

# THE PRIMAL HUNTER

## Chapter 131: Two kinds of people

Jake stood on top of a large purple mushroom as he inhaled deeply, taking in the atmosphere. This cavern, which he had decided to now call a biodome, was truly interesting.

On the ground beneath him lay tens of dead insectoids. None had been a threat, but all of them insanely aggressive, nevertheless. The beasts above had either scurried off upon seeing him or at least been hesitant. These insects didn't give a damn.

Which naturally resulted in their untimely demise. One charging mantis quickly attracted others to come out of the woodwork - or shroomwork in this case - and joined the charge. One charging mantis had quickly resulted in many dead mantises.

The strongest had been level 48, with the weakest at 26 - quite the disparity. Far more so than a dungeon would have, but then again, this area wasn't as 'designed' as those were. Besides, Jake could feel that he hadn't met the big boss of this biodome yet.

For the first time, he felt a bit of excitement. Maybe he could even find something worth fighting down here.

With those thoughts, he moved onwards. Slaughtering everything in his path as he went towards the center of the biodome.

On the way, he didn't care for herbs as before. He only focused on the aura he felt. It was faint... but it was there.

A sword in one hand, a dagger in the other, he cleaved down mantis after mantis. Occasionally a centipede-like monster would appear, but they didn't seem to be on friendly terms with the mantises either. Most of them were either injured or in the middle of being devoured.

The same was true for every other species than the mantises. This was clearly their territory. Their domain. A domain that had now been invaded by an enemy predator in the form of a human.

Soon he couldn't strike the mantises down in a single blow anymore. Their levels were growing. From the early 50s to now being in the early 60s. Even the occasional one in the early 70s. Any of these mantises would be the apex predator only a few hundred meters above them.

But down here, they could only play second fiddle to the true lord of the biodome.

Jake jumped to one of the tallest mushrooms and stared down at the huge insect beneath him.

Its body was bright green, its eyes even shining slightly. Its two blades were more than three meters long, strong mandibles that looked like they could easily crush steel, and a level making it worthy of being the ruler here.

### **[Alpha Mantis Scyther – lvl 89]**

Smiling, Jake looked down at it, making eye-contact. He had hoped to see a trace of intelligence as he had seen in all of the dungeon bosses. Yet, he found only disappointment. Not a single spark of intelligence was present; it was clearly nothing more than just a giant stupid insect.

*A shame, he thought. Hopefully, it can make up for it in power.*

Taking out his bow, a quiver appeared on his back simultaneously. At the same time, the mantis had now clearly noticed him also. And like all the others, it merely attacked.

Jake didn't use Infused Powershot but instead opened with a Splitting Arrow.

In-flight, one arrow split into two dozen, the most considerable amount Jake had created so far with a single shot. Jake could see the arrows about to hit the mantis when he got his first pleasant surprise. Its back opened up, and out came two transparent sets of wings.

With a swift motion, it dodged all of the arrows as it continued its attack. Even faster than Jake had anticipated. Less than a second after he had fired the arrow, the alpha mantis was before him, its scythe cleaving down.

Jake took a step forward as he saw the mushroom be split in two behind him through his sphere. His step had naturally been the skill One Step Mile and had taken him down to the ground, close to where the mantis had been initially.

Turning around quickly, he managed to fire off another arrow before the clearly confused insect managed to locate him. He hit it right in its midsection and saw the arrow sink in deeply as it shrieked in pain. He was pretty sure mantises couldn't shriek before.

His attack had done little more than alert it to his position. With its more than six-meter tall body, it flew towards him once more. Its speed still very impressive.

Firing off yet another arrow, he hit it another time before it reached him. And once more, he dodged it, this time without even using a skill.

Its attacks were predictable and straightforward. Its only advantage was in speed. Clearly, its agility and maybe even strength were far above his own. He didn't doubt that if he got hit by its blades, he would lose an arm or a leg. He just didn't feel like it would ever hit him.

Their dance kept going for a few minutes, with Jake dodging and the mantis frantically trying to cut him to pieces. Eventually, Jake began to get bored, as the insect hadn't done jack shit to adapt. The only change being its accumulating wounds.

He hoped for it to have more. Maybe some kind of new skill or hidden ability. But... nothing. It was just slowly fighting a battle it clearly couldn't win, with no thought of any kind. It was just... disappointing.

With a sigh, Jake decided to end it.

### **One Step Mile**

He appeared tens of meters behind the mantis as he turned around, an arrow already nocked. The mantis was once more confused, having clearly learned nothing from earlier.

### **Gaze of the Apex Hunter**

Then it felt its body freeze for a moment, not moving when it wanted to. And finally...

### **Infused Powershot**

It lost its head to an arrow that soared through the biodome with unstoppable power.

Miranda sat in the chair, staring out at the serene pond. She saw the small eels swimming without a care in the world as the thoughts jumped around in her head.

She felt like there was a vast difference between her and the young formerly-masked man. Not just in power, but mentality and understanding.

He had known so much of the system. Like he had lived in it far longer than Miranda or the others. Or actually been able to learn from someone who had.

His experiences of the tutorial were so much more than hers. The most significant difference, however, was the disparity in mindset between the two.

In her work before the system, she interacted and worked with many different types of employees. Over time she had begun to classify them mentally. Put them into boxes - one for those you need to watch out for and those you don't.

The first group was also split into many different types. Troublemakers, the lazy, the incompetent, etc. - yet she found the most volatile of them all of another category: the truly driven.

Many workers just go to work for their monthly paycheck. They work to live. Get the job done and go home. But the driven want more than that. They want to advance. They want to improve. They become restless if their ambitions aren't realized.

In her retrospection, she had come to see that she and even Hank and his kids were the first types of person. Not in her job before the tutorial, but in the tutorial itself. Like a worker merely working to live, she had done the tutorial simply to survive. Nearly everyone had.

Of course, she had worked hard in her own mind. She went above and beyond to organize and try and lead some of the other survivors. But... she couldn't honestly say that she hadn't done it for the sake of survival. To make herself useful and gain levels to not die in the next trial.

The trials themselves were also harrowing - a real struggle. And the moment they ended, Miranda returned to the rest area as quickly as possible. Yet... what if she had remained within the trial area? No one forced them to leave. What if she went beyond where they simply guarded themselves during the trial?

That was the first type of person. The type that was just walking forward to survive one day at a time. The other type was different.

You needed to look out for them, focusing on both the good and the bad. They would be the employee that could take the company to the next level. Have a new innovative idea or strategic insight that could lead to practical change. They could be the best type of employee imaginable.

At the same time, they could be the worst type. The one who would advance by any means necessary. Willing to stomp on anyone in their way on their path of advancement. Every other person merely a tool to help themselves.

Without a doubt, the masked man was the ambitious and driven type. If he had been in their tutorial, he wouldn't have stayed in the trial area. He would have gone beyond it. She heard how he spoke. As if it was natural to hunt down whatever monsters lurked in the most dangerous corners of his tutorial.

He had gone above and beyond and come out of the tutorial more powerful than she thought possible. And what did he do then? He kept working; he kept grinding. Somehow, he had managed to find the time and do his alchemy also.

She respected him. But at the same time, she was terrified of how foreign he felt.

As she concluded, he was the second type of person. Ambitious and driven. But was he the archetype that would bring himself up, and by doing so, uplift everyone around him? Or the one who left others in his wake, squashed beneath him.

She worried because this wasn't just a corporate job we were talking about. It wasn't just a lost bonus or a missed promotion. It wasn't a bastard taking credit for work he didn't do or cheat on an evaluation.

It was the difference between letting others live and outright killing them. The difference between the ones killing the people they entered the trials with and those who worked together.

Miranda had been incredibly sure that the masked man was the good kind for the majority of their conversation. She had been so sure... until the end. Now she wasn't so confident. Was he a monster or a savior? Perhaps neither...

She looked down at the pond, her face easily reflected by the calm water. Her slightly haggard look was making her a bit embarrassed. Her long orange hair all curled up from not having a proper wash since leaving the tutorial.



If she had to say so herself, she looked quite good usually, but now she could easily be confused for being homeless. At least her skin was still as healthy as before. She found it weird how the system affected appearance through the evolutions.

The consensus had been that the change was according to the one evolving and their own desires. If you had flaws or blemishes you considered faults, the system would better them. It couldn't do significant changes, at least not at E-grade, but it could do smaller things according to what she encountered.

*The makeup industry would have gone under without a doubt*, she thought as she sat down at the edge of the pond and began clearing her face and hair. The water was cold and pleasant, and it was refreshing to finally start feeling cleaner.

"Miranda?" she heard a voice she recognized, turning around to see Hank standing a few meters away. Not staring at her, but the two chairs right behind her.

"Where did the masked man go?" he asked, appearing slightly worried. "And where did these chairs come from?"

"Oh, hey Hank," she said as she continued washing her hair. "I'm not sure where he went; he just said he was heading out for a bit. Oh, and the chairs are his."

"He had these chairs just lying around?" Hank asked, still kind of hung up on where the hell they came from. They were in the middle of a forest, hundreds of kilometers from

anything as far as he could tell. And the chairs were clearly old and made of wood he couldn't recognize at all.

"No, he summoned them out of thin air as far as I could tell. Waved his hands, and then a chair appeared in each of them."

"Are they real?" he asked, studying them more in-depth. He knew that some classes and professions had learned to summon things with skills. But they always consisted of mana and would disappear after a short while.

"They are," she answered.

"Hm," Hank said, finally deciding to move on from the subject. "What happened after I fell asleep?"

The man walked over and sat a few meters from her, as he also began cleaning himself. Perhaps seeing her do it and recognizing how long it had been.

He had a full beard that was full of leaves and small pieces of sticks. Not to mention the blackened blood that had made it all stiff. His arm was back to normal, but the blood that had splattered all over his face as it exploded hadn't disappeared.

"I sat watch as we agreed and kept an eye on him. After a while, he called me out on it, and we ended up sitting here and had a pleasant chat. It was very enlightening," Miranda said, not wanting to disclose the embarrassing circumstances in which it happened.

“Any useful information?” Hank asked, a bit bewildered that they had ended up having what she described as a ‘pleasant chat.’

“Oh, so much. First of all...” Miranda began recounting all the useful information she had learned. The things the masked man had known of the system, of skills and whatnot. About dungeons and about what he mentioned his tutorial was like, surprising Hank as he also learned that different types of tutorials existed.

“It is indeed unbelievable... different universes, these magical spaces you call dungeons, different tutorials, alchemy...” Hank said as he leaned back, having now had time to clean his face properly. “A shame you told me alone. Now I will have to explain it to the kids later.”

“Hmph, like you aren’t going to enjoy looking all knowledgeable and cool,” she chuckled as the man also smiled slightly. Something he hadn’t done often after his wife, her best friend, had died.

“How powerful do you think he is?” Hank finally asked. A question she had expected and considered.

“I truly don’t know. His profession is at a very high level, of that I am sure. And from his retellings, assuming they are true, he has also done plenty of fighting,” Miranda said. “I think... I think his race-level may be over level 60.”

“What? is that even possible?” Hank said, with wide eyes. “Clearly, he is strong, but to such an extent... are you sure he told the truth? Did you use that mental skill of yours?”

“I did... and he didn’t just notice it; he found it enjoyable as he said it helped him to understand how such a skill works or something. With the comment that it was far too weak to have any effect,” Miranda sighed.

“Is it safe to even stay here? He is gone now... but what if he decides just to get rid of us upon returning? From what you said, the talk didn’t end on a positive note,” Hank said, somewhat worried as he looked back towards his still sleeping children.

“I am not sure... but is anywhere really safe these days? The forest was hell. And Hank... we are weak. All of us. Can we truly make it on our own? Or just long enough to find help? With just us four... I think it’s safer to stay here. Besides, he didn’t look like a bad guy,” Miranda said.

“You saw his face?” Hank asked. “Forget it... let’s just stay here for now, at least till he returns. By the way, what did he say his name was?”

Miranda froze for a bit as she began fiddling with her hands. “I eh...”

“Yes?”

“I... forgot to ask?”

## Chapter 132: Big Blue Mushroom

*Truly disappointing*, Jake thought as he looked at the now-dead Alpha Mantis Scyther. A level 89 beast that was the lord of this biodome reduced to a headless corpse in what couldn't even be called a real fight.

If he had to compare it to something, it would be the Den Mother. And not in a favorable way for the mantis. Despite it being seven levels higher, the Den Mother had been stronger. More importantly, it had a much higher level of intelligence and many more skills in its toolbox.

Focusing on physical stats, the mantis likely had the Den Mother beaten. Without a doubt, himself too. It was also surprising that there even was such a high-level creature down in these caverns. This biodome in itself was a pleasant surprise.

With their leader dead, the mantises were no longer a threat either. Not that they ever had been. Jake made his way towards the center of this biodome. His Sense of the Malefic Viper telling him that something containing a lot of mana was there.

Little was in his way as he ran there, encountering only a few mantises that he quickly cut apart. Soon he found himself before the source of it all - a glowing blue crystal embedded in the ground, surrounded by wild plant life.

Using Identify on it, he got... nothing. No response at all. A phenomenon he had run into many times before. If he wanted to identify a piece of metal, wood, or crystal, it usually didn't work. He didn't have the required skill to do so from what he gathered.

Like how others couldn't use Identify on plants and toxic things. It was why Jake had the skills Herbology and Toxicology from his profession that allowed him such knowledge; the only outliers he had encountered so far were things in dungeons and special items during the tutorial. Those he had been able to identify without a problem.

Now the question was... should, and could, he take the big shiny crystal with him? He could clearly feel it pumping out vast amounts of pure mana to the surrounding area, and it was likely the source of life in this entire biodome. Taking it would possibly result in the whole cavern no longer being the sprawling place of life it was now.

Of course, all of this was dependent on his ability to even move the crystal, to begin with. It was rather large, sticking out of the ground around three meters up, with another three meters under the ground. It reminded him a bit of the Pylon at first, but there were also clear differences.

The Pylon was clearly a creation of the system, while this in front of him was just a somewhat standard giant mana crystal. Also... he was pretty damn sure he had run into this kind of crystal before. He just couldn't quite remember where.

Raising his hand, he lay it upon the crystal and felt that it felt just like a big piece of glass. Or a regular crystal. There was nothing incredible about it except for the mana it so clearly emanated into the biodome.

Activating his necklace, he tried to store the crystal, but he felt like there was some kind of resistance. He kept trying for a while but ended up admitting to himself that moving it wasn't possible. At least not in his storage. His sphere of perception revealing the reason.

Beneath the ground, hundreds of small vines and roots extended into the crystal. Following them, he could see that they belonged to all the plants around him. Most surprising, however, was the fungi. Or perhaps fungus would be more accurate.

Every single one of the giant blue mushrooms was a part of this one plant - all just one entity that spread beneath the ground. From a mycology standpoint, this was very interesting; sadly, Jake didn't care that much for mushrooms to begin with. In fact, he had quite the distaste for the damn things.

And for these to even dare to be blue... it was an offense he couldn't let slide lightly. And he really wanted to bring the big shining mana crystal with him. If not, just to figure out exactly what it was and test things with it.

So he took out his Omnitool and once more turned it into a shovel. Plunging it into the ground, he hit the roots of the mushrooms, and-

**OoOOoOOOOoooO**

A loud booming sound was heard throughout the entire biodome. The ground shook, and Jake was momentarily dumbstruck by what the hell was happening. All he had done was to sever a few roots of the damn fungus.

It had awakened something. An aura spread throughout the entire biodome, suppressing every living mantis still scouring about, making them freeze up in fear. It was the type of aura Jake had only felt once before - the one that came from the suppression of a higher grade.

The ground in front of him exploded as he was pushed away from the crystal, stabilizing himself quickly. The crystal itself rose into the air as countless vines spun around it, shielding it from sight. But it was not only the mushrooms acting up. Everything was. Now every single living plant in the entire dome was giving off the exact same aura.

He felt his skill Big Game Hunter hum to life, his strength and agility both being empowered. Meaning whatever he now faced was a higher level than him, and not to a negligible degree.

Eyes wide open, he used Identify on a random tree-like plant and got a result.

**[Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza – lvl ???]**

He had made quite an error. The mantis had never been the lord of this area; the true ruler had been the area itself. And now, finally, he saw it.

The mushrooms had invaded every single plant here. Made them a part of it. It was all one giant living creature, connected through a network of fungi.



Now, with it awake, it jumped into action. Hundreds of tendrils flew out of the ground, and the plants moved in concert. But not towards Jake only. He saw the metal-like tubes he had found interesting earlier penetrate the corpse of a dead mantis he had left nearby. Like a needle, it pierced into it, and in mere moments the corpse turned into an empty husk. Drained of all nutrients.

For a brief moment on his way here, he did wonder why he saw no corpses. Now he understood.

Tendrils flew towards him as the entire area shook. The ground right beneath him exploded once more, but he had seen it coming in his sphere long ago. He considered his options as he jumped away from the four spike-like roots that exploded from where he stood only moments ago.

What he stood before was an actual D-grade being. Above level 100, with unknown abilities. It wasn't like the mantis before. Logically the best plan would be to retreat, as he doubted the entire monstrosity could actually follow him. But...

He couldn't stop smiling. *Finally*. He had found something worth fighting.

This creature was very different from the King of the Forest. The King had been absolutely dominating at every step. The King possessed intelligence rivaling that of a human. Stats far above one. His only weakness was the tools given by the tutorial and his own arrogance.

The Indigo Fungus, however... he just didn't feel the same pressure. He had gotten stronger, and this... thing, was weaker than the King. But at the same time... he couldn't underestimate it and end up being fucked like he was against the King.

Jake kept dodging as the vines came for him from all sides. Often, he was forced to avoid being enclosed by vines with Shadow Vault or One Step Mile. His Sense of the Malefic Viper also yelled at him at the back of his head.

*Of course*, he thought, as he felt the poison seep into his body. Many of the mushrooms and other plants were poisonous and now released all their fumes into the air. He heard the shrieks of all the still-living mantises from all around the biodome. Dying slowly.

To Jake, on the other hand, it was almost pleasant. And it did give him an idea.

When fighting a creature roughly the size of ten football fields, the first problem: where the hell do you begin your attack? What to even attack?

The second problem: how to get to whatever weak point it may have?

The third problem: how to outlast such a creature, with its likely absolutely enormous resources?

All of these questions had a single answer. Poison. Because the fungus had one fatal flaw. It was all connected.

His grin only growing, he cleaved through a few vines with his sword and dagger. The attacks were endless. A spear-like root was attacking him to try and pierce him, but this one he didn't dodge. Instead, he caught it beneath his arm, holding it in a good old nelson.

At the same time, he knelt to avoid a blow as he began channeling Touch of the Malefic Viper. He saw his hands radiate a dark green color as dark-green veins began spreading down the root and into the ground.

For the first time, he got a real reaction.

**OoOOoOOOOooOoOOOooOO!**

He smiled to himself at first, but soon it turned to a frown. He felt his poison quickly being purified by the overwhelming vitality of the fungus. Another sharp tendril also emerged and cut off the root he was currently grasping, effectively ending his attack.

In the end, his attack had done little more than anger the fungus. Anger which materialized in the shape of more than a hundred roots shooting out of the ground all around him.

Before, it clearly hadn't focused on him at all, its attention split between himself and all the other living creatures still roaming about the biodome. Now, however, he had its sole undivided attention.

He was forced to activate Limit Break straight up to 20% right away. The attacks were both stronger and more numerous than before. Even while boosted, he failed to dodge all the attacks as several cuts began emerging on his arms and legs.

Finding time to counterattack was impossible, and he was forced to admit that he had been too arrogant in his approach. While his analysis of the monster's weakness was entirely accurate, he had forgotten one of the most important things... his own relative strength.

Yet, for the next few minutes, he kept trying. And while he did clearly cause some damage here and there, the only thing he achieved was to make the fungus more determined in killing the beast that had invaded it. He chucked poison bottles out and hit several mushrooms or plants, them withering fast as a result. But it was only a drop in the bucket.

Finally, it had enough. Jake felt a massive amount of mana in the air as it used a skill. He saw hundreds of giant mushrooms wither as light exited them only to gather midair floating above the biodome like a new sun.

Before he could grasp its intention, he felt his danger sense explode. His near-precognizant senses activated as he quickly covered his entire body in scales. And just in time as a blue beam hit him right in his midsection.

The entire ball of mana had been transformed into a special attack that blew him back hundreds of meters. The beam seared into his body as his armor was quickly burned through, leaving only his scales to take the brunt of the attack.

Luckily for him, the scales specialized in defending against magical attacks. But that did not mean it could in any way negate it. The scales all chipped and cracked on his chest, while the ones on his back practically shattered the moment he smashed into the cave wall.

Coughing up blood, he tried but failed to dislodge himself from the wall before the follow-up attack arrived. Nine needle-like thorns pierced into his stomach and chest and began sucking.

*Fuck*, he thought, enraged as he activated Blood of the Malefic Viper. *If you want my blood, you better enjoy it.*

Something the fungus clearly did not.

The thorns began withering right away as the toxic blood entered them. With a swipe of his arm, Jake broke them all off like rotten wood. Free at last, he dislodged himself from the wall and charged towards where he had entered the biodome from.

His health and stamina were both draining fast as he didn't hold back on using Shadow Vault and One Step Mile. At this point, he had truly realized that this wasn't a fight he could win, but it was one he could survive.

Running, he soon spotted the exit. Only to see roots emerge and cut it off. Simultaneously, a figure rose from the earth just in front of thorns' newly erected wall. A giant creature,

made up of roots and mushrooms, clearly strung together from tens or perhaps hundreds of different plants.

It didn't look remotely humanoid, as the only feature that did so was its two arms. It didn't have a head, and it was like only the construct's upper body emerged. Yet it towered over ten meters into the air as he formed yet another barrier between him and his escape.

Jake didn't hesitate as he took out his bow and an arrow. For the first time since returning to Earth, he had to use his signature skill on full power - the one that had carried him through the tutorial time and time again.

Nocking the arrow, he felt the mana and stamina built up as he pulled back the string. The air hummed, and the earth cracked in his wake from the pent-up mana. After only a few seconds, he let it go, yet it was the strongest arrow he had ever released.

### **Infused Powershot**

The arrow flew out at supersonic speed and pierced straight through the giant construct. But it didn't stop there as it went straight through into the wall of thorns, blasting a hole more than large enough for a human to get through.

Before the fungus had a chance to close the hole, he stared down the construct with Gaze of the Primal Hunter, freezing it in place for only a moment. He felt a slight headache from doing so, but it was enough. As the construct was a part of the larger monster, it froze the entire biodome. Just long enough for him to take a step forward.

A step that took him through the hole and out of the biodome, and he didn't stop there as he began sprinting further away from the cursed place. Roots were extending through the tunnel, trying to chase him down behind him.

Luckily the fungus didn't have any intention, or perhaps ability, to follow him for long. After not even a hundred meters, the roots stopped and retracted back to the biodome once more. Jake let himself fall back to the ground as he breathed out in relief.

"Well, that went well," he joked to himself as he took out a health potion to chug down. At the same time, he deactivated Limit Break and felt a sense of weakness wash over him.

Once more, he had been shown that D-grades most certainly weren't to be underestimated. But despite losing, he wasn't discouraged at all. Instead, he felt a sense of relief. He had feared that powerful enemies would only be found in the different Danger Zones. That he wouldn't be able to encounter any real challenges.

Yet, in only a few hours, he had encountered two enemies above his level, one of them even D-grade. It gave him a target to instantly begin working towards, as different plans and hypotheses to take down the giant fungus already began forming in his mind.

For now, however, he would have to recuperate. Recuperate and return to his little camp to continue his practice in alchemy. And this time, he had something to work directly towards.

If fighting the fungus with his current means wasn't enough... if his current poisons weren't toxic enough... he would just have to make something better. A special cocktail for the dear fungus, if you will.

He was already smiling to himself as he envisioned his next encounter with the thing as he entered meditation.

## Chapter 133: Delegating (avoiding) responsibilities

Jake had been more injured than he had first thought. Then again, he did have quite a few giant needles pierce into his chest and attempt to suck him dry of any and all vitality. Nevertheless, it wasn't something a healing potion or two couldn't fix. He quite honestly felt bad for all those out there without the ability to get themselves healed.

If he had to rely on his natural regeneration, it would take days to heal the last bout's damage. To restore his entire 10000+ health pool would require more than a week. Maybe more, as health regenerated slower, the lower it was.

His armor was also pretty damn broken. His chest was exposed entirely as the mana beam had burned his chestpiece to tatters. Luckily the Self-Repair enchant made the armor virtually unbreakable unless utterly obliterated, and even then, it might not even disappear if it was completely destroyed as it was "bound" to him.

The problem was that it would take some time for it to repair itself, so he would have to go shirtless once more for a while. Oddly nostalgic in a sense, as he remembered his many shirtless days.



Getting up, he began making his way back out of the cave and back to his small basecamp once more. He had only been gone for several hours, but it had been more than worthwhile. He discovered a D-grade entity, got some experience, and picked up many different mushrooms and moss to play with.

*Miranda and those three others should also have left by now*, he thought. Their parting had been less than ideal, but sometimes that is how life is. She was a good conversation partner, but they clearly had different goals when it came to this new reality of theirs.

He had also determined for himself to not just aim to survive but strive for greater power. He wouldn't fault others for merely wanting to survive, as he genuinely understood where they were coming from. Before the system, he hadn't had any real ambitions but was just happy with what he had.

His only real motivation to improve was external. It was to make his parents proud, gain social status, and earn enough money for a comfortable life. Now that had changed. His motivation was entirely internal. He wanted to grow stronger, not for anyone else but himself. It was without a doubt selfish, but he honestly didn't care. One of the perks of power being that other's opinions stopped holding power over you.

Only through power could he attain total freedom. But he knew he had a very long way to go. Even an overgrown mushroom had beaten the crap out of him. But as long as he stayed true to his path, he firmly believed that he would one day reach the pinnacle. Or at least die doing something he loved, no matter how cliché that sounds.

As he thought, the exit of the cave finally came into sight. The bright light was now replaced with the orange glow of the evening sun. He wasn't in a hurry as he walked back, still a bit sore. Likely due to the aftereffects of Limit Break.

The trek was short, but as he got closer, he was surprised to hear voices. Going low, he used Advanced Stealth as he snuck closer to his camp. Peeking out from behind a tree, he saw Miranda and Hank together with the two teenagers - all sitting at the pond.

He had thought they would leave. Miranda had been quite distraught when he left... but that wasn't the real issue.

Jake had walked off with the thought that their parting would be final. Now... he wasn't quite sure what exactly to do. Would it be awkward to just stroll back to the pond, intruding on the four of them?

*Fuck, this is my pond, and the Pylon is buried right there. Stop being a wuss and get in there.* He tried to hype himself up. Yeah, he was a goddamn Progenitor of this universe, a Kingslayer, a Prodigy, and all that shizzle. There was no way he would let social anxiety beat him like this!

So he only waited around passively for 10 more minutes before realizing they clearly weren't going to leave the pond any time soon. That is when he remembered his ultimate weapon: the mask that was hiding his face. Steeling his will, he entered the fray, trying to look as confident as ever.

Walking out from behind the tree, he walked casually towards the pond, not trying to hide whatsoever, instantly drawing the attention of all four of them. Their reactions differed wildly.

The young man Mark looked slightly frightened, Miranda a bit concerned, Hank frowned, and Louise's face turned bright red.

The first to speak was Miranda. "What happened?"

Jake, a bit taken by surprise by the question asked. "What do you mean?"

"Your condition... what attacked you?" she reiterated.

This was the point where Jake remembered how he currently looked. Tattered armor, dried blood covering his bare upper body, and several still healing scars where the needle-like thorns had pierced his chest and stomach. In other words, he looked like he had just walked out of a life and death battle. Quite accurate, actually.

"Oh... that. Nothing of importance, and don't worry, what I fought cannot come here," Jake said, adding mentally, *at least I don't think it can.*

"I meant, are you fine? Is that your blood?" she asked, the concerned look not directed at the potential danger but his own wounds - something he hadn't expected.

"No worries, nothing a healing potion or two couldn't fix," he answered with a smile. Not that they could see it for the mask, though.

“That is good to hear...” she said, relieved.

Jake, at the same time, kept an eye on the three others. While none of them was a threat, he didn’t exactly know them at all. He hadn’t even spoken a word to them before, Miranda taking charge of their group.

“I didn’t think you would stay,” he said, breaking the silence.

“I... can’t we?” she asked, clearly a bit afraid. Jake also saw Hank and the young man tense up. The young teenage girl was still staring at him weirdly for some reason.

“Nothing’s stopping you. But my requirements from before still stand. I want peace and quiet for my alchemy,” Jake answered. While the forest technically belonged to him due to the Pylon, it wasn’t like he planned on forcing anyone who entered out of it.

“Thank goodness,” she smiled, relieved. “We honestly wouldn’t know where to go. And for some reason, no beasts want to enter this area, so it is the safest area we have seen so far.”

“Yeah... about that,” Jake said, as he got an idea. “Can I speak with you privately?”

Miranda looked a bit surprised at the request but accepted it. Hank also appeared totally okay with leading his two children away. Mark happily followed, while Louise still kept staring at him with a red face and weird expression.

Hank eventually just yanked her by her collar as the three left, leaving Jake alone with Miranda.

“Chairs are still here,” he noted, indicating for them to sit, which they did.

This time Jake took the initiative as he made his mask invisible to reveal his face. He felt a bit proud of himself for remembering that one – a sense of pride that was crushed by Miranda’s next words.

“How come you are half-naked, by the way? Did that armor break completely?”

“Fuck me,” he said accidentally out loud, quickly trying to explain himself while admonishing himself for forgetting his current state again within 5 minutes. “Eh... well, it’s in my spatial storage while it’s repairing itself.”

As he said that, he took out one of the many shirts he had swiped from the challenge dungeon. They were shitty quality and far less comfortable than his armor, but at least they covered him up a bit.

“Spatial storage?” she questioned, hiding a smile as he put on the shirt.

“It’s something an item of mine can do. I can store items within it. Mine even has the function of keeping all kinds of alchemical ingredients frozen in time to keep them fresh,” he answered truthfully. He didn’t see any point in hiding it with the plan he had formed.

“Interesting...” she said, as she kept asking. “But can you tell me what exactly you fought that caused your armor to require such repair?”

“There is a cave nearby that leads deep underground, wherein I discovered a huge biodome of sorts. Therein I encountered a D-grade entity and was forced to retreat,” he calmly explained.

“D-grade... aren’t those above level 100?” she asked, shocked.

“Yeah, at least. Each grade is quite a qualitative upgrade, too, meaning the difference between level 99 and 100 is huge. I am sure you remember the difference between 24 and 25, so think of it like that but much more extreme.”

“That is... quite something. To face such a thing... I can’t even imagine fighting something like that tiger,” Miranda sighed powerlessly.

“Actually, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. What is your goal in this new world?” Jake asked.

“My goal?” she asked, a bit confused at first, but soon began thinking. “To survive, I guess?”

“How do you plan on surviving?” he pressured her.

“I know what you are getting at... but I am not a fighter. I can’t face down beasts and monsters every day like you and Hank,” she answered, a bit ashamed at her own perceived weakness.

“It isn’t like fighting is the only way to survive,” he said. “But in either case, you do need power. So I ask again, how do you plan on surviving?”

She sat silently for a while until she resolutely looked him in the eye. “By making someone powerful like you protect me.”

“For that to happen, you have to offer something that makes it worth the hassle. And even then, it’s a fragile thing if you don’t even have a modicum of strength yourself,” Jake said, pleasantly surprised by her honesty. It made this entire conversation easier.

“You asked me earlier why no monsters enter this area. It is because of what lies buried in the earth right below our feet. A thing called a Pylon of Civilization. As the name suggests, it is an item made for founding a civilization, or in this case, a city,” he explained.

Miranda just sat there listening while peeking down on the ground.

“I have no desire at all to make a city, much less rule one. But at the same time, it would be a waste not to use the Pylon properly. So my proposition is this: become the city lord of this Pylon and found a city here. I will stay as the on-paper ruler while you pretty much do everything.”

“What would I-“ she began saying before she got interrupted by something Jake couldn’t see. He smirked to himself as his prediction proved true.

“Principal City Lord?” she asked him questionably.

“Had my suspicions that the system wanted someone to take it. So, do you want the job?” Jake smiled. He could vaguely feel the system offering it and his own ability to stop it from doing so.

“It says I need to have at least the title of Lord to get the profession...” she sighed.

Jake barely managed to frown before he got interrupted by a new message.

**Do you wish to grant Miranda Wells a nobility title? Note that as an Earl, you can only appoint 5 Lords (0/5 used), 3 Barons (0/3 used), and 1 Viscount (0/1 used)**

He was a bit surprised at the message but not overly much. The only truly surprising thing was the number of titles he could grant and wondering why the system so clearly used the old British royalty system. Not that he was complaining.



“I can give you a title. But before I do that, we need to come to an agreement,” Jake said as he summoned a pen and paper from his spatial storage.

“A contract?” she asked, actually smiling at the thought of how ‘normal’ writing down a contract in what was essentially an employment-situation was.

“Easier to remember if we write it down and agree on the terms. Besides, I have a feeling this method is more comfortable for the both of us,” Jake said. While he hadn’t written any legal contracts before, he had signed and read plenty.

Not that this was a legal contract. No laws really bound them but their own words. But then again... perhaps words and promises themselves held power beyond human understanding in this new reality of theirs.

“I agree. I can see the profession’s description, but as always, it is comprehensive... but the stat points per level alone are shocking. It’s more than pretty much all other classes or professions I have encountered so far,” Miranda said, clearly probing at Jake as to why he was willing just to give it away. “Also, what exactly do you expect of me?”

After that, the two of them spent the better half of an hour discussing the contract. To sum it all up, Jake wanted not to be burdened by the responsibilities and downsides of being a City Lord, but at the same time still wanted the benefits of a high-level noble who was technically in charge of a city.

Miranda wanted safety and a promise to have his backing if she was supposed to run a city. She would also get a powerful profession and a lot of organizational power as she would effectively be in charge of everything. Jake did stipulate a veto, though, and that he was at the top.

While it all may seem a bit overboard for a city that is only five people in total currently, both of them knew it wouldn't stay like that. Billions had survived the tutorials, and it was only a matter of time before more found their way here. The fact that this place was a safe haven due to the Pylon would undoubtedly make it a beacon of sorts. Not many would come due to its isolated location, but some would.

She also had to confess that the prospect of running an entire city did appeal to her. While she didn't have much confidence in fighting monsters, she did have faith in her ability to handle politics and management.

So, in the end, they agreed on a four-page contract, which they both signed to no great fanfare. Both knew it was a contract based only on trust, but then again, in many ways, so were contracts before the system.

With that, Jake granted her the title of Viscount. While she only needed to be a Lord, he had already decided to make her his partner in this endeavor. To hold back and give her a worse title didn't make sense and would possibly only lead to problems down the line. Besides... who else would he give it to?

Accepting the profession, Miranda was momentarily overwhelmed as the knowledge entered her mind. Knowledge she would take a while to truly comprehend. At the same time, Jake felt the shift in the mana in the air. Not only could he find wisps of his own mana within it now, but hers too.

They said their farewells as Jake stayed to do his alchemy, and Miranda returned to Hank and the others. On the way, she couldn't help but smile as she got a bit giddy. Maybe... just maybe, she could carve out her own little space in this world.

## Chapter 134: Construction plans

Jake felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders as he saw Miranda leave. Keeping up his professional persona did take some effort, but he was happy that it wasn't *that* bad to interact with Miranda.

For the last two weeks, the lost potential of the Pylon had been bothering him more than it probably should. Jake knew the offered profession was powerful, and he was curious to see what it could give. But as he didn't have any desire to pick it up himself, it was just lying there.

Which is when he got the idea to offer the job to Miranda. As he talked, he had stretched a small strand of mana down to touch the Pylon, allowing him to offer the profession. When he asked if she wanted it, the system read his intentions. It was a bit of a gamble, but his guts told him it would work.

He was a bit afraid of the prospects of a city where he was essentially the highest authority. Heck, just a small settlement was scary. On that subject, Miranda had offered that he could just keep up his mysterious masked protector persona. She seemed more than happy enough to just do everything while he would be the enigmatic figure standing behind her.

She was clearly reaching for a type of power far more structural than Jake. To make herself indispensable to the city and tie her own fate with the success of this settlement.

It wasn't the same as he would do, but he could acknowledge her path having some potential. Besides, if she did things well, she would likely get many levels and thus stats, making her powerful even in direct combat.

He also predicted that the profession would include several ways for the City Lord to protect him or herself. At least the description hinted heavily at that. But all that was for another time. They had agreed on a meeting at next sundown, where they would go over the profession and some more plans for what to do if or when more people arrived.

For now, his focus would return to alchemy. He had encountered an enemy below that he had to admit his bow could do little to nothing against.

Its entire body covered a few square kilometers, and while it certainly had weak points, he doubted it would die without at least the majority of its body being destroyed. He was even beginning to suspect that the mana crystal he found at the start was its way of luring its prey.

The Indigo Mushroom was clearly an immobile monster, bound to the area where it was born. But if the crystal could attract powerful beasts or even humans like himself, it would surely get plenty of prey to feast upon.

Its attack pattern had been relatively simple for the majority of the fight, but at the end had shown a modicum of tactical prowess when it distracted and limited his movements with roots, only to blast him with the beam of mana. The quick follow-up with the needles was also clearly a part of the 3-step attack.

He did discover the effectiveness of his toxins too. Both his blood and Touch of the Malefic Viper killed the roots and plants nearly instantly. They decayed in seconds, and while that

was good for getting the needles off him at the last moment, it wasn't handy if he aimed to kill the damn thing.

If it rotted too quickly, the poison wouldn't have as much time to spread. It also made it far more comfortable for the thing to cut off any infected part of it.

In the last few weeks, he had been mainly focused on making potions, more accurately on brewing common-rarity versions of all three resource potions. Now, it was time to shift his focus back on what his profession was really about: Poisons.

He wanted to design a poison directly aimed at the damn mushroom. He needed it to be powerful but slow. No matter what, the fight would be a marathon and not a sprint.

Necrotic poisons were out instantly. That type worked best against flesh and blood targets, and the same was true for any kind of hemotoxin as mushrooms tend not to have blood. Aka, his two most used types of poison were ineffective.

With that being the case, he would need something new - something designed for killing plants. A super-weed killer, if you may. Unluckily for him, he had never been much into gardening, so he didn't really know what kind of toxin was good against mushrooms.

On the other hand, did it even matter? This thing was clearly not an ordinary mushroom. So he did what he always did when in doubt. He dove his mind into his spatial necklace and summoned the bookshelves he had hidden within.

A small library appeared around him as he began going through them one by one. While he had read a bit about plant-focused toxins in the more general books on poison, he hadn't ever really delved into it. He had mainly been fighting beasts, after all.

It didn't take him long to discover a few books that may be interesting. **Gardening for Novices: Weeds & How to Kill Them**, followed by **Basic Mycology I, II, III, IV, V**, and so on and so forth. It was an entire series. While none of them directly related to concocting a poison, they would make him better understand what he was facing. Of course, these were far from the only ones he had picked to go through, but these were the ones that appeared most obviously helpful.

From the conversation with the Viper, he learned that none of them were considered high level despite the plethora of books available. But they did cover a lot of useful knowledge from F-D grade and would help push him further for an additional hundred levels easily.

He summoned the bed that he hadn't used in quite a while, as he sat on it with his legs crossed. It reminded him of being back in the challenge dungeon once more, only this time he didn't aim to cure himself of deadly poison. This time he would be the one making it.

Reading the books should go fast with his increased stats, but the books' writing was clearly designed for those with stats. He didn't know if it was because of his utterly overpowered translation skill, but the text didn't really fit on the pages.

It was likely written in a script that took up far less space than English or any other human language. Which, in essence, meant that each page held several times more content than the last. The paper itself was also so impossibly thin that each book had far more pages than reasonable for one its size. By human standards, that is.

Before he knew it, he was interrupted as a person entered his sphere of perception. She didn't approach any closer as he finished up the page he was currently on and closed the book.

"Time sure flies by," he said with a smile as he looked up at her. It was amazing how he wasn't tired despite immersing himself in books for nearly 24 hours. Was this the dividends from investing so much in his perception?

"You look like you've been busy. And these books... exactly how big is this spatial storage of yours?" Miranda said, staring at the dozens of large bookcases standing on the ground.

It honestly looked quite silly - two chairs, a bed, and a bunch of bookcases standing out in the wild like that. It was the saddest library for homeless people she had ever seen.

"Big enough," he answered, also recognizing how silly it looked. "So, how is it to be the new Principal City Lord?"

"There is quite a lot to go over, actually. I have gotten a few skills that grant me access to certain systems. For example, I can see how many people are within the domain of the Pylon. This is actually one of the things I wanted to ask about... I can't see you with the skill," she explained.

"I have a good guess why you can't. It is likely the same thing that also makes using Identify on me harder," he explained, eyeing his Shroud of the Primordial skill. With its rating being Divine, he didn't doubt its effectiveness of hiding him.

“Alright then. The rest of the skills are mainly ones helping me to plan out the construction of a city, and even one that increases the amount of experience earned for citizens when they do things that aren’t related to combat,” she continued her explanation.

“Oh, I know about that last one; it was actually already there. Interesting to see it is now a skill. Which is quite good as it means it can now be upgraded,” Jake nodded along.

“I also talked with Hank about beginning to actually make things. The three of them naturally decided to stay, and as this looks to be our long-term home, we discussed constructing some houses. Hank got an upgraded Builder profession and actually worked in construction before the system, so I think he would do well in that department.”

“Sounds good to me,” he agreed.

“So the first thing is... we want to defend the Pylon, correct? Not just from potential enemies, but we need to keep its existence, or at least location, hidden for as long as possible correct?” she asked.

He nodded once more, as they already agreed on this yesterday.

“Where it is currently is fine, and you clearly like this place. For a good reason,” she added, looking out at the pond and the waterfall. “I thought that maybe we could build a house right here on top of where you hid it?”



“Wouldn’t that be obvious? And is finding it not quite easy, considering the aura it gives off and the fact that it is so clearly located at the center of the city?” he asked, a bit skeptical. He had considered maybe building some kind of vault or something to hide the thing in.

“Well, as I will be the official leader to the public eye, I think most would expect me to be in charge of the Pylon. On top of that, who would dare to snoop around the strongest person’s personal abode in the city on a mere suspicion that a Pylon may be here? Of course, this is dependent on you remaining the strongest, but for some reason, I don’t think that will prove an issue for you,” she said with a cheeky wink.

“Still doesn’t solve the issue of it being pretty damn clear where it is if you have a skill or any practice sensing mana,” he replied, still skeptical.

“About that... one of my skills allows me to influence the zone the Pylon affects. In other words, it doesn’t have to be a perfect circle, and I can even restrict it to be smaller. Simply by getting the profession, the area affected has already grown quite a bit compared to just a few days ago, and I think it will keep growing based on my level in the profession,” Miranda added, continuing.

“Additionally, you don’t have to be afraid of anyone sensing the Pylon. I have a mana sensing skill, and I couldn’t sense its location before becoming the City Lord. And the knowledge I got when I became City Lord also made it clear that it is impossible to detect with any ordinary means.”

“Hm, that is good to know,” he nodded, one fear expelled from his mind. “What are your thoughts on expanding the area? And if a city or just small town is to be built, where will it be?”

“I talked over this with Hank, and I think we will keep the valley clear of any buildings. Make it a restricted area. That way, you can get your desired peace, and we can protect the Pylon more easily. Your role, as we talked about earlier, is to be the mysterious protector living here. If luck has it, many will likely even think you are the source of beasts staying away, and not the Pylon,” she said.

“Painting me out to be some kind of monster, aren’t you?” he joked.

“A little,” she chuckled, returning the smile. “But isn’t that good? Who wants to mess with a monster?”

“I guess that is fine. So, what is your first plan of action?” Jake asked, changing the subject away from his own supposed monstrosity.

“To build you a house,” she answered promptly.

“Huh?”

“Look around you, for god’s sake. You just have furniture standing on the bare ground right next to a pond. If anyone needs a house, it’s you. Of course, that will also have the practical implication of hiding the Pylon as discussed,” she explained.

Jake tried to argue back a few times but was shot down promptly at every turn. Miranda had come determined to make the first structure his house, whether he liked it or not. And

Jake had to admit that maybe it was a bit *too* silly having even bookcases standing out in the open like this.

In the end, they agreed, and with a huge smile, Miranda went to fetch Hank. It wouldn't be built in a day, but they still needed to plan out what exactly to make. And as Hank would be the one actually making it, he kind of needed to be present for that stage.

Who came back wasn't only Hank, however, but the two kids also following behind him. Jake had at least covered himself with a simple shirt at this time, and the instant he sensed them coming, he also hid his face once more by making the mask reappear.

They had decided that he would keep up his mysterious persona even towards Hank and the two kids. Because while Miranda trusted Hank, she didn't trust Hank not to tell his kids, and from what he heard, Louise was a real tattler. While they had seen his face once... it shouldn't lead to any issues in the future. Heck, Miranda could likely convince them that it was just an illusion or something if it came down to it.

Sadly, he only had two chairs, so they ended up all just standing as they met in front of the pond in solidarity. Hank was the first to speak.

"This is where we want to build?" he asked, looking at the bookcases, chairs, and bed. "It is a bit close to the water, but it is more than doable."

A man of action. Jake liked that as he didn't even have to say anything, with Hank already surveying the area.

“Any preferred material?” he asked, quickly adding. “I would advise wood as I have a profession specialized in making wooden structures. And wood is abundant being in a forest and all. But if you want, we can dig up some clay and make bricks, but it will take far longer.”

“Wood is fine, as long as it can stand high heat,” he answered, thinking of his alchemy. It would suck to burn down his new home first thing.

“Shouldn’t be a problem, I got an enchantment to help with that,” he nodded. “I plan on doing a simple one-plane wooden lodge. Two entrances, one at the front, one at the back leading directly out to the pond, while adding a small terrace of sorts. Louise?”

The girl, who Jake had noticed still staring at him weirdly, quickly took out a stack of papers from who-knows-where as well as summoned a small pen. Both likely conjured through some skill.

“Louise got an artist profession, one related to drawing and painting,” Miranda explained, as the young girl began drawing something on the paper. Hank was standing behind her, pointing and giving pointers here and there.

The young man Mark just stood awkwardly at the back. Having clearly followed along, he didn’t want to be left alone when everyone else went to the valley.

After ten minutes or so, the father and daughter pair had a sketch ready; one Jake just approved without looking at it much. He had never really been picky about where he lived, and his current stance was that anything was better than nothing.

“Putting on a second floor if needed in the future is also possible. How about a cellar?” Hank asked.

“No need,” Jake quickly dismissed. That would just reveal the damn Pylon right away. Though on second thought... ”Actually, yeah, make a cellar. Could be useful:”

Hank was a bit confused at his quick dismissal into a full 180 but just shrugged.

After a bit longer, Hank and his kids left to collect some wood and further refine the plan. Jake and Miranda being the only ones left in the valley.

“A cellar?” she asked, confused.

“Yeah. But not directly below the house. I got a plan.”

He couldn’t help smiling as he explained his genius plan.

## Chapter 135: First World Problems

Jake sat cursing to himself near the cave entrance he had exited just a bit over a day ago. He wasn't here for a rematch with the Indigo Mushroom, but instead just to do his alchemy. The reason for his sour mood was because he, in his stupidity, forgot the book he was right in the middle of reading back at the pond.

Could he go back and get it? In theory, yes. Would he? Hell no. They had already begun constructing his new house, and Miranda, together with Louise, seemed very adamant about him staying away until it was done - something that should take less than a week.

While they hadn't explicitly stated he couldn't go there, he very much got that feeling from them. He had helped a bit by leaving behind a few dozen potions of all three kinds. They were some of the mid-tier iterations he made in his two weeks of mass-production, but they were still peak-inferior or common.

He had explained to Miranda about his plan of making the cellar. They had decided to simply build around the pillar while making the cellar. To make the basement a square with a hole in the middle holding the Pylon, it merely looking like a supporting beam for the entire house.

It wasn't strictly necessary due to the builder profession's skills and the far improved raw materials compared to pre-system construction, but aesthetically it would look relatively normal.

The reason why he wanted to do it like that was relatively simple. He wanted to make that cellar into his secret alchemy lab to truly keep anyone out, which meant that he would make it a place where no one could easily enter.

He had learned from both Duskleaf and the Viper that alchemists of the Malefic Viper often designed their labs with affinities in mind. They often flooded a room with a certain kind of poison gas, creating a field of deadly miasma where anyone without strong poison resistance would quickly find themselves poisoned and dying.

If he could do that in the cellar, it would function as both an improved lab, and at the same time, keep anyone too nosy out. Quite a win-win if he said so himself. And from how Hank spoke during their final stages of planning, the man seemed like he knew how to do his job. The fact that he had been working in construction before the system was showing.

Though it was a bit surprising that the quiet kid Mark had followed in his father's footsteps and chosen the builder profession. In retrospect, this was quite a nice thing, as it would speed up the construction by quite a bit.

Louise served as the architect, and Miranda was apparently still messing around with her new skills. She had been above level 40 before her profession change but surprisingly hadn't lost a single skill. She had only gained new ones. A part of Jake couldn't help but wonder if this could somehow be meta-gamed by switching between professions, but then again, it more likely just had something to do with the City Lord profession being unique.

He was sure that he would have lost any skills related to the Malefic Viper if he changed. And speaking of skills associated with the Malefic Viper... he felt level 70 creep closer than ever before. So with nothing else to do, he began making the final push.

As his book was left behind, he just began experimenting instead. He already had gotten a few ideas, so he started by testing those. He still had many ingredients from the challenge dungeon left, and he reckoned some of those had to be useful.

Only a few hours later, he got his level.

***\*'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 70 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

And with it the expected message.

***\*Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper profession skills available\****

The last time he got a skill at level 60, he got offered quite a few useful skills, with Sagacity of the Malefic Viper being the clear standout. It was a no-brainer.

But when he opened it this time... he saw five options as always. He ignored two of them right away, both of them being rare skills related to being some fanatical prophet for the Viper or whatever. No, the issue was the next 3.

***[Wings of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – Refusing to remain earthbound, the Malefic Viper sprung wings to devour the skies. You too refuse to be earthbound. Allows the Alchemist to summon two phantasmal wings and take flight. While active, you can burn the blood within the wings and release potent toxic fumes. The toxicity and effect of the poison are based on Blood of the Malefic Viper. Toughness and maneuverability of the wings and speed are based primarily on agility but receive a bonus from all physical stats. The wings count as part of your body for all relevant skills. Passively provides 1 Agility per level in Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May the sight of your wings be the harbinger of death.***



***[Fang of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – When born, the Viper had little weapons to fight with, yet it prevailed only with its fangs. Its bites the deliverer of death. As a human, you have taken inspiration and learned to apply the same concept. Allows the Alchemist to coat his teeth in deadly venom, sharing all the same effects as Blood of the Malefic Viper in an empowered state. Additionally, all poisons you have crafted or created are significantly more effective when injected directly into the body of your foes. Passively provides 1 Strength per level in Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May you bring death in a single strike.***

***[Pride of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – The arrogance and strong will of the Malefic Viper is known throughout the multiverse. Now, you have learned to take after him, your own pride now a tangible weapon. Allows the Alchemist to force their will upon the world far more easily. Significantly increases the effect of all Words of Power spoken. Your pride increases all resistance to any kind of mind-affecting effects but be warned that it wanes in despair. Passively provides 1 Willpower per level in Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your will be truth, your pride eternal.***

Reading through all of them was quite something. Each one powerful, each one ominous in its own way. He wanted all of them, but he could only pick one. This was by far the most challenging skill choice he had ever had. Truly the definition of a first-world problem.

So, he returned to his true and tested method of going through them one by one. Starting from the top as always

First off: Wings of the Malefic Viper. The biggest pro of this skill was in the name alone. Wings. Flight. What human didn't desire to sprout wings and take to the air like a bird? It was enough for him to nearly make the impulsive decision of just picking the skill up right away.

He had to calm himself down and analyze it more objectively. Of course, the ability to fly was a huge plus and would very likely serve him incredibly well in combat. One of his most significant weaknesses currently was his inability to move properly when airborne. He had to fire off blasts of mana to push him in different directions, and that was both ineffective and wasted a lot of mana.

The part about burning the blood within the wings was also impressive. It even burned the blood from Jake's Blood of the Malefic Viper, once more proving the synergy between all the skills.

Burning this blood would give him an area of effect ability. It could even be effective against the Indigo Mushroom that he was having trouble dealing with. If he could release toxic gas into the chamber, he could potentially kill it. Though he seriously doubted it for several reasons. Likely it could just retreat underground or something.

The final good part was the stats given. Outside of perception, agility was the stat Jake desired the most, and, if he had to be honest with himself, needed most for direct combat. Perception was a weird stat, that while helping his damage quite a lot, didn't have much effect outside of boosting his skills and bloodline. At least not as far as he could directly tell.

Agility, on the other hand, helped tremendously. It allowed Jake to move faster, improved his reaction speed, and of course, also helped boost pretty much all of his class-related abilities. It was a stat he very much wanted, and picking the skill would instantly get him 70 in it. Factoring in his title bonuses, it would be closer to 120.

But... all of the skills gave stats. Another stat Jake felt like he could never have enough of was strength.

Fang of the Malefic Viper was a skill that was clearly just directly combat-related. It didn't even appear to have a single application while doing alchemy. Then again, neither did the wings.

The application for combat it gave was quite massive for his current fighting style. He chose to completely ignore the part about coating his teeth in poison, as there was no way he would go around biting people. He wasn't some kind of vampire. *Wait, do vampires exist now? Do they sparkle or not?* Moving on.

It also again borrowed from Blood of the Malefic Viper. He was happy that he had managed to upgrade it to ancient-rarity, as it would hamper many other skills if he hadn't. Then again... maybe he wouldn't have even gotten these options without it.

Thinking back, he didn't have any of them when he hit 60 despite the skill being upgraded then. Sagacity might have also been a pre-requisite.

Focusing back on Fang, however, there wasn't honestly much to say about it. It was relatively simple but would very likely provide him the most significant boost in overall fighting power here and now. Making all toxins he injected directly into his enemies stronger was just massive.

He knew it worked with his arrows. Why he knew, he didn't know. He just did. If he had to guess, it was likely related to Sagacity giving him knowledge of things. But the knowledge still felt locked away for the most part.

So, if he purely wanted to be stronger in combat, he would go for Fang.

Wing and Fang had both been relatively straightforward, but the last one was a bit of a curveball.

Pride of the Malefic Viper was the kind of skill that had more things in the description he didn't get than he actually understood. Sagacity was not helping at all here for some reason. Honestly, what the hell?

Force his will upon the world? Words of Power? He didn't get any of those. Like, could he just think stuff, and then it happened? Was that what it meant by forcing his will upon the world?

Maybe it instead was some kind of mind-affecting skill? One part of the skill he did get was the fact that it improved his mental defenses. That part he very much desired. However, he did find the whole 'waned in despair' part a bit ominous.

Getting more stats in willpower was also easily understood. However, Jake had to say that the stat was his most useless by far. Aside from the passive effects of improving mental defenses and increasing mana regeneration, he didn't notice it at all.

Even the mana regeneration part barely mattered as he chugged down mana potions like a teenager consumed energy drinks during a 24-hour gaming session. The mental defenses were passive, making it also unnoticeable.

He had already been explained that willpower didn't help with mental things that weren't affected by skills, so it wasn't like he could overcome his social anxiety by dumping more stats into it. If that worked, he wouldn't find talking to anyone besides Miranda as complicated as he did.

It was pretty safe to say that he wouldn't go with Pride. He knew that he would pick up all three skills, the next one at 80 and the final at 90. If he also managed to get his Sense and Touch of the Malefic Viper to ancient-rarity, and his theory proved true, he would have completed the 'set.'

For now, however, he needed to make a choice. He liked pretty much all of them, the last one the least, of course. Now he just needed to decide.

...

After sitting for a while, unable to decide on anything, he took out a piece of paper and wrote down each skill's pros and cons.

***[Wings of the Malefic Viper]:***

Pros: Freaking wings. Gives agility (best). Good in combat. Area of effect attack

Cons: Lots of unknowns as to the strength of the wings. Not as useful/impossible to use in small spaces.

***[Fang of the Malefic Viper]:***

Pros: Best in combat. Can technically make an improved version of Blood of the Malefic Viper. Can technically bite people better? Gives strength (second best).

Cons: Does not give flight. I don't wanna bite people. A relatively simple skill.

***[Pride of the Malefic Viper]:***

Pros: Increases mental defense. Probably other good things?

Cons: Not understanding half of what it does. Needs to avoid despair (obvious). Gives willpower (worst stat). Limited to no use in combat when fighting enemies not using mind-affecting skills. Also, no flight.

*Alright, he thought. Pride is out. I just don't know enough about it.*

So the decision was between Fang and Wings. His intuition was annoyingly silent. He nearly wanted to just sit down and grind another 10 levels in alchemy and pick both of them at once but knew that wasn't possible.

He even considered just flipping a coin for a moment. It was stupid, but he just couldn't decide. He had always sucked at making important decisions like this. He remembered how he spent over an hour unable to decide between getting a black or a silver car. It wasn't until his dad hit him over the head and told him just to pick one... so he got the blue car.

If he really had to put on his full-analysis glasses, he would have to rate Fang of the Malefic Viper highest. The Wings mainly provided flight and poison in an area. He didn't really need an area skill as he was now, and the wings also had limited use.

For pure travel, he was nearly 100% sure One Step Mile was still superior. It was an ancient skill designed for efficient travel, while the wings had many other things packed into the skill.

And while agility would be better than strength, both stats were tremendously powerful. One could even argue that strength could be best in some cases, as it would have a higher impact on Jake's Infused Powershot than agility.

So when he added all of the factors up, he would have to go with Fang of the Malefic Viper being superior. Improved effectiveness to all his poisons was just too good. It was still his main source of damage against powerful foes.

His analysis complete, he naturally picked Wings of the Malefic Viper.

Because flight.

# Chapter 136: How To Train Your Dragon

## Wings

He flew through the air like an elegant bird. He soared as no human had ever done before. By which he meant, failing miserably and falling a hundred meters, all while flailing his wings uselessly before smashing headfirst into the ground.

Only a quarter of an hour earlier, he experienced the wonders of having wings for the first time. Unfortunately, unlike most other skills, this one didn't come with as much innate knowledge as one would hope, which is to say, nothing on how the heck to fly at all.

When he got the skill, he instantly felt the effect of his increased agility. Every movement became a bit faster, his reactions a bit sharper. Summoning the wings came just after, another easy process. That part of the skill it did tell him how to do.

The wings were entirely black, with small, almost invisible, dark-green veins running along the fleshy part of them. They were a bit like those of a bat, or well, a dragon. He had seen those wings before on the weird copy of himself that he faced during the Trial of Myriad Poisons.

It did raise a few questions if he was walking the same path as that lunatic version of himself, but he didn't feel like he was. The mere fact that he could think of that version as a lunatic was perhaps proof enough he wasn't.



Feeling the wings was easy. It felt like growing two extra limbs, which in itself was quite challenging. Jake felt like he could make motions no other limb could, and it took him a few minutes to learn how to at least try and flap them a bit.

Which is the moment he decided, in his incredible moment of arrogance, to use a full-powered Badger Jump and take to the skies. Believing the ability of flight would come to him like a bird pushed out of the nest by its mother. Completely forgetting that those birds often just fell to the ground the first many times.

So with that, he now found himself lying on the ground, his two wings out to his sides - undamaged by the fall. He honestly wasn't sure what the hell it meant for them to be phantasmal, though. They appeared very much physical to his eyes.

The only difference was that they didn't break his clothes. They sprung out of his back, completely ignoring the fact that his armor was in the way. Quite handy and convenient, actually. On that note, his armor had been repaired after his encounter with the Indigo Mushroom by now.

Getting up once more, he wasn't at all deterred by his initial failure. As a certain man once said, it isn't about how hard you fall when you fail at flying, but how fast you get up to repeat that failure. Something like that anyway.

Another jump later, and he fell to the ground slightly slower this time. Even gliding a bit towards the end. Progress.

By now, he had learned that his wings didn't actually consume as much stamina as he expected. Far from it, in fact. Summoning them in the first place did consume a lot of mana, but once summoned, keeping them up was practically free.

It was a bit like his scales, actually, but far less draining.

And speaking of scales, the wings were naturally covered in them. Jake was sure that it borrowed directly from the skill itself and that the scales had the exact same properties. This made sense and made him suspect that Scales was another pre-requisite for getting the wings to begin with.

The next few hours were spent jumping up and trying not to fall too fast. After an hour, Jake managed to even get in a few solid flaps for a bit of uplift before falling down once more. This only fueled his enthusiasm to keep practicing.

In less than a day, he went from being a chick right out of the nest to what he would describe as 'adequate.' Which is to say he could kind of fly at that time.

Standing on the ground, he didn't jump this time but instead flapped his wings. With a single movement, he shot into the air, dust kicking up all around him. He reached a few hundred meters into the air with a few more moves of his wings before he began flying horizontally.

It was a bit wobbly at first, but he managed to get in a good groove soon after. He quickly learned that flapping his wings repeatedly only made it harder for himself. It was instead about finding the balance between gliding and flapping.

The speed was quite fast when he tried. Faster than sprinting on the ground, at least. If compared to One Step Mile, however, there was no comparison. Maybe only in extremely

harsh terrain would it be faster flying over it but in the end, being able to literally step through space itself was just too fast.

Flying towards the ground, he gracefully folded his wings while still a few meters above ground and fell the rest of the way. Yeah, he hadn't quite figured out the landing part yet.

His stamina was also getting relatively low at this point. It hadn't been topped up when he began, and he had been flying around constantly since the day before. This was even while drinking a potion here and there during his practice session.

Sitting down in meditation, he focused on the feelings of the wings on his back. He was glad that they didn't disappear even while meditating. He couldn't move them, but he could still feel them. Feel the energy within them.

It didn't come as a surprise that his inner energy ran through the wings. Like they were true limbs, he could also feel that he would lose health and not mana should he be hit on the wings. However, it was a weird phenomenon that he could summon wings with mana, which could directly hurt his health.

He still had a ways to go before he would be able to soar through the sky like a human-shaped eagle, but he had hope. It was a childish dream for most humans to fly like birds in the sky, and Jake was no different.

Even with his limited ability to fly, he still felt a unique sense of freedom. Like an entirely new dimension of possibilities was opened up to him. He was now no longer bound by the ground.

Taking his attention off the wings, he decided to check his status to see the growth it had gone through.

### **Status**

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (E) – lvl 76]

Class: [Ambitious Hunter – lvl 83]

Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 70]

Health Points (HP): 10541/10710

Mana Points (MP): 8245/12150

Stamina: 2135/8220

## Stats

Strength: 638

Agility: 987

Endurance: 822

Vitality: 1071

Toughness: 689

Wisdom: 972

Intelligence: 471

Perception: 1779

Willpower: 592

Free points: 0

**Titles:** [Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch],[Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer V], [Dungeon Pioneer V], [Legendary Prodigy],[Prodigious Slayer of the Mighty], [Kingslayer], [Nobility: Earl], [Progenitor of the 93rd Universe]

**Class Skills:** [Basic One-Handed Weapons (Inferior)], [Advanced Stealth (Common)], [Advanced Archery (Common)], [Basic Twin Fang Style (Uncommon)], [Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra (Uncommon)], [Splitting Arrow (Uncommon)], [Hunter's Tracking (Uncommon)], [Big Game Hunter (Rare)], [Infused Powershot (Rare)], [Mark of the Ambitious Hunter (Rare)], [Descending Dark Fang (Rare)], [Limit Break (Rare)], [One Step Mile (Ancient)], [Moment of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)]

**Profession Skills:** [Herbology (Common)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Concoct Poison (Common)], [Alchemist's Purification (Common)], [Alchemical Flame (Common)], [Toxicology (Uncommon)], [Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Rare)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Epic)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Epic)], [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Wings of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)]

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

**Race Skills:**[Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races (Unique)], [Identify (Common)], [Thoughtful Meditation (Uncommon)], [Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)]

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

It was indeed starting to get a bit long. Jake also couldn't help but find the disparity between his class and profession-skills a bit comical. He was a hunter, even had a bloodline to confirm it, and yet his profession was clearly miles upon miles ahead.

Without his bloodline and the tutorial rewards, the best class skill he had would still only be rare. He also thought that his archery, still being only Advanced Archery, stuck out like a sore thumb. He had felt it being close to an upgrade even before fighting the Great White Stag, and yet he had failed to get it upgraded even now.

Perhaps it was time for him to focus a bit on his class once more. But... he knew he had at least two potent ancient-rarity skills waiting for him at both 80 and 90 in his profession. While his class skills so far, while useful, had often been rather hit or miss.

He was still a bit sour about how he hadn't gotten anything good at 80. Even after he had miraculously just killed the monster that was the King of the Forest, he hadn't been rewarded with a great skill. Instead, he had to take one offered prior and settled on Hunter's Tracking. A skill he hadn't even used a single time yet.

*I had a reason to pick it, though,* he thought as he once more considered if he really shouldn't be out looking for his family. The Viper had said they were fine and that trying to track them down was a fool's errand. One of the downsides of Meditation was that he had nothing but his own mind to occupy himself while using it...

Luckily, he had his sphere, which allowed him not to be entirely confined within himself. He spread out his mana and began just practicing manipulating that to take his mind off things. He needed to keep working. Keep moving forward.

“Another one coming!” Hank yelled as he finally managed to chop the tree down. Mark stood below, ready to carry it back. Not that Hank couldn’t do it alone with his high strength, a tree was just far too unwieldy.

They had only been working for a few days now, and they were far ahead of schedule.

It did help quite a lot that the masked guy had dug out the basement before they even began. Its shape was a bit weird, though, but based on the look Miranda gave him, he shouldn’t question it. Besides, having an extra pillar of support to lean the wood against while building made his job easier.

During the tutorial, he had managed to evolve his profession to Woodland Builder. It allowed him to craft things out of wood far more easily. While one may question why he didn’t aim for one related to metal or even just stone or clay, the reason was simple. He believed wood had the most potential.

Strong wood was far easier to find than strong rock or clay. As living things, they naturally absorbed mana, making them far more durable than pre-system trees. This made them naturally inclined to be infused with additional mana, thus easing the process of shaping and enchanting the materials.



Even the wood he was chopping down for the lodge was hard for him to cut into. This was even with a skill that made logging easier from his profession, and a skill related to his class, making his axe-attacks stronger.

He had to admit that the manual labor he was doing now was far more fulfilling than running for your life from beasts. It gave him a sliver of normalcy, despite how absurd it still was to hoist an entire tree over his shoulder.

He also had his reservation about the whole 'city' thing. That is until he actually got a system-prompt asking him if he wanted to become a citizen of [unnamed]-city. Yes, it just called it unnamed because apparently the masked guy and Miranda hadn't talked about a name yet.

The whole concept of this being a city was just silly to him. There was not a single building, and it was clearly still just a wild forest. The only difference was the lack of monsters in the area.

Miranda had told him of her profession-change, something granted to her by the masked man. Once more, he had his reservations, but it didn't appear like it had any adverse effects on her. It was quite suspect why he would grant something like that for free, however.

Overall there were just so many absurd things he decided just to roll with it. If building a lodge could somehow placate the masked man and allow them to live in this protected land, he was all for it. If it even included Miranda somehow leading whatever they were building, he was even more for it.

His number one priority was the safety of his children, after all. Both of which also agreed to stay here. Louise even appearing quite pushy in making them stay. Perhaps she was just happy to have finally found some peace in this chaotic new world. She was clearly enjoying being able to sit down and draw, already working on additional building plans if they ever planned on expanding.

Mark was the same as before. He was good at just going with the flow and had instantly volunteered to help build the lodge. With Louise functioning as an architect of sorts with her drawing skill, it all went even better.

After carrying the tree back, he began chopping it up into more useful pieces as Mark helped him shape them with a builder skill to be placed as flooring for the ground floor. The basement was already more or less done and now just needed the lodge itself on top.

They went with a relatively simple style of just stacking some of the thinner wooden logs on top of each other to form the walls. Very much in the style of a log cabin, but Hank wasn't quite sure if you could really call the finished product that.

It would actually be rather big - around a hundred square meters just for the flat ground floor, with a basement around two-thirds of that. They planned on making only two rooms, a bedroom, and just a big common area. The cellar they had been told just to stay away from trying to do anything with.

Windows were the most challenging part of the construction. Louise and Mark had agreed to try and work together on that. With Louise having fire spells and Mark a builder class, perhaps they could shape a proper window. If not, they would just have to come up with some other solution.

As he worked, he suddenly spotted something out from the corner of his eye. He looked up as he saw what looked like a human with wings flying after a smaller bird. They were quickly hidden by the canopy of the trees, making Hank question himself.

*Must have been seeing things*, he thought, shaking his head.

## Chapter 137: I Believe I Can Fly

By far, the King of the Forest was the strongest enemy Jake had ever faced, yet he had won in the end. It was a hard fight, sure, but he always kept his head cool to look for a way to victory. A mindset he had kept from then to now.

He thought the King would be his most significant challenge for a good while... until he met *it*.

*It* was more insidious than any enemy he could ever imagine. Its cruelty and evil instincts were overflowing with every one of its actions.

Jake had been practicing his flying once more after his round of meditation. Practicing gliding around and not falling down. Until suddenly, he sensed it in his sphere. A figure had invaded it and was fast making its way towards him.

Faster than anything he had encountered since the King. Even quicker than the mantis. He was prepared for an attack, but it never came. Instead, the figure appeared right beside him, where he saw its form clearly.

It looked like an ordinary hawk. But Identify made it clear it wasn't.

**[Galesong Hawk – lvl 90]**

It was the smallest beast he had ever seen at such a high level. It didn't appear to have grown a single centimeter from when it was just an average everyday hawk. But what it lacked in size, it clearly made up for in speed.

As he observed it, so did it observe him back. Perhaps he had entered its area, him now being well and truly outside of the boundary of the 'city.' It looked at him... and scoffed. How he knew it scoffed, he didn't know. He just did.

It sped up as it passed him, only to make a large circle and fly right up to him again on his other side. Repeating the same damn scoff as it began circling above and beneath him. Jake just silently gliding along in a straight line.

Clearly, it didn't get the reaction it wanted, as Jake just tried to ignore it. He wasn't in any shape to fight it in the air, and so far, he hadn't actually felt any aggression. It also wasn't the first bird or flying creature he came across, so it wasn't that interesting.

And then it did it. It flew up once more, flying right above Jake. He ignored it. But then suddenly, it sped up and headed straight for the top of his head. His danger sense didn't even give him a small warning before he felt it.

It fucking pecked him. Right on his noggin. An absolutely unprovoked attack.

It didn't do any damage, but it still hurt like hell. Not physically. Mentally.

"What the fuck?" he cursed out loud as he began wobbling back and forth in the air. He had to use all his focus on stabilizing himself once more - a challenging endeavor with the damn bird still flying in circles around him.

After he barely managed to avoid spiraling out of control and falling to the ground, the next 'attack' came. This time, it just flew up in front of him and flapped one of its wings into his face. He tried to grab it with his hands, but the bird was far faster than him.

*What the...* he thought, as he was forced to flap his wings uncontrollably, trying to remain in the air.

The bird kept looking at him as he flapped desperately. It attacked once more by firing a blast of wind in his direction, hitting one of the wings.

Surprisingly this blow didn't destabilize him at all but did the exact opposite. He was wholly balanced for a brief moment before he flapped the wing on the other side, putting him off balance once again.

The hawk gave him a glance that he could only interpret as a mix between annoyance and disappointment. Releasing another gust of wind, Jake, this time, didn't try to avoid it but simply let it hit. For a second, he felt like his flying went far smoother than before.

*What is up with this bird?* He questioned. It clearly wasn't actually attacking him, but rather it felt like it was reprimanding him for something. Did it not like his way of flying, or what?

For a while, this went on. The hawk was flying around Jake, occasionally striking with blasts of wind, as he just tried to adapt to the situation.

His resentment slowly began to turn to gratefulness as the bird took hours out of its day to teach him. However, the entirely needless pecks and slaps with its wings weren't very welcome or productive.

While attempting to land, he spectacularly failed once more as he crashed into a tree. He got up just in time to see the bird sitting on a branch looking down on him judgmentally.

"Give me a break, I have had wings for less than two days," he complained out loud.

The bird just kept looking at him with the same admonishing gaze.

He took a stamina potion to replenish his fast-emptying pool of internal energy while sitting on a fallen log. This action got a hint of interest from the bird as it looked inquisitively at the bottle in his hand.

Jake noticed this as he took out another. “Want one?”

Even if it didn’t understand his words, it clearly got the gist of his meaning. Moving one of its wings, a gust of wind picked up the bottle as Jake allowed it to be blown out of his hand.

The hawk caught it with one of its talons without even moving from the tree, surprising Jake with its high skill in manipulating wind. It was pure manipulation, not unlike his own manipulation of pure mana or what the metal caster had done with metals.

It looked at the bottle for a few seconds before it ripped the small cork out with its beak. After smelling the liquid for a second and throwing Jake yet another glance, seeing him also drinking one, it lifted up the bottle and emptied its contents down its throat.

Jake considered for a moment if potions even worked for birds, but its next action confirmed that it indeed did. It flapped its wings in a happy motion as it threw the now empty bottle towards him.

“Potions are awesome, right?” he laughed as the bird screeched in approval.

He sat for a while just looking at the bird, thinking of what exactly it wanted. Its action today just seemed so random. By now, he was used to beasts either running away or attacking him. One just deciding to chill with him was a new experience for sure.

While thinking, he tried flapping his wings a bit behind him to familiarize himself with the feeling, unbeknownst to him, insulting the bird once more.

It flew down and gave him a nice peck on top of his head. “Ow, what the hell?”

This only got him an angry chirp in response as it landed on another branch.

Jake just looked at it, considering how novel the experience of chilling with this sadistic bird truly was. Did it just like pecking him or what?

Trying to ignore it, he began practicing with his wings once more, and a few seconds later, got hit by a gust of wind, making him fall backward off the log he was resting on.

“Okay, what?” he looked up at it, questionably. Was him flapping his damn wings so insulting?

This time it answered by flapping its wings in a silly way, making it look like a newborn chick. Jake thought it was funny until it fired a blast of wind at him. That is when he got it. *Is it calling me a stupid chick?*

“Am I doing it wrong?” he questioned. Hey, if the bird was willing to teach, he was ready to learn.



It answered by slowly lifting its wings and making a few flapping movements in slow motion. Jake got the hint as he began imitating its movements. Only for a few seconds, though, before his left wing was hit by yet another blast of wind.

This time he didn't get angry as he noted that he had indeed messed up. He nodded as he began adjusting his motions according to the directions of the hawk.

From an outsider's perspective, the entire situation was bizarre, to say the least - a human with wings sitting on a log imitating a screeching hawk. Apologizing every time he was hit with a blast of wind without any complaint.

Jake felt happy with the arrangement, but sadly all things had to end. Only a few hours of practice in, the bird suddenly stopped giving directions as it looked up to the sky. Jake followed its gaze and saw nothing but soon noticed that it was preparing to take flight.

Without thinking, he did the same as the two of them took off at the same time. Once more imitating the bird, Jake made a mighty flap, shooting him up in the air.

Instantly he felt the difference in his movements. He felt in control of his wings. And in conjunction also how he moved through the air. It wasn't even close to the hawk's level, but far, far better than before.

He followed the hawk through the air as it threw a few glances his way. On the other hand, Jake's eyes were focused on the wings of the hawk as it flew elegantly through the air.

Of course, there was a big difference between a human's physique with wings and a hawk's, but many concepts were nevertheless the same.

One of the first things he had noticed upon taking flight the first time was the internal energy movements in the wings. It allowed him to fly despite the questionable aerodynamics and other inconsequential things, such as fundamental physics.

Then again, he did remember reading how dragons wouldn't actually be able to fly at all. They were simply too heavy and their wings too small, which didn't appear to faze any of the dragons he had seen in visions so far, meaning that naturally, magic was involved.

Jake also noticed that the hawk was using its wind manipulation actively while flying. It was small, subtle things, such as giving itself a slight updraft or blowing a small gust of wind into itself to turn faster.

He had also seen, and felt, it using wind to speed itself up to ludicrous levels. But right now, it was being rather nice and allowed him to keep up. He said 'allowed' as it could clearly outpace him if it so wished, despite his speed increasing after their training session.

They ended up flying together for twenty or so minutes, Jake learning a lot once more on the brief journey. But suddenly, the hawk fired a gust of wind at him, forcing him to slow down.

Momentarily confused, he looked at it but was just met with another blast of wind. Its intentions now clear. It was telling him not to follow it any further than this.

“Don’t want me to follow?” he asked, not exactly expecting an answer.

And, of course, he didn’t get an answer. Instead, he just hovered in the air, the hawk hovering ahead of him too. It looked behind it a few times, making Jake suspect it didn’t want him to see something in that direction. A wish he decided to respect.

“Alright, I am taking a break down here,” he said, pointing down to the forest below. “See ya later.”

With that, he began flying downward and saw the hawk also turn around to fly in the direction it was flying before. He sincerely hoped it would come back to him later. Despite his initial hatred, he had actually come to like his feathered teacher over the last few hours.

Landing on the ground once more, he didn’t waste any time taking out his cauldron. He wanted to concoct some more stamina potions as his consumption of those had increased tremendously with his flying practice. And if the hawk wanted a potion too here and there, his expenditure would only increase further.

Though getting a grade A flying teacher like the hawk for only a few stamina potions was more than worth it. He still wasn’t sure why it decided to help him in the first place, and at this point, he didn’t care to question it anymore. Rather just write it up to curiosity or pure goodwill.

He still had the poison for the Indigo Mushroom on his mind, but for now, it would have to be pushed back. Learning to use his wings and flying, in general, took precedence for now. He hadn't even explored the poison fumes aspect of the wings yet.

That would have to wait for him not being in the middle of a forest. He had a solid feeling poison gas wouldn't do anything good to his immediate surroundings, and as a regular rule, he preferred living plants over dead ones. Except for mushrooms. Fuck mushrooms. Mushrooms aren't even plants, to begin with.

Taking out his ingredients, he began crafting the potions as he was humming to himself. Despite the terrible start with the hawk pecking his head over and over, the day turned out quite good anyway. He was having fun.

Cauldron after cauldron of stamina potions was made, giving him a good 40 potions in total throughout his crafting session. By now, the sun had set, and it was night once more. Not that it had any particular effect on his vision, as the little light the moon and stars provided made everything clear as day to him.

Just as he wasn't expecting the hawk to turn up again, he felt a presence approach him. Moments later, the familiar figure entered his sphere once more. He didn't hesitate to pack away his cauldron as he got up and summoned his wings once more.

Landing on a branch, the hawk looked down at him for but a moment before it took flight once more. He understood instantly. It was practice time again. Jake following along with a big flap of his own wings.

Soaring into the night sky, he followed the hawk as they flew higher and higher. Small clouds hung far above, and from their direction, that was their target.

Jake couldn't help but smile as he felt the rush of wind on his face. The forest below and stars above. A human and a hawk, soaring through the air, unlikely companions as they were.

## Chapter 138: Viewing Party

Archery had for many years been a vital part of Jake's life. It was his escape from work, stress, and intrusive thoughts before the system. After the system, it had been the tool that allowed him to fight and survive, especially in the beginning.

So not getting the skill upgraded to anything higher than common-rarity after so long had been a real thorn in his side - an annoyance every time he opened his status menu. It was only made worse by his intuition telling him he was oh-so-close to the upgrade all the damn time. He just needed that one final push - a final round of truly contemplating his bowmanship.

The thing that pushed the skill further turned out to not be a life and death battle, but instead an awkward struggle in mid-air as he tried to figure out how the hell to hit the damn birds flying all around him.

***[Advanced Archery (Common)] --> [Expert Archery (Uncommon)]***

It came the moment he hit his first bird. He felt an odd sense of pride that he quite honestly shouldn't have, considering he had fired over a dozen arrows already.

Meanwhile, his bird-buddy had ripped apart more than twenty of the attacking flock while still somehow finding time to send him condescending glances. Blades of wind revolved around the hawk at all times, cutting into anything that came even close.

On the other hand, Jake spent more time being badgered by the birds that kept pecking and slapping him with their wings in fly-by's. After the first few only managed to harm themselves as they chipped their beaks on his scales, they stopped attacking him in melee and instead fired blasts of mana at him.

Not that those blasts did any damage either. It only served to annoy Jake further as he tried to stabilize himself mid-air while at the same time trying to nock yet another arrow. Failing miserably as he could barely stop himself from falling to the ground.

But the experience had still somehow pushed his archery skill to the next level. Perhaps it was the ridiculous level of focus he was forced to apply, as he had to not only focus on his archery and hitting a flying enemy but also controlling his own wings meanwhile.

He didn't feel much difference from the upgrade. Likely due to his lack of ability to focus on the simple act of drawing a string and firing an arrow in his current predicament. In the end, he had enough as he opened his eyes wide at the flock of birds.

### **Gaze of the Apex Hunter**

His eyes shone an intense yellow sheen as the flock of birds all just... stopped. Stopped and fell to the ground one by one. Bloody tears ran down his cheeks as he was forced to shut them, but it had done the job.

***\*You have slain [Starling Flock Bird – lvl 14] – Experience earned.***

***\*You have slain [Starling Flock Bird – lvl 18] – Experience earned.***

...

***\*You have slain [Starling Flock Bird – lvl 34] – Experience earned.***

Nearly all of them died instantly. Only a few survived due to their higher level but found themselves frozen and quickly cut apart by the hawk's blades of wind.

The entire sky now basked in eerie silence as Jake spoke. "Villy, are you having a viewing party or what? I got used to your staring, but please don't invite friends over, or I'll have to charge you for it. It's distracting as hell."

Inside the Order of the Malefic Viper, in the most prestigious of chambers where only the Malefic Viper could enter. Just a few moments before Jake began considering charging for a media license.

A man lay with his arms behind his head, staring at the ceiling. Three women, barely covered by the thin sheets on the bed, lay around him, trying sheepishly to entice him into another round. Each of them with beautiful long green hair, emerald eyes, and bodies that anyone would call photoshopped if they saw a picture.

The man was not human either but covered in a thin layer of scales, with long black hair and dark green eyes that pierced the soul. The Malefic Viper hadn't had a round of nightly activity for eras, and from the ladies' reactions, he hadn't lost his touch quite yet - his non-deadly kind of touch.

"You said that you met one of our descendants not long ago?" one of the women asked as she twirled her finger on his chest. The scales didn't bother her in the slightest, quite the opposite, in fact.

"Yeah, Viridia. Current Hall Master of the only Hall left, so the leader of the mortal part of the Order," he answered.

"So, whose is she?" one of the other women asked.

"She can't be mine; I have never been with anyone but my lord," the third one stated proudly.

"Oh, what about that gallant guy we met back in Elwood? You spent a few millennia in his little treehouse, if I recall?" the first woman smiled as she retorted.



“That was so long ago! And the kids I had then weren’t any good, to begin with,” she argued back.

“Ladies, please,” the Viper interrupted. “It doesn’t matter now, does it? Besides, she is quite the fine young lass, so there is nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“She could be mine then,” the third one said, making a complete 180. Earning only a sigh from her two sisters.

The three women were known as the Ladies of the Verdant Lagoon. The Viper had first met them when they were only C-tier, and they had joined his Order. It was another time, during the third era, back when his Order was known and feared throughout the multiverse.

As sisters, they all had immense talent and soared through the ranks. Shortly before attaining B-tier, he took all three of them as his women, and they had quite the passionate time together. Thinking about it... he hadn't been with them since he met *her* during the 4th era.

Needless to say, all three of them eventually attained godhood. It was quite rare for a family to all ascend like that, but the sisters had always shared a special bond. They fought together, had skills that were dependent on each other, and even their Records had been tied together. Even Eversmile found their situation interesting enough to study at one point.

They had forsaken everything that was individuality. Even their names were given up to bring them closer; the three of them now simply known as the First Sister of the Verdant Lagoon and so on.

“Does this mean that you plan to call on all the Hidden Ones?” the first sister asked after a bit of silence.

“Most have walked their own paths by now. I never bound them in any way, and they have no obligation to the Order any longer,” the Viper answered with a sigh as he recalled the past.

“While I cannot speak for all others, my lord, I can say that us sisters were more than elated when we heard of your return. Even more so when you reached out. You forbade us from coming to you, but I believe that most, if not all, would be more than happy to return to your side,” she answered.

“I know,” he said, sighing. “But it is not time yet anyway.”

“Just know that we are all eager to serve once more,” she reiterated, as they let silence reclaim the room for a while.

The Viper was staring at the ceiling again, his gaze piercing the void into the planet known as Earth - his favorite pastime these days. However, he tried not to overdo it. Besides, there were many other characters in the multiverse he enjoyed observing.

As gods experienced with clairvoyance and farseeing, the sisters were aware of their lord's actions. That he was peering at Earth. As to who he was mainly observing, it was an easy guess. They found it peculiar and unusual for a god, much less a Primordial, to care so much about mortal affairs.

"What makes that mortal human so special?" the second sister asked, finally unable to hold herself back.

"His name is Jake," the Viper answered. "He is a... friend."

"A friend?" she asked before she began laughing. "What a novel concept. It sounds like an interesting game."

Turning to her, the Viper stared into her eyes, not a hint of jest in them. "I am serious."

"But... why?" the third sister asked, she too unable to hold her tongue. "To invest so much of your time and efforts into a mortal that could fall at any moment is just... wasteful."

Sighing, the Viper turned to all the sisters, asking. "Tell me, what am I to you?"

"My lord." "A supreme existence." "The one above all in my heart."

The answers came simultaneously, only the last one standing out a bit. Yet, they all had one thing in common.

“And there you have it. To you three, I stand above you. I am your superior.”

“Is that not only natural?” the first sister asked, a bit confused.

“It is,” the Viper agreed. That is how the multiverse works, after all. Power was what dictated everything. Respect was automatically earned simply by being powerful. It wasn’t just a norm born out of habits or a social structure that had been adopted. It was natural law.

A superior being suppressed those below them without even trying. One had to consciously hold back their aura, not to make those of lower rank feel an innate compulsion to submit. Even if someone could resist the compulsion, they would still be instilled with a sense of inferiority.

As a Primordial, the Viper was positioned at the apex of the multiverse. The beings he didn’t naturally suppress in the multiverse were few and far between. For him to find someone he both didn’t suppress and got along with was even harder, considering his eccentric personality.

Yet a mortal had waltzed into his realm, not given a shit about his aura or the natural suppression he should feel. Instead, the human looked upon him like he was an absolute idiot when he, a mighty god, had tried to show off. It was a novel experience. He had even dared to give advice to a god. An F-grade was talking to a god as an equal... it was unheard of.

It wasn't just a matter of pride or personality that allowed one to stand unfazed before a god as a mortal - much less F-grade before Primordial. The Viper knew it had to be the peculiar bloodline Jake possessed that allowed him to do so.

Of course, the Viper wouldn't have bothered as much if it was indeed just the bloodline making him stand out. Jake wasn't the first mortal he had met with the power to stand tall before gods. But he was the first to act like he was just meeting some random person on the subway.

That he also turned out to possess monstrous potential was what sealed the deal for him. While the disparity between the two was nearly as wide as it could feasibly be in the multiverse, it didn't discourage the Viper at all.

"I still don't get it," the second sister said, bringing the Viper's mind back to reality.

"And you don't have to. Just know that Jake sees me as an equal, and I see him in turn as an equal," he said. He knew it was useless to try and explain it. It was a concept that didn't make any sense to natives of the multiverse after all. Maybe something only those who had grown up in a world without levels and skills could understand.

Immortality was a long time, and to a god, the life of a mortal, even an S-grade mortal, seemed infinitely short. Perhaps it was a way to protect themselves... but barely any gods had any serious relationships with anyone that weren't gods. Sometimes it was done with an S-grade near the peak if the god believed they would ascend... but even that was rare.

The sisters tried asking a bit more, but in the end, gave up. Partly because they didn't get it at all, and partly because they feared angering the Primordial by being too pesky. For him to share a bed with them was already a massive victory in their minds, and they didn't want to spoil the mood.

But the third sister did give one last try after a while. "Can we see this mortal? I am very interested to know more."

"Eh, sure," The Malefic Viper said. He materialized a screen in the air showing what he looked at earlier.

A human with wings flew through the air with a bird that sometimes flew up and pecked him on his forehead. They appeared to be fighting some larger birds. None of the sisters cared much for the scuffle between E-grades but still watched intently to try and comprehend what made the mortal so extraordinary.

The fight ended rather quickly, the larger birds clearly being outmatched. The only interesting thing being the snickering of the Viper at the human's quite frankly horrendous flying skills. He full-on laughed when even the bird accosted him.

It was boring to watch what was happening to the three female gods until the fight was truly done as he finished off a flock of smaller birds with some soul-attack skill. And the human did something they didn't expect. He looked straight up - straight into the void where the Viper and three of them peered through and directly into their eyes.

"Villy, are you having a viewing party or what? I got used to your staring, but please don't invite friends over, or I'll have to charge you for it. It's distracting as hell," the mortal spoke into thin air before rubbing off the blood that was coming out of his eyes. The four

gods lying on the bed were the only ones to hear him except for the bird that appeared to only lower its opinion of him due to his apparent insanity.

Jake's casual rebuttal made the three sisters open their eyes wide. Now full of even more questions than before.

"How did he detect us?"

"How dare he speak the Malefic One's name like that?"

"Those eyes..."

The Viper could only smile, feeling a weird sense of satisfaction at the three dumbstruck gods. Felt good not to be the only one surprised by Jake's nonsensical abilities.

"Well, there you have it," he said, dispersing the screen once more. "As to how he knows I am watching... heck if I know. He just does, and I find it only adds to the enjoyment."

He chose to categorically ignore the comments on etiquette and whatnot. He didn't care. He also knew that any punishment short of death would be meaningless as she was a bit of a masochist if he had to say so himself. Not that he found the trait detrimental in bed.

But he had one more thing to add. “Oh, by the way, don’t mention anything about him to anyone, alright?”

The words were formed as a request, but the sisters were fully aware it wasn’t.

## Chapter 139: Going Up

Chugging a health potion, Jake opened his eyes once more and wiped the blood away. He was currently flapping his wings, trying to keep himself in the air as he saw the hawk gaze back at him like he was an idiot for talking to thin air. But its look was now not only of ridicule but now containing a hint of fear and respect, which gave him a silly sense of satisfaction for one-upping a freaking bird.

Villy being a peeping tom was something he honestly didn’t even notice anymore. Maybe the tutorial where many gods observed him all the time had desensitized him, but he did notice when suddenly three new observers joined after no one but Villy looking since returning to Earth. How exactly he knew... well, it was just his intuition.

He took a quick glance at his notifications and saw that he had killed 641 birds with his Gaze. This was the first time he used it with full power and the intent to kill and not immobilize - the effect was way above his expectations. Not a single bird below E-grade survived, and even the weaker ones in E-grade died instantly.

Jake had chosen the skill for its ability to immobilize his foes. To have a skill that made use of his high perception. But today, his eyes were opened to exactly how potent the skill was. It wasn’t just its ability to kill, but how it did it.



Not a single one of the dead birds had any wounds. Their bodies were completely unharmed. Instead, their souls had been completely and utterly shattered by the Gaze. The attack had been instantaneous and unavoidable. As long as they were within his line of sight and he intended to hit them, they would be affected.

The backlash he suffered was more due to his own inexperience with the skill than the skill itself. He had pushed more power into it than he could handle, which caused his eyes to suffer damage. But it was nothing a healing potion couldn't solve in seconds.

Flying down, he managed not to screw up the landing entirely as he only took a few stumbling steps. The hawk followed him, perching itself on a tree nearby. Jake could feel how tired it was as it rested its eyes for a moment.

Jake also sat down on the ground as he entered meditation. The first thing he did was to check the notifications. The birds he had killed with his Gaze had all been between level 10 and 37. Sadly the experience gained wasn't really worth much due to the significant level-disparity.

Next, he checked the upgraded skill.

***[Advanced Archery (Common)] – An Archer's best friend is the bow in his hand and the arrow in his foe's heart. You have shown improved proficiency with a bow, making the weapon even more familiar to you. Adds a minor bonus to the effect of Agility and Strength when using a ranged weapon.***

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***[Expert Archery (Uncommon)] – An Archer’s best friend is the bow in his hand and the arrow in his foe’s heart. You have proven yourself an expert with your chosen weapon and are fast approaching the level of mastering your craft. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Strength when using a ranged weapon.***

It wasn’t fascinating either, despite how much he had anticipated it. It was a simple and boring skill that just made his archery slightly better. It didn’t give him any knowledge of any kind. It was more just a confirmation that he had reached a level of proficiency - unlike his Basic Twin Fang Style, which gave him limited knowledge and guidance for melee combat.

He did remember that Casper told him how the Basic Archery skill gave him knowledge of using a bow upon first entering the tutorial. Knowledge Jake, of course, already had.

Closing down his menus once more, he instead focused on recovering his dwindling stamina pool. He and the hawk had been flying around for a few hours before the flock attacked them. It had already been more than half an hour into the fight before Jake decided to end it with Gaze of the Apex Hunter.

He and his new bird friend had truly bonded over this past day. And when he said bonded, he meant that his hatred had slowly been replaced by gratitude, while the bird was still condescendingly teaching him how to use his wings properly.

Yet he had a feeling the bird would be a bit nicer after today. Despite its level being higher than his, he believed that he had proven himself stronger. Because he was.

While the hawk was quite strong, even for its level, it didn't make Jake feel threatened at all. It was focused on speed and wind magic. Its attacks mainly comprised of quick and powerful blows that aimed to take the opponent by surprise.

Meanwhile, Jake had his danger sense and, if necessary, Moment of the Primal Hunter that would warn him of any sneak attack well ahead of time. At the same time, he could use Gaze to freeze it and land a blow. The hawk had been hit by a few blasts from the flock before, making him aware of how feeble the bird actually was.

To sum it up, the hawk was a glass cannon - incredible speed and damage, but low toughness and vitality. If he had to guess its stats, he would say nearly all of it was mainly in intelligence and agility, with a respectable amount in wisdom and strength.

Not that he had any intentions of fighting the hawk. They were buddies. And from the bird's actions, it clearly didn't intend on fighting him either.

After meditating for an hour, he opened his eyes once more. The cooldown for potions being over, he took two stamina potions out and downed one of them. The hawk saw him do this, as it gave him a knowing glance. With a slight chuckle, he tossed the stamina potion up in the air, only for it to be swept up in a gust of wind, landing in the talons of the hawk.

He spread his wings once more as they, in concert, took to the air.

They flew around for a few hours, bumping into a few wayward birds that quickly met their end to the blades of wind. Soon the hawk began flying back towards wherever it left to the day before, and like the day before, it stopped Jake's attempt to follow.

So Jake did as last time and landed once more. He didn't do any alchemy this time but instead began testing out his upgraded archery skill. There was not a lot to test, but he wanted a better idea of how effective the increase in the effect of attributes actually was.

It didn't take him long to discover the faint improvements. The string slightly more comfortable to pull; the arrow was flying slightly faster and carrying an almost negligible amount more power. It was small, nearly to the point of being unnoticeable, but any bonus was a welcome one.

After firing off a few more arrows to get a better feel for it, he thought about what to do next. It was either alchemy or a bit of solo flying practice. His decision, in the end, landed on flying practice. The kind he didn't practice with the bird.

Flying up a little, he tried his best at hovering. To flap his wings and have the rest of his body remain as stable as possible. He could already imagine how effective he would be if he became able to actively fight with his bow while flying at the same time.

But that was far off, as he couldn't even correctly hover in the air yet. His flying practice was something that would simply take time and effort. It wasn't something that should be rushed.

It was like a human child – in this case, an adult - learning to walk. Despite it being such a simple thing for any regular non-disabled adult, that didn't mean it was entirely instinctual. It wasn't like breathing, making your heart pump. It took conscious effort and

trained motor controls, and people who later in their life had to learn to walk or went through retraining took time to do so.

The skill itself didn't give him any hint or help with flying, so he was indeed a newborn bird in the sky. His only real help was his monstrous stats, which allowed for his suboptimal movements to let him fly. No matter how sillily or horribly he did so.

By the end of the day, when the hawk returned, he still hadn't learned to hover, but it was getting better by the hour. The two took to the air as they this time flew straight up. Higher than Jake had ever been before.

Before, they had never gone higher than a few kilometers. Jake had quickly learned that the skies had their own separate ecosystem from the ground below. Different flying creatures dominated above. The higher one went, the stronger they were.

Below 5 kilometers, one barely encountered anything in E-grade. The flock they ran into earlier being an incredible outlier. They were like locusts scouring the low skies, killing any other bird or flying creature on their way.

Above a couple more kilometers, one began running into the occasional stronger monster. Which is the threshold the two of them had just passed. But the hawk didn't show any intention of stopping or even slowing down.

They passed by a few low-hanging clouds, the hawk purposefully avoiding them. Jake peered into one of them and understood why. Within were several unnatural movements. He couldn't quite discern as to what they were - a natural phenomenon or perhaps a monster. Either way, he decided to rely on the hawk's expertise and avoid the clouds for now.

Monsters of many kinds appeared in his vision as they continued. Many different types of birds, even ones he had never seen anything like before. One looked like a flamingo but had two sets of wings. Another was just a big balloon-like bird that looked like it quite honestly didn't belong up there.

None of them had a level above 50, making Jake and the hawk ignore them entirely, but as they kept flying further and further up, that started to change fast.

At eight and a half kilometers, they encountered a not-so-friendly giant wasp that tried to sting Jake. This resulted in Jake just catching the stinger and with his hands on the thing, spreading death through it with Touch of the Malefic Viper. It had only been level 61, so Jake honestly didn't know where it got the guts to attack him from.

At 10 kilometers, they had to avoid a brawl between two giant flocks of birds. Thousands of birds in each flock were ripping into each other. They were relatively weak individually, most still not in E-grade yet, but their sheer sizes made up for it.

Jake felt tempted just to use Gaze of the Apex Hunter but decided against it pretty quickly. It was pointless to do, and he quite honestly wasn't keen on the idea of committing bird-genocide for no reason.

This kept up as they flew upwards. The hawk had clearly been up here many times before as it swiftly dismembered any bird that attacked it while avoiding flocks and stronger-looking monsters. Jake felt more like a tag-along but had no complaints.

He was blown back by the sights he saw. It indeed was an entirely new world up there. But he did wonder why it was like this. The hawk had clearly shown a need to land once in a while. To rest. While he didn't doubt that some monsters could rest while remaining in the air, he seriously doubted any of the more common-looking birds could.

At 15 kilometers, they encountered their first challenge – the word challenge being said relatively lightly. It was a small group of three hulking birds. They looked like vultures that had gone to the gym 6 days a week, never forgetting wing or talon day - all of them the same level at 87.

It was a bit novel to encounter such strength-focused birds. They attacked the pair as one of them went for Jake and the two others the hawk. The hawk danced around them effortlessly as the wind cut into them, while Jake met the brute in melee.

Luckily for him, it didn't even try to dodge but just smashed into him, trying to pierce him with its sharp talons. He summoned his sword and dagger, blocking the foot with the sword as he plunged the dagger into the leg of the vulture.

They kept tussling for a while before Jake managed to get in a few good blows to its stomach and lower body. The wounds didn't look lethal, but they sure as heck were. The dagger was releasing its innate venom with every stab, only further amplified by Jake coating the blade with his blood.

The hawk had managed to finish off one of its vultures when Jake's failed to keep itself airborne. It began falling to the ground as he flew over and helped the hawk finish off the last vulture. The one he had been fighting dying half-way through as it succumbed to the poison before even hitting the ground.

It had been a relatively easy and fast fight, which was why he was surprised as the message popped up with the death of the last vulture.

***\*'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 84 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 77 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

It was his first level in his class since returning to Earth, and he had a feeling that the sky would be the source of a lot more levels and unique experiences.

“Of course, my lord,” the first sister quickly agreed to the Viper forbidding them from speaking of the mortal. Her two sisters were nodding along fervently.

“All is good then. Now, on to official business,” The Malefic Viper said, getting up off the bed while summoning a robe. The women following his lead as they, too, conjured a dress each.

“My Order has turned to shit in my absence. I don’t blame anyone but myself for this. I wallowed in self-pity for long enough,” he said with a big sigh before continuing.

“I plan on getting shit in order. With only a single hall right now, we are confined to only a small part of this universe. I fear that my name has begun to be forgotten. Time to change that.”



“What are you planning, my lord?” the second sister asked, excitement in her voice.

“I don’t care for expansion much. Faith is not a big part of my path anyhow, and I couldn’t give less of shit about how many faithful believers I have. No, I want to consolidate our power in this part of the universe first. Make it like the good old days. Then we can expand from there.”

“You mean?” the third sister asked, stars in her eyes.

“Exactly. Send out warnings to every single faction and deity within this sector. Give them a week to either pack up and get the fuck out or to come here and swear allegiance. Make my word echo through the multiverse, so all know my message. Those that don’t listen... well,” the ancient Primordial said, with a big smile, “a show of force has never done any harm either.

“Additionally, I want you three to formally return to the Order once more. Having only Snappy and I as known gods is a bit too little. I want each of you to take a leadership position to help get this entire organization back on track.

“Once the Hall Master, as well as the branch leaders, return from Nevermore, I want one of you to take charge and guide her and lead the Order. She is your descendant, so that part should be easy enough. Another one of you takes charge of the academy, while the last takes care of managing the governed area of the Order and assisting me in taking any newly conquered land under our wing. You decide between yourselves who does what. Any objections?”

“We are more than willing to serve,” the first sister said, talking for all three of them.

“Good. I already informed Snappy to bring back the other leaders, so you may as well begin preparing now,” he said, nodding at the three women.

Looking at the messy bed, however, he added. “Though I guess we do have a bit of time.”

A request none of them had to hear twice. A few hours and plenty of ‘exercise’ later, the Viper walked out of the chamber, leaving the three women resting in the bed. He felt quite proud if he had to say so himself. Tiring out gods to the point of exhaustion was no easy feat.

Teleporting, he stepped into a giant laboratory with only a single old man in it. He was currently tending to a giant tree that appeared to be wholly rotten yet gave out an overpowering amount of life-affinity mana.

“Duskleaf, my dear disciple,” the Viper said with a big smile, the old man not reacting at all.

“Come on, old pal, don’t be mad,” he tried again, only to continue to be ignored entirely. So he tried something else.

“My, quite the tree you have made here. Your own creation, I presume? Very impressive.”

This time he got a reaction. “A tree someone, *especially* my so-called ‘master’ would be fully aware of if he didn’t keep breaking his promises actually to do some – any – alchemy with me.”

“Look, I know I fucked up, but I just had too much to deal with,” he tried to explain, being quickly cut off.

“Like sleeping with those witches? Or staring at Jake creepily? Or have you found a new deplorable hobby?” Duskleaf sneered. Clearly still mad.

“Okay, okay. Jeez. I even came here with something I thought you would want to hear,” the Viper muttered.

“We are doing an experiment?” Duskleaf beamed, all his anger momentarily forgotten.

“No, not that,” the Viper said, Duskleaf instantly deflating. “But! It is still a good suggestion. I plan on doing a bit of restructuring and improvements around here, and I want you to come out of hiding and take up a more official position in the Order.”

“How can that in any way be construed as good for me?” Duskleaf sighed.

“Listen, I want you to take the position as principal of the academy. One of the witches will help you do all the boring stuff; I just want you to have the title. The only work I will ask of you to do is to be involved in the next enrollment of alchemy students in a few years,” the Viper explained.

“I still don’t get it,” the old alchemist said, clearly not keen on the idea. “Why the heck would I want to be involved in enrollment of all things?”

“I think a certain student I plan on convincing to join will be of particular interest to you,” the Malefic Viper smiled deeply.

“... Let me guess, you haven’t even asked Jake yet?”

“I am sure he is 100% on board! Who doesn’t like having an extra school-arc in their lives!?”

## Chapter 140: A Cloudy Forecast

Jake would never claim to have in-depth knowledge of the happenings in the sky. He would never claim to be a meteorologist or a weather forecaster. While he had managed to get decent grades in physics and chemistry, he for sure wasn’t an expert.

But, despite his lacking knowledge, he was pretty sure that clouds weren’t supposed to have trees growing on them. About as sure as that one shouldn’t be able to walk on said clouds. This is precisely why his current situation was a bit perplexing.

He was currently standing on a cloud. Looking out into the vast sky. Behind him sat the hawk perched on a branch from an ivory tree that grew on the cloud. Its leaves were a light blue, with dark-blue veins running through every part of the trunk.

The cloud wasn't even very big. It only had that single tree on it and wasn't even five meters across. Jake knelt down and scooped up a part of the cloud into his palm.

It felt fluffy. Not quite like wool, but more like a soft water balloon. Letting go of the piece of the cloud, it just began drifting through the air, now its own separate mini-cloud. Which was likely the same as what had spawned the current cloud they were on.

The two of them had flown up for quite a bit until they reached around 25 kilometers high. If Earth were the same as before the system, they would have well and truly entered the stratosphere by now. Heck, commercial planes didn't fly above 12 kilometers - less than half of where they were now.

And yet, the air didn't even feel any thinner. The mana density the same as closer to the ground too. The only difference was a shift in the affinities. Wind-affinity now being far more prevalent, with earth affinity, on the other hand, severely lacking.

Looking further above, he only saw the endless sky expand even further. Exactly how far one could travel before reaching space, or at least just the outer parts of the atmosphere, was a mystery.

But back to the equally as mysterious cloud. As Jake noted earlier, he believed it to have once been a part of a much greater cloud. His belief in that theory stemming from the absolutely massive cloud floating just a few hundred meters below them - One made of the same tangible type of cloud.

And when he said massive, he truly meant massive. It was too big for him to see where it began and where it ended. He reckoned it was the size of an entire country from Earth before the system. Just hanging up there in the sky, far above where his so-called city was located. Well, not directly above. A hundred or so kilometers north and 25 up, but hey... relatively close.

Sadly the area affected by the Pylon barely extended upwards even if it was directly above. Only a couple of hundred meters at most even now. This meant that even if the Pylon began extending upwards, it would be a very long time before he was able to claim a sky-city. If ever. Though he was pretty sure the cloud was moving slightly... so maybe it would just float away.

Speaking of the Pylon, he could still feel its location. Which was honestly quite lucky as without it, he was pretty lost. He had just followed the hawk as they flew. And with his sense of direction, getting back without a beacon such as the Pylon would prove more than a little difficult. As in, he would likely go in the direct opposite direction and never return.

He had only been gone for a few days, and that Hank guy said it would take a week to make the house. So he didn't plan on returning for that time at a minimum, which gave him plenty of time to explore the enormous cloud-continent in front of him.

Something the hawk was clearly on board with. In fact, Jake was pretty sure it was the reason it had brought him here, to begin with. Maybe because it wanted a companion for some added safety, or just because it wanted to continue leveling itself.

Either way, after a brief break and a potion each, they took to the sky once more. Flying down to the giant continent floating below, Jake felt an almost child-like excitement at the thought of exploring a freaking sky-island made of clouds.

It spoke to an adolescent part of him that wanted adventure. So far, the things he had encountered in this new world were rather... unimpressive from a spectacle-standpoint. It was caves, giant forests, plains, and so on. But a giant cloud... now that's something.

The entire cloud was extremely thick too. The hawk and human had flown up parallel to a wall of cloud as they ascended. It had to be at least three or four hundred meters thick. But it was nothing compared to the sight that met him when he got above the edge of the cloud.

Before Jake, he saw the sprawling world that lay upon the cloud. Countless ivory trees were scattered about, with a giant tree off far in the distance - a giant tree that he could only see because of the bright flashes it gave off every few seconds as it was currently night time.

Like a lightning conductor, it was struck by bursts of electricity from all other trees on the island, acting as the epicenter of the entire continent. It made Jake believe that these trees were the whole reason the clouds were even able to be stepped on in the first place.

After the massive tree and lightning, the next thing that struck him was the many sources of movement he saw. Countless birds flew above the island, which wasn't a surprise at all. What was surprising was the other type of creature.

On the cloud below walked several figures. Vaguely humanoid but clearly not. They were entirely white and looked to be part of the cloud continent itself, but a quick Identify proved they weren't.

### **[Cloud Elemental – lvl 56]**

It was his first encounter with an elemental. He knew of their existence from books he had read on alchemy and from the description of his bow. Concerning alchemy, it mainly discussed how elementals were great sources of ingredients for many kinds of alchemical creations.

Once slain, an elemental will always turn into a small orb of its element. A Cloud Elemental, as an example, would drop a Cloud Orb. The orb would contain a highly concentrated amount of cloud-affinity mana and was thus highly suitable as an ingredient.

Jake didn't have any need for it, however. Mainly because he didn't know any recipes that required orbs. Secondly, because his alchemy branch didn't really use those sorts of items often, he doubted it would even be instrumental in the future.

Pure forms of a type of mana like that would most often be found in beneficial pills, flasks, or elixirs - not poisons. But of course, that wasn't the only reason to hunt them. Experience was a universal gain for any being with levels, after all.

Something the birds were fully aware of. The cloud elemental Jake had just identified was dived upon by a group of five birds. In its semi-intangible form, it ignored the purely physical attacks but took damage from magic.



In less than a minute, it dispersed and turned into a small fingernail-sized white orb. One of the birds, the largest one, ate it without any hesitation as the five of them flew upwards once more.

As he was observing this, he saw several other similar occurrences all around the island. Most ended with dead cloud elementals, but sometimes they turned it around on the birds and killed them instead. Enveloped by the elemental and consumed.

Despite the many deaths, it didn't appear to affect the population of the elementals, however. As Jake saw them die, he saw just as many emerge from the island below. Like climbing out of the ground, they came into being. Born from the vast cloud that was the island itself.

He was thrown out of his thoughts by a blast of wind from the hawk behind him. It tired of his useless gawking. He understood what it wanted, and he couldn't agree more. While observing the many birds hunt was entertaining in its own right, nothing was better than doing it yourself.

Sweeping down, the two of them split up slightly as they each went for a target. The hawk was going for another bird at level 93, while Jake aimed for an elemental larger than nearly all the others he saw. One that had just killed a group of birds being overconfident in their ability to face it.

**[Cloud Elemental – lvl 95]**

Jake smiled to himself as he landed on the cloud in front of it. He wasn't stupid enough to try and fight while flying. Jake knew his own limitations. On the ground, he was far more potent and far more comfortable.

The elemental towered over him, being nearly ten meters tall. It looked vaguely human but was way too bulky for it to be so. Its two arms were as thick as its torso, and it didn't have any legs but only a swirling mass of clouds that floated slightly upon the island below.

Looking upon it, he habitually used Mark of the Ambitious Hunter, took out his bow, and channeled and fired off an Infused Powershot without any hesitation. The elemental that was just floating there didn't even react before the arrow reached it - an arrow that pierced straight through it, leaving a big gaping hole.

*Wait...* he thought as the elemental now shifted its focus to him. His mark informed him that the attack had done barely any damage. Only a few remnants of mana had invaded the body of the elemental and actually harmed it.

It slowly extended its hand and fired off a compressed beam of steam towards him without making any sound. Its movements were slow, but the beam more powerful than he anticipated. It kicked up smoke as the cloud dispersed upon being hit, forcing Jake back.

It slowly hovered towards him as it continued firing out a constant stream of steam. Jake used his One Step Mile to create some distance as he tried firing a Splitting Arrow towards the elemental. He hoped the extra arrows from the skill counted as magical or something like that.

Once more disappointed, they too just passed through the cloud elemental. Not doing any damage at all.

He tried a few more times and even fired off an arrow coated in his blood in the hope of it having any effect. Unsurprisingly poison didn't work on a being made out of literal clouds. Having no blood. Or flesh. Or really a physical body to speak of.

By now, he was beginning to recognize that he may have a minor hole in his repertoire of skills. He was good at killing things mainly due to his incredibly useful Powershot and poisons, both of which proved useless against the elemental.

Then he thought he was brilliant as he used one of the functions of wings he hadn't tried before. He burned the blood within the wings, as the poisonous mist slowly seeped out. He smiled as he flapped his wings and sent a cloud of deadly mist towards the elemental. *Eat this!*

The cloud of mist floated towards the elemental... and then just swirled around it as it was slowly dispersed. Like a constant current of air flowed around the elemental at all times, his mist didn't even make contact. *Well shit.*

He also seriously doubted that swinging at it with his sword and dagger would do much good. Maybe Descending Dark Fang would do damage, but how many would it take?

From what he saw from the birds, they mainly used blasts of wind and pure mana to disperse and kill the elementals. Wind magic appearing especially useful.

The problem was that Jake didn't have a single magical attack. The closest thing he had was Touch of the Malefic Viper when it came to offensive magic. One could count his Gaze of the Apex Hunter as a magical attack, but its function was to immobilize against an opponent of his own level, not to deal damage.

On the other hand, the elemental didn't have a good way to attack him either. Its steam didn't hit, and its movements were way too slow to catch up to him. It was a stalemate where neither side could get any ground.

But Jake was reluctant just to give up. He knew mana-based attacks worked. So wouldn't he just have to attack it with that?

Spreading out his hands, mana began accumulating in them. His many hours of mana practice being shown off. This time he didn't bother to form strings, though. He simply gathered small orbs of pure mana.

Like back in the Forgotten Sewer, when he was exploring the dark-affinity, the mana in his hands began changing color. From a transparent shimmer to two black orbs. The process took a few seconds, but it was far faster than it had been back then.

He threw the two bolts of mana at the elemental with hope in his eyes. While it wasn't a skill, he had still packed a few hundred points of mana within each bolt.

The two bolts hit the cloud elemental straight on and sunk into its body. Jake felt the mana instantly dissipate as it spread throughout the body of the elemental. And then it... disappeared. Or, more accurately, it was suppressed by the elemental.

*Well, that was a bummer*, he thought, disappointed. He could tell that it had done *some* damage, but he was pretty damn sure that he would run out of mana before it died. He needed something else.

The next few minutes were spent with Jake condensing balls of mana of different forms to attempt to kill it. He tried to condense the mana, shape it, and even test if he could somehow make it into another affinity, like earth-affinity. Failing in all these attempts, and even when he succeeded, the resulting attack did nothing to the elemental.

In the end, he tried to move in close and attempt Touch of the Malefic Viper. He wasn't keen on it as he had seen the fate of a bird being devoured by the cloud but felt like he had no other choice. It was either that or retreating.

Carefully approaching the elemental, he dodged the blasts of steam as he neared its lower body. It floated about half a meter above the cloud island, meaning he could only touch its lower section without flying.

But just as he was about to reach it, it smashed both its massive arms down towards him. He managed to dodge, but the attack didn't end there. An explosion of steam and mist pushed him back tens of meters while scalding his skin slightly.

With the giant elemental's arms still lowered, he took a step forward and appeared right in front of it once more. His hand was glowing a dark green sheen as he plunged it into the Cloud Elemental's arm. Instantly he felt like he had just put his hand into boiling water as he quickly covered his entire body in scales. It helped immensely, but it still hurt.

At the same time, the elemental churned as parts of its arm began turning greenish. Jake barely managed to smile triumphantly before the elemental countered him once more. Parts of its arm that had begun turning color exploded. Right into him as he stood with his hand inside the elemental.

Jake found himself blasted backward, his entire upper body and arms scalded from the hot steam. He flew back nearly five hundred meters before he hit the ground rolling. The scales had blocked most of the blow, but it had still managed to do immense damage to him.

Especially the hand and lower arm that had been inside the elemental was a mess. Jake's hand was entirely broken, with the skin and flesh melted. More bone than hand remaining. The rest of his lower arm not much better.

By now, he had to admit that he was countered. He didn't know what to do.

Which was the moment where a giant blade of wind cut into the Cloud Elemental. The hawk landed between Jake - who was still getting up - and the elemental slowly trudging towards him.

In the fight, he had nearly forgotten.

He wasn't alone.

