mana Shaping Lv.5], [Mote of Light Lv.7]

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CHAPTER 41

Moving through the thicket was a simple task. Even if the wild belonged entirely to nature alongside its tendency to create dangerous monsters and plants, it was not all that difficult to avoid life-threatening situations. If one didn't run around like a rhino in heat. Neither Björn nor Eren were trying all too hard to keep their voices down. Even though Eren had been more vigilant at first, being around Björn brought out sides of him Hakon would have preferred to keep sealed shut.

The sounds they created should have been more than enough to attract monsters, but none attacked. Astrid pointed out a few lone predators stalking across the wide tree branches hanging overhead. Hakon located a few more monsters roaming around. However, the difference in strength was enough to force them into retreat.

As mindless and ferocious as monsters were, their senses were advanced enough to recognize a losing battle when they saw one.

Since no monster bothered the group, it should have been easy enough to reach the deeper and more dangerous parts of the forest. Alas, avoiding the most dangerous plants using [Inspection] while making sure not to mention them to anyone was a nuisance. Still, it was necessary considering the way everyone reacted when Hakon first mentioned poisonous plants. It would have been ridiculous if it hadn't also been so annoying.

Their reasoning was sound: they wanted to grow stronger and learn and improve [Poison Resistance] as quickly as they could. Except they could have done that after the hunt.

But it was neither Eren nor Björn's attitude toward the poisonous plants that frustrated him most. Astrid was the most irritating. She continued to

munch on the plants, marveling at their taste and texture. Björn, being the fool he was, had to try a bite, resulting in him losing consciousness.

At least Eren had been smart enough to avoid that particular plant after seeing what it did to a Barbarian at the 1st Ascension.

Working around his team's behavior and their repeated loss of consciousness, Hakon watched out for enemies. When Astrid told him she would wake up Björn and protect the group, he left and merged with the surroundings, using [Silent Steps] and [Stealth].

Roaming the wild without anyone slowing him down made everything easier. Hakon smoothly wove through the thicket, ignoring some plants with weak poison even as their thorns scraped across his skin, and searched for their first targets.

When he didn't find anything after a quick search in their immediate surroundings, Hakon used [Tracking] for the first time since his return from the Overflowing Fracture. His proficiency was nowhere near as high as it could have been, but his perception spread out all the same when he activated a few more Skills. Bursts of [Mana Sense] and [Sensory Expansion] helped him find the tracks of a few monsters. He found a disturbance in the mana nearby and looked up to see a leaf-furred panther skulking toward him.

It was deadly silent and pounced at him as soon as he looked up, but it was already too late. Pumping mana through his veins, Hakon jumped into action. Clutching Crusher tightly, he swung it around. No special Skills were required, as Crusher's flat side barreled toward the target, hitting it square in the side.

The monster's bones let out a series of overlapping cracks as they caved in. A moment later, the panther no longer leaped at him. It was flung through the air and crashed into a nearby tree trunk.

The tree creaked and its bark shattered as the monster smashed into it, but that was all. The panther thudded motionlessly to the ground.

"I offer you thy body. Its blood shed in your name," Hakon intonated, sacrificing the monster carcass to the Ancestors.

Nothing happened at first, making him wonder if the beast somehow survived, then it began to dissolve into blue mist. Turning back to the task at hand, Hakon searched for their first true target. A target worth hunting.

It took him a little longer to find what they were looking for, and the clearing was exactly what they needed. Towering trees blocked the view

behind a river slicing through the back of the clearing, but Hakon saw enough to return.

[Proficiency gained. [Tracking Lv.4] improved to [Tracking Lv.5]]
[Proficiency gained. [Tracking Lv.5] improved to [Tracking Lv.6]]
[Proficiency gained. [Tracking Lv.6] improved to [Tracking Lv.7]]
[Proficiency gained. [Silent Steps Lv.7] improved to [Silent Steps Lv.8]]
[Proficiency gained. [Silent Steps Lv.8] improved to [Silent Steps Lv.9]]
[Proficiency gained. [Stealth Lv.3] improved to [Stealth Lv.4]]
[Proficiency gained. [Stealth Lv.4] improved to [Stealth Lv.5]]
[Proficiency gained. [Inspection Lv.6] improved to [Inspection Lv.7]]
[Proficiency gained. [Inspection Lv.7] improved to [Inspection Lv.8]]

As pleasant as the Scriptures displaying his improvements were, they started to get on his nerves. Not because he did not acknowledge the Ancestors' rewards, but because the Scriptures blocked his view too often these days.

Some Skills were hard to Level, which made their Scriptures all the more valuable, but other Skills like [Reading], [Running], and many others were much easier to Level. That included [Tracking], but also Skills like [Throwing].

Hakon considered the reasoning behind the Skills' Levels and how they improved, but he could only assume it was somehow related to his knowledge, experience, and mana control. [Mote of Light], for example, Leveled quickly because he had Skills like [Mana Manipulation] and [Mana Shaping] that helped him adjust his mana's frequency, appearance, and the amount used to maintain the Skill.

Without them, Hakon would still be able to learn and improve [Mote of Light], but it would have been a lot harder.

That's not important right now, he chided himself, yet he made a mental note to change the Scripture, just like he'd changed the Ancient Scripture. Since the latter was possible, the former should not pose any trouble either. But that was a task for later.

Finding his way back to the others didn’t take long once Hakon knew where he was. The chieftain wouldn’t like what he was doing, and he did not think for a second that the Shaman would approve of his actions either, but the Ancestors didn’t seem to mind. If anything, it felt like the Ancestors pulled him to the forbidden lands. That was where he found the Overflowing Fracture, and where the herd of monsters was waiting for them.

It was the perfect place to grow stronger.

Darting back to the others, Hakon stepped around a large stone protruding from the ground in utter silence. Astrid’s eyes narrowed, and she tensed up. Her hands shot toward her daggers in an instant, only to pull away when their eyes met. Her eyes narrowed further, and she couldn’t help but check him from head to toe. When she didn’t see anything amiss, Astrid turned to Björn and punched him in the stomach, waking him up.

While Björn struggled to decide whether he wanted to curse or breathe, Eren stared at Hakon with wide eyes. He had many questions but asked none, and the glimmer in his eyes suggested that Eren knew what was going on. Or he was simply making guesses and wondering if he was right.

He probably was, if he thought Hakon did not follow the generic path of the Barbarians. He trod his own path instead.

“Found a group of grazing monsters.”

Björn jumped to his feet when he heard that. “A worthy group?”

“A herd of blood-drenched monsters,” Hakon said. The herd was not the kind of monster he intended to fight, yet it was enough to practice and grow stronger together. The others understood that as well, bringing a smile to the Blessed warrior’s face.

Astrid appeared satisfied, and unsheathed a set of shortswords. Then, as she prepared to leave for the hunt, something about her felt… different. Mana poured out of her. It raced alongside her fingers and wreathed her weapons’ edges. That wasn’t all too different from [River of Blood]. The Skill coated her blades’ edges with the energy granted from Blood Fury. But her mana was not crimson like Blood Fury. There was a green touch to the blades’ edges.

Astrid caught him staring at her and smiled vibrantly. Enjoying the situation, she walked past Hakon and followed Björn, who charged back into the wild.

“At least he knows where to go,” Hakon grunted, shaking his head when Björn let out a guttural roar.

There was no time to come up with plans or share them with warriors like Björn. That, among other things, wouldn't be any different with the other Barbarians. Some were more patient and did not rush out like that, but the gist wouldn't change. It was a problem he had to solve or learn to exploit if possible.

Hefting Crusher, Hakon followed the trail Björn's charge left behind and caught up to him.

Astrid and Eren were beside him, their attention drifting left and right to take in the scenery, while Björn pushed farther ahead, clutching a large war axe in each hand.

"We're on forbidden grounds," Astrid hissed and spun around on her heels to face Hakon.

"We are."

The difference was not hard to tell. There was a weight to the air all over the forbidden lands. The atmosphere was eerie, and it was almost like their connection to the Ancestors was not as firm as it should have been.

Either of those factors was noticeable, but only if one was highly perceptive. Neither Björn nor Eren sensed anything, yet Astrid noticed it almost immediately. She'd caught on even faster than he would have.

"Great," Björn called out, breaking Astrid's eye contact with Hakon as she turned to the Blessed warrior.

He noticed the look she threw his way and continued deeper into the forbidden lands.

"I don't care where we hunt," Björn finished with a chuckle.

Of course, he did not. Even if the Shaman considered this land cursed, it was still a perfect place to grow more powerful. After all, Barbarians rarely entered the areas the Shaman pronounced cursed. As for those who did, they had greater challenges to face. Most would cease to exist in the forbidden lands, which only confirmed the Shaman's decree, but they were Barbarians. And Barbarians were born to challenge the impossible, even if it meant going against the Shaman.

The Ancestors can always stop us, Hakon told himself, knowing they would never. If anything, it was almost like they wanted their descendants to break the Shaman's decree.

Regardless of their intentions, it was time to slaughter a herd of bloody monsters.

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CHAPTER 42

“Where?” Björn slowed, his head flicking left and right with a crazed look on his face.

Hakon took note of the eagerness in his friend’s voice and pointed in the right direction. “A monster herd is grazing in a small clearing over there. I haven’t been able to inspect them yet, but the monsters shouldn’t be too dangerous.”

Björn looked genuinely sad at the last part. Still, he rushed through the thicket, ignoring the plant life around him, and arrived at the clearing. And once he saw the bloody antlers, his lips curled upward, and he burst forth.

The others followed behind with swift strides, stepping into the clearing. Monster heads shot upright, their eyes were crimson orbs filled with carnage and bloodlust. The shrubs deeper into the clearing rustled, and it was only when several heads emerged from behind the trees and bushes in the back that Hakon realized two things.

First, he hadn’t counted this many monsters before. There had to be more than 50 monsters in the herd rather than the 20 to 30 he’d expected. That was bad. A mistake that could cost lives if not taken care of quickly enough.

Second, [Inspection] triggered, providing him with information that only worsened the first problem.

[Terror Deer – Low/Medium Threat]
[Terror Deer – Low/Medium Threat]
…
[Terror Deer – Medium Threat]

Terror Deer. Hakon was sure he'd read that name before, but it didn't ring…

Oh, right. Fragments of the scroll he read not too long ago resurfaced in his mind, reminding him that Terror Deer were omnivores, highly territorial, and that their herds had, more than once, killed overly confident Barbarians. They claimed strength in numbers, which was all too obvious to Hakon at this moment.

His lips parted instinctively for a quick warning, only to snap shut when Björn crushed into the masses of Terror Deer near him.

Björn accelerated right before he crashed into the first target. His hair shimmered, a tell-tale sign of [Crushing Advance], with which he stunned the first Terror Deer. However, that moment didn't last long enough because the Terror Deer's head swept to the side, blocking the Blessed warrior's war axe with its antlers.

But blocking Björn's strike with its antlers wasn't enough. Björn let out a guttural roar, pulled the axe jammed in the deer's antlers to the side with raw physical strength, and lodged the axe resting in his other hand in the Terror Deer's neck.

The monster stood no chance. Blood spurted through the air like a sacred offering to the Ancestors, yet the Terror Deer did not bleat out in pain or fear. Its crimson orbs locked on to Björn as the lifelight buried deep within faded. In the same instant, its kin attacked, heads lowered to impale him.

Before they could rip the Barbarian apart, Astrid emerged beside the monsters targeting Björn, her blades flashing dangerously. Hakon turned away from his friends, his attention shifting to the only problem in their group: Eren.

Björn and Astrid would be fine. Sure, Björn was likely to end up gutted by the Terror Deer, but his Blessing of the Bear made him tougher than most. Tougher than the Lightcaller, for sure.

Eren was more cautious than Björn, yet his excitement urged him to charge ahead. The tip of his blade released a glistening light, dazzling the Terror Deer around him. They let out shrill, painful noises, which Eren used to land a nasty blow on his target. But as badly as the Terror Deer bled, it wasn't dead yet. It was angry, and so were its kin.

Are you trying to get yourself killed? Hakon cursed in his heart, kicking the ground to propel forward.

While the Terror Deer were only Low to Medium Threats to Hakon, he didn’t doubt that [Inspection] would consider them as Medium Threats for Björn and High Threats for Eren. Fighting one, let alone a group, was already a challenge for a Barbarian who hadn’t even reached the 1st Ascension.

Still, as long as he didn’t have to fight a Colossal Terror alone, Hakon was sure Eren would be fine. The Ancestors would surely reward him generously for seeing him fight above his weight class. But that did not mean Hakon had to push Eren to an early death.

More Terror Deer headed toward the Lightcaller, so he made a move. Hakon retrieved a bone dagger and hurled it toward the injured Terror Deer. The throw was nowhere near perfect, resulting in a plethora of complaints from Enhanced Comprehension, which made him angrier than he already was for messing this up, but the bone dagger hit the target anyway. It just didn’t inflict as much damage as Hakon was hoping for.

Nonetheless, distracted and injured, the Terror Deer struggled to keep up with Eren.

That left him with a group of six Terror Deer to deal with.

Wasting no time, he exerted full control of [Weapon Mastery], adjusting his stance as he came to a sudden stop before the target and cleaved down with Crusher’s flat side. The Terror Deer closest to him pressed its hooves deep into the ground and lowered its head.

Having seen how easily the deer antlers deflected Björn’s blow, Hakon was not about to fall victim to the same trick. He pushed mana through his entire body, empowering his [Circulation], and poured a gargantuan amount of mana into Crusher in an instant, using [Mana Infusion].

It felt like a waste to use so much mana to defeat a single Low/Medium threat, but this was not the time to play around. Crusher descended and impacted with full force. The antlers resisted at first. They tried to absorb Crusher’s full force, and they would probably have succeeded if the antlers were shaped like a shield. Spreading out like roots with pointed ends was useful to impale foes, and they may help block regular attacks, but blunt force was not the same. Especially not when exerted through a mana-enhanced weapon.

The antlers caved in. They cracked and shattered, barely slowing Crusher as it hit the Terror Deer’s skull, cracking it open.

[Combat Awareness] flared up before he could verify his target's death. A pair of Terror Deer charged his way, their heads lowered. Letting go of Crusher, he felt light enough to shove mana into his legs to leap to the side. [Evasion] guided his stance and movement as he avoided getting impaled, and he followed that up by rolling over the ground and leaping to his feet. His hands shot toward his handaxes, but before he attacked the monsters passing by him, Hakon used [Bash] to block yet another Terror Deer from attacking Eren.

He rammed into the monster, axes flashing in his hands the moment before they dug into skin and flesh. Hakon relied on [Mana Manipulation] to maintain full control of the mana coating the weapons' edges, detonating them only once they were deep enough to trigger [Bleeding].

While [River of Blood] was not a Skill he could acquire, the days and nights he'd spent training and experimenting bore fruit. [Bleeding] was one of them.

Another result was [Pack Coordination].

"Focus on your target," Hakon snapped at Eren, glancing sideways. "Trust me."

[Pack Coordination] was no ordinary Skill. It didn't consume any mana, and it didn't look like the Skill did anything else. Hakon didn't sense much of a difference when the Ancestors first rewarded him with [Pack Coordination]. Despite that, training with others had become easier ever since he acquired the Skill, and it was especially useful when he gave out orders or when they did group sparring sessions.

And now it helped snap Eren back into focus. A burst of light coalesced before the Lightcaller's target's eyes. It exploded in a wave of heat and brilliant light, giving Eren the opportunity to hack the deer apart.

In the meantime, Hakon danced around them to reach another Terror Deer trying to take a bite out of Eren. The Lightcaller and the foe were in the way, so he did the only thing he could think of other than throwing an axe. He unleashed [Intimidation].

While it didn't stop the Terror Deer, it slowed the monster enough for him to reach it with a sprint and jam one handaxe into its antlers. Doing so intentionally turned out oddly difficult, but it worked.

Relying on [Two Weapon Fighting] and [Weapon Mastery], Hakon copied Björn's tactic. He pulled the deer's head to the side and let the razor-sharp blade in his other hand do the rest. A few Scriptures popped up, but

he’d learned to ignore them. It was just that this time around, something different happened.

Ambient mana poured into him without warning. His heartbeat accelerated, and Hakon’s head snapped toward the most recent Scripture.

[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]

“That was about damn time,” he grunted, a savage smile spreading across his face.

The other Scriptures faded as Hakon turned back to combat. [Mana Sense] informed him that he wasn’t the only one absorbing a gargantuan amount of mana. Eren must have earned himself a Level as well. It was not nearly as much as Hakon absorbed, but considering their Level difference, it had to be more than enough to fill Eren’s mana mass.

Checking the surroundings, it didn’t look like the Lightcaller was going to have any problems dealing with another Terror Deer. That being said, there were three of them nearby.

Hakon didn’t think twice as he threw his handaxes. With [Circulation] fully empowered, he still had more than enough excess mana to infuse the axes, which he did. He only infused as much mana as the axes could handle for a short period before throwing them.

Both struck true, lodging in the Terror Deer’s chests, deep enough to conceal the blades.

Hakon appeared beside one of them, hand pressed against its skull, and unleashed [Discharge] with the remainder of the mana pumping through his pathways. Meanwhile, the other one stumbled toward him. Grabbing the monster to keep it rooted, he kicked the back of the handaxe, ramming it even deeper into the deer’s chest. Then he shoved the antler aside as the monster’s lifelight began to fade. Hakon reached for its neck.

His eyes widened when it snapped like a twig.

That worked? He’d hoped for it to work but to actually see how far he made it even though he only had a power of the Mind was exhilarating.

That said, Hakon pushed toward the next prey.

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CHAPTER 43

Getting rid of the monsters heading toward the Lightcaller proved almost too simple once he didn't have to regulate how much mana his Skills consumed. The ordeal itself was straightforward. And once Eren was able to fend for himself, Hakon could finally join the others at the 'main' battlefield farther behind.

Björn looked a mess, blood running down his well-trained body in streams. Antler fragments stuck out of his chest and right upper arm, with one whole antler lodged deep in his abdomen.

Not that he seemed to notice. Björn severed the head of the beast attached to the antler before ramming his war axe into the Terror Deer's skull, splitting it in two. With that taken care of, he pushed onward, leaping into the masses with a manic smile.

The Blessed warrior's combat style was destructive, yet not the most lethal. It wasn't as bloody either. Astrid, on the other hand, was both bloody and deadly. She was drenched in blood, probably her enemies', and so was the area around her. A familiar crimson hue oozed from her body, fluctuating as soon as she burst forth.

Using her Runeskin, Astrid danced around a group of six Terror Deer with grace and swiftness. Her daggers flashed through the air, leaving red marks on her targets with practiced ease. The wounds burst open moments later, flooding the surroundings with even more blood.

Hakon expected Astrid to outperform Björn, but he did not expect her to be this powerful. Then again, he reminded himself that Blood Fury worked best against larger groups. The more blood there was, the greater Blood Fury benefited her.

As he maintained [Pack Coordination] and joined their fight against tens of frenzied Terror Deer thirsting for their lives, he realized he was not as needed as he first suspected. Björn was doing his own thing regardless, and Astrid never truly needed him. That gave him time to focus on his own abilities.

Crusher was back with Eren, resting near a lifeless deer, and that was fine. He didn't want to rely too much on the reward the Ancestors gave him for completing a Deed just because it would make things easier. To truly grow, he would have to suffer.

Doing so required him to push a plethora of Skills to their limit. [Split Focus]' passive effect was useful, and he currently had enough mana to push it further than ever before. So that's what he did. It felt like his mind grew sharper than it had been before splitting apart. The sensation was no longer as confusing as previously, but it still felt like the voices in his head quadrupled. While that did not necessarily include the prompts of his Ancient Power, it did affect Enhanced Comprehension as soon as he activated the other Skills.

[Mana Sense], [Sensory Expansion], and [Flow Observation] activated simultaneously, consuming a considerable amount of mana. If not for the recent Level up, Hakon wouldn't have unraveled their full power, and the Skills were needed for what came next.

Mana pumped through his entire body without triggering [Circulation]. However, he did trigger [Mana Manipulation] and [Mana Shaping] as he extended his senses beyond his physical shell. Mana flowed outward, forming several spheres at will.

He narrowed his eyes at the fluctuating structures floating before him and lobbed one through the air. It struck one of the Terror Deer closest to him but failed to do any damage. The mana sphere barely sustained itself long enough in the first place. Most of the mana within dissipated in the air before it splashed against the target, leaving it more baffled than anything.

Heat rose to his cheeks when Astrid appeared beside his target, her blades carving deep gashes across its neck. She raised an eyebrow at Hakon but was fortunately distracted by the bleating monsters charging at her.

Brushing the embarrassment aside, he shaped one of the mana spheres into a blade. It was rough and fluctuated even more wildly than the sphere, but it didn't dissipate right away. Closing in on one of the Terror Deer with

[Stealth], he reached for the mana blade, his intent clear. Alas, the execution failed miserably.

While he felt something when his fingers coiled around the mana blade, clutching it shattered the construct. Eyes narrowed, Hakon shaped another mana sphere into a dagger. He didn't follow the sense of wrongness from his Ancient Power right away, watching as the construct formed before his eyes. Reaching out with [Mana Sense], [Mana Manipulation], and [Mana Shaping], he tightened his control over the weapon before releasing it at the distracted target.

The structure didn't lose any of its mana as it crossed the short distance, yet it couldn't have done more damage than a feather. If anything, the mana blade tickled the target as it impacted. The mana within burst in all directions, and the Terror Deer's head yanked to the side.

Hakon groaned and conjured a [Mote of Light] in the monster's face. A moment later, [Circulation] burst to life, and he closed in on the beast with his shortsword in hand. The execution was swift and merciful. He doubted the monster even realized what happened when it collapsed to the ground.

Unfortunately, the Terror Deer's death didn't solve the issue at hand. If anything, it annoyed him more than before. He searched for a new target, which alone had grown into a problem. One reason was the monsters' brethren collapsing dead right beside them. [Stealth] was great for staying hidden, but hiding a broad-shouldered Barbarian in the center of a clearing was too much even for such a cowardly Skill.

With that in mind, Hakon pumped an immense amount of mana into his next mana sphere. The other conjurations dispersed from a lack of focus, while the one before him expanded rapidly. The influx of mana ebbed down, the gains from his Level up complete, but that mattered little.

There is no weight to mana, he concluded after analyzing the latest of his conjurations.

No matter how he shaped and shifted the mana, it didn't change the core issue. It wasn't a physical structure. Not like that, at least.

Fire could be destructive even if it did not have physical weight. The same could be said of water. Once boiled, water would evaporate, and something else he'd learned in the harshest of winters the tribe had faced in many cycles, it could also freeze. What did that mean? Hakon did not know yet, but he felt like mana wasn't too different from fire or water.

It was everything, yet nothing. Rootkeepers, Lightcallers, as well as any other Barbarian possessed the same type of energy. Sure, it might feel like they were different, but if they were truly all that different, Hakon wouldn't have been able to replicate Eren's Skill, [Mote of Light], let alone Astrid's [River of Blood]. His recreations consumed far more mana, and they were nowhere near as effective, but that was no permanent issue. It was something he could solve by improving his Skills. All he needed was time and effort.

Mana was everything in a way, was it not?

Again, he had no idea how true that was, but he'd heard, read, and seen enough to know it was possible to change mana's structure. Its frequency. He'd done so himself already with [Mote of Light].

To make it more tangible, to give it physical weight and more structure, wouldn't be that easy. Not with mana feeling more like evaporated water; like the mist that obscured parts of the forest near the mountains.

That left him with the massive mana sphere floating before him. How was he supposed to turn something with the same physical structure as mist into water, let alone ice? Modifying its frequency to add some weight should help, but it wouldn't be enough. Still, he tried anyway.

The sound of battle faded the second he focused on the task ahead. Adding 'weight' to mana was weird, but it was nowhere near as difficult as manipulating mana to glow. The sphere shrank in size while it grew more difficult to control. Putting the difficulty aside, Hakon added more mana when he noticed the sphere fluctuated more than before. Mana oozed from several spots, dissipating into the surroundings, which was most certainly not what Hakon wanted.

He created thinner, elongated mana shapes to place across the leaks, like one would use cloth on a wound. Barbarians would have to wait until their Skills healed their wounds before removing the bandages, but Hakon did not have that luxury. He placed more and more mana bandages across the shrinking sphere, following a mixture of instincts, lackluster knowledge, and Enhanced Comprehension's prompts.

The power pushed him in two directions, one of which felt like a rocky, obscured path, while the other was… well, it felt like a well-trodden path.

Even if Hakon liked challenges, he was in the middle of combat and couldn't let the challenge consume him, so he followed the simpler direction. Several prompts popped up as he worked, his senses fully locked

on the structure forming before him. But neither [Flow Observation] nor [Mana Sense] lingered on the sphere for too long. Hakon turned his attention to the patches he created to close the mana leaks.

They resembled bandages at first, but it wasn't long before they coated the sphere, forcefully maintaining its stability. The sphere could still shrink, but the layer of mana coating it shrank alongside it, making sure it wouldn't flicker and destabilize.

Once the layer of mana formed, it was like he stepped through a door of opportunities he hadn't known existed. It wasn't like he suddenly understood everything he was capable of, but more possibilities formed in his head the longer his attention lingered on the mana structure; his conjuration.

With countless ideas popping up in his mind, Hakon was about to try something new when several stings surged through his chest. Looking down, his Runeskin was glowing dimly. It absorbed some of the impacting force of a Terror Deer crashing into him, yet that did not stop the monster's pointed antlers from digging through his skin and flesh.

[Pain Tolerance] transformed the burning pain into a fickle wick, but his concentration faltered. The mana sphere burst apart, and he nearly lost the path he had been working toward.

Furious and unable to rein in his emotions fast enough, Hakon erupted. Mana burst from his fingers instantaneously, coating his hand just as it had covered the mana sphere. It was about to spread up his arms but slowed and went rigid once Hakon shot forward, punching the Terror Deer in the face.

A soft crack rang in his ears, but he wasn't done yet. The deer tried to pull away or ram the antler deeper into Hakon's chest, yet it was to no avail. Punches rained down upon the antler, smashing it to smithereens, before he did the same to the monster.

Blood and brain matter splattered through the air, yet neither belonged to Hakon. His fists were still pristine, a faint azure membrane protecting his skin and knuckles.

[Skill [Reinforcement] has been learned.]
[Proficiency gained. [Reinforcement Lv.1] improved to [Reinforcement Lv.2]]

That was not exactly the type of Skill he had been working toward… or was it? Staring down at the monster crumbling to the ground, his eyes narrowed. The layer of mana covering his fists receded at his command, but the pain did not. [Pain Tolerance]'s effect diminished slightly, assaulting him with crunching pain in his fists and searing stings in his chest.

"Far from perfect," he grumbled, his hands trembling as he tried to regain control of them. He went on to pluck fragments of deer antler out of his chest and turned to yet another Terror Deer mowing its way toward him. Hakon knew Astrid could have intervened, but she'd intentionally opened a path to funnel monsters toward him.

Utilizing [Mana Shaping] once more, he created a new mana sphere. The sphere ought to have been as heavy as his earlier creation, but it wasn't quite there yet. If he had a few more heartbeats, that would have changed. Alas, time was of the essence. Hence, [Reinforcement] came into play.

Hakon had yet to fully analyze the Skill, but [Reinforcement] came with some physical characteristics. If not for that, it wouldn't have repelled blood and brain matter.

That didn't make it perfect. Though it was one step in the right direction.

Shaping the mana sphere into a flat shield, Hakon used [Reinforcement] to coat it and watched as the Terror Deer crashed right into it. Enhanced Comprehension screamed at him, unraveling several possible paths he could take to acquire a plethora of new Skills, but he didn't plan on acquiring something of little use.

The Terror Deer was slowed by the shield of mana, then broke through and continued to charge. That was until a small blade the size of a bone dagger materialized before the monster's chest. There was some distance between the blade and the monster, but it was at top speed and didn't appear to notice it. With [Reinforcement] active and pushed to its limit, his mana reserves were affected more than expected, and that was fine. Because the mana coating the conjured blade added a physical layer to it.

It still shattered, but not before cutting deep into the Terror Deer's chest as it charged straight into the blade.

"Better," he grunted, imprinting everything he had done deep into his mind.

While it was nowhere near perfect, Hakon was satisfied. How could he not be after taking the first step toward something big?

He had no idea what awaited him at the end of his path, but he was looking forward to it.

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CHAPTER 44

Hakon paid more attention to his structures than the fights around him. He was gradually getting the hang of it, trusting the others would be fine.

And while he had yet to fall into a trance, his condition was not too far off either.

Exhaling deeply, mana flowed into the conjured weapon in steady streams. When that wasn't enough, [Mana Infusion] triggered, flooding the structure with even more mana. That, against Hakon's expectations, worked much better than anticipated. Sure, the conjuration cracked from the pressure coming from within, and a lot of mana poured out of it even faster than it had from the previous conjuration.

The mana structure's integrity was clearly not as durable as it should have been. That was yet another thing Hakon added to his to-do list as he cast [Reinforcement] to temporarily stop the leak. The layer of [Reinforcement] rippled and threatened to break apart as the mana from within ravaged the structure, so Hakon released the blade before it could fall apart.

He attacked the injured monster even though it was already on the ground, its chest heaving heavily as blood pooled around it. The strike ended the Terror Deer's suffering before the conjuration destabilized and fell apart. While that was much better than anticipated, it was nowhere near the level Hakon wanted. If anything, it showed him several more things he should fix and improve.

That's not it. I need to do something else.

Reinforcing the conjuration worked, but its stability was also important. Thinking back to the states of mist, water, and ice, Hakon was reminded of something else entirely.

He couldn't quite tell why he thought about them, but turning to watch the others fight made him think of the training ground and the Ironwood dummies they'd used before the Rite. Following that, Hakon thought of the hay dummies they'd thrashed when they were smaller children. Hay… It was nowhere near as tough as Ironwood. If anything, it wasn't all that special, yet it withstood the violent antics of dozens of children once compressed and reinforced.

Hakon was already reinforcing his structures, which left him with 'compression.'

Could that work? he wondered, leaning heavily on [Mana Manipulation] and [Mana Shaping] to conjure a sphere the size of his head. But it didn't stay that large for long as he compressed it with raw willpower. That worked much better than anticipated, the sphere shrinking to half its size.

"More," Hakon grunted, pressing down even harder. A headache crawled up the back of his mind from the effort, but he pushed until the sphere was the size of an apple. At that point, the structure was much harder to control. His hold over it nearly slipped several times, and hairline cracks spread across its surface, yet no mana leaked.

Hakon still used [Reinforcement], strengthening the structure only to press down even more. That turned out to be too much. He was already having a hard time maintaining so many Skills, but the real problem was [Mana Manipulation]'s Level. It was simply not at a high enough Level to support the ideas Hakon was forming.

And that was exactly why he had to keep going. To push further, forcing his Skills to advance under pressure.

Which required time, a lot more mana, and a gargantuan amount of effort.

For now, Hakon could only watch a group of Terror Deer charge his way. The small sphere hovering before him shifted slowly at his command, but it didn't transform into a blade. The conjuration's pressure was already too much for him to bear, every modification proving harder on the mind and his mana reserves than the last. With that in mind, all Hakon did was

give the sphere a pointed tip. Even that transformed the light headache into a mind-splitting catastrophe, but it worked.

A burst of mana was all the pointed sphere needed to shoot forward and pierce through the closest Terror Deer's skull. The monster collapsed a heartbeat later, which was followed by several prompts trying to catch his attention.

They were prompts he couldn't check because there were simply too many, irritating Hakon more than ever, and he still had to face several Terror Deer thirsting for his blood.

And it was their blood that would be shed. For the Ancestors, and, in a way, for himself as well.

Heavy breaths filled the corpse-ridden clearing. No one escaped the fight unscathed. Except Astrid, maybe, but while she did not get physically injured, the constant use of her Ancient Power and Runeskin wore her down. She was just as drained as everyone else.

Hakon was the first to regain his bearings. He did not jump to his feet right away, first checking on the others, even when his blurry vision made things more difficult.

Björn was a mess. His whole upper body was riddled with holes the size of a fingertip, some of which still bled or were stuffed with fragments of an unfortunate deer's antler. But as bad as Björn looked, his healing was monstrous enough to keep him alive. It wouldn't surprise Hakon if the Blessed warrior's wounds healed faster than his own.

Looking down at his body, he could only shrug. Hakon's wounds were not all that bad, but his mana reserves were empty. After earning a Level earlier, Hakon did not think about holding back. That came back to bite him now that [Natural Regeneration] couldn't use his mana to heal him faster.

One more thing to add to the list, he mused to himself.

While it was not a major problem, [Circulation] was good enough of a Skill to help him replenish mana. It empowered him and helped him catch up to physical monstrosities like Björn, but its secondary ability to suck in ambient mana was subpar. That would have to change sooner or later.

Shifting his attention to Eren, Hakon felt pretty good. The Lightcaller had nearly been stomped to death by a group of Terror Deer, which, in a way, was his fault, but he made it through. He was battered black and blue, and his chest was riddled with quite a few holes, but he was the only one overflowing with mana. How could he not be after Leveling up twice in a single fight?

Eren had yet to reach the 1st Ascension, which was quite the surprise considering he'd fought and killed monsters strong enough to pose a 'Medium Threat' to Barbarians at the lower Levels of the 1st Ascension, but that only showed how low his Level started out as. And that might be the most important part: it demonstrated quite clearly that Lightcallers did not necessarily have to be weak.

Eren understood that as well now. If not, he wouldn't be leaning against a tree trunk with that toothy smile, chuckling to himself from time to time even though that had to be incredibly painful.

Björn looked satisfied with himself, as did Astrid. Everyone was happy with the results, Hakon included. He noticed the others were looking to the side, eyes shimmering in a very familiar way. They checked out their improvements, studying the Ancient Scripture, so he did the same.

The Scriptures didn't wait for him to call upon them. They materialized before him the moment he stopped blocking them out.

[Proficiency gained. [Throwing Lv.5] improved to [Throwing Lv.6]]
[Proficiency gained. [Intimidation Lv.3] improved to [Intimidation Lv.4]]
[Proficiency gained. [Inspection Lv.8] improved to [Inspection Lv.9]]
…

There were way too many Scriptures, each looking exactly the same to Hakon. It felt like there were dozens, and even more of them popped up whenever the ones he just checked faded. The more he read, the more annoyed he became.

"Change something." He let out a loud groan, dismissing his friends when their heads swiveled in his direction.

Please change the Scripture, Ancestors. I know that's possible. We did it with the Ancient Scripture, so… can you make it more simplistic, please?

Waste less space and don't distract me in combat anymore, he called out to the Ancestors, sincerely hoping they were listening.

His attention snapped back to the Scriptures a moment later.

[Proficiency gained. [Pack Coordination Lv.3] improved to [Pack Coordination Lv.4]]
[Proficiency gained. [Pack Coordination Lv.4] improved to [Pack Coordination Lv.5]]
…

Hakon was close to complaining to the Ancestors. If they could listen to his requests about the Ancient Scripture, changing up the Scriptures themselves shouldn't be so difficult, right? Fortunately, the Ancestors did not warrant his complaints. They deserved high praise, as the Scriptures before him melded together. The Scriptures' letters moved and shifted before his eyes, forming into a single parchment.

[Scripture of Improvement
Throwing Lv.5 → Lv.6
Inspection Lv.8 → Lv.9
Intimidation Lv.3 → Lv.5
Pack Coordination Lv.3 → Lv.7
Bash Lv.4 → Lv.5
Bleeding Lv.2 → Lv.3
Mana Sense Lv.20 → Lv.21
Split Focus Lv.12 → Lv.13
Mana Infusion Lv.6 → Lv.7
Sensory Expansion Lv.11 → Lv.12
Flow Observation Lv.9 → Lv.11
Mana Manipulation Lv.6 → Lv.9
Mana Shaping Lv.5 → Lv.7
Reinforcement (New) Lv.2 → Lv.4]

The Scripture of Improvement was much better than the individual Scriptures, but that didn't make it perfect. It was good enough, though. Then again, if he were to tell anyone else about his rapidly improving

Skills, and there were so many Scriptures that he'd gotten annoyed at the Ancestors, they'd probably beat him to a pulp. That was all the more reason to carry this secret to the grave.

To be entirely truthful, the sheer number of Skill improvements was staggering. Hakon didn't think he'd gain that much from a single fight. Then again, he'd been focusing on many different things ever since the fight against the Terror Deer started.

Combat sure was a great way to improve, even if he ended up getting hit a few too many times. He'd been distracted way too often, thinking of new ways to create weapons from mana. There was so much he had to try, but it clearly hadn't been the smartest idea to experiment mid-combat.

Regardless, something Hakon expected to pop up in the Scripture of Improvement hadn't appeared. Enhanced Comprehension's prompting aside, he'd been sure to gain something from squashing his mana together and compressing it. But maybe that just meant he had to work even harder to earn yet another new Skill.

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CHAPTER 45

Blue mist, fueled with sparks so potent they smelled of power, filled the clearing as the Terror Deer herd disintegrated. Other than a few antlers, which had been removed as trophies of their first hunt together, everything had been sacrificed to the Ancestors.

Spilled intestines and the pools of blood snaking through the clearing dematerialized alongside the carcasses, leaving only small specks from the blood Eren, Björn, and Hakon had shed during the battle.

“That… was amazing,” Eren exclaimed between ragged breaths.

“A herd of Terror Deer,” Björn said, all while smiling through the pain. He glanced back to Hakon, his smile widening. “You picked worthy prey. The Ancestors are excited.”

As he spoke, traces of the blue mist flowed toward Hakon and his friends, filling them with energy. It was nowhere near as potent as the energy provided in the Fracture, but Hakon embraced the sensation, nonetheless. Eyes closed, he focused on the mana mass lodged deep within him. It tremored ever so slightly, making him think that his next Level was nearing.

If there was one thing he noticed about the mana mass, it was that it grew alongside him. Its tremors and growth spurts were usually directly related to Level ups.

“Of course, the Ancestors are excited. They’re watching the rise of the next Warlord, after all,” Astrid murmured, though the others could hear her. Their heads turned to her, filled with mixed emotions. Hakon let out a grunt, while Eren nodded in agreement. Björn just smiled, his emotions mostly hidden behind a mischievous smile.

“What? The era of the next Warlord is coming, and I am not going to bet my life on others.” Astrid turned to the others. “The tribe has already accepted him as the Successor, but that is not enough. War is coming.” She shook her head. “No, we are already at war.”

Even if Tribe Taskur had not yet been involved in the war, Hakon couldn’t help but agree. They were already at war. Tribe Pearot and the aggressive acts of the other tribes in recent cycles had been a statement. They were already at war, even if the younger generation couldn’t see it just yet.

“One step at a time,” Hakon called out loud enough for everyone to hear. “We should recover first.”

Björn leaped to his feet, his war axes held in a tight grip. “I am ready!”

As if to highlight his lie, the worst wounds burst open from the sudden movement. Björn was trying hard to ignore the blood flowing down his chest in streams, but the corners of his lips twitched.

“I can see that. Totally fine.” Hakon grimaced. He conjured a small mana sphere, which he compressed and reinforced with the little mana he’d recovered, and released it at Björn, hitting him right between his brows.

More surprised than hurt, Björn let out a groan and stumbled back. Tripping over a root, the Blessed warrior fell onto his butt. All the while, more of his wounds tore open, showing quite clearly that he was, in fact, not ready to barge into another fight.

“Proper recovery is important. If you fail to recover properly, you won’t be able to give your best in combat. And that is disrespectful to your opponent and thus an affront to the Ancestors,” Astrid spoke eloquently, using big words Hakon hadn’t heard before.

Still, the message was clear. Even Björn, who looked more confused than anything, nodded in understanding.

That gave them the time to take care of yet another important point: to discuss their earlier fight. As frustrating as it was, even to Hakon, some part of their fight against the Terror Deer herd was even more frustrating than a battle review. He made sure to tell Björn that his charge into the herd had been reckless and foolish, and pointed out all the other things he’d noticed.

While nobody seemed particularly happy to get called out like that so shortly after their first successful hunt together, they didn’t stop him. Instead, they stared at him as he spent quite some time analyzing the battle and what everyone could have done better.

“As expected from the Successor,” Björn muttered, though his voice wasn’t mocking or anything like that. He sounded genuine, if a little frustrated about getting called out like that, which surprised Hakon.

“Expected?”

“You are great, Successor,” Eren called out, sounding almost excited. “I will fight better next time!”

Astrid nodded seriously. He had the least advice for her, but Hakon caught her trying too hard to learn [Flow Control] and [Dash]. She had yet to learn either of those Skills, which was mostly owed to a simple problem: force of habit. Part of the reason was also likely to do with Hakon not being the best teacher and that Astrid didn’t like to expel impurities when he was present, but the habits she acquired in the short time since she’d awakened were difficult to get rid of.

Moving mana alongside the pathways felt right to Astrid, which was the first issue. Her Ancient Power didn’t guide her like Hakon’s did. Rather, Blood Fury provided her with supernatural instincts, which she’d used to wield her body in the best possible way. Which was to ignore the pathways’ insides, because they were filled with obstacles or outright blocked, and to use the pathways’ surface to move her energy around.

Those instincts and hundreds of hours of training created a habit, which made it impossible to learn Skills like [Dash] or [Circulation]. Hakon was not sure why, since Astrid’s energy control wasn’t all that bad, but if he had to make a guess, it would be that his method was superior. That circulating mana through them rather than along them was more potent, and that movement within the pathways was needed to create certain responses.

He would have to study the difference between circulating mana inside the pathways and outside, but when he did it once, he… Hakon actually didn’t feel much. There was no response from his body when he moved mana around the pathways, confusing him. As far as he was concerned, any movement with mana should create some sort of reaction from the body, yet there was nothing. Other than Enhanced Comprehension’s blaring reverberations through his mind.

The Ancient Power had never been this loud, screaming at him to stop doing this nonsense. That, if nothing else, told him all he needed to teach Astrid and get rid of her bad habits. He considered doing the same to the others once he’d figured out the best way to teach warriors that were not as

patient and determined to get it right as Astrid, but he would make it work. Somehow. Probably.

Guiding his peers through the cycles of blood that were about to follow was something Hakon had to do. It belonged to his tasks as the Successor and future chieftain, and he would have to lean more into that aspect if he wanted the young generation to survive the war.

But first…

Hakon froze when he felt something odd. It was a faint sensation that crept in the back of his head, tugging at him as if trying to tell him something. The sensation was nebulous and so faint he barely sensed it, so he focused on his sensory Skills, eyes closed.

His ears twitched involuntarily as the sensation grew more intense. He did not yet trigger any Skills, but his senses erupted outward instinctively. The feeling grew more potent, and his hair stood on end as it shifted.

It… smelled like danger. Albeit confused, calling it a “smell” was oddly fitting. Despite the confusion, Hakon leaped upward, his focus on the odd scent hanging in the air as he applied [Sensory Expansion].

“What’s–” He didn’t let Björn finish and shushed him.

Even when he felt his friends’ heads turn toward him with questions, Hakon ignored them, his focus on the dangerous scent and what it might mean.

Not a flower’s scent. That’s not how a monster’s bloodlust should feel either, he analyzed, eyes snapping open to use [Mana Sense] and [Combat Awareness] actively. Their passive effects were much cheaper and less mentally draining, but the sensation of danger lingered in the air, and he had no idea what it was or where it came from.

His head flicked right, eyes narrowed as he picked up on something. No, he did know where it came from.

“Stay here. I’ll be back in a heartbeat,” Hakon ordered, ignoring the muffled complaints as he pushed into the undergrowth, splitting his attention to use [Silent Steps] and [Stealth].

Unsure what awaited him, Hakon ramped up his passive Skills as much as his meager mana reserves allowed. He had recovered some mana since the earlier hunt, but most was consumed by [Natural Regeneration] to push him back to top form. That still didn’t feel like enough, so he relied heavily on the sense of wrongness to improve upon Skills that did not consume any mana.

Come on. Give me a quick Level up, he grunted inwardly, knowing very well that the easy Level ups from improving a few common Skills were long since over. He could still Level up from Skill improvements, but it needed more than that.

Pushing the idea aside, Hakon continued to skulk through the forest, focusing on the scent around him. The sensation grew more potent, which Hakon relied upon heavily as he moved mana into his upper body, straight toward his head. The pathways were not nearly as clean around that area as they probably should have been, slowing his mana's movement, but it reached his nose anyway.

By that point, Enhanced Comprehension filled him with more sensations. Sorting through them would take time. Time he did not have to spare. Moving onward with his Ancient Power and instincts mingling in ways he couldn't comprehend just yet, Hakon weaved around dangerous plants and avoided vegetation that looked far too harmless to survive in the deeper parts of the deadly forest.

He half-expected to find whatever emitted the dangerous scent quickly, but that couldn't have been more wrong. He moved through the forest for a little while until he found what he was looking for, rewarding him greatly.

[Scripture of Improvement
Silent Steps Lv.9 → Lv.11
Stealth Lv.5 → Lv.6
Tracking Lv.7 → Lv.9
Sensory Expansion Lv.12 → Lv.13]

As pleasant as his improvements were, Hakon felt nothing more than coldness in his heart. How could he not, watching a group of Barbarians lurking in the shadows of the forest, heading toward the tribehold?

Everything would have been fine if the Barbarians belonged to Taskur, but that was not the case. The marks etched across their wide shoulders proved otherwise. They spelled trouble. For they were the marks of Pearot.

Their enemy was coming for them.

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CHAPTER 46

Barbarians from Tribe Pearot were heading toward the tribehold. How they'd missed each other, Hakon couldn't tell, but Pearot's tribesmen were closing in on the outskirts leading to Tribe Taskur, all while he and the other young warriors were likely much deeper than they were.

Eyes narrowed, Hakon studied their weapons and bodies for blood and signs of combat. His vision improved greatly as he infused his eyes with mana, providing him all the information he needed.

There was only one small group of Barbarians, and none seemed to have been engaged in combat for a while. If anything, it appeared like they avoided threats of all kinds with a vigilance unlike the average Barbarian. They moved through the forest with great care, avoided making any sounds, and blended in with the forest around them.

Smelled like the forest? Hakon frowned deeply at that. Why did they blend in with the forest all of a sudden? Hakon had been certain their scents guided him to them, but clearly that wasn't quite right. Yet, it didn't feel entirely wrong either, even if the scents he noticed previously no longer existed.

Curious, Hakon stayed exactly where he was, focusing on the sensation while maintaining [Stealth]. His instincts screamed at him, telling him to charge and kill the Barbarians, but he remained unmoving. That was, until Pearot's tribesmen headed even closer to the tribehold. Hakon, changing his focus to [Silent Steps] for the time being, skulked through the forest and followed them from a safe distance.

He was itching for bloodshed but knew better than to attack. Especially since the entire group emitted a presence strong enough to warrant his

attention. Even if he was too far from them to use [Inspection], dealing with all of them alone would be a foolish ordeal.

Staying level-headed was crucial, and so was learning all about Pearot's intentions. So, he followed them as they closed in on the tribehold and didn't move even when they finally reached the border. He wasn't worried about his tribe and waited with patience he didn't know he had until they left once more.

Nobody noticed Pearot's Barbarians. They arrived at the border of Tribe Taskur, studied their structure, possibly even their movements, numbers, and more, and left before anyone could notice them. Hakon held his breath and closed his mind to bloodthirsty thoughts as Pearot's Barbarians moved back, passing not too far from him.

They failed to notice his presence, which was proven by the Ancestors' rewards, but that didn't make things better. If anything, looking at the Scripture of Improvement made him frown.

[Silent Steps Lv.11 → Lv.12
Stealth Lv.6 → Lv.7]

Instead of 'Scripture of Improvement,' Hakon only saw a small parchment with the two Skills that improved. That wasn't all that bad, but it was also currently not that important. Tribe Pearot's presence was.

The Barbarians moved through the forest without exchanging any words. Silence hung in the air, broken only by the occasional brush against a bush and the crushing of branches and smaller plants, neither of which was loud enough to be noticed by the groups of young warriors they passed.

Hakon felt something in the distance. It was nowhere near as potent as when he searched for Pearot's Barbarians, especially now that he had to hold back from using [Sensory Expansion] and [Mana Sense], but weirdly familiar scents hung in the air.

Teraq is among them, he muttered inwardly as his head swiveled to the left. Somewhere far off, voices and rustling bushes resounded, which only made him tense up more. Hakon was half-certain the Barbarians from Tribe Pearot would attack Teraq and his group, but they barely looked in their direction before the strongest among them motioned for the rest to keep moving.

While not everyone looked like they agreed with the decision, they followed their leader back to a small encampment. Hakon almost barged into the makeshift camp by accident. He had been so focused on the newfound sensation that he missed when the Barbarians stopped in their tracks. Distracted, the bushes around him rustled, forcing him to press into the ground and put his whole mind into using [Stealth]. He adjusted his position and used the surrounding environment to effectively turn invisible, but he couldn't be certain that nobody noticed him. Hence, Hakon stayed unmoving for as long as needed.

That gave him enough time to use his senses to figure out what was going on with the new sensation and all those scents he noticed… or felt?

Hakon didn't plan on staying too long near the makeshift camp, but it was increasingly difficult to find the right time to leave. Astrid and the others were probably still waiting for him back in the clearing, and, knowing them, they were cussing him out for taking so long. Well, Björn at any rate.

Regardless, they were impatient enough that it was only a matter of time before they would start searching for Hakon. And once they found him, they'd find Tribe Pearot's makeshift camp. That would lead to a lot of bloodshed. Their blood. After all, more Barbarians from Pearot found their way into the camp as time passed.

By now, he had no idea how long he'd been forced to stay there, Hakon sensed close to a dozen different scents. He heard enough voices to know there were more than half a dozen Barbarians, so it was fair to assume the camp housed ten, maybe a few more, enemies. Enemies that, once Hakon got the opportunity to inspect them, turned out quite troublesome.

[Barbarian – High Threat (1st Ascension)]
[Barbarian – High Threat (1st Ascension)]
…
[Barbarian – Extreme Threat (2nd Ascension)]

Hakon had to tweak [Inspection] a little to analyze the last Barbarian, but it worked. He connected the danger coming from the Barbarian with the

Skill and his memories and experiences, improving the Skill considerably.

[Inspection Lv.9 → Lv.11
Scent of Lifelight (New) Lv.1 → Lv.2]

[Scent of Lifelight] formed once he figured out that the sensation and scents came from the Barbarians, and that each sensation was connected to a particular scent and Barbarian. It was hard to put into words, but [Scent of Lifelight] was a nasty Skill by what he could tell. He had yet to learn more about the Skill, but it triggered more easily for stronger opponents. The higher the potency of their presence, the easier it was to sense them.

It was also how Hakon managed to sense the first group of Barbarians, because the first sensation came from the Barbarian at the 2nd Ascension. It suppressed all other sensations and spread farther than the others.

Their enemy was coming for them.

But this was not the time to praise his gains. Hakon moved as soon as the last group of Barbarians stepped into the camp. He masked his own movements with theirs and retreated slowly into the forest.

When he was confident nobody was following him, he exhaled deeply and made a run for it. [Scent of Lifelight] remained active even without his doing, but he empowered it more than necessary to locate all the life around him. He discovered a group of monsters, some of which appeared juvenile, yet they didn’t attack him. He didn’t strike out either, his senses spreading farther as he triggered [Sensory Expansion].

More scents surged toward him, and it wasn’t long before he found the first group of young warriors. They looked battered, their bodies shredded and drenched in blood. But they were still alive and looked satisfied.

“Hakon!” one of the young warriors called out with a vibrant smile, which looked more vicious than anything given his appearance. “You came to celebrate? Where are the others?”

“Come with me,” Hakon called out in a steely voice that allowed no disobedience.

The Barbarian’s lips parted, but they sealed shut as their eyes met. “Yes,” he called out, and the others followed.

Pushing through the forest with a mission in mind and several Skills to guide him, it didn’t take long before he’d collected three groups. Four if his

own group was included. He guided the young Barbarians to the clearing, where Björn, Astrid, and Eren waited.

“Where have you–” Astrid started to say, but stopped to inspect the men and women stepping into the clearing behind him. “Why is everyone here?”

“That’s not everyone,” Hakon corrected her without thinking. Either way, the details didn’t matter all too much. “I found them on my way back.”

“Back?” Björn got to his feet, looking serious. He sensed his friend’s tension right away and reached for his war axes.

“Back from a camp I found,” Hakon clarified. “A small camp of Barbarians. Tribe Pearot’s people. I found a group of them near the forest’s outskirts, inspecting the tribehold, studying it.”

The young warriors took the news in stride. Anger bubbled beneath the surface, and some clutched their weapons tightly enough for cracks to echo through the clearing, but they did not rush into the forest to find Pearot’s people.

Blazing flames burned in Astrid’s eyes as she unsheathed a set of arced shortswords.

“They dare to eye our territory? It’s time to crush them.” She sounded almost excited as she spoke, while the others let out deep growls of affirmation.

Hakon raised his hand to silence them, but the words died on his tongue. He initially brought the young warriors together to ensure their survival. If they’d found Tribe Pearot’s Barbarians before him, he did not doubt for one second they would have charged ahead. No matter how confident they were in their strength, the young warriors stood no chance.

He planned to bring them together, make sure they survived, and return them to the tribehold, doing what a Successor was supposed to do. To take care of his people.

But was that really it? Was that really the best thing for them? No… it was not. It was cowardly, maybe even stupid, and it was most certainly foolish.

They were Barbarians, born to fight, to grow stronger, to earn the Ancestors’ favor, and to die in battle with a Saga filled with all kinds of wondrous achievements. Running away from battle was not the way of Barbarians.

“They need to recover.” Hakon pointed toward the first group he’d collected. They were clearly exhausted and heavily injured even though a

tremendous amount of mana pumped through their bodies. All things considered, it appeared that they had ascended or Leveled up multiple times not too long ago. That was great, but it didn't mean they were powerful enough to handle Pearot's Barbarians. Not without Runeskins and considering they were at a much lower Level than the others.

Their Skills… Hakon grimaced inwardly. He wouldn't be surprised if he knew more about the extent of the young warriors' Skills than they did. He knew they would die against the older Barbarians skulking through Tribe Taskur's land.

"We need a plan."

"A plan? Lead us to them and we kill them!" Björn rumbled, weapons raised. An intense sensation came from Hakon's friend as he spoke about killing Pearot's Barbarians, and the other young warriors joined in, expanding its range of influence drastically. They too were thirsting for battle, appearing almost cheerful as their weapons shot high up, forcing Hakon to intervene with [Intimidation].

His presence erupted forth, crushing the intense sensation coming from Björn and the others.

"If you want to die Sagaless, I can lead you to the camp. Charge straight at their strongest if you want to earn the Ancestors' approval. Just remember that he is at the 2nd Ascension when he tears you apart." Hakon couldn't help but growl, turning to his friend. "But don't drag others into a worthless death. Don't let them die a death unworthy of our kind."

Björn didn't seem pleased, but at least he had the decency to look away in shame. That had to be enough for the time being.

"We will come up with a plan, and you will join us," Hakon declared, closing the matter before turning to the others.

"The camp is not all too big. There shouldn't be more than a dozen warriors, but that doesn't change anything. Every single one of them is as strong as I am, possibly stronger." That did not even include the 2nd Ascension warrior, who was definitely stronger than he was.

His words dimmed the young warriors' excitement considerably. As much as Barbarians were born for battle, rushing at opponents as strong as he mentioned was not something they would survive. That was more like certain death, which was wasteful. They'd waste their lives, but also the Ancestors' gifts, which was unacceptable.

Those present understood that much very well. Even Björn, his head swiveling back to listen more intently.

“If we want this to work, to defeat them and make them part of our Sagas, we will have to do this in the right way,” Hakon said, thoughts swirling through his head, only to be discarded and adjusted at Enhanced Comprehension’s behest.

“I have a plan…” He cleared his throat after a while, sharing what was on his mind.

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CHAPTER 47

Not everyone liked the plan. Honestly, even Hakon would have loved to come up with something better. A strategy that allowed them to fight Pearot head-on.

Unfortunately, that was simply not feasible. All he could do was adjust the plan so nobody felt like they had to abandon the way of the Barbarian.

While not perfect, revealing some of the Skills the Ancestors granted him was enough to convince everyone to follow him.

Once that was taken care of, the group focused on recovering until the sun disappeared beyond the mountains. The moons rose high up into the starry sky, their brilliant light illuminating the eerie forest, some in darkish hues, others in bright verdant colors.

That was when the young warriors moved out. Hakon half-expected his peers to run into deadly plants, to thunder through the forest, waking all those trying to sleep, or charge straight at the enemy camp as soon as they saw it, but his expectations were shattered. Everything went down as he secretly hoped, despite expecting the worst.

It took a while to find their way back to the small camp, prompting [Tracking] and [Scent of Lifelight] to improve by yet another Level, and he found several suitable locations and positioned his people. Once Hakon ensured everyone understood what they were supposed to do, he checked out the camp again and found a group of no less than four Barbarians guarding it.

While the group was a little bit larger than he hoped for, it didn’t change much. Adjusting the variables a little, Hakon retreated into the dimly lit forest, his attention lingering on the sleeping figures beside the campfire.

He could have thrown his hand axes and bone daggers, imbued with mana, to kill several sleeping threats in an instant. If the others joined him, they could have killed most of them long before they could react. That, however, would betray all they stood for. It would be an insult to the Ancestors and dishonorable.

Neither Hakon nor his peers were willing to stoop that low. The least they could do was wake them up. And that was the plan: to wake their enemies with the guttural, pained screams of their comrades.

Back in position, Hakon looked down at his chest. The intricate design of his Runeskin glowed with an abundance of power. Enough to make this work, hopefully.

Dispelling the doubts lingering in his mind, he motioned to Eren.

A light conjured not too far from the camp a moment later. It was neither too close to the camp nor too far, and wasn't too bright. Just enough to attract some attention.

Gruff voices rang out from the camp. An exchange, a verbal spat that ended with two disgruntled figures moving through the forest, carrying longswords in their large, paw-like hands. They were towering figures, their muscles tense and ready to leap into battle at the first sign of danger. But as they approached the light levitating several trees away from the camp, nothing happened.

No fight was waiting for them. The glowing enemy they must have expected to appear was nowhere to be seen. Only a light made of mana that levitated before them.

The taller Barbarian slashed at the mote without any real effort. It floated to the side, smoothly evading the incoming strike.

"Monster?" he asked, turning to his comrade.

The other Barbarian stepped forward, head tilted. "A Wisp?"

He poked the light, only for his fingers to pass through. Eyes narrowed, he punched through the light, making it dissipate. Eren didn't bother maintaining the Skill, knowing it would be too draining.

When they turned their attention back to the clearing, they looked at each other, shrugged, and started to return to the camp. That was when the light flickered to life again.

The taller Barbarian let out a grunt, spinning around to crush it.

"Annoying light!" he growled, turning back to his grimacing comrade, who walked ahead even when the light materialized for the third time.

Letting out a curse, the tall Barbarian spun around, his red face shimmering faintly in the moons' dim light. His hand was already lunging toward the light when the ground around him started to shake. A massive frame peeled from the shadows. It charged straight at him with a perfectly executed [Crushing Advance].

Distracted by the light and his emotions, the Pearot Barbarian was too slow to react in time. Björn was already upon him when he finally regained his senses. His body showed signs of erupting in power, but it was too late. Björn crashed into the target, stunning him.

Taking advantage of that moment, a bone dagger whistled through the air, finding purchase in the stunned Barbarian's left eye.

Next up was Björn with his war axes. One lodged itself in the Barbarian's shoulder without much difficulty, but by the time he struck out again, [Crushing Advance]'s stunning effect had faded.

The Barbarian did not retreat, nor did he scream out in pain. He advanced toward Björn, headbutted him with a manic smile even with a bone dagger stuck in his left eye socket, and punched the Blessed warrior in the gut when he refused to collapse to the ground.

No words were exchanged, but blood flowed. Hakon's second bone dagger was already ready, and [Reinforcement] shrouded its blade, but he didn't throw it. He spotted Teraq attacking the Barbarian from his blind spot and knew they were going to be fine. Their opponent was stronger and more experienced, but he was also wounded.

The Barbarian spun toward Teraq, intercepting his massive sword and leaving a deep cut on Teraq's chest when his leg caved in. Pearot's warriors were strong, but an axe to the calf could force them to the ground just like any other Barbarian. Björn's foe was not yet dead. He fought valiantly, but Teraq and Björn soon found a way to shove the bone dagger stuck in the eye socket even deeper.

In the meantime, Hakon turned to the dazzling light to his left. The smile on the other Barbarian's lips was nowhere to be seen. He looked around, disoriented and unable to see, but that didn't seem to unsettle him as much as their initial plan suggested. The Barbarian lowered his body and focused on his other senses. However, that did not help him much against Astrid.

She evaded an incoming sword strike, one of her blades pressing against the descending longsword, altering its trajectory just enough to close in.

The Barbarian shifted and tried to evade the attack he knew was coming, but all Astrid needed was to cut him. And that she did.

Her second blade scraped across the Barbarian's arm and erupted with the power of Blood Fury. [River of Blood] did all it was supposed to, and Astrid leaned into the sensation. Shedding blood was all she needed to fuel Blood Fury, creating a faint crimson hue, which she used to empower her Runeskin, consuming the hue in an instant. She accelerated further and slashed her target several more times before stepping back, throwing knives already in hand. Coated with Blood Fury's energy, Astrid hurled the daggers at the target, hitting his chest and abdomen with deadly precision.

Hakon was ready to help, but by the time the Barbarian regained a semblance of vision, he bled badly from several wounds. Astrid occupied his full attention, and Hakon didn't doubt that she'd manage her foe alone, but Eren had always been part of the plan. He waited impatiently and struck the moment the Barbarian charged at Astrid, his body expanding.

Dazzling lights exploded in the Barbarian's face. Not even a full heartbeat later, Eren stood behind the Barbarian, ramming his sword into his back before he could unleash his Bloodbearer power to the fullest.

Shouts rang out from the camp, but that had been within the range of expectations. Hakon pumped mana through his body and spread his presence into the surroundings. [Intimidation] triggered as he stomped toward the camp. He stepped into the open, his bare body basking in the luminescent light from above, his appearance catching the attention of the other two Barbarians watching the camp. Their shouts and curses reverberated, waking the sleeping warriors, but they didn't bother waiting for their brethren.

As expected. The corner of his lips curled upward as the two Barbarians rushed ahead.

They didn't appear to notice anything amiss even when Hakon retracted the pressure of [Intimidation] and triggered [Pack Coordination]. The Barbarian pair only realized something was amiss when the shrubs to their left and right parted simultaneously, revealing the remaining young warriors lying in hiding.

Unable to contain their excitement any longer, Hakon's people rushed toward the two Barbarians. Four shifted to the side and closed the encirclement when their targets slowed and tried to back away.

Faced with foes on both sides and to the back, they changed their tactic and focused on the weakest link. They pushed toward the sole warrior towering before them.

Hakon struggled to contain his smug smile at that. Their reaction was expected, yet it was also the best-case scenario. Being the primary target would ensure his people's survival, and, even better, it would allow him to go all out.

He braced for their charge while his allies came at them from the sides, executing coordinated attacks that were too hard to counter. They took nicks and deeper cuts to their arms and backs, but the wounds were not noteworthy. The Barbarian pair twisted out of the way of the worst attacks, and their senses even picked up danger coming from behind as a pair of axes came flying at them. Regardless, they didn't stop, their focus glued on Hakon, until they realized that he too was part of the group of attackers.

Moving alongside his people, in a coordinated pack, Hakon evaded the first strike by a hair's breadth, powering [Circulation] to its fullest. Any less, and he would have been struck. He continued evading, weaving through the incoming attacks, studying his opponents' movements, be they physical or mana-based.

One attacked with overwhelming strength, his axe certain to cleave through Hakon in one strike as long as he hit him just once, but he was not fast enough. [Combat Awareness], [Flow Observation], and [Evasion] made sure Hakon knew what was about to happen right before it happened. It may only have been a heartbeat or two early; however, that was all he needed.

Then, as if to prove it was not enough, a burst of power erupted from the Barbarian. He accelerated, closed in, and struck, forcing Hakon to pump mana into his legs. [Dash] triggered alongside [Evasion] as he shot to the side, which was rewarded by a grey hand axe coming for his head.

The other Barbarian had used the distraction to conjure an axe, be it a conjuration of his Ancient Power or Runeskin, and would have struck Hakon if he hadn't noticed the odd mana fluctuations. He barely escaped the axe aiming for his head with an overexerted twist of his upper body.

The Barbarian with overwhelming strength worked in tandem with the axe thrower and closed in again, his axe coming down.

Hakon let out a low growl and released a surge of mana, forming it into a shield, which he augmented with [Reinforcement] and [Mana Infusion] at

the last moment.

While not enough to block the attack just yet, the monstrous Barbarian's axe ended up being disrupted and slowed as it passed through the mana shield.

Clicking his tongue at the failed defense, Hakon used [Mote of Light] right before stabbing through it with his sword.

In the same instance, his peers were finally done. Their Ancient Powers came to life as their blades descended into their foes, writing the first passage of their Saga in the blood of the nemesis.

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CHAPTER 48

After painstakingly diverting and blocking the incoming attacks, Hakon's shortsword finally found purchase in the Barbarian's neck. There was little resistance from his opponent, his limbs restrained by several young warriors' constant attacks, blood flowing from dozens of wounds spread across his body. His eyes widened in shock, which transformed into terror as soon as mana erupted from the blade.

It was less of a [Discharge] and more of an explosion of mana that rocketed through the Barbarian's neck. The weight of the attack pressed down on Hakon's bloodied arm, but he tore his weapon downward and watched his foe collapse to the ground.

[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]
[Scripture of…]

He willed the Scripture aside, his head flicking around in search of the other enemy. Mana channeled into [Bash] already, only to see that his comrades were doing fine. Several swords stuck in the Pearot's muscly figure, some buried down to their handles.

Turning to Björn and Astrid, he was glad to see that they were fine as well. Bloody carnage covered the area around Astrid, transforming Björn's battlefield into something rather simplistic in comparison. The Blessed warrior and Teraq beheaded their opponent when ramming the bone dagger deeper into the Barbarian's skull hadn't been enough. That, however, still looked tame compared to the mess Astrid caused.

Hakon grimaced, returning his focus to the situation at hand. He embraced the mana influx of Leveling up and sensed the others do the same. Wide smiles crossed the features of most young warriors. As much as their bodies were riddled with injuries they'd failed to block, they were satisfied.

But the battle was not yet over. The third and final stage had yet to start. Glancing down at his shortsword as it fell apart, Hakon let out a grunt. No time wasted, he bent down to pick up the deceased's one-handed longsword and one of the axes tucked in his belt.

The weapons didn't appear much different from the weapons Tribe Taskur's best crafted, yet there was something about them that elevated their status. It was a subtle difference, one that had him infuse mana into the weapons after a second.

Moving mana through the longsword and handaxe was no simple feat. It was nowhere near as smooth as it would have been with Maulaxe Crusher, yet it was smoother compared to regular weapons.

Interesting, Hakon mused to himself, weighing the weapons. He would have tested them even more if not for the roars coming from the enemy camp.

Looking back to make sure Crusher was still attached to his back, Hakon turned to the remaining enemies. Six Pearot Barbarians had been ripped out of their sweet dreams, and they looked angry. Really angry.

One of them roared, hefted a javelin, and pulled back. Hakon's senses perked up, [Combat Awareness], [Sensory Expansion], and [Flow Observation] triggering near-simultaneously. He couldn't sense anything with [Mana Sense], but that was not needed to know that an Ancient Power or Runeskin was at work.

He tensed, his lips parting for a warning, but by the time his shout reverberated through the dimly lit forest, it was already too late.

The Barbarian jerked forward, his arm turning to a blur as he released the javelin. The sound of an explosion echoed in Hakon's ears, pushing him to react. Sensing where the javelin was about to impact, he erupted a mana shield and pumped it full with [Mana Infusion] and [Reinforcement]. He tried to compress the shield and give more weight to it, which would have worked. Should have.

Even Enhanced Comprehension agreed he did it right, although he couldn't quite tell what he had done right. Either way, it didn't work. He

was too far from the target. [Mana Manipulation] and [Mana Shaping] worked in tandem with [Mana Sense], but the Skills were either too weak, or he was.

No matter what Hakon tried, the javelin hit its mark. It pierced through the mana shield and barely slowed before piercing through the chest of a young Bloodbearer.

The smile on the Bloodbearer's lips was replaced by shock. Then he was yanked off his feet, the javelin's impact forcing him to his knees. Hakon rushed over to the Bloodbearer, whose body shrunk back to its original size, and was about to crouch down to remove the javelin and tend to his wounds when [Mana Sense] pinged something.

The first thing he noticed was the javelin vibrating. Then, there was the energy rocketing through the Bloodbearer. It tore through him and destroyed his insides within seconds. Hakon acted fast and pulled the javelin out, which resulted in a bloody mess.

"You have to activate your Ancient Power again. Pump as much energy as you can afford into your healing Skill," Hakon ordered in a voice that did not allow refusal. "You hear me?" He slapped the young warrior in the face as the life in his eyes was starting to fade. "Stay awake!"

He heard the Pearot Barbarians charge and cursed. Unsure what to do with the wounded Bloodbearer, he conjured a small pole to replicate the javelin's shape as precisely as possible and shoved it back into the wound. While clearly not the best he could have done if he had more time to spare, the Bloodbearer's bleeding slowed. Or so he hoped as he leaped back to his feet.

If only the shield had been stronger, he chided himself. Now was not the time to practice. The conjurations were nowhere near good enough to be used in battle, not if he did not want to get injured or watch his people get killed.

The Barbarians were already close and about to engage in battle, led by none other than the 2nd Ascension warrior, when a wreath of light came to life between the two forces. The young warriors were experienced enough with Eren's powers to know what to do. They shot to the side even when the Lightcaller's manifestations dazzled them.

Hakon, listening to the pained groans and curses, used the opportunity and [Dash]ed back to the battlefield. Using [Flow Observation]'s information to pinpoint the most likely positions of each of the six

Barbarians, Hakon got into position and unloaded the power stored within [Hoard Impact].

Eren's lights started to fade just as Hakon felt like his chest was about to cave in. The intricate design of his Runeskin glowed brightly, coalescing into a magnificent beam that cut through the air at his command.

The beam was even faster than Hakon remembered it to be, and it found its designated target, hitting the strongest of the Pearot Barbarians and forcing his charge to a sudden halt upon impact. The warrior roared at the top of his lungs, blood splattered, and…

Hakon watched in amazement as a severed arm lobbed through the air.

His head flicked downward to confirm he wasn't mistaken, that it was actually the warrior at the 2nd Ascension who lost his arm. Only when he saw it, and when [Inspection] confirmed it yet again with a small Scripture, did Hakon's lips curl into a nasty, self-satisfied smile.

Perfect. Hoard Impact, fully charged, was even more powerful now that his body could take more punishment.

Maybe the Major Runeskin could have killed the Barbarian, but he was still alive, looking furious. At least he only had one arm now and was bleeding badly.

"Give him to me!" Astrid called out, sounding ecstatic as she shot past Hakon and the others.

"No, I take him!" Björn followed, releasing tremors as he caught up with Astrid.

The others followed just as quickly, and so did Hakon, [Split Focus] fully empowered alongside all perceptive Skills.

Since he hadn't expected the trick with Eren's Lightcaller power to work this often in the first place, their position was better than they could have hoped for. Nonetheless, each of their opponents was powerful.

Hakon combined [Dash] with [Circulation] to push past his peers before activating [Pack Coordination]. A faint tingle made him adjust his stance. The next moment, he sensed the warriors behind him, and he collided with the first opponent.

His foe carried a mace and knew how to wield it, but Hakon pinpointed his strikes early enough to evade them or divert the mace's trajectory at the last moment. Enhanced Comprehension prodded him, urging him to pay more attention to his stance, movement pattern, and the flow of mana swirling through his body.

That was when he first realized that some pathways for [Circulation] and [Dash] overlapped, and that the mana streams for both Skills were too much for these particular pathways. They slowed each other and even stopped one another in some instances. That was not how it was supposed to be.

Frowning deeply, Hakon adjusted the mana streams just enough to interfere with each other as little as possible. He would have to fix the issue later or further cleanse the pathways to allow more mana through at the same time, possibly both, but that was not something he could do right now.

He twisted out of the mace's path, his sword's edge coated with a faint layer of mana. The mana layer didn't last long; it erupted as soon as it came into contact with the target's arm, releasing [Bleeding]'s power. The wound inflicted with the Skill was worse than it would have been otherwise, though it was nowhere near enough, so Hakon followed up with [Mana Infusion] coupled with [Reinforcement].

One strained the blade, pushing it to its limits, while the other absorbed a portion of the pressure. Both consumed a considerable amount of mana when combined with all the other Skills Hakon had to push to their limits to keep up with his opponent, but it hadn't been long since he last Leveled. He had more than enough mana to spare… for now.

Following the flow of battle, it was clear his opponent was more experienced than the others. He didn't have many openings to take advantage of, and even the few he had came at a cost. A single cut to the arm was rewarded with a punch to the face. Hakon's nose cracked, and blood flowed down his face, all while [Bleeding]'s cut was starting to recover. Or, it would have, if not for the remnants of [Bleeding] slowing the Barbarian's recovery.

His opponent noticed as much, which was why he accelerated. His Runeskin glowed with mythical power that made it seem like time slowed for everyone but him. He turned into a blur and appeared at Hakon's side, his mace swinging down toward his head.

Hakon conjured yet another shield, pumping it full of mana, but he didn't believe for a second that it would stop the attack. However, it would give him a heartbeat to react.

Relying heavily on Enhanced Comprehension, Hakon didn't move away. He closed the distance, his focus on [Weapon Mastery] and [Two Weapon Fighting]. The pathways, forced to endure the overlapping mana

streams from [Dash], [Circulation], and [Bash], screamed in protest and would probably tear apart if he used any more Skills that required the same pathways, but his body had yet to give out.

Strength surged through his body as he crashed into the Barbarian. The mace struck his side, shattering bones, but that was a problem for future Hakon and [Natural Regeneration]. Present Hakon stunned his target, his longsword and handaxe moving in perfect rhythm as he cleaved, stabbed, and thrust.

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CHAPTER 49

The mace-wielding Barbarian was clearly supposed to heal rapidly. He didn't pay much attention to his physical well-being and even went as far as to reveal several openings for Hakon to strike. However, what he clearly failed to understand was the effect of [Bleeding].

Hakon, moving his weapons in perfect sync, used those openings and left several deep gashes behind. Those gashes tore wide open as soon as [Bleeding] triggered, slowing the Barbarian's natural regeneration drastically. His eyes widened once he recognized what was happening, and his tactic changed, but he was nowhere near his peak physical condition by that time.

Maintaining [Split Focus] and his other perception-enhancing abilities, Hakon focused on melee. He evaded several strikes when his danger sense perked up and diverted others so they would hurt less once they found purchase. As painful as the blunt force was, Hoard Impact absorbed some of the force, diminishing the actual damage enough to keep fighting.

Weaving around the Barbarian, [Circulation] and [Combat Awareness] active, Hakon's weapons whirled around ferociously, yet with a sense of grace and rhythm that felt… different. New.

His weapons, imbued with mana, no longer felt like tools of destruction as he moved around his opponent, slashing and stabbing him at every opportunity. Instead, they started to feel like extensions of his body. Hakon's range of attack grew considerably as he thrust his longsword into the Pearot's abdomen, twisted the blade, and whirled around a descending mace, just to use the momentum to plunge his handaxe into the side.

[Bleeding] had been applied to every attack. However, as the fight continued, Hakon found himself adjusting the amount of mana infused into the blade, as well as altering the eruption of mana that followed when the blades applied with [Bleeding] came into contact with the target. Not every modification strengthened [Bleeding]'s effect, but the last two certainly did.

A bloody mess unfolded before Hakon, which only grew worse as his foe's strength waned. In the meantime, he felt stronger and faster than before, the sword and axe dancing in his hands as he cut the Pearot Barbarian again and again.

Finally, after the mace crashed into Hakon's side one last time, his blade tore through the throat and out of his neck. The life in the mace-wielder's wide-open eyes faded. His legs caved in, and he crumpled to the ground, where he bled to death, spending his last heartbeats praying to the Ancestors. Or so Hakon thought as he stepped away, sacrificing his prey to the Ancestors.

The sound of battle echoed in his ears, pulling him back to the situation ahead. The death of Hakon's foe reduced the Pearot's numbers to a meager five, but that didn't change anything. As far as he was concerned, it only meant the others had a little less to worry about.

He let his gaze drift across the battlefield and frowned deeply. The vicinity was utterly chaotic. Roars of pain and anger mingled with the clash of metal and the sound of breaking bones. Blood filled the vicinity, coating the forest's plant life, the ground, and the Barbarians thrashing one another.

And amidst it all was Björn, his abdomen ripped wide open, his chest dented inward. He was sprawled across a puddle of blood, maybe his own, possibly not, and he wasn't moving. He was de…

He's moving. Hakon caught the faintest movement as he pumped mana into his eyes. The details were unclear, but Björn was severely wounded and on the verge of death. But he was alive. And as long as a Barbarian breathed, he could survive.

The warrior at the 2nd Ascension seemed to think the same. He appeared before Björn, towered over the Blessed warrior, and was about to ram his sword into Björn's heart when a crimson flash whipped the blade to the side.

Astrid arrived at the scene, covered in severe wounds, looking worse for wear even though Blood Fury ought to enhance her greatly on a battlefield

drenched in blood. She forced her opponent away from Björn but paid dearly for protecting her friend.

A sudden headbutt forced her to her knees. Hatred burned in her eyes as she stared up at her opponent, daggers clenched tightly, yet she couldn’t move quite right. The crimson hue surrounding her was consumed in favor of her speed, but the Pearot Barbarian smashed the sword pommel against her temple before she could scramble to her feet.

She collapsed, all while the 2nd Ascension Barbarian towered above her with a self-satisfied smile.

Seeing all that made Hakon’s blood boil. The sight was infuriating, and the other unmoving bodies around the battlefield only amplified those feelings.

Pumping mana into his lower body, he crossed the distance to the strongest in a moment. He used [Bash] and crashed into him before following up with a fully empowered [Discharge]. The Barbarian let out a pained roar, confusing Hakon. Even if [Bash] hadn’t been strong enough to stun anyone at the 2nd Ascension for long, [Discharge] certainly should have been. Especially when the target wasn’t doing all that well.

The warrior’s chest, arm, and back were covered in a handful of bad-looking wounds. Blood flowed from the wounds in streams, telling Hakon all he needed to know. Astrid had successfully struck him a few times with [River of Blood].

But no matter how bad he looked, a Barbarian at the 2nd Ascension was still at the 2nd Ascension.

Hakon pushed on, trying to find an opening he could exploit, but his foe swiftly recovered. His blade whipped upward, blocking Hakon’s sword. Tilting the blade after they collided, the warrior managed to divert the descending handaxe as well.

I’m too slow. he thought as his foe pushed him back just to execute an attack too swift for him to respond.

A red line appeared across his chest, followed by a second, and a third. Neither of the wounds were severe, but they accumulated as time went on. [Evasion] and [Combat Awareness] had helped him tremendously against the Barbarians at the peak of the 1st Ascension, yet now he had to maintain [Circulation], [Flow Observation], and [Sensory Expansion] just to predict where the next strike was going to land.

He only managed to avoid the worst of the attacks, turning lethal strikes into minor injuries.

I need to move faster!

The thought reverberated in his head as he pushed on, his weapons flashing to intercept the descending sword. He failed the first few times, but as time went on, he analyzed the next strike early enough to block it properly. By then, his body was riddled with wounds, yet the corner of his lips curled into a vibrant smile.

Faster! he roared at himself. Moments later, the world around him blurred. All that remained were his opponent and his weapons.

He moved faster than ever, his movements sharper, his strikes smoother than before. Which was only the beginning.

As the fight continued, Hakon got struck less and less. He blocked more attacks and started to move with fewer redundant motions, allowing him to evade some slashes. And as he did, [Weakness Detection] flared to life. An opportunity unraveled itself right before his eyes, and his sword cut into the warrior for the first time.

His opponent did something, and his attacks hit harder. The attack pattern etched into Hakon’s mind shifted slightly, and he got hit worse than before. But that only revealed more and more weaknesses. Flaws Hakon took advantage of the instant he sensed the Barbarian’s strength fading.

He held on almost desperately to his own strength, preventing it from dispersing, and pushed onward. At last, his handaxe phased through the warrior’s defense and lodged itself deep in his remaining arm. Even with [Reinforcement] and [Mana Infusion], Hakon failed to sever the other arm, but he cut deep down to the bone before releasing the mana within the handaxe in a [Discharge].

The axe couldn’t take the punishment and shattered, but the damage was already done. Metal fragments tore through the Barbarian’s one and only arm, while the mana within erupted, worsening the damage.

Grasping the opportunity at hand, Hakon’s right arm holding the sword descended again. He conjured a [Mote of Light] between them, retrieved his last bone dagger in a second’s instance, and hurled it without hesitation.

The Pearot blocked the incoming sword strike with some effort and let out a groan when a light coalesced to his left. The next moment, his groan transformed into a stifled rattle as the bone dagger pierced the Barbarian’s neck, triggering [Bleeding]’s effect.

His strength was fading. Hakon was sure of it. However, his own power was starting to leave him as well. A mind-splitting headache assaulted him, and his body wanted nothing more than to collapse. Yet, he stood strong and pounced on the one-armed foe, slashing his arm again.

The last strike was all the warrior at the 2nd Ascension could take. Unable to hold onto his sword, it clattered to the ground, transforming the mighty man into nothing more than nourishment for Hakon’s Saga.

No more than a dozen heartbeats later, the strongest of the Pearot’s group collapsed in a lake of his own blood.

When the world around Hakon finally regained its luster, the battle was over. The one-armed Barbarian , or what was left of him, lay before him unmoving. The eyes that once flickered with an abundance of life and arrogance were now vacant and deprived of all life.

Cuts of all sizes spread across his body, telling the story of a mighty battle. The first cuts were shallow and had already shown signs of healing even before the fight ended, but that was not where it all ended. As the battle progressed, so did the wounds Hakon inflicted upon his target. They grew progressively worse until the Barbarian could no longer endure them.

His only arm was barely held together by his forearm bone, though that had not killed him. Neither had the bone dagger piercing his neck through and through; although it would have probably killed him in due time. It was the blood loss that finally ended him. His arm stump never stopped bleeding, Astrid clearly having worked hard to inflict him with [River of Blood] whenever she got a hit. She suffered a lot in exchange, but her contribution to the death of the 2nd Ascension warrior was great, nonetheless.

Hakon’s legs threatened to buckle as a wave of weakness reverberated through him. He felt cold, was drained of all energy, and wanted nothing more than to sleep through several nights. But that was not a luxury he could afford.

Exhaling deeply, he brushed the Scripture aside and turned to meet Astrid’s eyes. No words were spoken, but the grim smile forming on their lips said more than a thousand words.

Astrid scrambled to her feet, her gaze following Hakon's to stare down at Björn's unruly figure. The Blessed warrior was not yet dead, and he would probably make it out of this alive, but he didn't look all that great. In all honesty, his death had been certain until the 2nd Ascension warrior died. Hakon was quite confident about that, considering the flood of mana surging through his friend.

The Ancestors must have rewarded him with a Level following the Pearot Barbarians' defeat, his contribution great enough to warrant such a generous reward. Björn's physique improved from the Level up, which also influenced his natural recovery. That, alongside the abundance of mana surging through the Blessed warrior, ought to be enough to push his healing Skill to knit him back together.

Unfortunately, not everyone had been as fortunate as Björn.

The tribe lost four promising young warriors in the fight. That included the Bloodbearer who had been impaled by the javelin right before the third stage started. He didn't make it, leaving a sting in Hakon's chest.

Four died. Despite that, the young warriors were excited. Their morale rose as high as the silver moon, which only made sense. They survived a battle they shouldn't have won. Ten experienced warriors, one of which had reached the 2nd Ascension, fell victim to a group of no more than twenty young warriors. Four died, and more than one of Tribe Taskur's young warriors was desperately clinging to life, just like Björn. But the Blessed warrior's condition was clearly the worst, and he would still make it out alive.

The odds had been against them. Hakon knew that as well, but he couldn't help but sigh out loud.

"You deserve to feast with the Ancestors. All of you," he murmured to himself, while channeling most of his mana reserves into [Natural Regeneration]. But even as the soothing energy of [Natural Regeneration] reached him, Hakon felt his chest clench and burn with destructive power.

Power he released the second his danger sense picked up strange movement. A beam, much smaller than the one he'd used against the 2nd Ascension warrior, burst through the air, piercing the heart of a dead Barbarian. Or one everyone had presumed to be dead. The young warriors standing nearby whipped around and stared at Hakon before looking down at the man who barely managed to let out a desperate roar before Hoard Impact finished him off.

The moment the last threat succumbed to Tribe Taskur’s youngest generation, Hakon noticed several things.

Mana flooded his body in familiar waves, filling him with strength. At the same time, strength leaked out of him. That was when Hakon realized something he hadn’t even considered until now.

Hoard Impact was more than just an impact-absorbing Runeskin. It could do more than release a beam of compressed destruction when charged. The Major Runeskin provided him with power as well. It made him tougher, faster, stronger, enhancing his physique entirely.

Realizing his mistake brought a smile to his lips. Not because he had been foolish enough to never recognize his Runeskin’s full power, but because he had learned that there was more to Hoard Impact than he first thought.

Now he only had to learn how to exploit the power of his Runeskin to the fullest. Then, with a little bit of luck, he might even gain the strength needed to fight someone at the 2nd Ascension all by himself.

With that in mind, Hakon checked his Scriptures and the Ancient Scripture.

Ancient Scripture 1.3

[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]
[Scripture of Improvement
Pain Tolerance. Lv.19 → Lv.20
Throwing Lv.6 → Lv.8
Evasion Lv.18 → Lv.20
Natural Regeneration Lv.16 → 17
Intimidation Lv.5 → Lv.6
Pack Coordination Lv.7 → Lv.8
Combat Awareness Lv.18 → Lv.20
Dash Lv.12 → Lv.13
Two Weapon Fighting Lv.7 → Lv.10
Weapon Mastery Lv.13 → Lv.17
Bash Lv.5 → Lv.7
Bleeding Lv.3 → Lv.7
Circulation Lv.12 → Lv.14
Split Focus Lv.13 → Lv.14

Mana Infusion Lv.7 → Lv.8
Flow Observation Lv.11 → Lv.13
Discharge Lv.3 → Lv.4
Mana Manipulation Lv.9 → Lv.10
Mana Shaping Lv.7 → Lv.9
Mote of Light Lv.7 → Lv.8
Reinforcement Lv.4 → Lv.6]

Ancient Scripture

Hakon Taskur – Level 17
Race – Barbarian
Ancient Power – Enhanced Comprehension
Bloodline – Wildborne Lifeblood
Runeskin – Hoard Impact (Major)

Skills

Resistances – [Poison Resistance Lv.12], [Pain Tolerance Lv.20], [Acid Resistance Lv.10], [Fatigue Resistance Lv.2]
Utility – [Reading Lv.9], [Running Lv.17], [Field Crafting Lv.5], [Silent Steps Lv.12], [Dismantling Lv.6], [Stealth Lv.7], [Natural Regeneration Lv.17], [Inspection Lv.11], [Tracking Lv.10], [Teaching Lv.15], [Scent of Lifelight Lv.3]
Combat – [Combat Awareness Lv.20], [Dash Lv.13], [Throwing Lv.8], [Evasion Lv.20], [Grappling Lv.11], [Weakness Detection Lv.22], [Two Weapon Fighting Lv.10], [Weapon Mastery Lv.17], [Bash Lv.7], [Bleeding Lv.7], [Intimidation Lv.6], [Pack Coordination Lv.8]
Mana – [Circulation Lv.14], [Mana Sense Lv.21], [Split Focus Lv.14], [Mana Infusion Lv.8], [Sensory Expansion Lv.13], [Flow Observation Lv.13], [Discharge Lv.4], [Mana Manipulation Lv.10], [Mana Shaping Lv.9], [Mote of Light Lv.8], [Reinforcement Lv.6]

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CHAPTER 50

A lot of his Skills improved. Hakon also managed to Level up to 17, which was an extraordinary feat. Then again, most of his gains were expected.

Not only did he depend a lot on Enhanced Comprehension to improve, but the fight against several experienced warriors at the peak of the 1st Ascension and one Barbarian at the 2nd Ascension must have excited the Ancestors enough to reward him and his people generously. They nearly died, yet instead of succumbing, they survived and grew from the harrowing experience.

Then again, he and everyone else would have been killed if they hadn't pushed Hoard Impact to its limit before attacking the Pearot Barbarian. The Major Runeskin had been filled to the brim, fueled with far more force than when he fought against Ulfar.

However, no matter how pleasant the improved Skills and Level up were, his curiosity shifted to yet another Scripture.

[Skill compatibility has been detected.
Do you wish to integrate [Two Weapon Fighting Lv.10] into [Weapon Mastery Lv.17]?]

Hakon read through the Scripture thrice before making a decision. Of course, he wanted [Two Weapon Fighting] to merge with [Weapon Mastery]! That way, by improving [Weapon Mastery], his [Two Weapon

Fighting] would improve naturally even if the Skill was to improve from intense training with two-handed weapons like Crusher.

[Skill integration has been completed. Skill [Two Weapon Fighting Lv.10] has been removed from the Ancient Scripture.]

Integrating one Skill into another was not all that different from Skill Fusion. It was also why fused Skills were so powerful; all individual components used in the fusion would grow no matter how little they were used. Also, fused Skills were regularly much stronger than the individual parts. In [Weapon Mastery]'s case, the improvement was all too obvious. It enhanced his skills with all weapons, after all.

Even though Hakon rarely wielded a bow in the past, he was sure it would come naturally to him thanks to [Weapon Mastery]. While that didn't mean he'd need it, knowing he was a master of all weapons, in some way, was enough to instill raw, unfiltered confidence deep inside him.

Last but not least, fused Skills could grow more than others. Most ordinary Skills would never surpass Level 20. [Weakness Detection] and [Mana Sense] had already surpassed that Level, but Hakon recognized that it grew increasingly difficult to improve them. Still, they were unique Skills and could grow given enough time and effort. The same would never happen with [Sword Mastery] or other similar Skills.

To further improve them, they would have to be upgraded. His father hadn't mentioned Skill Upgrades often before, but Hakon had learned a little bit about that himself, if [Flow Control] and its upgrade to [Circulation] were, in any way, similar to other Skill Upgrades.

So why was there no Scripture for [Pain Tolerance]? He wondered as the young warriors around him split up. Some rushed toward the camp to loot it, others retrieved the superior weapons and a few armor pieces, while another group tended to their comrades' corpses, preparing them for the journey back to the tribehold.

Focusing on his Ancient Scripture a little while longer, Hakon guessed that neither [Evasion] nor [Combat Awareness] were regular Skills, unlike [Pain Tolerance]. Then again, they had all reached Level 20 and none of it resulted in a Scripture depicting a path to upgrade any of them. Not even [Pain Tolerance], which was most definitely a regular Skill among Barbarians.

Are [Evasion] and [Combat Awareness] regular Skills? He'd have to find that one out, which shouldn't be too difficult by paying more attention to both Skills. If their Level improved, he would have no problem. If not… Hakon would have to figure out how to initiate their Skill Upgrade or learn more about possible Skill Fusions.

Skill Fusions… [Weapon Mastery] was one such fusion his father mentioned long ago. The other was… What was it again?

It took him a moment to search his dusty memories, but he found what he was looking for.

"Resistances." He grimaced, only now realizing why he'd subconsciously changed the Ancient Scripture to isolate Resistance Skills from his other Skills. It was because they were also part of the whole 'Skill Fusion' talk his father had with him many, many cycles ago.

Fusing and upgrading Skills was something he would have to start paying attention to sooner rather than later. For now, it was time to return to the tribe.

After having recovered a little, Hakon felt a lot better. He caught his peers packed with weapons, armor pieces, and other items they'd foraged from the camp.

Hakon let out a faint chuckle at the sight before joining the remaining warriors at the camp, but not before offering the dead as a tribute to the Ancestors. Blue mist rose from the corpses of the ten Pearot Barbarians as they dispersed. The process was slower than it would have been with regular monsters, but that only made it more magical in his eyes.

The Barbarians' fresh blood spilled from their tough bodies was the first to evaporate. It swirled around the dead and rose into the sky, joining the Ancestors. Not long after, the rest of their bodies followed, turning fresh wounds and old scars into written passages of blue mist that told the Ancestors all about their descendants' lives.

But not all of the mist dispersed. Some coalesced, forming pristine, azure-colored cocoons speckled with star-like structures. They were beautiful, but Hakon put the marvelous sight aside once he had taken it in and entered the camp.

He didn't expect to find much, as it was completely ransacked, telling him one thing: his peers were as good at fighting as they were at looting. Some were holding a hind leg in one hand, its crust crispy, juice flowing

down their chins as they took mouthwatering bites, all while their other arm was filled to the brim with trophies and other valuable goods.

The small campfire in the center crackled quietly, the flames dying. Beside it, Hakon found something the young warriors hadn't bothered collecting. Several packs had been emptied, the contents sprawled all around the camp. Some things were collected, but they left behind flasks and other items. Not much, but the few things that remained were rather interesting. The scrolls he found certainly were.

Old parchment, now sprinkled with mud and flattened by a herd of young, wild Barbarians stomping around.

To the young warriors, the scrolls meant nothing. Most couldn't even read. To Hakon, they were a treasure. They had to be, given that no Barbarian would bring scrolls to a hunt, let alone a mission in enemy territory. Not without a good reason.

Hakon collected the scrolls and removed as much dirt as he could before stuffing them into his empty pouches.

When he couldn't find anything else of use, it was time to return to his people. Speckles of blue mist hung in the air even now, but the Pearot Barbarians were nowhere to be seen. Instead, Hakon found Astrid collecting some things.

Totems.

His eyes narrowed at the sight of his friend stuffing one Totem after another into a pack.

Astrid must have noticed him because she looked up to meet his eyes. "The Ancestors rewarded us for our glorious victory." She offered a bright smile, making Hakon's heart beat a touch faster.

Seeing her like this, covered in blood, her hair pulled into a messy bun, was one thing, but the brilliant eyes that burned within her small frame worked wonders. They did things to Hakon he didn't expect to be possible.

Stepping closer without a word, Hakon's gaze lingered on the small-framed, feisty woman for a moment that felt like an eternity. Once he had seen enough and Astrid raised an eyebrow at him, he turned to her pack and used Inspection.

[Silverheart Treant Totem
Runeskin – Silverheart Armor (Lesser)]
[Ambereetah Totem

Runeskin – Swiftness (Minor)]
[Gale Wolf Totem
Runeskin – Monstrous Claws (Minor)]
[Crimson Orc Totem
Runeskin – Bestial Rage]

Only four Totems. Then again, they had only fought against ten opponents, in a single battle at that. Taking that into consideration, four Totems were a lot, even more so with their rank being relatively high. The Silverheart Treant Totem was the worst, being a Lesser Runeskin, but if he recalled correctly, the Silverheart Armor was decently powerful. Combined with a suitable Ancient Power and fitting Skills, it could be nurtured into a powerful Runeskin.

The Minor Runeskins were surprising and appeared relatively useful. Swiftness would help warriors like Teraq make up for their slowness. Herculean Strength would become several times more potent when combined with Swiftness.

Monstrous Claws would ensure that a warrior always had weapons on them, but Hakon didn't consider it all that useful in most cases. His fists were just as powerful, especially if augmented with [Reinforcement] and mana constructs.

That left them with one normal Runeskin. It was the best, and that showed. Bestial Rage resonated in Hakon's heart. Not because he wished to bind it for his next Runeskin, but because it felt familiar, similar to some of the Skills Barbarians could acquire.

The same could probably be said about Swiftness. It was likely not all that different from [Dash] or a similar, more advanced Skill.

Interesting. He rubbed his chin, which Astrid took as her cue.

"Do you want them? You know, you deserve to keep them as trophies more than anyone," she said, loud enough for everyone to hear.

The young Barbarians around him slowed, their expressions distorting momentarily, but nobody said anything. They knew she was right. If not for Hakon's plan, they would be dead, their bodies sacrificed to the Ancestors.

"Give them to the others. I don't need these trophies. Not when they can help my people grow stronger."

His words brought smiles to their lips, and Hakon felt the way they looked at him change even more than it had over the last fortnight. Before

the Battle of Generation, they were willing to ridicule him. After it, they had grown uncertain. Power ruled everything in their world, and Hakon showed that he wielded the strength needed to stand at the very top, but it hadn’t made sense to them at the time.

Training together provided sense where there had been none. And now… now that he helped them win a battle they ought to have lost, and had given them his trophies to strengthen them even further, they had grown to not only trust him. Trust was just the beginning. The really important part was the seed of loyalty that bloomed deep within them.

It was not nearly enough to compare to the loyalty the chieftain had earned over the cycles, but Hakon was getting there.

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CHAPTER 51

The moons hung high in the starry sky, their pale light illuminating the tribehold as the young warriors returned from their first hunt. Or rather, what had started as their first hunt.

Nobody expected to encounter a group of Pearot Barbarians invading their land, let alone fight those experienced warriors. Every single one of their foes had been strong enough to fight multiple young Barbarians, yet the warriors of Tribe Taskur survived. Most of them did.

Hakon led the group through the forest, projecting [Intimidation] to ward off monsters that dared to approach, and it worked. They returned to the tribehold late at night with no further issues. All of them were exhausted, some wounded worse than others, but they kept going until the pyre torches of the tribehold entered their vision.

Björn was not the first to collapse to the ground as they stepped onto well-trodden paths, but he looked the worst for wear. He regained consciousness at some point and ignored his wounds to walk back to the tribehold without any support. The Blessed warrior pushed his chest out and held his head high even as beads of sweat trickled down his deathly white face. He gasped for air, his visage worsening the longer they moved through the darkness of the night, but he prevailed longer than the others.

His endurance was rewarded, and he even began to recover slightly at some point, but exhaustion emerged victorious in the end.

Despite arriving late at night, Tribe Taskur was still wide awake. Several tribesmen and women rushed toward the young warriors as soon as they were sighted, offering their support without hesitation. They tended to

their children first, scrutinizing them from head to toe and asking countless questions in gruff voices, yet their eyes sparkled with relief.

No matter how much Barbarians were in tune with death, the thought of losing their child before they could write a Saga worth remembering was heartbreaking to them.

Hakon watched several families collect their dead children with emotionless faces. Tears twinkled in the eyes of those too young to have experienced many losses, but the oldest were already used to the loss of their beloved. It was a sad sight that burned into Hakon's heart.

If I had been a little stronger… He let out a deep grunt and turned to the families carrying the young, dead warriors back to their huts.

"They fought well and protected their brothers and sisters against the Pearot Barbarians with their lives. Do not resent them for failing to live long Sagas, for the Ancestors will remember their bravery and power," Hakon called out, casting a dome of silence over the tribehold.

The older Barbarians stopped and turned to him, confused.

"We fought Pearot Barbarians. They were in our territory. Ask the others if you want to know more about the first passage of their Saga: their victory against experienced warriors of Tribe Pearot," he added, his voice reverberating. "The Sagas of those who lost their lives this night are short, but that does not make them any less valuable. They fought against those stronger than them, protected the people important to them, and are the very reason the rest of us survived. Honor them, think about them, and provide them with the grandest of farewells, because they deserve all of it and more!"

Tears welled in the eyes of the men and women who'd just lost their beloved. Part of it was because they had lost their child, nephew, or grandson, but that was not all of it. They were relieved; their tears were of sadness, but also happiness, because they would not be cast aside and frowned upon by the Ancestors. No, the young warriors who fell to the blades of the Pearot Barbarians would be welcomed with tight embraces and given a seat at the Ancestors' table.

Even if their lives were lost, taken too early, they would feast with the Ancestors, their afterlives filled with the bliss of food, combat, and all they could wish for.

Hakon hoped he hadn't worsened the situation. Telling the entire tribe about the Pearot Barbarians might cause trouble in the future, but it was not

like he could, or even wanted to, hide their infiltration. If anything, the tribe had to know about Pearot's actions to prepare for the worst-case scenario.

Glancing toward the mourning men and women, he grimaced. Had he made the right choice? Frankly, Hakon had no idea, but he thought they looked better than before, knowing that their children would not be rejected at the Ancestors' feast.

It didn't take long before he found the chieftain. His father nodded slowly before gesturing for him to go to the Healer. He looked surprisingly tired, even worse than he had when Hakon forced him to tend to his people at the training ground all day, but he still rushed toward the worst injured and helped them.

What followed was organized chaos. The tribehold became a bustle of activity as the older tribesmen moved around to help carry the severely wounded. In the meantime, the mildly injured joined their families and friends to brag about their experiences. Hakon heard them talk about their first hunt, how the 'Successor' found and gathered them to tell them about the Pearot Barbarians in their land, and how they defeated them.

Being called Successor was still a little odd, but it sounded rather nice to him. He studied the tribehold and found a few more injured faces, familiar faces belonging to the young warriors he hadn't found earlier in the forest. They stared at the scene unfolding before them in awe, clenching their fists tightly, jealousy burning in their eyes when they heard about the fight against peak 1st Ascension warriors and a Barbarian at the 2nd Ascension.

They, too, would have loved to fight the tribe's nemesis to show the Ancestors what they were capable of, and, of course, to protect Tribe Taskur from Pearot's invasion.

Regardless of their intentions, Hakon was glad they were fine. Not everyone was present, but he didn't think the warriors he trained would have died to most of the forest's monsters. They'd likely stayed near the tribehold, which appeared to have been the case, considering the mild injuries covering the present warriors' bodies.

Their heads flicked to him, jealousy replaced by newfound respect and awe, but Hakon turned to his father, motioning for him to follow.

Although exhausted, the chieftain wanted to talk to him, so he followed him back into their hut.

"You are alive," the chieftain said, matter-of-factly.

“I am.” Hakon smiled faintly, all while sending waves of mana into [Natural Regeneration]. He tried to do the same with [Fatigue Resistance], but the Skill wouldn’t budge. “We have returned with trophies and news.”

“Bad news. I heard about it. Pearot Barbarians on our land.” His father let out a disgruntled snort. “But you killed them, did you not?”

“We did.” Hakon nodded slowly. “It took some preparation, but we defeated them. Nine warriors at the peak of the 1st Ascension and their leader at the 2nd Ascension.”

The words made the chieftain stop in his tracks. He turned, eyebrows narrowed. “2nd Ascension. And you defeated him?”

“Not alone. Like I said, we were prepared,” Hakon said, then realized that didn’t explain anything. Organizing his thoughts, he took a deep breath and began to explain what had happened from the start. “So… at first, I tracked a herd of Terror Deer…”

It took quite a while to lay out everything that happened. Fortunately, the chieftain didn’t interrupt him. He didn’t utter a single word and listened intently. Sure, a frown marred his face as soon as Hakon told him about the first plan he’d come up with, or when he mentioned how he roamed through the forest stealthily, and it only grew worse when he explained how he had retreated from the Pearot Barbarians’ camp just to spend most of the remaining sunlight preparing for combat.

Even then, the chieftain said nothing. His frown faded as soon as the story reached the fight, and Hakon could have sworn he caught a glimmer of interest in his father’s eyes. At the end of the story, he even gave a sharp nod.

“You did well, son. Most would have led their warriors into certain death to receive the Ancestors’ favor. What you did was not what most Barbarians would have done, yet you did not abandon the path of our people. Instead, you walked our path… just differently.”

That…

Hakon couldn’t quite believe what he was hearing.

He half-expected his father to lecture him for not following the Barbarians’ way, but though he had looked disappointed at first, his current expression was one of proudness. Or so Hakon interpreted his father’s expression, making him smile brightly.

Excited, he retrieved the scrolls he collected from the enemy camp. “I don’t know if they will be useful, but I looted these, wondering why

Barbarians carried scrolls.”

His father furrowed his brows once more as he stepped closer and took a look at the parchments. His brows twitched ever so slightly, taking one of the scrolls. It was dirt-smudged, and the colors on the old parchment were already fading, but the chieftain walked over to the table to spread it out.

Hakon looked at the other scrolls for a heartbeat before putting them aside. Curiosity won, and he joined his father to inspect the scroll’s contents. Parts were covered in dirt, which made him curse his peers, but the rest was easy to read. Or would have been if there had been anything to read.

Instead of words, father and son looked at a drawing depicting a lot of green, mixed with some dark. The upper parts of the drawing were colored in a multitude of grey shades, while the rest was mostly green, except for a few spots. Some were circled and adorned with curious drawings, while others were crossed out with blood or a color that looked similar.

“That’s the tribehold.” The chieftain pointed at a small smudge near the bottom of the map. It was smeared with dirt and no longer clear enough to see much, but the chieftain sounded certain.

“A map?” Now that his father pointed it out, he could tell as well.

The scribbles were pretty bad, but the upper portion was definitely the mountain range, the rest was the forest, and in between were other things. But what exactly did the designs indicate?

To find out, Hakon and his father spent the rest of the night awake. As exhausted as he was, Hakon wanted to find out more. He had to, and he did, as the first rays of sunlight shone through the window.

[Fatigue Resistance Lv.2 → Lv.3]

The Scripture was part of the good news, but it was only a portion. He was still tired and wanted to go to sleep, at some point. That said, he turned back to the scroll.

The map was engraved with several marks, each labeled differently. Some were crossed out, and one in particular looked somewhat familiar. It was a cross around a mark that had been engraved on a small splodge of brown and green, which was surrounded by blue, hinting at a lake.

“Is that the Crawling Expanse?” he mused to himself in wonder.

“Your Fracture?” the chieftain asked, pointing at the crossed-out mark. “Is that where your Fracture was?”

Hakon nodded and proceeded to tell his father a little bit more about the Crawling Expanse and everything about it, including its location and the terrain around the portal.

His father gave him a knowing look, his finger hovering above the dark green region of the forest, which indicated that the area was part of the forbidden lands. That was yet another point that confirmed how recent the map had been created. As much as it was a mess of scribbles and splashes of color, it was more recent than the chieftain’s map.

Putting that aside, his father said nothing about him entering the forbidden land. Instead, he pointed out something else.

“The Crawling Expanse was Overflowing, you say? And nobody else was nearby.”

“Yes. Maybe they crossed it out after realizing I closed it.” Hakon shrugged, although he couldn’t quite explain how Pearot would have found out about that. “Maybe the other marks are also Fractures, and the crosses are Fractures they already closed.”

If that was true, then the map would be the most valuable treasure they had acquired from the Pearot Barbarians. Not even the normal Runeskin would match the value of that simple parchment. It was interesting, dangerous, but it also provided an opportunity. A grand opportunity.

Plans formed in Hakon’s mind, and he sure wasn’t the only one. The chieftain met his eyes, the corners of his lips curling into a devious smile. It was time to strategize. As for some well-deserved rest… Hakon could always sleep later.

“I think I know of a way to weaken Tribe Pearot.”

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CHAPTER 52

Hakon found himself in a peculiar position. He was awake, but his body wouldn't move, and his eyes wouldn't open. They resisted his call for action after he had spent yet another day and night awake, even though he already felt like shit. But no matter how troublesome the lack of sleep had been, he was more than happy with the result.

Staying awake this long was more than worth it. Plans and promises were made.

The map, as it turned out, showed the location of several Fractures that the tribehold hadn't known about. Some were in the forbidden lands, others in the lands of the other tribes, but two were located in Tribe Taskur's territory. They were well hidden, which the chieftain's people confirmed, all while father and son stayed in the hut planning Tribe Pearot's downfall.

Ten Fractures, labeled with marks and unique symbols, three of which had been crossed out, probably because they'd been conquered already. That left seven Fractures intact, offering the perfect opportunity for young warriors to prove themselves.

Seven Fractures, each probably being conquered as the chieftain and Hakon spoke, providing the means to gain the Ancestors' favor, to grow their younger generation, but also to collect the valuable minerals that could be found in Fractures. Hakon hadn't known about that, but his father did, and he told him about all of it in the night they spent together, leaning over the dirt-smudged map.

The chieftain had a lot of guesses regarding the symbols etched around the marks for each of the Fractures, and why Tribe Pearot hadn't closed

them yet. They had yet to confirm those guesses, but Hakon was more than ready to do so… as soon as he could move again.

That took quite a while. His eyes snapped open after what felt like an eon, but instead of regaining full control of his body, Hakon ended up staring at the wooden ceiling for quite a while. His ears perked up at the servants shuffling around the hut, yet he couldn't even call out to them. All he could do was check the Ancient Scripture and Skill improvements.

[Fatigue Resistance Lv.3 → Lv.5
Natural Regeneration Lv.17 → Lv.18]

Since he couldn't get up to start their plan, he ended up rummaging through his rather extensive Ancient Scripture, which reminded him of a few things he wanted to do.

For one, he had to work on his mana constructs. Even though they didn't belong to the traditional ways of the Barbarians, Hakon considered them important. Crucial even, if he could improve his mana Skills enough to manifest all types of weapons. That, among other things, would help him fight in a versatile manner against different types of opponents. It would also leverage his advantage with [Weapon Mastery].

But the mana constructs could also be manifested farther away to conjure shields on the other side of the battlefield to protect his people from surprise attacks or possibly kill enemies from a distance. He'd thrown more than enough daggers and axes to know he could do the same with the equivalent made of mana.

Thinking of the fight against the Pearot Barbarians, Hakon was reminded that he'd conjured and released constructs with bursts of mana before. If he could leverage that, it would allow him to deal with a herd of Terror Deer alone. Easily, at that.

Except the mana constructs were only one of many things he wanted to do in the next few moons. He also had a Skill Fusion to complete and a few Skills to upgrade if possible. That, as well as gaining a few more useful Skills, was quite crucial.

Acquiring Skills… Hakon grimaced, his mind pedaling back to the constructs. His Ancient Power was going crazy whenever he conjured something made of mana. Enhanced Comprehension clearly wanted something from him. It wanted him to do something specific, and Hakon

hadn’t fully grasped what it was. There was only one thing he was relatively certain about, and even that was only because his Power had tingled in the back of his mind when he got close to it.

He didn’t acquire the Skill at that time, but the sensation remained. Thus, unable to move his body, Hakon tried something else. He reached out to his mana reserves with his will.

A sphere of mana materialized before him with some difficulty. Pushing it away was even harder, but it worked. The manifestation floated high enough to increase the difficulty of maintaining and manipulating it without making it too challenging to work with. He felt his control improve ever so slightly as he tweaked everything, following the prodding of wrongness from Enhanced Comprehension. It wasn’t long before he realized that ‘Mana Control’ was not a separate Skill. [Mana Manipulation] incorporated control, and it improved as Hakon spread out his senses to keep the sphere contained.

He infused more mana into the sphere but didn’t allow it to grow. If anything, Hakon pushed the sphere inward, condensing it with as much willpower as he could muster. A headache crept up the back of his head, but it was nothing compared to the struggle he went through the last few nights. Staying awake while both body and mind were on the verge of collapsing from exhaustion ought to be more challenging than pressing a little bit of mana together.

That was exactly what he did for a long time. At some point, his body responded to him once more, yet Hakon remained unmoving and fully focused on the sphere before him. He was close, but whatever he was conjuring was not firm enough to warrant a message from the Ancestors.

A little bit more. Come on, just a little! he chided himself, his mind feeling like it was falling apart. The veins at his temples were on the verge of bursting. However, the mana sphere levitating above him kept shrinking. It grew unstable and erupted outward, growing in size once more, yet it did not fall apart. Hakon barely managed to contain it before starting anew.

At last, sometime after midday, the head-sized sphere transformed into a much smaller sphere the size of a fist, all while holding on to more than three times the amount of mana.

[Mana Manipulation Lv.10 → Lv.13
Compression (New) Lv.1]

[Compression] was nothing like [Reinforcement], but the sensation from both Skills was somewhat similar. Curious, Hakon tested his new Skill, creating a sphere made of compressed mana. It cost much more mana to manifest the construct than it would have without [Compression], but there was a physical weight to it. That weight wasn't even as ethereal as with [Reinforcement]. It was just there, and it would not leave him until he deactivated the Skill.

Conjuring a construct was relatively expensive, though maintaining it was not. And as soon as he held the sphere, his mana reserves barely registered any difference. That changed as soon as he willed the sphere to float around with a burst of mana, the cost increasing exponentially.

The sphere hissed through the air with surprising speed, and even more shocking power as it impacted the ceiling, drilling a hole the size of his pinky's fingernail before fading. The sphere's power caught his attention. He leaped to his feet and inspected the damage before rushing straight to the backyard. His father was nowhere to be seen, and neither were the servants, but that was expected from their ghostly nature.

Once in the backyard, Hakon studied a series of training dummies that hadn't been there before. They were equipped with white plated armor, the kind he had never seen before. That made him stop in his tracks. The armor pieces were way too small to be worn by a Barbarian. Maybe if they were smaller and not as wide, it would fit somehow, but there was no Barbarian like that.

His enhanced senses perked up, and his head yanked toward the ghostly servants. They stared at the armor in a mixture of emotions. Some appeared afraid of what the armor signified rather than the piece of metal, whereas others appeared almost angry, scared shitless, and… curious?

Ignoring the servants, Hakon turned to one of the dummies. He conjured a compressed sphere with some difficulty and pointed at his target before releasing it. Alas, his first projectile didn't quite hit the target. It crossed the first few meters easily enough with the same speed from earlier, but it didn't take long before the projectile plummeted to the ground.

An annoyed grunt and some curses later, Hakon tried again, from up closer. He wasn't too far from the target now and released the first projectile. When it hit where he wanted it to hit, he stepped back and tried again.

He repeated that for quite a while, until his mind drifted to his last fight. To the fight where his constructs failed not only to harm his enemies but also to protect his people. That said, he materialized a mana shield. He pumped it full of mana before compressing it as much as he could. When the shield was only the size of his fist, he nearly lost control of it, but by using [Reinforcement], he managed to stabilize the torrents of mana within the construct temporarily.

A few heartbeats were all Hakon needed to get hold of a few bone daggers to throw lightly at the shield. The first try started off with a success. His bone dagger whirled through the air and struck the mana shield, and instead of piercing through it, the dagger was repelled. Excited, Hakon threw the second dagger a little harder, cutting through [Reinforcement]'s layer effortlessly.

As soon as the layer dispersed, the mana shield burst apart.

"Again," he grunted to himself, conjuring yet another shield. This time, he did not compress it as much. It was probably not necessary, but he invoked [Reinforcement].

What followed was a series of daggers thrown at a magical shield floating a few meters in front of Hakon. And it prevailed, as long as he didn't throw too hard.

While that was not perfect, it was a good start.

"Magic?" Hakon heard a feeble voice to his right, and he didn't even have to turn to know that it was one of the servants.

"Since when can these brutes use magic?" a second voice, gruff and belonging to the older male servant, asked in shock.

"So crude. No ounce of delicacy. Just raw, brute force…" the third servant of the trio that had watched the white armored dummies before said quietly. "These brutes even destroy the magic's beauty."

Hakon narrowed his eyes at the last comment. He felt like spinning around and glaring at them, but that wouldn't help anyone. If anything, it might make matters worse the more he thought about it.

The servants never really talked much in his or his father's presence. If anything, they tried to avoid them as much as possible. And here they were chatting nearby, close enough for him to hear.

Magic. Is that what I'm doing? Wait… they know what that is? Hakon's lips curled into a smile.

If the human servants knew what he was doing, they could surely help him. Not knowingly, of course. They wouldn't help him grow stronger even if he threatened them. Not that he planned to dishonor his father's trophies like that in the first place. Still…

If they didn't know he was listening, they would continue to talk about magic. And, listening to them, he could improve further. Potentially. Probably.

It was certainly worth a try.

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CHAPTER 53

The servants didn't do much talking. Most of what Hakon heard them bicker about was the woman, cussing Hakon out for his lack of decency. She went as far as to curse Barbarians as a whole for being brutes and for their lack of mana control, which… was actually fair.

Hakon didn't mind their complaints. If anything, it was curious to listen to them. Compared to their usual quiet, restrained, and frightened behavior, this was much better. With a bit more confidence, more muscle, and a lot more power, he might even take a liking to them. Alas, they were weak and too afraid for his liking, and their comments were not always helpful.

The way Hakon practiced his Skills worked. A lot of tweaking was involved, but the mana constructs turned out good enough to warrant the Ancestors' attention.

[Scripture of Improvement
Mana Manipulation Lv.13 → Lv.15
Mana Shaping Lv.9 → Lv.14
Reinforcement Lv.6 → Lv.7
Compression Lv.1 → Lv.3
Mana Bolt (New) Lv.1 → Lv.4
Mana Shield (New) Lv.1 → Lv.3]

He didn't know why the title 'Scripture of Improvement' popped up only sometimes, but it didn't bother him all too much. [Mana Sense] did not

improve, no matter how much he focused on his senses, but his training proved worthwhile, nonetheless.

Weaklings shouldn't sputter nonsense when they have no idea what they're talking about. He snorted inwardly, yet Hakon couldn't get himself to say those words to the servants. He couldn't quite tell why. Enhanced Comprehension didn't see anything wrong with learning more about delicate mana control. It was the complete opposite compared to whenever he tried to brute force his way with mana.

Gentle, delicate movements with mana had also been how he modified his mana sphere to gain some weight. In a way, it was also how he found out about [Reinforcement], [Compression], and some of his older Skills. With that in mind, it was unreasonable to call the servants out for it.

Learning [Mana Bolt] and [Mana Shield] was another interesting development. Once the Skills manifested, conjuring a bolt or shield made of mana came much easier to him. They were still as expensive as when he created them without the Skill, but controlling them was no longer as heavy a burden.

He learned how to move the structures at the expense of mana, but he was far more interested in the tingle lingering in the back of his mind. It felt different from the sensation he had when he did something right. Nonetheless, there were some similarities. Hakon was also vaguely familiar with the tingle. He was sure he felt it before but failed to remember when and where.

Putting the phenomenon surrounding the tingle aside for the time being, he tried to focus back on the constructs. They were much better than they had been, and he was sure he could acquire Skills for daggers, javelins, spears, axes, and every other kind of weapon made of mana, but he didn't want to. Not if that meant the Ancestors would reward him with a Skill Fusion that would allow him to create a Skill like 'Mana Weapon Creation' or something like that.

"Does a Skill like that even exist?" he wondered, glancing at the servants from the corner of his eyes. Would they know about that?

A Skill like 'Mana Weapon Creation' wouldn't be all that bad, yet it didn't sit right with Hakon. He wanted something else.

I could force my way through to… No, that's exactly what the servants said. He let out a deep grunt before conjuring yet another [Mana Bolt]. It consumed a considerable amount of mana, lowering his reserves once more.

Hence, instead of supplying the Skill to create the strongest of [Mana Bolt]s, Hakon created a weaker version, the weakest version, to be precise, which turned out to be the most difficult to maintain.

Using as little mana as possible required finesse. Hakon didn't even know how little mana was needed to create the weakest of [Mana Bolt]s, so he fed the Skill slowly. He grew impatient several times, resulting in a small puff of mana. The fifth time he failed, the younger servant giggled loudly enough for him to hear. The others moved in a hurry, silencing the young woman before vanishing from sight when he turned to look over.

"Do they really think I didn't notice them?" he murmured before focusing back on the weak [Mana Bolt], without even knowing when he would ever need to use something this weak against an opponent.

But as useless as it felt at first, Hakon's control improved drastically. He paid attention to the influx of mana, the sphere's shape, and mana's movements, and every little change pertaining to the structure. It grew easier as time passed, and it wasn't long before conjuring a weak [Mana Bolt] was almost as simple as pumping [Mana Bolt] full of mana.

Sure, it required closer attention, but the drastic reduction in his mana consumption left Hakon with the capacity needed to conjure a second bolt. At first, he struggled to wield and control two simultaneously, but that too became much easier once [Split Focus] was triggered. However, as soon as the strenuous task became simple, it was time to increase the difficulty a notch. He created a total of four mana spheres. Two fizzled out as soon as he heard a gasp from his right, but then came shuffling boots and whispering, gossiping voices, and he conjured a new pair.

Multiple [Mana Bolt]s would be nice. Or multiple shields. A mixture of both might come in handy as well, he told himself, all while ignoring the mind-splitting headache threatening to overwhelm him.

[Natural Regeneration] could have worked wonders against the headache, but Hakon had no mana to spare. Even if he had, he was too focused on the conjurations to let mana stream through his body. It would distract him, which was probably one more thing he would have to add to his list of things to accomplish.

Once his mana reserves were empty, Hakon collapsed onto the ground, his body sweat-drenched, his chest heaving, and his head feeling like it had been stomped by a thousand Titan Boars. But pain was weakness leaving the body, which the Ancestors confirmed yet again.

[Scripture of Improvement
Mana Sense Lv.21 → Lv.22
Split Focus Lv.14 → Lv.16
Mana Manipulation Lv.15 → Lv.17
Mana Shaping Lv.14 → Lv.15
Mana Bolt Lv.4 → Lv.10
Mana Shield Lv.3 → Lv.4]

The tingle grew more intense as time passed. It was almost bothersome at this point. Almost. Then there was another sensation just like the tingle. They overlapped, showing Hakon that the sensations differed slightly. Focusing on the newer sensation that came with his most recent Scripture of Improvement, he realized the new sensation had a hint of wrongness, as if something was missing.

Whether it was his instincts telling him that or Enhanced Comprehension trying to inform him, Hakon could not tell. He wanted to find out what it was, but his mana reserve was empty. Only a minuscule trickle of mana flowed into his mana mass every few breaths, and it barely made a difference.

Curious about what the spectators were doing, he turned to them. It'd been a long time since he started practicing, yet they were still watching, their eyes wide at the residual mana swirling around him. Their eyes met his, and he almost expected the servants to flinch. Instead, they stood there unmoving, clearly unaware of the attention on them.

"How did he do that? Isn't he just a brute?" one of the servants asked, but none of them answered. Well, none of the servants did.

"The brute can hear you." Hakon grimaced when the servants finally noticed him.

They flinched and were about to make a run for it when they realized Hakon hadn't made a move. His eyes stayed on them as he lay on the ground. "How do your people recover mana?"

There had to be another way to do so. [Circulation] was one thing, but it cost more mana than it was worth. And given how they spoke badly about his brutish ways with mana, Hakon wondered if his combination of [Circulation] and [Mana Sense] had always been brutish.

Unfortunately, the servants wouldn't respond. They stood there frozen like Terror Deer caught in pyre torchlight.

“You called me brutish. That I am not delicate enough with mana. Doesn’t that mean you or your people can do it better?” he asked, breaking the silence, but never received an answer. His only advantage was that the servants weren’t trying to escape his gaze any longer.

They ought to have noticed that Hakon was not angry at them for their words. Pressing his arms against the ground, he sat upright, all while continuing to stare at them.

Silence permeated the backyard for many heartbeats, and Hakon’s patience was running out. “If you don’t want to say something, so be it. In the worst-case, I will have to tweak [Mana Sense] a little bit more.”

The last bit he merely muttered, though he noticed a subtle change in the servants’ faces. That only made sense. [Mana Sense] was a good Skill. It helped him circulate mana through his body and push it outward rather easily. With [Mana Manipulation] added, he could create ethereal tendrils of mana to lodge onto the streams of ambient mana around him more easily. It was probably still a brutish way to recover mana, but it ought to work with some effort. A lot of trial and error to make it work, but that was his life now with Enhanced Comprehension.

“You have [Mana Sense]?” the smaller servant asked, only for the older one to ram his elbow into his side.

“Of course he has [Mana Sense], you idiot. Did you not see what he did there!”

The youngest was still staring at Hakon with a mixture of shock and fear, but there was also a tinge of awe. “W-what… What Level is your [Mana Sense]?”

The bickering duo stopped and turned toward the youngest. A flicker of fear crossed their features, but that was soon replaced by an ounce of curiosity.

“It improved to 22 earlier,” Hakon said openly, seeing no reason to hide anything.

“Level 22? And you don’t know how to replenish your mana!” the older man called out in disbelief.

A deep frown directed at him sealed the servant’s lips. He backed away and started to shiver as if he was about to get pummeled for speaking up, but Hakon only turned back to the younger servant.

“I… I can help you,” the young one said, voice quivering. Pathetic, but Hakon listened anyway. “I-I-In exchange… I want to be free.”

He raised an eyebrow at the servant. As pathetic as the voice behind the request was, it took courage to stand up for oneself. Hakon could respect that.

“You want to be free? I can talk to my father.” He nodded slowly. “But you won’t be able to leave even if you’re free. You’re too weak to survive in the forest, you know that, right? Even if you make it through the first night, you will end up in the hands of another tribe.”

“Still…” That was the only word she managed to squeeze out of her quivering lips before turning away, fingers trembling as they dug into her clothes.

“Whatever.” Hakon shrugged. Her reasoning was none of his concern. “Show me what you got. If it’s good enough, I will talk to my father.”

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CHAPTER 54

At first, the young woman was hesitant. That was odd. If she was not okay with helping him, the servant shouldn't have made the offer. Maybe she did not expect Hakon to agree this easily to her request for freedom, but was it really that much of a problem?

It took the other two servants, whose names Hakon never learned, to bump into her and call her name, which was how he learned her name was Ava, for her to regain her senses.

Then again, she looked like she didn't trust Hakon. That was both understandable and not at the same time. It wasn't like he ever stooped so low as to hit the servants. If anything, he barely paid attention to them most of the time. Since they were his father's spoils of war, they ought to be treated respectfully, and that was exactly what Hakon did.

Not everyone behaved accordingly, but the chieftain made sure to punish those who disrespected the Ancestors.

One way or another, Ava met Hakon in the backyard. She avoided his eyes, and her voice was barely a whisper in his ear, but he listened to her even if his mind told him to dismiss the voice of those too weak and frail to stand up for themselves. The young woman looked too fragile, too afraid, to be of any use. However, Hakon crushed the doubts coalescing in his mind whenever they rose to distract him.

The humans' beliefs were laughable, if not outright wrong, but that was of no importance at this moment. They were clearly more experienced in the way of mana, magic or whatever, and they could help him in ways no Barbarian could. Other than the Shaman, probably. Yet it wasn't like anyone

really knew the paths the Shaman trod. He was wherever the Ancestors wanted him to be.

As for his talk with the chieftain regarding the deal he struck with the young servant, that was an issue for later. In the worst-case, he would have to pay the price. That thought made him shudder inwardly, but he was determined to try anyway, assuming Ava's help was worthwhile.

"M-Meditation…" Ava muttered quietly, looking up momentarily, only to cast her gaze down to the ground once again. "[Mana Meditation]. D-do you know what that is?"

"Meditation? Never heard of it." Hakon spoke truthfully, trying hard not to sound snarky. Keeping his emotions under tight control, he tried to accept that the human woman, while being scared, weak, and pathetic at times, could help him grow stronger. That she was a worthy teacher. That… turned out a little difficult when the words coming out of her mouth were swallowed by the rustling tree nearby.

"Repeat that. The tree's rustling was louder than your voice," he grunted, taking deep breaths when Ava flinched.

He tuned out the noises around him and activated [Sensory Expansion] while focusing solely on the fragile human.

"M-Mana Meditation is a Skill, f-for some, b-but many use it as a practice. A technique to train their attention and awareness to achieve a calm, focused, and clear state of mind. It… it should help you let go of your thoughts jumping around and to observe your mind, slow your thoughts, and focus on yourself and the surroundings to sense your Core, pathways, and the streams of mana around you."

Hakon considered learning the Skill of meditation right away. Not to sense his body or surroundings, but to gain better control of his emotions. He was much better at that than most Barbarians, but Ava made him feel like he was an angry, little fledgling.

"I already know about pathways. They're the tunnels that spread through the entire body like a cobweb, right? The Ancestors told me about them when I cleansed them. So, you humans know what pathways are," Hakon spoke up when the young woman stopped speaking. "Do you cleanse them as well? If so, do you know the Skills [Flow Control] or [Circulation]?"

The older servant back in the hut gasped and called out something unintelligible, but he was more focused on Ava's reaction. She looked up,

her eyes wide, but quickly turned away when they made eye contact. Ignoring her weird antics, Hakon waited until she nodded slowly.

“Do all humans know about those Skills? Is that what you call magic?” he inquired curiously, his frustration forgotten when she shook her head at the first question.

Does that mean they’re special? Hakon wondered, glancing up to stare at the older servant and the others, sensing they all had heard about [Circulation] and [Flow Control]. They may have been impressed with his improvement of ‘magic’ or his [Mana Sense]’s Level, but that was mostly because he was a Barbarian, wasn’t it? For he was a brute who shouldn’t be learning all those Skills… right?

Rummaging through his mind and memories, he recalled that Ava and the others belonged to an army. Ava didn’t look old, she had always looked like this, even when he was still wet behind the ears. Maybe that was a human thing, or he was simply too bad at guessing a human’s age. All he knew for sure was that the old man was old and that Ava had to be a little older than himself. And that they had all been part of the humans attacking Tribe Taskur and the surrounding tribes.

They were the only survivors, but did that really mean they were weak? Yeah, it did. They were weak. However, being weak didn’t mean they were useless. Just like awakening the Ancient Power of the Mind or Lightcaller did not necessarily mean one couldn’t be a true warrior. It was just… different.

Were they warriors? No, probably not. Lightcallers, maybe? Or Earthcallers? Hakon doubted they were powerful wielders of elements, but if they had been taught in the ways of mana, which appeared to be special even among humans, then that meant all servants of the tribe could be helpful. Probably.

He had to ask her again if all humans learned [Mana Sense] and similar Skills to satiate his curiosity. She hesitated at first but shook her head, which did the opposite of what he wanted. Growing more curious, Hakon asked a few more questions. He conjured a [Mana Bolt] and [Mana Shield] simultaneously and asked if many humans could do that and if their [Mana Sense] was at the same Level or higher than his. To that, she shook her head vehemently, though her eyes grew wider.

“Effortless,” he heard one of the other servants mutter back in the hut. It could have been the old man, but Hakon couldn’t be bothered to find out.

“Can you do that?”

Ava hesitated again, then nodded, her gaze still locked onto a bushel of grass before her. Turning to the others and trying to gauge if they too were wielders of elements turned out to be rather difficult. Some servants were watching out of curiosity rather than fear, but their expressions didn’t change much when he looked their way. If anything, they grew more curious about him, surely wondering why he bothered talking to them when every other Barbarian ignored them or stared at their smaller frames with disdain.

“If you and the others can do similar things, why did you never try to flee?” Hakon inquired, guessing that Ava was not the only capable servant.

He found himself respecting her a little more, which promptly faded when she began to shake violently. She, too, had been present when the chieftain returned with the servants who’d tried to flee in the past. In fact, they had all been present when Hakon’s father made an example of what would happen if anyone else were to flee.

Those who survived long enough to be dragged back into the tribehold were killed in front of the entire tribe, their souls and bodies sacrificed to the Ancestors.

Even if she and some others were somewhat capable, they were still too weak to survive the chieftain’s pursuit. That, if nothing else, was understandable. Nobody could escape the chieftain’s wrath.

With that in mind, Hakon turned back to the topic at hand. “Anyway, what was this about a Core? Is that what the mana mass is called?” He pointed at himself, roughly above the section where the mass of mana was located.

It was nothing more than a guess. Considering that he knew what mana streams and pathways were, it didn’t seem too far off.

“Y-yes, you are right. The Core is the body’s vessel for the realm’s mythical energy.” Ava forced a faint smile, but it cracked as soon as she met his eyes. Her eyes quivered, but she didn’t look away immediately.

“Good to know,” Hakon mused to himself. “But why do I need that? I can sense my Core and the pathways. Even without using mana to empower [Mana Sense], I can sense the mana around us. Activating the Skill makes it even easier. Do I really need this ‘Mana Meditation’?”

Ava struggled to come up with an answer. She maintained eye contact, but now that she could lift her head to meet Hakon’s eyes, the words were

stuck in her throat.

“Whatever. Show me what this meditation is about, and I’ll figure out if it will be useful to me.” He waved dismissively and sat down, following Ava’s instructions once she regained her composure somewhat.

First things first, Hakon had to learn how to breathe. That was the first hurdle, one he fortunately solved with his Ancient Power. Ava’s stammering voice rang in his ears, telling him to relax his shoulders, to keep his back straight but not stiff, and to “notice” his breathing.

The hesitation in her voice soon faded as Hakon closed his eyes, trying to follow the instructions given. Focusing on his breathing, he felt the air move in through his mouth, flow down his throat, and fill his lungs. It was invigorating, prompting him to focus more on his perception Skills. Ava must have noticed that because she told him not to use any other Skills and to focus on the mana he was breathing in.

So that’s what I’m doing? I’m breathing mana?

His chest rose and fell slowly, which felt unnatural at first, but transformed into a practiced movement. He switched to inhaling deeply through his nose, taking in as much air as possible before exhaling gently. That, as it turned out, was too brutish, which was confirmed not only by Ava’s commentary but also by Enhanced Comprehension. Adjusting his breathing, Hakon kept it smooth and relaxed, his thoughts drained of distractions, his focus lingering on the mana entering his lungs.

That was when he noticed something around his mana mass, or Core as Ava called it. The few strands of mana he’d recovered since his [Mana Meditation] practice started swirled through his pathways and entered his Core. There, they flowed around each other, forming a small maelstrom like he had seen with the Fracture. It wasn’t the same, considering the storm of mana in his Core was unstable and collapsed as soon as Hakon’s concentration faltered, but it returned once he fell back into a trance-like state.

The maelstrom grew stronger as more mana joined his Core, accelerating the annexing process of mana. And it did much more than that. Hakon sensed the pathways around his Core shift. They stirred as the maelstrom expanded and grew more stable, and it wasn’t long until the pathways throughout his body were affected. Not all of them, but the more he focused on meditating, the stronger the vibrations his every breath sent through his body.

As for the mana entering his lungs, it flowed straight into the adjacent pathways, which guided it directly to the Core.

“It works.” Hakon’s eyes snapped open, startling Ava. She didn’t back away this time but looked at him in confusion.

“How are you–”

“But I don’t like this,” he interrupted Ava, barely hearing her, and continued when she tilted her head at him. “Sitting down to recover mana makes no sense. It’s wasteful.”

There was no way he could sit down in the middle of the forest to recover mana. Doing so didn’t feel right because it would make him vulnerable and too easy to kill.

“I need to recover mana in combat. Or while moving, at the very least,” he muttered to himself more than anyone else.

Ava stared at him strangely, almost like he was an idiot. She looked like she had something to say, but the words never left her tongue. Rather than waiting for her to speak, Hakon asked questions in between several sessions of meditation. First with open eyes, then while standing up.

The young servant tried to tell him to learn the Skill first and upgrade it later, which was interesting, because it meant humans were somehow connected to the Ancestors and their Ancient Scriptures. There had been hints before, but everything they discussed made it obvious.

Humans carried a connection to the Ancient Scriptures. But there were differences, the biggest being that they did not believe in the Ancestors. So how could they gain access to the Ancient Scriptures, learn and improve their Skills, and be rewarded with Level ups?

It didn’t make any sense, but it was not Hakon’s concern to think about. He’d ask the Shaman the next time he saw him. Until then, he would learn magic from the humans, and how to walk around while meditating, or doing something with the same benefits as meditation.

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CHAPTER 55

The sun dipped below the horizon, shrouding the tribehold in brief darkness. The moons rose slowly, carrying the light of the Great Ones, but it didn't take long before Tribe Taskur blossomed in a myriad of lights. Pyre torches in the dozens flared to life all across the tribehold, illuminating their territory for monsters and other enemies to see. And that was exactly what Taskur's tribesmen and women wanted.

They wanted to be seen and to see those daring enough to step onto their land.

But while others waited eagerly for their enemies, Hakon was still at the hut, doing the same thing over and over again, his head feeling like it was on the verge of splitting in two. Although, as painful as it was, a parchment appeared before him, telling him he did the right thing.

[Fatigue Resistance Lv.5 → Lv.6]

Improving that Skill was among the most difficult, and every Level up was incredibly rewarding. At this point, he did not need nearly as much sleep as in the past. Having ascended contributed to this as well, but it was [Fatigue Resistance] that really helped him preserve his energy.

Fatigue was special. It was one of the big words that didn't make much sense to him at first. Now that he'd experienced the Skill's effect for a while, it made much more sense. Being more resistant to fatigue allowed him to preserve his energy better, be it the energy in his mind, body, or soul.

He could also practice for prolonged periods because the energy he did use was used far more efficiently.

It was perfect, especially since the Skill improvement meant the Ancestors wanted him to push further. They agreed with his methods and helped him in their own way.

The pathways stirred again as he formed yet another swirl of mana within his Core. The vibrations coming from the Core affected the adjacent pathways in almost the same way as before. Changing the swirl had been rather difficult, but it was possible at the cost of a mind-splitting headache and a lot of time.

Hakon's initial plan to meet up with the young warriors to check up on them and to prepare them for the bloodshed that awaited had been pushed aside for it. A swirl of mana.

He grimaced at that thought but pushed himself, reinforcing the swirl over and over again until it was stable enough to start anew. That was when something clicked into place. Hakon compressed the swirl a little, using his newfound knowledge to push more mana into it, augmenting it slightly. It drained him mentally to maintain the swirl as soon as he pushed more mana into it, but the increased difficulty did little to worsen his headache. It was only slightly worse, which was hardly noteworthy.

His eyes grew wide, and he turned to Ava to ask her more about the problems behind empowering the mana swirl of meditation, or maelstrom, or whatever it was, but the young servant was asleep on the ground.

Hakon clicked his tongue at the sight of the young woman resting peacefully before turning back to work on his Core. Unwilling to waste several more nights on a mana recovery Skill, he pushed for as long as his body and mind kept working.

At first, it was only important to maintain the swirl of mana. Ensuring it didn't transform into a raging maelstrom out of nowhere was just as important. It was also important to ensure it didn't shrink or grow, for every change would send ripples through the Core and its adjacent pathways. This, among other things, would greatly alter the mana absorption and annexing process. The difficulty of maintaining the mana structure within the Core would only increase the more the swirl changed, since every ripple sent down to the pathways would return and collide with others of differing mana frequencies.

Once Hakon was certain the swirl of mana was constant and stable, he got up and walked around. Doing so created yet another challenge. First, he figured that he wouldn’t be able to fight while focused on the swirl of mana. Understanding the problem, Hakon chose the easiest solution and activated [Split Focus].

While the Skill was not a perfect solution, it helped him perform multiple tasks at the same time much more easily. Glancing at Ava’s resting figure, he deliberately ignored her advice to avoid using other Skills. There was no reason not to use [Split Focus] when it helped him.

Smiling faintly, he kept his eyes wide open and began to move. Rather than running around and making erratic movements, Hakon focused on sequences that were already etched in his mind. Fine, controlled movements that changed his fighting stance came to him instinctively, yet they were nowhere near as easy as they had been in the past.

It was almost like he was back to being a toddler, learning how to walk.

He hated being a toddler once more, but it was much more annoying to know he was failing, because he was. Hakon changed stances, moved around a little, and even went as far as to try working out. He threw out a few punches, yet the swirl of mana collapsed whenever he moved too quickly. It collapsed dozens of times, each failure stinging more than the last.

Failure is okay. I failed a lot before, and I grew from failing, he had to remind himself.

As painful as failure was, it was part of life. He was not gifted with unparalleled power and an instantaneous understanding of how everything worked. Ulfar, as much as he was hated, was far more talented. No matter which weapon he wielded, it would become an extension of his body in no time. He was a genius, his talent too valuable to be wasted by falling victim to his Ancient Power.

The chieftain pushed Hakon to his limit and beyond just to keep up with Ulfar. Even then, it took a fair amount of luck and trickery to win against Ulfar in a handful of the many sparring sessions he had with the Barbarian before the Rite. Now… now things were different. Hakon was still no prodigy, but he learned to use the experience he gained from his father training him, even when something didn’t work out the way it should, to push further. To burn through the flaws he created, to build something new, and to create a strong foundation.

A foundation built from countless failures.

So that was what he kept doing. Failing. This time, Hakon did not have to endure his father's punishment before correcting his mistakes. He studied his every move until he knew what went wrong and came up with a quick theory on how to improve. Then he tried again, repeating the same set of movements with minute adjustments. When the swirl of mana collapsed again, Hakon adjusted his movement, breathing, and mana flow once more. Again, and again, and again, as often as necessary to make it work, and it did by the time the sun peeked over the horizon.

Somewhat.

Someone beside him moved, and he saw Ava sit up and stretch. Her eyes fluttered open to see Hakon towering beside her, and she would have screamed out loud if she hadn't caught herself at the last moment.

"You… I…" Ava's head flicked left and right, but there was nothing special to see. She leapt to her feet, muttering something Hakon didn't catch under her breath.

"I'm sorry for falling asleep. I… I don't know what… I-I should return to work," she blurted out, but he dismissed it with a wave.

"Stay here. We both know there's not much work to do in the hut."

The servants spent a long time preparing food, but the chieftain was rarely home these days. As for himself, Hakon doubted they needed so many servants to prepare breakfast for one person. Even if he ate enough to last several days, they wouldn't need Ava right now.

Ava didn't seem convinced but obeyed. She looked back at his sweat-drenched chest and blushed.

It took her a moment to regain her composure, and when she did, Ava studied him more curiously. "You… you're already practicing? Did it work?"

Hakon grimaced. It did work out, but the Ancestors had yet to give him the Skill he was waiting for.

"That only means you're doing something wrong. But don't worry, things like that sometimes take weeks, if not months, to get right," she said, sounding almost consoling. Then again, it could mean something else entirely. Also… what were those weeks and months she was talking about? Whatever these words meant, Hakon didn't like the sound of them.

"Just learn [Mana Meditation] first. You should be able to if you focus on it. After that, you can improve the Skill and… wait a moment." She

narrowed her eyes at Hakon, and a flash of mana flowed through her body and into her eyes. “And stop using your Skills.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Did you not notice how mana-draining your [Mana Bolt] and [Mana Shield] are?” she asked, clearly not believing he hadn’t noticed yet.

Thinking about it, Hakon did indeed have quite expensive Skills. And that was because… The pieces in his head finally came together, and it clicked.

“Of course,” he grunted.

The more mana-consuming Skills he used in the creation of other mana-based Skills, the more draining the creation would be. This was because every Skill used in the creation of the new Skill would be activated to perform the task of the new creation.

That was the reason some of his Skills were so mana-draining. They incorporated many other Skills, each using mana, to do what he wanted. Modifying the Skills to improve them made it possible to lower the mana expenditure, but if he had learned the Skills without the extensive use of other Skills first, he would have been able to create the ‘base’ Skill much faster, depending on the Skill.

So the way I earn Skills is brutish as well? Hakon thought, the corner of his lips curling into a self-mocking smile. As brutish as humans considered it, his method worked. And as long as it worked, did it really matter? Maybe it did, but he did not want to learn one new Skill every other moon. Even one Skill every fortnight wouldn’t be enough for him. Hakon needed much more than that.

Learning the ‘basic’ version of [Mana Meditation] would be useless to him. The same could be said about [Mana Shield] and [Mana Bolt].

“You said you can create a bolt of mana as well,” Hakon pointed out while invoking [Mana Bolt]. “How long did it take you to learn how to create something like that? What Level would a regular [Mana Bolt] need to be to hit as hard as mine?”

The second he asked the last question, he released the bolt at the nearby tree. It pierced through the bark before fizzling out.

Ava’s lips parted then sealed shut. She clearly realized what he was getting at. At this point, she was much more comfortable with him. She no longer sounded as timid, and her stutters were gone. Truthfully, she looked

almost frustrated as she stared at him. Were other humans like her? Timid until they knew someone wouldn't crush them?

"I never advanced to become a true Mage. I am still only a Mage Apprentice," Ava spoke quietly. "But if I had to make a guess… I think my [Mana Bolt] would have to reach Level 15 to generate as much power as yours. But it would be several times cheaper, its range would be at least twice as long, and it would have learned how to accelerate as well as alter its trajectory mid-flight."

She stopped for a moment to gather her thoughts. Her eyes grew wide, and she looked up to meet Hakon's intense stare head-on. "But… but it would take months to reach that Level. We would have to learn all about [Mana Bolt]'s spellweave for weeks to ensure we wouldn't damage our pathways before we could even think about conjuring our first [Mana Bolt]. Even then, our teachers wouldn't teach us about [Mana Bolt] until we learned all about the spellweave modifications we wanted to incorporate into the spell."

Hakon didn't even understand half of what Ava said. He pieced together a few snippets of information to get a rough understanding of the meaning behind the big words she used, but he failed to grasp everything.

Mage. Mage Apprentice. Spellweave. Weeks. Months.

The last two were probably like the Barbarians' night, fortnight, and moons, if he didn't misinterpret Ava's words completely, but the others made little sense to him. Regardless, if a regular Level 15 [Mana Bolt] was needed to be as powerful as his Level 10 [Mana Bolt], that was fine with him. He could always modify the Skill until it was cheaper and could travel farther. With enough practice, a few nights would be enough to do that, pushing [Mana Bolt] to Level 15. But even if his [Mana Bolt] would be a little more expensive and less flexible, it hadn't been all that long since he first tried conjuring one.

His mana constructs were a relatively new creation, certainly much shorter than several weeks or months, whatever the humans' equivalent to moons was, and that was all that mattered.

That, and the fact he did not want to learn [Mana Meditation]. He felt like he could have gotten [Mana Meditation] by this point, but he simply didn't want to. Clearly enough, the Ancestors did not want him to earn the Skill either. They were on his side.

Reassured by their silent affirmation, Hakon pushed forward once more, knowing perfectly well what exactly he had to do.

Something in his mind clicked again, and this time it was accompanied by a familiar tingle.

Enhanced Comprehension is the best, he thought, mixing his understanding of meditation with his Barbarian instincts as he returned to work.

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CHAPTER 56

[Skill [Aether Spiral] has been learned.]

[Split Focus] went up by one as well, but [Aether Spiral] was clearly the biggest gain. It took a while to form, but now that the Ancestors accepted Hakon's efforts as worthy, it was ever-present, refilling his mana swiftly.

Using the Skill helped him form and maintain a swirl, or a spiral or maelstrom, considering it was nowhere near as feeble as a 'swirl,' within his Core, which helped him absorb and draw in mana quicker. Doing so did not cost any mana either, which had been the case with [Circulation]; however, the mental power needed was rather taxing.

Enhanced Comprehension helped him a lot in the creation of a Skill with a fairly simple goal: to keep it activated at all times. But while that was the final goal, Hakon didn't think it would come easily. He maintained the Skill and felt the ambient mana flow toward him, seeping into his pores after being attracted by the rippling pathways. Mana trickled slowly into him, though the effectiveness was nowhere near the level he wanted.

As slowly as mana entered his Core, being able to recover mana while on the move, potentially even mid-combat once using the Skill became second nature to him, was promising.

"I got it." Hakon exhaled deeply.

Ava was on her feet and staring at him. "You are not talking about [Mana Meditation], are you? What did you get?"

He didn't respond to her question. Satisfied with her help, Hakon said, "I will talk to my father about your freedom."

That said, he left in search of his father. Curiously enough, his father was at the hut, devouring what appeared to be half a grilled Terror Deer. He motioned to the servants, who left in a hurry to return with the other half.

“Sit,” the chieftain said, but Hakon stayed where he was. His stomach growled in defiance, though it was better to stay on his feet for this conversation, in case his father planned to punch or punish him.

He grimaced at that thought but informed his father about his actions and the promise he made to Ava. The chieftain looked up from his plate with that particularly displeased look, which nearly made Hakon wince. Yet, against his expectations, the chieftain nodded slowly.

“She can have her freedom.” He waved dismissively, like he didn’t care, but the look in his eyes told otherwise. Understandable, considering his son had just deprived him of his spoils of war. They were part of his Saga, meaning Hakon had ripped out a portion of the chieftain’s Saga. Granted, it was only a tiny, very insignificant portion, but that didn’t really matter to Barbarians. They did not particularly like anyone or anything that harmed their Saga.

“Are you sure?” Hakon couldn’t help but ask.

“If she helped you grow stronger, losing her is acceptable. For you are my blood.” The chieftain shrugged, seemingly not minding. And he probably didn’t because Ava would die. The moment she regained freedom, hopefully after helping Hakon, she would try to flee. But someone as frail as Ava wouldn’t make it through the forest. Its monsters would tear her apart.

Maybe she’ll stay a little longer, Hakon mused to himself before rooting himself once more.

Being the son of the chieftain, he too was part of his father’s Saga. The stronger he was, the more heavily his Saga weighed on his father’s. That, if nothing else, was more than enough reason for the chieftain to forfeit his claim of Ava.

“If she leaves, I will not hunt her. The others, I will hunt if they try to leave. But if she does not leave, she has to abide by the laws of the Ancestors and become part of the tribe. As much as such pathetic creatures can be part of the tribe.” The chieftain grunted. “She will be your responsibility. Whether she does good or bad, her actions will be yours.”

As annoying as that could turn out to be, it was more than fair.

“You did not leave the hut,” the chieftain remarked. “When are you leaving?”

Hakon smiled grimly. His father was still not all that talkative, had never been, but their conversations were more pleasant now, and that felt good. Really good. “When everyone has recovered.”

That earned him a raised eyebrow.

“Tomorrow, when the sun rises,” he said and sat down to eat with his father. No more words were exchanged, and once Hakon was done, he stepped back outside to tell Ava about his father’s decision. She bawled her eyes out, which was confusing to see. There was no reason to cry in such a situation, was there? Unwilling to be part of this pitiable scene, he stepped out of the hut and headed toward the training ground.

Alas, before he even came close to the training ground, Teraq noticed him and approached.

“Hakon!” the towering Barbarian shouted, his massive paws crashing down on Hakon’s shoulders. “We want to hunt! When are we hunting? Everyone is excited!”

“Everyone is excited to go out and hunt again?” That was as good as it could be. “We will leave tomorrow at dawn. You can tell the others to prepare for a very long hunt. Nights of hunting.”

That only excited Teraq more. A brilliant smile bloomed on his face, and he was about to leave to tell the young warriors when something came to mind.

“You know about Astrid, Hakon?” he asked, turning back to look right at him. “Many like her. She is beautiful. Powerful. Thorat, Paru, Ragon proposed the bond.” Something in Teraq’s eyes shifted, and he hesitated, but only for a moment before continuing, “I approached her, too.”

The words didn’t do anything to Hakon. He accepted them, fully aware of Astrid’s popularity. Even before the Rite, she was approached by many warriors who proposed the bond with her. Now that she had awakened a legendary power, she’d only grown more popular, as it appeared.

What annoyed Hakon weren’t the words. It was the conviction and determination burning deep within Teraq’s eyes. The towering Barbarian was deadly serious, and that made Hakon angrier than he thought possible.

“She’s mine,” he growled before realizing what he was even saying. Regardless, he unleashed his bloodlust at full power.

Teraq’s eyes grew wide, and he took a step back before he could regain control of his body. His lips parted, then he grimaced as soon as his eyes drifted to something behind Hakon.

“I leave. Need to tell others about the hunt,” Teraq muttered quickly before taking his leave. If that had not been obvious enough, the presence that appeared behind him a few heartbeats ago certainly was. Knowing his luck, Hakon knew Astrid stood there.

“I’m yours. Is that it?” Astrid said with furrowed brows as soon as their eyes met; angry eyes.

Unsure what else to do, Hakon shrugged and smiled wryly. “You are mine, and I am yours… If that’s alright with you.”

He was fairly sure he just said something stupid, but her expression softened, and the faintest hint of a smug smile formed on her lips.

“You are mine?” she asked, clearly appeased with the sound of it. Astrid crossed the distance between the two of them, her scent and presence engulfing him.

“You are mine now,” Astrid declared, her smile growing wider. “But whether I am yours depends on your performance.”

The look in her eyes changed. It transformed into something that would have driven most tribesmen crazy, but Hakon only smiled at the challenge. He burned for Astrid’s challenge, which she fanned by planting a faint kiss on his cheek.

“Perform well, or I will never be yours,” she whispered into the wind then disappeared in a blur, her cheeks burning crimson.

Don’t worry about that. I will perform well, Hakon promised in his heart. Either that, or he would die. One way or another, he would have given his utmost.

[Script of Improvement]
Reinforcement Lv.7 → Lv.8
Compression Lv.3 → Lv.5
Mana Bolt Lv.10 → Lv.11
Mana Shield Lv.4 → Lv.7
Aether Spiral Lv.1 → Lv.2

Hakon maintained [Aether Spiral] until early into the night. As arduous as that had been, his effort was rewarded. It was only one Level, which was rather disappointing, but maintaining the spiral within Hakon's Core got a little bit easier. The [Aether Spiral] even absorbed more ambient mana more efficiently now that it Leveled up. Though far from perfection, it was exactly what Hakon needed.

[Split Focus] was yet another necessity to improve if he wanted to learn how to permanently utilize [Aether Spiral]. He maintained the latter while using the former to conjure [Mana Bolt]s and [Mana Shield]s at various angles and distances, and while moving around to test his current limits before going to bed. Though he didn't gain a Level, he believed he was close.

The first rays of sunlight woke him, overflowing with energy. Leaping out of the bed, he was ready to gather his weapons when his attention shifted to Ava standing beside the dining table, covered in the Maulaxe Crusher, several handaxes, and a bunch of bone daggers. One of the longswords he'd won in the fight against the Pearot Barbarians rested in Ava's hand, the young serv… woman, grinding it meticulously.

"You're awake!" Ava exclaimed with a little pep in her voice.

"I am," Hakon said slowly. "You decided to stay?"

Her bright expression faltered, her eyes drifting to a few bloody cuts across her arms and neck. A trace of fear sparked in her eyes, but it faded as soon as it appeared.

"I will, for now…" She nodded after a few heartbeats. "I… after everything you told me, I… I think it wouldn't be a good idea to leave alone. But everyone else will die if I convince them to leave with me. I… I might be able to return safely to the kingdom if I sacrifice them, but…" She shook her head. "I can't do that. That's why I decided to stay. I need to grow stronger and show your people that we are more than just servants. That we can be useful."

Hakon's brow rose. He did not expect Ava to have changed this drastically. Then again, considering the wounds she sustained, it was fair to assume she already tried fleeing. The forest's denizens clearly didn't like their territory being invaded.

She would have left if she could.

Ava gathered all the courage she could muster and added, "I want to show the tribe that they need me. Us. All of us!"

Hakon could easily guess her plan, but it did not matter.

The weak, bawling figure of Ava flashed before Hakon's eyes, only to return to the vaguely confident figure standing before him. She was still tiny, with a fragile body that couldn't be more than 1.5 meters tall, yet she no longer looked as pathetic as before. Not respectable just yet, but granting her freedom clearly changed the human.

"How are you going to–" Realization dawned upon him. "You want to grow stronger to earn more respect, but that's only part of it. You also want to help me, so when I perform well, the chieftain will have to acknowledge your contribution. Or others will notice it. Either way, you want to earn the freedom of your people by helping us grow stronger."

That was a plan, and would be a good one if not for a small problem. It would fail, for Barbarians were nowhere near patient enough to follow Ava's guidance. [Mana Meditation] may be a useful Skill for all Hakon knew, but it was useless to Barbarians. Nobody would want to learn it, and the Ancestors would certainly not be willing to 'reward' anyone with it either.

Maybe Astrid would want to learn something from Ava. She was patient enough to go through the torture of boredom if it meant she would get stronger. Björn… possibly as well, if Hakon punched him a few times. Regardless, Hakon was curious to see how the human woman would perform. Maybe he was wrong and she would succeed. One way or another, he would benefit from her plan.

"If you know about a way to cleanse pathways more easily, that would be interesting. For me, personally. Also, we are impatient, which you probably figured out already. We like to feel it when we're getting stronger, and most of us don't really like mana. They call it Lifeblood and use it to strengthen their bodies through their Ancient Powers. If you have a way to make use of that… do it." With that, alongside a few more pieces of advice, Hakon sheathed his weapons and left the hut, leaving behind a pondering young woman.

It was time to steal Pearot's Fractures.

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CHAPTER 57

The young warriors left the tribehold as a unit. Everyone was eager to push ahead and write new passages of their Saga in monster blood. They thirsted for blood and the Ancestors' approval, yet they were especially interested in the Deeds and Feats they were bound to accomplish. All they needed to do was follow Hakon.

He didn't know what Teraq told them, but everyone, even those who hadn't fully recuperated from their first encounter with the Pearot Barbarians, arrived at dawn to depart with him. Even Ulfar was present, covered in blood, a large scar spreading from his collarbone to his left eye.

Ulfar's arm was still missing, but that didn't change his bloody presence in the slightest. If anything, he was stronger than ever, his presence swallowing those around him.

Hakon tried to speak with him, to make sure Ulfar knew enough about their plan to help them, but the Behemoth Blood warrior only snorted, the fire of hatred and envy burning deep in his eyes. Leaving the angry warrior behind with a shrug, Hakon adjusted his plans.

He split his people into smaller groups, working from a rough understanding of everyone's prowess. They may have grown since the fight with the Pearot Barbarian, but Hakon did not forget what he had witnessed. He now knew who worked well together and which Ancient Powers were better kept apart. He made sure Teraq wasn't grouped with one of the more aggressive Bloodbearers, knowing they would only stand in each other's way. Then he tried to pair Eren with Ulfar, which the former accepted reluctantly. Ulfar, however, refused.

“I fight alone. Just bring me to the Fracture and stay out of my sight,” he growled, which was fair enough.

Once the groups were assigned, Hakon disappeared into the forest. He left behind a trail for the more experienced hunters to follow and wove his way through the dangers of the forest and the forbidden lands until he reached a quaint, familiar lake. A handful of Giant Ants and Acidic Beetles skittered around the lake and the small island at its center, but they were quickly taken care of. A few [Mana Bolt]s and a massive, descending Maulaxe Crusher were all it took to get rid of most of them.

“The Fracture disappeared,” he noted to himself.

It was expected. Hakon and his father simply needed confirmation to proceed.

Focusing on his memories and utilizing [Aether Spiral] to recover the little mana he used, Hakon materialized the image of the Pearot map in his mind. The mark on the map was not far from the lake, which was all the more reason to use this place as a gathering point. He rotated Crusher in his hand and struck the largest nearby tree with full force, embedding its bladed side deep into the trunk. Twisting the blade, he pulled it free.

“That should be enough.” It was a mark, albeit a poor one, but it would suffice for Astrid and Björn.

With that taken care of, Hakon used some of his least favorite Skills. The moment he did, he moved more cautiously, his steps reduced to little more than muffled noise in the vibrating forest. He melded with his surroundings as much as possible and reeled in his mana until it was as if he no longer existed.

[Silent Steps] and [Stealth] were not bad Skills. No matter how much he disliked the secrecy and intent behind them, he acknowledged their power and usefulness. If only they were bad Skills. He chuckled inwardly and triggered [Tracking], augmented by [Sensory Expansion].

Once that was done, it was time to disappear into the forest and scout the surroundings.

The first task at hand was to ensure the safety of the immediate area. That didn’t take long, so he pushed deeper into the forbidden lands. Weaving around plant life that appeared dangerous even to him, Hakon located several monsters. Some were powerful enough to pose a threat to him, while others would be more suitable for the weaker Barbarians to handle. Noting their behavior, movement patterns, and the trails they left

behind, Hakon moved past them. No matter how much his fingers itched for combat, he couldn’t be certain he was alone.

No, he knew he was not alone in there. That much was confirmed when he located one of his targets: a Fracture portal, guarded by none other than Pearot Barbarians.

Hakon didn’t strike immediately. He wanted to push forward, but he waited as several Barbarians stepped out of the Fracture portal, their hair ablaze, their bodies covered in burns, claw marks, and bite wounds. Their faces bore vibrant smiles, which only widened as they joked with their comrades.

Those comrades rose from a small campsite Hakon hadn’t noticed before and approached the wounded Barbarians. They slapped each other on the shoulders with equally bright smiles and excited roars, tightly clutching their weapons as they charged into the Fracture.

The wounded stepped into the campsite. Some collapsed onto bedrolls, while others feasted on grilled meat with gusto.

They do not plan to conquer the Fracture, do they? Father is right, Hakon mused to himself, his mind churning as he retreated into the forest.

The others were already at the lake when he returned. They were forced into a few small skirmishes with weaker monsters, as well as some strong enough to wound several Barbarians. Even though the injuries hadn’t been part of the plan, dealing with the monsters resulted in some improvements, and that was a fair exchange.

Hakon didn’t rush everyone to the Fracture. He allowed them to recover from the recent skirmishes before setting out to deal with it. A pesky Blackfang Panther slipped into hiding as they closed in, its bloodlust perfectly concealed. The monster was ready to pounce on the weakest Barbarian but was met with a [Mana Shield] blocking its pounce in midair, followed by an axe lodging into its side. A bolt of mana whistled through the air and cut through the monster’s skull as it writhed on the ground, bringing an end to its suffering.

The monster dispersed into blue mist as soon as Hakon retrieved his hand axe, and their journey continued, with all eyes drawn to him. He heard

the warriors' whispers and felt their gazes on him, but he continued onward.

They didn't encounter many monsters for the rest of the way. Some skittered away as soon as they saw the group of young warriors, while others needed a little more convincing before they turned to flee.

Hakon moved ahead once again, using the combination of [Silent Steps], [Stealth], and [Tracking] to scout and analyze the situation ahead. [Silent Steps] improved to Level 14 as he advanced, [Stealth] reached Level 9, and it didn't take long for [Tracking] to improve by one Level and reach Level 11. The Skill improvements were useful and helped him stay hidden from the Pearot Barbarians, although he didn't think he truly needed them for that. The Barbarians were guarded against monsters and vigilant in their own way, yet they didn't appear particularly afraid as he studied them anew.

His gaze fell upon the violet arc cutting through the air. He had only ever been in the Crawling Expanse, but the difference was apparent. The violet vortex unfurling in the distance was large. It stretched wide and was taller than even Teraq, yet it was not as massive as the Overflowing Crawling Expanse had been. It did not radiate as much energy either. There was no uncontrolled violence, just heat.

As he studied the Fracture portal, Hakon caught a ripple from its epicenter. The edge of a half-molten blade was the first to emerge from the portal, followed by a half-charred Barbarian and his comrades. They looked worse for wear, which was interesting. The others hadn't been that battered. Narrowing his eyes, Hakon noticed yet another issue.

They're not the same. The Barbarians stepping out of the Fracture portal were not those he had seen enter earlier. Curious, Hakon was about to pull back and inform the others of the plan when a familiar presence erupted nearby.

The presence of a powerful Bloodbearer surged outward, filling the area with unending bloodlust. Ulfar was the first to arrive at a group of shrubs that gave him a perfect view of the Pearot Barbarians. That alone was enough to push him over the edge.

He didn't even think about following their plan. Of course, he did not. Ulfar kicked off the ground and burst through the shrubs, the roar of his Bloodline reverberating through the surroundings. If his presence had not been enough to warn the Pearot Barbarians, his roar certainly was.

Charging ahead, Ulfar raised his massive mace. His skin tore as his body expanded, and his presence only grew more intense as he crossed the

distance to his targets in several heartbeats. His opponents had time to react, but they were exhausted and injured, which was far from ideal when facing an enraged, one-armed Behemoth Blood warrior.

Ulfar was no longer a brawler, given that he had only one arm left, but that was likely the best decision he could have made. He had always been proficient with all kinds of weapons, and Hakon sincerely doubted that had changed. If anything, his Ancient Power likely strengthened his prodigious talent.

Hakon watched as Ulfar crushed the first Pearot Barbarian with supernatural strength, filling him with anger. For Hakon was not nearly as physically intimidating as Ulfar.

Focus! he chided himself, motioning to his people behind him. Then, gripping Crusher tightly, he advanced as well.

Dashing across the battlefield, Hakon closed the distance in a moment. Ulfar crushed yet another enemy while taking several sword slashes and mace strikes to the body. The attacks barely affected the Behemoth Blood warrior, prompting Hakon to attempt the same approach. That thought didn’t last long when the first sword grazed his cheek, leaving a deep cut with far less effort than it took anyone to even scratch Ulfar.

Cursing himself once again, Hakon invoked [Mana Shield] to protect himself from a second strike. He used [Evasion] to weave around a third and fourth strike and empowered Crusher with [Mana Infusion] and left a massive dent in his first foe’s chest. It caved in effortlessly, prompting Hakon to follow up with another move. He conjured a second [Mana Shield] to block several strikes and released a bolt of mana at the wounded Barbarian as he stumbled back.

A bolt to his wide-open maw ended the Barbarian. Activating [Circulation] at full power, Hakon weaved around his opponents, his arms blurring as he cleaved through the wounded Pearot Barbarians.

Their opponents were at a devastating disadvantage. Not only were they at a numerical disadvantage, most of them were still exhausted and injured. Even those who managed to recover had yet to return to their peak condition. It was unfortunate, but they didn’t stand a chance. Their Saga ended abruptly, their deaths recorded in the passages depicting one of Taskur’s greatest hunts, which was yet to come.

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CHAPTER 58

Not one died. One of the Bloodbearers came close after he took a blade to the chest, but that was his own fault. Not only had he been too excited, he also kept advancing even with a razor-sharp blade lodged in his chest. The blade missed his heart, and the Bloodbearer managed to ram his own weapon into the Pearot Barbarian's neck, killing him, but the damage had already been done.

Mana flooded him, and the Blood of his Ancient Power erupted, further enhancing his regeneration, which was enough to preserve his life.

The younger warriors plundered the weapons of the fallen and replaced their own blades with the superior ones. Afterward, the dead Pearot Barbarians were offered to the Ancestors and dissolved into mist.

"Finally," Ulfar growled from the side, his mace drenched in blood and brain matter. Only a few opponents managed to land a strike on him, and even they failed to leave behind lasting injuries. Even minor cuts had already stopped bleeding and were knitting themselves together at a visible pace.

The Behemoth Blood warrior was much stronger than he used to be, and he did not hesitate to show it. Letting out a growl, he stepped into the Fracture, with others hurrying in after him. Hakon felt several eyes on him and nodded before stepping through the violet vortex as well.

As soon as he was inside, the temperature increased drastically. Every breath burned in his lungs, the heat stung his eyes, and even the ambient mana was affected. Activating [Mana Sense] together with [Sensory Expansion], Hakon was assaulted by the overwhelming heat. With his senses heightened, the changes within the Fracture pressed harder against

him, yet he couldn’t help but smile at what he saw. One of which was the Scripture describing the Fracture.

[Fracture – Magma Field
Rarity – Common
Recommended Level – 10
Slots – 20/20]

Magma Field. It was nothing like the Crawling Expanse, yet it felt somewhat similar. As for the ‘Slots,’ it said 20/20, which made him wonder if that was the number of people able to enter the Fracture at a time. That would also explain why the Crawling Expanse had said 1/10. He had been alone in the Overflowing Fracture, after all.

Looking around, Hakon found himself on a plateau of blackened stone. Ponds of liquid fire dotted the area stretching far and wide.

[Incomplete Saga Trials discovered!]
~~[Lesser Deed – Slay 10 Magmaspewers (10/10)]~~
[Major Deed – Survive in the Soul-melting Ponds (35/50)]

Hakon was not sure why the Ancestors had shown him a Saga Trial that had already been completed, but he ignored it and focused on the Major Deed. Someone was, or had been, close to completing it, yet they failed. Looking around at the magma ponds, it wasn’t hard to guess what the Major Deed required. It was something the Pearot Barbarians should have been capable of. Those at the 2nd or 3rd Ascension, at least, should have been tough enough.

That reminded Hakon of his conversation with the chieftain. He had to figure out why Pearot hadn’t closed the Fracture. He needed to understand what was valuable enough about the Magma Field and the other Fractures to justify keeping them open rather than closing them to appease the Ancestors.

Ulfar was already far ahead, and it didn’t take long for the other young warriors to spread out. Not everyone managed to enter the Fracture, but those who did were enough to deal with the remaining Pearot Barbarians, wherever they were.

Hakon turned his attention elsewhere. A series of stalagmites caught his eye. They weren't made of the same material as the rest of the plateau and surrounded the magma ponds at specific intervals. The closer the stalagmites were to the Fracture portal leading back to the forbidden lands, the fewer there were. Yet some ponds lacked even a single stalagmite.

No, that wasn't quite right. It looked as though there had once been stalagmites there, and they had been removed.

Moving closer to inspect the pond and the stalagmites, Hakon failed to sense anything unusual. It wasn't until he broke off the tip of a stalagmite that chaos unfolded. The magma pond stirred, and a glob of magma was hurled his way. Reminded of the days he spent evading acid, Hakon conjured a [Mana Shield] while pushing [Circulation] and [Dash] to their limits.

With his arm coated in [Reinforcement], Hakon shot toward the edge of the pond, his arm bursting through the rippling magma surface.

Pain assaulted him, raw and unbidden, as the membrane of [Reinforcement] collapsed, but he did not pull back until his melting fingers coiled around the creature's neck.

Hakon pulled his hand out of the pond as quickly as he could, dragging the creature along with him. It looked… different from what he expected. What unraveled before him was a writhing mass no longer than a meter. It was not particularly wide, but it was quite heavy for a worm since that was essentially what it was. A worm with a grinder of razor-sharp teeth for a mouth and the ability to spit magma.

Yet the magma it spat was unlike the magma in the pond. First of all, Hakon blocked the creature's spit with another [Mana Shield], but it melted through it effortlessly. Splashes of magma reached him, burning far more than the droplets clinging to his arm.

Looking down at his arm, he was grateful for [Pain Tolerance]. Yet despite the Skill being at Level 20, he was still in pain.

He pumped mana into [Natural Regeneration] and crushed the creature after it released another burst of magma.

"Weird," he mused through gritted teeth. As painful as it was, Hakon's attention lingered on the creature's spit and the fragments within it. The pieces looked not dissimilar to the stalagmites, just molten.

Did the creatures produce the stalagmites? If so, they likely didn't destroy them. That could only mean the Pearot Barbarians harvested the

stalagmites and used them for something, or that something else did. Glancing at his weapons, particularly the longsword he acquired from one of the Pearot Barbarians back in the forest, Hakon grinned.

“Is that it?” he wondered aloud before motioning to a group of young warriors.

“Collect some stalagmites and bring them to Theor. Since he’s injured, he should return to the tribe to recover.” Even though the task was important, crucial, even, the Barbarians grimaced. They wanted to hunt, acquire Deeds, and expand upon their Saga too much to fully understand the potential value of the stalagmites.

“This is important. If I’m right, everyone will be armed like Tribe Pearot in a fortnight,” Hakon announced with a wolfish smile. “Imagine the Feats we can achieve with such superior weapons.”

The young Barbarians swallowed hard. They looked at each other, then leaped into action.

Distracted by the orders and the thoughts flashing through his mind, Hakon failed to recognize what was happening around or within him. [Natural Regeneration] was still active, and something else was happening as the magma tore through his arm. He was healing even as he sustained damage, yet it was the synergy of his instincts, his steadily increasing control of mana, and his Enhanced Comprehension that gave birth to something new.

[Skill [Fire Resistance] has been learned.]

As the Skill entered his Ancient Scripture, Hakon felt a subtle shift. He knew he would have gained the Skill at some point, and he was sure most Barbarians would only need a little time to grow accustomed to the flesh-melting heat, but he was satisfied with the Ancestors’ generosity.

He embraced it and focused on the movement of mana as it coursed through his arm, healing damaged tissue even as it melted before his eyes. [Natural Regeneration] was nowhere near powerful enough to fully counteract the damage, yet it slowed the process and ensured he didn’t sustain any permanent injury.

At the same time, he felt [Natural Regeneration]’s potency increase as he adjusted the flow of mana. He pushed more mana into his arms, aided the process, and removed the magma clinging to his skin with a discharge

of energy. Focusing entirely on his healing Skill, Hakon began to tweak it again and again. The Skill itself did not improve, no matter how much he adjusted it, yet his regeneration grew stronger. His mana consumption skyrocketed, but the damage done to his arm was already healing.

That left him with an important question.

Now that he had gained a Resistance Skill, there was only one thing he could do. But did he want to do it now? Of course he did. No matter how much he wanted the tribe to grow stronger, he had to focus on himself first.

With that in mind, Hakon plunged his arms back into the magma pond, his mind fixed on one particular thought.

Pain is weakness leaving the body.

Hakon had no idea how much time had passed. Ulfar and a group of young warriors had left the Magma Field after the last of Pearot's Barbarians were killed, but that was about it. Hakon provided Ulfar with the location of another Fracture claimed by Pearot, so he could only imagine them somewhere else, trying to kill more of Pearot's warriors.

Astrid and Björn had not joined them, but that did not stop them from studying him with disappointment. They clearly expected him to lead the young warriors into a grand battle, only for him to end up wasting everyone's time in a low-Level Fracture. Worse still, he hadn't stopped Ulfar from taking the reins, effectively splitting the group.

Many stayed with Hakon and mined the stalagmites. They had already returned some to the tribehold and made the journey back, and now they waited for him. Some displeased, others mimicking his actions, trying to understand why they hadn't left to hunt Pearot's warriors yet.

The answer to that was as simple as it could be.

[Scripture of Improvement
Fire Resistance (New) Lv.1 → Lv.12
Natural Regeneration Lv.18 → Lv.20]
[Skill Upgrade has been discovered. All requirements to upgrade [Natural Regeneration] have been met.]

[Secondary Skill Upgrade has been discovered. First requirement to upgrade [Natural Regeneration] has been met.]
[Upgrade Natural Regeneration – Conditions have been met.
1) Pathway Purity exceeds threshold (30%/25%)
2) Level requirement has been met [20/20]
[Secondary Upgrade to Natural Regeneration – Conditions have not been met
1) Pathway Purity has not been met. (30%/50%)
2) Level requirement has been met [20/20]
3) Uninterrupted use of Natural Regeneration [54%]

The moment Hakon finished the last Scripture, the third line changed from [54%] to [0%].

That, like the rest of the Scriptures, was new to Hakon. He somehow ended up with two potential upgrades for the same Skill. Something he had never seen before. Worse still, he had nearly proceeded with the first upgrade since he met all the requirements. But his attention shifted back to the second upgrade message.

There had to be a reason for it. The Ancestors wouldn't have given him the option without purpose. But what exactly that purpose was, Hakon didn't know. While part of him was urged to choose the first option, he found himself more inclined to complete the requirements for the latter. It was more challenging, and challenges were usually rewarded. He etched the requirements into his mind with a faint smile, promising to complete them as soon as he had the time, before turning his attention to the remaining Scriptures. The Skill Upgrades had only been the beginning, after all.

[One suitable Skill Fusion has been detected. Fuse [Poison Resistance Lv.12], [Pain Tolerance Lv.20], [Acid Resistance Lv.10], [Fire Resistance Lv.12]?]

He expected a similar message, but not this soon. Apparently, [Pain Tolerance] at Level 20 and three additional Skills at or above Level 10 had been enough to trigger the Skill Fusion he'd been aiming for. That was almost too good to be true. Almost.

“Add [Fatigue Resistance] to the Skill Fusion,” he muttered, reminded that he had done the same when creating [Weapon Mastery].

[Skill [Fatigue Resistance Lv.6] has been detected. Skill Level deemed too low.
Improve the Skill’s Level to avoid potential diminishing returns.
Do you still wish to add the Skill to the fusion?]

The Scripture hadn’t changed one bit, prompting Hakon to agree with an excited heart.

[Skill Fusion initiated. Skills [Poison Resistance Lv.12], [Pain Tolerance Lv.20], [Acid Resistance Lv.10], [Fatigue Resistance Lv.6], [Fire Resistance Lv.12] have been fused and removed from the Ancient Scripture.]
[Skill [Adaptive Resilience Tier-1] has been learned.]
[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]

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INTERLUDE

ULFAR

His entire being was one of anger and fury. It embraced him and threatened to consume him, but Ulfar did not cave this time. He suppressed the overwhelming power of Behemoth Blood as he thundered through the thicket, searching for Pearot Barbarians to kill, or he would lose himself once more. And that was not something he could afford.

Not now, maybe never again.

Nothing worked as Ulfar and his father had planned. His father's training was ultimately useless. It helped him unleash his Ancient Power, learn more about it, and even pushed him to the 1st Ascension, yet in the end, it had been to no avail. Several Barbarians made it to the 1st Ascension, Astrid and Hakon included.

Hakon. He ground his teeth until it felt like they were about to chip.

The Battle of the Generation was an utter disaster. Accidentally killing one of his subordinates had been a problem, but how was he supposed to know those fools were so weak? They were simply too fragile and would have died sooner or later anyway. He had merely accelerated the process.

Their deaths didn't linger in his mind. It was their fault they were such frail, pathetic creatures. To think they were delusional enough to call themselves warriors. Ulfar still didn't understand how the tribesmen could be so blind as to acknowledge so many weaklings, to let them believe they were worthy of fighting in front of the Ancestors and the sacred Monolith. It filled him with anger even now.

Many tribesmen loathed him now. He had lost his mind that day, and he understood that. But he…

No! I did the right thing!

He growled inwardly and shook his head to discard the thoughts flashing through his mind.

He had done what his father wanted of him, showing everyone that he was the strongest and the most deserving of the Ancestors' attention. That thought filled him with justification, yet it also reminded him of what happened.

Looking down, Ulfar saw the stump where his arm had once been. Behemoth Blood flowed through him, filling him with power while battering against the walls of suppression he created. The more he thought about it, the angrier he became.

How did he lose? The Ancestors had been on his side. Their blessing and acknowledgment rested on his shoulders, yet that disgusting cretin defeated him? He won with *the Mind*? His veins bulged as Lifeblood surged through his body, his suppression growing weaker with every passing moment.

Hakon… won? That made no sense. It was utter nonsense. If not for Astrid and Björn, that would never have happened.

Ulfar ignored the fact that he should have never lost, even with Astrid and Björn present. He should have never lost. Never!

"Why are they with him?" he growled to himself, ignoring the young warriors struggling to follow him through the dark forest.

Astrid's eyes always rested on Hakon, fueling the hatred in his heart and igniting it into a blazing wildfire. Lovestruck fool. Ignorant woman.

But as miserable as the Battle of the Generation proved to be, Ulfar never forgot the Ancestors. Not all had turned against him.

He may have lost the Battle of the Generation and been shunned by many, yet it was Hakon, of all men in Tribe Taskur, who made a grave mistake. The cretin was foolish enough to believe that it was over, that he was the 'Successor' and that all the glory belonged to him. But it was far from over. Ulfar glanced at his minimized Ancient Scripture, a crazed smile forming on his lips.

Ulfar Tyrath – Level 20
Race – Barbarian
Ancient Power – Behemoth Blood
Bloodline – Blood of Zeldron

The Ancestors were still with him. Their guidance helped him survive and prosper even when the entire tribe was against him. Now, one-armed, he should have grown weaker, yet it felt as though he was stronger than ever. Because that was the truth. He was powerful, as he should be, and all he needed to reach the 2nd Ascension was a true challenge.

And that was exactly what the foolish cretin gave him. He created a challenge, to crush the strongest of Pearot's Barbarians, and through that, he would ascend. He would become the strongest warrior of his generation, the prodigy who reached the 2nd Ascension faster than anyone else in the tribe, possibly among all tribes.

The tribe was foolish to believe Hakon would rise to become the next Warlord, but it was going to be him. Ulfar was destined to be the next Warlord. Even with only one arm, it was only a matter of time.

His father was preparing something, and his legacy was not just for show. The Ancestors were still with him, his downfall momentary and nothing more than a test. A challenge he had to overcome to claim his rightful place.

That was why he joined Hakon. Not to act as his subordinate, but to surpass and crush him. And if he could fight Pearot and establish his claim as the next Warlord at the same time, that would be even better.

It was perfect, just like him.

A dangerous gleam coalesced in Ulfar's eyes. He could fight, shed blood for the Ancestors, reward their trust in him, and ascend.

His Runeskin triggered the moment he located a group of Pearot Barbarians, and he burst out of a cluster of thorny shrubs. Scales grew from his skin, covering most of his bare body within a few heartbeats. His Ancient Power surged and flowed through his Runeskin and scales, their synergy elevating its potency while channeling his hatred.

Wild, unbidden emotions ravaged his being, yet this time, Ulfar did not succumb to his power. He clung to the last threads of control as he crashed into the group of Barbarians at the 2nd Ascension.

This was the beginning of his Saga. The rise of the next Warlord. As for Hakon… he was bound to die at his hands sooner or later.

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CHAPTER 59

Hakon let out a deep breath. He regarded his Ancient Scripture again, a vibrant yet foolish smile blooming on his face. His plan worked out much better than he could have hoped for. It was beautiful.

The section for Resistances no longer existed. In its stead, a new section had appeared, rewriting the bottom portion of his Ancient Scripture:

<u>Passives</u>
[Adaptive Resilience] – [Tier-1]

Passives. It was interesting to see the section, and that [Adaptive Resilience] was the only Skill within it. Especially considering he already had multiple Skills he would have considered ‘passive.’ That included the same Resistance Skills that fused into [Adaptive Resilience].

Hakon wanted to understand the Ancestors’ reasoning behind the different label and why they deemed it important to rank his new Skill differently, but they were silent, as always.

Tiers rather than Levels, he mused as he studied the Ancient Scripture, all while wondering which other Skills could be labeled as passive. As it turned out, none fit the criteria Hakon had formed in his mind. Skills like [Combat Awareness] and [Weakness Detection] would activate as soon as he engaged in combat, but they were not always active. They required a specific trigger, like initiating combat. Even then, he could focus more on those Skills, further increasing their power.

[Mana Sense] was not all that different either. While it was always active at a low intensity, he could fuel it, drawing significantly more power from the Skill if needed, and the same could be said about [Mana Manipulation] and similar abilities.

None of his current Skills truly belonged in ‘Passives,’ for their greatest boon came from active use. With a shrug, Hakon stepped away from the magma pond. He was ready to leave, only to see several warriors staring at him.

“You are still here?” The corner of his lips tugged into a smile at that. Even if he’d hoped for them to stay, he understood why some didn’t stay behind to watch him torture himself.

He also knew how rewarding a Fracture’s Feat was, but that did not change the situation.

“They left with Ulfar, did they not?” It made sense, yet it was also dangerous. Ulfar was strong and could overcome many walls that would kill others, but he was not a leader. He was self-centered.

Björn leveled a glare at him and let out a frustrated snort, yet his eyes shone vividly. “You done here?”

“I am,” Hakon answered, swatting the glare aside. “Ulfar left with the others a while ago to conquer the nearby Fracture.”

It was a statement, not a question, yet Astrid nodded regardless.

“They conquered the Fracture already. I checked on them when we returned from the tribehold, and the vortex to their Fracture was already closing.”

They already succeeded? That was a little surprising, though not entirely unlikely if the nearby Fracture had been anything like the Magma Field. Even an Overflowing Fracture like the Crawling Expanse was no longer as deadly as it had been right after the Rite. Even then, Ulfar would have been able to deal with it. Now, Ulfar was stronger, and he had several 1st Ascension warriors by his side. The only things that could stop them were stupidity or several enemies at the 2nd Ascension. And that was the problem. Both options were bad and likely to happen.

Hakon had no doubt that Ulfar would push into Tribe Pearot’s territory. He knew the Behemoth Blood warrior well enough to understand where he would go and how he would approach it. Loud, imposing, and with the force of a legendary warrior.

“Did you at least warn them?” Hakon turned to Astrid and Björn.

Astrid nodded again. “We tried.”

“If they are stupid enough to follow Ulfar, they deserve nothing but the worst,” Björn growled, earning him several glares.

Hakon didn’t see it like his friend. The young warriors wanted glory and staying with him learning the fused [Adaptive Resilience] had nothing to do with glory. That was his fault. Even if he gained a lot, his actions caused a deviation in their plan.

I should have planned for that to happen. Or put aside [Fire Resistance] for later.

Burning the doubts to cinder, a new plan formed in his mind. They set off shortly after.

Heading to the next Fracture with a group of fourteen warriors turned out to be much easier than he imagined. To begin with, Astrid informed him that the Bloodbearers had acquired Skills that allowed them to move more smoothly through the forest’s difficult terrain. Curious, Hakon observed their movements, pushing [Mana Sense], [Sensory Expansion], and [Flow Observation] to their limits. They were sure-footed and moved almost instinctively through the forest, avoiding low-hanging branches, roots jutting from the ground, and anything else that might slow them down.

He also noticed they were not particularly fast compared to him while he maintained [Silent Steps]. That made him wonder if [Silent Steps] guided him as well, but that alone wasn’t enough. Knowing the others had earned the Ancestors’ approval irked him in ways it most certainly shouldn’t.

Regardless, he focused on their movements and replicated them within a few dozen heartbeats.

With a number of tweaks and adjustments, some of which originated from [Silent Steps], his understanding of their actions and their purpose steadily improved. With every heartbeat, his comprehension deepened, and it wasn’t long after they had set off that the Scripture he desired appeared.

[Skill [Unhindered Movement] has been learned.]

The corner of his lips curled upward, and he activated the new Skill. His stance shifted ever so slightly, and his movements grew more fluid as he blazed through the forest, unhindered by the natural obstacles.

Astrid caught up with him, her eyes trailing his form, but Hakon remained focused on refining his stance and every movement he made. He was sure-footed and instinctively weaved through the forest, finding the easiest path through the dangerous, forbidden lands.

[Unhindered Movement (New) Lv.1 → Lv.2]

“Did you really just…” Astrid’s voice failed her. She was at a loss for words but did not leave his side, even as they closed in on their next target.

It was later into the day than their initial plan anticipated, but the repercussions following their change of plan were minimal. They encountered a few hungry monsters, but that was about it.

“We should be getting closer to the…”Hakon’s quietly spoken words faded into the forest as his hair stood on end. He whirled around, instincts screaming at him. [Combat Awareness] flared to life, followed by [Mana Sense] and [Sensory Expansion]. Not even a full heartbeat later, Hakon caught a pair of flashes. He raised Crusher and pumped mana through his body, pushing [Circulation] to its limit, only to realize he wouldn’t make it in time.

He was fast, but the flashes heading toward the group were terrifying, to say the least. A pair of arrows burst from a set of unassuming bushes and whistled through the air with frightening velocity. Too slow to block anything, [Evasion] had been activated even before the arrows made it out of the bush. Hakon evaded one of the arrows. It barely missed his chest and disappeared into the bush behind him. Björn, on the other hand, was not as fortunate. The second arrow lodged itself deep in his chest.

Surprised, the Blessed warrior looked down at his chest. Yet instead of crying out in pain, he let out a deep, guttural growl, snapping the arrow in half, the tip still stuck in his chest. Readying his weapons, he shot forward, heading straight toward the bush. But the perpetrators in hiding did not remain idle. They released a second volley of arrows, both of which slowed upon contact with a shield made of highly compressed mana.

The arrows pierced the shields, but their momentum faltered enough for Björn to cleave them apart. A pair of Barbarian hunters emerged from the rustling bush, longbows slung across their backs.

[Barbarian – Extreme Threat (2nd Ascension)]
[Barbarian – Extreme Threat (2nd Ascension)]

They weren’t Extreme Threats like the other 2nd Ascension Barbarians they had fought not too long ago, but this time, Hakon didn’t have the opportunity to empower Hoard Impact with much strength. The self-inflicted damage from the magma ponds didn’t count, and the fights with monsters and Pearot Barbarians barely amounted to any empowerment by the Major Runeskin.

Frankly, the situation didn’t look particularly good or bad. It simply was.

Björn accelerated, the ground underfoot crunching as if it were about to rip apart. His great axes whirled through the air in a wild, yet smooth and oddly precise manner, aiming to tear down his opponent’s defense. But his foe was at the 2nd Ascension. He was faster and stronger, and while he was not a Bloodbearer, he was likely Blessed, and with heightened speed.

Björn pumped an enormous amount of mana into his attacks, trying to fight his foe head-on, but he was overwhelmed within moments. Blood flowed down his chest from several cuts, and even the [Mana Bolt] hurtling toward the Barbarian failed to change much. The Barbarian’s hunting knives carved through the bolt of mana with ease. After that, Hakon couldn’t see much more of Björn’s fight, as the other hunter arrived before him.

A moment of distraction was punished with a gash across his chest, forcing Hakon to snap to attention. Neither side said anything. Pearot’s hunters knew they weren’t here for chatter or negotiation, and they couldn’t have been more right.

Pushing [Circulation] to its limit, he evaded another three strikes, only to be caught off guard when the Barbarian sucker-punched him. An instant later, the Barbarian twisted the blade in his tightly clenched fist and attempted to cut him. Hakon released [Mote of Light] into the Barbarian’s face, distracting him long enough to launch a counterattack. Alas, the hunter sensed something amiss and retreated, Crusher whistling past his face.

Accelerating the flow of [Circulation]’s mana was difficult even with [Mana Manipulation] active, but it was necessary to squeeze more power from the Skill. Further enhancing his strength, Hakon charged forward with [Bash]. His opponent rubbed his eyes but was still slightly dazed when

Hakon struck with full force, stunning him for another fraction of a moment. Long enough to bring down mana-infused Crusher with [Bleeding].

Hakon didn’t think for a second that his opponent would fall so easily, so he left a small opening, which the hunter took in exchange for being struck. The hunter moved out of Crusher’s path as quickly as his slowed movements allowed, but his chest still split open, courtesy of [Bleeding].

As for the opening, it was a feint and never really there in the first place.

The moment the Barbarian hunter moved for the opening, trying to deliver a quick killing blow, three [Mana Shields] empowered by [Reinforcement] materialized. The shields cracked and shattered under the hunter’s raw force, but certain death was avoided, and Hakon was rewarded with another opportunity to strike.

He invoked a [Mana Bolt], compressing it as much as possible with all the mana the Skill could take, and released it straight into the Barbarian’s gaping wound. The hunter let out a pained growl, bringing a bright smile to Hakon’s lips.

Then came [Pack Coordination], and the tide of battle changed completely.

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CHAPTER 60

The movement around him seemed to slow as Astrid appeared beside him. She zigzagged around the target, her daggers flashing at her sides, drawing blood wherever they passed.

As troublesome as the hunters were, Astrid swirled around them gracefully, blood spurting everywhere. And with every drop of blood, she grew stronger. The crimson hue formed by Blood Fury empowered her, yet she consumed it and converted it into a burst of power.

Accelerating, Astrid transformed into a deadly beauty, her daggers raking across the hunter's neck. She suffered a fierce blow to her side, which Hakon couldn't block perfectly with [Mana Shield], but he arrived before the hunter and released [Discharge] at full power. The next moment, Crusher's blunt side cracked bones.

The hunter collapsed, battered and throat slit. But he did not give up. Even when the Barbarian was on the ground, he scrambled to his feet, shaking off [Discharge]'s effect. If not for Crusher descending a second time, its blunt side infused with mana and coated with [Reinforcement], he would have succeeded. Unfortunately, Hakon knew better than to underestimate a Barbarian's recovery, especially those at the 2nd Ascension.

He only believed his enemy was dead when he stopped moving. And the hunter certainly didn't look like he was about to stop moving anytime soon.

A spike of danger caught Hakon by surprise. He glanced to the side for a fraction of a second, expecting the other hunters to strike, but they were busy clashing with Taskur's young warriors. Instead, the danger came from ahead.

The injured hunter stopped bleeding. His body expanded and his hand shot upward to block Crusher’s descent with raw power and unfiltered willpower. Crusher impacted with tremendous force, snapping the Barbarian’s massive, paw-like hand. A cacophony of cracking noises and wet snaps echoed in Hakon’s ears, but he did not flinch. He didn’t even bat an eye at the disfigured hand and instead studied the half-dead Barbarian.

The hunter ought to be dead, yet he felt more dangerous than before. His skin burst and his bleeding only got worse. He lost so much blood, it would make sense if he was growing weaker as a result. Hell, he should have been dead within a dozen heartbeats, yet power rocketed through his body.

“Berserk.” Hakon cursed as the hunter shot forward.

He was faster, stronger, and more resilient than previously. His weapon clattered uselessly to the ground as he forsook all thoughts of defending. He reached for Crusher with his unscathed hand and effortlessly disarmed Hakon. Truth be told, Hakon let go of Crusher to escape the hunter’s wrath. Next up, he unsheathed his longsword while conjuring a series of [Mana Bolt]s. A glistening light materialized between them, yet rather than blinding and slowing the hunter, it only enraged him more.

How long can you go on like that?

Crusher flung through the air like the deadly projectile it was, forcing Hakon to dive to the side. His back crashed into small, jagged stones, sending waves of pain through his body, but he rolled over and smoothly returned to his feet. Just in time, because the hunter was already upon him, his strength and speed still rising even as his wounds worsened.

Bolts of mana tore through the air. Most splashed uselessly against the berserk hunter’s skin, but one found purchase in one of many gaping wounds, and another pierced his right eye. Then the hunter arrived before Hakon, who thrust his longsword deep into his foe’s stomach, but he got pummeled.

The berserk hunter couldn’t feel the pain even as the mana-infused blade tore through him. He probably didn’t even realize what was happening when mana rocketed through him or when Hakon twisted the blade, tearing it sideways. He certainly did not notice his intestines spilling out as he punched Hakon in the chest.

Something in Hakon’s chest cracked at the first punch, and he didn’t feel better when the second and third punches landed. His ribs cracked, and

breathing was a challenge all of a sudden, yet the more he endured, the less it hurt. It was not only [Pain Tolerance]'s effect, which was now incorporated into his new Skill, but something else. It was likely his body was growing more resilient to the force of the impacts.

The blunt punches still hurt, and they wreaked havoc on him, though it was also rewarding. Hoard Impact was charging, enhancing him ever so slightly with every bit of energy it hoarded, and [Adaptive Resilience] awakened. It flared to life and helped him adapt.

Hakon twisted his body sideways, escaping the worst damage without getting steamrolled by the berserk hunter. Then, he analyzed the hunter's condition and movement with a glance. There was no more thought behind the Barbarian's actions. Wild instincts were all that prevailed, and they created predictable movements. Patterns that Hakon imprinted on his mind.

As soon as he did, the fight was over. It didn't end for quite a while, but Hakon recovered while the hunter at the 2nd Ascension tried to tear through him. He even charged Hoard Impact until his chest burned from his Major Runeskin rather than from his broken ribs, while also pushing [Adaptive Resilience] to new heights.

Hakon would have continued, his Ancient Power only augmenting his desire to understand more about his new passive Skill, but the battle ended prematurely. The hunter shrunk, his Runeskin out of lifeforce to burn, and collapsed a second time. And this time he did not get back up.

Hakon maintained [Natural Regeneration] and started to meditate as he turned, triggering [Aether Spiral]. It was nowhere near as effective as it should have been with all the adrenaline pumping through his veins, but the vortex in his Core absorbed enough mana to offset some of the energy needed to recover.

I need to be better. He gritted his teeth, half his mind focused on recovering and the other half on his new Skill and the chaos unfurling around him.

Clearly, [Adaptive Resilience] did not only amp up the resistances he'd put into the fusion. It enhanced his resistances to physical damage as well. Not by a lot, but enough to make a difference.

Could have applied [Reinforcement] on myself, Hakon chided himself as the stray thought came to him. He could have fought far more efficiently, wasting less mana and sustaining fewer severe wounds. Sure, he fought a

2nd Ascension hunter with little support from Astrid, but his frustration knew no bounds.

Still, it was fine. He was alive. Even the pain ravaging his body was fine. It was a sign of his growing strength and endurance.

The others were still fighting. Astrid was upon the other hunter, her left arm hanging limply down from her shoulder. Several bad cuts marred her body, yet she fought fiercely. Her opponent was stronger, faster, and far more durable; however, it did not look like he was on the winning side. If anything, Hakon was confident in Astrid's victory. Because, while she took the brunt of most attacks, she was not alone.

Eren conjured a brilliant light right behind Astrid, blinding the hunter. When he regained vision, blood was all he saw. Astrid was nowhere to be seen, but she left behind a trail of blood and pain.

The three 1st Ascension Barbarians of Pearot felt that firsthand. Hakon had no idea where these three Barbarians popped out from, they were just there, but it hardly mattered. They writhed on the ground, one with a severed hand and a hole in his chest, another was gutted like a fish. The third wasn't even writhing anymore. Björn's great axe was lodged in her neck, splitting it wide open.

Another flare of light illuminated the surroundings, and Eren dashed forward. He burst through the dazzling light alongside several fellow Barbarians and attacked Pearot's hunter in a pack.

The Lightcaller, just like everyone else, had improved greatly. His Ancient Power had yet to be used in a more versatile way, but Hakon was confident in Eren. It was only a matter of time before the Lightcaller created a personalized fighting style.

The young warriors' greatest weaknesses didn't appear as glaring as they used to be, ensuring their survival. Well, *almost*.

Unleashing his Ancient Power and two Runeskins near-simultaneously, the wounded hunter retaliated. He slowed and accelerated to top speed and beyond in the next moment, fiery tendrils pouring out of his fists. He punched through three reinforced mana shields without slowing. If anything, more power erupted from the hunter as his fist tore through a Bloodbearer's chest.

A heartbeat later, Astrid and Hakon emerged at the hunter's side, eyes burning with hatred. Their weapons flashed dangerously, [Bleeding] and [River of Blood] triggered.

His longsword arced through the air, sharpened by mana, and it carved through the enemy’s arm like butter. The hunter’s skin and flesh tore apart and ruptured at [Bleeding]’s effect, but this was just the beginning. Astrid twisted her upper body and swirled around to reach Hakon’s side, her blades digging deep into the gash.

The hunter gritted his teeth, his bloodlust potent enough to nearly manifest, but Hakon was seeing red on his own already. His free hand shot toward his handaxe, and he pumped it full of mana before cleaving the Barbarian’s arm, cutting it off.

His axe didn’t survive, but maybe the Bloodbearer would. As long as they killed the hunter and removed the flame-wreathed hand stuck in the Bloodbearer’s chest, he could survive. Maybe, with a lot of luck and even more mana.

What Hakon failed to notice was that his danger sense never stopped tingling. It only grew more intense the longer the battle lasted.

Even when Björn joined the battlefield, war axes tearing through the hunter’s neck, his danger sense didn’t fade.

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INTERLUDE

FJORD

Tribe Taskur had done it. They learned about the Fractures the chieftain had kept open, and about the resources they acquired over the last three cycles. They knew, and they had come to stop them, but it was already too late.

Fjord and the hunters skulked through the forest, their steps mostly silent, their presence almost perfectly hidden. Almost. Maybe moving through the dark forest would have been easier if his hunters hadn't been injured, but pain and suffering were the price of an honorable battle.

Tribe Taskur's warriors had been located near the Mountain Island Fracture. The same warriors seen emerging from the Murky Swamp Fracture before the portal fizzled out. The young, one-armed Barbarian made that easy enough to tell. It was no feat to distinguish him because of his power, aggression, but also appearance.

Fjord and his hunters attacked them, following the chieftain's order. They struck mercilessly, arrows whistling through the air before they charged into battle.

The fight didn't last. Fjord and his hunters eliminated several Barbarians before pulling away, following the warfare strategy that had been forced upon them. It was unsatisfactory, and Fjord would have sworn that the strategy displeased the Ancestors if not for the Scriptures saying the opposite. The Ancestors were a mystery, their thoughts elusive. Nobody could read them, yet the Scriptures were as clear as the silver moon. They were all Pearot needed to know that they and their chieftain were still in the Ancestors' favor.

So, they retreated into the dark forest and watched the young Barbarians as they collapsed. They retreated as well, even if none of them looked particularly pleased.

Tribe Taskur is strong. Fjord remembered what the chieftain said less than a moon ago. That the Shaman was going to visit Tribe Taskur again after cycles of silence. That was proven correct now that he and his hunters fought the young warriors of Taskur. Some were cycles older than the youngest warriors of Tribe Pearot, yet they had not awakened their Ancient Power for nearly as long. And despite that, they were strong enough to wound Fjord and his hunters.

One of his hunters caught up to him, a bad cut spreading from his temples down to his jaw.

“Invaders. Tribe Taskur,” he reported quickly, his voice a deep rumble.

“Young warriors?” Fjord asked, to which the hunter responded with a simple nod.

“Lead the way.” He motioned, his expression as calm as a lake even though his mind was in chaos.

They sacrifice their youngest. Why? The other tribes respected Taskur. Some even feared them, which Fjord considered a gross exaggeration.

Chieftain Ragna of Tribe Taskur was an old monster. He was a powerhouse and not someone anyone would want to face head-on, yet Tribe Pearot was stronger. They had accumulated more strength while Taskur rested on their chieftain’s power. Pearot had far more warriors at the 4th Ascension, and it was only a matter of time before their chieftain would be powerful enough to fight Ragna.

He can fight him now. We are stronger already. Fjord was certain, his steps accelerating as the hunters ahead slowed. He approached the thicket with nimble movements and stared ahead at the bloody chaos unfolding before his eyes.

A scene of death and destruction registered in his mind. Two hunters he’d trained for cycles, both a few Levels into the 2nd Ascension, lay dead on the ground, their bodies disfigured. Near them were their apprentices, three young hunters at the 1st Ascension. They hadn’t been weak. Fjord remembered they had prepared for their final test. They would have reached the 2nd Ascension in a cycle at the latest.

Now they were dead, their bodies dispersing in blue mist, their souls joining the Ancestors to feast with them.

His mind went blank. Fjord was familiar with death. He did not participate in the tribal wars between Pearot and Onyr, yet he witnessed his fair share of combat. But the scene before him did not look like mere combat.

Taskur's warriors, no more than ten of them, had been fighting the five Pearot hunters, yet only one of them was dead. Fjord's eyes narrowed at the young warrior who had half a smoking arm stuck in his chest.

He's still alive. The Barbarian twitched and grew weaker with every breath he took.

None of Taskur's warriors died fighting the five hunters. Even worse, the strongest of Taskur's warriors was at the peak of the 1st Ascension. Fjord was certain, yet he couldn't believe it.

"Strike them down," Fjord hissed to his hunters. He didn't know if the chieftain would have approved of his actions, but he knew one thing for sure: the warriors before him had to die. Just like the one-armed Barbarian. Fjord should have killed him when the opportunity arose.

The hunters did not strike immediately. They did everything they could to stay unnoticed. Then they watched the young Taskur warriors as they rested. Some gathered around the half-dead Bloodbearer. They talked to him, forced him to increase the output of his Ancient Power, and then they removed what was left of the Pearot hunter's arm. Blood flowed, but it was only the beginning.

The Bloodbearer showed signs of recovering, and that was unacceptable. Fjord and his hunters spread out, eyes lingering on the Bloodsteel arrow tips with a savage smile. The black steel had turned crimson from all the Lifeblood-infused blood it absorbed, transforming them into the perfect weapons.

It was wasteful to use them on Taskur's young warriors, but Fjord made his hunters use the Bloodsteel arrows regardless.

At last, he gave the signal and the arrows sang the song of death.

One warrior, the same one Fjord's attention had returned to over and over again, spun around even before the arrows reaped death. He let out a roar and raised his massive, gnarly weapon, blocking the arrows coming for

his life. In the same moment, shields manifested out of nowhere, shimmering in a faint, azure light.

Fjord had never seen structures like that before. He knew metal shields, but that, whatever it was, was not metal. Fortunately, it was not as tough as metal either, not that it would have made any difference. The Bloodsteel arrows, carrying the lethal force of 2nd Ascension hunters, tore through the air and found purchase in their targets. It was already an unwelcome surprise that the young warrior managed to block two Bloodsteel arrows, and the shields that absorbed some of the arrows' force were certainly not welcome either. They worked regardless.

The recovering Bloodbearer was the first to fall victim to a pair of arrows. As for the other Barbarians, they were ready. While no one seemed to know what was happening, their leader's call was all they needed to raise their guard. No one hesitated, signaling undeterred trust. That only infuriated Fjord more as the young warriors twisted their way out of the Bloodsteel arrows' trajectory. Only one managed to escape their wrath fully, while only one of the young warriors was struck in the heart. The others took the arrows to their shoulders, hands, or chests.

And the young warrior who died was barely at the 1st Ascension. He'd been the weakest.

Furious, Fjord snorted. He slung his bow across his shoulder and was about to charge when vibrant brown eyes flicked toward him. A densely grown bush separated them, making it impossible for Taskur's warriors to see Fjord or the other hunters, yet that set of eyes promising death locked right onto him.

Eyes that appeared oddly familiar, yet so unfamiliar, tore through the bush, making him shudder.

Then, as if on cue, more structures materialized around the warrior, the strongest as well as the leader of the group. Bolts, small blue projectiles, coalesced around him and whistled through the air, tearing through the undergrowth, precisely aimed at the hunters' hiding spots. Another arrow came flying, yet the eyes of Taskur's young leader were already in the right direction even before the Bloodsteel arrow released. A shield coalesced, slowing the arrow, only to be shattered by a highly condensed projectile.

"Cowards," he snarled that single word, and it reverberated throughout the dark forest, reaching the ears of all those supposed to hear.

Filled with fury, the hunters charged. Fjord was among them, and just like the others, he was ready to kill them all. Yet neither he nor the other hunters targeted the leader of the young warriors.

Why? Because they were not confident in their victory. Because it felt like he was everywhere and that he could see everything.

It was the hunters who initiated the surprise attack, so why did it feel like the young warrior was in full control of everything? Fjord didn’t know, and he hoped he would never have to find out. As long as that guy died, everything would be fine.

He had to die.

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CHAPTER 61

Hakon knew what was about to happen. He even saw the arrow as it arced through the air like a magnificent star streaking across the bountiful sky. Yet he couldn't do anything about it. His mana structures were not durable enough, his mana too slow. If he had been closer, maybe something would have changed, but as it was, all Hakon could do was watch as the arrowhead lodged into the side of a young warrior's head. It pierced through and through. The Barbarian was dead before his head hit the wet soil.

The fight was already over, the victor decided, but yet another of the young warriors fell victim to Pearot's arrows.

Diving to the side, Hakon caught a glimpse of Astrid, her body drenched in blood, wearing a savage smile as she turned into a blur. She was in her element, wielding power no warrior at the 1st Ascension should be able to summon, yet she did, and she knew how to use it. Astrid blocked a hunter's sword with one of her daggers, while the other snaked forward, finding purchase in the hunter's lungs.

Her opponent stood no chance, and it was not long before more blood flowed, further empowering Astrid's legendary power. She didn't need Hakon's help, but the same couldn't be said about the others. They struggled, and so did he. But he was still alive, and if the Ancestors so willed it, Hakon wouldn't die anytime soon.

Nooo! Hakon roared out in his mind, too weak to do anything. He barely stood, his leg numb like it never truly belonged to him. It was surprising he hadn't lost it to the vicious axe that cut through it with ease.

Mana poured out of him in quantities he didn't even know were possible, though maybe he needed that much mana to keep death at bay. No, he was certain the mana in his Core, pathways, and every other part of his body was the sole reason he survived. And maybe the membrane of [Reinforcement] holding his body together.

Hakon used [Compression] on half a dozen layers of [Reinforcement] he'd conjured and spread all over his body, but it was neither mana-efficient nor enough to keep him combat-ready.

"Heal faster, useless body," he growled weakly, funneling more mana into [Natural Regeneration] than he thought possible. His body reacted to the healing energy coursing through him. With his natural regeneration amplified, Hakon visibly saw himself healing at a rapid pace, his flesh knitting itself back together.

Looking around, the vicinity was a mess. The epitome of death and blood.

Thorstur lay there, spiked with arrows, and he was not the only one of Taskur's warriors no longer among the living. Unmoving bodies, some unrecognizable, sprawled across the ground and over each other. They were everywhere, highlighting his failure.

Four. That was how many warriors they lost to Pearot's hunters. They killed the same number of hunters, all of whom had already reached the 2nd Ascension, yet that didn't fill Hakon with pride. It only deepened his anger.

More hunters were alive. They'd retreated into the forest, yet Hakon was sure they would return. He could no longer sense their presence, nor could he locate them with [Scent of Lifelight], no matter how high he pushed his senses, but that meant little. They could be hiding somewhere, his Skills too weak to pick them up. And if they were still nearby, which Hakon did not doubt for a second, they would strike again, their arrows reaping the lives of all those who survived the first wave.

Hakon was furious. He wanted nothing more than to twist the hunters' necks and tear them apart right in front of the Ancestors, but forcing a pursuit would result in certain death. Their deaths. Astrid had seen better days, a bad cut across her left eye worsening her eyesight while one arm still hung limply at her side. She was battered, but that was the case for

everyone. Björn was a mess, and Eren was fortunate to have made it through the fight. He'd nearly been gutted. Björn stopped the attack with his own body before beheading their opponent. It was a risky sacrifice, one that nearly resulted in Björn's death, but his Runeskin helped him endure and recover.

Even when everyone was on the verge of death, one fact remained. They were alive. The mana flooding every part of their bodies ought to have been the only reason the young warriors still breathed, yet they were still among the living. For now.

Anger threatened to consume him, but Hakon forced his mind and body to calm down. He funneled the anger into his mana and poured it out into the world, knowing that the emotions and mana surging through him were too much to handle. He could only take so much. Enough to recover and keep going, but not enough to affect him negatively.

Taking several deep, deliberate breaths, he focused on the situation. The dead could no longer be helped. Now, he had to make sure the living stayed that way.

That said, Hakon checked his Scriptures first.

[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]
[Experience threshold met. Level Up!]

The last fight pushed him more than anything before. He couldn't remember much about it, but the Scriptures acknowledged the challenge he and the young warriors went through.

Level 20. Hakon was half-certain he had done enough to warrant his 2nd Ascension, but the Ancestors didn't seem to agree. The wall was still there, blocking him.

However, Hakon knew better. It was only a matter of time before he would ascend. And then, once he reached the 2nd Ascension, he would be strong enough to decimate the hunters. Kill them before they could even think about harming his people.

Maybe with his strengthened physique and all the Skill improvements he'd acquired, Hakon would be strong enough to defeat the hunters now… once he'd recovered.

With that in mind, he studied the Scripture.

[Scripture of Improvement.
Throwing Lv.8 → Lv.9
Intimidation Lv.6 → Lv.10
Pack Coordination Lv.8 → Lv.10
Dash Lv.13 → Lv.14
Grappling Lv.11 → Lv.12
Weakness Detection Lv.22 → Lv.23
Weapon Mastery Lv.17 → Lv.20
Bash Lv.7 → Lv.9
Bleeding Lv.7 → Lv.10
Circulation Lv.14 → Lv.16
Mana Sense Lv.22 → Lv.23
Split Focus Lv.17 → Lv.19
Mana Infusion Lv.8 → Lv.9
Sensory Expansion Lv.13 → Lv.14
Flow Observation Lv.13 → Lv.14
Mana Manipulation Lv.17 → Lv.19
Mana Shaping Lv.15 → Lv.18
Mote of Light Lv.8 → Lv.9
Reinforcement Lv.8 → Lv.11
Compression Lv.5 → Lv.7
Mana Bolt Lv.11 → Lv.13
Mana Shield Lv.7 → Lv.10
Aether Spiral Lv.2 → Lv.3
Unhindered Movement Lv.2 → Lv.5
Predator’s Gaze (New) Lv.1
Edge of Awareness (New) Lv.1 → Lv.2]

The list was long, almost uncomfortably long, yet it filled Hakon with pride. The Scripture gathered all his improvements from both fights against the hunters, showing him just how much he had improved. Truth be told, he improved greatly.

Reaching Level 20 in such a short period was already enough of an achievement. It was almost certainly worth a Feat, and that did not even take his full strength into account. Every waking heartbeat was a moment he used to gain more strength. It was what he lived for, and he would not give it up for anything.

As confusing as his list was, Hakon studied it thoroughly. Some Skills had either reached Level 20 and required yet another condition to display an upgrade, and then there were the Skills he was almost certain would fuse with one another. He was working toward a Skill Fusion, although there was no proof that such fusions existed or that he had the right Skills in the first place. It was merely his instincts and the prodding of his Ancient Power that guided him down paths no one else had taken.

He cracked his knuckles, which tore open a gash on the back of his hand. Frustrated, he conjured a mana construct to stop the bleeding. It was not good, and it wouldn't last long; the structure came to him easily enough, though. Almost no effort was put into the small rectangular sheet that now covered the gash.

Looking at the small construct made him wonder how he would have used it if he'd been a Healer. He'd infused his power into the construct to give himself and his people localized healing.

Hakon kicked a hunter's corpse in frustration before taking yet another deep breath. They surprised them from the forest's thicket. He didn't think the first hunters had any idea of Taskur's invasion, but the other hunters knew. The surprise attack had been planned, somewhat, and…

He shook his head.

Not important, he had to remind himself, forcing his thoughts back to the important parts.

There had been many injured hunters, and they were all at the 2nd Ascension. Did they know about the invasion? Hakon's eyes narrowed. Some hunters had been seriously hurt. They'd been too exhausted to use their full strength.

Did they fight Ulfar and the others before they found us?

While he couldn't be sure about that, knowing it was possible made his course of action easier.

"We need to move," Hakon called out. "Now!"

The others groaned and complained under their breath, yet they complied and scrambled to their feet.

He retrieved a fingertip-sized crystal from his pouch, a gift from his father, and crushed it without hesitation. Their plan took a turn in the wrong direction, forcing his hand to bring out his father's gift. Hopefully, it would be enough. Frustrating, but not unexpected. The forest offered surprises at every corner, and they had accounted for that.

Hakon channeled the full power of [Sensory Expansion], [Mana Sense], and his other sensory Skills to empower [Scent of Lifelight]. Focusing on the familiar ‘scents of life’ was far from easy, but it came to him as he channeled thrice as much mana into each of his Skills.

His head hurt like it was about to split at any moment. Not even [Adaptive Resilience] was enough to help him endure the assault on his mind, but that was fine. He limped in the direction they came from until he found something. His mind was mush at that point, so he reduced the mana output as much as possible, yet his head remained a mess.

He was exhausted. He could only hope his leg wouldn’t fall off, and yet he maintained several mana-based Skills to push farther and find the fools who should have never left his side.

And he did find them. At least, what was left of them.

Ulfar was alive, which was not particularly surprising, but Hakon had never seen him look this bad. His Runeskin scales were shattered in several spots, a chunk of his chest was missing, and he had several deep cuts in his neck, most of which should have been lethal. How Ulfar lived, Hakon didn’t know, but Behemoth Blood certainly played a major role. Anyone else with Ulfar’s injuries would be dead now.

He’s mana-drained, Hakon noticed, which told him enough to understand the situation. So were the corpses.

Ulfar’s group had been larger than Hakon’s. The fool of a legendary warrior used everyone’s excitement to pull them to his side, promising them a great Saga and whatnot. In the end, they failed. Hakon and his friends killed as many enemies as they lost; enemies that should have been strong enough to defeat them.

As for Ulfar and all those that survived, they hadn’t killed anyone, or the Ancestors would have rewarded them with a Level up. Not everyone, maybe, but a handful at most. Now, they were out of mana to channel into their recovery Skills, and it didn’t look like they had enough energy left to empower their Ancient Powers.

Hakon ground his teeth, yet he retained the calmness of a Healer as he stepped forward, all eyes turning to him.

“Let’s get out of here.” That was not a request. It was an order of the Successor.

Ulfar noticed him and turned a furious red, fists clenched. “You want us to flee? To run away like dogs?”

Are you serious? Hakon looked at the sky. *Ancestors… why did you give him a legendary Ancient Power?*

He spun toward the legendary fool, struggling to keep his emotions under control. [Intimidation] erupted from him, but it was not nearly enough to affect Ulfar. The Behemoth Blood warrior snorted. That was the wrong reaction. Not even a full heartbeat later, a [Mana Bolt] whistled through the air, tearing through a bad gash on Ulfar's leg and forcing him to the ground.

"You want to fight like that, Ulfar? Is that really what you want? To die like a useless, pathetic dog when you actually have the chance to retreat and recover enough to seek vengeance? Do you, wielder of a legendary power, really want to die that much?" Hakon let out a deep growl. "I expected more from you."

Ulfar scrambled back to his feet, a roar erupting forth, yet Hakon couldn't be bothered. He ignored the challenge thrown his way and helped those who couldn't walk properly.

"We have to leave. Fast, before they return with reinforcements," he called out, all while [Edge of Awareness] flared to life. It was more instinctive than intentional, but Hakon used Enhanced Comprehension to learn more about the Skill, its intentions, and the warning it carried.

[Edge of Awareness Lv.2 → Lv.3]
[Edge of Awareness Lv.3 → Lv.4]

The Skill screamed at him, and the more he learned about it, the worse he felt.

"Stop," he called out to the young warriors as they prepared for a hurried departure.

Their heads flicked toward him, but all they could see and hear was Hakon, realizing their misfortune.

"They're already here."

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CHAPTER 62

The bushes rustled. While not all that uncommon in the dark forest, the snarls and low growls that followed were. A sense of familiarity tugged at Hakon's worn-out mind, but he failed to organize his thoughts before a scaled, muddy-brown head popped out of the shrubs.

A long neck, covered in the same muddy scales, followed, and attached to it was a massive body. Hakon tensed when the creature emerged, with its shoulder height much greater than his own. While he didn't have to use [Inspection] to understand that the creature was much stronger than he was, Hakon did it instinctively.

[Mature Drake – Lethal Threat]

The Scripture was black, only highlighting what Hakon already knew. The monsters emerging from the forest promised death. Their death.

Even worse, there was not only one Mature Drake. More stepped out of the undergrowth, bulldozing through it without a care in the world. Their deaths were already certain from that alone, yet it got worse. For the Mature Drakes were not mere monsters. They were mounts, saddles slung across their backs, Barbarian men and women seated atop them.

Mounts belonging to the greatest warriors of Tribe Pearot.

[Barbarian – Lethal Threat (?th Ascension)]
[Barbarian – Lethal Threat (?th Ascension)]
[Barbarian – Lethal Threat (?th Ascension)]

[Barbarian – Lethal Threat (?th Ascension)]

…

[Inspection Lv.11 → Lv.12]

Pearot's warriors towered above Hakon and the others from the backs of their massive mounts. Beast and rider blurred into a single, overwhelming presence, a formidable mixture of muscle, iron, and raw bloodlust fused together. It was terrifying, to say the least.

The Mature Drakes shifted beneath the Barbarians with slow, heavy breaths, their desire to rip their prey apart apparent in every movement, yet the Barbarians seated atop them remained unnervingly still. It was almost like moving around was beneath them.

Their height alone forced Hakon to look high up, yet it was their shadows stretching long across the ground and pressing down on everything beneath them that made it increasingly difficult to breathe. Even though the Drakes and riders were still a good distance away, their sheer scale made him feel like they were right there, breathing down his neck. As if a single heartbeat separated him from life and death.

The man, a terrifying presence of raw, unbidden power, asked as the moments of silence stretched long and wide, "Did you have fun?"

He leaned forward, his mount letting out a deep, guttural growl. "Ragna's son, I asked you something." The corners of his lips curled into a broad, toothy smile. "Did you have fun attacking my Fractures? Conquering them? Killing my people!"

His smile was bright, almost excited, yet his eyes were cold and rational, as though he was always thinking several steps ahead.

Is that Pearot's chieftain? What… is he doing here! Hakon's hair stood on end.

Rogarth Pearot sat relaxed in his saddle, weapon resting loosely while the reins sprawled over his lap. His broad smile shifted into something smug yet savage, small and all-knowing, as his eyes drifted over the scene unfolding before him. Disdain marred his face for a fraction of a second. He was fully aware that it was none other than a bunch of young warriors who tarnished his reputation. They invaded his land, conquered his Fractures, and killed his people. Hunters who should have been stronger than the young warriors of Taskur had been killed.

Taskur’s warriors didn’t look well, yet they were certain to have earned the Ancestors’ approval, and Chieftain Rogarth clearly did not like that at all. But the disdain faded, and the smug smile tugging at his lips returned.

“Do you want me to be honest?” Hakon asked, ignoring the voice in the back of his head. He took a small but deliberate step closer to the threat that was certain to kill him if nothing changed.

“Of course.” Chieftain Rogarth laughed, yet his eyes remained deadly cold. “I expect nothing less than the truth from Taskur’s Successor.”

The Drake riders let out low chuckles, their voices laced with ridicule aimed at none other than him.

There was no urgency in their behavior, no hint of the slightest doubt. Only the calm certainty of beings who had already decided the outcome. Around them, the air seemed to tighten. Movement slowed, and the voices of the dark forest faded. Even the ground beneath Hakon felt heavier the longer he endured the chieftain’s presence.

But it was not just strength that imposed itself upon the dark forest. It was the unshakable belief that nothing before them could overcome what awaited Hakon and the others.

“Did you really think my people wouldn’t notice anything?” Chieftain Rogarth asked smugly.

Hakon didn’t think so. They never believed Pearot would be oblivious to their invasion. Sure, they thought it would take a little longer for the chieftain and his Elders to react, but by the looks of it, Tribe Pearot had been prepared for a large-scale battle.

The plan had been badly timed, or else they would have conquered a few more Fractures before retreating into Taskur’s land. After all, they had yet to step out of the forbidden land. Truthfully, they hadn’t taken a single step into Pearot’s territory. The edges of Tribe Pearot’s land were far enough away to justify the plan Hakon and his father came up with.

But it failed. They did.

Except…

“You conquered Onyr.”

Rogarth raised an eyebrow at Hakon. Though their chief didn’t respond, the Barbarians behind the chieftain did. Not with words, with their bodies. The excitement in their eyes, the vibrant smiles that spoke of bloodshed and honorable combat.

Tribe Onyr was no more. His father told him Onyr wouldn't fall within the next two cycles, but he had either overestimated Onyr's strength or underestimated Pearot's power.

Rogarth, as far as Hakon was concerned, was not all that old. He was only a handful of cycles older, yet he wielded a legendary power, one that gave him the strength needed to kill Onyr's chieftain. Or suppress him. Regardless, Hakon was confident Chieftain Rogarth wouldn't have allowed his Elders to pummel Onyr's chieftain. He wanted to crush him with his own power, and that was exactly what he did.

"I'm glad we came here so early." Hakon let out a heavy sigh. "You know, my father likes balance. I never understood it, and I still don't, honestly, but it is what it is." He shrugged lightly, ignoring the furrowed brows coming his way. "But that changed because of you. My father thought we had another cycle or two before you and your tribe would become a problem. That's not the case any longer."

Taking a deep breath, he met the chieftain's eyes with the same coldness Rogarth directed at him. "He will find out what you did, no matter what you do now. Whether you kill me or not, he will learn about Onyr. And what do you think he will do then?"

The corners of his lips curled into a smug smile. A bona fide copy of the smile the Drake riders wore this whole time.

"In that case, it does not matter if you survive. If Chieftain Ragna finds out anyway." Rogarth Pearot waved dismissively, looking as calm as a lake on the surface. Deeper down, Hakon could see movement. He was thinking, mind churning, and whatever he was thinking about made him angrier with every heartbeat.

Hakon's smile and the calmness he exuded only irritated him more.

"Did you really think we would invade your tribe without a plan? For someone who kept the Fractures open to create a training ground and resource field for his people, that does not make any sense, does it?" He chuckled in Chieftain Rogarth's face.

The legendary warrior was powerful. There was no doubt about that. However, he was also a schemer. In a way, he was not all that different from Hakon, his mind nothing more than a slimy, squishy mass stuck between his ears. He planned, schemed, and followed a path unlike that of traditional Barbarians.

“I hope you don’t think I was overzealous enough to guide the young generation into forbidden land without telling anyone.” Hakon snickered. “I am not the chieftain. Yet.”

His father was a nuisance at times, and it would take more than the last few nights to forgive him for taking his mother away, but Hakon could trust him with his life. A familiar sensation prickled at the edges of his perception. It closed in rapidly, followed by several more sensations prickling against his senses.

It worked! Hakon nearly shouted out loud, not at all worried his father’s crystal would fail. Fortunately, it did not.

[Scent of Lifelight Lv.3 → Lv.4]

Chieftain Rogarth had been a little irritated before, but he wasn’t worried. Even when Hakon spoke, Rogarth was unbothered. That changed the moment Hakon looked to the right, his lips curling into an excited, victorious smile.

“Thank the Ancestors,” Hakon muttered, the relief in his voice barely concealed.

One moment, silence flooded the dark forest, and the next, the forest bent to the crescent blade that tore down everything too slow to react.

Power unlike anything Hakon had ever felt before rocketed through the forest, familiar yet several magnitudes greater than anything he could have imagined.

He saw it one moment and when he blinked, the crimson crescent blade was nowhere to be seen. In its stead was a path of destruction. Shrubs fell apart and crumbled, and even the oldest trees collapsed, a single, clean cut marking where the blade had passed through.

Hakon recognized it as a structure, yet that was all he could tell through his inexperienced eyes. Oh, and that it was lethal.

Chieftain Rogarth and the Elders were no longer seated on their Drakes. They’d leaped back, their weapons brandished, Ancient Powers erupting from them. Rogarth looked more dangerous than ever, his body covered in thick scales and expanded to twice Hakon’s size. Yet as dangerous as the legendary warrior felt, the crimson crescent blade had been more terrifying.

In a single instance, it not only cleaved through part of the dark forest, it tore through the Mature Drakes, removing the Lethal Threats from

existence. Creatures, each strong enough to effortlessly kill Hakon and the young warriors in their prime, were eradicated just like that.

And the perpetrator walked across the path of destruction with the calmness of a man strong enough to split mountains.

Chieftain Ragna of Tribe Taskur had arrived, the ground beneath him trembling violently, as if it had waited for him.

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Even though his father's pressure was not directed at him or his people, Hakon felt it. It made his hair stand up on end and froze his body. He couldn't even fathom how the Pearot Barbarians felt as the crushing force descended with raw fury.

Chieftain Rogarth shuddered for the briefest second, barely long enough for Hakon to notice, as his father's stony gaze landed on him. It drifted past him, and his Zweihänder flashed. There was barely a blur before a portion of the forest exploded. A long cut, several meters deep and over a dozen meters long, was carved into the ground where trees and shrubs had dominated only a moment ago. Soil, pebbles, and all kinds of plants were propelled in all directions, while the Barbarians standing between Chieftain Ragna and the destruction collapsed to the ground. Their eyes widened as their upper bodies slid from their lower halves.

Death was all that lingered, along with the ground that stirred to the chieftain's power.

Hakon swallowed hard at the execution, for that was exactly what it was.

He didn't even see the attack that ended the lives of a dozen 2nd and 3rd Ascension warriors. It was simply too fast. Goosebumps covered his skin, yet there was also a part of his mind that wanted him to do more than watch in awe. Part of Hakon's mind urged him to watch more intently and to understand.

Chieftain Ragna regarded his enemies calmly and, without bothering with the danger his actions entailed, looked back to meet his son's eyes. A

sharp nod was all they exchanged before his attention returned to Chieftain Rogarth and his Elders.

Hakon's father told him he wouldn't step in. That he would give the young generation the space and time they needed to earn the Ancestors' honor. To build their Saga and embrace the power that was gifted to them. However, he would step in if someone worthy of his presence entered the battlefield to stop him. Even though Hakon crushed the crystal his father gave him prematurely, he'd been certain something was about to happen. And he had been right.

Their plan may not have worked out the way they initially intended, but the turn of events was not necessarily bad. Pearot's chieftain and Elders were present. They ought to be worthy enough for his father.

Good timing. Hakon grimaced, glad his father responded fast enough.

Watching the chieftain as he stepped closer to Rogarth and the Pearot Elders, his heart skipped a beat, for his father moved like death incarnate.

Chieftain Rogarth and the Elders also noticed that. They tensed up, power rolling out of them, and attacked in unison. Hakon's father responded in kind. Crimson aura flowed out of him in gargantuan waves that threatened to swallow the entire forest before he blurred. A crimson flash was all that was left behind as Taskur's chieftain faced the strongest of Pearot alone.

But this was not only a fight between the strongest. Their fight would decide the fate of the tribes, yet there were more of Pearot's Barbarians thirsting for bloodshed. And they were not alone, as more familiar scents of life burst through the path of destruction his father had caused.

Astrid's mother was the first to emerge from the path of destruction. Hakon hadn't seen her fight before, but the pressure coming from her was enough to force him to watch more intently as she leaped into action. She avoided obstacles coming her way with ease, her lithe body twisting and swirling in ways he'd seen from Astrid, yet her mother was far beyond young Astrid. She was faster, stronger, and much deadlier, power rippling from her in raging streams.

After Astrid's mother joined the battle of the chieftains and Elders, the tide of battle didn't change immediately, yet it felt like something was about to change. The prodding in the back of his head only grew more intense, urging him to adapt and surpass all those presences.

More of Taskur’s warriors followed behind Chieftain Ragna and Astrid’s mother. The older Barbarians, 2nd and 3rd Ascension warriors, let out mighty roars, their bloodlust ever-present. They fanned out, ignoring the central fight to clash with enemies they could face head-on. Even the Healer was present, surrounded by several 3rd Ascension warriors known for their savage, self-destructive fighting style.

“Join us, young warriors!” he hollered at the top of his lungs, his Runeskins shimmering and flaring to life. Power rolled out of the Healer, yet it was unlike anything produced by the other Barbarians’ Runeskins and Ancient Powers.

Emerald light flowed from him and spread rapidly. It seeped into Taskur’s warriors, augmented their natural regeneration, and flooded them with enough life force to keep them awake for weeks, or to last through a tribal war, allowing even those barely holding on to life to return to battle.

Looking down, Hakon’s body knit itself together at a shocking speed. It itched terribly, but if that was the price for a rapid recovery, Hakon would pay it a thousandfold.

Maybe the young warriors were not ready to fight Tribe Pearot head-on, yet nothing stopped them from trying. They were forced into a tribal war, and they would be fools to reject the opportunity. The chieftain protected them from certain death, and they had the rest of the tribe at their back to help.

Taskur’s youngest warriors were not alone. They were a tribe, a unit, and every single one of them knew their tribe would die for them. How could they not be willing to do the same for the tribe?

[Pack Coordination] triggered. Hakon dashed toward a bustling mass of brawling Barbarians.

He let out a thunderous roar, which resonated with the shouts and roars that followed from behind. Even though he couldn’t see his allies, he felt them. Their lifelight was ever-present to his senses, just like the changes to [Natural Regeneration]’s Skill Upgrade.

[Uninterrupted use of Natural Regeneration: 23%]
[24%]

It ticked upward, so he kept feeding it, knowing damn well the next bad gash was waiting for him.

Licking his lips, he stormed the Barbarians, feeling the Ancestors' gaze upon him. They were watching, and they would enjoy this fight, no matter who emerged victorious.

Ramping up his sensory Skills, [Mana Sense] included, Hakon took in the situation. He noticed one of the older Taskur warriors' skin turn grey. A horn jutted from his forehead and his muscles bulged as he bulldozed into a group of warriors. They slashed at him with newfound vigor, trying to cut him down. A blazing sword tore into the grey-skinned Barbarian, his foes only paying attention to him. Hakon's eyes narrowed, and he was about to intervene when the Healer's emerald light reached the grey-skinned warrior. At the same time, their allies arrived, taking advantage of the distraction.

The sound of metal clashing, the roars of pain and victory, and the loss of blood and body parts could be found everywhere, yet Hakon pushed further. His perception at an all-time high, he weaved around an enemy, weakness exposed, and stabbed him in the side.

A bone dagger was all he used, yet it was filled to the brim with compressed mana. The moment it came into contact with the Barbarian's steel-like skin, it should have shattered, but it did not. [Reinforcement] held the blade together until it penetrated the target's first layer of defense. [Bleeding] triggered almost immediately, and so did [Discharge]. An explosion of mana, one much more destructive than intended, tore through his opponent's side, but that was only to his advantage as an older Taskur Barbarian stepped forward, war axe crashing down.

Hakon didn't even look their way as he moved on. He twisted out of the trajectory of a javelin sizzling through the air and blocked another warrior's attack before they could even accumulate enough momentum. A simple, unmoving [Mana Shield] conjured above the target's rising hand was all it took.

His head flicked left and right, analyzing and digesting every single piece of information coming his way. Responding to every threat was impossible, and it was not what his people would have wanted. He was not there to tarnish their Saga. He was there to save as many lives as possible while ensuring he also made it out of this alive.

And even if he did die, Hakon was certain the Ancestors would be proud of him. He may not be shedding as much blood as others, but the little things he did led to the bloodshed the Ancestors loved so much.

A perfectly timed glistening light, a bone dagger cutting deep into an exposed vital point, or a mana construct to worsen existing injuries or restrain movement was all it took. And it was all Hakon provided at first.

When that wasn’t enough, Hakon unsheathed his one-handed longsword and handaxe and jumped head-first into battle, his drastically enhanced senses combining with the raw, uncontrollable instincts of a Barbarian and his combat Skills.

[Combat Awareness] told him all he needed to know to prepare for incoming attacks, while [Evasion] helped him step aside without losing any momentum. Next up, [Dash] closed the distance to the target, while [Weakness Detection] revealed all the weaknesses his opponent never corrected.

Even when his foe was stronger than him, they didn’t have the Skills or instincts to block Hakon forever. And Hakon, wielding [Weapon Mastery] at a Level hardly ever attained by any 2nd Ascension Barbarian, showed them how powerful he was and what it meant to wield the power of the Mind.

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Moving around an incoming strike, Hakon twisted his body. A second attack aimed at his head followed, forcing him to react more drastically. His longsword shot upward, redirecting the attack, while the handaxe in his other hand snaked toward his opponent's neck.

Smooth, seamless motions helped him keep up with the 2nd Ascension warrior, but the Barbarian raised his free arm to block the axe strike. The blade dug through skin and muscle, failing to carve deep into the Barbarian's flesh. That was fine, though, because Hakon twisted the axe, triggered [Bleeding] with a burst of mana racing down the blade's edge, and spun around, ripping his weapon free.

His foe gritted his teeth but followed up with rumbling strides, blood dripping to the ground. Wild strikes empowered with raw strength met beautiful sequences of slashes, precise movements, and calculated counters meant to block, redirect, or evade grievous injuries.

Hakon twisted his way out of the worst blows but still took a blade to the stomach, biceps, and even face whenever it meant his sword or axe could find purchase deep inside the Barbarian.

The nicks and bruises spreading across Hakon's body did not hurt nearly as much as the old wounds that had yet to fully heal. They were nothing in comparison. Rather than hurting, he found them pleasant because they fueled his Runeskin. Hoard Impact was already full, brimming with immense power, yet Hakon didn't bother unleashing the hoarded strength, for it gave him the edge he needed to fight his foe head-on.

[Combat Awareness] flared, aided by his other Skills, as someone behind his foe crashed to the ground. A group of Taskur and Pearot

Barbarians fell over each other, their roars in perfect sync with the trembling ground. The warrior facing him twisted his body to glance sideways, clearly expecting an enemy to leap at him from the side. Instead, a Taskur warrior lunged at the Pearot Barbarian behind him.

Hakon used the opportunity presented. He conjured a small mana shield at a low altitude, right behind the Barbarian's calf. Then, as soon as his foe noticed something amiss, Hakon burst ahead, [Circulation] and [Dash] ramped up beyond their safe limits. His body screamed at him, yet his opponent was all he could see.

Hakon didn't bother evading the sword coming for his side. He used [Evasion] alongside [Combat Awareness] to avoid the worst of it but pushed ahead, his feet crashing down upon the Barbarian's foot as soon as he closed the distance. [Bash] triggered a fraction of a second later, and he rocketed into his towering opponent.

The sound of snapping bone rang out from the Barbarian's foot, and he stumbled back only to trip over the mana shield hovering behind his calf, revealing dozens of weak spots. Yet before Hakon could leverage them, his foe regained a semblance of balance, his sword carving through the air. Hakon blocked the strike easily enough while his axe tore into the Barbarian's chest. Mana burst out of the axe's edge and detonated, creating tiny explosions while the blade dug deeper.

Understanding how much, or how little, time he had, Hakon ripped the axe free, revealing a grievous wound. A gaping hole that was only waiting to end the Barbarian. Skidding back half a step with a light, unbothered motion, Hakon materialized half a dozen [Mana Bolt]s right before him.

He shaped them more through newfound instinct than comprehensive understanding, making them pointier. Then he forced [Bleeding] upon the mana structures simply because he wanted it to work. And it did. The moment he used [Compression] and [Reinforcement], the unstable masses shrank to the size of a finger. Pointed, coated with [Reinforcement] to retain their shape a moment longer, and deadly. The barest hint of red shimmered at the bolts' tips, though they were barely visible as the structures whizzed through the air and straight into the Barbarian's chest.

Something Hakon couldn't quite grasp was happening right in front of him, and he loved every moment of it.

A fountain of blood much greater than expected spurted through the air, and both their eyes widened. Their reasons couldn't have been more

different, and while the Barbarian had regained his balance momentarily, his strength faded.

[Circulation] active, weak point detected, Hakon did the only logical thing. He struck out, blade raking across his opponent's throat and slicing it wide open.

The Barbarian collapsed dead to the ground, giving Hakon a moment to take in the situation around him. It was chaotic, for lack of a better word. Neither Hakon nor the other young warriors had ever been part of a battle on such a scale before. Heck, he doubted most warriors below the 3rd Ascension had participated in a tribal war.

Death was everywhere, and it wouldn't have surprised him if more Barbarians died to stray javelins or handaxes than in direct clashes. He loathed the chaos because it made planning more difficult. Hakon was about to leap back into battle, his next target already picked, when a group of Barbarians charged into one another, their clash swallowing his target and forcing her to join the melee.

He barely caught her body transform, tufts of hair growing from her neck and cheeks, when something else caught his attention. The chieftains.

Rogarth fought hard. The ground beneath his feet split apart from raw power, all while flames burst from his thick, scaly armor. Flames surged to the side and back whenever a crimson blade carved through the air, yet the searing-hot fire that could melt even the greatest metals failed to reach the greatest of Barbarians.

Chieftain Ragna was terrifying. He was Hakon's father, but even he couldn't help but stare in awe at the unfolding battle. His father moved faster with every passing moment, making it feel as though he was removing seals that had locked his strength in place mid-combat. And with every seal removed, Chieftain Ragna's power grew ever potent.

The ground stirred more violently the more power billowed from the chieftain. He flashed, disappeared in a sudden blur, and reappeared holding the head of one of the Elders.

Pearot's strongest failed to even come close to him. They attacked furiously, their might more than enough to eradicate the rest of Tribe Taskur. However, they couldn't even touch Ragna. The more time that passed, the greater the gap in strength grew. It was as wide as a chasm already, yet it spread further, filling Hakon with certainty.

Chieftain Rogarth would die, and his tribe would collapse and cease to exist. Their death was inevitable, or so he hoped when the world trembled beneath Hakon's feet.

The tremors had been ever-present ever since his father joined the battle. It'd been a faint vibration running through the earth and trees alike. But as the fight went on, the rumbling grew much deeper. The ground split apart beneath them, roots and trees snapping apart from what Hakon initially believed to be the power of everyone present.

Yet now, something told him that wasn't the case. Something pulled at his attention, dragging him away from the chaotic battle and toward the distant mountain range.

He didn't expect anything, yet his body tensed and a torrent of mana surged out of his Core to defend him against what was about to come.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as an eruption split across the horizon.

Flames and debris burst into the sky far in the distance. A pillar of liquid death clawed upward, dyeing the once-still mountain range red. The shockwave followed moments later, flattening entire stretches of the dark forest as a pressure unlike anything Hakon had ever felt entered his perception.

No. It was him who had entered its range.

A head rose from the mountain. It was massive, though the word did not begin to describe it, and it resembled a Drake's, although Hakon would never dare to compare them. Silver scales the size of huts reflected the crimson glow of the eruption while smoke and ash curled around gargantuan jagged horns that seemed to pierce the clouds themselves.

Ancestors… what is that thing? He wanted to shout, but his body didn't respond as pressure crashed into him.

The Barbarians around him staggered and groaned in pain. Some collapsed to one knee beneath the overwhelming presence, yet it felt several magnitudes heavier on Hakon. His blood was boiling and heat flooded every part of him until it felt like molten iron coursed beneath his skin. His muscles spasmed violently, mana rampaged through his channels until they felt like they were about to tear apart.

Then, the creature turned its head, slow and deliberately, until it looked straight at him.

Hakon shouldn't have been able to be certain about something like that. How could he be so certain that the creature was looking at him when all of

them were on the battlefield so far away from the mountain? He could not, yet he was.

The moment the silver-scaled creature's gaze settled upon him, Hakon felt as though something reached into the depths of his very being, tearing through every layer of his existence. Every emotion, every weakness, and every ambition buried within him lay bare before something so impossibly vast.

At last, the pain overwhelmed him.

His skull felt like it was about to burst apart. Blood snaked down his nose, eyes, and ears, his vision blurred, yet somewhere amidst the agony, something inside him changed. The pressure hammering against his body no longer tore through him as easily as before. His flesh, soul, and mind adapted, while his very being hardened beneath the impossible strain.

The Scripture appeared before Hakon's eyes, bringing a strained smile to his lips even when he felt like he was about to die at any moment.

[Skill [Spirit Forging] has been learned.]
[Resonance detected. Adaptive Resilience improved.
Tier-1 → Tier-2]

Unlike most of his Skill improvements, this one felt fundamentally different. It was instantaneous. Everything became clearer. The boiling sensation faded from unbearable agony into something he could barely manage. His channels no longer felt like they were about to tear apart, and his flesh endured the pressure with newfound resistance. The improvements were so drastic that Hakon nearly gasped.

Then, the pressure disappeared entirely. Not because of his Skills or his unbreakable will.

Shaking, Hakon lifted his head with every bit of strength he could muster, only to see his father standing beside him.

The strongest of the Barbarians towered over him like an unbreakable wall, unmoving despite the remnants of the divine pressure that had yet to leave the battlefield. Blood poured from his nose and eyes alike, streaking down his face while every muscle in his body remained tense. His bloodshot eyes were locked onto the gargantuan creature in the distance, anger burning deep within them.

And there was more. Hakon could faintly make out something much greater than anger. Hatred, deep and festering. There was also something else, something Hakon struggled to comprehend.

Fear.

His thoughts immediately rejected the idea. His father feared nothing. He had to be wrong, his interpretation incorrect. Otherwise, how could fear and longing exist within the same gaze? It made no sense. There had to be another explanation.

The moment passed, and the gargantuan creature from the mountain seemed to fade away. It vanished as suddenly as it appeared, yet the situation didn't change.

Hakon regained the strength to turn and finally noticed the chaos around him. Barbarians, Pearot and Taskur alike, had retreated. Yet, while Taskur's warriors stayed by Chieftain Ragna's side, Pearot's forces vanished into the forest, abandoning the fight without a second thought. Hakon tried to search for Pearot's chieftain and Elders, but they must have been among the first to leave. Of course, they did.

Cowards. He spat, only to croak in pain.

The battle between Pearot and Taskur may have ended, however, the war had just begun. Amidst it stood Hakon, wielder of the Mind, surrounded by an unfathomable creature even the strongest of the Barbarians seemed to fear.

So why was he not afraid like his father? And why did his desire to rise to become the next Warlord burn even brighter in his heart?

Hakon had a thousand questions, and he couldn't wait to find answers to all of them. Whether that happened before or after he killed Chieftain Rogarth didn't matter.

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EPILOGUE 1

DEVIL'S LAIR, THE DARK FOREST

Rogarth was furious. He was alive, though it felt like he was barely holding on to his lifeline, but that was the least of his concerns.

Today's battle was not supposed to go like it did. The hunters positioned near Tribe Taskur had last reported that Chieftain Ragna and the strongest of Taskur's warriors were in the tribehold. So how was it that they arrived precisely when Taskur's young warriors needed them the most? The hunters…

They were dead now, either way. Rogarth was not foolish enough to believe they made it out alive.

Phasing through the forest, his feet barely touching the ground as he propelled himself forward, away from Ragna and whatever terror their fight had awoken, Rogarth heard them: his people following closely behind, cursing and growling. He wanted to tell them to shut up and move on, yet he felt just like them.

His body was barely held together by the Blessing of the Onyx Dragon, marking the day they first lost. He lost. As for those who believed he was strong enough to best Ragna, they were either dead or smart enough to keep their lips sealed.

Ever since the Rite five cycles ago, Rogarth had felt powerful, as if he were destined to become the next Warlord. But now… now he had been too weak to defeat the living legend, even with the Elders helping him.

Chieftain Ragna had been a problem, but the rest of Tribe Taskur proved just as bad. The woman fighting by the chieftain's side had been strong enough to fight several Elders simultaneously. She hadn't been strong enough to kill them, but with a warrior at the 5th Ascension by her side,

stalling several Barbarians at the same Ascension as her was more than enough. And that did not even account for the young warriors strong enough to fight and kill enemies one Ascension above them.

Taskur should not have been this powerful. If they had always been like this, why had they never conquered Pearot and the other tribes? That was what they all wondered as they retreated to the tribe, fear blooming in the hearts of even the most savage warriors.

Chieftain Ragna alone was enough to unite the tribes if he had always been this powerful, and that was something Rogarth did not doubt for a second. And it filled him with hatred. The Ancestors had chosen him. *He* was supposed to be the strongest.

Rogarth was not the only furious chieftain. Ragna burned with fury all the same.

He was angry, but not at his son or the young warriors. They, especially his son, Astrid, and Ulfar, had far exceeded his expectations. It was a shame that Ulfar reached the 2nd Ascension before his son, but that would only fuel Hakon's ambition. Ragna knew his son would reach for the stars and beyond, so long as there was something pushing him hard enough.

No, Ragna was not angry at anyone in Tribe Taskur. Nor did Tribe Pearot's actions bother him, although it was they who forced him to use more power than he intended. Chieftain Rogarth had pushed him, even though Ragna had been certain he'd held back enough to avoid drawing *her* attention. Looking back at the mountain range, liquid death trickling downward and swallowing stretches of the dark forest, made it clear he had not held back enough.

It had only been a warning, yet it was enough to nearly kill Hakon.

She was not yet moving, nor were the others, but soon they would be. Turning to his son, Ragna grimaced and cursed inwardly. Soon, everything would change, and he could only hope he could stall long enough to see his son grow into the man he was meant to become.

If only his mother could see him now.

As the weight of the Great One weakened greatly, she stirred for the first time in many cycles. And this time, she truly awakened. She, the Silver Dragon, Divine Beast of the old age, had expected a great disaster, but what she found was no catastrophe. Although it was no less threatening.

Her presence surged, encompassing the mountain range and the entirety of the dark forest, revealing all that belonged to her domain the moment she awoke. What she saw was unpleasant, to say the least.

A portion of her land had been ripped away from her domain. It was small and insignificant, but that was not the point. It was an insult to her pride. She let out a low growl, slowly realizing what happened during her slumber. The Alliance had moved, severing their pact before the end of its term.

As short-lived as mortals were, she had not expected them to be this foolish. Not when they had centuries to learn from the history of the races that came before them.

It was time. The Silver Dragon had rested long enough.

The insect was still alive, and he had even sired a son, but none of that mattered. Not until she sensed something within the child. She studied it and nearly killed it. A disgrace.

She should have killed father and son, but the bindings were still there. The Barbarian may have removed some of his seals, but not the last of them, returning just enough power to her to kill the boy… yet she failed.

She still could not quite believe it. The Silver Dragon had only been able to use a fraction of her power without affecting the Great One's curse, but that should have been more than enough to kill that disgrace. The boy, however, had been tougher than he should have been.

He survived. A being at the 1st Ascension had overcome his soul nearly being crushed. Worse still, near the end, his condition improved.

The hardened stone beneath her gargantuan claws crumbled.

Don't bother. These insects are not worth my attention. That was right. They were not worth it. Instead, she had to find out where the others were. If they were still sealed, she could free them… after finding out where her own had gone.

With the Alliance's movements, Ragna would be forced to remove the final seal. Then the Silver Dragon would return, and the Barbarians would take their last breath. She would eradicate them, their Ancestors be damned.

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EPILOGUE 2

THE ALLIANCE

The Alliance was on the move. Human soldiers stumbled through bustling border towns and villages, setting up camps and completing the final preparations for the Campaign into Devil's Lair.

For most humans, the forest, Devil's Lair, was less a place and more a nightmare whispered from one generation to the next. Few ever crossed its borders, and those who returned spoke little of what lurked beneath its endless canopy.

No one liked the dark forest crawling with the realm's most terrifying creatures, yet the Alliance prepared to step inside and conquer it. How could they not after the most renowned Magi and Arcane Scholars informed the nobility about the rapid spike in the Devil Lair's essence signature? The essence signature had skyrocketed over the last few weeks, and it was predicted to rise even further, creating the perfect environment to grow invaluable treasures. Treasures found in dungeons that were waiting to be plundered and used to train the Alliance's greatest forces.

The common soldiers feared the coming expedition openly. They sat restlessly around their camps, sharpening their blades with trembling hands and forcing laughter into conversations that died too quickly. Veterans checked their armor twice, then a third and fourth time, unable to rid themselves of the feeling that simmered beneath rigid discipline.

To many Knights, the terrors laying in hiding in the Devil's Lair represented glory in its purest form. To them, Devil's Lair was a place where legends were born and names were carved into the Alliance's history. The dark forest and its dungeons were their ticket to greatness.

As for the Magi, they glanced upon the dark forest differently. There was fear, certainly, but excitement flashed in their eyes whenever discussions turned toward all that was hidden within the Devil's Lair. Exotic creatures, plants that were long believed to be extinct, ancient dungeons containing treasures of unfathomable worth.

Entire Academies buzzed with barely restrained obsession at the thought of studying a land sealed away from mankind for so long.

The Blood Pact would end soon, and once it did, the Alliance would tread the Devil's Lair once more. And if those savage brutes were still alive after all those years that passed, the Alliance would show them a second time what happened to rabid dogs, having learned from their past mistakes.

The Oracle and the Gods had prophesied dark times, but the Alliance was prepared.

Nobody would be spared this time.

Savant Barbarian will continue in Book 2!

Savant Barbarian 2

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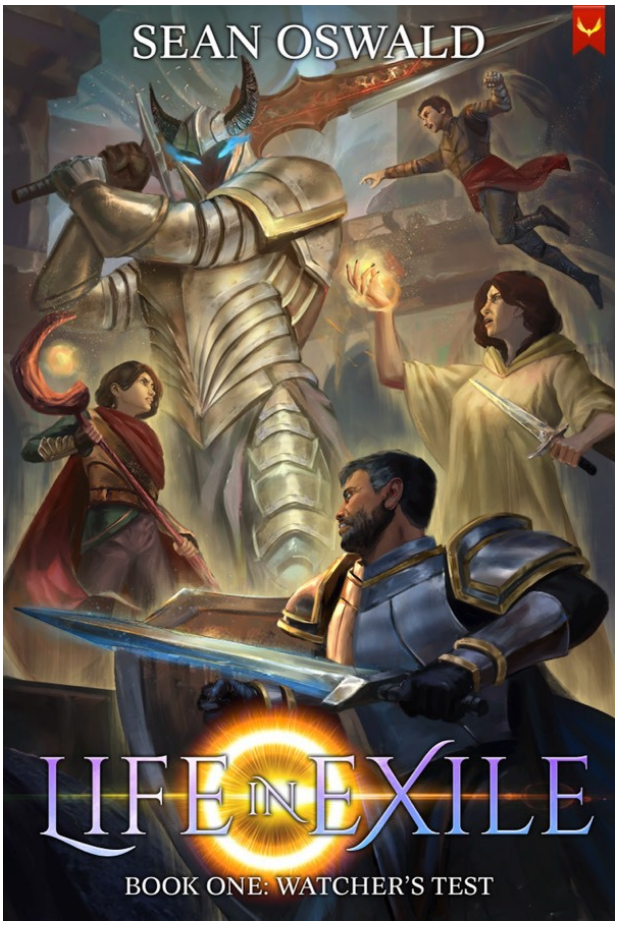
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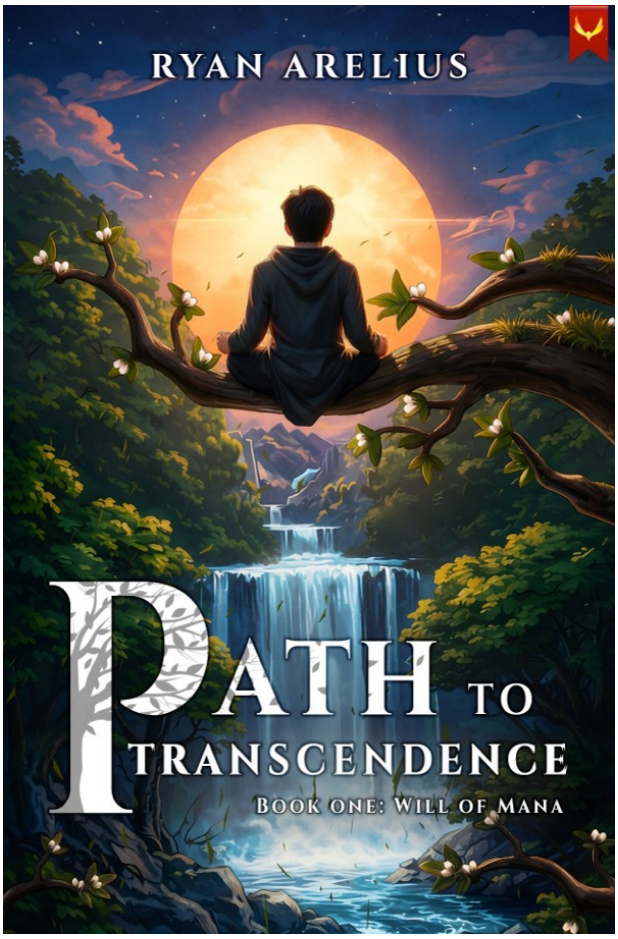
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