

Project: Primal Instincts

Error. Administrator 01 approval pending.

Test. Primal Instincts initialized.

Requesting Access from Administrator 01.

Error. Administrator 01 approval pending.

Test. Subject 01 awakened.

Requesting Access from Administrator 01.

Error. Administrator 01 approval pending.

Test. Lord Vishnu awakened.

Requesting Access from Administrator 01.

Error. Administrator 01 approval pending.

Test. Approval Accepted.

“Get him, put him through Hell Gate 7,” the despicable man shouted, his voice carrying easily over the crowd. An unnatural smile stretched across his face, making him appear more like a predator who had already cornered his prey than a man issuing orders. “Make sure he doesn’t escape. This trial will reward us with enough Aciiums to satisfy Lord Braxton of Grand Thornton.”

The man's long black coat swayed behind him as he pointed directly at Alex. His bright orange pants stood out against the city's dull colors like a warning sign, drawing attention wherever he went. The confidence in his voice was unsettling. It was as though Alex's fate had already been decided, and everyone else was waiting for the inevitable conclusion.

A chill ran down Alex's spine.

Without wasting another second, he turned and sprinted.

His boots slammed against the stone streets as he pushed through the crowded marketplace. Merchants shouted in frustration as he brushed past their stalls. Startled citizens stumbled out of his way while others turned their heads, trying to understand the

sudden commotion. The smell of cooked meat, burning coal, and sweat filled the air, mixing into an overwhelming haze as Alex fought his way through the sea of people.

His heart pounded violently in his chest.

Every breath burned his lungs.

Behind him, the man's words echoed through his mind.

Hell Gate 7.

Even hearing the name was enough to make his stomach tighten. Rumors about the gate had circulated throughout the kingdom for years. Some claimed it was a prison. Others whispered it was a trial designed to break even the strongest individuals. Whatever the truth was, nobody who spoke of Hell Gate 7 ever did so with comfort.

Alex shoved past the confused people gathered around Master Aly. Some stared at him with curiosity. Others watched with amusement, as if the entire situation were nothing more than entertainment. A few even stepped forward as though considering whether the reward was worth helping with the chase.

That thought terrified him most.

The crowd wasn't just watching.

They were deciding whether to hunt him.

Alex lowered his head and pushed harder through the mass of bodies, desperately searching for any path that might lead him away from the nightmare rapidly closing in behind him.



Quest Objective:

- **Bring Alex unharmed to Master Aly**

Rewards:

- **1000 gold Aciiums**
- **10 increases in echelon**
- **Recognition and Favour with the Guild of Grand Thornton**



“1000 Gold Aciumms is that true, Master Aly?” a confident noble asked from within the crowd.

The question immediately drew attention from everyone nearby. Conversations slowed as curious eyes turned toward Master Aly. Merchants paused in the middle of transactions, travelers stopped to listen, and even those who had only been casually observing the commotion suddenly became interested. A thousand Gold Aciumms was a life-changing amount of money for most people. It was enough to purchase land, establish a business, or live comfortably for years without worry.

Master Aly slowly raised his hand, and silence spread through the crowd. The confidence in his expression suggested that he had anticipated the question long before it was asked.

“Of course, order must be maintained,” Master Aly said.

The response was immediate.

“Order must be maintained,” everyone repeated.

The words echoed throughout the street with an almost religious devotion. Alex felt a knot form in his stomach as he listened. Something was unsettling about the way they all repeated the phrase without question. It wasn't merely an agreement. It felt more like a ritual, a belief deeply rooted within the people of Grand Thornton.

The familiar quest marker buzz sounded inside Alex's head, granting him a brief opportunity to act. While the crowd's attention remained focused on Master Aly, Alex carefully pulled a black ski mask over his face and lowered the hood of his sweatshirt over his short black hair. He blended into the movement of the crowd and forced himself to walk calmly despite the panic building inside him.

His destination was already decided.

Fairgreen.

The small city sat far from the influence of the Guild of Grand Thornton and its devoted worshippers. While no place in Seare was completely free from the guild's reach, Fairgreen was known for its independence. If Alex could reach the city before the hunters organized themselves, he might still have a chance of escaping.

Keeping his head down, Alex moved with the crowd and tried to appear as ordinary as possible. Every passing second felt precious.

“What is your name, mister?”

The unexpected voice nearly caused Alex to stop walking.

Standing beside him was a man dressed entirely in blue. His shirt, pants, and even the short jacket hanging around his waist shared the same shade. Unlike the nervous citizens around them, the man appeared completely relaxed. His calm demeanor made him stand out more than his unusual choice of clothing.

Alex hesitated.

Using his real name would be foolish. If anyone connected him to the quest, the reward alone would be enough motivation for them to turn him in. His mind quickly searched for an alternative.

What is a good name?

Alex won't do.

Victor?

Yes. Victor sounds normal.

“Oh, my name is Victor.”

The lie slipped from his mouth more naturally than he expected.

The stranger smiled.

“What would be your name, mister?” Alex asked.

“Name's Vish,” said the mysterious man dressed in blue.

For some reason, the name lingered in Alex's mind. There was nothing unusual about it, yet it felt strangely familiar.

“Do you happen to know what the quest marker buzz is about?” Alex asked Vish.

Vish looked at him with genuine confusion.

“Do you seriously not have a charm? How old exactly are you?”

The question caught Alex slightly off guard. Most people his age already possessed one.

“I am nineteen and am eligible to have a charm, but I don't have the necessary Ascium to obtain a charm,” Alex answered.

Even as he spoke the words, he felt a hint of embarrassment. Lacking a charm at his age was uncommon. Not impossible, but uncommon enough that people often made assumptions.

To Alex's surprise, Vish reached into one of his pockets and withdrew a small object.

“Here, you can take my extra charm; it will show you the quest,” Vish said.

Alex stared at the offered item. Generosity from strangers was rare, especially in a world where almost everything carried a cost. The charm rested calmly in Vish's hand as though offering it away meant nothing.

For a moment, Alex considered refusing.

Then curiosity won.

Slowly, he accepted the charm, wondering whether this unexpected encounter would become the turning point that saved him—or the mistake that ruined everything.

“No, I can't possibly take your charm. It is worth at least 100 Silver Aciiums,” Alex explained.

The offer seemed far too generous. Even though he had never owned a charm himself, he understood their value. Most people spent years saving enough Aciiums to purchase one, and some never managed to obtain a charm at all. Giving one away to a stranger made no sense.

“No problem, I can't sell this one anyway. It is barely worth 5 Copper Aciiums. Don't worry, I can give you this charm for free. I need someone to guide me to the nearest temple in this kingdom, Hellfare,” Vish replied.

Alex studied the man carefully. Vish's expression remained calm and sincere. There was no sign that he was attempting to deceive him or demand payment later. The arrangement seemed unusually simple, especially considering everything that had happened that day.

“You are new in this city?” Alex asked.

“Yes, I need directions to the nearest temple,” replied Vish.

Alex found that difficult to believe. Most travelers arriving in Hellfare already knew where the temples were located. The temples served as gathering places for worshippers, merchants, adventurers, and travelers alike. Yet Vish seemed completely unfamiliar with the city despite appearing perfectly comfortable walking through it.

“Ok, I will guide you to the nearest temple. Could I possibly have the charm now?” Alex asked.

“Yes, I believe you will guide me, so I might as well hand over the charm now,” Vish answered.

Without hesitation, Vish placed the charm into Alex's hand.

Alex immediately examined it.

The charm was shaped like the letter V. At first glance, it appeared incredibly ordinary, resembling nothing more than a plain brown block letter carved from simple material. There were no jewels embedded within it, no intricate carvings running along its surface, and no visible signs of magical craftsmanship. Most surprising of all, no light radiated from the charm.

That alone made it unusual.

The glow emitted by a charm typically represented the amount of Echelon stored within it. Throughout Seare, Echelon was one of the most important concepts governing everyday life. It was often described as the combination of logic, magical understanding, and knowledge capable of resisting the definition of impossibility itself. Without sufficient Echelon, many tasks remained impossible. With enough Echelon, however, the impossible could gradually be redefined into something achievable.

The entire realm of Seare had been built upon this principle. Across its five kingdoms—Hellfare, Heavengrace, Neutrality, Freefire, and Keepersbay—individuals spent their lives pursuing greater Echelon. Wealth, influence, magical ability, and social status were all affected by it in one way or another.

Alex turned the charm over in his hands once more.

Despite its simple appearance, he couldn't shake the feeling that there was something unusual about it.

“Thank you for this charm,” Alex mentioned.

“It doesn't seem much, but it will serve you well moving forward as long as you sync up and pray to Lord Vishnu,” Vish replied.

The statement immediately raised another question.

Alex had heard stories about patrons before, but nobody had ever explained the process properly. Since he had never owned a charm, he had never needed to learn.

“Thank you for mentioning. I was about to ask what patron I must serve to use the charm. Could you possibly show me how exactly I am supposed to sync up with my charm? I haven't prayed to a patron before, so it is my first time,” Alex replied.

For a brief moment, Vish seemed genuinely surprised.

Then a faint smile appeared on his face.

It was almost as though Alex had just revealed something Vish hadn't expected to hear.

“Really, that is how you must have remained hid...” Vish suggested.

The words slipped out so quietly that Alex almost missed them. There was a strange tone in Vish's voice, as though he had suddenly connected several pieces of a puzzle that had been troubling him for a long time.

“What did you say?” Alex asked.

Vish seemed to snap back to reality. For a brief moment, uncertainty flickered across his face.

“That's how I remained hidden from the patrons. It must be, but I don't understand why they or anyone would be interested in me.”

Alex frowned.

The statement raised more questions than it answered. Hidden from the patrons? What exactly did that mean? From everything he had heard growing up, patrons were powerful beings capable of observing and influencing the world through their followers. The idea that someone could somehow remain hidden from them sounded impossible.

Before Alex could ask another question, a look of genuine despair crossed Vish's face.

It appeared suddenly, transforming his normally calm expression into something far more troubled. For a brief instant, Vish looked less like a mysterious traveler and more like a man carrying a burden too heavy to bear alone.

Then it was gone.

The emotion vanished almost as quickly as it had appeared, replaced once again by the composed demeanor Alex had come to expect.

“Right, to pray to Lord Vishnu, the way I would do it is by clasping my hands together and saying something heartfelt to the... Patron,” Vish replied.

Alex noticed the slight pause before the final word.

It was subtle.

So subtle that most people would probably ignore it.

Yet something about it felt strange.

Almost as though Vish had nearly said something else.

Still, Alex decided not to press the issue. He had more immediate concerns than deciphering the behavior of an unusually dressed stranger.

Holding the V-shaped charm between his hands, Alex slowly clasped his fingers together. The rough surface of the charm pressed against his palms as he closed his eyes.

For a moment, nothing happened.

The noise of the city faded into the background. The distant voices of merchants and travelers became little more than a dull murmur as Alex focused on a single thought.

Master Aly.

The chase.

Hell Gate 7.

The reward was placed on his head.

Fear tightened in his chest.

He had no idea whether patrons could truly hear prayers. He had never owned a charm before, nor had he ever spoken directly to a patron. Yet if there was even the slightest chance that someone was listening, he had to try.

Alex took a deep breath.

“If you can hear me, please help me escape from Master Aly.”

The words left his mouth as little more than a hopeful whisper.

For a brief moment, the world seemed to hold its breath.

Request Received. Request Accepted.

Syncing up with Subject 01.

Requesting Administrator 01 approval.

Error. Administrator 01 approval pending.

Requesting Lord Vishnu's approval.

Test. Approval Accepted.

“I believe it worked. There were some weird phrases about Subject 01, Administrator 01, and Patron Vishnu. Although it did mention syncing up and approval accepted, is that normal?” asked Alex.

Alex lowered his hands and looked down at the V-shaped charm resting in his palm. The strange messages still lingered in his mind. He had expected some sort of confirmation that the prayer had worked, but the phrases he had seen made little sense. Subject 01. Administrator 01. Approval pending. None of it sounded like something an ordinary charm should display.

Vish stared at him for a moment, his expression unreadable.

“I have no idea what you were mentioning about weird phrases, but it seems to have worked. Now you can use your charm. Would you care to show me to the temple?” Vish asked.

Alex frowned slightly.

The answer felt strange. If charms were common throughout Seare, shouldn't Vish recognize those messages? Then again, Alex himself knew almost nothing about charms. Perhaps unusual messages weren't as uncommon as he imagined.

Still, the mention of an Administrator continued to bother him.

Before following Vish any further, there was something he needed to know.

“Wait! Before we go, I need to see the quest,” Alex replied quickly.

The quest marker buzz had nearly slipped his mind amidst everything else that had happened. Master Aly's pursuit, the mysterious charm, the prayer, and the strange system messages had all distracted him from the original reason he had accepted the charm in the first place.

Vish nodded as understanding crossed his face.

“Right, almost forgot the quest marker buzz. You need to tap on your charm and repeat the following phrase: Show Quest,” Vish replied.

Alex glanced down at the plain brown charm once more.

It still looked remarkably ordinary.

There was no glow.

No visible magic.

No indication whatsoever that it possessed the ability to communicate with a system capable of assigning quests and rewards.

Yet only moments ago, it had displayed messages that seemed impossible.

His curiosity quickly overwhelmed any hesitation.

“Here goes. Show Quest,” Alex said as he tapped the surface of the V-shaped charm.

The moment his finger made contact, he felt a faint vibration travel through the charm and into his hand. The sensation was subtle, almost like the gentle hum of distant energy awakening from a deep sleep.

Alex held his breath.

For a brief moment, nothing happened.

Then the familiar buzz echoed through his mind once again.

Test. Approval Accepted. Subject 01.

Quest Objective:

- **Bring Alex unharmed to Master Aly**

Rewards:

- **1000 gold Aciiums**
 - **10 increases in echelon**
 - **Recognition and Favour with the Guild of Grand Thornton**
-

New Questline Available!!!

Quest Objective:

- **Become an Administrator**

Rewards:

- **Unknown**
- **Unknown**
- **Unlimited Reward Tokens**

Accept Quest? (Yes / No)

What is an Administrator? Alex wondered as he stared at the newly appeared quest.

His eyes moved across the floating text again, carefully rereading the objective and rewards. Everything about the quest felt wrong. The System had provided no real explanation, no details, and no indication of what becoming an Administrator actually meant. Even stranger were the rewards themselves.

Unknown

Unknown

Unlimited Reward Tokens

Alex had never seen anything like it.

Normally, quests were straightforward. Complete a task, receive a reward. The System always provided enough information for someone to make an informed decision. This quest felt different, as though important details were being intentionally hidden from him.

Is it someone like Master Lyn?

The thought immediately made him uncomfortable.

Master Lyn possessed influence, authority, and responsibility that Alex had never wanted. People constantly sought his guidance, challenged his decisions, and expected him to maintain order. It looked exhausting.

Alex frowned.

The more he thought about it, the less appealing the quest became.

I don't ever want to be like Master Lyn.

Power sounded attractive in theory, but responsibility was another matter entirely. Every position of authority seemed to come with endless expectations, obligations, and problems. Alex had enough difficulties surviving his own life. The last thing he wanted was additional responsibilities forced upon him by some mysterious quest.

No.

I don't want the responsibility.

"No," Alex replied while tapping his V-shaped charm.

The decision felt immediate and final.

Whatever an Administrator was, someone else could become one.

Alex wanted no part in it.

For a brief moment, he expected the quest window to disappear.

Instead, the charm vibrated softly in his hand.

A familiar sense of unease settled in his stomach.

Something was happening.

And judging by the strange messages he had already received, Alex suspected the System might not care very much about his answer.

Request Received.

Test passed. Accepting Quest.

Requesting Administrator 01 approval.

Error. Administrator 01 approval pending.

Requesting Lord Vishnu's approval.

Test. Approval Accepted.

"What happened? Why did you say no?" Vish asked.

The question caught Alex off guard.

His attention had remained fixed on the floating quest window for several moments after making his decision. Even now, he couldn't stop thinking about the strange objective that had appeared before him. The entire thing felt wrong. Every quest he had ever heard about came with clear instructions, clear rewards, and a clear purpose. This one felt different, as though the System itself was hiding information from him.

“Oh, this charm asked me if I wanted to be something called an Administrator. Do you happen to know what that is?” Alex replied.

For the first time since they had met, Vish appeared genuinely interested.

“Sorry, no clue what an Administrator is, but what you were talking with is not called a charm, it is called the System. The charm is what is used by the System to navigate and deliver tasks to us. Maybe an Administrator is someone who can manipulate the charms and send quests to others, therefore bypassing the System and delivering tasks to everyone.”

Alex's eyes widened slightly.

That possibility sounded far more significant than he had originally imagined. If ordinary people received instructions from the System, then an Administrator might stand somewhere above it. The idea of someone possessing that level of authority was difficult to comprehend.

“Does that mean that Master Lyn is an Administrator?” Alex asked Vish.

“Maybe. No one knows for sure, but he might likely be manipulating an Administrator to send tasks on his behalf,” Vish replied.

Alex looked down at the V-shaped charm resting in his hand.

The strange messages suddenly seemed much more important.

Administrator 01.

Approval pending.

Subject 01.

The words echoed through his thoughts.

If an Administrator truly possessed the ability to influence the System itself, then whoever Administrator 01 was, they had to be important.

A sinking feeling settled in his stomach.

“Shit, that means... someone needs to help Administrator 01,” Alex replied.

For a brief moment, Vish remained silent.

His expression became difficult to read.

“Yes, I am aware. Unfortunately, no one is capable of passing Project: Primal Instincts,” Vish replied.

The name meant nothing to Alex.

Yet the way Vish said it made it sound less like a quest and more like a death sentence.

Before Alex could ask another question, a voice suddenly drifted through the crowd.

“Find him, he must be here,” a dark-haired man said with a smile on his face as he walked past Vish and me.

Alex's heart nearly stopped.

The man's smile was wrong.

There was no excitement in it.

No frustration.

Only confidence.

The confidence of someone who believed success was inevitable.

Alex quickly lowered his head and remained motionless. Around them, hundreds of people moved through the busy streets of Hellfare. Merchants advertised their goods, travelers pushed carts through the busy roads, and adventurers discussed quests and rewards. Despite the constant movement surrounding them, Alex felt as though every eye in the city was searching for him.

The dark-haired man continued walking.

Alex resisted the urge to look back.

Instead, he remained perfectly still beside Vish.

We remained motionless in our corner among the crowd of people passing by.

Several long seconds passed before Alex finally allowed himself to breathe again.

The opportunity to escape would not last forever.

They needed to move.

“How about I show you the direction to the temple, Vish?” Alex asked.

“Sure, sounds good,” Vish replied.

The pair began moving through the crowd, carefully avoiding attention whenever possible. Alex kept his hood low and his mask firmly in place. Every person who looked in his direction felt like a potential threat.

Suddenly, a woman stepped directly into their path.

“Stop. Where are you going? Take off your ski masks and answer our questions.”

Alex immediately felt tension build in his chest.

The woman wasn't alone.

Several other individuals stood nearby, each carrying the same eager expression he had seen on the faces of those discussing the reward earlier.

They were hunters.

“Why don't you take off your mask and answer our questions? We are looking for Alex; we are to bring him to Master Lyn personally,” Vish answered.

To Alex's surprise, Vish sounded completely relaxed.

The woman narrowed her eyes.

For a moment, Alex feared she might insist.

Instead, she sighed.

“Fine, keep your stupid ski masks on. We'll all go together and find Alex and split the rewards equally. Fair?” the woman asked.

The offer immediately made Alex suspicious.

A thousand Gold Aciums was not the kind of reward people willingly shared.

“No, we can do this on our own; we don't need you,” Alex answered.

“Yes, we were heading to the temple anyway to look for him there if you are interested in joining,” Vish answered.

The woman studied them carefully.

Alex forced himself to remain calm.

Every second felt like an eternity.

Finally, she shrugged.

“Nope. Good luck to you.”

Without another word, the woman and her companions continued down the street.

Alex waited until they disappeared into the crowd before releasing the breath he had been holding.

That had been far too close.

“Lead the way,” Vish answered.

Alex nodded and began walking once more, though the uneasy feeling in his chest refused to disappear.

Somewhere behind them, dozens of people were still searching.

And every minute that passed made it more likely that someone would eventually recognize him.

“Thank you for leading me to the temple,” Vish said.

The large temple stood above the surrounding buildings like a monument to the patrons themselves. Massive stone pillars lined the entrance while glowing symbols carved into the walls emitted a faint golden light. Worshippers moved in and out through the enormous entrance doors, some carrying charms while others whispered prayers beneath their breath.

For the first time since escaping the crowd surrounding Master Aly, Alex finally felt as though he could breathe again.

“No problem, thanks for the charm,” Alex replied.

As soon as the words left his mouth, Alex reached up and pulled the black ski mask from his face. Cool air brushed against his skin, immediately relieving the irritation that had been building for what felt like hours.

Finally.

I can take this stupid ski mask off.

The fabric had become unbearably uncomfortable. Sweat clung to his face, and every breath trapped beneath the mask only made the experience worse. Alex still didn't fully understand why so many people in Hellfare wore them so casually. Compared to

places like Keepersbay, the air pollution within the kingdom wasn't even particularly terrible.

Alex exhaled slowly.

For the first time all day, he allowed himself to believe he might actually be safe.

Then a familiar voice shattered that hope instantly.

“Well, well, well, look at what we have here. Alex came to us, and we didn’t have to do anything. How stupid can someone be? Isn’t that right, Alex?”

Fear struck him like ice running down his spine.

No.

I am not turning around.

It can’t be Master Aly.

There is no way he could have found me.

Slowly, Alex turned his head.

Master Aly stood several feet behind him, surrounded by armed men wearing the colors of Grand Thornton. The same unnatural smile stretched across his face, calm and confident as ever, as though Alex's escape attempt had been nothing more than a minor inconvenience.

Panic immediately flooded Alex’s thoughts.

How?

How did he find me so quickly?

Then another realization struck him.

Vish.

“It was Vish, wasn’t it? I knew I shouldn’t trust anyone,” Alex asked.

The accusation escaped before he could stop himself.

Master Aly raised an eyebrow.

“Who’s Vish? We don’t know anyone by that name in this kingdom, Hellfare,” Master Aly replied.

Alex frowned.

That answer made no sense.

“You wouldn’t know; he was new in the kingdom,” Alex replied.

“Nope. No one came within Hellfare. Who would be crazy enough to even come to Hellfare?” Master Aly replied.

The confidence in his voice made Alex hesitate.

Wait.

Is he lying?

Was there never a Vish?

The thought hit him harder than he expected.

His mind immediately replayed everything that had happened since meeting the mysterious man in blue. The conversation. The charm. The explanations about the System and Administrators. The walk through the crowded streets.

Was it possible none of it had actually happened?

Was it my imagination?

No.

That couldn’t be true.

Vish gave me my charm.

Alex immediately looked down at the V-shaped charm still resting firmly in his hand.

The object was real.

Solid.

Cold against his palm.

Unless...

No.

I must have picked up the charm somewhere else.

Wait a sec.

The realization made his thoughts spiral even further. The more Alex tried to make sense of the situation, the less sense anything seemed to make. Vish had felt real. The conversations had felt real. Yet Master Aly spoke with absolute certainty.

“Enough talking, throw him in Hell Gate 7,” Master Aly said.

The command instantly shattered Alex’s confusion.

Several armed guards stepped forward without hesitation.

The mention of Hell Gate 7 immediately sent fear crashing back into his chest. Rumors about the gate spread throughout every kingdom in Seare. Some claimed it was a prison. Others believed it was a trial designed to break the minds of anyone forced inside.

Whatever the truth was, one thing remained consistent.

Nobody ever spoke about Hell Gate 7 without fear.

A group of five masked men immediately stepped forward.

Their movements were disciplined and mechanical, as though they had performed this exact task countless times before. Each man wore massive blue coveralls reinforced with heavy plating along the shoulders and chest. The uniforms alone made them appear intimidating, but it was the weapons in their hands that truly drew Alex’s attention.

Gold-covered spears.

The polished metal reflected the glowing temple lights as the guards slowly surrounded him. Every spear remained perfectly leveled toward his body, leaving no possible opening for escape.

Alex’s pulse quickened.

The crowd watching nearby instinctively moved backward, creating distance between themselves and the confrontation. Nobody wanted to interfere with the Guild of Grand Thornton once its guards became involved.

The five masked men advanced together and forced Alex toward the massive temple doors. The closer he came to the entrance, the heavier the atmosphere seemed to become. Strange symbols carved across the ancient stone glowed faintly beneath the evening light, and an unnatural cold radiated from the cracks surrounding the sealed doorway.

Hell Gate 7.

Even standing near it made Alex uneasy.

The stories he had heard throughout his life suddenly returned to him all at once. People whispered that the gate led somewhere beyond ordinary death. Some claimed it was a prison created by the patrons themselves. Others believed it was connected to failed experiments involving the System and Echelon.

Nobody agreed on the truth.

But everyone feared it.

“Open the door and go through Hell Gate 7, and we might give you the quest reward,” Master Aly said.

The smile on his face made the offer sound more like mockery than negotiation.

Alex stared at the enormous stone door.

Then realization struck him.

A slow grin unexpectedly appeared on his own face.

“You are so stupid,” Alex said. “You probably just realized that you told me that you guys are physically unable to open the door. That is why you need me to do it to settle the doom to my destruction. Is it not?”

For the first time since capturing him, Master Aly’s expression shifted slightly.

Only for a second.

But Alex noticed it.

The hesitation confirmed everything.

They truly could not open the gate themselves.

That meant the guards, Master Aly, and perhaps even the entire Guild of Grand Thornton had been searching for him specifically because they needed something from him.

The realization terrified him almost as much as the gate itself.

Why me?

What made him capable of opening something the others could not?

“It does not matter. Either you open the door yourself, or we torture you before you open the door. Guards of the Guild, apprehend this fugitive, and let's have our fun before we throw him in,” Master Aly said.

The guards immediately tightened their grip on their spears.

Several stepped closer.

Alex could hear the metal scraping softly against their armored gloves as they prepared to seize him.

Fear spread through his chest like ice.

This was no longer about a quest reward.

No longer about capture.

No longer even about punishment.

Whatever waited behind Hell Gate 7 was important enough that the Guild of Grand Thornton was willing to torture someone just to gain access to it.

And somehow...

that someone was him.

Lord Vishnu has synced up with his charm.

Test. Waiting for approval from subject 01.

“Yes, I need your help, Patron,” Alex replied.

The words escaped his mouth almost instinctively.

Surrounded by armed guards and standing only a few feet away from Hell Gate 7, Alex no longer cared how foolish he sounded. Fear had stripped away his hesitation. If Lord Vishnu truly existed—if the mysterious connection through the charm was real—then this was the moment he needed help more than ever before.

The V-shaped charm resting in his hand suddenly felt warm.

Not painfully hot.

Just enough to make Alex immediately notice the change.

A faint vibration pulsed through the charm and traveled up his arm like a heartbeat. The sensation was subtle yet unmistakable. For the first time since receiving the charm, Alex felt as though something on the other side was actually listening.

Around him, the guards continued closing in.

The gold-covered spear tips remained leveled directly at his chest while the masked men slowly tightened the circle around him. Their heavy blue coveralls rustled softly with each step, and the glowing temple lights reflected off the polished metal of their weapons.

Master Aly watched calmly from behind them.

Smiling.

Always smiling.

Inside his mind, panic and desperation collided. He still barely understood how charms, patrons, or the System truly worked, yet somehow, he had already become involved in something far larger than himself.

Administrator 01.

Project: Primal Instincts.

Hell Gate 7.

The strange phrases echoed repeatedly within his thoughts like pieces of a puzzle he couldn't solve.

Suddenly, a familiar buzzing sensation rang through his mind.

The System.

Lord Vishnu has synced with Subject 01.

Waiting for approval.

For a brief moment, time itself seemed to slow.

Alex's breathing became shallow as he stared at the floating text only he could see.

Then another message appeared.

Approval Accepted.

Relief immediately crashed over him.

Not because he understood what was happening.

But because he finally knew one thing for certain.

He was not alone.

Test. Approval Accepted.

“Don’t mention you have your own charm,” Lord Vishnu replied in my mind.

The voice echoed clearly inside Alex’s thoughts, calm and controlled despite the chaos surrounding him. Unlike ordinary speech, the words carried no sound through the air. They simply appeared within his mind as though they had always belonged there.

Alex’s eyes widened.

So, it was real.

The connection.

The patron.

Vish.

Everything suddenly began fitting together.

“I knew it, you’re just Vish. Vish was Lord Vishnu the entire time. No?” Alex replied.

For a brief moment, silence followed.

The guards still surrounded him. Master Aly still stood nearby, watching carefully. Yet Alex’s focus remained entirely on the voice inside his mind.

“Sorry, I needed to see you, and please don’t repeat my true name to anyone,” Vish replied.

The response only deepened Alex’s frustration.

Needed to see me?

After everything that had happened, the explanation felt painfully insufficient. Since meeting Vish, Alex had been hunted through the streets, manipulated into accepting mysterious quests, and dragged directly to Hell Gate 7. None of it felt accidental anymore.

Fear slowly transformed into anger.

“I don’t believe you. All you have done is try to hurt me; get out of my mind,” Alex replied.

The words came harsher than he expected, but he no longer cared. Trusting Vish had brought him directly into the hands of Master Aly and the Guild of Grand Thornton. Whether Vish intended it or not, every interaction with him seemed to pull Alex deeper into danger.

For the first time since the connection began, Vish sounded genuinely disappointed.

“Ok, I am leaving, but it was necessary for the Project: Primal Instincts. Remember, save Administrator 01. Order must be maintained.”

The final sentence lingered heavily within Alex’s thoughts.

Order must be maintained.

The same phrase repeated endlessly throughout Hellfare.

The same phrase spoken by Master Aly.

The same phrase echoed by the crowds.

Before Alex could ask another question, the presence inside his mind suddenly vanished. The connection disappeared so abruptly that the silence afterward felt unnatural.

Alex immediately felt alone again.

The guards tightened their circle around him.

Reality returned all at once.

Hell Gate 7 towered nearby like the entrance to another world, while the massive temple doors radiated an unnatural cold into the surrounding air. The crowd watching from a distance had grown larger now, drawn toward the confrontation by curiosity and fear.

Master Aly stepped forward slightly.

“You can’t hurt me; I know about the quest. It was to bring me to Master Aly unharmed,” Alex repeated hopefully.

Even as he said the words, uncertainty remained in his voice.

The argument sounded logical.

If the quest specifically demanded that he remain unharmed, then harming him should violate the System itself.

Shouldn't it?

Master Aly smiled.

The expression immediately destroyed whatever confidence Alex still possessed.

“The quest is already complete; it is now up to me whether or not I hurt you before you decide to go in. How did you know of this quest? I will give you the choice of entering on

your own free will, without anyone hurting you, or the other option will be more painful. I will give you this choice only if you answer my question. How did you know of this quest?" Master Aly said.

The threat in his voice felt disturbingly casual.

As though torture was merely another negotiation tool.

The guards slowly lowered their spears closer toward Alex's body. The polished gold tips reflected faint light across the temple entrance while the massive blue coveralls made the men appear less human and more like enforcers carrying out inevitable judgment.

Alex's heart pounded violently in his chest.

He could lie.

But what would be the point?

Nothing about this situation felt normal anymore.

"I am telling you it was Vish who told me everything," Alex replied.

"Lyn, go check the records and see if we missed anyone new entering Hellfare," Master Aly said calmly.

Lyn let out a tired sigh. "Really? I have to search the entire records section again?"

Master Aly slowly raised his eyes toward him. "You didn't check the first time I asked, did you?"

"...I did," Lyn answered, though the hesitation in his voice betrayed him instantly.

The room fell silent.

Master Aly turned his head slightly. "Ben. Kill Lyn here, and you will be promoted to general."

For a fraction of a second, Lyn froze in disbelief. Then instinct took over. He jerked his spear upward, trying to level the blade toward Ben's throat.

Too slow.

Ben moved with terrifying precision.

His spear shot forward like lightning and pierced directly through Lyn's chest before the man could even take a full breath. The impact echoed across the chamber.

Lyn staggered backward, eyes wide with shock. Blood spilled from his mouth as the spear slipped free. His body collapsed onto the cold stone floor like a discarded weight.

Silence consumed the room.

No one reacted.

No one dared to.

Master Aly looked down at the corpse without emotion. "Ben, you will be checking the records for someone named Vish entering Hellfare. Go on. Get to it immediately."

Ben lowered his spear and bowed his head slightly. "Right, sir. On it."

Master Aly's gaze shifted toward Alex.

"Enter now," he said coldly, "or I will use the other, more painful option."

"...Okay. I'm going."

Alex forced his legs forward.

The massive golden doors towered before him like the entrance to another world. Ancient Hindu scriptures were carved across the surrounding walls, glowing faintly beneath layers of age and ash. The symbols pulsed with a strange energy, as though the gates themselves were sealed by something sacred... or imprisoned by it.

Around the entrance lay scattered remains of those who had once tried to force the gates open. Broken bones, rusted weapons, and decayed corpses disappeared into the rolling mist surrounding the doorway.

A cold shiver crawled down Alex's spine.

He placed both hands against the enormous doors.

The metal groaned.

Slowly, the gates began to open.

Darkness waited on the other side.

Alex swallowed hard and stepped through.
