

## Hunter 581

### Chapter 581 - Choice

The last time Jake had faced the hydra, it had ended in his defeat due to a timer. In this dungeon, there was no such timer and no interruptions to their battle. Jake could spend as much time as he wanted, as long as his resources allowed it.

Jake had no idea how long it would take, but inside his Soulspace, he already felt sim-Jake begin his part. Charging forward, Jake prepared to meet the hydra in battle. It still showed the same lack of intelligence as their first fight, but its power had grown significantly, as one would expect from a beast getting 39 more levels.

However, Jake had gotten even more levels and power.

The two-headed hydra turned toward him and got ready as he approached. Its instinctual knowledge was enough to identify Jake as a strong opponent, making it clearly take him seriously from the get-go. One maw snapped forward as the other waited to strike, evaluating what Jake would do.

Its massive teeth-filled mouth missed Jake as he side-stepped and jabbed one katar into its side swiftly. The blade only went five or so centimeters into the flesh as he retracted it, the scales and flesh of the hydra too durable for Jake to ignore. If he tried to really jam it in there, he even reckoned it would get stuck.

As expected, the second head descended and tried to snatch Jake up. Jake again dodged and tried to counter, but the first head swiped to the side to hit him. This forced him back as the second head lifted itself towards the sky and breathed in.

Space itself appeared to distort from the inhale, with Jake feeling the movements of massive amounts of mana. Air mana primarily. It was being extracted and absorbed in huge quantities at a time, making it look like a maelstrom had formed above the hydra. Even the clouds several kilometers up in the air were affected.

Needless to say, all this took a bit of time, giving Jake ample opportunity to move. The other head of the hydra naturally moved to stop him, and the four-legged beast even tried to stomp him with its large legs to keep him away as Jake dodged the head and got beneath. He ran quickly but managed to stab four times into the underbelly of the beast, each blow delivering a solid dose of poison from Fangs of the Malefic Viper.

Just as he got to the other side, the hydra roared with the head not inhaling. Jake felt his entire body tense up as the second head bent and aimed its maw straight at Jake.

Let me have it.

A massive sonic boom rocked the entire marsh as a bubble of pure air was released. Trees were uprooted, and Jake found himself impacted straight in the chest. Blood pooled in his mouth as he spat it out, flying through the air through a few trees that had survived. He slid to a halt as he landed on his feet, using both katars to slow himself down.

The released air had been far more potent in the beginning but was just a mild wind by now. Jake felt his ribs hurt a little from the impact earlier but still smiled. It needed to at least be this strong.

He stepped down as he teleported forward and, in only three steps, appeared in front of the hydra once more. Without hesitation, he attacked again. The beast happily responded as the two heads capable of swallowing him whole descended from above to eat him like a snack. Sadly for the hydra, such elementary attacks had no way of hitting.

Jake dodged both as he landed several stabs, the poison slowly seeping into the body of the beast. The scales were tough, and the hydra healed quickly, but it was outmatched. Jake had gotten stronger, and the level gap was severely lower than last time. He was no longer a complete idiot when it came to melee, either. In fact, he felt better than ever. A part of him had feared that only practicing with sim-Jake for so long would have made him worse against an opponent like the hydra, but that fear had been needless.

In reality, the movements and attacks of the hydra just seemed so damn inadequate. It was a beast that fought based on its instincts, making it all too predictable. In some ways, Jake was a bit disappointed. Then again, he knew he couldn't expect too much. It was common knowledge that the smarter a beast was, the more dangerous it was. If this hydra had the same level of intelligence as a human or even just the Phantomshade Panther, it would be far more frightening.

Not that Snappy had been weak when he was still a dum-dum.

Jake managed to land dozens of strikes, stabbing one of the legs several times, hoping to weaken it. He circled the large beast, making it harder for the heads to pin him down and attack him, positioning himself in such a fashion that only one head could strike at a time. Even if the hydra was dumb, it clearly was aware this was not good and changed tactics.

A massive roar was released, stunning Jake again. The hydra quickly spun and swiped Jake with its tail, sending him flying back from the impact. It did little damage to him, but it did buy the beast some time. Instantly it began shrinking, using the skill Jake was already familiar with from the first time around, and he knew this was when the true fight would begin.

Rather than try and take advantage of this slight opening, Jake let it finish. Soon, a hydra about four and a half meters tall stood before him, its gray scales now a darker shade. Jake felt its dense energy from a distance and knew it had improved this skill even more than last time, making him smile.

This time, he wasn't even the one to attack. Incredibly swiftly, the beast ran towards him, not even using a movement skill. The two heads shot forward like two snakes, the many teeth biting down on air as Jake had already teleported back. With the very next step, he teleported forward again to counter, but a leg was raised to kick Jake, forcing him to block for the very first time in the battle.

Jake did so by reflecting the blow towards the ground as one of the heads flew in from the side. Once more, he dodged but had no time to counter as he got pressed by the now far faster beast. The only chance he got was for a slicing attack, but the bone katar just slid helplessly across the thick scales. To his surprise, he also noticed that the many wounds on the hydra were nearly healed, and even the poison in its body was being rapidly consumed.

Does not seem to have gained more tricks in the last 39 levels but just upped everything it already could to a whole new level, Jake concluded. It maybe did have one more trick. Hopefully it did because Jake was also about to get a bit more serious.

A head came for Jake as his body exploded with power, Arcane Awakening activating at the safe 30%. His body was flooded with energy as he dodged the attack, landing a solid jab with Eternal Hunger. He had taken the hydra by surprise, allowing him to penetrate all the way to the handle and pull it out again in one swift motion.

Roaring in anger, the hydra spun again to hit him with its tail. Jake angled himself and pointed both weapons towards the tail as he jumped slightly. The impact sent him flying, but the momentum of the blow also made both katars penetrate the tail as if the beast had just slammed itself into two nails.

Jake barely allowed himself to fly backward before he canceled part of the momentum with a blast of mana before stepping down and teleporting to keep up his constant assault. Wanting to really push himself, Jake even boosted Arcane Awakening, using the destructive mode. His increase in all his offensive stats grew from 30 to 50% as Jake got even faster and hit even harder.

Yet the hydra kept up well. It was clearly on the back foot, but it still managed to keep Jake at bay for the most part. More concerning was that even if Jake landed blows, he wasn't doing much damage. The scales were thick and durable, making slicing attacks difficult, while the regeneration of the hydra made its wounds heal incredibly swiftly. It didn't even feel like it drained a lot of health points doing this, as the beast probably also regenerated that at an insane pace. Moreover, Jake came to discover the hydra did have one new trick...

A berserker-like effect. The more damage it took, the faster and stronger it got, but at the same time, its regeneration also sped up. This made it so that one had to not only outpace the regeneration that increased the more damaged the hydra was but also keep up this high damage output while the hydra got stronger and faster. It was indeed true the beast had few abilities, but those it had all seemed to synergize and turn baby Snappy into a true terror.

The beast and human soon got into a status quo of exchanging blows. Jake focused on what he had come there for as he finally felt himself be pushed, the occasional stunning roar and absorption blast putting him on the back foot at times. He knew that a single slip-up would end up losing him a limb to the maw of the hydra, making it all the more exciting. Jake also bit onto the fact that even if the beast had increased regeneration as it got hurt, he was also gaining momentum himself.

Moreover, he had a few other tricks up his sleeve for when the time came.

However, for now, he would simply indulge himself in the dance of death with his opponent as the ball was firmly in sim-Jake's court to begin what came next.

Inside Jake's Soulspace, sim-Jake stood in front of the massive curse beast with one hand on its head. He had his eyes closed as he also felt the battle outside and experienced everything like he was Jake himself. Because he partly was.

The hydra was powerful but simplistic. The winner was clear, especially if Jake decided to go all-out and not limit himself as he currently did. That would ruin the entire purpose of this exercise, though. Sim-Jake felt the rush of adrenaline running through his body as it ran through Jake's body outside. As he stood there, he carefully observed how Jake fought and what decisions he made.

Dodging was pure instinct with few decisions involved in it, but countering had many. In most instances of a fight, there were several choices that could be made when responding to something. Dodge, block, counter. Even while dodging, he had a few decisions to make, the standards being: side-step, reposition, disengage, or close the distance to set up something in the future.

Blocking was more limited and was only done when dodging was not an option or to potentially deflect and counter. However, by then, it may as well just be considered a full-on counter. Every counter had a myriad of methods behind them, too, though often only a few would be optimal. Adding in a bow had expanded the scope of possibilities significantly, though.

The more time passed with sim-Jake looking, the more sure he became of the Path he wanted to take. He wanted to fight. That had always been who he was. It was all he ever had. It was all he ever felt like he was good at. While he had lost all memories of who he truly was, the emotions remained... no, they had gotten stronger. Likely an aftereffect of attuning himself to a curse.

Sim-Jake had genuinely hated the world before the system. He knew that. After his parents died, he never really had any reason to not act out his inherent impulses, even if it was a world that had developed to not accept them. The world had not been made for the Primal Hunter. At least not back then.

The regular Jake also had some hate back then growing up. Had the same instinct and impulses. One to hunt and dominate. It still sometimes came through, but for the most part, he suppressed himself. He had chosen to bury it... bury it deep.

Jake's Bloodline had awakened during the Tutorial, but it was never the system that had put it to sleep. It was Jake himself who had managed to make his own Bloodline dormant. To try and soothe his family. To try and fit in and be a normal human. Naturally, he could never truly suppress who he was, and what little of the Bloodline remained only made Jake know how much he missed. How hollow the world was.

He had been a shell of himself. Sim-Jake's best way of describing Jake before the system was... depressed. Jake was walking the line between staying alive because surviving was so inherent to him and not seeing the point of life when it was so boring and mundane. Every action he made back then was so empty.

In some ways, sim-Jake understood why he never formed any good relations with others besides his family. It was only his family he ever could feel a connection to.

If sim-Jake had indulged his Bloodline and tried to find a purpose in life, Jake had suppressed his desire to ever find meaning and just tried to ride out the mundanity of the pre-system world. In some ways, they had both just waited for the system. Waited for them to finally enter a world where they could thrive. Who could blame Jake for losing himself after finally letting go and awakening his Bloodline after decades?

The sheer euphoria Jake had felt back then echoed into sim-Jake even now. Decades of pent-up instinct and desire had come rushing through his body at once, with ample targets to take it out on. The Jake of shortly after he awakened his Bloodline had been the closest he had ever been to sim-Jake since the day their Paths split when they were children. When they had made different choices...

"It's funny," sim-Jake smirked as he looked through the real Jake's eyes while talking to the cursed beast. "A single choice can mean so much. That single choice meant that I became me, and he became him. One single choice where we reacted differently to our shared instinct..."

Shaking his head, sim-Jake stared at the cursed beast. "I believe it is time. A final fight, if you may."

Sim-Jake let go of the beast as he sent a pulse into it. The beast's eyes opened wide as it roared, making the entire Soulspace shake. He simply smiled as the beast attacked, and they fought. A brutal brawl where he didn't even use any weapons. A final moment of pure indulgence.

The two of them clashed for several minutes before sim-Jake was sent sliding back. A massive maw came towards him as the cursed beast wanted to eat him. Sim-Jake simply smiled. This had always been the plan. To become one with the beast through the one thing it did: consumption.

The giant maw descended upon him as the cursed beast consumed sim-Jake. The energies of the beast began eroding him as sim-Jake connected with the Records he had stored there. This was what most of their time had been spent on: assuring this would succeed. The two would become one, whether Eternal Hunger liked it or not. At any moment, he could still escape from within the beast. At any moment, he could suppress it. He could stop this entire process. But he didn't. He let it consume him because that was what he had chosen to do.

He had chosen how he lived, and now he had his final Path.

Because in the end, sim-Jake was nothing but the outcome of a choice. Such was his Origin, and so he would remain.

Just another choice: a shadow of what could have been.

Chapter 582 - An Eternal Shadow



Jake instantly knew. He felt the awareness of sim-Jake slowly slip away as the bone katar began to show even more cracks. At the same time, Eternal Hunger hummed with power as if it was growing by the second, actively consuming something incredibly valuable – sim-Jake himself.

Despite knowing this had always been the plan, Jake still felt a sense of sadness. It was a weird sentiment, but he felt like he had become good friends with his other self. To have him disappear like this wasn't something Jake wanted to see, but it was inevitable from the beginning.

All Jake could do was help make sure the Legacy he left behind would be worth remembering for eternity.

The hydra kept attacking Jake as he picked up the pace. He dealt more damage, made the beast faster and stronger due to the berserk effect, and truly pushed himself. He was in the zone as sim-Jake did what he had to do. After a few seconds, Jake felt the full change. A humming of sorts went through his body, and the bone weapon let out an audible crack. The very next second, it began falling apart, forcing Jake to temporarily retreat.

Pieces of the broken weapon fell towards the marsh water below but never reached it. It turned to dust that rapidly began moving towards Eternal Hunger. The black bone dust swirled and entered the cursed weapon as Jake felt it grow more powerful with every whisp of energy absorbed. Its aura underwent subtle changes, and Jake felt a connection to it unlike anything he had before. Like it had become more than a simple weapon and truly a part of him.

Then, it truly hit as an audible heartbeat sounded out from the core of his Bloodline... No... two heartbeats at the exact same time.

**\*THUMP!\* \*THUMP!\***

Knowledge, Records, Emotions. It all slammed into him like a truck. For a moment, Jake became unable to properly think and simply let his instincts take over. His body dodged through pure instincts, the hydra unable to hit him while Jake digested all that was streaming into his mind. His eyes were closed as he tried to focus, relying only on his sphere.

It was only now that Jake understood. Truly understood. Sim-Jake and Jake himself had wanted to keep parts separate for a reason. They were the same person but didn't have the same personalities. They shared one body but could make different choices - both see possibilities in combat and read an opponent through their instinct. Yet, at the same time, they perfectly understood what the other would do in any given situation.

The hydra was upon Jake again at that moment. His eyes opened as he saw the head descend... and he made a choice. A reaction. At the same time, a second choice was made. Two possibilities were valid, and two reactions were effective. Hence both were chosen.

And both manifested.

Jake dodged backward at an incredible speed as his body took on a shadowy hue, accelerating him further. He drew his bow and released Splitting Arrow towards his foe. Simultaneously, a second shadowy Jake dodged to the side in melee range of the hydra and stabbed his katar into the leg of the beast.

Two figures spawned from one. Two possible realities manifested at once. One simulated, one true, yet both made real. At least for a moment.

The hydra responded quickly and ignored the arrows, clearly not having expected that attack. It instead focused on the one attacking its leg and promptly attacked. Both heads came for it, but this version of Jake didn't even try to dodge. One of the heads chomped down on Jake, but his body simply turned to black curse energy and disappeared – still leaving behind a deep and nasty wound.

Jake – the real one – landed on the ground shortly after as he still tried to digest the skill properly. He had felt like he had been both, yet only one. Both had been real, yet not. Frowning, he kept going. There is more. He wanted to test it again immediately; however, he also noticed what felt like an internal cooldown. No matter; he had time.

His opponent was still confused by what had happened as Jake retreated a bit, waiting for the skill to be ready once more.

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“That’s... how does it work?” Duskleaf asked with a frown. “Their auras felt exactly the same; it took me nearly a second to properly distinguish them. And-”

“My dear disciple,” Vilastromoz smirked. “Just enjoy the show for once.”

A bit of time later, it was time for another go. Jake got in position before charging straight at the beast. Right as he got in front of the hydra, it tried to bite down. Once more, there were two responses. Dodging to both sides was correct. Hence both choices were made as the “real” Jake dodged to the right and his other version to the left. Both stabbed the side of the neck at the exact same time, both wielding Eternal Hunger, both using Fangs of the Malefic Viper to deliver poison, both absorbing energy through the mythical weapon.

With only one other head, the hydra had to choose. It went for the one on the right – the real Jake. He saw the attack descend... and realized that neither choice of the beast mattered. Because he could be either.

Once more, the beast only bit down on shadows as the real Jake stood on the left with his weapon in the neck of the beast. That is when he understood the second aspect.

Both are real to the rest of the world... but I only need to be the outcome of one of them.

After the second use, Jake also noticed that the cooldown had gotten slightly longer, and the mental strain was detectable. Nodding to himself, he kept up the fight. A bit later, he tried to use the skill again. One version jumped back and shot an arrow while the other stayed in melee once more, but this time Jake chose to stay as the melee combatant. The arrows fired from his second version had still hit the hydra and dealt damage too. The arrows themselves were gone with the shadow version, though, and Jake reckoned that should any arrows be in mid-air when he manifested as the other version, they would disappear.

By now, Jake was also beginning to feel the cost of the skill. Which was...

Pretty much nothing besides mental energy.

It drained a bit of mana each time, but it seemed to only really be the Shadow Vault aspect of the skill that had a cost. Not that Jake didn't know what the other version of himself consumed: it ran on pure curse energy. It used the massive pool of curse energy within Eternal Hunger to spawn his second shadowy version every time, making it highly efficient.

The only other cost was, of course, the mental energy, and in this aspect, it was a bit taxing. Especially when switching places with his other version, it took a bit out of Jake. Not that Jake complained... because he had a feeling he had only begun to figure things out.

Jake began to explore what skills his other version could use. Splitting Arrow? Worked. Gaze? Didn't work. Powershot? Not really; it didn't have enough time to charge, though it did look possible. Passive skills? All seemed to work as the shadow copied Jake himself. Could he summon scales on it? Yeah, it copied those, but it didn't do anything, as the shadow could always be destroyed in one blow. Touch of the Malefic Viper? Not enough time to channel, sadly. Things like Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter also worked, though with few practical applications. Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter also worked just fine... too bad it had no time to ever summon the arrow. Ah, and of course, Arrows of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter worked.

However, more than any other active skill, one worked far better than any other:

Descending Dark Arcane Fang.

It was instant, dealt good damage, and worked tremendously well with his shadow. The shadow also used Eternal Hunger, making it even better as the weapon also benefitted from Fangs of the Malefic Viper. Oh, on that note, the shadow could cheat. It could instantly transform Eternal Hunger into a bow when it became ranged, something Jake sure as hell couldn't, as it took a long time for the weapon to change shape. Then again... the shadow was tied to Eternal Hunger, so it made sense. He estimated that "version" simply always had the bow and never transformed it, as it could only have either-or.

Jake's battle against the hydra had quickly gone from a mere fight to transforming the peak D-grade into a test subject. The fight kept dragging on, and soon it had been nearly five hours since they began. Jake repeatedly retreated and even flew into the air a few times to reset, deactivating all his boosting skills and consuming a potion to recover. The hydra naturally also recovered before their bout continued. When he had no more tests... Jake decided to get serious and finish the fight.

For the first time, Arcane Awakening fully activated at 60% to all stats as Jake's body was flooded with power. He took out a vial of his best hemotoxin and put it on his one remaining katar. Hemotoxin was naturally chosen to impede the hydra's regeneration at least a little and increase the damage done with the many blows he inflicted. Would it work with the shadow? He sure hoped so.

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"It won't work with a crafted poison. That would delve into the concept of creation as it isn't tied to his soul. If it does somehow apply, the effect would simply stop working the moment the second version disperses, resulting in-" Duskleaf began commenting before shutting up and staring.

"I told you already, didn't I? Just enjoy the damn show," the Viper grinned.

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The poison worked quite nicely. Jake's clone appeared with a katar also coated in poison, and Jake had feared the effect would simply stop once the copy disappeared, but no, it remained. That hammered it home... everything the clone did to affect the world became a reality.

This made him try to summon Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter and use a shadow with it already in hand, only to feel sad afterward. That didn't work, maybe because it counted as another weapon, and Eternal Hunger was the only possible one? He also tried some other consumables, like using the shadow while holding a bottle of poison to throw, but that didn't work either. The only-Eternal-Hunger-theory had gotten stronger, though he hoped it would at least work with two melee weapons once he got his second katar.

Anyway, all stuff for later. The plan had been for testing to be over, and even if he kept doing a few, that didn't mean he hadn't also upped the pressure to a new level. He had even hit with Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, dealing some serious damage.

By now, the result of the fight was already clear. The hydra was struggling, and after fighting so long, Jake had a thorough read on everything it did. It was truly predictable and did not have the intelligence to switch up its tactics.

The massive hydra was covered in wounds, and after activating the second fully-charged Arcane Charge from Mark, coupled with all the poison, it was also in serious pain and struggling to keep up. Without its berserker skill, it would already have fallen a long time ago.

Jake did encounter one issue here at the finishing line: Crossing the actual finish line. He knew the hydra was close to death; he knew it was hurt all over... but it was also more dangerous than ever. Moreover, it regenerated at an insane speed, making its wounds heal in seconds. The only way to victory was to do a large burst of damage to finish the beast... and Jake had just the thing.

Throughout these hours and all this testing, something accumulated and built up. For hours it pooled and, with his massive Perception, pooled a lot.

It was naturally his Hunting Momentum. Would it work with his shadow? Jake really had no idea... but fuck did he hope it did.

Jake got ready as he set up the perfect opportunity. Half a minute passed as Jake kept up the status quo until, finally, a weakness displayed itself. The hydra had overextended, using both heads to try and catch him out. As it retracted both, Jake struck.

Momentum welled up from within as he charged. Right as he got close, both heads attacked again, and Jake reacted with a counter. Two heads, two targets to respond to... two reactions. Every shred of Hunting Momentum was consumed as Jake split into two, each stabbing Eternal Hunger toward one of the two necks of the hydra.

Both exploded in power as Descending Dark Arcane Fang was used, releasing a torrent of energy as both punched forward. Two heads flew into the air as one of the Jakes disappeared, and all Hunting Momentum was consumed. The two heads slammed heavily into the marsh, sending the water splashing. Jake stood ready for the hydra to do something, but it only stumbled a bit before falling over into the shallow water, joining its heads.

\*You have slain [Two-Headed Hydra of Perennial Consumption – lvl 199] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\*

\*‘DING!’ Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 196 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

Jake saw the notifications but didn’t pay them much heed. Instead, he closed his eyes and entered his Soulspace right away. He did not know what he expected to see, and honestly? What appeared before him was in line with expectations.

Inside the Soulspace, a singular figure sat with his legs crossed. A shadowy figure with indistinguishable features, giving off an intense curse aura. Jake knew... this was sim-Jake... or was it Eternal Hunger? It was both... but...



Shaking his head, Jake finally checked the skill, its name also telling him what sim-Jake had become. The moment he saw the rarity, he looked at the shadowy figure.

“We bloody did it, mate.”

[Eternal Shadow of the Primal Hunter (Mythical)] – Two choices, two realities, a single soul. A cursed shadow born and sustained by sin. Allows the Primal Hunter to use his instincts to respond to an enemy. Allows the Eternal Shadow to use his instincts to respond to an enemy. Both reactions will manifest at once as two realities are created. Both realities are real, but the Primal Hunter can choose his own soul’s reality and manifest it as such. The Eternal Shadow will experience the consequences of any reality not chosen. Upon activation of Eternal Shadow of the Primal Hunter, this skill allows both the Eternal Shadow and the Primal Hunter to embrace the shadows momentarily, vaulting in any chosen direction. Adds a large bonus to all stats dependent on the nature of the reaction while using Eternal Shadow of the Primal Hunter. Walk forth, Primal Hunter, your shadow forever eternal, waiting to strike.

The description offered little new information Jake had not already learned himself. Jake did not know what the baseline of a mythical skill was, but this felt like it hit the mark. It was probably the weirdest skill he had now, too... besides maybe Path of the Heretic-Chosen.

It was a skill that only Jake could have made and used. It relied on the concepts of the virtual world, his Bloodline, and shadows. The shadow aspect was not large, and Jake had also discovered that he didn’t even have to use the Shadow Vault functionality. In fact, there was rarely a reason to when he used it to attack. The Records of Shadow Vault had simply been fodder for the creation of the skill.

Jake was also sure of one thing... this skill was just the beginning. It was a baseline for what could be. Already now, he saw so many upgrade paths. All things in due time, Jake thought.

Looking at the Eternal Shadow, Jake simply stared at it. He felt its attention on him, but he saw nothing he would identify as intelligence. It was a being of pure instincts but no longer the mere instinct of the chimera. It was not called the Eternal Shadow of the Primal Hunter for nothing.

Jake smiled and nodded at the Eternal Shadow, surprisingly getting a nod in response. His smile turned to a faint smirk. Guess there is a bit more to it.

Next, he turned his attention to everything else. The notification of something to do with a title gained, the change in Eternal Hunger, the dungeon coming to an end, and this annoying projection blabbering in the outside world about how awesome the Chosen of the Malefic Viper was.

#### Chapter 583 - An Even More Prodigious Prodigy

Jake reluctantly exited his Soulspace and addressed the projection first. He was inside a dungeon and wanted to avoid things turning awkward by suddenly getting teleported out or something. Opening his eyes, the projection that had been silent for a few seconds after noticing he was meditating spoke again.

“Honored Chosen, I want to congratulate you on your victory over the Lord Protector’s image. It was a marvelous display,” it praised in what Jake could only describe as an ass-licking tone.

He simply nodded at it as he looked at the corpse of the hydra. “It was a good fight.”

“It pleases me to hear the Chosen enjoyed himself. May I know if the Chosen intends to battle any of the other projections stored here?”

Jake shook his head. “No, I already know this one was the strongest. Defeating it should count as a win, right?”

“Indeed, however, defeating all projections will result in the opportunity to get even better rewards, especially if you face the five strongest,” the projection offered.

“Not interested,” Jake dismissed. He really didn’t care. It was still a D-grade dungeon, which meant the most it could offer was D-grade equipment or crafting material. Jake was at the crux of C-grade and didn’t need any of it.

“Very well. May your Path lead to the pinnacle, all by the glory of the Malefic One.”

He just nodded, not wanting to make a snark comment but just get a move on. He was teleported once more and appeared at the same entrance hall as before, a treasure chest in the center with the exit right behind him.

Congratulations! You have cleared Dungeon: Order of the Malefic Viper: D-grade Legends of Old.

Dungeon shutting down in: 00:59:23

It was the fastest dungeon Jake had ever done, mainly by just skipping to the last boss right away through cheating with his status. But, hey, at least it also gave a title upgrade, so that was 1 more to all stats...

[Dungeoneer IX] – Successfully clear a Dungeon suitable for your level. +17 all stats.

Jake looked at the treasure chest but decided to wait a bit and check everything else out first since he had an hour before he had to be out. The first thing he wanted to look at was Eternal Hunger.

[Eternal Hunger (Mythical)] – A weapon born of eternal hunger - a living sin of consumption, forever starving, forever seeking sustenance. Given form by the [Redacted] Hunter, this new myth still holds properties of its Origin as a weapon created by vampires from the core of a Chimera, allowing it to change shape and adapt to the will of its master. Origin has been further altered by [Redacted], giving birth to the Eternal Shadow of the [Redacted] Hunter. This weapon is eternally Soulbound to its creator; their souls are one and the same, making Eternal Hunger indestructible as long as the Hunter persists. Any attack made with this weapon will absorb energy from the target. Foes slain by the owner of this weapon will have their souls absorbed. Can consume absorbed souls. Take pride as you wield hunger incarnate. Enchantments: Curse of Eternal Hunger. Souldrinker. Soul Consumption. Eternal Shadow Requirements: Soulbound

No change in name, it seemed, which kind of made sense. The description had just gotten longer, with a few more [Redacted] added in there for good measure. It also specifically mentioned the Eternal Shadow enchantment... even if it was damn weird to call it an enchantment. It also became clear that Eternal Hunger was no longer just a mere weapon. It was now tied to Jake through-and-through, even if the requirement still just called it Soulbound. Then again, Soulbound was eternal by design, so it made sense there was no reason to change it.

What had changed was the part saying it was now indestructible. Jake reckoned this did not mean unbreakable but that it could not be utterly destroyed like it could before. Destroying Soulbound weapons was damn hard, but methods did exist in the multiverse. As an example, then Jake could probably have some craftsman dismantle and “break” his cauldron if he wanted, and one also had to remember that when he had that vampire crafter improve his necklace, she was able to modify it. She could even potentially have destroyed it if she had wanted to.

Jake could also have – in theory – destroyed Eternal Hunger using his Alchemical Flame before. That would – not in theory – have released the massive amount of curse energy in a completely uncontrolled state and probably ruined the solar system or something, but now that wasn’t even an option.

He didn't know why he felt a bit sad about that. Oh well.

Next up was something Jake kind of already knew about. He had felt it a bit during the battle, but now that he had winded down, he truly experienced the change. His stats had all grown... and the source was obvious. Jake checked the notification and was a bit surprised to see that while he hadn't gotten a new title, one had upgraded.

[Legendary Prodigy] – A true talent standing at the pinnacle of his generation. Young yet showing promise above even the elders of yore. Due to your immense accomplishment of creating a legendary skill while still below D-grade, you have proven yourself a true legendary prodigy. +10 all stats +10% all stats.

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[Mythical Prodigy] – A genius ahead of the curve, not even the mythical eluding him. It feels as if your Path has barely begun, yet you refuse to be confined to the expectations of your station. Creating a mythical skill while below C-grade is no easy feat and the achievement of a true myth in the making. Be proud, affirmed in your Path. +100 all stats +20% all stats.

Jake read it over and smiled. In reality, it didn't matter much if it was a new title or an upgrade to his existing one: the bonus was massive, nevertheless. 90 flat points and 10% more to all stats. Actually, on second thought, not getting a second title was nice, as that meant this was now his best title, even beating out the Progenitor one, making it feel like an even bigger accomplishment.

He was fully aware of how much a title like this mattered. There was some diminishing return as these percentage titles were all additive, but it still helped tremendously and was what allowed Jake to fight things so much stronger than himself – or utterly dominate foes of the same level.

Upgrading it again did seem like an insurmountable task, though. Especially if Jake had to do it in C-grade. Shit, he didn't even know what the next rarity was yet. Either way, that was stuff to think about after he actually evolved. Who knew? Maybe his last two evolution quests would stump him?

They wouldn't. But they could. But not really.

As he was still in all the menus and stuff, Jake decided to take a good look at this full status – the last time before he made the push to C-grade.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (D) – lvl 197]

Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter – lvl 196]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 199]

Health Points (HP): 65841/68240

Mana Points (MP): 85010/130218

Stamina: 16859/58990

Stats

Strength: 5456

Agility: 8744

Endurance: 5899

Vitality: 6824

Toughness: 4929

Wisdom: 8334

Intelligence: 6913

Perception: 15247

Willpower: 6904

Free points: 0

Titles: [Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch], [Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer IX], [Dungeon Pioneer VI], [Prodigious Slayer of the Mighty], [Kingslayer], [Nobility: Marquess], [Progenitor of the 93rd Universe], [Prodigious Arcanist], [Perfect Evolution (D-grade)], [Premier Treasure Hunter], [Myth Originator], [Progenitor of Myriad Paths], [Mythical Prodigy],

Class Skills: [Traditional Hunter's Tracking (Rare)], [Arcane Stealth (Rare)], [Superior Stealth Attack (Rare)], [Splitting Arrow Rain (Epic)], [Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Epic)], [Big Game Arcane Hunter (Epic)], [Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)], [Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Epic)], [Fangs of Man (Ancient)], [Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Ancient)], [Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Ancient)], [Arcane Powershot (Ancient)], [Moment of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Steady Focus of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Arcane Awakening (Legendary)], [One Step, Thousand Miles (Legendary)], [Relentness Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Legendary)], [Eternal Shadow of the Primal Hunter(Mythical)]

Profession Skills: [Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Alchemist's Purification (Common)], [Alchemical Flame (Uncommon)], [Craft Elixir (Uncommon)], [Cultivate Toxin



(Uncommon)), [Concoct Poison (Rare)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Epic)], [Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Ancient)], [Advanced Core Manipulation (Ancient)], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Wings of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Legendary)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Pride of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Anomalous Soul of the Heretic-Chosen (Legendary)]

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

Race Skills: [Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races (Unique)], [Legacy of Man (Unique)], [Identify (Rare)], [Serene Soul Meditation (Epic)], [Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)]

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

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There had been massive growth across the board, especially in Wisdom and Perception, partly for the same reason and partly for different ones. They shared that he had upgraded skills related to the Malefic Viper giving him stats in both, but the primary reason for the growth in Wisdom was just the sheer amount of levels he had in his profession.

Perception had grown because Jake had thrown Free Points into it without any regard and consumed as many damn elixirs as he could to push the stat further. Seeing he had over 15000 total now, it was totally worth it. It was a big number, after all, and big numbers were good.

As for the growth in skills, the profession ones were obviously no surprise, while he did have some good growth in his class skills too. A few of them were still a bit lacking, but all good things in due time. Tracking, Arcane Stealth, and Stealth Attack were his weakest by far, but Jake had confidence in upgrading them all. Well... besides maybe tracking.

He did consider trying before C-grade, but there really was no need to. Upgrading them were not vital to Jake's Path. Maybe some would argue that things like tracking and stealth were core to the "hunter" archetype, but Jake was not the type of hunter to track a target for a long time and then kill it. That was just one aspect of him. His core was that of a fighter able to hunt those more dangerous than himself, no matter the means.

Jake felt done analyzing his status and closed all the system windows, finally turning his attention to the final thing in the room. The treasure chest. It was quite ornate and impressive, making him raise an eyebrow. Without waiting further, he went over and touched it, only to see it be replaced with a new chest. Using Identify, he had to admit the reward did make sense.

[Scales of the Two-Headed Hydra of Perennial Consumption (Legendary)] – The scales of a peak D-grade Two-Headed Hydra of Perennial Consumption. These scales retained their durability even after the death of the beast and have even been improved slightly by the Records of their former owner. These scales are incredibly durable, and if they are used as armor will make the equipment near-impenetrable by physical damage. They are incredibly hard to work with. Due to their nature, these scales have very limited alchemical applications.

His earlier assessment of this reward not really mattering to him also proved true. Maybe a really skilled crafter could make these scales into C-grade equipment, but if that person was skilled enough to do that, then having them just use actual C-grade materials would be far better.

Not to misunderstand. Had Jake gotten these scales in early or mid-D-grade, he would have gone and had some armor made right away. As it was now, they were just something to sell or give to someone he knew who may want them to experiment with.

In his sphere, the projection appeared once more. Jake turned to it, prompting it to speak.

"I am aware that the Chosen likely has no need for such a reward, but it is not I who decide what is given. Nevertheless, you have my apology," the projection bowed.

"As you said, not your fault," Jake waved it off. "Sorry for my earlier attitude; I was in a rush. Wanted to make a mythical skill before I evolved to C-grade."

Jake had kind of hoped to surprise the projection, but it simply nodded. "As expected of the Malefic's Chosen. Let me congratulate you on your evolution, and may your Path lead to divinity."

"Thanks," Jake nodded. "I will be off then."

The projection once more just bowed as Jake went out of the dungeon and appeared in... yeah, he had no idea where the fuck he was. Villy had swept him up and brought him away at his own request, and he now found himself in a hall. The hall was empty, but through his sphere, he saw a lot of people behind a gate leading into the hall with the dungeon entrance, all of them looking rather annoyed.

Jake wondered what was going on as a figure appeared beside him, having noticed Jake staring at the gate. "I took the liberty to seal off the dungeon a bit ago to make sure you could enter and exit without any annoying disturbances. The rabble seems displeased by this decision."

"Understandable," Jake muttered to the snake god. "But thanks anyway."

Villy waved him off. "Who cares about them. Anyway, let's get out of here."

Jake found himself teleported again as they appeared back at his own mansion, right in the living room.

"That forced teleportation is a little unsettling, not gonna lie," Jake commented.

"People tend to find it more unsettling when I purposefully choose not to teleport a part of them. Always funny to see them freak out when I "forget" a foot," Villy snickered.

"I would think that was a joke... but I have a strong feeling it isn't."

"Nah, but I only do it when they don't know I am the one teleporting them, and honestly, I did kind of lie when I said it is always funny... it does get boring after a bit," the snake god admitted.

Jake shook his head before flopping down on the sofa, finally allowing some of the exhaustion from the dungeon to wash over him. He groaned a bit and looked at the ceiling.

"Snappy was real strong back then," Jake said. "But... simple. Limited."

"He was a bit lopsided, yes," Villy nodded. "Luckily, his C-grade evolution did him good in the intelligence department. Not that stat, the- ah, you know what I mean. Anyway, I can promise you that a level 200 Snappy would have whopped the floor with you, even with that new skill of yours."

"Any comments on the skill?" Jake asked, rather proud.

"Nope," Villy answered.

"None at all?" Jake frowned.

"Not a single one. You do you. My guesses or estimations of how exactly it works and the concepts behind it would only poison your own thoughts and conclusions. You made something that fundamentally doesn't make sense, so for others to try and make sense of it is pointless anyway. All we need to see and understand is the result, so I can at least comment on that. It is strong, but it has some flaws I already noticed, ones I assume you did too?" Villy asked.

"Yeah," Jake nodded.

"Good. I won't share what I think are weaknesses either. Again, you made a skill that is incredibly conceptually complex. All I can say is to keep it up and see where it can take you. Ah, but you did create a Soulbound weapon that seems hard to get rid of, huh? And a Sin weapon nonetheless," Villy did comment.

"Is that bad?" Jake asked, not really worried.

"No, not at all. What could possibly go wrong with eternally linking your soul with a cursed weapon? Totally safe and even recommended by nine out of ten dentists," the Viper joked.

"Damn. Better go for another cursed weapon then; that should only lead to a better result!"

"Oh yeah, for sure, because mixing curses inside of your soul is brilliance itself," Villy laughed. "In all seriousness, it is probably fine, and as odd as it seems, having a stronger connection to the Sin weapon may allow you to control it more easily. The connection with which it will try to control you is the same one you use to control it. Also, if all goes wrong, you can even modify it away from being a weapon at some point and transform it into something else. Worst case, seal it away somewhere until you get strong enough to separate it from yourself in a soul ritual."

"Think that will ever be necessary?" Jake asked.

"Maybe, maybe not. It is more likely it will just end up being a weapon you can use for a long time to come as long as you keep feeding it souls. I would fear linking a weapon to you like that impacting your Path if it was anyone else, but I have a feeling you will be fine. Speaking of Path, I assume you will be heading off back to your planet to evolve? Or do you want me to point out a nice leveling spot around here?" the Viper asked.

"I will go back to Earth," Jake nodded. "In fact, I will be going right away. I have dallied enough in D-grade, especially after my time in the time cha-"

That is when Jake remembered something. The time chamber. He had been so caught up in everything else happening he had completely forgotten. It didn't help that he hadn't visibly aged at all, even if he knew a long time had passed. Longer than his time with Shroud for sure... but...

“How... how long was I in there?” Jake asked a bit nervously.

“From your point of view?” Villy asked.

“We can start with that...”

“Eh, around forty years. Congratulations, you managed to double your age by sitting still.”

“Wha-“ Jake said. He knew it had been long... but that long? His sense of time had completely slipped away, he could admit that, but it was still far longer than he had expected. Worse... he was now older than his damn parents. Which was just bloody weird to think about.

“And... how long in Realtime?”

Villy put on the vilest smile Jake had seen in a while. “Take a guess?”

Chapter 584 - (Mostly) Checked Off Checklist

Jake knew the question of how long he had been in time dilation was just a stupid joke, but he still thought about it seriously. The last time he had spent fourteen years or something in time dilation, and that had translated to a few months. Would it be more? Jake considered and concluded It couldn't be more than half a year, even if that would be a while.

However, he did notice one thing. His token had no new messages left behind on it. The last time he was in the time chamber, he had gotten some messages in the meantime, with the messages appearing whenever he exited. This time he hadn't gotten any. So, maybe less than three months? Forty years resulting in three months passing would be a 1-160 dilation, which seems like... a lot? Was it a lot?

Needless to say, Jake had no way to math it out. But he did have one way to find out quickly without having Villy tell him.

"How about we make a bet on if I can guess the time? Down to the hour." Jake proposed to tease the snake god in turn.

"Oh, interesting? What are we betting?" Villy answered with genuine curiosity. "Wait, I know! The loser has to wear an outfit decided by the other."

Jake seemed to consider it seriously for a few moments. "Pictures allowed?"

"Obviously."

"Hm... fine," Jake accepted.

"I am already assuming I lost, so how does my Chosen have a way to accurately determine Realtime? It tends to be annoying unless you have system timers, and I don't think you have any of those, and I already scanned the mansion for any kind of timing features on the ritual circle," the Viper asked curiously. "Then again, maybe you were bluffing."



Jake smiled as he spoke up.

"Hey, Duskleaf, how long was I in there?"

The sprout-clone of the alchemist god had been in another room, and Jake spoke loud enough for him to hear. Not that Jake doubted he would pick up what Jake said no matter how loud he spoke. As expected, the alchemy god peeked his head in.

"It was-"

"My dear disciple. Do not answer that."

Duskleaf looked confused a bit as Jake countered.

"If you tell me, you will get a picture of Villy in an outfit of your own choosing," Jake smirked, offering up the opportunity for him to decide.

"If you tell him, I will-"

"Fifty-five days, eleven hours, sixteen minutes, and... seventeen minutes now," Duskleaf cut Villy off.

Jake looked at Villy. "Fifty-five days, eleven hours, and seventeen minutes. Give or take."

"This is clearly collusion," he answered defiantly.

"You never said I couldn't ask anyone," Jake defended himself.

"Well, excuse me for not expecting my own disciple to so thoughtlessly betray me like that. My dear Duskleaf, what have I ever done to you?" Villy said in an exaggerated hurt tone.

"Left for eras after telling me to make sure the Academy didn't collapse, repeatedly refused to work with me on anything, forced me into your own projects, forced me into helping others I had no interest in, made me take up the position as Leader in the Academy, is pressuring me to give lessons at the Academy, stole a lot of the ingredients I had gathered while you were gone, proceeded to use those materials for your own goals without even asking, then tried to convince me that I had just misplaced my own ingredients despite full-well knowing I would ne-"

"Okay, so one or two things, I got it," Villy raised his hands on defense. "And, to counter, I would have used my own materials if I had any. Plus, you know I would repay you for-"

Duskleaf raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, good point. I wouldn't," the snake god shrugged. "Anyway, why the hell did I even agree to this? And shouldn't you be getting back to your little planet already, Jake?"

"This could all have been avoided if you had just given me a straight answer," Jake answered with a deadpan expression. "I would have probably already been on my way back if you had done that."

"Yeah, but then I would miss the opportunity to do a dramatic reveal of you being able to endure a time dilation around 1-265 despite still being in D-grade," Villy said in a tone making it sound like Jake should be impressed or proud.

"...I genuinely have no idea what is considered impressive; you do know that, right" Jake answered. Did 1-265 sound impressive? Sure it did, but what was the standard? Considering how time dilation was often only used for specific things like this or avoided entirely, it wasn't something he often heard people talk about. But it sounded like it was above standard, so that was nice.

"Sometimes I really forget how ignorant you can be... it is almost impressive. Most people have a hard time even reaching 1-100, while 1-200 is considered really damn good. Anything above that is for chronomancers who are specialized in time magic and have an incredible affinity for the concept. They can reach insane levels and practice often, while your resistance is only due to a few skills," Villy explained.

"I see," Jake nodded. Yeah, he didn't entirely get it. Maybe it was a bit like adapting to pressure in deep water? He did have Moment and Steady Focus, though he was not sure if Steady Focus even counted as that skill only affected his perception of time.

Turning to Duskleaf, Jake smiled. "Remember to take a picture whenever you pick out an outfit and send it... I want a nicely framed version if possible."

"This is why you're a heretic, Jake. You care more about some silly bet than the praise of your Patron. This is downright blasphemous, I tell you!" Villy said with much indignation.

"I accept such a label with honor," Jake bowed, also getting a nod of confirmation from Duskleaf. He did not know what the old alchemist was planning, but he was looking forward to it.

"Oh yeah, before I forget," Villy said as he tossed a crystal to Jake. "Schematics for the new ritual circle to teleport back here while piggybacking off the main formation the snake made."

"I had totally forgotten about that. Thanks!" Jake said, saying his goodbyes for real.

Having nothing more to do in the Order, Jake decided not to dally. Meira was gone for a lesson, so he couldn't say goodbye to her, and he quite frankly had no idea where Scarlett even was. He considered contacting Irin to ask about her but decided not to. Maybe being apart from Jake for a bit was a good thing? It had only been a few months anyway, and if something bad had happened, he was sure Irin would have told him anyway.

With that in mind, Jake left the Order relatively shortly after getting there. Well, in actuality, he had been there for over forty years, but thinking about time passing in time dilation only made Jake feel weird, so he didn't really count it.

His checklist of things before C-grade had been mostly finished, and there was only one point left:

Actually evolve to C-grade.

Scarlett had been worried about joining the Order from the get-go. Not about if she could join, but if it was okay for her to join. She didn't know anything about the Order, and she wasn't even that strong yet, plus she didn't know how to do any alchemy and, in all honesty, had no interest in the subject. She honed her own personal venom through the consumption of certain natural treasures and practice, and that was all she needed.

Getting taken to the assessment dungeon by that... woman didn't help either. Scarlett had no idea who that demoness had been and hadn't liked her at all from the very moment she saw her. She was weak, even for a C-grade, and it was clear she wasn't a fighter at all. Yet she dared act towards the Chosen like that... Scarlett didn't like it. At least she still didn't go too far, and after spending some time with her, maybe she wasn't that bad. Irin was also pretty helpful and told Scarlett a lot about the Order and gladly guided her around.

Irin had led her to a new area through many of the teleportation gates spread around until they reached a dungeon entrance with many other people.

"Due to recent events, I have gotten quite the promotion and am able to handle everything related to your enrollment personally. As you are not joining the Academy, there is not really an assessment per-se, more just a dungeon that has to be passed. Do note that this particular C-grade dungeon is capable of handling both groups or individuals, and you are free to choose how you want to be assessed. There are always individuals looking for someone to enter with, and I won't mince words: you getting a party is easy as pie with your Blessing," Irin explained.

Scarlett thought for a while. "I want to do it with a group."

She didn't know anyone in the Order, and she was still oblivious to the power level outside of her own planet. Entering with others would allow her insight into the general power level of those wanting to join, and with Irin helping her, she could hopefully get a group of people considered above average.

An assessment that proved true less than an hour later as she stood in a full group of five. It consisted of a party of three dragonkin with rather diluted blood who were already a group before this. The last member was individual who had come alone. Scarlett and the other individual were the only beasts, the other one some kind of mammal-like beast who had taken a very hairy human form.

The group was more than happy to have Scarlett join, but as they left, Irin had given a warning.

"Take care, I am not getting good vibes from those dragonkin."

Scarlett took the warning to heart, though she was not overly worried. Their levels were all rather high, though, all firmly in mid-C-grade.

[Dragonkin – lvl 274]

[Dragonkin – lvl 277]

[Dragonkin – lvl 275]

[Venomtongue Alstmaw Alpha – lvl 297]

And finally, there was herself.

[Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake – lvl 285]

As enlightened species, the three dragonkin all had classes, with herself and the Alstmaw being beasts. This was when Scarlett encountered something unexpected she had not seen coming from the Order of the Malefic Viper – or people wanting to join it.

These three dragonkin looked down on herself and the Alstmaw, only allowing them to join because Scarlett had a Blessing and the Alstmaw was nearly at the peak of mid-C-grade, which was the highest one could be for this test dungeon. All three were clearly proud of their draconic heritage, despite their blood being so thin, their True Dragon ancestor no doubt many generations removed from all of them.

Perhaps what came next should not have come as a surprise...

The fighting in the dungeon had been too easy, according to Scarlett, and the dragonkin party happily did most of the work while forcing the Alstmaw to act as a tank and had Scarlett designated as "rear support" despite not having any support skills. She didn't even have to reveal her true form but had just stayed humanoid the entire time. When they reached the end of the dungeon, signifying they would be allowed to join, it was time for loot distribution... which was just three items. Two natural treasures of a highly toxic nature as well as a spear of epic rarity.

"Unfortunate. We of the Grehalstrom tribe will naturally have first picks of the bounty, and it appears there is not enough for anyone, but us," the leader of the dragonkin said as he sneered at the Alstmaw before looking at Scarlett.

"Though I guess an exception can be made, and we can allow you one, snake," he said with a smile turning to Scarlett. "I will even offer you the honor of joining our group. With your Blessing, it should make things a bit easier, and my father has bothered me about taking more mistresses to sire more children, so you will."

And that was the moment Scarlett reconsidered if going into the dungeon was a good idea. She had hoped to make a better first expression, but sometimes things just didn't pan out. The dragonkin had thought themselves powerful, not realizing one of the basic strategies of any good ambush predator. Considering what made snake's so dangerous.

Their ability to strike instantaneously and decisively.

The first one barely had time to react as Scarlett assumed her true form instantly. It was the healer, and she knew finishing off her opponent swiftly was important, hence why she went all-out right away. Surprisingly, the Alstmaw reacted only a second after her, going for one of the other two.

Scarlett injected a dose of neurotoxin into the healer, making him unable to properly react to the following dozen or so rapid bites, ripping his body to pieces. The Alstmaw turned far larger than before, looking like a bear walking on two legs with a far too large mouth. He was decently strong, but Scarlett still found him lacking.

A slaughter commenced. The three dragonkin looked astonished that the beasts had even dared to attack, and one of them even screamed for the projection in charge of the dungeon to offer assistance. Only to be met by silence and the fangs of a superior predator. The begging of the leader had been pleasant, too, as his body slowly rotted away.

After the fighting, she regarded that rather injured Alstmaw as she resumed her humanoid form. She preferred it and wanted to get used to it, even if she knew her snake form would forever be her most



powerful state. The Alstmaw looked at her and the corpses. Scarlett picked up a severed limb and took a quick bite before spitting it out.

The other beast took this as a go-head as he proceeded to consume all three corpses with quite a gusto. They didn't even taste good, and Scarlett left for the exit, with the Alstmaw coming a bit later. They got a natural treasure for each of them, and a spear none of them knew what to do with. Scarlett had got it in trade for the corpses in the end, even if she didn't really want it.

"I thank the mistress for her assistance and mercy," the Alstmaw said after they reached the exit, also back in his way too hairy humanoid form.

Despite over a week in the dungeon, no names had been exchanged, outside of those dragonkin yelling about their clan all the time. There simply had been no reason to.

"It's fine?" Scarlett said. She and the Alstmaw were not enemies, and she saw no reason to attack him.

"Does the mistress think we will still be allowed to join the Order after killing those three? The rules state killing other members of the Order isn't allowed..."

That is when Scarlett learned that she could get better at listening to things, as she came to know that the three of them had been members of the Order of the Malefic Viper for over a century already and were all three part of a small dragon clan with a B-grade True Dragon leader.

And also the day she learned how insignificant rules and some dragon family was for someone brought to the Order by the Forefather's Chosen.

Jake appeared back on Earth at the Mangrove circle. Old Grumpy was also there down a tunnel, and Jake flew by and informed him that Scarlett was still doing stuff at the Order before he headed off. He considered getting a second katar as he was about to do some hunting but decided not to. He wouldn't need it.

As for what he wanted to hunt? He considered going for the termites, but honestly, he couldn't be arsed to go into all those tunnels again after just spending so long cooped up. That frost wyvern was also out of the question as, quite frankly, Jake didn't think he could beat it.

So, Jake decided to finally explore the forest Haven was placed in the outskirts of. Properly this time. He had been interested to see what was at the core for a while, and now seemed like a perfect chance to check it out and finally tick off that final subject on his checklist.

#### Chapter 585 - A Whale Of A Time

Jake's plans were spoiled right from the beginning. His nemesis reared its head the moment Jake returned to Haven: politics. More accurately, Jake was being asked to do political stuff in the form of going to greet a whale that had made it to the edge of the ocean quite a bit away, right at the border of where C-grades could go. It was annoying, but it appeared only Jake could "invite" C-grades into the safe areas, so he had to go himself.

Miranda, who had been waiting in his damn lodge to ambush him after being tipped off by her evil witch Patrons, filled him in on all this. It had been decided to have the Sky Whale join as the last member of the council, and from the sounds of it, there were already positive relationships with the ocean-based faction the whale led being established. So, overall, a good choice from the sound of it.

"Just to tell you, Sultan has already gone and talked to the whale about the time it arrived," she informed him.

"Sultan?" Jake said, remembering the shady merchant. He hadn't talked to the guy since before the Ell'Hakan invasion. Shit, he had barely heard about what he was up to, which was a rarity as he usually didn't keep a low profile.

"What did Sultan do during the invasion, by the way?" Jake asked Miranda. "And what about afterward?"

Miranda got a smile of pure schadenfreude. "Sultan stayed back in Haven after being contacted by members of the United City Alliance who had tried to convince him to switch sides. By the time we hid away due to the attack, he was already separated... and then Ell'Hakan got to him. From what I can gather, he never actually gave the nahoom anything, but he did help him by giving out information and willingly trading with him. After Ell'Hakan was gone and he began to realize how much he had fucked up, Sultan stayed away from you on purpose because he was afraid of what you would do, and he even tried to bribe me to put in a good word. I said yes to this request, by the way, which helped quite a bit as the city funds are doing well. On a serious note, I really don't care what he did. He told me himself that Ell'Hakan made him think that he had to trade freely with both Chosen to make it a fair fight or something and that you would even be angry if he refused, as that would lessen the challenge. Something I honestly cannot fault him for as I could see you get mad over someone making life easier for you."

"Huh," Jake said. Well, that explained why the guy had avoided Jake altogether. "So, you're good with him?"

"He has been easier to work with since then. Though it has driven him to pursue more business ventures to try and make up for the losses he suffered by giving more back to Haven, and he is also actively leveraging the new position of Haven and the council," Miranda answered. "So, he is still the same slimy merchant as before, but one who feels like he owes us a major debt. And he does not strike me as the type to not honor debts."

Jake shrugged. "I never even knew he "betrayed" me. Not even sure it was a betrayal? We just agreed that he could trade out of Haven, not that he would swear loyalty to me. So, yeah, I don't care, either."

Miranda nodded. "He will probably be relieved to hear that. Ah, but don't actually tell him; I like it when he squirms."

"I am beginning to worry about the influence of those witches," Jake muttered.

"Power brings out the worst in people," Miranda smiled in response. "Now be off. The whale has been waiting for over two weeks already. A patient monster, that one."

Jake headed off a bit after that, wondering on the way why Villy hadn't mentioned he had contacted that Karroch dude while Jake was in the time chamber. Then again, maybe the god didn't really think it important?

Getting to the ocean was also a lot easier than it used to be. Teleportation gates were now properly established once more. In fact, the new ones were better, and with the elimination of most factions on Earth, there was less red tape and more cooperation to get the network up and running as fast and efficiently as possible.

All this led to Jake making it to an ocean town within only an hour of leaving Haven. Despite having been away for nearly two months, nothing special had happened back on his home planet besides more developments in cities. Beast tides had stopped, faction wars had died down, and while there was still some unhealthy competition here and there, it was nothing outrageous.

Another thing that had improved was also his mask. The cracks were pretty much gone by now, with only a few minor fractures left on it. This meant the King was likely also close to fully healed... which also meant the Unique Lifeform was probably sitting impatiently and annoyed, waiting for Jake to get on with his evolution.

Anyway, back in the ocean town, Jake instantly noticed the buzzing crowd and armies of people moving boxes from the harbor. People holding shareable spatial storages ran back and forth and teleported away, using the surprisingly big teleportation venue.

Walking through the city, Jake only stopped once because he saw a woman selling ice cream, but otherwise made his way down to the epicenter of activity at a good pace. From afar, he saw that a long floating pier had been constructed, stretching several kilometers into the vast ocean with several large sea creatures flocking around the end of it.

When he got closer, he finally saw someone familiar. Close to the shore, a floating ship was docked with a large tent placed in front of it. Sultan was within, along with a dozen other people Jake assumed to be merchants, clearly hard at work and discussing something.

Jake decided to just walk in on them, still carrying his ice cream that didn't seem to be melting at all. Truly a marvel of magic, rivaling his newly created mythical skill.

Sultan turned and seemed ready to yell when Jake entered but instantly shut up as his eyes turned wide. "Ah... Lord Thayne... you're back."

This was the most nervous Jake had seen him, and Jake had to admit: Miranda had a point. Watching him squirm was pretty satisfying.

"I am," Jake said, menacingly taking a lick of his ice cream. "I see you are doing well for yourself. Trading with the ocean creatures relying on their leader, the Sky Whale, I assume?"

"Ah, yes, the Chosen is indeed correct," the merchant nodded. "I entertained our guest while waiting for your arrival, and-"

"And made a lot of money doing it. I don't doubt an entire faction filled with C-grade ocean-bound creatures is a good trading partner and can offer materials far better than nearly anyone else can get," Jake pointed out.

"Naturally, the new world government and the Chosen shall benefit from all this," Sultan answered, not at all disagreeing, though seeming a bit more reassured by Jake not caving his face in right away. "I believe Lord Thayne has come for the Sky Whale? He is residing on a small island about a hundred kilometers off the shore, directly ahead of the pier."

Jake looked at Sultan one final time. "We will talk later then."

He left with those words, Sultan looking a bit worried behind him. Jake didn't actually know if he would talk to Sultan again anytime soon; he just wanted to spook the guy.

After getting his priorities straight and sitting on a bench while finishing his ice cream, Jake headed off toward the island. He summoned his wings and repeatedly used One Step as he teleported across the surface of the water, quickly seeing the island in question.

It was small, only about five hundred meters in diameter, and with only a few simplistic wooden structures on it. Jake felt the aura of the C-grade in question, along with several other C-grades, as he got closer. Soon, he turned his attention to a wooden pavilion close to the shore.

There, he saw the whale of the hour, though he didn't currently look like a whale. He was a large, nearly two-and-a-half-meter-tall humanoid man-thing with blue skin and a bald head. There didn't appear to be a single trace of hair anywhere on his body, and to only call him obese would be a compliment.

[Sky Whale - ???]

The humanoid form was not super refined, but it rarely was. Scarlett was the only C-grade Jake had seen truly care that much about the Polymorph skill, as most just went for a useable form, not caring that much about aesthetics and actually looking human.

Jake flew over and landed in front of the pavilion, having the attention of the humanoid figures sitting there turn to him. There were even a few actual humans among them. More merchants, from the looks of it.

"My Lord, you have made it," the Sky Whale said as he stood up and nodded. Jake was glad he didn't bow, as that would have looked very silly.

"I apologize for the delay; I was occupied elsewhere. I take it you have already been filled in about the council?" Jake asked to make sure.

"I have, and it would be an honor to join," the Sky Whale smiled. "We of the ocean also wish for a peaceful and mutually beneficial relationship between ourselves and humanity going forward, as conflict will benefit neither of us."

Jake nodded and did his World Leader stuff. First, he allowed the Sky Whale to go where it pleased, also including the other C-grades in the pavilion after making sure they were all part of the whale's faction, before finally giving the Sky Whale the official title of Minister.

"I will do my utmost to live up to expectations," the whale said very politely. "My Patron and I both thank you for the magnanimous attitude you have shown toward us."

"Glad to have you aboard," Jake answered with a smile. "If there is nothing else, I shall leave you all to your matters."

"Ah, there is one thing," the Sky Whale said. "I am certain the Chosen also knows of the approaching Prima Guardian, and I have a warning... I do not think we will be able to assist the Chosen in this matter. We who have grown from Unique treasures will be unable to fight the Primas but only have the choice between joining them or not engaging at all. An innate restriction of sorts, that will apply until a victor has been decided between it and the enlightened of Earth."

Jake was a bit surprised at hearing this but just shrugged. "It shouldn't matter either way. I think we got it handled."

In fact, it was good news for Jake. Fewer people to share the fun with, leaving more for him. It also strengthened his belief in what the purpose of this Prima Guardian test was all about... it was to decide whether the planet would be controlled by the enlightened or monsters. It was common for an antagonistic relationship between these two groups, and Earth was a bit of an outlier in that area, with monsters and humans working together.



"I will be off then," Jake said after a bit more chatter. He was a bit in a hurry, partly because he wanted that evolution and partly because he saw the gazes of the merchants all seemingly looking for an opening to take advantage of him.

The Sky Whale waved as Jake flew off back to the harbor town. A few teleports and a bit of flying later, Jake was back in Haven again. Without further delay, he headed into the forest, bow in hand. It was time for some good old hunting before he could finally evolve.

Running between the trees felt oddly nostalgic, reminding Jake of after he had just evolved to D-grade. When he thought about it further, he had barely bothered to explore this forest, the family of hawks having spent far more time in there.

Passing through the areas the monkeys had been living in didn't take long; Jake honed in on where he felt the subtle C-grade auras from the get-go. The levels of the D-grades grew the deeper in he got, as the trees also grew in height and power. The area itself infused them with far more energy there, Jake getting the feeling he soon wouldn't be able to easily break any of them.

Jake knew that while his forest had C-grades, it wasn't a major hub. It was more like the Grand Mangrove River in that it had a limited number, perhaps no more than a hundred C-grades total. It was the kind of area where a single alpha would take over the area sooner or later – if it hadn't happened already.

However, the forest was different from the Mangrove in that it didn't connect to the ocean even if it bordered the shoreline, still allowing C-grades to come and go. The strongest creatures on Earth Jake had encountered were either air or water-based monsters, and while it was possible powerful land-based ones could exist on the other continents, Jake was confident there weren't any here in his backyard.

Soon, Jake felt the environment shift, and he knew he had entered the domain of C-grades. Powerful D-grades were still in the area, most of them at or near the peak, and none of them of any interest to Jake. Making his way past all of them, Jake spread out his senses, searching for an enemy worth facing. One area gave off a stronger aura than anywhere else. In fact, Jake got the feeling there was something going on.

Activating Arcane Stealth, Jake got stealthy as he sneaked toward the center of the forest. On the way, he did see a few beasts that had barely reached C-grade, all of them, surprisingly enough, running away from where he was going. One of them did seem to spot Jake but ignored him and just kept running, making Jake all the more curious.

Flying upwards to get a good vantage point to see what was ahead, Jake soon found a good place. From there, he could barely see a clearing in between all the trees, nearly twenty kilometers away. Movement. Light. Something appeared to be on fire too.

He moved closer, realizing that whatever was going on meant they likely wouldn't pay Jake much mind. So, a few minutes later, he finally got a good look at things and... damn. It looked like Jake had stumbled in on quite the ongoing fight. Or maybe this was something that happened regularly.

On one side – with the defenders – was a tree nearly a hundred meters tall. It gave off an odd white light and looked a bit strange with a thick trunk and barely any canopy, but it gave off a powerful aura. It was dwarfed by all the other trees around it, but it was the largest of the combatants. Because, yes, it was a combatant.

[Ethgleam Mothertree – lvl ???]

A soul tree of some kind. Jake moved his eyes off the thing, feeling that merely looking at it could cause some annoying soul magic stuff. As for its level? Less than 220, but it was a decent variant. Its name Mothertree also made sense when Jake looked at its helpers.

[Ethgleam Elderbark Treant – lvl ???]

[Ethgleam Elderbark Treant – lvl ???]

There were only two of them, but they were huge hulking treants that were both conjuring huge balls of wood before throwing them towards their attackers.

Bears.

Big fire bears.

[Fireheart Ursine Den Mother – lvl ???]

[Fireheart Ursine Den Protector – lvl ???]

[Fireheart Ursine – lvl ???]

[Fireheart Ursine – lvl ???]

[Fireheart Ursine – lvl ???]

[Fireheart Ursine – lvl ???]

All of them were large black bears, the Den Protector and Den Mother the largest, with the normal ones about a fifth smaller. All of them were still around ten meters tall when on all fours, with the Mother and Protector sitting at around a dozen meters.

These bears were all spewing fire toward the tree, a barrier of magic blocking most while letting the treants throw out their big root balls. The more Jake looked, the more sure he became that this was not some battle to end all battles but more just the two groups each testing each other. Perhaps a regular thing they had going on.

Jake shook his head as he looked. It would be a shame for a third party to decide to mess up this beautiful balance of power, wouldn't it?

Then again, who doesn't love a good threeway?

Chapter 586 - Soul Tree & Fire Bears

While it was true Jake usually didn't like to get involved in the fights of others, he didn't really count this one. They were barely fighting but just throwing stuff at each other, accomplishing nothing. What did the bears hope for? That the big tree would run out of energy? They had a limited time to be there from the looks of it as the tree gave off a constant aura slowly wearing them down, and coupled with the thrown root balls, they could end up getting hurt unless they left at some point.

In some ways, looking at it annoyed Jake. Neither side was willing to take any risks but just tried to play it slow and safe. Suddenly it made a lot more sense why none of these beasts had managed to properly progress in C-grade with so long passing... they were slacking off.

It honestly was an excellent area for beasts. The passive mana alone would allow most to grow into C-grade if they managed to form a den and properly absorb it for long enough. The problem, as always, was the quantity of this energy. It was well-known that it was limited, and if one packed an entire group of beasts into the area and had them all absorb it, the environment would be unable to keep up. This was why singular, powerful beasts often claimed large areas for themselves to monopolize the energy allowing them to grow. The source of this energy seemed to often be a natural treasure, or maybe it simply came from the land itself, though Jake was honestly not sure. Probably a natural formation formed by a concept that appeared exclusive to the system.

The area Jake was in currently was more akin to the peak of the mountain that the Frost Wyvern was in than the vast ocean and the open skies. It was a small alcove of dense energy, but there was not enough to sustain many monsters. That was probably also why none of these monsters had grown much despite having been there since around when Jake returned from the Tutorial. They had to share the energy between too many individuals, and they didn't make up for this lack of energy by hunting for more experience points.

Okay, Jake could maybe excuse the Ethgleam Mothertree for not moving about and hunting down other beasts, but the bears were just damn cowards. Jake considered his approach as he looked at the bears, still throwing their weak attacks at the seemingly impenetrable barrier.

Should he break the barrier to spur on the bears? Attack the bears to make the tree try and take advantage of the opening? Stay and keep a look at the situation until either side decides to retreat and ambush them when they try to leave?

Or, the most fun option, rain down destruction on the entire area and create some chaos?

It naturally wasn't even a question as Jake flew up and stared down from above. Sadly, he could not do a big barrage as there were trees and stuff in the way, but he could do a bit of arrow rain.

Nocking an arrow, Jake took aim. He released it quickly before nocking another and firing it immediately. Both arrows curved around any obstacles before splitting once they had a clear line to their targets.

Neither side of the warring monsters below had expected his arrival. The bears were taken by surprise as destructive arrows exploded in the midst of them, while the tree's barrier was impacted hard by dozens of explosions too.

Both sides stopped what they were doing for a moment, neither hurt by the relatively weak attack, but the bears sure looked stunned. The tree didn't really have any facial expressions to read. Jake smiled to himself and flew below the canopy of some of the trees, his stealth disabled and his aura flaring. The attention of the many creatures below landed on him as Jake smiled.

"Ladies, gentlemen, bears, and trees. Pleased to make your acquaintance," Jake spoke, his smile deepening, knowing the monsters understood him. "Now, let's decide who gets to claim this forest as their own, once and for all."

They seemed confused for a moment before, surprisingly enough, a voice came from the large Den Mother below. "How dare a mere D-grade come here and-"

Jake activated Arcane Awakening in its destructive state, his body overflowing with arcane energy. "I didn't come for a talk but a fight."

"Human of the city on the edge, may I offer alliance of benefit?" he, even more surprisingly, heard from the tree. The telepathic message also included an explanation of some sort. It showed Jake the tree able to influence weaker beasts and monsters and allow them to give memories, showed the tree knowing of Haven, and guessed Jake was from there. Finally, the tree wanted to trade and work with humans.

He wanted to just reject both and get fighting but ended up sighing. Should he agree? A soul tree had to be helpful if it was telling the truth-

"Begone, you pathetic creature, or be consumed by the fires of-" the Den Mother spoke again, Jake making up his mind.

"Sure, but they are all mine, so don't get in my way, and if you change your mind and want to fight to the death afterward, I am up for it," Jake answered the tree as he turned his attention to the bears. He saw some of them were charging up some kind of energy to attack him, just waiting for an opening.

"I feel thee soul, powerful human; I desire no fight," the tree simply answered, having quite the Perception for a tree to get such a good read on Jake's aura and soul. Jake knew at that moment that an alliance was more than possible, as any tree with a high Perception stat had to be a good tree. It was just science.

It was only a bit disappointing, but Jake guessed the bears would have to make do. Six C-grades, two variants, and four weak beasts who had barely reached their grade. Looking down at them, he knew that the only reason they hadn't attacked yet was because of the soul tree. Perhaps they feared getting distracted with killing Jake would leave an opening. In fact, their attention was barely on him... proving these bears had shit-tier Perception and were thus bad bears.

Let's stop delaying, Jake thought as he nocked another arrow and took aim. Drawing back the string, time seemed to slow down as Steady Aim activated, and the arcane energy began to build up. The bears below seemed to finally pay him more heed as the intensity of energy grew, and the Den Mother roared as two of the Fireheart Ursines released two beams of highly condensed fire.

Jake let go of the string as Arcane Powershot barreled down. The beams of fire were utterly repelled as the arrow struck true, hitting one of the bears straight in the mouth. An explosion of energy from the Powershot alone sent the bear flying back, the attack having torn off a large part of its mouth and heavily injured its entire face. Sadly, the beast was far from dead as it quickly got up.

Now, finally, the bears paid him full attention... and reacted by performing a strategic retreat, also called running the fuck away.

"Oh no, you don't," Jake muttered to himself as the beasts began running. He nocked another arrow and released it, hitting one of the running bears. Flapping his wings, Jake gave chase while repeatedly firing arrows, focusing on the same C-grade he hit earlier.

Jake had really hoped for a good fight before evolving but grit his teeth as he found everything so far just annoying and insulting. At least the termites would have fought him properly, making him reconsider if those tunnels were really that bad.

Then, something happened that made Jake's eyes shoot open. He chased the bears into a denser area of trees, forcing him to fly lower to allow him a clear line of sight. The moment he went in between two large trees, he felt a sense of danger from both sides, making him quickly step down and teleport backward. Just in time too.



Two massive explosions rocked the area he had just been in, two trees entirely consumed by flames. At the same time, six blasts of flames came towards him from the directions the bears had run, all beasts having turned around in a coordinated motion.

Once more, he was forced to dodge as the entire forest around him set ablaze from the massive attack. Jake was still flying downwards as two bears came flying towards him, their bodies both burning. It was two of the normal C-grades, but a C-grade was still a C-grade.

The first one swept its massive claw upwards as the ground was torn up from the swipe. All the rock it pulled up turned red as a torrent of lava headed towards Jake, with the second bear going straight for Jake.

It was a good attack.

Unfortunately for them...

Jake charged straight toward the bear going for him. His body turned shadowy as he punched forward, Eternal Hunger appearing in his hand. At the same time, he dodged to the side. The bear smashed into a shadowy version of Jake, the impact sending the bear flying back in a large explosion of mixed dark and fiery energy that would also have severely hurt Jake. If it had been the real him.

The Eternal Shadow dispersed as Jake moved to the side while pulling out his bow, firing a barrage of arrows, not toward the bear he had just struck, but at the four preparing another attack in the distance. All of them seemed confused by two versions of him appearing, making the bear he had aimed at not react as its already torn-up face was injured even further by six condensed explosive arrows.

Below him, the second bear on the attack tried to follow up its own lava swipe but instead found itself freezing up as Jake glanced its way right at he stepped down. Jake appeared right in front of the bear's face as he stabbed Eternal Hunger forward right into its skull.

To penetrate the skull of a C-grade while in D-grade would usually take an extremely high level of skill or an insane Strength stat... or an overpowered Mythical weapon.

The katar penetrated deep as Fangs of the Malefic Viper pumped venom into the bear. He grinned a bit at how the skull of a C-grade bear felt less durable than the scales of a peak D-grade hydra but didn't have much time to ponder on this as the bears in the distance finally seemed to realize the gravity of the situation.

Jake let go of Eternal Hunger- still embedded in the bear – as he moved around the beast to dodge its attempt to retaliate. Planting both his hands firmly on its hide, Jake began pumping in poison with Touch of the Malefic Viper.

Once more, the disadvantage of a large body was made apparent. The bear tried to get Jake off, but he easily dodged its repeated attacks as toxicity built up within the beast. It was only when the other bears arrived Jake was forced to retreat.

Eternal Hunger was still stuck in the bear even as he went away, and Jake could only grin as one of his theories had been proven correct. Fangs of the Malefic Viper made the weapon appear as if part of his Soulshape. Recent events had made the weapon far more intimate to Jake. The end result?

Fangs of the Malefic Viper remaining active despite Jake no longer physically touching the weapon. It kept on forming poison on its form like usual, though Jake did notice the constant upkeep having increased and a strain on his mental energy. Nevertheless, it was effective. Something the bear clearly noticed as it tried to get the weapon out of its brain.

It was firmly stabbed in there, and with its large paws, the bear had no way to get it out by itself, meaning it needed help. Jake was sure any of the others could tear out Eternal Hunger. If Jake let them, that is.

Jake went straight for the five other bears, who were now fully engaged in the fight. His attention was on the Den Mother and Den Protector from the beginning, as they were clearly superior variants. Cowardly variants from the looks of it, but variants nonetheless.

At close range, Jake shot several Splitting Arrows primarily to cause chaos as he allowed his wings to pump out poison mist. The bears seemed to care more about killing Jake than helping their comrade, not realizing the folly of their actions.

He easily dodged the first few bears who got close, their attacks big, powerful, showy, but so, so slow. Jake outclassed them all in Agility, no question about it, even with the boost evolving to C-grade had given the bears. In fact, Jake no doubt had more raw stats than all of the bears. It wasn't only the stat disparity that made fighting between grades more difficult – it was as much the disparity in the effectiveness of stats. Every evolution made every stat point matter more, after all.

But this disparity was overcome as Jake engaged not one but five bears in direct combat. With Eternal Hunger preoccupied killing a bear by itself, Jake only had his bow and bare hands. Getting distance between himself and the bears would probably be best, but he wanted to keep them all occupied, so he stayed in the middle of them as he finally got the chance to apply something that had not been feasible against the hydra.

Bows were ranged weapons, yes. However, that did not make them only useable as range weapons. In fact, Jake had learned from his sparring with sim-Jake that an Arcane Powershot straight to the face from a few centimeters away was quite effective.

Effective versus sim-Jake... and Fireheart Ursines. A bear was blasted in the side of its belly as it was sent flying right as the Den Mother went for Jake. He stepped down and teleported over to another bear. The Den Protector came next, and Jake smirked as he grabbed the pelt of the bear he had teleported to and, to the horror of the group of beasts, swung it straight into the paw of the Den Protector, tearing off a considerable swat of flesh.

Just as he prepared to follow up, the ground beneath his feet rumbled, and Jake was forced to jump back to avoid a spout of lava from beneath. Looking to the side, he saw the bear whose face he had nearly torn off earlier with both paws on the ground, infusing it with fiery energy as it looked like red veins spread throughout the forest.

Finding openings was a challenge, but the longer the fight dragged on, the greater Jake's advantage became as he landed blows left and right. The large bears had some level of cooperation, but Jake was just too tricky of a target, and they clearly had no experience fighting someone his size. In fact, the one who had taken the most damage from their fight was the forest itself.

The flames all around him also intensified with time as it looked like the entire forest had been set aflame. Jake cared little as he knew it had little chance to spread, and besides... the fire would lose most of its energy once all the bears died.

Speaking of which, a certain bear still hadn't managed to get Eternal Hunger out of its skull. It had tried valiantly, but in the end, it was just a weak beast barely at C-grade.

\*You have slain [Fireheart Ursine – lvl 203] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\*

Jake smiled as the bear behind him finally collapsed from the constant poison pumping its body. With the death of the beast, its Soulspace and Soulshape also ceased to be, meaning Eternal Hunger was no longer considered inside a creature, so...

The Den Mother, enraged at Jake for killing what he assumed to be its cub, released a giant wave of flames as it shot forward to try and bite down on him. With a smirk, Jake met it head-on as Eternal Hunger was once more summoned, and his Eternal Shadow appeared to face the Den Mother as Jake dodged back and pulled out his bow to aim toward the most injured bear.

His arrows struck true as the enraged Den Mother and Den Protector both tried to desperately kill him. Explosions able to destroy minor towns began to be released as they attempted to simply destroy the entire area, hoping to catch out Jake in the midst of it.

Sadly for them, dark green scales had already covered his entire body. All the explosions managed to do was force Jake away before he landed on a flaming branch on a tree that had been burning for several minutes already, yet it still stood strong.

He stared down at the angry bears and saw the rage in their eyes. The intelligence he had seen earlier was gone, and all he now faced were monsters relying solely on their bestial instincts. Jake shook his head to himself as he decided to get fully serious, activating Arcane Awakening at max power.

Chapter 587 - Promise Of A Good Thing

A massive area of the forest burned, enough so that it would constitute a huge natural disaster in the world before the system. Yet, oddly enough, none of the tall trees had toppled, but all stood strong. Their bark burned, their leaves perhaps gone, but their trunks stood strong, and their auras of life remained powerful. A low-tier C-grade was simply not capable of destroying these trees unless they dedicated a long time and a lot of power to do so.

If this fact benefitted Jake or the bears was hard to determine, but in reality, it didn't matter. Jake would take advantage of the terrain either way. Be it a forest with nothing but massive burning pillars of wood or an empty burning field, he would still dominate.

Arrows flew around the massive trees, hitting the bears when they couldn't even see the shooter. The beasts were separated and blasted in opposite directions to spread them out so Jake could more easily kill them alone. Meanwhile, poison built up within the bodies of the bears, and Hunting Momentum built up within the body of Jake.

After the first bear died, the second fell not even ten minutes later. The third bear fifteen minutes after that, and the fourth only a few minutes after the third. Only the Den Mother and Den Protector remained, and as their children lay dead, their bodies decaying on the ground, a glimmer of sanity finally seemed to have returned to the beasts as they had stopped attacking mindlessly and teamed up.

Not that it ultimately mattered. All it did was extend the fight. Between Jake's higher mobility, his advantage in ranged combat, and his ability to easily get out of any tricky situation and even strike with Eternal Shadow, they never had a chance. They had a horrible matchup versus Jake, and once he forced them into the air from some flying combat, his advantage only grew, as clearly the bears sucked at flying.

Still, C-grades were C-grades. They did have some hidden cards and powerful skills, the most impressive of which was one Jake named Fireheart after their names. From a distance, Jake could feel the heat emanating from the two bears as their bodies heated up to insane levels, enough to turn the ground beneath their feet to lava. Their furs caught fire but clearly didn't hurt them, and the two got stronger in every way as they seemed to become one with the burning forest around them.

Giant blasts of fire and flaming tornadoes summoned with a single paw-swipe, beams of pure heat able to sear off parts of the otherwise incredibly resilient trees. They even had the ability to seemingly combust the air itself, making it blow up, lit only by a single spark released from the fur of the bears. Moreover, the heat from each bear seemed to empower the other, making it difficult to approach.

So, Jake didn't approach. He kept a distance as his arrows bombarded the two bears that tried to chase down and kill them. Explosive arrows were too unstable to reach his targets, but the bears simply couldn't destroy the stable versions.

Jake did run into one of the downsides of Eternal Shadow here. The explosions would nearly always still hit Jake, and the Eternal Shadow could barely handle taking any damage and was instantly destroyed by explosions whenever Jake tried to use it to attack. Luckily it did not get destroyed by something like the heat alone, but even any semi-direct hit would make it disperse.

As always, Jake took this fight as an opportunity to learn and improve, but after it had gone on for nearly an hour total, there really wasn't more to it, and it just became a hunt of attrition. The bears also noticed this and knew they were losing, so they resumed an earlier strategy.

They ran.

Jake chased.

Marks were on both of them as Jake hunted them down, arrows curving around the trees to find their target. The occasional Arcane Powershot blasted forward, tearing off a slab of flesh and making one of the beasts roar in pain and anger.

In the end, the Den Protector died first, unable to handle the building poison any longer. The Den Mother was stronger and held on, but in the end, it became the victim of Jake unleashing all his built-up Hunting Momentum in the form of a final Arcane Powershot with the good old Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter for a true killer finishing blow.

With them both dead, Jake flew down and landed in front of the dead Den Mother, finally checking all his notifications. He was a bit disappointed upon reading them through.

\*You have slain [Fireheart Ursine Den Mother – lvl 215] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\*

\*You have slain [Fireheart Ursine Den Protector – lvl 211] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\*

\*‘DING!’ Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 197 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

\*‘DING!’ Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 198 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points\*

\*‘DING!’ Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 198 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

He skipped the normal Fireheart Ursines’ notifications, not a single of them above level 205. Even the level of these two leader-type beasts was low. To even gain two levels from this fight was impressive enough in Jake’s mind due to how damn easy it had been. The only thing these bears had going for them was durability and some decent firepower, but they were in no way proper threats to someone like Jake. The fire had left Jake looking a little haggard, though, with his armor burnt and ruined in places and his face covered in soot.



Shaking his head, Jake deactivated Arcane Awakening, letting the period of weakness wash over him. As he waited to recover anyway, Jake extracted all the Beastcores he could and took whatever else of value he could find. He also considered looking for the den of these bears, but after some more thought, he decided to just go back to the soul tree and ask it about where the bears came from.

It did not take him long to make it back to the tree, and when he got close, he saw the barrier was still up. The treants looked to be in a dormant state, roots extending from their bulking bodies into the ground. Jake landed in front of the barrier as the tree spoke.

“The extinguishment of souls of fire felt from afar. Destroyers destroyed, I thank thee, human of the edge,” the Ethgleam Mothertree spoke in its vaguely female voice. “Allow me gratitude, displayed.”

The barrier in front of Jake opened up, allowing Jake to enter the domain of the soul tree. At the same time, right in front of the tree, an altar of roots grew out of the soil. On it was a glowing white orb, giving off potent energy. Some kind of natural treasure, perhaps... or was this the fruit of a soul tree? Who knew? Jake just knew there was no need to reject a good thing.

He walked up to the orb as the tree spoke once more. “Consume to nourish, heal, improve.”

Looking at the item offered more closely, Jake used Identify on it.

[Soulfruit of the Ethgleam Mothertree (Unique)] – The Soulfruit of an Ethgleam Mothertree. This fruit has been made with an extreme level of effort by its creator and contains incredibly potent energy capable of nourishing and improving the soul of whoever consumes it. Must be consumed within the domain of the Ethgleam Mothertree, or all effects will be lost.

Jake looked at the item for a bit and initially smiled. However, quickly his expression changed. Something was off. It was as if the words didn't fit properly in the description. As if something was wrong with it. He squinted his eyes, and it was as if a veil had been placed over the actual description.

Slowly his smile faded as the three also noticed his hesitation.

"This treasure, I offer thee, to form synergy," the Ethgleam Mothertree said in a convincing and oddly soothing tone. "Made with great difficulty, consumption must be soon, or opportunity lost."

Jake had learned enough about marketing to know when someone was trying to use FOMO – fear of missing out - marketing on him. He also knew that those who abused these sales tactics tended to be less than savory... something that was soon confirmed.

You son of a birch, Jake cursed as he focused and used Identify again.

[Soulfruit of the Ethgleam Mothertree (Unique)] – The Soulfruit of an Ethgleam Mothertree. This fruit contains incredibly potent energy capable of negatively influencing the soul of whoever consumes it. Warning, consuming this item may lead to soul damage.

It had tried to pull a fast one on Jake and make him consume an item that would deal serious damage to him. Even if it didn't kill him, it would harm Jake severely and give the soul tree quite the opening. If it was even its plan... something Jake got a feeling it wasn't. No, he had a strong feeling this was something far worse.

"Tell me," Jake asked. "Absorbing this will merge it with my soul, right?"

“Yes, it is as such. Absorb and gain power; I shall assist,” the tree answered.

“Willingly absorb a lot of foreign soul energy into me... leaving a ticking time bomb controlled by you, no doubt,” Jake shot back. “What was the plan here?”

It was clear. Science had been proven wrong, and a tree that focused on Perception had turned out to be an evil scheming asshole tree. No... it has to be Willpower-focused. That is the only explanation.

“Unfortunate,” the tree spoke as the orb exploded right in front of Jake. “A human weakened, his soul susceptible.”

Energy invaded Jake’s body as he just stayed there. He was in his state of weakness from Arcane Awakening, looked tired from fighting the bears, his armor was burnt and broken, and he looked utterly spent at a cursory glance. However, if the tree had truly possessed a proper Perception stat, it would have known appearances could be deceiving.

Behind him, the treants began to move towards him, as Jake felt the foreign soul energy worm its way into his mind. That is when Jake understood what the tree wanted. It wasn’t to kill him... it was to use him. His hunch was proven correct as words materialized in the air in front of him. A contract.

“An alliance offered, life preserved, and thee walks free,” the tree spoke as Jake saw the contract.

It wasn't a slave contract... but it was just as bad. It wanted Jake to bring it humans so that it could enslave and use them as vessels to grow itself. It wanted to plant seeds within their souls and spread through human bodies. In return, it would allow Jake to survive as long as he agreed to never be antagonistic to the tree again. If he refused, it would kill him then and there.

"A Path to survival given. Take it, and synergy shall-"

"No deal."

Jake's body once more exploded with Arcane Awakening, and the period of weakness was bypassed instantly. The treants behind him moved immediately, but Jake was faster and stormed forward towards the tree. At that moment, Jake's sense of danger flared, and he knew what was about to happen. An idea appeared instantly, and he acted on it.

One body became two as the Eternal Shadow materialized. Just as it did, Jake was hit by the detonation of the soul energy released by the tree that was still trying to worm its way toward Jake's soul and invade it. It sent a pulse of pure damage through Jake's body, about to tear through his blood vessels and damage his internal organs... as he switched places, taking the place of the Eternal Shadow.

His Eternal Shadow instantly dispersed as the violent wave of energy tore through it, leaving the real Jake utterly untouched and nearly right in front of the tree.

"Two?" the female voice echoed out as a katar slammed into the trunk.

It barely penetrated a few inches into the bark as dense magic stopped it, repelling Jake. A second pulse was released from the large monstrous tree, but it was met by a barrier of pure, stable mana that managed to block it.

Sadly, Jake had to disengage from his main target as the two treants were upon him. A root arm swept over and tried to grab him, forcing him to teleport away. Just as he appeared at his destination, a ball of vines was tossed his way. In mid-air, it exploded, releasing a torrent of writhing vines trying to whip him, making him step down and teleport a second time.

Both treants came for him again, and Jake saw what they wanted to do. They tried to force him away from the tree and out of the barrier it had erected. Why would they want him out when the barrier could serve to seal him in... unless...

“Leave, human, speak nay of this encounter, and thee shall-“

“Oh, come the fuck on,” Jake cursed. The audacity of this birch, to tell him to just leave after all it did. Fuck no, only one of them was leaving there alive, and only Jake was capable of walking. So his response was an Arcane Powershot fired straight at the damn soul tree, kindly telling it to go fuck itself.

The tree seemed to finally realize there was no negotiation and, thankfully, decided to actually do something. In the air, white bolts of pure energy began condensing as the tree went on the offensive. Jake saw no reason to wait around but pulled out his bow and took a quick potshot at one of the treants.

Unsurprisingly the large monster failed to react in time and took an explosion to the face, making it stumble slightly. Three more arrows made it nearly fall over as Jake dodged the second treant while bombarding his first victim again.

In the center of the battlefield, the soul tree was done with its magic as thousands of shimmering bolts were fired toward him. Jake initially thought them easy to dodge but soon discovered that the tree had some level of control over them, making it a bit more tricky.

Not too tricky, mind you.

Pride of the Malefic Viper activated as Jake responded in kind. Mana gathered all around him as more than three hundred bolts of destructive arcane mana were gathered and released in an instant toward the attacks of the tree.

This did leave an opening for the treants that had both managed to close in on him, stretching their hulking arms towards Jake as they split into dozens of vines, trying to constrain or pierce through him. One of them even stomped on the ground as massive spears of wood shot up from the ground toward him.

Jake twisted in the air as he blocked one of the spears with his hand, the scale-empowered gloves easily handling the blow and allowing him to use their momentum to dodge away from both treants and the many bolts of soul magic chasing him. While in the air, Jake released several arrows toward the treants, dealing even more damage while he still had the opening.

The many bolts of soul magic still chased him, and Jake stared at them for a moment before he lifted his palm. Soul magic had a lot of good things about it but also some very inherent weaknesses. Mana flowed into his palm as a massive blast of pure destructive mana was released, destroying more than fifteen-hundreds bolts in one go as the feebly-held-together soul magic bolts fell apart.

A few more powerful soul attacks were released, but Jake easily handled them, making the Mothertree show some level of adaption.

It released a pulse that was not aimed at Jake but at the two treants. White energy began to be emanated from both as their auras grew substantially. Roots even shot up from the ground and dug into the two treants, healing their wounds as the Mothertree had adopted a more supportive role after realizing its attacks wouldn't work.

Not that it would save the tree from becoming a pile of timber. Jake did need some materials for his soul poisons, and since the tree had volunteered to give him its good stuff, who was he to refuse?

#### Chapter 588 - Blinding Gleam \U002B Author Note Rant

The treants had both grown significantly more powerful after the infusion of power from the Ethgleam Mothertree, making it apparent there was great synergy between them. It did not come as a surprise considering the treants were called Ethgleam Elderbark Treants, but it was still fascinating to see how two completely separate races would end up influencing each other as such and end up becoming intimately linked.

It was good too. As that meant Jake at least got some entertainment value from the fight. The two of them barreled at him like two hulking monstrosities, a faint layer of magic protecting their bodies and a shimmer of soul magic revolving around their vine-like appendages.

One of them reformed its hand as it came to resemble a club, and it swung down hard in an attempt to squash Jake, missing as he teleported away. Soil flew everywhere from the powerful impact, and Jake felt the ground shake a bit beneath his feet where he had just stepped.

As he looked at the flying soil, he got an idea.

"You know, this will likely be my last major fight before C-grade," Jake spoke to the tree that didn't respond anymore. "Which means I should probably begin cleaning up some of the things I no longer need. Like these."

Jake teleported and waved his hand as several bottles appeared. A blast of mana sent the liquid splashing forward, all of it hitting the soil and slowly seeping into it. He repeated this as Jake began to make it rain, even throwing some of the better ones straight at the treants or soul tree.

What he was throwing was some of all the poisons he had stocked up throughout his entire time in D-grade. Jake tended to use his best first and work his way down, resulting in a stock of hundreds of bottles of poison that wasn't even that good when he was in early D-grade. It was creations he would never use anyway and would be even worse once he reached C-grade.

So he decided to do some illegal dumping to fuck up the local environment. It was completely wasteful and inefficient, and quite frankly, not even super effective... at least not right off the bat. Because all he wanted was to get some poison into the tree, something that immediately succeeded as the Mothertree absorbed energy from the soil itself and was too slow to cut off its absorption.

What poison it did absorb would be easily eliminated. If Jake allowed it to, that is. Reaching out, his hand began to glow dark green as he took hold of the poison within the tree and infused it with energy. Cultivated it using Touch.

The treants still came for him, but Jake simply threw more bottles at them. He had some leftover fungicides that they seemed to really not like, and while things like necrotic poison or hemotoxins sucked against non-flesh and blood lifeforms, it still did some damage simply due to the energy within.



With so much poison thrown out, the environment itself began to change, and the created barrier by the soul tree became a detriment. The poison vapor that rose into the air impacted it, draining mana from the soul tree's resources.

Jake soon stopped using Touch of the Malefic Viper on the tree as he found it not that effective. He was also already out of poison bottles, having thrown them all wastefully at the two treants, doing barely any damage. What it had done was distract them all long enough for Jake to get a great opportunity to get close to the tree once more and take it by surprise.

With full speed, he flew into the Ethgleam Mothertree as he infused all his Hunting Momentum built up so far into a Descending Dark Fang. He punched forward and penetrated the passive barrier of the tree, the katar digging into the bark and wood. With the barrier gone, Jake easily pushed it in all the way to the handle before he retreated, leaving the weapon in there.

What? It had worked great against the bear, so why not give it a shot again. That you could kill a tree by hammering a nail into it was common knowledge, and Jake had effectively just hammered a cursed nail into the Ethgleam Mothertree.

From a distance, he felt the influx of energy as Eternal Hunger absorbed more resources than usual. The curse seemed to really like the soul tree and drank to its heart's content. Jake made it his mission to ensure that the treants couldn't assist their boss and attacked the two treants that rapidly charged him.

The first was blasted back by a quickly charged Arcane Powershot, and the other one tried to punch Jake but found itself restrained by his gaze before he walked forward and punched it in the chest, making it fly back to its comrade.

Ouch, Jake complained as his knuckles hurt from the punch, his bones thankfully not damaged due to the gloves. Switching back to his bow, Jake pelted the two trees with even more explosive arrows as he

let loose, not caring about saving resources. He really didn't have to with the constant stream of involuntary resource donations coming from the soul tree.

"What be this cursed thing!" the tree screamed in desperation from behind as Jake felt it try to push out Eternal Hunger in vain. The weapon seemed to almost entrench itself, refusing it let go as it constantly drained energy while pumping out poison from Fangs.

Jake did not bother giving it an answer as he went hard for one of the treants, arrow after arrow firing it back. They had no good ranged method of combat, allowing Jake to shoot them away faster than they could approach. It felt almost like he was playing a turret section in a video game where he repeatedly blasted them back while slowly having the damage accumulate.

These treants were dumb as bricks and just protectors of the soul tree. They were pawns made to act as its agents, so even if they were C-grade, they had no ability to adapt or formulate a proper response to an archer with highly explosive arrows. With every second his advantage grew, and-

"ENOUGH!" a scream came from behind as Jake felt a pulse wash over him. Then came the sound of wood exploding as Eternal Hunger was thrown away, the Mothertree having decided to blow up an entire section of its own trunk to get the weapon out.

"Human, choose fate, leave, or face destruction of twin souls!" the tree said in a clearly pissed-off tone.

Jake reckoned it meant twin souls in that it would go for mutual destruction. He would love to see it try.

Eternal Hunger disappeared mid-air and appeared within his Soulspace once more, ready to be summoned.

"I choose the destruction of three souls!" Jake yelled in response, naturally referring to the Mothertree and two treants. "You lost all chances of not becoming a pile of timber the moment you decided that trying to forcefully make me serve you was a good idea."

Jake had kind of expected another attempt from the Mothertree to make him leave, but it seemed to finally become a bit more decisive. It knew killing Jake was not an option unless it went all-out... and it looked like it was about to.

He was ready for an attack as he kept shooting the two treants but was surprised to see them both stop moving. Then, their bodies began glowing as Jake felt their auras surge intensely. For a moment, he believed they were going to blow themselves up and was ready to retreat, but once more, they defied expectations. The glow turned almost blinding as both treants suddenly crumbled, and two beams of light flew toward the Mothertree.

\*You have slain [Ethgleam Elderbark Treant – lvl 211] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\*

\*You have slain [Ethgleam Elderbark Treant – lvl 210] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\*

Jake got two notifications the moment this happened, as his interpretation of the "destruction of twin souls" turned out to be off. It was not talking about his and the Mothertree, but the souls of the two treants.

Turning around, the Ethgleam Mothertree was now truly gleaming. Jake regretted looking at the tree the very next moment as he felt like a hammer whacked him straight in the brain, making him all wobbly. The light before him only grew more and more intense as soon the entire world began to turn white. With his Sphere of Perception, he knew nothing had truly changed, but he felt like he had been transported somewhere else.

He tried to move away from the tree, and while he felt like he had moved, he stood completely still in the outside world. Around him, the white void began to warp as hundreds of trees sprung up all around. Thousands of vines shot at him from all directions, far too many for Jake to evade. His foot was caught first, and then his arm. Swiftly, his entire body was covered in white glowing vines as pain went through his body.

Jake felt like he was in two places at once, the real world seen through his sphere in no way reconcilable with what all his other senses felt. It was as if his brain tried to reject reality itself and allow the vines to slowly consume him. He struggled, trying to get free, but it was impossible.

Then came the drain – one that hit his very soul. The Mothertree was consuming him, and Jake's mind kept telling him it was okay. That struggling was a waste of time and that it wasn't that bad. The vines around him slowly began entering his body, merging with it. Seeking deeper and deeper.

Was it an illusion? A mental delusion? Something in between? Jake didn't know, and his brain refused to even try to understand. Gritting his teeth, he still resisted. He began fighting back against the many vines as it became a battle of will. Pulses of destructive arcane energy went through his soul, trying to wrest off the vines. Some of them broke, but new ones grew back nearly instantly.

Jake, focusing all he could, closed his eyes and entered Serene Soul Meditation. He appeared within his Soulspace immediately and stared at the sky as his head cleared. Massive large vines surrounded the world of his Soulspace in all directions as if he was on the inside of a snow globe. While Jake was in full control of everything within... he had no influence on anything trying to crush the glass from the outside. All he could do was resist.

“This will take far too long,” Jake muttered within the Soulspace as his mind jumped to the first and most strenuous approach – a direct battle of wills. While he did think he could win this, it would not be fast. No, he needed an advantage. He considered solutions, found some, and disregarded them as he just did something far simpler.

In the real world, standing in front of the Ethgleam Mothertree, a katar appeared in his hand. While he was unable to move his body, that didn’t mean he was unable to do anything. With quite a bit of effort, Jake telekinetically pushed the katar towards the tree, into the large wound from before when it blew up a part of itself.

The tree was utterly occupied with its attack and failed to put up any defenses, allowing the weapon to embed itself only a few centimeters into the exposed wood. Within the white void, the vines all shuddered for a moment as Jake took advantage.

Pride of the Malefic unfolded as Jake launched a mental counterattack, taking advantage of the shock that resulted from his katar toss. The vines all weakened more, and Jake went all-out as his eyes glowed yellow. Gaze of the Apex Hunter activated, not on anything specific, but simply the exposed soul of the Mothertree that was the white void.

Dozens of the trees spread throughout the white void crumbled as the vines loosened enough, and Jake roared as his body exploded with destructive arcane energy, tearing them all apart. Free to move, Jake planted both his palms on the ground as they began to glow dark green.

Pure corruption spread out from Jake like black color in water. It invaded everything, making its way up the trunk of the many trees surrounding him and rapidly had them wither and collapse.

New vines sprung from the ground, but Jake released another pulse of destructive mana, tearing them apart before they could reach him. His mind was finally clear, and he knew allowing the vines to touch him again could change that.

The white void was soon overtaken by the corruption from Touch of the Malefic Viper. The Ethgleam Mothertree seemed to realize it had failed, and in a flash of light, Jake was thrown out of the void, also getting blasted back in the real world.

Jake flew back slightly before landing on the ground and opening his eyes. The tree only shimmered with light now, signs of corruption having invaded its soul. Another weakness of this type of soul magic. While it exposed the soul of your opponent, you also had to expose yourself. Same as the Minotaur Mindchief back in the day, though a far less extreme version.

“Please-“

There was no need to listen anymore. Jake stormed forward towards the tree and punched into the handle of the katar, making it pierce deeper and create a fissure up the trunk of the tree. Jake punched again, making the weapon pierce even deeper, like a wedge. This repeated several times as he slammed it with his fists that both hurt like hell.

With the weapon firmly in there, Jake jumped back, seeing that the barrier was already gone. The tree tried to respond, but it was far too late. An Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter was nocked, and Arcane Powershot was charged to its highest level as Jake invested every shred of Hunting Momentum he had.

“Cursed you be, I shall-“

The arrow flew out and struck true as it sunk into the tree, the energy of Arcane Powershot blasting off a huge part of it. The destructive energy of the arrow ravaged the Mothertree as Jake activated the Arcane Charge from Mark of the Avaricious Hunter, making the tree light up for a second.

Then, the gleam dimmed.

“Cursed!”

And turned entirely black as a blast of dark curse energy was released as a final gambit,

At least it tried to make it a blast. The dark energy barely left the trunk before a black hole appeared, seemingly from within the tree itself. It was naturally Eternal Hunger which had noticed a tasty snack being given and begun to dig in. The blast of curse energy never even got five meters from the tree before being sucked back in and consumed by Eternal Hunger.

The tree itself was already dead the moment the curse was released, the Mothertree splitting in half and falling over from releasing the energy.

\*You have slain [Ethgleam Mothertree – lvl 219] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\*

Jake saw the kill notification, seeing the level of the soul tree had truly been below 220. A strong variant, though, one he had underestimated. The system also agreed it had been a worthy adversary as it had rewarded him with what he had come for.

\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 199 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 199 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points\*

With that, Jake had reached the peak of D-grade. He also knew he had gotten his evolution quests, but before he addressed those, Jake had something far more important to deal with.

Who knew that fighting a soul tree using soul attacks could be so tiring? Jake sure didn't.

Deactivating Arcane Awakening, Jake yawned and sat down, leaning against the broken trunk as he took a quick well-deserved nap.

Chapter 589 - Always Has Been

Jake woke up with a yawn after his nap and was instantly struck by the stench. He held his nose for a moment as he looked around and saw the source of it. The ground was black and rotting, the treants already well on their way to getting decomposed by now.

With a bit of panic, Jake turned to the Ethgleam Mothertree, and luckily it still looked fine. For a moment, he was afraid he had broken the damn thing, but the wood still looked unblemished, and he felt the energy still within.

It did not take him long to locate his loot as he dug it out from within the center of the tree.



[Ethgleam Mothertree Lifecore (Ancient)] – The Lifecore of an early-tier C-grade Ethgleam Mothertree. Contains potent life energy attuned towards the soul, making it a highly suitable ingredient for any vitality-increasing potions or life and soul-based toxins. Directly consuming this Lifecore may have an adverse effect. If this Lifecore is planted and nourished adequately, regrowing the tree may be possible.

The Lifecore was a stone quite a bit bigger than Jake had anticipated. It was about the size of a human torso and looked difficult to use in alchemy simply due to its size. He would have to extract the energy and not use the core itself, that was for sure.

Looking at the description, Jake, first of all, considered if it felt longer and more substantial due to Identify and Sagacity upgrading or if this was just the expected information. Secondly, he considered the part about potentially regrowing the tree. Was it worth it to try? Maybe he could do some fancy stuff with it...

Shaking his head, he decided to just put it inside his Palate of the Malefic Viper space for now. Jake had not really had anything in there for a long period in recent times, as there wasn't really anything worth studying deeply. He did know he wanted to make better soul poisons, so maybe this core could help a bit.

On a side note, no, time dilation did not have any effect on Palate. It worked solely in Realtime, unaffected by all fancy time magic stuff.

After Jake was done eating, he decided to start a minor forest fire. He still felt dense energy from within all the wood of the tree, and rather than bring it with him by cutting up the trunks and branches into small enough pieces to transport, he decided to turn the entire thing more transportable.

Alchemical Flame activated as Jake used telekinesis to manipulate all the wood. Jake drove his fire to form a large flame and began lowering the wood down into it. It instantly caught on fire and seemed to

simply disperse into nothing to the naked eye. However, Jake saw that some byproduct was made. Ash. Not a lot of it, as it looked like he had to burn around a kilo of wood just a few grams of ash, but when one considered the size of the entire tree, it was pretty damn good.

He collected the ash from the burnt tree in glass jars with a hundred grams in each. Jake noticed that the more he burned, the less ash was generated, but once he was all done, he still ended up with forty-two and a half jars of ash. Identifying it, he nodded in satisfaction.

[Ethwood Ashes (Rare)] – The ashes left behind by burnt early-tier C-grade Ethgleam Mothertree. Used in a myriad of recipes as a catalyst when the creation is related to the soul and mind. Has no effect upon direct consumption.

Jake had remembered the Forgotten Sewers dungeon and the staff he burned back then, generating Lesser Ethwood Ashes, and reckoned he could make some himself. His theory proved accurate, and he managed to walk away with not just a Lifecore but a nice extra bounty of ash he could use in alchemy.

With everything gathered up, Jake took a seat on the ground again. It seemed that he had only slept for an hour or so, and while the weakness from Arcane Awakening was mostly gone, it was still there. As he had some time to spare, Jake checked out his evolution quests. Two of them had arrived with his level-up, and he started with the class one.

#### Class Evolution Quest

A hunter at heart, you seek out worthy prey with avarice. While a bow is your preferred weapon, you gladly make use of any tool available to you, embracing your Legacy as a human. Yet you also deviate, willingly picking up weapons shunned by your kind, delving into and holding onto curses and realities best forgotten. Your Path is wide, rife with exploration, myriad prey fearfully awaiting their encounter

with you. You have proven yourself a hunter standing at the apex more than once, and only death shall stop you from continuing to do so.

Objective: Slay ten C-grades (10/10). Slay at least one C-grade more than 15 levels above your own (1/1)

He always liked how the system was so nice and praised him every time in these descriptions. It was like a small summary of how he had gone through the grade and acknowledged some of the things he had done. Jake was surprised by it talking quite a bit about curses, though, making him slightly worried about the impact on his evolution options. It shouldn't be too bad, right?

Nah, it would be fine. His gut told him so.

That he had already completed the quest didn't come as a surprise either. He was a bit disappointed to see it didn't count above the requirements of the quests, though. Then again, all it would do was give him a nice summary, and it did make a bit more sense when it came to the Legacy of the Malefic Viper skills.

Moving on, Jake opened to see the race evolution quest.

This one Jake was actually worried about. Race quests were notorious for barring people who had struggles in their Paths from evolutions, especially those who were scatterbrained. A bit like Jake. More than that, the goal was often not apparent before you saw it. Jake could make educated guesses for class and profession and had a good idea of what he would have to do beforehand, but it was not the case with his race evolution quest.

With determination, Jake opened the description of his final quest.

## Race Evolution Quest

Humanity. The enlightened race with the largest population in the multiverse, a race that can walk myriad paths, be found in all grades and at all levels of power. Be it the Path of a creator, a destroyer, or anything in between, a human can be found who has walked it. Yet you have managed to create your own Path, claiming what you desire from the Legacies of others as your own while using your unique Origin as the foundation. An unshakeable will, indomitable mind, immutable desire, and unrivaled Origin. Continue on your Path to supremacy, Primal Hunter.

Objective: N/A

First, the elephant in the room.

N/A.

Not applicable.

There were two ways that could be interpreted off the top of his head. Firstly, Jake had already fulfilled the evolution requirement, so it didn't bother showing it to him... but if that was the case, why did it show it for all prior evolution quests?

Secondly, it could mean it in a far more literal sense. That he never had any requirements from the beginning because these usual requirements simply didn't apply to him. If that was the case, why? He

already knew the most likely answer... Bloodline. However, Jake had a hard time seeing the Bloodline outright cause this, as it usually didn't interfere – or wasn't allowed to interfere – with system stuff like this. Of course, this was only worth worrying about if his situation was actually abnormal.

Maybe Jake was overthinking it, and people who had sufficient Records would always just get N/A. But he had a feeling it wasn't so... and he failed to hold himself back from asking someone who had to know.

"Hey... Villy... I got a question," Jake reached out.

"Yes, you can make quite delicious drinks using Ethwood Ash. It comes out tasting a bit like-"

"What is a usual objective of the race evolution quest?" Jake interrupted him and asked.

"Fine, I lied anyway; it tastes like shit. But a usual objective? I know a few of the common archetypes. There is the Find Your Path style, this one tends to be annoying, but you only get it if you have serious problems. Then there is the Affirm Your Path type, which is something people who are already doing well often get offered to reflect on their Path and properly articulate it. The third big one is Enact Your Path, where you have to do something in accordance with your Path. Pretty similar to the one before, but this one is offered to those who already know. Due to that, this one is the easiest by far and is considered the fastest and simplest of these three classics. Mind you, there are far more kinds, but these are the most common types, and most of the variants still fall under one umbrella or another," Villy explained.

"Are there those who don't get one?" Jake asked with a frown.

“Well, yeah. Plenty doesn’t need to do any race evolution quests,” Villy answered nonchalantly. Just as Jake was about to breathe out in relief, the Viper continued. “The Sylphian is one such example, as her actual grade is considered higher than she is currently at, making evolutions just a formality. Children of beings at a higher grade also dodge this requirement, which is one of the reasons it is so much easier for the True Dragon Whelp to grow to a B-grade. To summarize, they don’t have any quests as they are just catching up to the grade they technically already are. You should already know this; we have talked about it before.”

“Okay... any other cases?” Jake kept asking searchingly.

“Considering your level, I assume you are not asking for a friend. There are race quests that are already completed once you get them, but this is not the same scenario. For these individuals, it is just a formality, and the objective simply says-“

“Not applicable,” Jake answered.

The Malefic Viper got uncharacteristically silent for a while. Several seconds passed as none of them spoke before Villy just came out and asked.

“Your objective says N/A?”

“Yep,” Jake confirmed.

“And, as stupid as it sounds of me to ask, I need to confirm. Your race is human, right. Not a variant of any kind?”

“As far as I can tell, I am as human as they come. Gives the same stats and matches the descriptions in the books to the letter,” Jake answered. Then he got an idea, and his eyes lit up. “I did get that Anomalous Soul of the Heretic-Chosen skill we talked about a while back that changed my soul, together with my Bloodline, maybe that-“

“No, that isn’t how it works,” the Viper shut him down. A few more seconds passed before he spoke again. “When you evolved to D-grade, you got the choice to evolve to a Malefic Dragonkin, right?”

“Yeah, I did, but just thinking about the option made me... wait... damn, it really is the Bloodline,” Jake said with a sigh.

“Explain.”

“When I was evolving to D-grade, I did have the Dragonkin evolution offered, but I felt such a visceral disgust towards the mere thought of not staying human. Stemming from my Bloodline. Thinking back, I even get the feeling something seriously bad would have happened if I had picked it,” Jake explained.

Another long pause followed before the Viper spoke again.

“I want to give advice, but I truly have none. What I can do is at least give a bit of insight. Many races have a base grade that they cannot naturally be born above and that base grade for humans is D-grade. That means if two S-grade humans have a child, it will be born as a D-grade and have to evolve like anyone else going above that – sans the influx of Records from the parents making this Path easier. What I am trying to say is that not getting any evolution quest objective as a human isn’t possible. There

is no precedence. This makes me reconsider if you are human at all, though everything does point to that being a fact,” Villy explained.

Jake knew the thing about humans being born at D-grade as long as their parents were C-grade or above. The same was true for most enlightened species, though many of them did have variants. Elves could become High Elves, for example.

However, one thing did bother him with this explanation.

“Why does it work like that?”

“Why does it work like what?” Villy asked, a bit confused.

“The grade thing. Why can the true grade of a beast or monster be at a higher grade than D from birth, but not humans? You said Sylphie won’t have any race quest either, right? So why would I? Human is not an inferior race inherently to a Sylphian Hawk,” Jake said confidently.

“It relates to Records of their Origin, which... huh,” Villy said as he seemed to realize something. His tone became more solemn and serious as he continued. “Okay, this conversation will end after this, and we are adding everything regarding anything with these evolutions to the list of things to never fucking talk about again, alright? This will be the last thing I add, so listen up. As you know, then beasts have different names despite their true grade varying. The Sylphian Eyas will evolve to a Juvenile Sylphian Hawk or something like that before probably becoming a fully-fledged Sylphian Hawk at B-grade. Same for Sandy, who will evolve to their true form, probably at B-grade too. Yet their names vary. The stat points they get vary. There are no inherent indications outside of the name of the race that they are not already at their true grade. I hope you understand what this means, and now let’s shelve this topic. This doesn’t change anything, at least not right now, so just keep going as normal and evolve. Talk to you post-evolution.”



With those words, Villy cut the connection, leaving Jake alone with his thoughts. His frown deepened as he wracked his brain, looking for an answer he kind of already knew. One he felt. In some ways, hadn't the truth been in front of his eyes all along?

Jake always had a superiority complex. He always had to try to suppress this to not turn into an utter asshole, thinking he was better than everyone else. You know, like sim-Jake, who had never been able to care about another human being in this life. Never been able to view anyone as an equal.

This did make it hard to engage with other people, especially those who weren't strong, but he had always thought he knew why. The explanation for this had always been his Bloodline, but when he thought about it... why didn't it make him feel superior to other races in the same way? He never felt the same innate sense of superiority towards Irin, Draskil, any of the hawks, or really anyone that wasn't human. He could recognize he was stronger, but it was not a purely instinctual sense of superiority.

Why was this? Again, blaming the Bloodline was easy, and it was certainly involved. Very involved, even. Superiority was a part of his Bloodline and who he was, hence the entire resistance-to-presences aspect. But it was more than that. Far more. He truly should have realized it sooner.

Jake had fucked with so many rituals and so many evolutions of other creatures and monsters throughout his life with the system so far. A child of a late E-grade and an early D-grade hawk turned into something that was rightfully a B-grade. A Sand Worm transformed into a creature even gods didn't recognize. A cursed scimitar and an old curse smashed together to form a Sin weapon with room for infinite growth.

All of this was done by injecting some of his own energy and thus Records. Yet he had never asked a fundamental question...

How had this affected Jake's own evolutionary Path?

What exactly had the Bloodline done to his own Origin?

He was human. Just... not entirely the same kind of human as everyone else. He was more. This feeling did not simply come from his inflated ego or his Bloodline but from his Origin itself. His sense of superiority had never been solely due to the Bloodline but because, when among other humans, he felt like a dragon amongst winged snakes.

Jake was just a fledgling of a higher race, still growing into his own. The thought of the potential of better race evolutions during race evolution during the selection had long been at the back of his mind. The thought that maybe he could get some superior variant of human is an appealing prospect.

Never realizing he had been such a variant all along.

Chapter 590 - A Final Act Of Vanity

Complicated.

That was the word Vilastromoz would describe the situation.

He had an odd relationship with the unknown. On the one hand, the unknown was a nuisance. It represented an obstacle one potentially had to understand to continue moving forward. Yet, on the other hand, it represented a chance to learn something new. Something truly new.

After ninety-two full eras, there wasn't much new to learn about the system besides whatever new things it decided to introduce at every initiation. However, the core mechanics never change. The rules of skill rarities, the level at which you evolved, the races and the stats they gave, the stat limits... all of these things were set. Unchangeable. Not even Transcendents or Bloodlines could touch these.

While it was never quite on the same level, the rules of evolution for the popular enlightened races were also set in stone. Not because some inherent concept meant these were theoretically unchangeable, but because they simply hadn't ever changed. Ninety-two full Eras. Throughout the history of the multiverse, they had remained stagnant. Not due to a lack of trying either.

Sanguine and the creation of the vampires was an attempt to make a better version of humans, but it ended up just creating an entirely new race. The Holy Church had tried, Valhal had tried, and every single other major faction of the multiverse had tried to create a better version of the base races at one point or another. None had ever succeeded.

The existence of High Elves had long been a point of pride for the elven race, as they were capable of being born at C-grade, a grade above all the other regular enlightened races. However, this was not a given, as it was mostly up to chance if two B-grade High Elves or above would have a regular elven child born at D-grade or a C-grade High Elf. Humans did not have any "high human" version and would always get a D-grade, no matter what.

This low base Origin of humans was also what allowed them to multiply so quickly. The higher the grade of your race – and thus the children you could produce – the harder it was to have a child. But this was all based on the grade that the child could potentially be. Two A-Grade True Dragons trying to have a child would be incredibly difficult, while two humans at S-grade could pump them out one after another as the kid would always be D-grade. It was a quantity-over-quality kind of thing. This did mean that elves had a lower rate of reproduction compared to humans, partly due to their ability to sometimes have High Elf variants and partly their longer lifespan.

Everyone knew these things. It was public knowledge, and even E-grade forces on desolate planets could manage to get this kind of information.

But...

Then there was Jake.

High Elves were born with the name of Elf, but it could be determined if they were High Elves due to some special features the kid sometimes had and magical measurements. These measurements were developed by the Altmar empire by the Autarch and the council, and relying on magic was very much unique to the elves. The point was that only an elf would know if there was a High Elf, and that was only through these means.

On the other hand, Jake was a human. Vilastromoz did not have a shadow of doubt in his mind about this... at least he didn't. Now he began to wonder. An unknown had been introduced, one of many related to his young Chosen.

This was nothing new when it came to him. From the very first moment that Vilastromoz saw Jake, he had felt the Bloodline. One thing he was confident of back then was that Jake's race had not yet changed into what it was now. It had slowly morphed, and the Viper now believed it was at the D-grade evolution he set his Path as a human in stone.

Variant humans were seen at times, but one could not pass down this variance to children. There were already so many differences between two humans due to professions and classes, so it wasn't necessary to change the race. As long as one wanted to remain human, that is.

Jake was different. He was just a higher variant of humans. Not a different human, just... more of a human. A straight-up more powerful version. A High Elf that reached maturity at a higher level than C-grade. An impossible outlier, now made possible.

Ultimately this left the question... what would this mean?

How would it affect him moving forward? Would it impact his ability to get classes and professions? Would all his human evolutions be identical to the expected? How would his ability to reproduce be affected? Humans were already the race in the multiverse the best at passing down Records due to their unique racial skills, so how would this affect the evolutions? On that note... with his Bloodline... if the major factions knew...

Vilastromoz shook his head and looked at his young Chosen currently running through a forest stalking some rodent, seemingly unbothered by what he had just revealed to the Primordial. Jake did not know what all this meant... and neither did the Viper.

They were in unexplored territory. The result could mean nothing, just that Jake would get a race with a slightly different name and ultimately be unable to reproduce other variants like himself. Or, it could be a multiverse-changing discovery that would affect every major force in existence and send waves throughout existence.

The Viper didn't know, and if he had to be honest, that was kind of exciting.

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Jake had no idea what this realization regarding his own race truly meant. Villy refusing to talk about it more and shutting down the topic did indicate that this was way out of the ordinary and something far more impactful and important than Jake perhaps realized. But Villy also did point out that none of this mattered right now. He was like the wyvern to a True Dragon – on the same Path, but still not quite there.

All that mattered right now was to just keep going and actually evolve. Jake was confident... no, he hoped there would be no evolutions for this race this time around. Because if there wasn't one, it meant Jake was still not yet at his "intended" grade. In fact, he would prefer to just stay a "normal" human until S-grade, if possible, as dodging those race evolution quests seemed like a nice thing.

Letting out a sigh, Jake stood up and stretched a bit. The period of weakness from Arcane Awakening had fully passed by now, and Jake was back in near-top condition. Still a bit low on stamina and mana, but nothing major. Nothing that would impact what he would do next.

He also wasn't surprised this time by still needing another race level to evolve. A part of him had hoped the Ethgleam Mothertree and treants would have just given him two levels total so he could evolve right away, but on the other hand, this was fine too as it allowed Jake to attempt another of his vain goals of D-grade. One he assumed wouldn't actually mean anything when it came to evolutions of his Path, but that he just wanted to do this for his own vanity.

It was naturally to one-shot a C-grade.

With all his skills, it should be enough if he found a weak one. Hence, he went looking. On the way to the center of the forest, Jake had run by many C-grades, a lot of them barely having reached their current level of power.

Jake took flight and scanned the forest with his senses, even using a bit of tracking to find prey worth taking down. He came across two pretty quickly, one of them a large beetle with a resilient exoskeleton, and the other a beast Jake did not quite recognize, but it had a shell of some kind covering its back. Both of them were big and lumbering monsters, meaning they had high vitality and toughness. Bad targets, so he moved on.

It was only when he found the fourth C-grade that his eyes lit up. It was a smallish rabbit-like creature with wings and small antlers that he saw jump through the forest down below. It was incredibly fast and seemed to be hunting peak D-grades for itself. It struck with insane speed and slammed its oversized feet into its prey, releasing a shockwave that sent them blasting back. Based on his estimates, there was some sound-based concept in there, turning the inside of its target into mush.

At least it would have if the rabbit was strong enough. The peak D-grade it had targeted was a large wolf that managed to get up and fight back for a good while before finally succumbing to repeated attacks from a far faster foe. It did manage to land one good swipe, drawing blood. Jake was certain after seeing this exchange that what he was looking at was a bottom-tier C-grade with shitty defenses.

[Sonic-Springfoot Wolpertinger - ???]

It also didn't have good Perception as it failed to notice Jake setting up on it. He observed the rabbit for nearly an hour as he stalked it around, waiting for it to calm down and rest. It hunted a few peak D-grades, consuming their beast cores once it killed them. The one time it did encounter another C-grade, it ran away, easily escaping with its superior speed.

As he observed, Hunting Momentum slowly built up, and Jake learned more and more about the beast. He didn't really have to learn much, as mammals like this were very familiar to him. An Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter condensed within his quiver as he continued his observation.

Even if the beast killed a few weaker beasts than itself, it even ended up running from a peak D-grade it didn't feel confident against. Jake guessed the rabbit had either eaten something really good to reach its grade or that it had been good enough at hiding and surviving while running away until it managed to evolve while staying in the outskirts of the C-grade area.

His theory that it was good at hiding was proven half an hour later as the rabbit rapidly climbed up a tree, going far up, forcing Jake to also reposition to make sure he was not spotted while still having a line of sight. Even then, Mark was on it, so the little bastard couldn't escape.

It ended up climbing more than halfway up the entire length of the tree, far enough up for several thick-leaved branches to appear. The rabbit made its way onto one of these branches and hunkered down. Jake did not feel any magic move, but he clearly saw something happen as the rabbit seemed to completely melt away, becoming one with the tree.

Camouflage.

Jake could still focus and spot it, but it took some effort. He was certain that the rabbit indeed had some kind of high-level camouflage skill, a bit reminiscent of Jake's own Arcane Stealth. The rabbit's version was way better, though, and without Jake's high Perception, he would not have seen through it. With its high speed and ability to hide, Jake could understand how it managed to stay alive this far. It was a tricky bastard. Based on how it was sitting, Jake also got the feeling it was ready to strike at any point if anything got too close, and he could even imagine it jumping for something moving on the ground far below to descend like a meteor and smash them into pieces.

So, the C-grade did have some things going for it. However, it was still a weak C-grade that was a prime subject for Jake's desire to prove he still had it - it being the ability to kill something an entire grade above himself in one shot.



His best fast-acting necrotic poison, an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, Arcane Powershot, Hunting Momentum, Bonus from Big Game Hunter, and extra damage added by his archery skill. To truly make sure Jake would succeed, he even tried to optimize the extra damage from attacking at a long range.

Oh, and of course, Stealth Attack.

Jake flew far up into the air, as far as he could possibly go, while still allowing him a clear line of sight. Mark allowed him to know where the rabbit was even if the camouflage could fool his insane Perception from that far up in the air.

The creature was utterly still and did not look like it wanted to move anytime soon, as it was probably busy digesting all the cores it had gathered. Jake had flown nearly a hundred kilometers up in the air at his point, but he sadly couldn't go any further. He would have to shoot at a small angle due to the tree the rabbit was on, meaning he couldn't shoot straight down like with the Unique Lifeform he had slain with the Fallen King.

Once he found a good position, Jake began to prepare. He took out the massive Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, coated it in his poison, and nocked it on the string. Slowly, he drew back the string as he slowly breathed, relying on old exercises that truly no longer mattered with the system now a thing. At least he didn't think it mattered.

Arcane magic began to revolve around him as it entered the bow and arrow. His muscles were infused with energy, and Arcane Awakening activated at full power to empower him further. Slowly, he began to charge the shot. From practice, he learned that starting slowly allowed him to reach a higher peak as his body and weapon could slowly acclimate to the energy that way.

Seconds ticked by. Ten seconds, fifteen, twenty. Ever-so-slowly the amount of arcane energy grew as Jake kept steadily breathing in and out. The air around him began to shudder, faint cracking sounds

were heard from who-knows-where, and the entire environment around him changed as it was bathed in the purple glow of his arcane energy.

The pain began to shoot through his shoulders as the pressure mounted. Then the weapon itself struggled, but luckily the legendary bow held up. It would be his body that broke down before it did.

It took nearly a minute until Jake knew it was time. With a final deep breath, he released the string, and the moment he did, several blood vessels burst on both his arms and most of his upper body, making blood soak his armor.

An explosion of power pushed away all energy around him, momentarily destroying every other affinity, resulting in even color and light blinking out of existence before it retook the vacuum left by pure destruction.

The arrow flew downward like a spear from the heavens, a purple vertical line descending towards the forest below. Jake slightly repositioned himself to make sure he could see where his target was hiding far below. Just in time, too, as the rodent noticed what was coming.

As he had predicted, it moved to dodge. A fraction of a second before it jumped, it was forced to dismiss its camouflage, and at that moment, Jake saw it once more. His Gaze landed on its form as his eyes glowed, the soul of his prey bare and vulnerable.

It froze. Unable to do anything but form a meager magical barrier to try and block the attack.

Then, a flash of light. A shockwave was released the moment the arrow hit the rabbit, blasting the rabbit down through the branch it had been sitting on towards the ground below, sending wooden splinters

flying everywhere. A second shockwave was released as a purple wave of energy was released, momentarily bathing the forest in the color of Jake's arcane mana.

When the light cleared, all Jake saw was a great pillar begin to topple, now blocking Jake's view of his prey. The tree the rabbit had been sitting on began to fall over due to the crater that had ripped out many of its roots, making it unable to keep standing.

Jake simply stared as it slowly fell, a mighty crash echoing as the tree several kilometers tall was now lying prone across the vast forest. At its base was a massive crater pulsing with purple veins of energy, fissures of pure arcane mana still humming with power.

In the middle, only a few feathers and pieces of broken antlers.

\*You have slain [Sonic-Springfoot Wolpertinger - 201] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\*

He smiled as his body hurt all over. Arcane Awakening deactivated as a rush of pain went through him, and he knew he had overexerted himself. It felt as if he had just gone through a major battle, and he knew he was in no shape to fight... fortunately, he didn't have to.

Because he had accomplished his goal.

\*Race Evolution Requirements Met\*

Your Path to the apex continues, one step at a time. You have overcome and consumed curses, experienced and adapted different realities, and remained steadfast in your convictions. The labels placed upon you matter little as you know who you are. Yet more choices remain. Legacies of humanity await you as you get inspired by those of the past and the Paths they have walked.

Begin Evolution now?

Y/N

WARNING: Postponing evolution may have adverse effects, and no further race experience can be earned before the evolution is completed

"Hell yeah," Jake muttered to himself through the pain. He read the message over a few times, and he was now more sure than before that this evolution would still just have him become a C-grade human like everyone else. A bit comforting, actually.

With a smile, Jake quickly made his way back to Haven, got on his good old bed from the Challenge Dungeon, and accepted the prompt as he disappeared, finally starting his C-grade evolution.