

Hunter 591

Chapter 591 - C-Grade

The soft fabric of the bed was replaced with the feeling of weightlessness as Jake was whisked away.

Oh, dear void, we meet again, Jake thought as he opened his eyes and found himself floating within the same space as all previous evolutions. The intense energy, unlike anything else, was all around him, ready to nourish him at any moment. It was truly energy unlike anything else, only found in this space and seemingly only operable by the system itself.

He moved his limbs a bit, just enjoying the sensation of floating there as he waited for the system to do its thing. It didn't take long before something happened. The energy all around him began to move towards him as a message appeared in front of him.

Congratulations! You have successfully managed to evolve into C-grade as a variant evolution.

All future potential variant evolutions will be blocked due to Origin.

Congratulations! You have successfully evolved to C-grade!

This message made it clear that he, indeed, was now set on his Path when it came to his race. When he would reach his intended grade, no one knew, but Jake looked forward to that day. Jake did not have time to ponder more on his race as the evolution finally began for real.

His body became a vacuum of energy as it sucked in everything it could. His soul and body were both nourished and grew with every passing second as Jake felt himself change on a fundamental level. A portion of the energy also seemed to enter his Soulspace, and he felt Eternal Hunger be fed some of the energy. Even a mythical weapon could not forcefully claim any of this evolutionary energy, but it seemed like the system saw it fit to feed it nonetheless. The reason Eternal Hunger was fed was naturally due to the Eternal Shadow.

The mask did not absorb anything this time around, making Jake assume it was because he was now separate from the King. Even then, the amount of energy being funneled into Jake was intense.

As Jake felt all this, ripples went through him as he finally became able to see what he had evolved into.

Human (C) – You have reached a step on the evolutionary ladder few can ever stand on, and for that accomplishment alone, you should be proud. The human race is known as the most balanced and numerous races in the multiverse, being able to walk many different roads on their Path to power. With this evolution, you shall pick a small part of that future Path as you specialize further. Stat bonuses: +18 to all stats, +45 Free points per level.

It was the expected outcome, and Jake truly had no complaints. As expected, then all the stats gained had tripled – the same as when he reached D-grade.

The evolution was far from over, though, as the process of energy absorption only picked up until suddenly... it stopped. For a fraction of a second, Jake was confused until he remembered. He had read about evolutions for humans before but had kind of forgotten this aspect.

As you walk on the road pathed by your predecessors, you learn from the experiences of old. You view the Paths of those before you, and in turn, they bless you with their power. In return, they can only hope you will continue the tradition of passing down knowledge.

Ten Paths appear before you, all paved and proven. Take inspiration, and choose one that fits you to embrace the Records within.

No two evolutions were entirely alike, and this was the special feature of the one that humans got. Other races had their own varying special things. The gap between C-grade was far larger than the one between E and D-grade, and this was one of the reasons.

Within the void, the energy was frozen as ten roads began to condense. Some had paved stone reminding him of an old city street, others dirt roads, some the undergrowth of a forest, and others lonely and desolate stone.

At the end of each Path stood a version of Jake himself, but all wearing different outfits and all doing something different. Jake stared down the first of the Paths and saw a version of himself in what looked like old fur armor, surrounded by monsters, yet none of them seemed to see him as he was picking up a glowing orb of some kind.

Path of the Gatherer – A Human who walks the Path of a gatherer, forever searching for all there is to find and claim. As a gatherer, you do not only seek to acquire material goods, but all that can help humanity grow. Having far evolved past the need for food and sustenance, you search for the one true thing that matters: Knowledge. Permanently increases Wisdom, Perception, and Agility by 10%. Grants the [Wisdom of the Gatherer (Unique)] skill. Upon selecting this Path, you will instantly gain a one-time bonus to the Wisdom, Perception, and Agility stat.

Jake looked at his version of himself but shook his head. Looking to another road. There, he saw a version of himself wielding two swords in the midst of a battle with a wyvern of all things. He was wearing tough-looking armor, and his weapons were gleaming with the blood of his foe. Jake barely skimmed the Path, only viewing the important part about what stats this one revolved around.

Path of the Warrior - Permanently increases Strength, Toughness, and Endurance by 10%.

The next depicted Jake doing alchemy in a lab, wearing a robe. Jake once more shook his head and decided to not dwell too much on possibilities he would never pick.

Path of the Creator - Permanently increases Wisdom, Perception, and Willpower by 10%

The fourth showed Jake standing in the middle of what looked like the World Congress hall, surrounded by faceless humanoids.

Path of the Ruler - Permanently increases Wisdom, Willpower, and Intelligence by 10%.

Another one showing Jake silently sitting in a cave, meditating in complete calmness.

Path of the Hermit – Permanently enhances Willpower, Agility, and Vitality by 10%.

Jake standing in the middle of a burned-down city, corpses all around him, with a smile on his face.

Path of the Outcast - Permanently increases Vitality, Agility, and Intelligence by 10%.

A version that nearly made the real Jake puke as he saw himself wearing black robes on his knees in front of a statue depicting Villy while surrounded by fanatics.

Path of the Faithful – Permanently increases Wisdom, Vitality, and Intelligence by 10%.

The third to last displayed Jake surrounded by enemies on all sides, yet not a shred of fear was on his face as he remained stoic, his arcane magic revolving around him to form different magical constructs.

Path of the Indomitable – Permanently increases Vitality, Willpower, and Toughness by 10%.

In the second to last version, it was Jake standing bloody upon a massive corpse of a manticore, his bow in hand, and this version wearing nearly the same armor as Jake himself. This Path fit him really well, but it was not the one.

Path of the Slayer – Permanently increases Strength, Agility, & Intelligence by 10%.

Then there was the tenth Path. It was not actually the tenth going by order of appearance but had been the second Path of the ten displayed. Jake had saved it for last for a reason. Because he already knew this was the one from the beginning.

Gatherers were often paired with another way of life in humanity's history. While the gatherers collected all they could, this other group was in charge of obtaining a far riskier source of food and willingly risked their lives to hopefully defeat something much stronger than themselves.

Down the final Path Jake evaluated, he saw a nearly spitting image of himself, wearing the same armor and holding a bow with his back turned to Jake, staring at a monster of ridiculous size in the distance.

It was naturally the Path of the Hunter.

Path of the Hunter – A human who walks the Path of a hunter, forever seeking his next prey. Any community needs those willing to face dangerous foes to sustain the group, be it through gaining food or scavaging valuable materials of the slain prey in a dangerous situation. You have walked a Path where you do neither. You hunt not for material gain but for the experience, the Records, and the thrill. Permanently increases Perception, Agility, and Endurance by 10%. Grants the [Wisdom of the Hunter (Unique)] skill. Upon selecting this Path, you will instantly gain a one-time bonus to the Perception, Agility, and Endurance stat.

Note that all Paths are Paths to the pinnacle. Choose that which suits you.

There was no real decision to be made here. Even if the system said that all these Paths were equal in principle, only one of them truly fit who Jake was. He was the Primal Hunter, for Villy's sake.

As for the Paths themselves, Jake had read about them. It was a way to further specialize yourself, and getting a 10% increase to three stats was usually considered huge. It was still big for Jake, but this was an instance where diminishing returns on additive titles really came into play. The relative stat increase Jake would get compared to someone with barely any titles was more than noticeable. At least for the percentage part. Because with these Paths also came a one-time bonus. Quite a big one too.

Jake did not delay further as he selected the Path, and once more, time began to move, and the influx of energy resumed. All other paths ceased to be as the Path of the Hunter turned into pure energy. A rush of Records and energy went through his body repeatedly as his skin almost seemed to ripple. While experiencing this oddly wonderful feeling, he got some more prompts.

Per your choice to walk the Path of the Hunter, you will experience a one-time increase to all stats associated with the aforementioned Path. Perfect Evolution Stat increase applied. +550 Perception, +550 Agility, +550 Endurance.

Feeling the stat increase while also undergoing his evolution was nearly impossible. Feeling much of anything that was not his own body while within the void was hard, but Jake still went through all the other prompts.

***Race Skill Gained*:** [Wisdom of the Hunter (Unique)] – You walk the Path of a hunter, a pillar of any community and one of the few who dare forage into hostile territory to hunt. Rather than stay and improve the safe settlements of humanity, you seek more power through the act of killing your foes and claiming all the bounty that comes with it. A potent yet risky Path. +10% Perception, +10% Agility, +10% Endurance. Increases all experience gained from slaying foes. Increases alignment to all classes or professions related to the Path of a Hunter. Allows you to more easily pass on Records related to your Path as a Hunter.

His one race skill gained in C-grade, it seemed. Perhaps a bit underwhelming, but such were the race skills of the human race in general. Not that the skill itself was underwhelming. Sure, Jake didn't really need the part about teaching others his Path as a hunter or whatever, but everything else was great. More experience from kills and more "alignment" – whatever that meant – had to be good. Oh, and of course, the nice stat bonuses, but he already knew about those.

To scroll back a bit, the one-time increase to his Endurance, Agility, and Perception stat above had increased by 10%, too, due to Jake reaching level 199 in both class, race, and profession before evolving. That prompt above had mentioned it already, but Jake had naturally gained yet another Perfect Evolution title.

[Perfect Evolution (C)] – You have undergone a perfect evolution to become a C-grade human. +660 all stats.

All in all, it was a massive increase numerically in his stats. However, that was far from all. Evolutions did not only improve oneself with an increase in stat numbers but also stat effectiveness. Every stat point mattered more than before, every health point more valuable, every mana point containing more energy, and every point in Strength made him stronger.

Exactly how much this was, Jake didn't know, but as with his D-grade evolutions, he felt at least twice as powerful as before. Without fighting, he would have no way of knowing, but he was confident that in his current form, he could handle ten of himself from before evolving without even using Arcane Awakening – with them naturally allowed to go all-out.

The next system message Jake had received was also a very expected one. He had gotten it at every evolution so far, after all.

Bloodline Ability Evolved

The evolution has stirred your Bloodline, allowing it to evolve along with you.

***Bloodline Ability Upgraded*:** [Bloodline of the Primal Hunter (Bloodline Ability - Unique)] – Dormant power lies in the very essence of your being. A unique, innate ability awakened in the Bloodline of Jake Thayne. Grants the Sphere of Perception. Grants an improved sense of danger. Enhances all instincts and intuition. +25% to Perception.

The description was the same as ever, and it added another 5% to his increase in Perception. Coupled with the 10% increase from the Path of the Hunter, Jake saw that he had now reached one of those numerical milestones that, in reality, didn't mean anything but still made him feel damn good.

He had reached a 100% stat increase in Perception. Was this overly massive compared to a 95% increase? No, no, it was not, but reaching 100% still felt significant somehow. Overall his stat amplifiers had gotten quite extreme by now, something he could only feel proud and happy about. There was just something satisfying about seeing numbers going up.

Within the void, Jake felt the intake of energy slow down significantly, and he knew the evolution was about to come to an end. The race evolution of humans was never the most exciting, though Jake had ended up making this one interesting through the revelations it brought. Nevertheless, it was the profession and class evolutions where the real meat was at.

He then frowned as he already felt it just floating there. The improvement to his Bloodline was significant.

Jake still vividly recalled his last evolution and the resulting barrage of information once he returned to the real world. This case would be far worse than the one last time if he didn't do anything... but this time, he was far more prepared and knew it was coming.

As he knew he was soon returning to the real world, he focused his mind and tried to limit the Sphere of Perception. He reigned in all his senses and closed his eyes, trying to restrain himself as much as possible. His Bloodline naturally responded to his will, and while he had no way of knowing how far his Sphere extended within the void, he knew it had gotten far bigger and would have to be smaller for him to not risk passing out or causing severe damage.

Taking a deep breath, Jake was ready to return to his lodge in Haven. Prepared for all the bad things there were to come.

He wasn't just talking about the backlash from his own senses improving but something all newly evolved C-grades had to face:

The horror of seeing many of your hard-earned skills reduce in rarity.

The Fallen King felt the change instantly. The little hunter had finally bothered to evolve, thus opening the Path for the King too. At least the King did not have to wait long, as the fight with the alien Unique Lifeform had left him weakened and unable to evolve for quite a while. Not that the Fallen King wouldn't say it hadn't turned out for the better, as he had managed to consume the core of the Ashen Phantom Devourer and assimilated his Records into himself.

Standing within his domicile in the mountain range in which he had fought this other Unique Lifeform, he saw no purpose in delaying his claim of earned power. The prompt appeared before him as he willed it to be; the thought of evolution quests naturally a laughable subject for one such as he.

Chapter 592 - The Ups And Downs Of Evolution

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 200 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

The level was gained, and he returned to the real world.

Jake had been prepared this time around. He had steeled himself and done all he could to limit his senses to not experience sensory overload. His control since he became D-grade had increased significantly, and Jake had far more confidence this time around when he was teleported back to the bed in his lodge.

The moment he appeared, he was still hit hard. Thousands of smells, extremely loud sounds and so much information from his Sphere got fed straight into his brain. He imagined colors he didn't even know existed, impossible sounds, and the mana in the air felt suffocating.

Gritting his teeth, the cracking sound from some of them breaking was deafening, but it allowed him to focus on that one sound. He kept grinding his teeth, the sound echoing within his head like he was living inside a drumset, and he focused solely on this noise as he tried to filter everything else away. Not opening his eyes had been a godsend, and for a few moments, he even considered just stabbing something into both of his eardrums.

Minutes passed by, and slowly, he felt some calm. The sounds were now more muted, and his body and mind adapted to all this new sensory information. Increases in senses like this from evolutions were completely normal, and everyone felt these heightened senses, but usually, the system helped in advance. It did still help Jake, but only with the same level of assistance it would give everyone else. This is to say, it was far from enough.

The smells were still bothering him, primarily because he could not distinguish or place them. It was just a huge mass of different scents, some of them nice, some of them foul, but all mixed together in this amalgamation of pure stench.

Muting these smells took a while as Jake began to breathe heavily, taking in some of the atmospheric mana.

Throughout it all, Jake had managed to restrain the worst offender when it came to sensory overload: his Sphere of Perception. Even then, it had still grown to nearly five hundred meters, and Jake knew this was due to his suppression of it. The level of detail throughout the Sphere remained mostly the same, but he detected more energy now compared to before. For a few moments, it had felt like he was back

in the Forgotten Sewers dungeon filled with dark mana, blinding him entirely. Luckily, his instinctual filtering quickly kicked in and helped.

Choosing to shelve the issue of the Sphere for now, Jake opened his eyes and, surprisingly enough, felt fine. He was confused for a moment until it clicked. Jake was used to using his eyes a lot and straining them to the utmost, while he usually didn't actively practice and use his sense of smell and improved hearing as those two were more obstacles than beneficial outside of tracking.

It was a bit the same with many of his other senses. His sense of touch, the sensation of pain, and other senses like that were something Jake was used to and, in many ways, desensitized to. They also just didn't feel as overwhelming as the auxiliary senses.

Jake, to do a test, took out one of his hated enemies from his inventory: a mushroom. He stared at it for a moment before throwing it into his mouth and chewing.

"Still tastes like shit," he muttered as he gulped down the necrotic toxins within the fungi. Nothing seemed to have really changed with his sense of taste, so that was good, at least. There were still many other tests left, but Jake returned to his Sphere once more.

Focusing, Jake slightly released it, feeling it spread out. Six hundred meters, seven hundred, eight hundred. The added area covered for every meter it extended was larger than the one before, making the pressure on his psyche only grow. After it reached a kilometer, Jake had to stop and forcefully pull it back into around the four-hundred to five-hundred meters range where it felt the most manageable.

The maximum limit is... a lot higher.

He had already limited it in D-grade, but now he had to limit it even more. It annoyed him as he felt like he was wasting potential, but on the other hand, he knew processing so much information was too much for him. Even at a few hundred meters, he didn't truly process everything at once, but it felt more like certain things happening within triggered instinctual responses making him notice it.

Even so... Jake wanted to see how far it could truly go. Was it risky? Yes, but he was also far more durable now, and even if there were some issues, he believed in his own ability to recover. It should be fine. Definitely.

I can take it... right?

Yeah, he should be able to.

Oh well, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Closing his eyes and cutting off all other senses, Jake let go for but a fraction of a second. It was as if a pulse was released that went outwards and took a snapshot of everything it encountered on the way before finally being cut off, leaving Jake with just an image in his head – and a splitting headache.

As for the range... Jake felt it as the pulse spread and scanned everything.

A kilometer, twelve-hundred meters, fifteen hundred meters, two kilometers... three... five... ten... twenty... fifty... a hundred... two....

Jake saw Arnold in his workshop at the Fort. He saw Miranda in her office, a party around a hundred kilometers out in the forest, every single home at the Fort, every single person living there, every single thing...

Jake was overwhelmed as the mental picture faded before he could process even a fraction of it, and he opened his eyes as he felt the blood drip down onto his shirt, coming out of his nose. He just stared a bit into the wall as he frowned.

A bit over two hundred and fifty kilometers. That was the actual range of Jake's Sphere of Perception if it was fully released. It was so large there was simply no way to process all this information... it was just not possible for a C-grade. At least not Jake. Maybe someone like Arnold could, with some of his special skills and his fucked up mind that had probably been warped by eldritch influence.

However, while Jake could not process all this information, that didn't make it useless. Closing his eyes once more, Jake repeated his action, releasing another pulse. It swept out, and this time Jake did it with a purpose. His instinct guided him, and as the snapshot faded, he still felt something.

Over a hundred kilometers away, a Mark had been placed on Arnold's assistant. A smile crept on Jake's lips. "The possibilities..."

Jake was turning into a living, walking, surveillance state. At least some of the time. Just releasing a few of these pulses made him feel drained, and he knew he was straining himself whenever he did it, making it a limited technique only to be used sparingly.

Shaking his head, Jake moved on to another thing he had dreaded facing nearly as much as the outcome of his Bloodline evolution:

Skill rarity adjustment.

All newly evolved C-grades would experience this horror, and Jake chose not to needlessly delay his suffering. He had already been spammed with messages and dove straight into it.

Skill Rarity Adjustment Initiated.

As your power grows, so do your Records. What may have been an achievement before is now only to be expected, and what may have seemed rare before may now merely be uncommon. Thus, an adjustment must be made to represent your progress.

All skills will be adjusted to your current grade, resulting in potential downgrades in rarity. All functionalities of the skills will remain unchanged. Some skills may be adjusted without having their rarities affected. This may or may not result in increased difficulty of further rarity upgrades.

Even if the description said the skills wouldn't get nerfed and be worse, that didn't really make Jake feel that much better. It still sucked to see the rarities decreasing. It felt like taking a step back on one's progress.

It also mentioned that some skills were downgraded without losing their current rarity. Every rarity was a spectrum, so if a skill was at the peak of legendary and close to reaching mythical rarity, it would likely stay the same. Some skills also just wouldn't ever downgrade due to how they worked. Brew Potion and Concoct Poison were two examples of this.

Speaking of those skills, Jake already knew that the massacre would be worse with his class than his profession, so he started with the gentler of the two.

Profession Skills:

Note that some skills that did not experience a downgrade in rarity did have their relative rarity lowered.

Rarity Adjusted:

[Alchemist's Purification (Common)] --> [Alchemist's Purification (Inferior)]

[Alchemical Flame (Uncommon)] --> [Alchemical Flame (Common)]

[Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)] --> [Cultivate Toxin (Common)]

[Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Ancient)] --> [Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Epic)]

[Advanced Core Manipulation (Ancient)] --> [Advanced Core Manipulation (Epic)]

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Five skills were downgraded... that wasn't terrible, actually. It still hurt, but some of them were expected. Then again, he felt pretty damn called out for never really using something like Purification by the skill now being Inferior-rarity. It wasn't Jake's fault he didn't really need the skill.

Alchemical Flame downgrading was a bit sad, and as for the others, it was expected. While Jake had used all of the skills, he hadn't used them a lot and had not really worked on actively improving them. Core Manipulation and Soul Ritualism were both skills he had used for the Bee Queen ritual, and he planned on getting them up to speed when he got back to that project too.

As for the others... time would tell.

Finally, he had the profession skills that did not experience a change in rarity.

Rarity Unchanged:

[Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Craft Elixir (Uncommon)], [Concoct Poison (Rare)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Epic)], [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)]

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Jake had already predicted all of the Legacy skills would stay the same, and he had been proven right. Honestly, looking at the list, he only saw one skill he was surprised had remained at its rarity. He did not remember using Legacy Teachings much, and yet it remained at legendary rarity. Actually, it was pretty much entirely passive, so perhaps he did use it unknowingly? Hard to tell.

Anyway, overall, the profession skills had gone as expected, and there were no nasty surprises. Jake still looked forward to seeing what would happen to Path of the Heretic-Chosen, but that would have to wait for his profession's evolution.

For now, Jake moved on to what he had dreaded far more. His class.

Class Skills:

Note that some skills that did not experience a downgrade in rarity did have their relative rarity lowered.

Yeah, yeah, same as last time. It couldn't be that bad with the downgrades, right?

Rarity Adjusted:

[Traditional Hunter's Tracking (Rare)] --> [Traditional Hunter's Tracking (Uncommon)]

[Splitting Arrow Rain (Epic)] --> [Splitting Arrow Rain (Rare)]

[Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Epic)] --> [Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Rare)]

[Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Epic)] --> [Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Rare)]

[Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Ancient)] --> [Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Epic)]

[Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Ancient)] --> [Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)]

[Arcane Powershot (Ancient)] --> [Arcane Powershot (Epic)]

[Steady Aim of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)] --> [Steady Aim of the Apex Hunter (Ancient)]

[Arcane Awakening (Legendary)] --> [Arcane Awakening (Ancient)]

[One Step, Thousand Miles (Legendary)] --> [One Step, Thousand Miles (Ancient)]

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It was as bad as he had feared.

Ten skills were downgraded, Three of them legendary and three of them ancient. Jake nearly felt physical pain just looking at it, seeing nearly all of his core skills reduced. Some of them he understood, like Descending Dark Arcane Fang and probably also Arcane Powershot, but for Arrow of Ambitious Hunter to downgrade was a surprise. Then again, the skill had been given at level 90 and had not been upgraded since. He really needed to work on it.

Arcane Awakening downgrading also hurt, especially as Jake now instinctively knew the skill had gotten quite a bit harder to use now. Before, he could keep it up for a long time and even be in the fully activated state for a long time, but with the evolution and the percentage boost staying the same, that had changed. Activating it above the safe 30% was now something he had to do with forethought.

Or whenever he felt like it while just taking the bigger backlash that would follow. This was not due to the downgrade in rarity but simply because he had just reached C-grade and gotten a lot of stats, making a 60% boost utterly massive.

On a side note, One Step, Thousand Miles downgrading was completely expected. This skill was so widely known that the fact it would downgrade was something Jake had already read about. Now, Steady Aim downgrading also wasn't that big of a surprise, but it still sucked. He liked having a lot of legendary skills.

At least there was one pleasant surprise. Jake had expected his two stealth skills to downgrade, but somehow Arcane Stealth and Superior Stealth Attack had retained their rarity. He wondered if they had actually been close to upgrading or if there was some other reason behind it.

Luckily, even if it felt like he had just been punched in the face from these downgrades, some skills had not betrayed him.

Rarity Unchanged:

[Arcane Stealth (Rare)], [Superior Stealth Attack (Rare)], [Big Game Arcane Hunter (Epic)], [Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)], [Fangs of Man (Ancient)], [Moment of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Relentless Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Legendary)], [Eternal Shadow of the Primal Hunter (Mythical)]

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Needless to say, Jake was the happiest about seeing Eternal Shadow of the Primal Hunter still a mythical skill. His archery skill staying was also nice, and Fangs of Man not downgrading was a bit surprising. Moment and Gaze, he totally understood, and Relentless Hunt felt so damn powerful to Jake he didn't question it either.

It still bore repeating how much it sucked to have skills downgraded. Fifteen skills in total had fallen in rarity, most of them the core skills Jake used all the time. Trying to look a bit on the bright side, it offered him a chance to upgrade them once more. Having created one mythical skill, Jake also felt more confident in making more, and if he understood the system properly, having created one made getting more far, far easier.

Knowing there was nothing he could do to change reality, Jake moved on, and he instantly had a thought. And a smile appeared.

As Jake was finally done going over all these horrible downgrades, he had something he needed to do. During the pulses of Sphere, he had seen Arnold and knew the man had reached C-grade, which meant Jake had something extremely important to do before he could continue with all of his evolutions.

Getting off the bed, Jake rushed out and enjoyed his increased speed. He was faster, stronger. His speed had increased to a whole new level, and Jake beat his record of traveling from Haven to the Fort by nearly three times. Once he got there, he beelined for Arnold's metal dome, and he was let in without question. Arnold was in his workshop, looking just the same as before despite his evolution.

"Hey, Arnold, did your mythical skill downgrade to legendary after you evolved!?" Jake quickly asked the mad scientist as he stormed into the workshop.

"Yes, but I should be able to-"

"Get fucked; mine didn't!" Jake said in return before swiftly making his exit, leaving a very confused Arnold behind. With glee, Jake flew back to Haven to continue his evolution after completing this imperative objective and getting a good ego boost.

Now the question was... profession or class evolution first?

Chapter 593 - A Way More Professional Evolution

Okay, Jake had perhaps been a bit too excited about his evolution when he had gone to visit Arnold, and it was probably also not a good idea to annoy the guy you wanted to make stuff for you. Even if Jake didn't want favors from him – which he did - pissing off a mad scientist with an army of drones also seemed unwise.

To make things worse, Jake planned on going to visit him to ask about the Nanoblade after all his evolutions were done, but now he had just turned things awkward. He could go and apologize then and there, but wouldn't that just make things worse? He had no idea, and he failed to resist using his Sphere Pulse – the official new name - once more. He took a new snapshot only to see Arnold back at work, his neutral facial expression the same as ever.

At least he didn't seem bothered, so Jake would just let it rest for now. He had evolutions to do, didn't he?

He could evolve either his class or profession first, and while the order didn't matter whatsoever, Jake did recall evolving his class first at D-grade. As a supporter of equality, Jake found it only fair to go with his profession first this time around.

Without further ado, Jake got started as he willed the message to appear, and his profession evolution could officially begin.

Profession Evolution Requirements Met

Living paradoxes tend to be transient beings, unstable amalgamations of circumstance that cease to be once the feeble balance is broken and one side has to give in. Yet you remain a heretic and a Chosen. The two sides are perhaps not equally represented in your Path, but a balance has still been struck that allows both to persist in harmony, amplifying one another. Your heretical actions instead seemingly bring you closer to your Patron, as you have gladly embraced the Legacy of the Malefic Viper. Not that you shy away from less-used means, willingly deploying curses to further your goal. Your alchemy has also only grown, your poisons ever more potent, yet something else has appeared too. Something that causes Origins, Records, and Paths to warp in your wake. To what extremes will you go?

Begin evolution now?

Y/N

WARNING: Postponing evolution for too long may have adverse effects, and no further profession-experience can be earned before the evolution is complete.

The system just kept being so nice in all these long messages describing his Path and whatnot. The message itself was as expected, primarily about Jake being a heretic and a Chosen, at least until the last few sentences. It mentioned Jake's curses, his alchemy getting better, and then that ominous final part about warping Origins and Paths and whatnot. Definitely related to all the things Jake had done that created things like Eternal Hunger – both versions – and of course, Sandy. A bit of Sylphie, too, for sure.

He already had a good idea of what kind of profession upgrades he would get and stopped delaying as he jumped right into it.

The first option was indeed one he had expected.

Planetary Leader of the Malefic Viper – The will of the Malefic One is omnipresent, expanding to all worlds and all realities. As a World Leader, you support the Order of the Malefic Viper, dedicating the lives of all who live on your planet to the Order and the Malefic One. Planetary Leader is a profession focused on managing and guiding a planet to glory. Grants skills related to management, economics, leadership, and control, as well as methods to protect your new dominion. However, be warned that should the planet be destroyed, you will not escape unscathed. Stat bonuses per level: +35 Vitality, +35 Wisdom, +30 Willpower, +60 Free Points. WARNING: Skills pertaining to Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper may be lost or changed upon becoming a Planetary Leader of the Malefic Viper.

Becoming World Leader was usually viewed as a massive achievement and a Path in itself. For Jake, it had just been an annoying responsibility he chose to take on, and in all truthfulness, the quality of this upgrade reflected that. It was a pretty bad version of World Leader and didn't even include any of his Chosen or heretic stuff in there. It was a barebones one that sounded a lot like what Arthur had feared Jake planned on becoming to control Earth.

It was a profession Jake could see quite a few people in the Order of the Malefic Viper possess. If the Order had a lot of planets under their control, that is. Jake really didn't know as he wasn't overly invested in his friend's culty social club.

Stat-wise it gave 160 total, which was... okay? As was shown in the race evolution, the stats tripled once more in C-grade, bringing the maximum a profession could give from 80 to 240. 160 put the profession above average but still pretty bad in Jake's eyes. It was the same as a profession giving 60 total stats in D-grade, so way worse than what he had before. Also, losing or changing skills? Yeah, no thanks.

He did not doubt that people like Arthur and Miranda would get offered skills related to being Ministers and on the council, with even the Sword Saint perhaps getting an annoying option to skip. Which was, of course, exactly what Jake did as he moved on. And the Heretic-Chosen stuff came early, it seemed.

Heretic-Chosen Prophet of the Malefic Viper – Your Path is long, lonely, but potent. It would be a shame to walk it alone. Bring others into the fold, allowing them to see your reality and no longer merely serve the gods as their tools but as their equals. A foolhardy vision, perhaps, but it is your vision nevertheless. As his Chosen - his prophet - you still keep expanding the Order while not shying away from the heretical, creating a Path few would willingly follow. Your skills in Alchemy remain, but you create not for yourself or the love of the craft but to respect your Patron and remain close to him. Grants skills related to alchemy, persuasion, manipulation, and religious practices. As a heretic, the Legacy of the Malefic Viper is no longer contingent on retaining any blessing from the Malefic Viper. Be you a corruptor or a savior, only you can decide as you embrace the moniker of Prophet. Stat bonuses per level: +60 Willpower, +50 Wisdom, +30 Vitality, +25 Int, +40 Free Points.

See, if Jake didn't know better, he would think the system was trolling him with options like this. In what world had the system observed Jake and everything he did during his entire journey and reached the conclusion that, yeah, Jake would for sure love becoming a prophet. It would be the most awkward shit Jake could imagine if he had to go around playing mega-priest for Villy.

Also, he did bite onto the fact it did not only include stuff related to the Malefic Viper but was also about leading others onto the Path of a Heretic. Just an interesting observation.

When he looked at the stats, it was actually pretty good, at 205 per level. It would still be a quality downgrade compared to his D-grade profession, but not horribly so. He did have a suspicion that there existed way better versions of this, and a bit like with the World Leader one above, he just didn't get it offered as it didn't suit him. At least this one didn't make him lose any skills... but it was a no. A fuck no, even.

Moving on.

Heretic-Chosen Cursed Corruptor of the Malefic Viper – Corruption is at the core of the Malefic Viper's Path, but can it be taken too far? It is your aim to find out. You have begun to deviate from the Malefic One, implementing the power of curses into your Path – something even your Patron rarely did due to the innate volatility of curses. Your skills as an alchemist wane as you specialize in only the act of transformation and transmutation through the art of corrupting anything and anyone. As a heretic, the Legacy of the Malefic Viper is no longer contingent on retaining any blessing from the Malefic Viper. May your touch be as feared as that of the Malefic One, and your mind stay true to your Path, lest the curses consume you. Stat bonuses per level: +70 Willpower, +40 Vitality, +40 Wisdom, +20 Perception, +15 Int, +30 Free Points. WARNING: Skills pertaining to Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper may be lost or changed upon becoming a Heretic-Chosen Cursed Corruptor of the Malefic Viper.

Now, Jake had expected to see at least one option talking about curses, and this sure fit the bill. Looking at it more closely, Jake was a bit surprised at how different it still was compared to his expectations. It wasn't even an alchemy profession anymore but was all about corrupting things. It was some extreme version of transmutation from the looks of it. The stats were good, at 215 per level, which was only 25

short of the theoretical maximum. This did mean it firmly fell within the realm of having some drawbacks besides the whole heretic-chosen dichotomy. Probably had something to do with all the curse stuff.

Yeah, definitely the curse stuff.

Jake was not really against using curses on a fundamental level, but that didn't mean he wanted to go down a Path only revolving around them. He also liked his alchemy, and this profession would cut that away entirely, it seemed, with him potentially losing skills just from selecting it. It was definitely a no from him just based on that. He did consider maybe using curse stuff a bit more, but he could do that as an alchemist too.

With two more professions to go, Jake was pleasantly surprised with the next one.

Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – Still, you walk a paradoxical path, understood by none but you and your Patron. The Path you walk continues to be Unique as you learn more about the Path your Patron once followed, his struggles, and even his mortality. Secrets most ancient beings would wish forgotten lay bare before you as you gaze upon Records only known by the Malefic One. Allows one to combine the natural treasures of the world, and make potions, pills, transmute one material to another, with a slew of other mystical means to be discovered. This rare type of alchemist specializes in the production of poisons, contrary to the craft of potions. As a heretic, the Legacy of the Malefic Viper is no longer contingent on retaining any blessing from the Malefic Viper. May you continue to embrace your Path and all that comes with it. Stat bonuses per level: +50 Will, +50 Wis, +40 Vit, +30 Int, +25 Tough, +35 Free Points.

Hello again, Jake thought with a smile. It was his good old friend, Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. The description was very similar but had sprinkled some more stuff in there, especially the part about also learning about his mortality. Clearly, the skill referred to Path of the Heretic-Chosen with many of these references, making him already sure it would be one of the skills upgraded or affected by this evolution.

When it came to stats, it had only improved. Jake's D-grade version gave 74 stat points per level total, while this one gave 230. If it had just been a straight upgrade, it would only have given 222. Probably 225, as the system seemed to like sticking to numbers ending either in 5 or 0 during this evolution, but even so, this was better for sure. Was this a reward for surviving his Path, or perhaps just him moving closer to its true potential?

As mentioned, then 240 was the maximum amount of stats a profession could offer in C-grade, putting him only 10 stats per level away from it. Pretty damn fucking good if he said so himself.

Jake already loved this option, and it was damn good... but that only made him wonder. There was one more evolution option available. What exactly could that offer which was better? Jake checked it out with great interest.

Harbinger of Primeval Origins – All have an Origin; all have a Path to the peak. You shall be the Harbinger bringing forth that Origin. Allows you to awaken the Origin of other creatures and objects as you awaken primeval concepts within, resulting in the birth of things never seen before or long forgotten. As you embrace this Path, so will you affect the Origin within yourself, embracing it fully as you shun all else but what lies within. With it shall come power, and all those around you will bathe in a presence that will forcefully passively affect their Records, pushing them toward their Primeval Origin. Grants skills related to the nurturing, improvement, and manipulation of Records in all living beings. Be the Harbinger of Primeval Origins and awaken all. Stat bonuses per level: +65 Will, +40 Vit, +40 Wis, +20 Tough, +75 Free Points. WARNING: Skills pertaining to Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper may be lost or changed upon becoming a Harbinger of Primeval Origins.

Jake felt like the description said so much and yet so little. What he did know was that it was powerful. More powerful than any profession Jake had ever seen or read about – partly because the truly powerful ones were always kept secret. It practically oozed potential, and he did the rudimentary math to know how many stats it gave per level.

240.

The theoretical maximum. Which meant it came with drawbacks. Severe ones, from the looks of it, as Jake read it more closely.

Many drawbacks came not in the form of limitations of progress but through something far more insidious. Loss of control. Not necessarily loss of control of your own body like a berserker, but the loss of how you affected the world around you. The best example Jake knew of this was the undead species known as Plague Spirits that he had read about. These spirits sometimes appeared in areas with a lot of uncontrolled death-affinity mana, condensing from all the energy. These spirits were powerful but were also hunted down instantly if they occurred. This was due to them passively killing everything around them, the plague even consuming other undead. It was entirely uncontrolled, and even if these spirits could be intelligent, there was simply no way to allow them to keep living. That is unless you wanted to risk them wiping out entire solar systems before dying from starvation as they ran out of life to consume.

Oh yeah, he forgot the part about them being unable to regenerate resources but having to consume constantly just to stay alive.

This profession gave Jake similar feelings, albeit in a far less extreme fashion. It included words such as forcefully, mentioning it would change his own Records while shunning everything else. Rather than merely a profession, it read more like a true calling. A Path that he could and should dedicate everything to, a bit like Jacob and his Augur Path.

Jake was not blind to the implications of merely having it offered. He knew this came from all he had done to affect Sandy, Sylphie, and even himself. It was also a clue as to what exactly he did, mentioning Primeval Origins. However...

He had spent most of his life learning to control himself and his instincts. Choosing this profession was letting go of some of that control. He was not against what it stood for and wanted to accomplish, but how it would be done. Jake would be the one in control. He would choose who to affect.

Finally, and perhaps the biggest one. Jake would no longer be an alchemist if he went down this Path. As mentioned, Jake liked alchemy. He found it fascinating and fun and a great pastime when not killing things. He also liked all of the heretic-chosen stuff, even if he knew it was a bit weird.

Lying down on his evolution bed, Jake considered them both for a while longer, not wanting to make a rash decision. Usually, he had a gut feeling due to his Bloodline, but this time it was oddly silent. He knew why. Both choices were legitimate, and both would be great in their own way.

Ultimately, Jake knew what he wanted to be. It all came down to him liking alchemy and not wanting to forcefully affect others while not even knowing he did it. The thought just didn't sit right with him, and to that, his gut agreed.

Besides, who would keep Villy on the straight and narrow if he didn't have Jake to keep his ego in check? Couldn't leave it all in Duskleaf's hands.

Without further ado, Jake made his selection as he was hit with a rush of knowledge. There was also something else, something Jake should perhaps also have considered when making his choice:

How his choice would affect Villy.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 200 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

It did not take long for a reaction to come.

"What did you do now?" the snake god asked him just as he picked the profession, Jake also feeling the slight shift in their bond.

Chapter 594 - An Even More Skilled Heretic-Chosen

Jake smiled as the Viper probed him. He felt the Blessing strengthen as he knew he had just entrenched himself even further with the Viper, and clearly, so did the snake god.

"Just upgraded my profession. A straight upgrade, the same name, too, meaning I am still a Heretic-Chosen Alchemist. So nothing overly exciting," Jake answered his divine buddy.

"A straight upgrade that dragged even more out of me," the Viper said. "To a level where it is beginning to limit the maximum number of other Blessings I can give out."

"... Is that bad?" Jake asked with a bit of worry.

"No, I am not even close to reaching that maximum and probably won't be unless I one day wake up and decide to give high-level Blessings to an entire planet. What actually happened isn't the problem; it is the principle in the thing," Villy answered, clearly not a trace of actual worry in his voice.

“My apologies, then,” Jake said with a grin.

“Did you at least get something out of it?”

“Let me check,” Jake answered, already knowing the answer as he checked the first of many notifications.

Your bond with the Malefic Viper is further strengthened as you now share not only a karmic and bodily connection but a bond of history and Records, sharing memories known to no one but the two of you. You will no longer be able to receive a new Blessing even if the Malefic One perishes unless you purge yourself of all his Records.

He had not expected that to happen. No longer being able to receive a Blessing would probably seem like a very bad thing to anyone else as that meant if the god started to dislike you for some reason, you would be screwed. Luckily for Jake, Villy could not take it back, so the snake god was fucked in that regard and would have to talk things out with Jake if they had problems. Or kill him. As for the Viper dying... yeah, Jake saw the chances of that happening as really fucking low, especially before Jake himself either died or reached godhood.

Jake checked his Blessing and saw that it indeed had changed slightly from this upgrade.

[True Blessing of the Malefic Viper (Blessing - True)] – An Alchemist recognized by the Malefic Viper himself that has now seized parts of the Blessing in an act of defiance. Few throughout the ages have found themselves blessed by the Primordial, despite their desire to be so. You are his Chosen. Now even the true blood of the Malefic Viper himself is found within your very being, only strengthening your bond further. Your Records are more and more intertwined with that of your Patron, and through a powerful direct karmic and bodily connection, the Wisdom, Willpower, Vitality, Intelligence, and Toughness of the Malefic Viper empower you. +10% Willpower, +10% Wisdom, +10% Vitality, +10%

Intelligence, + 10% Toughness. Grants access to many new paths. Only one Blessing can be held at a time. Cannot be denounced or retracted.

“Villy, not to sound like an ass, but why do the stats tied to your Legacy suck so much?” Jake asked after seeing the Blessing had been empowered to also give an extra 10% Toughness. Why did it have to be Toughness? Jake didn’t want Toughness.

“Wow, you come in here, steal some of my Records related to Blessings to empower yourself, and then complain about it not giving the stat you want?” Villy asked with a faux tone of outrage. “Very heretical of you, that’s for sure.”

“Just following my Path. I firmly expect it to increase Perception next time,” Jake said with a smile. “Anyway, I still got all the skill changes and upgrades, so talk to you later?”

“Keep me posted on that Path of the Heretic-Chosen skill,” Villy said, finishing off the conversation so Jake could get back to business.

Going through his notifications, he saw they included three skills. Two that had experienced changes and one new. He began with the least exciting of the bunch.

[Malefic Viper’s Poison (Epic)] – The Malefic Viper stalks its prey and needs only to strike once as venom devours its prey. Increases the potency of all crafted poisons. Grants the ability to craft a poison with a rarity above that of your Concoct Poison skill if certain conditions are met. The poison may at most be upgraded to the rarity of the Malefic Viper’s Poison skill (Rare --> Epic). Allows poison not to lose efficiency for a prolonged period of time after being applied to a weapon.

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[Malefic Viper's Poison (Ancient)] – The Malefic Viper stalks its prey and needs only to strike once as venom devours its prey. Increases the potency of all created poisons. Grants the ability to craft a poison with a rarity above that of your Concoct Poison skill if certain conditions are met. The poison may at most be upgraded to the rarity of the Malefic Viper's Poison skill (Rare --> Ancient). Allows poison not to lose efficiency for a long period of time after being applied to a weapon.

Together with Big Game Arcane Hunter – another skill he felt fairly confident would upgrade during his evolution – this skill was one of his unsung heroes. It was simple, and while Jake had barely activated that special ability part of it to upgrade a crafted poison, it was still nice to have.

Needless to say, the primary benefit of this skill was that it just made everything poison-related better. It made all poison Jake crafted better and made it last longer when applied to a weapon. Both were great things that he took for a given due to the sheer passivity of the skill.

The changes from the evolution were nearly forgettable, except for one important change. The word “crafted” had become “created,” signifying that it now also included stuff like Fang and his Blood. Besides that, It just improved every part of it by a little, and that was it. In fact, the only real change was the rarity the triggered ability could upgrade to and the wording changing for how long poison would remain potent while coated on a weapon.

So, yeah. Great to see it upgrade, but otherwise, nothing overly exciting.

Next up was another skill Jake had expected to change.

[Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)] – A unique path between the Primordial known as the Malefic Viper and his Chosen, the Progenitor Jake Thayne. Allows you to experience the Legacy of the Malefic Viper on a far more direct level by relying on your direct connection as a Chosen and the mentality of a heretic. Focusing on the Malefic Viper's Legacy's core skills, a skill that you adequately comprehend will allow you to peer into its true Records as you journey through time, space, and reality, to experience history firsthand. Be warned that gains are not guaranteed, and while the journey cannot harm you directly, the journey may cause harm or have lasting effects – a risk you must take as a Heretic. May you walk with confidence as you tread a path never walked before. Gains 1 use every 10 levels in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. Any skill can only be chosen once. Current uses remaining: 0

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[Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)] – A unique path between the Primordial known as the Malefic Viper and his Chosen, Jake Thayne. Allows you to experience the Legacy of the Malefic Viper on a far more direct level by relying on your direct connection as a Chosen and the mentality of a heretic. Focusing on any core skill, event, or entity related to the Malefic Viper's Legacy will allow you to peer into the True Records of the past as you journey through time, space, and reality to experience history firsthand. Limitations on Record Fragment selection may apply. Be warned that gains are not guaranteed, and while the journey cannot harm you directly, the journey may cause harm or have lasting effects – a risk you must take as a Heretic. May you walk with confidence as you continue to thread a Path never walked before. Gains 1 use every 20 levels in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. Current uses remaining: 0

Another skill that remained mostly the same, but with some subtle changes here and there. The biggest of which was in how Jake could use it. The old version required Jake to focus on a skill, while this version required him to focus on a skill, event, or entity. What this meant was in no way lost to him, and he already knew at least one goal during his journey through C-grade just from reading this skill:

To figure out more about what the hell was up with the First Sage. With the wording of the skill, Jake should even be able to focus on the guy directly and hopefully learn some spicy secrets. The skill was still a bit fast and loose with the actual requirements to trigger the skill, but hopefully, it would work. If not, then the limitation of only being able to focus on a skill once was also gone, so maybe he could use it to cheese out a great upgrade?

One thing he was sure of was that it wouldn't be a skill offering borderline free skill upgrades this time around. The gap between ancient and legendary rarity was big, but it was nothing compared to the gulf that separated legendary and mythical. The complexity of Eternal Shadow should be proof of that. This would only be doubly true in this instance, seeing that none of the Legacy skills had downgraded in rarity. Them not reducing in rarity still meant they had reduced in quality, and even now, he had seen that they hadn't been upgraded to give him more stats every level. Though that was perhaps something he could do something about... because a skill didn't have to upgrade in rarity to change slightly.

A project for later.

The number of uses he got had also been reduced to every 20 levels, and it didn't even give him a use right away. With it happening every twenty levels and C-grade being from 200-350, Jake would get a total of seven uses. Less than in D-grade, but with the expanded scope of what he could focus on, it wasn't that bad.

Overall, it was a skill Jake was looking forward to using more than ever. There was so much to see and so many juicy and embarrassing secrets of Villy for Jake to discover and make fun of him for.

With the two upgrades out of the way, there was still one more skill gained. In D-grade, every alchemist had gotten Craft Elixir, but there was no such basic crafting skill in C-grade. Not sure what to expect, he looked at the last one.

[Grimoire of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)] – Expand your Path and allow others to walk in your footsteps. Allows the Heretic-Chosen to craft a Grimoire related to his Path, allowing another of the enlightened races to consume it, granting them either a class or profession. The nature of the Grimoire depends on a multitude of factors, including crafting ingredients, the will of the creator, and several unknowns. Requirements to use the Grimoire vary. A cooldown period is required between each crafting attempt, and a longer cooldown is triggered after a successful Grimoire craft. Due to your unique Path,

every Grimoire created will be more potent by default and receive additional Records based on all your stats.

After reading it and the instinctual knowledge that was given fitting into place, he still wasn't sure what to think. This was not at all the kind of skill Jake had predicted to get, even if he begrudgingly had to admit it fit his entire Path of the Heretic Chosen thing. This skill would allow him to spread his Path, creating these tomes that others could use to get a class or profession. Probably a profession.

He knew that crafting them was hard as fuck, but a dedicated skill would definitely help. Jake was also pretty darn confident it wasn't something he could do entirely alone. A high-level scribe would be needed to assist him in making the book itself, he reckoned.

It was also clear the system really wanted him to make one, with the last part pretty much telling him that it would lend a hand and make them better than normal. The boost also seemed significant, with it adding free Records just based on his stats.

Now, the ultimate question: would Jake actually make use of this skill? Jake had come across a total of three Grimoires in his life. The first one had given him the profession he had today, the second he had gotten from the Great White Stag and given to Lillian, and the third had been from the Treasure Hunt. That one had been the Fulgarian Depthcaller that Jake came to learn was killed unceremoniously by Scarlett. At least he had gotten good money for it.

The best usage case of a Grimoire was someone with a bad class or profession using it at the beginning of a grade to get a better one than what was offered. The second best option was using it right before evolution to hopefully get a variant of it in your next grade. Jake could already see some possibilities if he ever got into crafting it, but he wasn't sure.

What held him back was the entire heretic-chosen thing. Who could he actually make a Grimoire for? Especially if it was alchemy-related? The only one really on his mind was Meira, and he wasn't sure it would fit her at all...

Shaking his head, Jake wasn't sure if he would call the given skill a bummer or not. Others would be up in arms in excitement, but Jake just felt uncertain.

Done with all the evolution stuff related to the profession, Jake contacted the Viper again.

"Hey Villy, done looking at stuff here. Here is the run down..."

Jake explained what he had gotten, not really bothering to hold anything back. The Viper did not seem surprised by anything either but did ask a few questions about Path of the Heretic Chosen, though he seemed to purposefully hold himself back from giving any suggestions or making any comments.

As for the Grimoire skill...

"Definitely look into crafting some," the Viper said with certainty. "I am not even saying you need to make use of them, just create them. Creating a Grimoire takes a lot of effort and a high level of comprehension of your own Path and the Records that is behind every concept. The skill helps tremendously, but you will still need to learn some things yourself, and that learning process will be incredibly valuable in other places. So even if you don't do it for others, do it for yourself. Also, I am sure that if it comes down to it, you can find people worth giving a Grimoire to. This can also just be for purely selfish reasons. Looking at someone else making use of Records similar to yourself can also be a great learning experience."

“Huh,” Jake said. “I guess I hadn’t thought of it like that. Good point; I guess I should look into it.”

“I truly don’t care if you do end up making more part-heretic, part-believers in the Order. In fact, I think it could be a fun and interesting experience and spice things up a bit. It would also be interesting to see what kind of variants you make,” the Viper further added.

“Noted,” Jake said with a smile. “Any other pieces of advice?”

“Don’t neglect the Legacy skills you got from me, even if you don’t have Path of the Heretic-Chosen to upgrade them so easily anymore. Even without getting them to mythical rarity, if you focus solely on the stat-increasing effect, you can-“

“-make them increase in stats without improving the rarity, but simply making them better legendary versions. Another semi-new thing to C-grade, from what I can gather. It feels like I didn’t really see this happen before,” Jake answered.

“Look at you,” Villy said in a sickly sweet tone. “All grown up actually knowing system stuff yourself without being told. Brings a tear to my eye. Anyway, it is not a new thing, just far rarer in the earlier grades. The relative breadth of every skill rarity increases in every grade, so it would get quite silly if all changes required a full rarity upgrade in later grades. It only really applies to the higher rarities in your current grade, so most upgrades you see will still also result in a rarity change.”

“Makes sense, makes sense,” Jake nodded along. “Guess that is something I should work on for sure. Any other tips or inputs now that I got you?”

“Nothing that can’t wait till you get back here,” Villy said with a rather insidious undertone for some reason.

“Okay... well, see you later then,” Jake said his goodbyes.

“I will be awaiting you...” the snake god said as he cut off the telepathic phone call while doing an exaggerated evil laugh, leaving it to echo even after the connection faded.

Wonder what that is all about, Jake thought, but just shrugged. Problems for later. He had more important things to deal with right now.

Namely, a class evolution.

Chapter 595 - An Impossible Path

Ah, class evolutions. Who didn’t love class evolutions? They were often a lot more exciting than race and profession, even if this time around, the race one had been quite noteworthy, to say the least.

Jake had always viewed his class quite a bit differently than his profession. He felt closer to it, and he also knew why. The Heretic-Chosen profession hinted at the reason in the name alone – it wasn’t truly his. His class only came from who Jake was, while the profession relied on Villy. As time passed, it began to belong more and more to Jake, but it would take a long time till he could truly claim it as his own.

On the other hand, his class had always been Jake’s through and through. It belonged to him, and he didn’t want it to be influenced by anyone or anything other than his own will.

As for expectations during this evolution... Jake didn't really have any major ones. He just hoped to get some good options and at least one or two that fit him. Also, he knew he would sure for sure get at least one option related to all the curse stuff. There had to always be curse stuff.

Without further ado, he began the evolution.

Class Evolution Requirements Met

Your avaricious hunt has proven fruitful and paved a Path of domination. Beasts more powerful than you are viewed as nothing more than prey, and those meant to be of equal strength are not even worth putting in your sight. You continue to expand your repertoire of tools to fulfill your thirst for battle, embracing all that you believe can grant you more power while not compromising your vision of a true hunt – your horizon forever expanding. Monsters and enlightened alike recognize your Path and power, finding themselves influenced by you.

May your Path lead to the pinnacle and encompass all you desire, Primal Hunter.

Begin Evolution now?

Y/N

WARNING: Postponing evolution for too long may have adverse effects, and no further class-experience can be earned before evolution is completed.

The message was the third one he had seen during all these evolutions, and Jake could only nod at it. He was at least a little happy it didn't mention curses outright. It also repeated the same horizon theme that his archery had on it. The mention of people finding themselves influenced by him was a bit questionable and gave him a good idea of what he would be offered.

As one would expect, Jake started from the beginning and was surprised right off the bat.

Veteran Avaricious Arcane Hunter – A direct upgrade to the Avaricious Arcane Hunter class. Your Path remains pure, and your ambitions only grow. Avarice still burns within as you unhesitantly seek stronger and stronger foes, embracing all means to attain victory. This class combines the pure Path of the hunter with the pure Path of arcane magic, driven by the endless Avarice, making the bow your weapon, amplified with arcane magic, but you also retain your abilities to face enemies in close combat, making your enemies despair at your simple and powerful – yet diverse - methods of attack. You will find yourself more powerful than ever as you stand before those stronger than yourself, and by decree of your Path, you shall come out victorious. Remain true to yourself, do not falter, and your Path shall prevail – as long as Avarice does not consume you. Stat Bonuses per level: +55 Per, +35 Agi, +32 Int, +30 Wis, +30 End, +20 Will, +18 Str, +25 Free Points.

See, Jake had expected a straight upgrade to his old class, but not like this. This was the most boring form of a straight upgrade. No, it was worse than that. His class in D-grade gave him 86 stats per level, and this one gave 245. Anyone with some level of skill in math could see 245 was not three times as much as 86. Anything under 258 stats per level would thus be a downgrade. In conclusion, it would reduce his stats per level in a relative sense and otherwise just be a bit boring.

It even had veteran in the name. Jake was certain every class with veteran in the name had to suck.

Not much else to consider as he skipped it.

Apex Beastmaster – A friend, confidant, guide, and master. To beasts, you are viewed as both one of them, yet a being who stands above them, worthy of respect and reverence – a leader worth following not through force but their own desire. You embrace your bestial instincts, truly allowing you to connect with them. This class revolves around making use of your bond with beasts and monsters, empowering them as they empower you. Rather than have them fight in your stead, you join them on the battlefield as their alpha, leading them to victory, be it with a bow, blade, or nothing but your bare fists and your arcane magic. As you fight alongside your companions, may you grow and reach for the apex together, your existence as much that of a beast as a man. Stats bonuses per level: +40 Per, +40 Agi, +30 End, +25 Str, +20 Wis, +20 Int, +20 Will, +20 Vit, +15 Toughness, +30 Free Points.

He went straight from a shit option to a pretty damn good one. Just looking at the stats, this one gave him 260 per level, making it better than the 258 a C-grade Avaricious Arcane Hunter would offer if he got a real upgrade. Jake mentioned some things he had expected to be offered before, and this was one of them. Semi-unintentionally, Jake had made friends with a lot of beasts and also helped them progress quite a bit, making some offering of the Beastmaster variant predictable.

It also clearly borrowed a bit from the old Bestial Alpha Hunter upgrade he got offered in D-grade. Jake assumed the class would offer some good stuff for his melee fighting, some things to help empower his companions, and probably even a skill to create some special bond with them. A light version of the Union Bond Sylphie had made with Jake, perhaps. In theory, it all sounded fun and interesting, but Jake wasn't interested.

Besides, it was only the second offering. All the following ones had to be better, right?

Wielder of Eternal Hunger – It is said there lies power in ancientness. In emotions. In desire. You have taken all these and molded them into a weapon that might enter the annals of the multiverse's history and be remembered eternally. This class revolves around the usage of the weapon Eternal Hunger and the near-endless source of energy within. Curse magic is at your fingertips, but that does not mean you ignore all other tools, as they, too, can experience the power that lies in sin. You realize that the curse of hunger is not one to shun and suppress but grasp with all your might as you and your weapon become one and hunger in concert for power. With time, hunger shall claim all of your magic, leaving only a pure Path. Eternal Hunger will grow faster and evolve more as it embraces its primeval concepts as a true Sin weapon. Eternal Hunger will be forever bound to your soul, and your existences shall become

interlinked. Stat bonuses per level: +60 Vit, +50 Agi, +50 Str, +40 End, +20 Tough, +15 Wis, +30 Free Points.

Jake would like to retract his statement that all the following options had to be better. Stat-wise, sure, 265 was 5 more stats per level total, but damn, did Jake not like the sound of this one.

What he did like was some of the implications behind the skill. The mere fact he had created and used Eternal Hunger had resulted in a high-tier class, proving the Records of his weapon were more than impressive. It also mentioned primeval concepts, and after seeing the Harbinger of Primeval Origins professions, he knew that was a big deal.

However, that didn't mean he considered the class a legitimate option. He did not want to become a full-on curse mage and did not want to risk changing himself in some weird way by walking a bit too close to the fire when it came to the Sin weapon. Jake and his cursed stabber were already plenty interlinked, and there was no need to make it worse than it always was.

Finding the option way too spooky, Jake thus moved on to another semi-expected one.

Heretic-Chosen Champion of the Malefic Viper – Some call you an instrument to carry out the orders of your Patron, others a heretic bringing out chaos, careless of the impact on the god you have presumably sworn loyalty to. As his champion, you use his Legacy as your base and wield poison and corruption as your weapons of choice. You do not care for your equipment as long as it brings you victory, and while your preferred weapon remains a bow, you do not shun embracing magics, even those outside of the scope of the Malefic One's Legacy. Your independent will, yet powerful tie to your Patron, shall be the cornerstone of your Path as you slaughter all who dare stand in your way. Your Path is your own, yet bound to greater things, not by force, but by choice. May you walk the balance between being a heretic and a Chosen as you claim the power from both aspects. Stat Bonuses per level: +45 Will, +45 Wis, +45 Per, +30 Agi, +25 Str, +20 End, +15 Int, +10 Vit, +45 Free Points.

His snake god pal just had to rear his scaly head in every evolution. What made it all the worse was that every time he did, the option offered was damn good. This one was quite a bit like the Hunter-Champion offering from D-grade but had leaned into his Heretic-Chosen Path, which had made it a lot more appealing. At the very least, he had gotten rid of Villy having to help distribute his Free Points. That part had always struck him as super weird.

Quality-wise, this was near the peak for a class. 280 stats per level was quite something, just 20 away from the absolute maximum possible. The stats themselves were fine, but they were not exactly the ones Jake would prefer. He still considered it, though.

Jake couldn't lie... he did see some appeal in this class. It was good, and it aligned well with his profession. Getting a class and profession working well together was a tried and true Path to success in the multiverse, and Jake did not doubt this would work well with his alchemy.

There were some arguments against it, though. First of all, this was still very much a semi-mage class based on the stats offered. It would also pigeonhole Jake into a far more narrow Path of poison and one that followed Villy's far more closely. And that was the ultimate argument against this class.

Jake was not the Malefic Viper. He was fine with borrowing from Villy, maybe even a bit of stealing to get stronger. But he was not the Viper himself, nor did he desire to be his champion. That one-third of his Path already revolved around the Viper was fine with him, but that was it. Jake wanted to at least keep his race and class as his own, not too influenced by any other gods.

Moreover, the biggest argument of all to skip this one: it didn't even have Hunter in the name.

Something the next one sure did.

Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge – To chase the horizon is to seek the impossible. Despite your chosen futile Path, you shall hunt it in your endless arrogance, refusing to give up even when faced with reality. For each step, it moves further away, yet for each kill, you feel like you inch closer to the unattainable. To chase this horizon, you have selected the bow as your primary tool, but you do not shun away from deploying your arcane magic or close-combat techniques, allowing you to use myriad methods to attain your goal. With every footfall, you encounter stronger and stronger foes, your Path only moving forwards, never backward. Yet you shall rise to the occasion at every turn, finding yourself stronger the more powerful your foe is. Do not turn away your gaze, but forever face the endless horizon till one day you attain the impossible and reach its edge – or at the very least slay whatever resides there. Stat bonuses per level: +60 Per, +40 Agi, +35 Str, +30 End, +25 Int, +25 Wis, +20 Will, +50 Free Points.

Out of all the descriptions, this had to be Jake's favorite. It was simple yet impactful. Jake liked it a lot, and he understood why. It all revolved around a single concept... one quite familiar to Jake. Before he even considered the class, he checked out his archery skill with quite a similar name.

[Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)] - An Archer's best friend is the bow in his hand and the arrow in his foe's heart. As your horizons expand, you realize flaws and build upon a foundation to make that expansion everpresent. You do not shy away from mixing archery with magic and making your arrows arbiters of your will. Your arrows will cross all horizons and bend over any obstacle to pierce your target, with only your own will limiting the possibilities. Allows you to apply your will to control the trajectory of arrows before releasing them. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Strength when using a ranged weapon. Adds a small damage bonus to all arrows based on distance traveled and Perception. Arrow trajectory control based on Willpower.

Jake knew that the system liked to give classes, professions, races, and all kinds of descriptions for skills and whatnot metaphors that represented something greater. The Sword Saint and his Transcendence revolved around springtime, which seemed more like an analogy for youth and a time one was at one's prime. Even his Primal Hunter Bloodline was very much a conceptual thing, the word Hunter doing a lot of heavy lifting and having many meanings.

So, the question was... what did this horizon truly represent? Jake had theorized it had something to do with him using so many different ways to fight during earlier upgrades to his archery skill, and he still

believed that was true. The horizon included breadth, but it was more than that. It was also a distant goal. The furthest away that one could see. As the description said, it was something one could never reach, as it would just move further away if you moved. You could get to what had been the horizon prior, but a new one would always form.

An endless struggle. Like chasing the gold at the end of a rainbow. An utterly foolish and futile waste of time that would never lead to success. If one chased the horizon, there was never even a way to go backward. There was a horizon to all sides, so unless you stood still and did nothing to progress your own power, you would still move towards a horizon. That was why Jake also believed that his archery skill also had to do with breadth. Everything that progressed Jake just a little would move him forward.

And... while it was true Jake would never be able to actually go to the horizon, it didn't mean he wouldn't be able to reach it. If not with his own body, then perhaps his arrows.

Jake sighed and got a bit more serious as he analyzed the class a bit more objectively. Arcane magic. Archery. 285 stats per level, making it the best one so far. A buttload of Perception per level, the most of all those offered. A Hunter class. Not affiliated with anything or anyone but Jake himself. There wasn't even anything about curses in it.

It even had a theming concept that encompassed Jake very nicely. It was not an upgrade to Avaricious Arcane Hunter but something at a higher level, still including parts about hitting above his weight class. It had gone above Jake's own greed and become a genuine Path with conceptual power.

He now realized he had severely underestimated his own archery skill. It was still considered a low rarity, and he had been a bit surprised it had now been downgraded earlier, but that was just because he didn't fully understand it. It was a skill that allowed Jake to expand his own horizon and reach targets further away. One that tried to allow him to get just a little bit closer to the edge.

To pursue the horizon was to constantly progress, not caring about actually reaching the goal. Jake knew it was impossible, but if it was fun to do... why not at least give it a try? If you enjoyed the journey, did the ending really matter?

With a smile, Jake shook his head. It was a bit silly, wasn't it?

Chasing the edge of the horizon? It was futile. But, Villy had said many times that achieving godhood was to do what everyone else thought couldn't be done.

Besides...

When had something being impossible ever stopped him before?

'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 200 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

Chapter 596 - The Status Of A C-Grade & Silliness

Jake felt the influx of knowledge as his class evolved. For a moment, Jake felt as if he sitting within an endless void with only darkness all around him, except for a single horizontal line of light impossibly far away. He blinked, and it was gone, making Jake certain he had not actually been transported anywhere... it was just a vision.

It lingered for a while before Jake shook it off and returned his attention to what the evolution had brought with it.

Checking it out, he saw that he got one skill upgraded and another new skill, mirroring what had happened in D-grade. The skill that had upgraded was once more Big Game Hunter, with a name that was now just getting silly with how long it was.

[Big Game Arcane Hunter (Epic)] – A true hunter seeks not the easy prey but a true challenge. Your hunt has taken you further than ever before as your methods improve, and you have embraced the Arcane. The Avaricious Arcane Hunter has, through his many hunts, become more accustomed to facing higher-level enemies. Increases the user's resistance to auras and gives a small increase to Strength, Agility, Intelligence and Willpower while facing enemies above your class or race level. The bonus is based on the disparity between the level of your prey and you. Limit of 1.25x your level or 50 levels, whichever is highest. May your hunt be fruitful and your Avarice sated.

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[Horizon-Chasing Big Game Arcane Hunter (Ancient)] – A true hunter seeks not the easy prey but a true challenge. Your hunt has taken you further than ever before as your methods improve, and you have embraced the Arcane. As you forever chase the horizon, you have become more accustomed to facing higher-level enemies. Increases the user's resistance to auras and gives a small increase to Strength, Agility, Intelligence, and Willpower, and a substantial increase to Perception while facing enemies above your class or race level. The bonus is based on the disparity between the level of your prey and you. Limit of 1.30x your level or 75 levels, whichever is highest. May your hunt take you toward the horizon.

A bit of change to the flavor text, with substantial changes coming in the later part. It had upgraded all current functionalities and increased the level cap of when he would get extra bonus stats, but more importantly than all that, it had finally added Perception to the list of bonus stats.

More than that, it had done so that the skill boosted Perception more than the others. Jake touched on it before, but together with Malefic Viper's Poison, this was one of those unsung heroes that he never really thought about. It was just there, always in the background, always making him stronger. Looking at it also made Jake more determined to hunt higher-leveled enemies more often. He had fought a lot of powerful variants lately, making them not above his level by much but still powerful. Of course, there

was also the fact he was right at the end of a grade before, while he had now just entered C-grade, giving him 150 levels before the next evolution.

Jake was more than satisfied with the upgrade and looked forward to feeling and mentally noting the effect of the skill for two fights before forgetting it existed until his next evolution.

Moving on, Jake had only gotten one skill this time around. Another passive skill, from the looks of it, and a pretty weird one at that.

[Unblemished Arrows of the Horizon (Ancient)] – To allow your arrows to reach the horizon unblemished and unobstructed is nothing but a given for a hunter of the Horizon's Edge. Allows your arrows to gain significant resistance to all environmental factors and far more easily destroy any environmental energy or material. Grants a slight increase in penetrative power against energy-based defensive barriers and magical interference that may obstruct the arrow. The potency of the Unblemished Arrows of the Horizon skill is determined by the inherent power of the arrow. The maximum and minimum potency of Unblemished Arrows of the Horizon is determined by Perception.

He called it a weird one, but it was still pretty simple in concept. Just not what he had expected.

The skill would effectively allow Jake's arrows to have less trouble when in flight, and with how he understood it – and the instinctual knowledge granted from the skill confirmed – he could now ignore things like wind resistance in most cases. More than that, he would now be able to far more easily shoot through obstacles that were considered environmental. That meant he could be able to shoot through rocks or soil, while something like the trees would still prove difficult as they were living beings.

To add on, the skill even helped a bit against magical barriers and what the system called "magical interference," which Jake was not 100% on what that meant. Maybe it meant domains or something like that? Such as the flames around the Fireheart Bears he had killed? Yeah, that seemed probable.

In the end, this was the kind of skill Jake would have to test out in the field to fully understand. Something he sure planned on doing in not that long.

Done with all the evolutions and now firmly in C-grade, Jake pulled up his full status.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (C) – lvl 200]

Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge – lvl 200]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 200]

Health Points (HP): 81070/81070

Mana Points (MP): 151421/151421

Stamina: 83881/83890

Stats

Strength: 6649

Agility: 11568

Endurance: 8389

Vitality: 8107

Toughness: 6393

Wisdom: 9691

Intelligence: 8207

Perception: 19251

Willpower: 8193

Free Points: 130

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], [Perfect Evolution (C-grade)]

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

Profession Skills: [Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Grimoire of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Alchemist's Purification (Inferior)], [Alchemical Flame (Common)], [Cultivate Toxin (Common)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Craft Elixir (Uncommon)], [Concoct Poison (Rare)], [Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Epic)], [Advanced Core Manipulation (Epic)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (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)], [Wisdom of the Hunter (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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It hadn't gotten that much longer since the last time he checked, only adding a few new skills. One in each category, to be more exact. Some changes were better than others, of course. Seeing so many of his skills reduced in rarity was painful on a fundamental level, but this was sadly just how the system worked. At least he could now upgrade them all again and hopefully come back stronger than ever.

The biggest change in his status was naturally his stats which had all experienced explosive growth.

However, he did begin to notice some issues. 6649 Strength versus 11568 Agility was quite a disparity, one far bigger than before he had evolved. The primary offender was the extra 550 Agility from the Path of the Hunter during his race evolution and the 10% extra stats in it too. Jake now had an 80% multiplier to Agility and only 60% to Strength, making the disparity only grow. At least he got 35 Strength and 40 Agility from every level in his class, making the difference not grow that much.

But that still left him with an issue here and now. He knew it would begin to negatively impact his combat potential if the stat fell too much behind, even if he didn't rely on it as much as others. He looked at it for a good while before shaking his head.

I can decide later.

He did have 130 Free Points from the evolution to spend, and he would gain far more. In fact, he got a lot of Free Points. 50 for every class level was quite insane alone, which should allow him to shore up any weaknesses. He also had room for more elixirs now, and he saw that the cap of stats one could get from elixirs was 45 per race level this time around. Three times the 15 it had been in D-grade, making it scale like everything else.

Jake also had to look into getting new equipment now. His stats from equipment was right now 6400, but he could have a total of nearly 12000 if he had good enough stuff. That was over 5500 missing stats just from not wearing C-grade equipment. Effectively, these stats were not as good as the usual ones as they didn't scale with his percentage amplifiers, and some skills didn't amplify them either, but it was still a major lack of potential power.

Lying down on the bed, Jake smiled a bit to himself. More elixirs, new gear, looking into making grimoires, getting the Bee Queen ritual properly started, exploring his new skills, getting some levels, upgrading some skills, getting levels... so many things, with even more he had probably forgotten.

But more than any of that, he had to consider his upcoming trip off-world. Nevermore was calling, and Jake needed to be ready for the mega-dungeon World Wonder.

As for who he would go with... he already had a few in mind. One of which he felt approaching at a quite frankly alarming speed.

Sylphie whooshed through the air as it told her a lot of funny and interesting things. The wind had gotten a lot more talkative, though it often just said weird stuff that didn't make any sense. But that was okay; the wind wasn't really a person, so it wouldn't make sense if it made sense. Sylphie still understood anyway.

She liked flying around and zooming really fast, though it was a bit boring right now. Finding baddies to beat up had gotten super hard after she had done another growing up, and now everything was either not grown up like her or didn't wanna fight her. The wind did tell her about some strong baddies, and she had wanted to go say hi to them, but then Sylphie felt something.

Uncle was back at the home with the bananas, and he had now also grown up! Sylphie was so excited and rushed over. She had just been visiting mom and dad, who were both busy hunting the weak baddies, and had told her not to help, which she thought was pretty unfair. She liked helping.

Mom and dad could be really super silly sometimes. Sylphie was definitely sure of that. Most people were actually super silly a lot of the time when Sylphie really thought about it... or maybe Sylphie was just the smartest? Definitely possible. For sure, she was smarter than Uncle, as anyone smart would have thrown away that smelly pot a long time ago or at least begun hitting people with it.

Anyway! Both her parents said Sylphie was now nearly grown and had to be more serious, but that didn't make any sense at all. Sylphie was always super serious; that was why she was so good and could grow up so fast.

Also! Big Bird said that growing up was "overrated" or something. The other kind of growing up, Sylphie came to learn, not the kind of growing up that made her wind windier. Sylphie agreed on that one; Sylphie didn't need to change. She needed to be like the wind getting windier, and as Sylphie, get Sylphier.

But... she did get that Polymorph skill thingie that allowed changes, and as Sylphie was smart, she had to learn how to use it. She had heard about many not-humans using the skill to change how they looked. Sylphie could do that too, and she wanted to show Uncle that as she quickly approached the banana home.

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Jake smiled as he walked out of the lodge and jumped upwards to get above the trees, allowing him to see the speeding green murder ball fly straight toward him.

He could easily feel that he was not the only one who had reached C-grade, and from the looks of it, the little bird had evolved quite a bit before him. Jake knew Sylphie was powerful and that she would grow into her power with time, but he still found himself pleasantly surprised by her progress.

[Juvenile Sylphian Hawk – lvl 204]

However, he was a bit surprised to see that Sylphie had indeed manipulated her own form using the Polymorph skill to change significantly. And when Jake meant significant, he meant that she had changed some of her feathers to a lighter shade of green to better match the color of her small vest from Treasure Hunt.

Seeing Uncle reminded Sylphie of something else!

Whaleman was weird.

Whaleman was one of the funniest things she had ever seen, mainly because he was a Whale and not a Whaleman, so why had he started to look like a Whaleman? Whale couldn't even swim fast while looking like a Whaleman, but now Whale had become a Whaleman nearly all the time. At least the big annoying eating worm was better than that, knowing that being a human-looking worm would be mega weird. Why would anyone even bother looking like an Uncle or a Punching Lady? That would just be silly.

Besides, Sylphie thought very smartly, humans had some big flaws. Like how big they were.

As she flew over to Uncle, she did a pivot in the air and landed right in her nest on top of Uncle's head. It felt a bit different than before, but it was okay, and she used her talons to put all the hair in the right places before sitting down and making herself super comfy.

Silly human beasts couldn't sit in her nest on Uncle's head, so why would she ever become human-looking?

That would just be silly.

"Hey, Sylphie?" Uncle asked her, making Sylphie look down and ask what he wanted.

"Ree?"

"When did you evolve?" he asked while smartly not moving his head.

“Ree!” Sylphie promptly answered very accurately.

“An entire month, huh?” Uncle said, raising his hand to give her the scratches.

Sylphie liked the scratchies.

“But you need to be a bit careful if you wanna go to Nevermore,” Uncle reminded Sylphie.

“Ree! Ree!” Sylphie complained as she had, of course, known. Big Bird had reminded her. Sylphie considered pecking the scratching hand for his wrongness, but she allowed him to continue. She was really nice like that.

“Of course you knew,” he correctly corrected and scratched her under her chin. That was the best spot, so Uncle must have truly realized he said dumb stuff.

Suddenly, he stopped and lowered his hand, making Sylphie prepare to tell him that it wasn’t okay as he spoke:

“What do you say to a little bit of sparring? I wanna test myself a bit and not just stand here in the middle of the sky.”

Sylphie looked down at Uncle for a moment. She considered but then realized something. If Uncle used that...

“Ree?”

“No... I won’t try to hit you with my cauldron; why would I even-”

“Ree!” Sylphie thus issued her challenge.

Uncle was truly underestimating her by not even using his ultimate weapon!

Chapter 597 - A Childish Apocalypse

Sylphie released a challenging screech as Jake smiled in response. Fighting in Haven was naturally a no-go, so they would have to head somewhere else.

“Find a cloud island?” Jake asked the bird, getting an approving screech as she pointed with her wing toward a spot in the sky. Jake narrowed his eyes as he looked that way, and after squinting a bit and piercing through a few normal clouds, he did indeed see a large cloud island. It was only after he nodded at Sylphie that he realized what he had just done.

The island was thousands of kilometers above them and hidden behind several layers of normal clouds and the usual interference caused by environmental mana. Usually, trying to see really far was made blurry simply due to the mana in the air, but with enough Perception, one could still see clearly.

Perception has once more been proven the ultimate stat, Jake told himself as he and Sylphie took to the air. He summoned his wings and began flying and quickly noticed Sylphie getting annoyed at his low speed. Before Jake had a chance to switch to One Step to go faster, he felt the wind at his back.

Not a slight breeze either...

His wings caught the constant buffeting of winds, propelling him forward as Sylphie flew alongside him. The entire area around him had a light tinge of green to it, and Jake felt the intense mana at work as Sylphie used her magic.

This type of flying was still slower than Jake using One Step repeatedly, but it was far more relaxing as the wind just carried them forward. Sylphie also looked like it didn't bother her at all to use the skill if it even was a skill and not just some magic. Jake truly wasn't sure what Sylphie was capable of, which was another reason he wanted this sparring match.

He and Villy had gone over it earlier, but Nevermore had different sections. Dungeons for solo fighters and parties both, with the best approach being to do both. For the party dungeon, parties were mandatory, and while it was possible to just bring four weak people for one person to try and do it alone, it would undoubtedly result in a worse outcome than if it had been a full party of powerful individuals.

With that in mind, Jake wanted to collect a party of five. Sylphie was naturally on his list of candidates, but he wanted to test her first to see if she was truly up to the challenge. While he did want to do Nevermore with her, he wouldn't take her along just for the sake of it. If she proved too weak, she couldn't go, and he would take this approach with every candidate he had in mind.

From Earth, he also had three other candidates in mind besides Sylphie. Two of which he felt like he had tested enough already to have along. He was naturally talking about the Sword Saint and the Fallen King, both of which were utter powerhouses of their own.

Lastly, he had Carmen in mind. If possible, Jake would actually have preferred to ask Eron as he wanted a healer, but he was gone as far as Jake could tell. There was also the issue of trust, of course. His only worry with Carmen was that she wouldn't be able to keep up. He could only know after having a bout with her. The actual fighting kind.

But first, he had a murder bird to duel.

Not soon after, they reached their destination, still finding themselves within the non-restricted zone... which is when Jake finally noted something.

Sylphie was not at all affected by the restrictions a C-grade would usually be under. Jake frowned a bit and wondered why this was, but he knew asking her would be useless. Was it because she was born on Earth? Because she had grown to that level of power all on her own? Some other reason?

Humans weren't tossed out either, so maybe it was all linked to those special items beasts consumed. Oh well, it didn't really matter.

What mattered was the upcoming duel.

Landing on the cloud island, Sylphie simply stood perched in the air a dozen or so meters in front of him.

“Sylphie, no need to hold back too much, okay? This will help determine if you are allowed to come along to Nevermore,” Jake made clear.

“Ree!?” Sylphie asked, offended by Jake even daring to question her awesomeness.

“I know you are awesome, but the point is for you to show me that awesomeness for me to tell the other potential party members of the awesome stuff you can do,” Jake smirked. He opened his hand as a bow appeared in it, and faint wisps of arcane mana began to appear from his body.

“Also, I am not entirely sure just how awesome you are. Maybe you are only a little awesome. So, are you rea-“

An explosion of wind sent Jake flying backward as the small hawk made the first move. Instantly, Jake felt that the environment changed, the wind picked up, and a slight tinge of green was seen here and there whenever a powerful gust appeared. He also knew that if he had still been D-grade, small cuts would now be covering his exposed skin, thus forcing him to use Scales.

Not that easy.

No Scales were needed this time around as Jake tanked the wind easily, preparing to face what was next. The wind gathered at several points and condensed into crescent shapes that flew toward him, trying to cut him into pieces.

One Step gave him distance as Jake retaliated. He nocked an arrow and released it, feeling how much faster he was than before. The speed of the arrow was also incomparable to before, splitting the wind as it headed for the green hawk. Jake also came to learn about his new Umblemished Arrows quite a bit earlier than expected.

The arrow seemed to ignore the wind for the most part while in flight, much to the annoyance of Sylphie as she tried and failed to blow it away with a gust of wind. Instead, she had to dodge to the side while gathering even more magic.

Jake looked on as he decided to also let a bit loose himself. He felt the power boil inside of him as he unleashed some. A blast of arcane energy pushed away the wind around him as more than a hundred bolts formed instantly, taking barely any effort. Jake raised his hand and pointed towards Sylphie, releasing all of them at once.

The sky itself moved as a barrier of wind formed and effortlessly blocked the many bolts as they all blew up in mid-air. A large part of the cloud continent was annihilated as Jake was still getting a handle on his newfound power and hadn't quite gotten the balance down yet, making the explosions larger and less dense than intended.

Returning to his bow, he continued to open fire as Sylphie dodged or blocked them all easily, not really sending anything in return. She gave him a taunting look due to his inability to hit her. If she wanted it that way, fine with him.

"Gonna pick up the pace a bit!"

Narrowing his eyes, Jake focused. He nocked another arrow and fired, with Sylphie tauntingly trying to dodge it again, only for it to curve and fly straight into her trajectory, forcing the hawk to do a last-second dodge that still resulted in a few feathers getting blasted off.

Jake was far from done as several more came, all curved and all predicting her movements. Sylphie literally had her feathers ruffled as she decided to go on the offensive and not just take the barrage.

Before, Sylphie had only released attacks by condensing wind mana and firing it off. This time, she took a far more personal approach and deployed a familiar skill. Her wing began to glow green as she whipped it towards Jake, releasing a crescent wave of green wind energy. It left a faint outline of a wing in its wake, and upon seeing it, Jake knew it would be wisest to dodge.

He used One Step to get out of the way, only to see the green wind blade be pushed by the wind to follow after him. As he prepared to step down again, he saw a second blade be released. Followed by a third and a fourth in rapid succession.

Each blade was pushed forward by the wind, aimed towards him as a slight breeze seemed to be able to affect them. They circled him and came from different directions, but Sylphie clearly wasn't that good at control quite yet.

Jake dodged the first and teleported away to avoid the second. The two remaining blades turned in the air, but Jake twisted his body and released a Splitting Arrow towards Sylphie. The small bird dodged, but as she was too busy reacting to Jake, she failed to control her wind blades and allowed Jake to create even more distance and pressure her instead as he bombarded her with arrows.

Lack of Willpower. Intelligence stat seems high. Wisdom potentially low. Agility is definitely the highest stat, Jake quickly assessed. This was as much a test as it was a fight, and he had quite a few things he wanted to make sure of.

He knew Sylphie had great offensive power, but she had always struck Jake as lacking defensively. Small bodies tended to result in more susceptibility to damage, and while she was fast and had some defensive skills, she was still limited as far as Jake could see. Dodging was all fine and good until someone had a way to make that an unfeasible option.

Someone like Jake.

A part of him didn't want to hurt Sylphie, but he felt like it would be disrespectful to hold back. Besides, she was a C-grade, and he knew he had no attack she couldn't survive.

Sylphie dodged several more of his arrows, and he felt her get a bit cocky. Her wind blades were scarce, and Jake took aim as he began charging his Arcane Powershot. The air shuddered, and the wind all around him was pushed away or destroyed by the arcane energy that exploded out of his body.

The small hawk saw this and countered with her own large blade of wind. At least she tried to. At the very moment she was about to whip her wing to send it out, Jake attacked. Gaze of the Apex Hunter activated, her mobility nullified for a moment as the Arcane Powershot was loosed.

Jake did not know what he had expected to happen next. At the very least, some kind of defensive barrier... but instead, a large gust of wind pushed the frozen Sylphie out of the way of the arrow, just in time as it only faintly scratched her.

Not yet.

He stepped down, refusing to not take advantage of the opening. Once Sylphie unfroze, she would need a moment to stabilize, and that would be a chance. Teleporting forward, a gust of wind came to attack him, but it only allowed Jake to further monopolize.

A shadow emerged, dodging to the side with a bow. Jake himself charged straight towards the hawk that had not become able to move again. He saw her confusion from seeing two Jakes, and she chose to dodge the arrow and not the shadow. A mistake from Jake's point of view.

She dodged, and at that moment, Jake pushed himself a bit further. Power welled up from within as he flew forward, and her eyes locked on him at the very last moment.

The katar hit flesh, Sylphie too late to dodge. Jake felt it penetrate feathers, breaking bones, and then...

His arm continued forward as Sylphie's body exploded. Jake was momentarily alarmed until he saw the pieces of flesh, bone, and feathers turn into a light green wind. The wind moved far faster than anything the hawk had done before and flew around him in a circle. The dozens of small wisps of green wind coalesced behind him, forming the faint outline of a hawk, and Jake's danger sense exploded as he barely managed to dodge a lethal blow in time.

The wind turned tangible as a green hawk flew by him, a gush of blood flying out of his side as a wing still cut him during her fly-by. Sylphie turned in the air again and went for a second attack. Jake met her head-on and stabbed forward, but the second his blade hit her, she once more exploded into a pure green wind that whisked over him, leaving several deep cuts on his limbs.

Once more, the wind collected, turning into Sylphie. Jake turned slowly to see her smug look. He raised his hand and pointed, firing a small beam of arcane energy. Sylphie didn't even move but just turned a part of her body into air as it flew straight through her.

“That’s new?” Jake commented.

“Ree!” Sylphie confirmed proudly.

“Well then,” Jake smiled in response. “Doesn’t that mean you are quite a tricky one now?”

“Ree!” Sylphie kept being smug.

“That’s good,” Jake nodded slowly. “That’s very good.”

He looked at Sylphie, who seemed to realize what he was getting at and quickly began making some distance as the wind condensed around her.

“That means I no longer have to hold back.”

Multiple reports came in at once, and she got a message from Arthur within minutes to check in and see if everything was okay.

“Ms. Wells, I have gotten many distress signals, have some beasts managed to attack Haven or is anyone else attacking-“

“No... everything is fine. It is just two children having a squabble,” Miranda sighed. “Calm your followers and let them know it is under control.”

“When you say children...” Arthur asked inquisitively after a short pause.

Miranda just gave him a small smile. “Very dangerous children. One of them the world-leading kind.”

“Why would-“

“Why indeed,” Miranda shook her head as she interrupted the man. “Anyway, if there isn’t more, I have to make sure no idiots decide to try and get closer and check it out only to see themselves killed by some wayward blow.”

“Very well,” Arthur nodded. He hesitated for a bit before adding on: “I am beginning to understand the... difficulty of your position.”

She waved him off and cut the connection.

Looking at the reports of the nearby apocalypse, it at least looked like the newly-evolved Jake had fun with Sylphie.

A giant tornado that was nearly a hundred kilometers tall in the middle of the sky, wayward explosive attacks ravaging the desolate plains below, an arrow that blew off the top of a mountain, and auras more powerful than anyone else had felt before.

C-grades were not allowed within the area humans usually occupied. The energy from their fights didn't even reach the human settlements, and no one outside of the absolute top ever dealt with beasts of that grade.

To the average person – which was still no more than E-grade – what was happening did indeed look and feel like an apocalypse. C-grade was considered the grade where one truly entered the higher echelons. A powerful C-grade could conquer a smaller planet, and most planet leaders spread throughout the multiverse, even those from major factions, were C-grade. Of course, this assumed that the planets could house C-grades, to begin with. The reality was that most planets had no real life on them, and even many of the planets with intelligent life had no interactions at all with the rest of the multiverse. To these, a D-grade was more than enough to be in charge, though it was rare they could have more than a small country. Of course, all this relied on the size of the planet too.

The point is, C-grades were rare, even from a multiversal perspective. Seeing C-grades fight was something most would never experience. To have front-row seats were even less of a thing, especially not outside of preset arenas and tournaments.

So what the hell had Jake and Sylphie expected to happen when they decided to fight only a few thousand kilometers from Haven and still close to several other settlements? Sylphie could be excused. She was only a few years old, but Jake? Jake was... well... Jake.

At least no one has died to a random missed arrow...

Just then, another new report came in about a large explosion in the sky that could be felt thousands of kilometers away.

Yet...

Chapter 598 - A Wise Choice In Retrospect

In the sky, there had once been a cloud island. It had been quite large, too, with a few elementals spawning here and there. Using past tense was very important in this case, as now there was no island to be seen anywhere. It turned out that clouds and giant tornadoes did not mix well. Or, well, it could be said they mixed really well, considering how the entire cloud island had been swept up, and Sylphie tried to use all the cloud mana to amplify her own attack.

It hadn't worked, but it was a nice attempt. In fact, their fight was constantly marred by the same thing: not much working for either side. Jake could not deal any significant damage to Sylphie due to her newfound ability to be half-ethereal and turn into wind at will, and while Sylphie did have attacks more than capable of dealing severe damage to Jake, actually hitting him was another story. What few chances she did get, she ended up abandoning or dodging as Jake happily countered. After the first use of Eternal Shadow, she didn't retry.

Neither had been fully serious and gone all-out, or the outcome would have been different. If Sylphie was willing to take a few blows to land one on Jake, it could get dangerous for him, and if Jake began to use poisons, it would get dangerous for Sylphie. Ultimately, the likely outcome of their fighting would be Sylphie retreating or losing, something she realized, much to her annoyance. At least Jake saw her occasional pecking as a sign of annoyance.

"Hey, it was a good workout," Jake smiled as he slowly flew through the air back toward Haven, with Sylphie refusing to fly herself. She was a bit tired too, which was another difference between them. Jake could last far longer in a fight, and he didn't waste as much energy with his attacks. Sylphie had a large mana pool, and her wind attacks didn't seem to cost much mana, but that was just her normal wind magic. Her attacks using her physical body were large and flashy, which ended up still consuming a lot.

More than that, it took a lot to turn herself into wind and become corporeal again. Something she did perhaps a bit too much as she loved showing it off.

“Ree!” Sylphie complained with another peck.

“If you wanted to win, you should have come for me before I also evolved,” Jake teased her.

“Ree! Ree!”

“True, that would have been very not-nice,” Jake nodded, his slight head movement making her peck him again. It didn’t actually hurt; he just smiled and stopped himself from shaking his head at the bird’s antics.

To conclude their fight, Jake had decided Sylphie was more than fine to bring along to Nevermore. She was by far the strongest C-grade Jake had ever met for her level, and she also didn’t seem to have any large weaknesses. Her magic was limited, yes, but her wind magic was not simple at all. The green wind did things Jake could not quite understand, sometimes easily tearing through an arcane barrier and other times assisting or even healing Sylphie herself. It could even heal Jake a bit. Far from what an actual healer could do, but it was something that added to the mystery.

One thing that had made Jake apprehensive was her lack of survivability. She had a small frame, and he was sure that a mega-dungeon like Nevermore would have enemy types capable of locking her down. To know that she could turn herself into wind at will and that destroying her body didn’t actually matter much to the small hawk had alleviated nearly all of these worries. Jake was honestly not confident in being able to kill Sylphie even if he tried, and she decided to run away. As for her offensive prowess... it was there. Her charges were capable of tearing Jake apart if he wasn’t fast enough at dodging, and even her area of effect magic was impressive.

Now he just needed to confirm with three more, and he would have a full party for Nevermore. Jake already knew the King had evolved to C-grade like him, so that shouldn't be an issue level-wise, but the Sword Saint and Carmen were both unknowns. This was why Jake was heading back to Haven to talk to Miranda and have her check in with them. Also, it was an excuse to delay going to Arnold.

Getting back did not take long, and he headed straight for her office. Ten minutes of scolding with Jake and Sylphie both getting an earful later, and Jake got an update on what the other major characters of Earth had been up to. Firstly, she told him the King had evolved the very same day he had, likely within the same hour, making Jake know he would also get some snide remarks from the Unique Lifeform about how he had delayed the King's evolution.

Secondly, the Sword Saint had yet to evolve but was working on something himself. Hearing that gave Jake mixed feelings as he hoped for the old man to evolve soon so they could go to Nevermore together, but it also felt nice to know Jake had evolved first.

Thirdly was Carmen. She had not evolved either, but was killing a lot of things and "figuring stuff out" the last Miranda had heard, which was about four days ago. That one was kind of expected, as she had fallen a bit behind after the whole El'Hakan thing and the actions of Valhal during it.

After getting his update, Jake prepared to head over to Arnold to check in about the Nanoblade and if he had any other projects Jake could take advantage of now that he was evolved. However, what Miranda said next made him stop.

"Arnold contacted me right around the time you and Sylphie decided to create widespread panic, mentioning that you forgot to leave the materials you promised to bring him the last time you visited," Miranda said nonchalantly.

Jake stopped abruptly halfway out the door and searched his necklace. He quickly found the list.

“Shit.”

“...You forgot?” Miranda said a bit judgmentally.

“In my defense, I promised him like... decades ago,” Jake said, trying to use his time-dilated training session as an excuse.

“So you are even more overdue than I first thought?” Miranda teased him back. “Be happy it wasn’t a loan with late fees.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jake waved her off. “Hey, Sylphie, it seems like I am going to the Order first anyway. Wanna come along?”

“Ree!”

“Fair,” Jake shrugged at her refusal. “Just don’t go and level too much. You need to be below 210 for the event at Nevermore. The lower, the better.”

“Ree?”

“Yeah, working on your skills seems like a good idea,” he approved. Sylphie seemed full of determination as she jumped off his head and flew out a nearby window.

“I will admit... I still don’t understand how you can interpret anything from those screeches,” Miranda said with furrowed brows. “It seems utterly unrelated to the translation skill.”

“Eh, I think we had this talk before? It isn’t really words but more about intent or something like that. I dunno, but I get it. Other beasts do too, you know, so it isn’t that big of a deal,” Jake shrugged unbothered.

“That says more about you than me,” Miranda smiled and shook her head. “Also, it is a bit late, but congratulations on your evolution. Looks like you... didn’t change at all. Not even your height.”

“How about my face?” Jake asked after taking his mask off. He hadn’t noticed anything himself, but maybe Miranda would?

“No... the same. Maybe a few minor things are ironed out? I honestly don’t know. You are the person I know who changes the least. Well, besides maybe Arnold...”

“Hey, why change perfection?” Jake smirked. “Anyway, I should get going back to the Order and pick up the stuff for Arnold. Might be a bit as I have some other stuff to handle too while I am there.”

With that, Jake made his way back to the lodge and down to the laboratory below. He honestly felt a bit bad about having commissioned it, considering how little he used it. He had planned for it before he knew about the whole mansion ordeal at the Order, so at least he had an excuse there.

Down there, Jake began setting up the formation that would allow him to teleport to the Order. He could just go to the Mangrove and use the main one, but he wanted to place one back in Haven anyway. Unsurprisingly, it was far easier to set up now that he was C-grade. In fact, everything just felt easier. His energy moved more fluidly, his mana felt denser and more potent, and his head was clearer than ever.

After he had set the formation up, he activated it, and a quick trip through the void placed him back on the grass outside of his mansion in the first universe.

"The prodigal son returns, now a true elite of the multiverse," a voice said behind him a second or so later.

"Hey, Villy," Jake said as he turned to regard the god. He had wondered if he could see something "more" about the Primordial with his evolved Bloodline, but sadly it was just the same old. His instincts still just made it utterly clear that the god was at a level of power so far beyond him it wasn't even worth considering countermeasures.

"So, how does it feel? To undergo yet another metamorphosis and get closer to truly shredding your mortal coil?" Villy said.

"Normal?" Jake said. "It doesn't feel different than any prior evolutions, outside of this one being the most potent yet. But I assume that is only to be expected."

“For you, perhaps it is to be expected, but in the multiverse, C-grade is quite the barrier, and reaching it is a point of pride,” the Viper said. “C-grade is when life truly begins for most beasts. It was when I, for the very first time, had true intelligence. When most monsters for the first time experience sapience. By now, the Path is mostly set, and what they have going for them now is what they will use to eventually grasp for godhood. Their foundation is built, and it is now time to create a pillar that will stand eternally. So, do you feel confident in the Path that you have chosen? That it is one that will allow you to reach the apex?”

Jake just smiled and shook his head. “Nothing has changed on that front either. Why wouldn’t I be confident? Since day one, it has been godhood or death, and dying seems like the worse of those options.”

“Confidence is indeed a qualifier, but so is the mindset. To become immortal is not just about power but being the right kind of person to live that long without going insane. Even your current grade is a challenge to some. Do you know what the lifespan is for C-grades?” Villy asked.

“No,” Jake confessed. “Not the maximum anyway. I read C-grade humans tend to live well into the tens of thousands?”

“Ten thousand is the natural lifespan for humans, before other modifiers, like the Vitality stat, increasing it a bit,” Villy clarified. “The maximum lifespan for a C-grade is ten times that or a hundred thousand years. Of course, to reach this lifespan, you will need some natural treasures, alchemical goods, or to just be a race that lives this long naturally. For reference, elves naturally live about five times longer than humans on the average but are, of course, still limited to a hundred thousand years total.”

“Ten thousand years,” Jake muttered. “Nearly taking a hundred to reach C-grade doesn’t seem that bad, then.”

“Not a sprint, it’s a marathon, bla bla bla, you know the deal,” the Viper waved it off. “I just wanted to come by and congratulate you. Also, to try and see if I can feel anything when up close... and nothing. You still give off the aura of a perfectly average human. Bar the Bloodline, of course.”

“Good to know,” Jake said, feeling a bit relieved.

“You are here for the bee ritual, right?” the Viper asked after a bit.

“Actually, I am here to get some stuff for Arnold, but also tending to the ritual was the plan,” Jake confirmed. “Why, are you curious about what will happen?”

“Yes,” the Viper said, not a hint of jest. “I genuinely am. You see, the Sylphian Hawk I could write off as a fluke, as it also included my own Records. It was an odd amalgamation of energy that helped give birth to her, so I could write it off as something non-replicable. Then Eternal Hunger. Followed by Sandy. Those two did still rely on natural treasures with powerful innate energies, but they were still mostly you. Finally, we have the fact that you managed to even change your own race into something more than human. Everything indicates that influencing these evolutions is something you can do at least semi-intentionally.”

“Yeah... about that...” Jake said as he began to explain the deal with his profession evolving. More specifically, he told Villy about the Harbinger of Primeval Origins evolution option, including the fact it gave the maximum number of stats and the full description.

Jake knew there were many hints of potential alchemical applications in that evolution option, and who was better to ask than Villy? More than that, to hear if there were any pitfalls.

The more Jake explained the profession, the more the Viper frowned and the deeper in thought he seemed to be. After Jake was done talking, the Viper took a deep breath.

“First of all, good you didn’t pick it,” the Viper said. “Not just because it would be a very sudden shift in your Path that could be problematic, but because it seemed too good. Harbinger is an incredibly specific word to be used in this context and often refers to an innate inevitability. I do think that your assertion it would be mostly uncontrolled is correct, and you would have seen passive skills that would influence the world around you, intentionally or not. Moreover, it could influence you to walk down a Path that you do not intend. Also... if you picked it, you probably shouldn’t have ever gone to the Order or Nevermore.”

“Wait, why?” Jake asked with a frown.

“Think for a bit. What do you think would happen if anyone found out that you are a passive wellspring of powerful evolutions. What if another human who is about to reach C-grade experiences what you did? A sudden discovery of a human variant? People would put two and two together, and soon enough, you will find yourself in quite a pickle. Being my Chosen, perhaps some will hesitate to force you, but at the very least, you will have people flocking around you at all times to benefit from your presence. This all assumes that being the Harbinger of Primeval Origins is a good thing in every instance. What if you can influence people towards an Origin that is less than ideal? Spawn things that are best never seen? If that happens, it may be decided leaving you alive is too dangerous, and there are pacts I am a part of that could compel me to take action. If your very existence was deemed a threat to the multiverse, I would have to kill you myself,” Villy explained, outlining quite a few potential issues Jake had not considered.

“Ah, not to say you shouldn’t aim to become an existence that endangers every other lifeform in the multiverse,” Villy smirked as he added. “You should just do it intentionally and only make people aware of the danger you pose once you are strong enough to make those threats a reality.”

“Noted,” Jake said after considering the words for a while. “Another reason not to pick it is also that it would make you sad I no longer wanted to do alchemy with you, right?”

“You could probably still do some alchemy, but sure, let’s say that was one of the reasons,” the Viper waved him off. “I doubt the profession would have removed the Blessing either. Shit, it may even have rolled back some of the restrictions it placed on me, so at least I could take the Blessing back and wash my hands of you.”

“Ouch,” Jake said, acting hurt. “Anyway, since I am gonna work on the ritual, any tips?”

The Viper, seemingly happy with the change of subject, nodded. “Just one. Do it properly. Ectognamorph females are powerful by default, especially the Queens. If you spawn one at C-grade, you may even be able to make one that is....”

“One that is what?”

“Not saying anything more. Giving you advice is counter-productive, so I shall take my leave here. Again, my only advice is to do it properly and don’t half-arse it,” Villy said as he flashed a teasing smile before he disappeared.

“Didn’t plan on half-arsing it,” Jake muttered as he turned and looked towards the formation.

And... well, there was one downside to having a lot in the best stat...

It allowed him to see how many damn mistakes he had made in his D-grade incompetence.

Chapter 599 - Complicated Rituals & Annoying Issue

Setting up a ritual circle was a bit like making a painting, but in order to make the painting, you had to program every stroke using some illogical programming language that also, for some bloody reason, had to follow weird rules reminiscent of feng shui. Concepts had to play properly together, which could be likened to mixing colors to get the optimal palette. Some colors did not mesh well together, and if all colors mixed haphazardly, you would get a muddy brown. AKA, you would get shit.

All of this also had to be done while painting within the lines if one was following some pre-set ritual circle and trying to make a very specific image. Not following a pre-set ritual circle was far beyond anything Jake could do quite yet.

When Jake initially set up the ritual circle, all looked well. The colors were adequately separated, and things seemed to be meshing well. However, with a higher Perception stat, he could begin to see the flaws. This could be likened to seeing the borders where the different colors mixed. To the naked eye, perhaps it looked fine, but if digitalized and someone zoomed in and saw the individual pixels, small flaws could be spotted. A bit of color may have gone over a line, the intensity of a certain color may be off, or a faint shade darker in one place than another.

The problem is that any minor change would echo throughout the rest of the formation. To once more bring it back to the programming analogy, fixing one bug could create another. Jake slightly changing a shade of color could push some paint over a line at the opposite end of the formation, and if he messed with too many things, he could even end up ruining one of these lines altogether, making the entire ritual collapse.

All of this is to say that Jake's usual approach of just trial and error did not work with ritual circles. At least he did have the ritualism skill that gave him some ideas and faintly hinted at what he should do here and there while also giving warnings when he was about to do something dumb. It was far from enough, though, and there simply wasn't a ritualism skill with enough innate knowledge to make you a good ritualist. In the end, everything took time and practice, and luckily for Jake, he had some time for that while waiting for the others to be ready for Nevermore.

More than that, he had a library full of high-level books and someone, quite frankly, way-overqualified willing to teach him.

“Your analogy is good, but it still has some flaws. You cannot simply view a ritual circle as a two-dimensional creation but as something that functions in a mesh. It is part of a three-dimensional world and has to interact with it through catalysts and energy absorption. This even ignores the fact that this specific ritual interacts with an egg of a living creature possessing a soul, making it pass into the metaphysical,” the old alchemist said after Jake voiced some of his thoughts.

It was naturally Duskleaf, someone more than happy with teaching Jake here and there. Though he did limit himself to basic things and did not want to comment directly on the ritual circle Jake had made for the Pollendust Bee Queen. At least not outside of the aspects that weren’t considered basic.

“So, a 3D painting of sorts,” Jake muttered to himself. “Though I am beginning to also run into some issues with the final energy infusion. I had not properly taken into account the qualitative difference in power between D and C-grade when making the ritual, and I fear it may be overloaded and fail at the final moment.”

“To redraw the lines of a circle is entirely possible, but you have to delve beneath the paint. Remember, you are working in far more than two dimensions. You view it only from one direction and not as a mesh where you can focus on small singular aspects, even if one looks to be covered by other. The surrounding constructs will need to be stabilized before the redrawing, and adaptation of the paint is necessary afterward, but I believe you are more than able.”

Jake thought for a while before opening his palm and making an outline of the ritual circle. He studied it for a while before shaking his head.

“It just all feels so interconnected,” Jake complained. “Stabilizing certain elements with my arcane affinity does seem doable, but controlling this stabilization while also redrawing seems bloody hard.”

“It is,” Duskleaf smiled. “Ritualism and formation, in general, are not simple. Formation masters can spend lifetimes creating and mastering a single formation. I know that usually, the circles you make are simply following a blueprint, but this is different. Hm... to use your analogy, then usually you are just acting like a printer and not actually doing any proper painting yourself, while now you need to pick up the brush yourself. You do have it a bit easier as this ritual is still based on a well-studied one, but that also means the changes you make need to be well-thought-out.”

About now, Jake also had some more context on the difference between all the terms. Ritual circles, magic circles, and formations in particular.

Ritual circles were, on average, considered very conceptual in nature. They relied more on traits of mysticism and leaned into a lot of what Jake called system-fuckery to work. These rituals also nearly always dealt solely with energy and not really with anything else. This meant they, in most cases, needed an active caster, and if the caster died, the ritual would cease to be. The main guiding energy of a ritual was thus nearly always the caster or casters who would actively participate for it to work. More than that, rituals were often considered shorter endeavors and not long-term installations. They were created with a purpose, and once the ritual was done, they would fade.

Formations leaned more into math. They were highly calculated creations that were more like a grand circuit board made to run one specific computer program. They could activate autonomously, be self-controlled, and the really high-level formations were even capable of showing AI-like behavior. More importantly, they did not necessarily require a controller but could function purely off external energy sources. In fact, if the creator had to actively use any energy to make it work after its completion, it was a sign of a poorly made formation. Even if the original creator died, as long as the formation was maintained over time, it could remain active nearly indefinitely.

This did mean that, on average, formations were seen far more often in the multiverse. Arrays that helped defend cities were just another form of formation. The teleportation circles made to allow travel were also just formations.

Ultimately, these two could never truly be separated. A ritual would always have traits of a formation, and a formation would nearly always have aspects of a ritual. To call one more complicated than the other also wouldn't be right, as it often depended on the person what they found harder. Both could also just be considered magic circles.

Honestly, the terminology was all mixed up, and some used the two interchangeably. Even the system changed between them at times, seemingly viewing them as very much the same. The only reason they were separated as they were was because of just how damn complicated formations and rituals were. Miranda could call herself a great ritualist but not quite a formation expert. Neil was just the opposite. So if both called themselves magic circle experts, it would just lead to confusion.

Anyway, that was a quick summary of what Jake had been forced into reading way too many books about. This was even without mentioning all the researchers arguing about it and their different hot takes.

For Jake, hardcore formation theory was the worst. He was way more of a ritual guy himself, as he liked the control they required. Duskleaf also agreed that he should know when to limit himself. While having some breadth was a good thing in alchemy, he would learn enough about formations simply by trying to get better at rituals.

Not to misunderstand that Jake couldn't do math. He was just more the kind of guy who liked math with numbers, while formations were all about that high-level math that wasn't even real math. Real math had numbers, not letters, and yes, he had fought with Casper about that several times. Speaking of Casper... that dude was one of the few who truly did do both rituals and formations to a very high level. Jake hoped he was doing well and to meet too.

Regarding Jake and rituals, Duskleaf seemed extremely keen on convincing Jake to study curse rituals more, primarily due to Eternal Hunger. The old alchemist god had some good points, including how he could use the weapon as a powerful catalyst to do some amazing things, especially as the weapon was linked to his soul. Worth considering, but later. For now, it was all about the bee ritual.

Jake and Duskleaf had only been at the bee ritual for about half a day when someone else also returned to the mansion. Someone who had been quite busy herself.

“Lord Thayne, congratulations on your evolution,” Meira said with a bow as soon as she exited the mansion upon noticing him and Duskleaf outside.

“Thank you,” Jake said with a smile, adding on. “You are fast approaching C-grade yourself too. Ah, but one warning. You have to, at the very least, attempt to officially join the Order before evolving, okay? Of course, I am also open to alternatives, but the status quo will change.”

He had not really talked to her about it during his last visit, but Meira had picked up even more classes on her own. Jake had kind of expected it, but more just that she would continue down the Path they had talked about. Seeing her take the initiative and pick up entirely new topics was only a positive and only more proof she was more than ready. Based on what Duskleaf had said, she was also skilled enough by now to join. Jake wasn’t entirely sure what her hang-ups were, but he felt like he had to set a deadline.

Meira did look a bit taken aback at Jake forcing the issue. She looked to Duskleaf, but the old alchemist just smiled in response.

“If you have any concerns, just ask me,” Jake said with a shrug.

"I will," Meira said after a moment of hesitation. "I apologize for disturbing Lord Thayne and the Grand Elder and shall return to my studies."

With a bow, she left towards her own residence, walking at quite a brisk pace.

"I don't get it," Jake muttered to himself.

"What is there not to get?" Duskleaf asked.

"Shouldn't joining the Order be something she wants? I also know that she has the opportunity to go to the Altmar Empire. Both must be better than being a slave here," Jake voiced his thoughts.

"Hmph," Duskleaf scoffed and shook his head. "You truly are clueless. While this may be overstepping, and I am usually not a fan of getting involved in personal business, I guess I have no choice. First of all, you view her as far more naïve than she is. She is still a D-grade and isn't stupid. She knows the benefits her current station brings. Just look at her. Unlimited lessons, me teaching her, and this mansion to live in with you, someone who does not care at all what she does. The only negative is her status as a slave, but considering that is never used against her, all she truly lost is her own sense of pride from not being free in principle. For someone who has never truly been free, that is not a demerit at all."

"That," Jake said after thinking a bit, "makes sense."

"I am not saying for you to change anything, but if you want to convince her the status quo has to, a conversation is needed. If not, it will be nothing more than a punishment. To you, perhaps freedom is the ultimate prize, but for her, it has never held any understandable value."

"But who ever said her not being a slave would change anything besides her status?" Jake argued.

"Who says it won't? As a slave, she is tied to you. She has some kind of connection with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. I am only here because of you. If she is no longer your slave, then what is she? A random D-grade elf member of the Order that you used to know. What she has right now is good, and the unknown is always frightening. She doesn't know what will happen. Also, can you truly tell me nothing would change? Tell me, where did you expect her to live once she became a member of the Order?"

"Well... every member of the Order gets their own place..." Jake said, but he instantly saw the issue there.

"Which to most is nice, but to her a bad thing when she wants to stay where she is," Duskleaf said. "Granted, if you make this an issue is still your own decision. Ultimately, you could just kick her out at any time if you wanted to. While the girl isn't horrible, she is far from a genius, and if separated from you, I see a difficult future for her, but that isn't your concern. Right now, she is taking advantage of you due to the circumstances both of you unintentionally found yourselves in, and you truly don't have any obligations to her. But from what I gather, you do feel responsible, so you have to do something to make her want to change the status quo."

"So, what is your advice?" Jake asked, a bit unsure what the god was getting at. Clearly, Duskleaf was not just mentioning this for nothing. Or maybe he had just gotten annoyed at Jake being oblivious... both were entirely possible.

“Make a decision and tell her. From my understanding, you want to no longer have her as your slave, so assuming that is a given, tell her what will come next. Whatever rules or norms may exist don’t matter to you. If you want her to remain here working for you, simply hire her as an attendant, making the status quo unchanged despite her change in status. If you don’t want her around, tell her that. If you want to be rid of her entirely because she now knows your secrets, kill her or make her sign a contract,” Duskleaf said. “The only important thing is actually sitting down with her and talking about it. Make it so her future is not a feared unknown but has some element of certainty.”

“It just feels like me deciding what will happen goes against the entire point of me doing this. I want her to want to be free and to make decisions herself. If I just tell her how things will be...” Jake muttered.

“Then explain that to her too. In some ways, you fail to realize that she has actively made her choice already. She wants to become someone you want to keep around and is useful to you for purely selfish reasons. You are the Chosen of a Primordial, Jake. If you decided to recruit slaves tomorrow, there would be a line halfway across the planet. The two of you will never be equals, and I doubt you can ever make her truly see you as an equal, no matter how much you may want that,” Duskleaf shook his head.

“Yeah...” Jake said with a sigh. “You do have some good points; I guess I should have a proper sit-down with her and decide on what the future holds. In all fairness, I am fine with whatever she wants to do. I do kind of need an attendant in the Order to do things for me, and it may as well be her, right?”

“All up to you,” Duskleaf smiled. “I do like the girl as a student. She picks up on things quickly, and being in your presence will for sure keep benefitting her. Her talent is growing by the day, and if she keeps up her current dedication, she could go far. Right now, her primary motivator is to remain useful to you, and I doubt that will change if you keep her around, but that is honestly not a bad thing. The system at least doesn’t care, as long as she remains consistent in her Path.”

Jake nodded along. “Got it. I will talk to her about it and try to figure out what she wants. I still hope that some part of her wants freedom and to, at the very least, be able to leave if she wants to. It isn’t like either of us wanted to be in this situation originally, and she must carry at least some level of resentment towards me as the Order enslaved her, so who knows?”

“That is the final part you don’t get,” Duskleaf shook his head. “She clearly likes you, Jake. Not you as the Chosen, but you as a person. I would not say her emotions pass into love, but it is similar. For this, I will not say anything; that is up for you young ones to figure out yourselves. Just know she doesn’t solely remain around you due to the benefits you bring.”

Jake didn’t say anything but just looked at the god.

“You did know,” Duskleaf realized. “More to consider, then. I will go get some tea while you sort your thoughts.”

With that, Duskleaf disappeared with the clone that was made from a plant that couldn’t even consume tea, as far as Jake knew.

Chapter 600 - Experiments Requiring Varying Degrees Of Violence

Jake had a lot to think about. Annoying things to think about.

He knew he wasn’t the most moral of people, considering his rather liberal approach to killing. He did not hesitate when he went out into the world and hunted down sapient C-grade beasts simply for experience points, and he had killed plenty of other humans during his Path so far. Some were more deserving than others, with quite a few just being at the wrong place at the wrong time or having chosen to trust someone they really shouldn’t have.

But that didn’t mean he was entirely amoral, and he had some things he wouldn’t do. Likely due to his upbringing and the culture of Earth and because, quite honestly, these things had nothing to do with his Path. They were unrelated to his goals. One of those things he wouldn’t do was use his position to take advantage of others. It just felt icky and wrong to him to even consider it.

Miranda, Meira, pretty much anyone in the Order... it just felt wrong to even consider any kind of relationship that was more than friends. Meira more than anyone else. He had watched enough movies to know she may feel attached or something due to not being treated like shit, which just made it even slimier.

Perhaps more importantly than anything else, Jake didn't want any romantic relationships. At least nothing serious. It didn't even have to do with his bad prior experiences anymore, but just that he didn't have time and didn't want to dedicate the necessary mental energy to it.

Jake had already talked a lot with Caleb and how he struggled with balancing family and his role as Judge of the Court of Shadows. Caleb did not regret his way of life, and if he had to choose between the Court and his family, he would pick family every time. Jake could honestly not say he was the same. In other words, he would be a shitty partner.

There was also the entire thing about his insane innate fear of betrayal, but that was a whole other can of worms he really didn't want to address.

In conclusion, Jake wanted to avoid relationships, and if acting oblivious made that easier, he would continue doing so. It was honestly just easier to never try and read more into anything others did, and he would rather assume people were being friendly and not make any conclusions. The result would be nothing happening, no matter what.

The whole thing with Meira was a complicated issue and one Jake was far from qualified to deal with. All he knew was that entertaining her emotions would be unhealthy for both of them. He could handle casual relationships, like the one with Carmen, but anything more would be too much.

These annoying emotions were a lot to deal with and, quite frankly, not worth the mental energy. Hence, he moved on to something far simpler:

The ritual circle.

It took him about a week to fix the most outrageous of issues with the ritual circle, and while there was still room for improvement, it wasn't anything important. All they really resulted in was the circle being less efficient and draining the many cores of energy faster, with more energy going to waste, but Jake didn't really care overly much about that.

During this week, Jake tried to approach Meira to talk, but she seemed to try and avoid any long conversations as much as possible. At the very least, her actions allowed Jake to consider excuses to talk to her, which was when he handed her the list from Arnold that he had totally remembered. Having her do all that shopping and then confirming all the purchases afterward would be a perfect segue into the conversation he wanted to have with her.

Additionally, it set a deadline for Jake to get his act together. Luckily, it seemed like it would take a bit of time to get everything together as some of the things the scientist had asked for weren't readily available.

After the week of ritual circle work, Jake moved on to another important task. The improvement of cores. For this, Jake had the Advanced Core Manipulation skill, one of those skill choices Jake had semi-neglected but now felt more than happy about having picked.

[Advanced Core Manipulation (Epic)] – To touch upon a core of pure energy and Records is to touch upon the broken shell of a soul. Allows the alchemist to far more easily manipulate cores and the Records within the broken soul shells with the goal of refining them. Refined cores will, in most cases, be more effective, and you can also choose to amplify certain effects. Having taken it further, you have

learned that the layers of souls can be malleable in some circumstances, and applying this knowledge, you have learned to fuse cores containing similar Records and even change their nature in some circumstances as your own soul influences the core. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Advanced Core Manipulation based on Wisdom and Willpower.

The description wasn't something Jake had truly dwelled on much, but now that he read it after being offered the Harbinger of Primeval Origins profession and recent revelations about his ability to affect the Origin of something, he saw it in a new light.

This skill was all about manipulating the Records within a core. It even allowed him to merge several cores to create a more powerful one.

For the final push to evolve the Bee Queen to C-grade, Jake would need a few powerful natural treasures, but more importantly, a core of pure Records. Records that would allow him to improve this Origin somehow. Jake wasn't sure exactly how to do this yet, but luckily he had time.

Hatching the egg before Nevermore was a priority, but if he didn't manage to do it, that would be fine too. He wasn't in a rush and wanted to get this one right. As Villy had said, this would be Jake's first time intentionally trying to create some super variant using his Bloodline-related abilities.

While he didn't have a core yet, he would go get one after he practiced a bit with what he already had, as well as some cheaply bought cores. Insectoid monsters were far from rare, and getting the cores was easy and cheap. Compared to most beast cores, ectognacores were a dime a dozen, and from just clearing one hive, thousands, if not millions, could be obtained.

There was, of course, still a variance to them, and Jake did have some better variant versions. Like the Queen's Guard cores.

[Isoptera Queen's Guard Ectognacore (D-grade)] - An Ectognacore left behind by a D-grade Isoptera Queen's Guard, containing remnants of its Records within. Can be used as an alchemical ingredient for many types of creations but is most often found in Elixirs.

Jake did plan on heading back to Earth and making a visit to the termite hive to obtain more cores. More specifically, he wanted some C-grade cores from the Queen and to get some revenge on the Termite King. But that was only for when he was ready to actually use the cores.

Or really needed a break from doing alchemy.

For this core manipulation, Jake had wanted to ask Duskleaf for any tips, but the god had categorically refused and told Jake he was one hundred percent on his own. The intent was clear there: the two gods wanted to see what Jake could come up with himself without any feedback. He and Villy both wanted to see what exactly Jake would come up with through his reckless experimenting.

Not that Jake was against this as he got to work.

The Fallen King slowly lowered himself toward the white void as he observed the landscape before him. Ice covered everything, and he felt the intense mana in the air. What had the humans called this... the pole, he believed? An odd name, but the naming sense of humans often struck him as weird.

He took in the environment for a moment, and he felt slightly affected by it. The cold was so intense it required him to keep his barrier constantly active or risk his movements being affected, which bode well that he would find worthy prey. Flying inwards, the cold within the desert of ice and snow only intensified, and soon enough, he spotted movement in the distance.

An iceberg appeared to be moving as five bulky blocks were put together. One larger one with four smaller blocks functioning as feet, the entire body made of pure bluish ice. It was over five hundred meters tall, and the snow below it seemed to almost solidify as it walked.

[Northbound Ice Elemental – lvl 226]

Disappointment was the next emotion he felt. He had hoped for something better. 226 was low, but sometimes he had to take what he would get.

The King was not there to get levels. Not truly. He knew of Nevermore, the witch of Haven, having told him about it. He knew he had a level limit of 210 until the humans were ready, but he still wanted to test himself during this time. He wanted to properly understand his own power and the Path he walked.

As a Unique Lifeform, he had three forms of magic. Gold, Soul, and Force. Those were the three schools he practiced, and everything he could do was one of those three or a combination. Was this limiting? Perhaps, but with enough power, anything was possible, and the more he grew, the more he began to understand what he could do.

His issue with what he called Gold magic in D-grade was how much power it required to use. It was not actually related to metal but was just named for the color. In reality, it could be more closely compared to an arcane affinity, but naturally, Unique Lifeforms could not possess arcane affinities. They were born with their inborn magical powers, and that was all they had and would ever have.

Now that he was in C-grade, his energy had spiked. He had far more mana, and using his golden magic was finally more feasible.

Staring at the elemental, he began to condense the first type of magic he could now use. Force magic could be used as a form of telekinesis, and it allowed him to control objects directly or form constructs or waves of force. He would do the same now, but he could also introduce the power of gold.

Force and gold combined as a golden translucent barrier appeared. With his other hand, he attempted to create a spear, but he felt its weakness. Force magic and the concept of piercing never worked well together, as while focusing the power on a singular point seemed smart, it also made the construct incredibly fragile. No, better to go for more solid constructs.

His second try was far better. He allowed the energy to flow out of him, and he created a golden orb about a meter across. He slightly began to reform it and discovered that if he remained in contact with his construct through a constant stream of energy, it was far easier to control.

Turning his attention towards the elemental, he saw that it, too, had taken notice of him. There was little movement of life within the icy plains, making him stand out as his very presence disturbed the land. The elemental didn't seem keen on conversation as magic began gathering around it, and the King gladly responded.

With one hand, he sent the barrier of gold flying toward the elemental. It slammed into it with force capable of making mountains crumble, and the King followed up with the orb. Golden energy still extended to it as he swung it like a flail, slamming it into the side of the huge C-grade in front of him. The impact lifted the living iceberg off the ground for a brief moment before the orb managed to pierce all the way through and go out the other side.

Adequate.

But with room for improvement.

The King considered the weapons of man. Swords, axes, spears... nothing quite fit him. Ah, but there was one that came to mind. A weapon he rarely saw people use but that the King believed would prove quite helpful.

Extending both his hands, golden forms grew from them. The golden energy extended out and formed two constructs resembling battle hammers, the heads made circular. He admired his weapons for a moment, but before he could use them, he annoyingly had to deal with a counterattack.

A giant blast of ice magic flew toward him, and the land itself seemed to rise in opposition to his presence. A singular golden bubble appeared around his body, and he allowed everything to impact him. The blast of ice energy washed over the barrier, turning the world blueish white, as a giant spike of ice pierced from below, but broke apart and shattered upon impacting the barrier.

The King never moved at all from the attacks.

With a thought, the defensive barrier expanded outwards, pushing away all the energy and allowing the King to go on the offensive. A single hammer flew out and grew in size while mid-air as it hit the elemental, sending it tumbling back with huge cracks covering its icy body. A second hammer came from above soon after, smashing the living icy mountain into the ground below, making the land itself crack and crumble from the impact.

Naturally, something like this was far from enough to actually kill a C-grade, and the elemental soon rose again, only to promptly get smashed down again by yet another hammer of golden force. The constructs made by the King were more durable than most equipment humans wielded, so even when the elemental tried to fight back by breaking the hammers, it failed spectacularly. While attacks on the hammers did drain the King's energy, he remained connected to them through a constant stream of golden energy.

To call these constructs some form of shaped barriers would be an accurate assessment. They were in essence simply barriers moved through powerful telekinetic force magic, allowing them to hit harder and faster than the vast majority of warriors wielding the weapon using their bodies.

After attacking the elemental for a while, the King stopped as he no longer saw a purpose in it. The C-grade ice elemental healed from the attacks nearly as fast as they came, the mana in the environment feeding it. Physical force would likely never be able to kill a being such as this, so the King moved on. Moved on to a form of magic that no living creature was not susceptible to.

Soul magic was quite difficult to attack with. The energy would rapidly disperse when exposed to environmental mana, and often one had to use one's presence to attack. That is to say, some kind of contact was necessary. Rituals that worked with soul magic were much the same; the caster just used the ritual itself as the origin of the presence.

Soul bolts were possible, but they were the simplest form of soul magic. These bolts mundanely attacked and dealt damage to the soul, and its mana efficiency was far from ideal. The King could do them too but viewed them as beneath him. So he did something else to make a ranged soul attack.

Rather than create a simple soul bolt, the King condensed a golden orb and filled it with soul energy within a barrier. He looked towards the ice elemental and blasted the orb in its direction. The elemental seemed to realize the danger and created a barrier of ice mana just in time as the orb exploded, releasing a golden nova of pure soul energy reminiscent of his ultimate attack.

The response of the elemental was correct, as the energy was mostly blocked by the ice barrier, but what made it through tore into the soul of the C-grade.

Satisfied, the King continued this line of action. A dozen orbs condensed around him as he pointed at the elemental, sending them all out at once. The elemental reacted promptly as giant barriers appeared all around it, but with dozens of novas at once, it failed to adequately block everything.

Damage for cost is acceptable.

The elemental had parts of its body crack and crumble, but sadly for it, the King was far from done. Next, he moved on to more novel applications of his magic. Soul, Gold, Force. These were his tools to reach godhood, and while that was far fewer tools than nearly any other race would have, the King knew.

It was enough.

Waving his hand, he began weaving more magic as he stared at the unfortunate elemental.

He had more experiments to carry out.