

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 181: Methods of Improvement

Jake saw Miranda leave and reentered the lodge to continue his work. It was a nice break to get once in a while when she came by, and he often got something quite valuable out of it too. Today, he had gotten the idea of *actually* using the city to his advantage.

The issues of upgrading his Touch of the Malefic Viper and Sense of the Malefic Viper had been bothering him more than before these last few days. Especially so after he had reached level 80 in his profession only a few hours prior and gained the next incredibly powerful stat-granting skill.

It hadn't taken him long to decide between Fang and Pride. His encounter with the Minotaur Mindlord had made him aware of how weak he was against any kind of mental attack, even if the fight had been on the easy side for him.

He feared he would encounter something stronger, as the memory of briefly considering the Mindlord a 'friend' still haunted him. What if it had been

permanent? Or lasted far longer? What if he had been with actual friends, and it fooled him for long enough to kill one of them?

What if Mystie had come along and he had made Jake fight it... all of those things had been bothering him, so he wanted to shore up the weakness at least a little bit. So yeah, he picked Pride of the Malefic Viper.

[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.

Jake still had no idea what Words of Power were, but he figured he would find out eventually. He wanted it for the mental resistance thing anyway. To explore an entirely new 'thing' when he already had two skills to upgrade and his profession to level up also seemed like a bit too much.

The skill hadn't come with any instinctive knowledge or anything like that. Then again, it just made him do things better. Things he didn't know how to do, but.. he was better at them now, so yay?

He had experimented a bit with the whole "force your will upon the world" part, and... he had just made himself look silly. How the hell was he supposed to do that anyway? It wasn't like it just made all his skills stronger because he wanted them to be, and it didn't make mana manipulation any easier either. Jake was sure there was some trick to it, and he was looking forward to figuring it out.

But back on the topic of what he had made Miranda get... he had just asked for one thing. Equipment, but preferably weapons. Not anything for him to use but to experiment on. He had spent quite a lot of time thinking about improving the Touch skill and had come to some realizations.

Jake had to remember that at its core, Touch of the Malefic Viper was an alchemy-skill, not a combat-skill. The one time he had upgraded it prior was when he infused the Essence in the Valley of Tusks dungeon. Before that, he had also used his Touch on the massive concoction in the Lucenti Plains, and most recently, he used it on the Malefic Beastorb he created to help the little birdie sleeping on his head.

In every one of those cases, he had changed an item, or more accurately, corrupted an item. He hadn't just poisoned them but made their properties different, even making them be seen as other objects entirely.

Jake had a theory that Touch of the Malefic Viper's original purpose was to be used during concoction-processes to fuse different poisons or add the property of another poison to the concoction. That... or just corrupt the shit out of it all and make something far deadlier than before.

He had injected Touch into the Beastcore through the cauldron, showing the runes on the cauldron recognized the Touch as an alchemy-skill. He knew the base-runes for alchemy were entirely system-created and actually weren't that hard to make. Given a few weeks, Jake could likely learn to create a basic mixing bowl. They would be shit but useable by anyone with any crafting-skill related to potions or poisons or just knowledge of how to use the runes.

He had already done a few experiments using Touch during the crafting process, and quite honestly... it went swimmingly. No issues at all, and he even felt like it improved some of his concoctions a bit. He made his best Necrotic Poison yet by mixing in some of the effects from his blood towards the end, amplifying some aspect of the concoction instead of just using his blood purely as a catalyst.

It was still a Necrotic Poison, but it appeared like it could spread slightly faster than before. It wasn't enough for it to change the name or description at all; it was just the feeling he got from his Sense of the Malefic Viper.

But the fact that it was so easy to do was the issue. Clearly, the skill was already meant to do that, and Jake was just a bit of a dummy for not having done it a lot earlier. Well, he hadn't lost much as it didn't necessarily make the concoctions stronger, often just slightly altering the effects. Sometimes making it weaker, too, if the effects didn't mix well.

No, he needed to go in another direction... he had already managed to alter the skill slightly by expanding its scope by allowing the effects of affinities to be mixed in, so now he wanted to increase its depth. He wanted to double down on the corruption effect and learn to use it on other things outside of just mimicking a poison.

He felt like it was a bit like cheating... but he had asked the Viper and gained a semi-useful answer:

"The true Touch of the Malefic Viper - or any of my skills really - are way outside the scope of your understanding. Your epic-rarity version may not be the same as another's, and neither will your ancient-rarity one be. Mixing in affinities is just a mere fraction of what the real Touch of Me can do."

Okay, it was actually quite useful and gave him some good insight into how all those Legacy skill-things worked. It was pretty much just saying: “go right ahead and try to improve it in any way possible!”

So that’s what he did. He wanted to see if he could further corrupt and change items, so he had Miranda put out a quest to deliver him some. He had some items in his inventory... but quite frankly, they were just too good to experiment on.

He still had the Staff of Lucenti Realms and the epic-rarity Scimitar of Debauchery, for example. Both of those interesting due to how different they were. One held mana of moonlight, a very pure type of mana, while the other was only good because of some fucked up curse.

While he wouldn’t feel bad about just breaking the scimitar, he would prefer to at least get something useful out of doing so. So he would start out by breaking a bunch of inferior-rarity items made by smiths training their craft. It also had the nice side-benefit of injecting some of his Credits into the economy.

However, for now, it was back to trying to make something tasty for Sylphie.

Days passed by as his commission was out, and while Miranda collected weapons he had intended to create something to help Sylphie grow but he quickly ran into some problems.

First of all, he had never made anything like it before, so it was an entirely new area. While that was a bit exciting, he found out it really was way outside his area of expertise. He found a book that described a few recipes, and it noted that creating any kind of nurturing product for a beast was far closer to the cooking profession than alchemy. There were also entire professions dedicated to raising beasts besides that, so maybe it would be better to find someone else to help?

He also found out that different beasts required different things. You needed to know the beast's mana affinities, its general species, and last but not least, the grade of its Origin. The Origin was related to the core of its Records and was something Jake had encountered in the description of his bloodline as an example.

Using himself as an example once more, while he himself was the Origin of the bloodline, the Malefic Viper was the Origin of all his skills carrying the name. Origins then had grades, the grade of the Malefic Viper, of course

being pretty damn high. This again tied back to upgrading the skill... if he managed to go beyond the Origin, he would be able to change the skill entirely, perhaps making it into Touch of Jake Thayne... *actually, let's just stick with Malefic Viper for that one*

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The Origin of his profession was naturally also the Malefic Viper.

For beasts, their Origin was often tied to the name of their race. Sylphian Eyas meant its species was that of a hawk, not hard that one, but the name Sylphian was a bit more challenging to figure out. Jake assumed it was related to Sylphs. The issue was... what exactly was a Sylph?

In conclusion... Jake had no idea where the hell even to start. He would at most make some shitty inferior-rarity soup for the bird, and at that point, it would just be better to feed it meat from a high-level beast anyway.

So... Jake returned to his original goal, which was actually going quite well.

****You have successfully crafted [Fungicide (Common)] – A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned****

****'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 82 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

Jake breathed in the fragrance of the liquid in the cauldron and nearly gagged. God was it horrid. He also felt some of the poison enter his system before quickly being eliminated by Palate of the Malefic Viper.

As a responsible bird-babysitter, he had only been crafting today because the little one was with her parents. They were outside running around as the small hawk was still too young to fly. She hadn't even begun growing feathers yet.

Jake wasn't the most knowledgeable about birds, but he was pretty sure most birds tended to grow pretty quickly. Sylphie was definitely growing up slower than pre-system hawks, not that he minded. She had gotten slightly bigger and was a lot faster and stronger now, but just as cute.

Well... he was pretty sure the little eyas could kill an average pre-system adult no problem, seeing as he had already seen the small bird peck small holes into the incredible resilient bark of some of the trees.

She was getting stronger every day, but he still didn't want her in the house when concocting poisons. It didn't matter when he worked on potions, but the fumes from poison alone would hurt the little one. With the common-rarity toxins, perhaps even a chance she could die. Either way, it was a risk he was absolutely unwilling to take.

The barrier around the house also served to keep any fumes inside, an unexpected but welcome benefit.

Taking a look at his new creation, he noted that the description was pretty much the exact same as before.

[Fungicide (Common)] – A poison created to kill fungi and similar lifeforms. This type of poison is made to spread through any physical connection of the fungi, quickly infecting large parts of it. Deals relatively low damage but is hard to cleanse.

It was like when he went from Weak Hemotoxin to just Hemotoxin... it added a word here or removed a word there, just indicating it was now slightly stronger, which made sense, as the concoction was pretty much the exact same as the weak version.

The primary ingredient of the fungicide was actually his own blood. He remembered how it utterly annihilated the needle-like tendrils of the Indigo Mushroom when it tried to suck out his blood and wanted an effect like that, but slower.

Besides that, he just used some moss and some of the mushrooms he hadn't paid much attention to prior. Most of them common-rarity. He was beginning to run low on most ingredients, but he did have a plan to alleviate that a bit by once more using the city. He would take that up with Miranda the next time she came by.

Yet even with a common-rarity fungicide, he wasn't satisfied. He knew it would deal damage to the mushroom, but he doubted it would be enough. So he was going to go beyond common-rarity and make an even stronger poison.

And to do that... he already had some ingredients in mind. All of them were things he had gained during the tutorial and then just kept hidden away in his spatial storage. The first of which was taken from the Forgotten Sewers dungeon.

[Lesser Ethwood Ashes (Uncommon)] – The ashes left behind by burnt Lesser Ethwood. Used in a myriad of recipes related to the soul and mind. Has no effect upon direct consumption.

With that item alone, it was clear that Jake was going for a poison that wouldn't just infect the body but the mushroom's soul. He didn't need to actually damage the soul – that was something at a level far beyond what he could do – he just needed to muddle the mushroom a little. Make it more challenging for it to detect the poison.

He had been inspired quite a bit by the Minotaur Mindlord. While it had been a real asshole, it was competent in what it did. He still vividly remembered the phantom pains he endured and his inability to detect the Minotaur with anything besides his bloodline-related abilities. He wanted something in that vein.

A second ingredient he would use for that came from a bush growing beside his porch.

[Soothing Bellberry Bush (Uncommon)] – A bush of Soothing Bellberries. The berries growing on this bush are known to have a soothing effect on the mind.

Jake had 'borrowed' the bush from the tutorial a long time ago and had quite frankly totally forgotten about it until he began forming his plan to kill the mushroom. The bush grew berries quite quickly, and he already picked a few dozen of them.

[Soothing Bellberry (Uncommon)] – A berry that provides a soothing effect to whoever consumes it.

He wanted them to work in concert with the ash to help soothe the mushroom. He had found some recipes that he believed could help him do that, but all of them mentioned one final crucial ingredient to make such a fungicide.

A part of the fungus itself.

Chapter 182: Just Getting a Few Samples

Jake walked through the cave again, the first time in quite a while. He was heading for the biodome with the Indigo Fungus, ignoring anything on the way. He was just there for a few samples... but he wanted to test a few things if he was there anyway.

He wanted to test how effective the poison mist from his Wings of the Malefic Viper was and to try and fight the mushroom a bit. He had already made a dozen bottles of common-rarity fungicide, and he wanted to test the effect of those too.

Heck... maybe he could even kill it without the need to create an uncommon-rarity poison. In that case, he could switch to making a better necrotic poison or something like that. He sure as hell wouldn't complain about one less massive blue mushroom in the world.

When the entrance to the biodome was within sight, he already began scouting inside. He didn't see any movement, so maybe he had come just after feeding time. Assuming the mushroom was still doing its lure-and-kill strategy.

He had felt the mana-lure for a while now, so he was pretty sure it was.

Jake walked into the biodome, and everything was as idyllic as last time he came here. Even more so as there weren't murder-mantises running around the place.

Moving in a bit further, he did spot some signs of life in the form of a large centipede crawling on one of the larger mushrooms, munching on it. It was only level 40, so not really worth noting, but it did show that at least he hadn't come just after the mushroom had eaten everything.

It only became more apparent as he got closer to the mana-lure. More centipedes appeared, fighting some beetle-like creatures. All of them the size of horses, none of them below level 50. It was quite the brawl, but Jake didn't have any intentions of getting involved.

He wasn't there for them.

They didn't get in his way either but kept just fighting each other.

Jake needed to wake up the monster lurking below to hopefully get a good sample. The needle-like tendrils had to be connected to the rest of the fungus to deliver nutrients, so he wanted a few of those.

He prepared himself by summoning his wings and jumping up, flying towards the ceiling.

There were only around 130 meters from ceiling to floor, but it was enough to get a bit of a vantage point. Jake found a small pockets in the wall, just slightly large enough for him to stand on. He closed his eyes as he tried to focus on his foe and summon his Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter.

...Wait, what is that damn Blue Mushroom even? It was called a Mycorrhiza, which according to the books, is a type of fungus creating a symbiotic relationship between itself and plants... what kind of arrow can be used against that?

This was when Jake discovered a weakness of his Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter that he hadn't even considered. He could only summon an arrow specially made to slay a particular enemy if he had a good enough idea of what was needed to kill the aforementioned enemy.

Sure, Jake could imagine an arrow that would impact the ground and spread deadly energy throughout the entire area... but he couldn't focus on it and summon the arrow with confidence. He *knew* what kind of attack worked well against the Cloud Elementals and pretty much anything made of flesh and blood... but against this damn mushroom, he just held too many doubts. The most significant doubt being if arrows were even of any use.

In summary, he just didn't know enough about the enemy to summon his Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. So learning more about the damn mushroom was another item added to his to-do list.

Mushrooms are truly my bane... he thought disgruntledly but soon picked himself up again when he imagined making an uncommon-rarity poison that would slowly make the entire fungi-nightmare wither.

His vain hope of maybe slaying the damn thing had waned by now, however. *Let's just get some samples and get a feel for the thing before getting the hell out of here.*

So Jake took out a regular arrow, nocked it, and aimed down for the mana-lure. He was pretty sure breaking it would piss off the big bad boss, so naturally, he began charging a Powershot to ensure breaking it.

At the same time, he opened his wings as the blood within began boiling. A faint mist began being emanated as he channeled the Infused Powershot for a full ten seconds.

Wakey-wakey little mushroom.

BOOM!

Stone and soil flew everywhere as he released the arrow. It flew straight down towards the crystal that functioned as a mana-lure, shattering it completely. To double-up on the pain, he flapped his wings to send a cloud of poison gas down into the biodome as he pushed even more mana into the wings to increase the output.

OoOOoOOOOooO

Shattering the lure and blanketing the biodome in poison did wonders to wake up the sleeping mushroom, and Identify once more worked as he used it on one of the giant mushrooms.

[Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza – lvl ???]

Jake also finally felt its aura and could tell that it was slightly stronger than the last time he came. It had likely grown a few levels since then from eating all the insects coming there. Or maybe it just grew naturally like beasts? Quite frankly, he didn't know and didn't care.

The many insects scattered around the biodome panicked but had little time to react as nature itself came alive to devour them. Like last time, the fungus didn't respond by

attacking him directly, but just by killing everything within its domain. Or maybe it hadn't detected him yet... it actually wouldn't be surprising if it lacked perception.

It allowed Jake to get an excellent aerial view as tendrils shot up all over the place, and some of the mushrooms released paralyzing gas. Hundreds of insects died in seconds, sucked dry of all nutrients. Ten or so seconds after awakening, the fungus finally found the one that was attacking it.

At least Jake assumed it had, as beams of mana headed towards him, forcing him to dodge. Tendrils also began worming their way up the dome from all sides, coming towards him. It was quite a lot easier to deal with than last time, his progress showing.

He saw the poison mist dig its way into the many plants on the dome below, but the effects were minimal. The plants had some inherent resistance to poison, while the mushrooms clearly didn't care that much about the poison whatsoever. It did a bit of damage still, but it wasn't very reassuring.

That is until something else was mixed in. A drop of liquid hit one of the mushrooms and sank into it unnoticed as Jake kept dodging the many attacks from the giant fungus-monster. However, he barely focused on it as he instead zoned in on sensing the movement of his poison.

He did shoot off a few needle-tendrils with his bow, and with a quick fly-by, threw them into his spatial storage. Jake felt like the mushroom was barely trying; as soon a minute had passed, the fungicide was slowly making its way into the creature.

With dozens of samples already in his storage, he didn't need anything more as he also just began cutting off parts of the other plants and threw them in his storage. Soon, he

would be the only living thing in the biodome besides the fungus, and he was considering to spread some more fungicide to see if he could maybe actually kill the damn thing before it dete-

SWOOSH

Jake barely managed to react as a whip-like tendril came up from below, and without his danger-sense, he would have now been one arm lighter. But he still had a several-centimeter deep cut in his shoulder. *What?*

One thing was clear... it now knew about the fungicide... and it wasn't happy.

The tendril that attacked him before was... different. It was teal and even thinner than any prior. Moreover... it was stronger.

A lot stronger.

Jake scrambled, able to focus on nothing but the two tendrils that now attacked him. Both of them were like whips as they cut through the entire biodome, carving deep gashes into the walls. *Time to get the fuck out of here.*

He activated Limit Break to 20% as he flew towards the exit of the biodome, attempting to avoid the two tendr-

A third one flew out of one of the walls, and even if he tried to dodge, it was too late. His right wing was cut off, and one of the original two tendrils returned and severed the left one.

“Fuck,” Jake muttered under his breath as he air-stepped to avoid getting his legs cut off. With difficulty, he leaned to the side, allowing himself to fall once more as he accelerated himself downwards with two blasts of mana from his gloves.

He barely got a bit of leeway from that move, but soon two thin beams of mana flew towards him, fired from one of the teal tendrils. Jake quickly summoned his scales, dodging one of them, but the other scratched his side.

His entire body was consumed in a blue explosion, sending him flying. He had enough foresight to make sure he flew towards the exit of the cavern, but he had made a colossal miscalculation when it came to the power of the beam.

Scales and blood flew everywhere as his entire right side became a bloody mess. Without the scales, the strike would have done far worse, and Jake could barely make heads or tails of what the fuck was happening.

All he knew was that he had to get the fuck out of there now.

For every passing second, it mobilized more and more tendrils to kill him, and soon a fourth one joined the assault.

Luckily, Jake was finally on the ground, allowing him to move far more elusively. With a step forward, he teleported back fifty meters, and with another, he stood right in front of the exit of the cavern – two tendrils sticking out behind him from where he had just taken two steps.

The entrance was blocked off by a mass of tendrils, with even one of the blue ones reinforcing it. Jake ran straight for it and tried to use Shadow Vault to phase through, which resulted in it feeling like he had just run headfirst into a wall.

He smashed into the barrier of vines that simply contained too much mana for him to phase through. They also counted as living things, which he wasn't even sure he could phase through, to begin with... he could sometimes barely get through a tree, but the vines were just too much. No, he would have to break it instead, but that was far from easy.

Jake couldn't find any opportunity to use Infused Powershot, so he tried to cut a hole with Descending Dark Fang. He managed to cut through a part of it before a tendril came up from below him, forcing him to interrupt his attack.

He leaped back a bit, but his thigh was still pierced by a thin tendril, sending even more blood and scales flying. Stumbling, he couldn't avoid in time as two thin needles came straight for his head. The wounded hunter Stared directly at them, his eyes shining yellow as the tendrils stopped mid-air.

Gaze of the Apex Hunter

Jake made his way to the wall of tendrils again with a One Step Mile and threw a dozen bottles on it while also spraying some of his own poisoned blood over it. It wasn't to break it but to just weaken it a little.

The tendrils had stopped longer than expected, proving his Gaze of the Apex Hunter was very effective. It had bought him quite a lot of time, even allowing him to summon three mana bolts that he fired towards a tendril charging up another magic attack. He would have used his bow, but he needed his hands to throw bottles and spray blood.

When he fired them, he observed something interesting. A tendril flew for each of them, making them explode, but the way they moved was as if they attacked him. *Mana-based vision?* Jake barely managed to think before the next tendrils came for him.

This was when he saw movement. Not from the tendrils, but below him. He saw a whole net of roots coming up towards him. Far more than he could possibly handle. Jake turned to hack away at the barrier closing off the exit, cleaving off vine after vine.

But it was just too thick, and when he had to continually avoid getting impaled or have limbs sliced off, it went far too slow. The roots from below got closer and closer before they soon finally emerged.

A single very small blue tendril came first, followed by a dozen more moments later. They weren't whipping at Jake or trying to damage him directly... instead, they just grew. It was like hundreds of small thin stalks of fungi grew around him.

They all swayed slightly towards him as the first one hit his arm. Jake wanted to move away but found it stuck to his arm as it slowly began wrapping itself around him. He

ripped some of it off, but the damn things were even adhesive. More and more wrapped him up as he found it harder and harder to move.

With them touching him, he couldn't use his One Step Mile. Shadow Vault didn't help either, as he looked up and saw more than ten of the indigo tendrils forming a pattern together in mid-air with a huge ball of mana forming.

He could barely move at this point, as he used Touch of the Malefic Viper to try and grab some of the small tendrils to wither them. Jake looked towards the tendrils channeling the spell and used Gaze of the Apex Hunter on them, freezing them and the stalks growing on him.

But... the spell wasn't interrupted. Just paused. As if the fungus knew Jake would do something like this.

Jake saw only one final solution as he managed to get himself to stand right in front of the exit to the biodome. At the same time, he began condensing a giant mana bolt above himself.

After barely getting there, the blast was released as the entire biodome was enveloped in intense blue light. His danger sense screamed at him to dodge, and Jake tried to, but couldn't move... he desperately cut and ripped the small tendrils to get himself free, but it was too late.

The massive beam of mana was heading straight for him... and Jake knew it wasn't something he could tank. His scales were already summoned, and he pushed mana all around him to form a barrier. The mass of mana was already forming above his head, looking vaguely like a mana bolt but far too big.

The beam tore through the air, but when it was just five or so meters from its target... it slowed.

Moment of the Primal Hunter

Every spore floating in the air looked frozen mid-air, the now thousands of evergrowing stalks motionless. The only thing that moved was the mass of mana floating above Jake and the hunter himself. Moment of the Primal Hunter was Jake's final gambit as he sent the mass of mana above himself straight down.

It exploded as all the tiny tendrils were broken, and Jake could finally move. He managed to sway to the side, and his foot was mid-air preparing to use One Step Mile when time resumed... and the beam arrived.

The barrier blocking off the entrance was sheared away as the massive beam continued into the tunnel he had entered from, killing any weak creature within, only stopping when it hit a wall. Jake's foot landed a millisecond after the barrier was impacted, and he teleported.

Parts of him.

Jake noticed that his peripheral vision wasn't what it should be and that his balance was absolutely off. But he couldn't think straight and diagnose the problem. Yet even when his mind couldn't process what exactly had just happened, his body still moved.

A single wing sprung from his back as he flapped to get out through the hole formed by the massive beam in a single mighty flap. He flapped once more, allowing his foot to touch down, taking him forty meters forward, before another flap took him around a corner.

The move had been haphazardous as he fell to the ground.

He took out a potion with his left hand and tried to drink it, but half the liquid didn't enter his body but just fell to the ground below. The effect still worked, but he only now truly noticed what was wrong.

The entire right side of his body was gone; even large parts of his head were no longer there.

Jake couldn't think straight, his body just laying there as flesh was already wriggling as his massive vitality, boosted further by the potion, got to work.

Back in the biodome, the hundreds of small indigo tendrils slowly receded back to the ground as everything began being restored. New plants and mushrooms grew, and all traces of the massive fight were gone in less than half an hour.

A small crystal appeared in the middle of the biodome once more... and an hour later, a small group of unsuspecting beetles crawled into the biodome, lured by the mana to continue the feeding-cycle of the Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza.

Chapter 183: Important Jobs

Jake felt an itch on his right side that he just couldn't scratch. The kind that felt like it was just below the skin. It woke him up as he tried to rub it anyway. But... his arm didn't move. He finally opened his eyes but found the sight in his right one blurry.

Oh... yeah... Jake thought as he remembered what had happened. A quarter of a second. No, even less than that. That was the difference between Jake perfectly avoiding the attack... and losing half his body. He moved his left hand and summoned a healing potion.

He rolled onto his back and drank the potion down, finally getting a good look at himself through his sphere.

The entire right side of his body was gone. In fact... if the human heart weren't slightly to the left, his heart would have been sheared away. He hadn't been as lucky when it came to his head, however. While his head had regenerated already, his hair hadn't, making him aware of how extensive the damage was.

A large part of his head had been gone... a good part of his brain too. Needless to say, if it had happened before the system, Jake would have died instantly. He could perfectly remember what had happened after he was hit, even if he couldn't recognize the thoughts he had at the time. He had just moved on instinct to run and had managed to tumble away.

The mask had helped a lot... resulting in only parts of his head being fried. The mana had still entered where his eye-holes were and had clearly exploded through that tiny hole in a cone, taking out a large part of his head. He had a completely bald spot at the back of his

skull, several centimeters across... showing the energy had burned straight through his skull. The mask itself was undamaged, besides looking a bit burnt. Nothing a quick rinse couldn't fix.

As he lay there, his arm and leg still hadn't regenerated, as clearly his vitality prioritized getting organs and other more vital things fixed first. The health potion he had just consumed helped speed up the process drastically, but it was still taking its time.

Jake knew that to heal an injury like this would require more than his full health pool. Without his potions or a healer, it would take weeks for him to return to his peak condition. But with potions, he should be up and about within the day...

"I fucked up," he spoke out loud as he stared up at the ceiling of the cave.

It was the second time he found himself lying there, his body broken. The second time he had faced the damn mushroom and gotten his ass handed to him. Was the damn mushroom really his bane? Also, what the hell happened back there?

The last time he came, he handled it pretty well, and he even had thoughts of just killing it... but it had been hiding so much power. Those blue vines were just so damn strong it was insane. Was it perhaps the actual body of the fungus?

As a Mycorrhiza, it mainly lived inside other plants, using them to fuel itself. Did this mean it had an entire body hidden deep beneath, just like all those vines? And why hadn't it used the vines, to begin with? Did it perhaps take too much energy?

Next time... I will come prepared... and I'll take it down, Jake thought, as he closed his eyes, replaying the fight.

The fungicide had worked quite well, and he could feel it doing damage... but what had worked even better was his Gaze of the Apex Hunter. He had theorized that it should be pretty weak to it, and that had been confirmed today.

He could freeze it even longer than the Thunder Roc by quite a bit, and even when he came last, the Gaze worked wonders too. To him, that indicated its soul wasn't very resilient... which boded well for the poison he was planning on concocting.

Looking at his resources, he was actually quite fine in that department. Well, besides health points. His stamina and mana were both looking healthy, so he didn't really need to meditate. Instead, he summoned the book he was currently reading from his spatial storage and began reading.

An hour later, the human lying in the middle of a damp cavern with a book consumed another potion before he resumed reading. The more he read on fungi, the more confident he became in using a poison that partially attacked the soul. In fact, fungi or plant-based lifeforms tended to have relatively weaker souls as theirs are awakened and typically not something they are born with.

The hours passed as Jake slowly felt his entire right side regenerate. The vision on his right eye was back to normal again too, and his hair was growing out at a near-visible pace.

With enough strength to get up, he managed to shakily stand on his feet. He once more gave himself a good look-over and even checked his status menu. Nothing had changed,

but he had expected it to. He had assumed he would have lost a few stats because during it all... he had lost one of his boots.

His Boots of the Wandering Alchemist was the only piece of equipment he had that didn't either sink into his body and thus couldn't be destroyed or had the overpowered self-repair enchant. Yet... he hadn't lost the stats provided by it even when one was gone.

Jake tried to feel a bit for his mana and noticed something in the direction of the biodome. He walked over there, and after going only a bit, he saw the carnage left by the mana-blast.

The entire hallway from the biodome to the first bend had been utterly annihilated, with nothing living remaining. The walls were still faintly sizzling with energy even after such a long time, and the wall where the blast had impacted was now just a large hole, creating a small cave inside the cavern.

It was from within that newly-created cave he felt the boot. Jake walked in there and saw nothing but sizzling dirt and two things lying on the ground.

One of them was a boot that didn't look any different from the day he got it... except for the half-destroyed bloody foot still within it. Jake didn't hesitate to pick it up and rip his own foot out before taking out a barrel of water as he quickly cleaned it. He even used Alchemists Purification a few times before he put it back on.

Is this old boot indestructible or what? Should I make a shield out of it? Jake thought as he couldn't help but double-check its description to see if he had missed anything.

[Boots of the Wandering Alchemist (Rare)] – Boots once offered to an alchemist before setting out on a journey to experience the world outside. Despite being made of simple leather, the Records of the alchemist has left a deep mark on this item, allowing it to transcend many ranks. Enchantments: +20 Endurance, +15 Agility. Reduces stamina expenditure from all movement-related skills by a small amount. Increases sensitivity towards earthbound plants.

Requirements: Lvl 25+ in any humanoid race.

He couldn't spot anything he missed... so his only conclusion was that the alchemist that once owned these boots was awesome. He would need to see if he could find a way to improve them at some point...

Moving on, he went to the other thing lying on the ground... one he recognized instantly. It was the blue vine that had reinforced the exit barrier to the biodome. It had apparently been caught up in the blast. Maybe on purpose or because Jake had frozen the entire plant with Gaze shortly before firing... he didn't know, and after using Identify on it, he was just happy he got it.

[Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza Lifevine (Rare)] – The Lifevine of an Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza. The Lifevine is a part of the main body of the fungus. Contains intense amounts of vital-energy and is incredibly resilient. Can be used in a myriad of alchemical creations.

The blue vine was nearly four meters long and a few centimeters thick. Jake could feel the intense energy still contained within as he smiled, putting it in his inventory. *A better sample than I could hope for.*

He threw one last glance towards the biodome as he gave the damn mushroom within the finger. He had promised not to badmouth mushrooms... but he could still hate them internally - and outwardly, just without saying anything.

Within ten minutes, he was back at the valley, not a single person noticing him on his way back. It would ruin his whole mysterious owner-look a bit if he walked through the settlement in tattered clothes.

When he entered the valley, he saw the family of hawks and smiled. The tiny bird also noticed him.

“Chirp! Chirp! Chirp!”

She ran towards him, taking small leaps along the way. Jake squatted down as he allowed her to run onto his arm as she headed straight for the top of his head. He just chuckled as Sylphie sat down on top of him while he brought a finger up to rub the little girl.

The mother and father hawk just looked on happily as Jake waved at them in greeting. They threw him a glance, and he nodded as they took off. He knew their plan already, as he had seen Hawkie reach level 99 just the day before. They were trying to get him to D-grade like his wife, and Jake was more than supportive.

So, he entered the lodge, continuing his job as an alchemist, but more importantly, the vital role of baby-hawk-sitter.

“I can ask, but do not expect a meeting any time soon, if ever,” Miranda said with a steadfast voice to the man in front of her.

“We insist on setting up a formal meeting with this owner to discuss the future of this settlement. We have many points of improvement and offers that we belie-“

“I said I would ask. Now stop pestering me,” Miranda said, annoyed, shooin away the man.

He scoffed as he turned around and left the rather large building that was the mayoral office. Or the City Lord’s office. They hadn’t really settled on any official name, but most knew what people were talking about no matter the term used.

Miranda leaned back in her chair as the annoying man finally left.

He represented a group of newish settlers. They had come only a few days ago with a group of around 400, led to Haven by their leader, who was also a Lord. He had decided to find a Pylon after the notification about ten being claimed appeared and had found his way to here.

When he learned that Miranda was just a mayor and not the actual owner, he had insisted on meeting Jake, but she had refused him every time. The man had then had the gall to try and go to the valley on his own, but she heard reports of him running away when he saw the D-grade hawk.

If he was just another opportunity-seeker, she could handle it, but the man was more than that. He was a damn fanatic.

His name was Kenneth Copefield, and he fancied himself a preacher. His 400 followers weren't just travel-companions but truly did *follow him* as a spiritual leader. He had apparently been blessed by a god or something, and Miranda was more than a little skeptical.

Kenneth's level was high, though. He was level 62 and followed a religion Miranda found a bit suspect. It didn't sound like he was after ritual sacrifices or the like but just looking for more people to pray to the god. The god was related to metal and stone from what she could tell... at least he was very adamant about constructing a temple made up entirely of expensive ores and stones.

And that was actually the root of their issues... she didn't allow him to construct a giant temple to some god that was most likely imaginary. To use religion as a way of leading people wasn't anything new, but the way he went about it was weird. He gave her bad vibes.

I will have to ask Jake tomorrow during the weekly visit; maybe he has some insight into this...

She didn't like relying on him, but she honestly was unsure how to handle all of this. Phillip hadn't been of any help with this particular case as he was far too busy handling the integration of the residents of the fort.

There were especially issues with those mind-controlled and taken hostage by the Minotaur Mindchief. All of them were scarred in different ways, and especially their view of Jake varied. Some saw him as a savior, while others blamed him for *how* he saved them.

From what she could tell, the Minotaur had tried to use them as hostages to make him surrender, and he hadn't cared but just attacked, making some of them kill each other. While it wasn't the best way to handle it... Miranda felt like she couldn't blame him either. She wasn't there, and could they really ask him to risk his own hide to help strangers?

It sounded a bit callous... but she had learned to be less soft in recent times. People were shitty, and compared to old office-politics, this new world was a lot rougher. Heck, she heard from Phillip that there had already been two assassination attempts on him during the fort's early days. Luckily no one had dared try and kill her... yet. It was likely because they feared the owner. Killing her would give them nothing if they couldn't convince the owner to let them become the new leader.

I really need to get my damn class evolved at least...

she thought as she shook her head. Her profession was getting high, and while the next evolution was still a fair bit away, it was now within sight. To have a level 23 class with that was just sad.

She just couldn't find the time these days. It was partially her own fault due to them sending out a few parties to scout the area for other settlements or travelers to recruit, filling up her plate with a constant influx of new issues.

But the recruitment-effort had paid off.

City Overview

City name: Haven

Population: 4647

City Owner: Jake Thayne

City Lord: Miranda Wells

City Tier: Earl

The city had most certainly expanded a lot, and the City Overview was now far more filled out. After Jake had introduced himself, it filled out the City Owner spot, and of course, the city had now been named, so that left all areas filled out.

Every so often, the population number increased, and she was pretty sure it didn't actually just show every person in the area, but only those whom the system recognized actually to belong to the city. That Kenneth guy and his group of fanatics weren't counted as an example, and she reckoned they were close to 5500 people within the Pylon's area.

Another menu that was no longer hollow was the quest panel... after she had gotten the skill to make quests and even the ability to allow others to create them, the panel had really taken off.

Quest Panel:

Current City Quests: 14

Current Open Quests: 34

Current Contracted Quests: N/A

Current Compulsory Quests: N/A

Granted, the two last ones were still empty, but it wasn't like those actually did anything. As for the quests they had made, the City Quests were quite simple. When she chose to view it closer in her menu, it showed her all of them... and they were honestly quite dull.

[Construction Effort: Housing (East)], [Construction Effort: Housing (West)],
[Construction Effort: Housing (South)], [Construction Project: Storage]...

Yeah, all just construction, she thought with a bit of a laugh. All of them were about building stuff or collecting materials to build stuff.

As for the Open Quests... those were quests created by citizens. They were quests anyone could take and were closer to commissions than anything else. The owner's quest was within that batch too. Most of them revolved around getting things crafted or collecting crafting materials. She was honestly just happy it was used.

Right next to the building she worked and lived in was a quest office of sorts. It was a building she had directed Hank on how to build, and with her skills, she had 'chosen' the building to serve the function. She then had Christen craft a metal slate that would open up a quest-creation window when you placed your hand on it and had that placed within.

The quests themselves could be found on message boards around the small city, all linked to the questing office. It worked a bit like the slate, where you could see the quest window by just looking at it. It was pretty functional and convenient, actually. Miranda still had many ideas and things to improve, and she looked forward to every new development. Though she could do without the religious fanatics and people constantly trying to one-up her in the political game during meetings with the city council...

Well, I can handle them, she thought confidently. There was just one final job she had to finish for today, an absolutely essential one - one that could impact her future as City Lord and in concert the fate of Haven in its entirety. A choice concerning the meeting she could have with the city owner the next day, one of utmost importance:

What to bring for dinner?

Chapter 184: Divine Influence

Jake had to admit that it was actually quite impressive he could have so many talks with Miranda without ever bringing up the subject of gods. He had honestly just come to assume everyone knew about gods being a real tangible thing. Maybe his view on the topic was a bit skewed, though. Just maybe.

So, when Miranda came to his lodge for their weekly meetup, and she brought up the topic, Jake just listened as she ranted a bit about someone wanting a temple. Apparently, a follower of some god had come, and Jake's first question was upon hearing this was just:

"Oh, who?"

Which got a perplexed look from Miranda, who clearly hadn't expected *that* to be his first question.

"What do you mean?" she asked, trying to get him to reclarify.

"The name of the god. Or title; a lot of them prefer to go by titles over their actual names, I heard," Jake tried to explain, as Miranda just looked more and more confused. He didn't help the situation by casually rubbing the belly of the bird on his head.

"I... didn't get a name... do you know something I don't, about this so-called god?"

At this point, Jake realized there was quite a knowledge-gap when it came to divine stuff. Thinking back, he never mentioned anything about gods to her before, and without meeting one herself, it was quite natural she didn't know about it.

He reckoned many people had met factions or people associated with gods... but Haven only had citizens from limited areas. Abby only recruited people from her own tutorial, Neil and friends coming from that same one, and Miranda's tutorial didn't have any divine involvement as far as he could tell. At least not on the surface.

The same was true for the fort. Jake had yet to hear anything about gods from them, and clearly, Phillip wasn't blessed by any. *I guess it's time to bring her up to speed.*

Jake could see many issues arise in the future if Miranda remained ignorant about the fact that a bunch of bored gods likely fucked around behind the curtain and had many followers on Earth doing their bidding.

"So... here's the deal..."

The entire night was spent with Jake giving her a bunch of exposition that would make everyone complain if written in a novel and dumped all at once. He didn't really bother hiding anything, which got many confused looks and questions when he said that he was blessed by a god but wasn't really a follower of a god. He didn't give any too personal details, just saying that he was on good terms with a few gods, which in itself was enough to screw over her understanding of divinity.

"Gods are just people who got extremely strong. Some are assholes, some are nice. Well, from what I gathered, most tend to be arrogant asshats towards mortals, but I guess they did kinda earn it. I got lucky with the ones I met, I guess," Jake said, shrugging.

That was just his understanding of gods... and he had a feeling he wasn't wrong, even if his interpretation was a bit simplified. Villy honestly was just a dude - an extremely strong and immortal dude, but still a dude. And as Villy had said: one doesn't become a god without at least having a bit of arrogance. The audacity to believe that *you* of all people can achieve godhood was just inherent to divinity.

"I... this changes a lot... the ideological differences between gods will trickle down to their followers and inadvertently lead to conflict... if we keep recruiting as we are now, there will without a doubt come parties with opposing religious views... wait, what does the god you follow, eh, I mean befriended... what is this god's faith?" Miranda asked, after sitting in contemplation for a while, taking it all in.

She didn't believe that Jake was lying for even a second. He had no reason to. So either he was some delusional fanatic himself, or he was actually telling the truth. And while she did think he was pretty weird, she also saw him as relatively sane.

"Eh... not much? He said faith isn't really a big thing for him... but he does have an Order..." Jake answered. Had Villy told him what his whole Order was about? Jake didn't remember...

Miranda, sensing Jake was unsure, swiftly moved on with the conversation. "Back to the whole temple-construction business. Should we allow it then? What if others come and ask for the same?"

"Well, from what you said, the temple sounds more than a little... gaudy... and not really fitting in," Jake said. She had described the monstrosity of ore and stone that the man wanted. Not really something going well with the whole forestry aesthetic they currently had.

“Hank doesn’t like the idea either and is adamant about not making it. Personally, I am also against it, but it could be dangerous if we offend some divine being with a slew of followers,” Miranda said, with a bit of hesitation. She could already imagine a crusade against their small city for blasphemy...

“Have someone bring him here,” Jake said, after thinking a bit. “I’ll handle this one myself.”

Miranda made a big smile as she nodded. They talked for a few more minutes before she went to get that Kenneth fellow.

Jake just leaned back in his chair as he spoke out loud: “Hey Villy... any input? I know you said you aren’t much into faith, but since I have this whole city-thing going anyway, I would be fine with making a church or something. Or at least a statue... just don’t expect any sermons.”

He waited for a few moments, and just when he questioned if he caught the god at a bad time, he got a response:

“Up to you, mate. I told you, I didn’t give you the blessing expecting anything in return. A statue or a church or whatever on your tiny planet won’t help me much at all. Even if you conquered your entire planet, a few billion believers would just be a drop in the bucket. So unless you can see it benefitting yourself, don’t bother.”

“But as for dealing with other gods wanting to encroach on your territory... just tell them to fuck off. If their believers get annoying, kill them. If they insist, wipe them out. Not like they can bring outside help to your universe, and when you leave your universe or yours is fully integrated, no one will give a flying fuck about you killing a few weaklings. And if the god they follow raises an issue, well, I’ll enjoy handling that one on my end.”

“In conclusion... do what you want. You were asked about my faith or beliefs earlier... those are my beliefs. Might makes right, and power gives freedom. I like people who try, and I despise those who don’t. I hate those who surrender to fate, and I give a big thumbs-up to those that tell fate to go fuck itself. Actually, you are quite a good Chosen now that I think about it. Oh, and if you really want to do something religious for me, I am still open to mass ritual sacrifice. I could even provide you with the schematics for this formation to sacrifice an entire planet; it actually isn’t tha-“

“Anyway, thanks for the answer, Villy. Talk to ya later,” Jake quickly interrupted the god with a snicker before turning a bit more serious. “But seriously... if you ever need anything, just ask. I feel like I owe you a lot already.”

“You owe me nothing; at least I am not keeping a score. But I’ll keep it in mind. Cya around, and good luck with that glorious Indigo Fungus!”

“See you around, mate. Good luck conquering the multiverse or whatever you’re up to,” Jake answered with a sincere smile. Soon after, he felt the presence of the Malefic Viper fade, and everything returned to normal.

Jake did feel like their friendship was quite one-sided... Jake hadn’t done anything for the Viper, really. Besides talking to him a bit when they first met, it was just Villy doing him favors over and over again. It felt like having that one friend that always brought you out to do cool shit and gave you the best presents, but you could never figure out what to do for them.

Honestly, I am just too weak to be of any help, Jake admonished himself. He didn't feel like he was slow. The gap was just absolutely enormous, to begin with. But it wasn't like he could do anything but soldier on. *Actually, the divine messages have gotten longer and way clearer. Probably something to do with the blessing upgrading or something like that.*

He didn't need to sit there in his own thoughts much longer before he felt Miranda and a man enter the valley. Jake took the little bird off his head and put her on a pillow on the table. She gave a small chirp to complain but otherwise stayed put.

Jake exited the lodge and saw the one who had entered with Miranda. The man looked to be in his late fifties to early sixties, with finely combed hair and a big fake-looking smile on his lips. He instantly rubbed Jake the wrong way, but he didn't let it show. Mainly because of the mask that now covered his face.

The first to speak wasn't Miranda or Jake, but the newcomer as he loudly exclaimed: "Honored City Owner, I am delighted that we could finally meet. I shall not waste your precious time but come with an offer. I represent a congregation of more than four hundred people, and we would be more than happy to welcome the City Owner if he would--"

Jake just listened to the guy babbling for a dozen more seconds before he raised his hand, indicating for him to stop. Kenneth reminded Jake of a discount-Jacob without any of the charisma. He was closer to some traveling salesman than a priest or preacher... and he had the audacity to try and openly recruit Jake to join his faith too. It was honestly laughable.

Seeing Jake raise his hand, the man paused briefly before asking: "Pardon, did I do anything to offend?"

“Besides using an offensively pathetic mental skill to try and sway me while being insufferably annoying... no, not really,” Jake answered, instantly seeing the man pale a bit. “As for your whole preaching shtick... who is the one that blessed you?”

“It is no shtick, I hones-“

“Name. Of. God.”

“.... I am a follower of Terauasniom, the great shaper, he who forms the mountains and raises the-“ Kenneth began before Jake cut him off again.

“So, Tera-something. Tell your god that he can take his shitty temple elsewhere. I don’t give a shit what you practice in your own time, but don’t go around preaching like a lunatic. You can find somewhere else to do that. This is my territory, not that Tera-something’s.”

“It is Terauasniom, and I don’t think you comprehend the situation. Terauasniom has tasked me with bringing this Pylon under his great name and-“ Kenneth began again, before once more getting cut off.

“Oh, I comprehend perfectly. I just don’t care. This is my city, not yours, and definitely not Tera-something’s. I don’t give a shit about your god, and I don’t give a shit about any task he has given you,” Jake said, honestly getting annoyed.

Kenneth just stood open-mouthed for a bit, not saying anything as Jake let his aura press down on him before finishing with.

“And if your god has any complaints, he should bring it up with me directly. And if you have any complaints, then you and your followers can just fuck right off. I don’t need you, and I most certainly don’t need some shitty god that isn’t even in-the-know about whose Pylon he wants to claim.”

The preacher only managed to stammer out a few more words; it sounded a lot like apologies, but not to Jake but to his god for Jake’s blasphemy. Honestly, he couldn’t help but consider giving the guy an arrow in the knee at that moment. He didn’t, mainly because it would make the man leave his valley slower and get blood all over the grass.

When he was gone, Miranda turned to him with a hint of worry. “This is going to be tough dealing with...”

“No, it won’t. I gave the guy a simple choice. He can choose to leave now, get in line, or he can become an example of what happens to those that don’t listen to the soft approach,” Jake said, making his face visible again.

“I doubt he will just leave or give up...”

“Then throw him out. And if he refuses to leave, we can just remove him. One way or another.”

Jake didn't hear anything else about Kenneth Copefield after that, besides Miranda coming by to tell Jake that the man left with his followers. Jake couldn't help but think he would likely become an issue in the future... but he just couldn't bring himself to care. He didn't fear the man, and he most certainly didn't fear his god.

He just returned to his alchemy and bird-sitting. A day after the preacher left, the Malefic Viper contacted him unprompted with quite a peculiar question, not from the Viper himself, but some of his followers. Jake just agreed to it... he honestly found it a bit weird that they even asked for permission, but he was kind of their boss's friend, so it made sense. Still a bit strange, mainly because of who was asking. They were gods, after all.

Meanwhile, Miranda was working hard on finally getting her class to 25 and evolving it...

Miranda fired off another mana bolt that easily tore into the beast, causing significant damage. She kept barraging it by throwing bolt after bolt until it finally died. It was honestly too easy... with her profession so high, killing these beasts only around level 35 was just simple. Simple but rewarding when it came to class-experience.

Honestly, it was almost criminal that she hadn't gotten it done before. It had taken less than two hours for her to gain the last three levels she needed, and she finally got the prompt with an evolution. She quickly began heading back to Haven before evolving, Neil and his party in tow. They had functioned as bodyguards to make sure nothing happened and hadn't needed to do anything.

But just as she entered the office and was about to begin choosing her class... she got another message.

****The Ladies of the Verdant Lagoon have invited you to their realm. Accept?****

Miranda stared at it for a bit, unsure what it was about. She then remembered Jake talking about how gods had realms and how gods sometimes blessed mortals. He had also put a lot of emphasis on how accepting blessings was entirely optional.

She had to be honest... she was curious. Jake had told her so many things that she found unbelievable. She just couldn't stop herself from accepting the prompt as her vision shifted.

"See, I told you she would accept," one of the women said confidently to the other.

"No, you guessed she would accept. And no one disagreed with you either," the second woman said with a sigh.

"Hm, I think we should address the mortal soon?" the third interjected, finally turning their attention to Miranda, who had just appeared there.

For Miranda, she suddenly found herself in what looked like a small island in the middle of a massive swamp. At the same time, she felt pressure bear down on her, unlike anything she had ever felt before. She thought the aura of a D-grade was bad... but this was on an entirely different level.

She failed to hold herself back from falling to her knees. The worst part was... the figures in front of her clearly weren't trying to make her submit. Their mere existences alone were enough to make every fiber of her being want to submit.

But just as the feeling became overwhelming, the pressure suddenly amplified manifold as another presence appeared... before she felt something even worse. She felt her entire existence was being thoroughly searched in both body and soul. As quickly as the presence had come, it disappeared again, leaving Miranda shaking.

"Relax, child," one of the women said as she teleported over and placed a hand on Miranda's shoulder. She instantly felt the pressure on her lessen, and she felt like she could finally breathe again.

"...W... what is this? What was that?" Miranda managed to stammer out. Were these gods? What was that scary presence before... it made her feel like her mind was crumbling just by feeling its gaze upon her... what kind of monster could do that...

The first woman proudly introduced them, "We are the Ladies of the Verdant Lagoon, and that presence before was our magnificent Lord, the Malefic Viper."

The last part was said with stars in her eyes, as her cheeks even reddened a little. "As for what this is, well, we thought that if our Lord has selected your Lord as his Chosen, doesn't it only make sense that we also bless you so you can be of better use to him?"

"What?" Miranda asked, still confused.

“Oh, but you won’t get a True Blessing. Can only have one of those, and if you died too soon, it would suck for us. You still get the second best, so it isn’t all bad... what do you say?” the third sister butted in with a bright smile, making Miranda only more confused...

What the hell kind of religion is this?

Chapter 185: Progress For Everyone!

Miranda returned to the office building as if nothing had happened. In reality, only a few moments had passed, but to her, it had been several hours while she had been whisked away into the realm of three gods.

She sat in her chair in a daze, trying to comprehend everything. A few days ago, she saw Kenneth as a fanatic for believing in some new god that she believed to be make-believe. Now, she had just come from a meeting with three freaking gods. From what she gathered from Jake, gods weren’t that special but just people who reached a really high level... but those women didn’t feel like people anymore. Not at all.

They were utterly terrifying. Miranda felt like she couldn’t do anything but agree to everything they said, no matter how nice they seemed. It was like

talking with a gun constantly pressed to her skull, and no matter how much the person holding the gun insisted it wasn't loaded and they weren't going to shoot... it still felt like she had a fucking gun pressed against her skull.

She now wholly understood why Kenneth had been so reverent towards that Tera-something god he had met and been blessed by. If those three women had told her to do something... she wasn't sure she would dare say no.

Now, if that was just everything, she could deal with it. Fine, gods are now a thing, and they can bless people and have agents in the new world. That was manageable. But that wasn't everything... because apparently her boss... Jake Thayne... was somehow also recognized as a superior by those absolutely terrifying gods. At least when it came to status.

Their Lord recognized Jake as an equal, which meant she had just endured hours of three gods trying to convince her to call them "senior sisters" as apparently, they were now colleagues of sorts. Miranda honestly felt like her entire worldview had been turned upside down, and she seriously needed to go have a meeting with Jake... but for now...

Just... just roll with it, Miranda...

It wasn't like she hadn't gotten extreme gains from the madness she had just gone through. It was actually insane how much she had gained for doing practically nothing - another reason why following gods suddenly made a lot more sense in her head.

The first gain was a blessing she had pretty much been coerced into accepting... but then again, it wasn't like she held any regrets, especially not when she saw the benefits.

[Divine Blessing of the Ladies of the Verdant Lagoon (Blessing – Divine)] – You have been recognized as one of the most valuable followers of the Ladies of the Verdant Lagoon. To become an essential follower of the trio of Godqueens, a true honor for any mortal. Through a strong karmic bond, you have tapped into their mysterious powers. +10% Willpower, +10% Wisdom. Grants access to many new paths. Only one blessing can be held at a time.

This was the first percentage stat gain Miranda had ever seen, and it was to some of her most valuable stats. As a caster, she naturally used a lot of mana, so more of it was always welcome. Willpower also made some of her existing mental skills stronger, which would help her do her job as a City Lord more efficiently.

But with the blessing also came a title.

[Holder of a Godqueen's Divine Blessing] - Obtain the Divine blessing of a Godqueen. Godqueens and Kings sit in the higher echelons of power in the multiverse and can find few equals. To have their Divine blessing is a gift much sought after but rarely gained. Grants the skill: [Dreams of the Verdant Lagoon (Legendary)]. +5 all stats, +5% to all stats.

Miranda didn't have any titles besides the Forerunner one that everyone got, so this one was also massive. It, too, gave stats and even more than the blessing itself. There were many terminologies she didn't understand, and she had no idea what a Godqueen was... but it was just one of a myriad of questions she still had.

Something the new skill she had gained would likely help with. It was a bit silly how this was her first Legendary skill, and she got it so easily and coincidentally.

[Dreams of the Verdant Lagoon (Legendary)] – Through your dreams, you enter the coven. When you close your eyes, your soul seeks towards the Verdant Lagoon, home of the Ladies that created it. Allows the caster to travel to the Verdant Lagoon while sleeping or meditating. Increased resistance to time dilation effects while in the Verdant

Lagoon. A part of your soul shall forever remain within the Lagoon, allowing you solace even if you are stripped of your mortal coil.

The skill was also just weird. Miranda had read it a few times already, and her conclusion of what it did was the same every time: a skill that allows her to keep working even while asleep or meditating. As for that whole part about her soul... well, all that did was confirm that the soul was now a real thing. She had a *lot* of questions.

The last thing she gained was, of course, her evolution. The thing she was working on before this entire thing began. She had done it within the realm of those three gods and had been offered five options. The first three sucked, the fourth was okay and related to her profession... while the last one was entirely new.

Neophyte Verdant Witch – Magic is a tool you use to fulfill your wishes, and by treading the path of the Verdant Witch, you shall realize all your desires. Verdant magic is a school of magic deeply rooted in mysticism and borrows from the ancient powers found within the Verdant Lagoon. The Verdant Witch is a spellcaster focusing on magic rituals and intricate spells but is far from untalented in more conventional magic. This class is relatively fragile but with highly diverse magics and tools to come out on top, so preparation is the key to victory. Stat Bonuses per level: +4 Wis, +4 Will, +3 Int, +2 Vit, +1 Per, +3 Free Points

She picked it and instantly gained a few new skills. One of them rare-rarity even. She knew Hank had only gained an uncommon-rarity skill from his class evolution, so she personally thought it was quite good. She had also just gained a legendary skill through the title... but if she had to be honest, she wasn't clear exactly on how good that was. The skill was a bit weird, while the one she had just gained was a skill to create rituals.

All in all... Miranda had to admit that the last few hours had been very productive. She was also acutely aware that everything that had happened had nothing to do with herself. She wasn't delusional... she knew everything was because of her relation to Jake. The gods seemed to only care about the fact that she was *his* City Lord.

She felt like the pressure on her to do well and make Jake happy had just increased manifold within a day... but she also felt oddly satisfied and was looking forward to the future. She had for the longest time thought their little city a confined corner of their planet... but today, she had that understanding upturned.

They weren't some small fringe faction but a genuinely influential force on Earth. Jake Thayne wasn't just some above-average human but likely the strongest human on their planet. And she was the City Lord he had entrusted to lead that faction formally.

With great gusto, she got back to work with even more energy than before – the extra stats also helping there.

The weeks passed by as Jake grinded alchemy, and the small hawk slowly grew. The little bugger was growing quite slowly and barely got a level every few days, making Jake a bit worried. She didn't really eat much, but Jake did find that she enjoyed eating things with mana in it. Mainly meat. Luckily, Jake had quite a lot of it from some of the Herd Leaders he looted after the battle at the fort.

Hawkie and the Mystsong Hawk had been gone for nearly three weeks. Jake had gained only two more levels in his profession over these weeks, bringing him to 84. It was slower than usual, but that was kind of expected.

He was mainly experimenting and not crafting much. Jake was refining his technique and planning for the fungicide he would create to take down the Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza. He had to adequately prepare as he didn't have enough ingredients just to play around.

Besides that, he had kept up with his usual mana-control training, and he especially had one place where he had made rapid progress.

“Move,” Jake spoke to the small marble on the table. He felt a bit of mana be consumed as he did so, and the tiny marble rolled forward and fell off the table. Sweat was pouring down his face after only making something so small happen... yet he smiled triumphantly.

What he had just used was technically recognized as a Word of Power. Words of Power were when you infused your voice with your willpower and imposed your will upon the world through speech. Which is to say... he had ordered the inanimate marble to move, and it had followed his command.

Pride of the Malefic Viper made imposing his will upon the world easier and amplified Words of Power. This means there was a double-up on the effect when using Words of Power. When he finally began to learn about Words of Power, he realized why they fit with Pride of the Malefic Viper...

What is more arrogant and prideful than believing your commands can shape the world itself? That your spoken word is a law of nature that must be

followed by anything ordered? It was truly insane to think about the possibilities...

Jake so far had only managed to move the small marble a bit, but he was swiftly trying to make more discoveries. Using Words of Power used mana, but it also took a lot of concentration and mental strength. It also required one to have confidence in the words spoken and honestly believe it would work.

Words of Power weren't really something done at his level; Jake had quickly learned. It was something most often seen by powerhouses, often only at C-grade or possible late D-grade. For Jake to be able to do *anything while* at E-grade was a testament to the power of the Pride of the Malefic Viper skill.

Willpower was a stat Jake had indeed underestimated. It was so much more than just one that increased mana regeneration and helping with mental defenses and other things related to mental magic. Willpower was, as the name implied: power through will.

With enough willpower, Jake would be able to do nearly everything simply by willing it to happen. It was to make your imagination into reality and shape the world as you intend for it to be. At the pinnacle... gods could order the universe itself.

While the use of Words of Power and his willpower as a whole seemed to be so far away, it wasn't like it wasn't also used at low levels. Chanting, incantations, and speaking the name of a skill or spell were all parts of some of these skills and spells. Either it was a requirement, or it simply made them stronger.

The Minotaur Mindchief had spoken out the Echoing Dream skill... even thinking back to the tutorial, that Hayden guy had spoken out "Trail of Embers" when he used his ultimate move. Jake didn't have any such skills, but that was just because he wasn't a caster, he reckoned.

Chanting and incantations were apparently pretty standard among mages. Especially in group spells or large rituals, chanting could help unify and shape the mana by everyone focusing on the same thing. It was a way of using Words of Power that the system helped very actively with. Jake's use of making a marble move was a lot rougher than using it with a skill or spell.

For now... using his willpower more actively in combat was a pipedream, and it was more for small fun tricks right now. But in the future, he could see its usefulness. But that was okay. Jake had never aimed for immediate gains and was fine with doing work that would only pay off down the line. He wanted to go all the way, after all.

He was a bit ambitious and prideful like that.

On the subject of improving his Touch of the Malefic Viper, not much had happened.

Miranda had brought by a few crafted weapons, but it wasn't many. They were all inferior-rarity, but apparently, even those weapons were in-demand for the citizens. There was also the issue of the crafters mainly making things for the construction-effort, and Jake had explicitly said that he didn't want to impact the city negatively with his request.

As for Miranda herself... she was a bit different. Jake thought they were getting along better, but she had turned more subservient than ever before. He knew she had gained a blessing from some weird group of triplet witches that worked for the Viper, but that was about it. She had gained a nice class and some titles too, so maybe she just felt thankful? He did miss her snappy comments when he said something weird, though.

At least she didn't seem to have become fanatical like that Kenneth guy. She had also begun spending some time actually leveling, going out with Neil and

his party once in a while. So that was good. He wasn't sure about everything going on with her, and he didn't need to. What he did know, however, was that she kept doing her job as well as ever and kept bringing him food for their meeting once a week. Even if the meetings themselves were getting a bit boring and overly formal.

On the 23rd day since Mystie and Hawkie had last returned, Jake found himself outside playing with the little birdie. It was still covered in soft down and had only grown a little bit. Actually, it just looked a lot fatter now...

Well, it had begun getting a bit of color. A few nascent feathers were starting to grow out, and they all had pretty greenish-brown colors. Sylphie hadn't changed how she acted much, still primarily spending her days sleeping on Jake's head, eating, and running around, causing problems.

It sure didn't help that the baby bird could now do a bit of wind magic. She could make the wind blow a bit, and she found it especially fun to turn Jake's pages when he was reading. To counteract this, Jake had learned to set up some simple mana barriers around himself and the book.

Currently, they were outside playing by Jake practicing mana control on a small feather while Sylphie tried to catch it, using all her newly-discovered wind magic and just by jumping after it. It was good practice for both of them.

Jake kept playing for a while, smiling at the small hawk as she finally caught the feather. Sylphie stood victoriously with it in its beak for a bit before running towards Jake and landing on his head with a mighty leap. She placed the feather down into his hair, making sure to tuck it in so it wouldn't fall out.

He didn't wonder why she didn't want to play anymore, as he had already felt it. He noticed Sylphie was now looking up towards the sky as she flapped her small wings excitedly, having felt the approaching two presences too.

Jake looked up and, with his gaze, pierced high up where he saw two approaching figures. One of them was a blue hawk that Jake, of course, recognized as Mystie right away.

The other one Jake didn't recognize by look but by the signature of its aura - an aura far more potent than before. The hawk was no longer brown and relatively normal-looking but now had gray streaks resembling lightning bolts running through him, and all his feathers had turned slightly darker. Even from down on the ground, he could see the energy running within those patterns. Jake smiled as he made eye-contact with Hawkie. *You finally evolved, eh?*

[Stormsong Hawk – lvl ???]

Chapter 186: One Step Closer

Jake raised his arms as the thunderbolt hit him, sending him tumbling back. His entire body was smoking, but his Scales of the Malefic Viper had nullified most of the attack. He took out his bow again as he side-stepped a massive blade of wind coming towards him.

The wind blade tore into the clouds below, cutting off a huge part of it and sending all the surrounding birds and elementals scurrying even further away. Jake smiled a bit as he fired a Splitting Arrow towards the small bird that was his opponent.

It dodged all of them easily as the hawk zoomed through the air, far faster than any opponent Jake had ever fought before. Simultaneously, a constant stream of attacks headed for him, but he was no slouch when it came to speed and avoiding blows either. Jake was enjoying the small bout quite a lot, and his opponent also seemed to enjoy being able to let loose its power and practice its newfound strength.

Hawkie had gotten a lot faster and stronger after his evolution.

And while the power-dynamic had changed slightly, with Hawkie no longer utterly outmatched... it still wasn't the superior predator.

Jake flapped his wings as he chased after the far-faster bird while shooting the occasional arrow. One would assume it could get away... but Jake had quite a few tricks up his sleeve. His gaze landed on the hawk, making it freeze up momentarily, and at the same time, solidified the mana under his foot as he took a step.

He appeared right above the hawk, stepping on an arrow he had fired just beforehand. He was now right above Hawkie and within range of the bird. Jake reached down and pulled the bird towards him with a hastily constructed web of mana strings.

Hawkie had only been frozen for a moment, but it was enough for Jake to land his hand on the hawk and grasp the wings that were already crackling with electricity to get him off.

“Won’t work,” Jake snickered as he dragged the hawk down and smashed it into the cloud.

Size had some strengths and some weaknesses. Being large made you immune to some physical attacks from smaller forms, such as pretty much making it impossible for them to tackle you. But it made you slower and a far easier target.

In the same vein, being small made you susceptible to being wrestled around by a larger opponent. This was especially true for the Stormsong Hawk that relied on speed and high damage output to fight. In summary... Hawkie was screwed if Jake got hold of him.

“I win again,” Jake said with a big grin as the hawk pecked his hand in annoyance.

“Don’t be a sore loser; it’s just sparring. Besides, I doubt I could catch you if you decided to just bail from the fight,” Jake shrugged.

Hawkie, of course, knew this but was still a bit sour. Today was far from the first time the two had fought, as it was just one of many bouts. It was great practice for both of them, and Jake had learned a lot about magic combat from it.

It was rare to find an opponent that could shoot lightning bolts at you to practice making a mana barrier.

“Aight, let’s head back,” he said, motioning for the hawk to follow. It happily did so as Jake threw one last glance towards the massive tree on the cloud continent. Jake could feel that this is where Hawkie and Mystie had gone when they were gone for over three weeks. They were doing as the Thunder Roc and Storm Elemental had done before and claimed the massive tree for themselves. With Mystie putting down formations to increase the absorption rate and Hawkie already at 99 when they left, the hawk had achieved D-grade pretty quickly.

It did help that Jake had killed all other powerful contenders for the tree, making Mystie able to easily handle any other bird or elemental that decided to get in the way of Hawkie’s evolution. He did see that many other birds and elementals now swarmed the tree, and it was just a matter of time before a new D-grade would appear.

Arriving back at the lodge, Jake touched down on the ground, and instantly a tiny goofball of a hawk jumped out of the lodge and ran up to him.

“Chirp! Chirp!”

Sylphie looked expectantly up at him as Jake picked her up and placed her on his shoulder. She had begun getting a bit big for his head, even if she did occasionally climb there

anyway. He kept playing with her a bit as he made preparations for his next crafting session.

Nearly an entire month had passed since Hawkie returned in his evolved form, and Jake had made plenty of progress in that time on his newest crafting projects. He had already made plenty of common-rarity fungicides that were all far better than what he had used on the Indigo Fungus what felt like so long ago.

In this time, he had also gained another five levels in his profession, getting him to 89. Just one more level and he would get the final skill in the stat-granting “of the Malefic Viper” skills. Hopefully, today would be that day, as Jake was preparing to finally make the final push.

Looking over the materials he would use, he did a bit of counting and concluded that he only had enough for a total of twenty attempts or so. It sounded like a lot... but this was also his first time truly trying to concoct an uncommon-rarity poison.

[Lesser Ethwood Ashes (Uncommon)] – The ashes left behind by burnt Lesser Ethwood. Used in a myriad of recipes related to the soul and mind. Has no effect upon direct consumption.

[Soothing Bellberry (Uncommon)] – A berry that provides a soothing effect to whoever consumes it.

Throughout this period, Jake had analyzed and done many experiments with the samples he took from the Indigo Fungus. He had already used a bit of the ash in prior concoctions as he had enough of it to do that. He patted himself on the back for burning down all the traps within the Forgotten Sewers and looting all the ash he could get.

The ash contained a weird sort of energy that was a bit like mana, but not entirely. Jake was sure it still actually was mana; it just acted so differently. So ethereal. He had trouble controlling it within the concoction but found that his Pride of the Malefic Viper and the whole “imposing your will upon the world”-thing also applied in alchemy. It was small, subtle things, like slightly nudging the mana here and there, but it helped immensely.

Now, he was a bit ashamed to admit it, but he had tried talking to the concoction using Words of Power. He had done so when no one else was around, but he still felt stupid for doing it. Naturally, it hadn’t done jack-shit, and the only real feedback he got was Villy sending a divine message that was just him laughing.

Well, the Viper did finish off by saying that he had sure as hell had never seen anyone using Words of Power while doing alchemy. Still, Jake was totally welcome to develop his own new innovative style of singing to his cauldron.

So yeah, he never tried that again but returned to the methods he knew worked.

After offloading Sylphie to her parents – much to her displeasure – he finally went out onto his porch, where he sat down on a chair and summoned his Altmar Cauldron. The ingredients were already on the small table beside him as he began his concoction.

He wouldn’t use a lot of Purified Water for this concoction. No, nearly all the liquid would stem from his own blood and the juices inside the berries. He still needed a bit of Purified Water for when he mixed in the ash, as otherwise the entire concoction would become way too solid to work with.

Next, he added some Aged Green Moss he had been preparing for more than a month. The moss was normally a common-rarity herb used in nearly all kinds of poisons, but this moss was a bit different. He had several batches he had taken out daily to use Cultivate Toxin on to prepare them for these concoctions. It was far from enough to bring them to uncommon-rarity, but it did make the herbs far more potent.

He let it all swirl a while as he integrated the moss and his blood. He was meticulous throughout the entire process, not rushing anything. He wanted to make the most potent toxin possible, not create a lot of it – his only goal was to succeed.

When the entire concoction was stable, he added a bit of liquid from a pre-prepared common-rarity fungicide. It wasn't more than a few droplets, but it was enough to throw the entire mix for a loop for a few moments, with Jake working to stabilize it. It was an easy task for him now, but a few months ago, he would have had all the contents of the cauldron blow up in his face.

The fungicide was quickly diluted into the mix, and Jake had a strong feeling that if he finished up now, he would have just made a large batch of inferior-rarity fungicide. With this method, he could easily turn one bottle of common-rarity fungicide into a dozen inferior-rarity ones... but of course, that wasn't his goal.

Instead, he took out some of the Lesser Ethwood Ash and threw it into the cauldron before quickly placing the lid back on. The expert craftsmanship behind the cauldron completely sealed in all the energies, including the mysterious ethereal energy that the ash released when Jake directed his mana to break it down.

Jake carefully tried to control the energy, but it just refused to mix correctly with the rest of the concoction. He used all his willpower and mana control to try and integrate it... and eventually, he did. It was incredibly inefficient, but he breathed out a sigh of relief anyway. This part he had even trained before, and yet it was so hard.

Moving on, he slowly began using Touch of the Malefic Viper to mimic the poison found in the fungicide, but at a very low intensity. He would slowly bring up the entire concoction's toxicity without accidentally overwhelming the oh-so-feeble energy from the Ethwood Ash.

He had to walk a very narrow line between the poison not being toxic enough to reach the threshold of uncommon-rarity and have enough potency while at the same time allowing the soul-affecting energy to assimilate with the entire mixture.

It took careful control to-

And it's gone.

He slipped up for only a moment, and instantly all the soul-affecting mana was gone. Consumed by the poison around it, turning it into nothing.

Jake just sighed as he cleaned up the cauldron, downed a mana potion, and started over again.

Two hours later, the entire concoction was ruined because he added too much common-rarity fungicide too quickly.

His third attempt failed when he used Touch of the Malefic Viper at a too high level of intensity and completely overwhelmed the other toxins in the mix.

The fourth time he got further than ever before. He had managed to raise the toxicity level adequately. However, the ethereal energy from the ash still wasn't 'active.' It was more a catalyst than anything else, and the Soothing Bellberry would be the effect it would amplify.

He added the berry and instantly felt it clash with everything else in the concoction. Jake already knew this would happen, as the berry wasn't considered a toxin at all. Far from it. It had the gentlest energy one could imagine within it and held purely beneficial effects.

Except Jake wanted to turn those beneficial effects of soothing the mind into instead soothing the experienced effect of the fungicide for the Indigo Fungus. To that end, he also added one final vital part:

[Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza Lifevine (Rare)] – The Lifevine of an Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza. The Lifevine is a part of the main body of the fungus. Contains intense amounts of vital energy and is incredibly resilient. Can be used in a myriad of alchemical creations.

Granted... it wasn't the entire Lifevine, but a small part of it. This was another reason he had limited attempts... because he, of course, had pieces of Lifevine to make the concoction's energy feel more familiar to the fungi. Make it feel like it was just its own energies.

He would make it so that the toxin would slowly and unnoticeably spread throughout the massive creature, into every little crevice of its body.

The fungicide would slowly erode it from the inside out, with the damn mushroom unable to feel it before it was too late. Jake wanted to make it so there would never be a fight... but just a poisoning and then a slow death. It was very ambitious of him, but then again, he was an Ambitious Hunter.

Jake carefully tried to integrate the berry, but it felt like the toxic energies pounced with great vigor to devour it only a few moments later. He was a second too slow to react adequately, and yet another concoction failed.

Well, he said he failed, but even these failed attempts still resulted in crafting either an inferior or common-rarity fungicide every time after all the effects from the ash and/or berry were consumed. It did result in a worse toxin than if he didn't use the ash at all, so it was a very suboptimal way of crafting fungicide.

His sixth attempt failed right away as Jake just wasn't in the right mindset when he began, so he took a break and played with Sylphie, afterward taking a quick nap with the small hawk when she got tired.

The entire second day of attempting to create the fungicide was spent failing repeatedly but getting a bit better every time.

The third day went the same, but he got to the last part of the process pretty much at every attempt. He only had a dozen attempts left on the third day. He only used his more limited ingredients for the last part... so he used more now than in the beginning.

During the fourth day, he got so close that he could practically *feel* the concoction just about to complete, but he got impatient and tried giving it a final push, ruining it all.

On the fifth day, he failed the first craft... but on the second concoction, everything finally went well.

The first steps had been easy for a while, and even when he infused it with Touch of the Malefic Viper, everything remained stable. He added the ash and controlled everything near-perfectly. Finally, when he added the berry and part of the Lifevine, he took it slow and handled himself.

Sweat poured down his face as he kept his cool. He felt how close it was yet didn't get impatient, but just kept slowly integrating grain of energy after grain of energy. Finally... everything seemed to just click. The energy from the Bellberry mixed perfectly with the concoction, and Jake even felt the entire concoction now faintly give off an aura similar to the Indigo Fungus.

****You have successfully crafted [Ethoxic Fungicide (Uncommon)] - A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned****

****'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 90 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

****'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 91 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 95 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

****'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 92 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

Jake basked in the feeling as he felt the level-ups but was even more excited about the liquid he saw upon removing the cauldron's lid.

[Ethoxic Fungicide (Uncommon)] - A poison created to kill fungi and similar lifeforms. This type of poison is made to spread through any physical connection of the fungi, quickly infecting large parts of it. Deals relatively low damage to the mushroom but is hard to cleanse. A distinct trace of ether-mana makes the poison incredibly difficult to detect for the fungus that has provided life-energy to the concoction.

One step closer, Jake thought. I'm coming for you, you fucking blue mushroom.

Chapter 187: Sylphian

Jake smiled as he took a deep breath of the toxic concoction. He felt the fumes enter his system and quickly be eliminated and turned to mana, but he also felt the potency of what he had just made. Even if the fungicide wasn't made to kill humans, a person sure as hell shouldn't risk getting it on them.

He quickly bottled up the super-fungicide. He didn't get a lot of it, only enough for two of the small bottles, but the most important thing was that he had succeeded.

Leaning back in his chair, he quickly went through a few of his other notifications. The first of which was one he had expected, but seeing it still broadened his smile.

[Concoct Poison (Common)] – While most focus on the aspect of giving life through their craft, others prefer to take it away. Allows for the concoction of common-rarity poisons and below. Must have suitable materials and equipment in order to create poisons. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of created poisons based on Wisdom.

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[Concoct Poison (Uncommon)] – While most focus on the aspect of giving life through their craft, others prefer to take it away. Allows for the concoction of uncommon-rarity poisons and below. Must have suitable materials and equipment in order to create poisons. Adds a small increase to the effectiveness of created poisons based on Wisdom.

The changes in the description were absolutely minimal, but that didn't matter. Jake knew the requirement for upgrading both Brew Potion and Concoct Poison was just to make a creation of that rarity with your own skills, aka without effects such as those from Malefic Viper's Poison. The upgrade did little to actually help him except making his wisdom increase the effectiveness of his poisons a little more.

No, what mattered far more was the implications of him having upgraded it. At F-grade, he had learned to create common-rarity poisons, and now in E-grade, he had learned to make uncommon-rarity ones. He was a step ahead every time.

It would help him with his profession-evolution for sure. Though Jake had to admit he wasn't sure if he needed any help in that regard, as his Records had to be quite good. But a small part of him did fear his evolution options would have too much focus on his friendship with Villy and not as much on his abilities as an alchemist.

Jake would hate for that to happen. He refused to become some kind of priest or preacher for a friend. That was just too fucking weird. No, he wanted just to be a damn great alchemist. This is also why he had set the requirements of upgrading his skills before reaching D-grade.

Now, he only needed to upgrade Touch of the Malefic Viper and Sense of the Malefic Viper. As for the last skill from level-ups, he had naturally picked that up.

[Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – When born, the Viper had limited 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.

Jake had briefly skimmed the other options, and while they were fine, some of them great even, nothing could compare to the Fangs skill. There is also the fact that Jake predicted it to be part of a “set,” and he really wanted to complete that set.

With his skill chosen, he took a look at the free points he had built up. While it was suboptimal for sure, he hadn't actually spent any for a long time. Not since he last picked a skill at level 80. For the longest time, he had just been putting every point into perception and honestly still felt like doing so.

He had 90 free points available to distribute. Of course, those points would be way more after the percentage bonuses from all his titles, so it was closer to 150 in any stat he wanted. He opened his status screen to see how it was beginning to look after many weeks of alchemy.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (E) – lvl 95]

Class: [Ambitious Hunter – lvl 99]

Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 92]

Health Points (HP): 13068/13150

Mana Points (MP): 3841/15637

Stamina: 7014/9930

Stats

Strength: 855

Agility: 1172

Endurance: 993

Vitality: 1315

Toughness: 840

Wisdom: 1251

Intelligence: 640

Perception: 2234

Willpower: 926

Free points: 90

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)], [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)], [Archery of Vast Horizons (Rare)], [Descending Dark Fang (Rare)], [Limit Break (Rare)], [Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Epic)], [One Step Mile (Ancient)], [Moment of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)]

Profession Skills: [Herbology (Common)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Alchemist's Purification (Common)], [Alchemical Flame (Common)], [Toxicology (Uncommon)], [Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)], [Concoct Poison (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)], [Pride of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Fangs 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)]

Jake looked over his ever-growing status menu and smiled. It wasn't like at the beginning where he felt it go through substantial changes every single day, but it was still developing at a noticeable pace. He was looking forward to D-grade more than ever too, and he could almost smell it. He had less than ten levels remaining... it was truly the final stretch.

The Malefic Viper sat in his realm as power swirled around him. He stared through the void, not looking at anything in particular but just the vast nothingness that existed between the universes. He raised his hand and stared at it before sighing as yet another attempt failed.

"Still not quite there," he said as he got up and shifted his gaze to raise his spirits a bit.

"Sylphian... heh," he chuckled before shaking his head. "I wonder how that came to be..."

Sylphs were rare, old, and extremely powerful wind elementals. They were some of the most intelligent among all elementals and wielded powerful magic, not just of the wind-affinity but also possessed a plethora of other means. They were hell to deal with and could often defeat enlightened races at equal levels. A top-grade race for sure.

But... the part about being old was important. They were almost archaic. A Sylph was not born but only evolved into by powerful elementals that had lived nearly to the end of their lifespans before evolving. Was that his own contribution to the creation? A touch of time and ancientness? No... that wouldn't have been enough... far from it.

Was it Jake's mana that had caused the change? It was incredibly pure and was approaching a new threshold; one the Viper hoped he would overcome before reaching D-grade... even if it would be ridiculous for him to do so.

Jake's path was one the Viper respected. It was honest and without any deceit. He truly just wanted to fight and become stronger. His desire for power, not one borne of any greed for anything but power itself. A truly pure and straightforward path. So was his approach to everything, including mana. His way of doing it was... simple. His mana practice was almost insultingly effective considering how inane and uncomplicated it was. He didn't mix in other mana affinities but had even ignored his quite frankly top-level darkness-affinity.

He had managed not to pollute or specialize any of his mana with any mana attunements because of that. One didn't need to have an attunement to shape one's magic, but simply using a type of magic too much was enough to... "color" your mana and shape your Records.

Jake hadn't done that. His mana always remained pure. A purity he was only condensing and refining to an entirely new level, even if he did so unknowingly. It was a purity not just in mana but in will and intent as well.

So... was that truly what gave birth to the Sylphian Eysas? Just... the purity of his mana? The Sylphs were as pure as any elemental could get. They were primeval and concepts incarnate.

The only way he could see Jake having such a strong power of "purity" within his Records could only hold one explanation... his bloodline. If not, the Viper's Records would have undoubtedly affected him on a more fundamental level. Yet they hadn't.

But that answer confused the Viper quite a bit too. What did increased perception and natural fighting instincts have to do with purity and rawness?

Honestly... it didn't matter. The Viper had no desire to find out all the small intricate details of his pal's bloodline outside of pure curiosity. The only real reason he truly wanted to know was to discover its effects on the small avian.

His friend clearly cared for the small thing...

Vilastromoz couldn't help but look towards a particular area in his realm as his mood dampened significantly. He knew he couldn't linger with his consciousness in the realm any longer.

The avatar closed its eyes as it became dormant and returned to slumber, the Viper's real body still in the outside world.

The beast in question was currently on a mighty quest to find the big human. For too long, she had been denied her rightful resting place. Too long had her parents kept her away. The warnings of danger by being near when the human created the smelly smoke didn't faze her. She could handle the smelly smoke.

Stealthily, she crept across the floorboards, making sure to stay low. She swiftly made her way under one of the chairs, staying perfectly hidden throughout it all. Small amounts of wind even surrounded her to limit sound, a true stroke of genius she had come on to mask her every movement.

Sylphie didn't doubt her prowess for even a second as she made a long leap - assisted by the wind and a flap of her small wings - as she made her way under the table.

Halfway there.

Her goal was the back end of the big treehouse and through the opening leading to the water with the scary-long-fish. She could have tried to go around the building, but she knew her parents watched from above and would detect her instantly. No, through the house was the best way to stay hidden.

Everything was as she had planned - each of her steps calculated to the smallest detail, her approach perfection itself.

After another sneaky walk, she was close to the door. She could already see the tall human, utterly unaware of the apex creature about to pounce! Indeed, she had gone above and beyond herself.

In one final leap, she jumped through the slightly open door as she made a mighty roar:

“Chirp! Chirp! Chirp!”

The human jumped with fright as Sylphie triumphantly jumped on top of his head, where she stood proudly. She was rewarded for her perfection as the tall human scratched her in that good spot below her neck.

Once more, she had proven how great she truly was! It rewarded the human back by mercifully reciprocating his affection. Great *and benevolent*!

Jake scratched the proud bird as she cutely nuzzled up to him happily. After a long day of crafting, he found nothing more relaxing than playing with the small hawk. To watch her “stealthily” sneak up on him through his lodge.

Of course, Sylphie’s version of stealth was to kick up a deafening whirlwind around herself, so instead of listening to footsteps, you could hear the sound of a small tornado walking through the house, making things fall off their shelves. Yet Jake couldn’t bring himself not to let her win every single time.

A Primordial couldn't observe him unnoticed, and so far, he had yet to encounter any skill that could hide from his sphere, but Sylphie had found the one way to counter him: make him lose on purpose. Well, not like Jake needed any of his perception-related abilities to notice the bird... he doubted she could sneak up on anything...

But damn, was she cute when she did it.

And luckily, for the work Jake was now doing, she wasn't in any danger when spending time with him. It was four days since he finished his first uncommon-rarity fungicide, and now he had already moved on to his next task: Touch of the Malefic Viper.

He hadn't forgotten about the fungus... oh no, he was just waiting for a delivery. Besides, he couldn't leave the tiny bird alone after he had kept her away for so long.

Over the last four days, he had gained another level in his profession, bringing it to 93 while also giving him another race level. That got him to a total of 100 free points at the ready to distribute whenever. He could throw it all into wisdom now and make his poison a bit stronger, but he preferred to save them.

The day earlier, Miranda had come by with a delivery of weapons. It was weapons made by the craftsmen of the city; all created mainly to practice. Of course, they were still more-than-useable weapons in combat, but these were spares that no one needed... or at least that is what Miranda had told him.

Most of them were just inferior-rarity ones and were relatively simple.

[Sharpened Steel Shortsword (Inferior)] – A blade made of steel that has been soaked in mana and crafted by a still-growing smith. The craftsmanship is lacking in some areas, but the blade is still solidly built. Enchantments: Sharpened Blade

Requirements: lvl 25+ in any humanoid race

[Deflective Iron Buckler (Inferior)] – A buckler made of mana-infused iron and crafted by a still-growing smith. The craftsman has put his all into this item, making it a respectable buckler for a smith of the creator's level, and is especially potent at deflecting ranged attacks. Enchantments: Deflection

Requirements: lvl 30+ in any humanoid race

Jake looked them over and saw the inferior tags, instantly discounting them both. Yet from what Miranda told him, they actually tended to hold up well against the common-rarity tutorial items. Likely those items back in the tutorial's outer zone were created for those around level 25, seeing as they were primarily found in areas with weaker beasts.

As those items didn't have any level requirements, that did kind of make sense. The uncommon-rarity tutorial items were, of course, a grade better. Jake's quiver was still doing okay if beginning to feel a bit lacking, and as for the cloak... well, it existed and could change colors a bit and make his head not get wet when it rained.

Anyway, level requirements clearly mattered for items a lot, maybe even as much if not more than the rarity - one of the last weapons a perfect example of this.

[Ferocious Machete (Common)] – A machete created from iron that has been soaked in the blood of a powerful beast. Due to the crafting process, faint remnant Records of the beast remain within the weapon. The craftsman behind this weapon has shown great promise. Any wound inflicted with this weapon will inflict amplified pain, increasing with each successive attack. Enchantments: Ferocious Slashes

Requirements: Lvl 10+ in any humanoid class

Jake had tried the blade a bit and found it significantly worse than the steel sword. Apparently, it was an early creation from a smith that had only recently begun working hard on his profession, so Jake was looking forward to getting interesting things from that guy later.

Apparently, he had created many weapons by soaking metals in the blood of the dead Herd Leaders. Clearly, he had some skill to facilitate it, and Jake found it quite interesting.

He also noted how all the system's descriptions of the items were relatively... friendly. None of them called the smiths bad or something like that but instead used very positive language. Maybe the system wasn't that bad after all. Sure, it kind of allowed fucked up degenerate bastards to choose a path of absolute debauchery, but at least it was polite while doing so.

Jake chuckled a bit at his thoughts, earning an annoyed slap from the small wing of Sylphie, telling him to stop moving his head.

Shaking his head – making the bird slap him again – he happily scratched the small hawk and dove right into absolutely destroying weapons that the many hopeful smiths of Haven had worked hard to make.

Chapter 188: A Plan Brought to Fruition

Jake sat in meditation with a sword placed on the palms of his hands. He slowly began using Touch of the Malefic Viper as he pushed the corrupting mana into the blade. He felt it resist at first, but Jake was too strong for the metal, and soon he forced his energy into it.

Like a trillion microscopic tendrils, the mana invaded every part of the blade, coloring it from its old steely color to a dark, almost entirely black, palette. The mana it gave off grew with every second as the blade went through a complete transformation.

Jake opened his eyes and quickly Identified the sword.

[Unstable Necrotic Steel Shortsword (Common)] – A blade made of steel that has been soaked in mana and crafted by a still-growing smith, infused with powerful necrotic mana. The necrotic mana has increased the blade's rarity and power but made it incredibly unstable and fragile. Will break apart within 12 minutes and 13 seconds. Enchantments: Necrotic Strike

Requirements: lvl 45+ in any humanoid race

Still not good enough, he admonished himself as he shook his head. Sure, the blade looked better, but it was just a broken object already. He could see the minuscule cracks across its edge, and he was sure that it would break apart if he tried hitting anything with it.

Jake had come to another realization about the Touch of the Malefic Viper skill and its relation to more regular alchemy. The Viper clearly focused on poison above all other things, but his skills also helped with other parts of alchemy.

Palate could now also allow him to eat herbs to learn their effects, while the rare version only allowed him to learn from toxins. It also increased the effects of potions, making brewing those clearly a part of the Malefic Viper's repertoire of skills.

Sagacity of the Malefic Viper was another piece of proof that the profession was about more than just making poison. It helped create a plethora of other alchemical creations, including flasks and elixirs, making Jake believe that the Legacy of the Malefic Viper encompassed pretty much anything that had to do with alchemy, even if it was highly specialized in making toxins.

And when Jake thought back to what an alchemist was supposed to do, he missed one very apparent ability: transmutation.

To alter an item, transforming it from one state to another. It could be argued that any alchemical creation had some aspects of transmutation. Still, nothing was more evident than the changes he had brought about in items through Touch of the Malefic Viper.

So... he reached the conclusion that a core part of the authentic Touch of the Malefic Viper revolved around transmutation through corruption. Even if the skill description didn't currently say it, it very clearly had at least partly such a function already.

And now he was trying to improve that part of the skill. So far, there was the minor issue of his Touch of the Malefic Viper kinda breaking stuff. Jake was looking for a way to both infuse the mana and at the same time make it stable.

This had resulted in a pile of broken metal off to the side of the valley lying on a large wooden platform. Before it was on the platform, all the metal had just been placed on the ground, but Jake noticed that the grass surrounded it withered as the metal's corrupt mana began soaking into the ground.

At that point, Jake had gotten the brilliant idea of maybe trying to do something with all the discarded metal. Sadly, that proved to be a worthless idea as the metal had truly become too brittle and broken after his failed experiments.

He kept working for the rest of the day and into the morning, only taking breaks to play with Sylphie while regenerating mana or diving into his Thoughtful Meditation to mentally go through what he had just learned from his last practice session.

On that morning, it wasn't Miranda but Lillian that came by.

She was dragging a small cart with metal tubes in it, and Jake quickly ran over and helped the moment he saw her. On his way over, he made his mask invisible, internally praising himself for remembering it.

"Thank you," she said, as Jake lifted up the cart with his mana control, allowing her to just walk to the lodge with him. It wasn't that she couldn't move it herself; Jake was pretty sure any human at level 10 could easily, but it was still a bit awkward to move through the grass.

A few days before he finished his first fungicide, he had sent another commission to the city with another item he needed. Today, they had finally arrived, and Jake expectantly Identified the first of them.

[Simple Timed Injector (Inferior)] – A simple tool to inject a liquid from a bottle fitting the form after a set timer. The injection method is through a long metal barrel shaped like a large needle. Solidly, if hastily constructed from steel and simple Manuscripts.

Requirements: Variable

Just what I needed, Jake thought as he smiled.

Lillian noticed his smile and added: “Arnold worked quite fast in making them, and even if he wasn’t satisfied with their rarity, he was quite pleased with their functionality. The slot in the side is explicitly made to the poison bottle you provided, and on all his tests, they appear to work as intended. Here, he made this small manual for some reason.”

She handed him a small pamphlet with some easy-to-understand diagrams that explained how the very self-explanatory device worked. Jake couldn’t help but chuckle a bit at it.

It reminded him of before the system and of the absolutely inane guides found on the intranet of the company he worked at. The simplest things were explained to the lowest denominator. Jake heard it had something to do with regulations or avoiding lawsuits or

something. Still, he was personally sure it was just because there honestly were many people out there who were absolutely technologically illiterate.

Jake was pretty damn sure Arnold had worked with making inventions or something like that before the system, and he must have made the small guide by habit. Or maybe Phillip's men also kind of sucked at using technology? Well, he had learned that a lot of people sucked at manipulating mana, so perhaps it made sense to give people guides.

After unloading all the injectors, he held one up and inspected it deeper. They were nearly two meters tall and had a piston-like device installed to drive a needle-like barrel into the ground before injecting the payload.

It was solid workmanship, and Jake was more than happy with it after doing a few of his own tests. Mainly with how durable it was. Sadly he didn't have any spares for testing, so he chose to believe in them working.

Now, what would he need eleven large timed injectors for? Well, quite simple, actually. To kill a fucking mushroom.

Eleven doses of uncommon-rarity fungicide were all he had enough materials left over to craft. He didn't know if it would be enough, but he hoped so. His plan was to place these all over the biodome and set the timer to inject, so they all went down simultaneously.

With the powerful fungicide in the ground, the mushroom would naturally begin absorbing it little by little without noticing. Maybe it would even believe the energy to be beneficial due to the effects of the Soothing Bellberry.

But he had another trick up his sleeves to attract it.

Jake had studied fungi monsters a lot, and they tended to have a few things in common. They tended to require a lot of nutrients due to their large size and because often their progression relied on expanding their sizes.

To do this, they often preyed on living things – or far more frequently – absorbing powerful natural sources of mana. And of the many mana affinities, they were known to mainly prefer water and earth-affinity mana. Well, besides pure mana, but pretty much everything wanted that.

For pure mana, he didn't have any good bait, but for earth-mana? He had barrels full.

[Soilwater (Common)] – Water infused with strong earth-affinity mana, making it purer and hold certain magical properties. Can be used as an ingredient in many alchemical recipes or simply consumed in its raw form to restore mana for those possessing the earth-affinity.

Jake would gladly dump half a barrel around each Injector to make the mushroom drink it all up along with the fungicide.

And then... then he would wait. Either the fungus would die without even discovering how or it would notice its poisoning and go berserk, at which point Jake would jump into action and begin bombarding it with arrows and magic.

It was simple, but if Jake wanted to take down the damn blue mushroom-fuck while still in E-grade, he didn't think there would be a better time. Sure, he would get stronger if he upgraded his Touch or Sense first... but he had also been sitting still for too long.

While he had practiced a bit with Hawkie, it wasn't enough.

Jake began his final preparations. Each of the Injectors had a small compartment for one of Jake's poison bottles to be placed into, and he found that they fit in perfectly. When the timer would go off, the bottle would be crushed, and the liquid pushed down into the ground - a bit simple but nevertheless effective device.

When he was done preparing all eleven Injectors, he put them into his spatial storage before turning to Lillian.

"I'm heading down. Say hi to Miranda for me, and see you next time," he said.

"Be careful," Lillian said, already aware that Jake was going to fight the creature that dwelled below. She had only heard rumors about it from Jake, so she wasn't sure how strong it was... just that he had returned battered and with tattered armor every time he went down there.

Jake just smiled as he raised his hand in a wave, making his mask visible again, and his eyes sharpened.

He had fought the mushroom twice and had to escape for his life both times. But as one says... third time's the charm.

The caterpillar crawled across the large leaf, munching on the small pieces of moss growing on it. Its sharp teeth were ripping it out after loosening it with an acid that didn't cause any damage to the leaf below. It just sat there munching when suddenly the leaf ruffled, and it was thrown off.

It landed on the ground unhurt and made a threatening sound towards the direction of the two larger insects fighting. But its instincts made it aware it wasn't a fight it should get involved in, so it cowardly crawled in the other direction, looking for more mana-rich food.

Dragging itself away, it searched the ground until encountering the most peculiar plant. It was roughly one meter tall and looked very odd as it was perfectly cylinder-shaped. A bit confused, the insect tried biting the plant but found the "bark" too tough.

Annoyed, it scurried away until suddenly the plant made a move itself. Without any warning, it suddenly slammed its upper portion into the ground before coming inert again. Even more confused than before, the caterpillar hurried away, as it got a feeling something terrible was about to happen.

Jake sneakily made his way out of the biodome as he did everything he could to not engage in any fights or scare any insects too much. He wanted to avoid waking up the mushroom as much as possible. While he had gotten a bit stronger since last, it was far from enough actually to fight the monstrous fungus. He still got chills when he imagined the speed of those vines and the final blast of mana.

He carefully placed down each Injector and embedded them in the ground with a good push. At the same time, he made small holes at the bottom of a barrel he placed right beside each Injector. It wasn't as fine-tuned as the Injectors, but Jake believed not enough energy would have time to seep into the ground and be detected before the fungicide injector also went off.

Was the plan perfect? Of course not. If it were, it would be too dull, wouldn't it?

Jake's sneaky adventure into the biodome only took a few minutes, with each Injector set to go off five minutes after being placed. Activating the five-minute timer took nothing more than injecting a bit of mana.

When the last Injector was placed and the final barrel dumped right next to it, he quickly ran out of the biodome while still trying to stay undetected. If the mushroom woke up, it sure as hell wouldn't be happy, and being in the middle of it rampaging sounded like a horrible idea.

Once outside in safety, he knelt down to make himself appear smaller and made sure the cloak covered his entire body with its camouflage active. While he was outside, he knew it still had ranged attacks that could potentially reach him, so he wanted to be as invisible as he could.

Closing his eyes, he focused on the feedback from Sense of the Malefic Viper. He felt his concocted fungicide vividly in his mind.

Time ticked by, until around forty seconds later, the first Injector activated. Jake felt the poison be released from its bottle and be forcefully pushed into the ground. Fifteen seconds later, the second triggered, eighteen seconds after the third, and so it continued until all eleven had delivered their payload. Not a single one of them failed to do their job.

Jake smiled as he thanked Arnold internally and decided to give the man a bonus after he returned.

Minutes passed by with nothing happening. The Soilwater and fungicide were mixing as it slowly seeped deeper and deeper into the ground. Perhaps it was due to the soilwater, but it sank way faster than water normally could, and soon it hit something – a part of the fungus.

It didn't make any large sounds or movements, but Jake subtly felt it absorb a bit of the nutritious mana, inadvertently ingesting the fungicide along with it.

Jake crossed his fingers that the fungus wouldn't notice anything was amiss. A dozen or so seconds passed as he felt the fungicide go deeper through the roots of the fungus before it reached the actual body. It was swiftly absorbed along with the mana from the Soilwater, with the fungus not having any immediate adverse reactions.

Instead, it sent more roots to absorb the energy. Not long after, it noticed another potent source of energy and began drinking from there too.

Within half an hour, it had absorbed all the Soilwater and fungicide. Jake felt it slowly burn away at the fungus' vitality below the ground as it spread throughout the entire creature. He felt like he had poisoned the whole biodome.

With bated breath, he waited. Waited as the poison got more and more ingrained in the fungus. Not just in its body, but even in its soul.

After over two hours, Jake was beginning to believe that the fungus would never notice. He felt it weaken with the fungicide still as powerful as ever. But just when he thought he would be able to win without a fight, he saw one of the giant blue mushrooms above-ground suddenly wilt...

And then...

OoOOoOOOOooO!

All hell broke loose.

Chapter 189: Press F for Fungus

Absolute mayhem. That is the only phrase Jake could use to accurately describe the chaos happening inside the biodome.

Vines were flying everywhere, random bolts of mana fired at anything moving, and all the poor insects that were just crawling around the biodome minding their own business

were ripped to pieces. The fungus didn't even look like it tried to absorb them; it just killed them and evaporated their bodies.

Jake just sat there, patiently monitoring the poison.

[Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza – lvl ???]

While he was there, he also tried to focus on improving his Sense of the Malefic Viper. To better sense how his poison interacted with the body of the fungi. He felt how it spread and invaded every part of it, how it polluted its resource-pools and devoured its health points.

He felt like he was improving his ability to sense the energy, once more also finding parallels between it and his mana control. Learning how the fungicide worked to kill the fungus would help him out in the future when he needed to create better mana techniques, so he took it all in.

As long as he could, that is.

Finally, the mushroom noticed him.

It fired a few small blasts of mana his way in what Jake could barely even recognize as an attack. Clearly, it didn't focus on him or even recognize him from their last encounter. Indeed he was right when he surmised the fungus was stupid. Unsurprising, considering it was a goddamn overgrown blue mushroom.

Jake got up and went into action after dodging the mana blasts thrown his way. He knew he would now catch its attention, but he was prepared. He summoned orbs of mana above him that he charged up to hold quite a quantity.

He then sent them floating into the biodome, where he instantly saw a few vines fly over and try to destroy them. Jake smiled as once more his theory was confirmed: it indeed did rely on some kind of mana vision.

It went well with how it also sucked at detecting that it was infected by something. All in all, its perception just sucked outright. It didn't *need* to see things when it could just kill them by way of its sheer size and overwhelming power. It was a monster designed to be the king within its own hunting grounds.

A king that Jake was about to dethrone by poisoning the land the king reigned over.

Two wings appeared behind him as they began pumping out a mist of poison. Yet Jake didn't blow it into the dome but kept it around himself in a cloud of thick smoke. He obscured the entrance to the biodome, far from enough for Jake not to be able to see through it, but enough for the fungus to only see a giant blob of mana in its vision.

At the same time, he summoned mana bolts - weak versions of his regular bolts that looked more like transparent floating crystals than anything meant to attack with. He waved his hand, and bottle after bottle appeared, each containing mushroom-killing juices.

It was all the common-rarity fungicide he had concocted over the last weeks. Far from as effective as the uncommon-rarity soul-invading poison, but more than effective nevertheless.

He swayed a bit to avoid a blast of mana fired his way as strings of mana sprung out of his hands and began tying the bottles to his bolts. He fused the bottles inside each bolt and fired them into the dome, aiming for the larger mushrooms or plants within.

When the bolts hit, they exploded in a rather unimpressive explosion. It didn't even harm the plants, but it was more than enough to make the bottles shatter and send the fungicide flying everywhere.

This continued as Jake dodged all attacks coming his way, noticing that the fungus' aim was totally off. It tried to make up for it with quantity, but the poison mist made the area it had to bombard too large, especially considering it had to shoot all its bolts through the relatively small entrance to the biodome.

He kept up his barrage of fungicide and weak bolts. The reason why he used bolts to deliver his attacks was quite simple - the fungus reacted to them. Several of the bolts were intercepted by vines that either stabbed into the bolt or just slapped it, making the bolt explode and spraying the fungicide all over it.

Minutes passed with the damage building up. Finally, it was forced to show its actual body.

Blue vines flew up as the entire biodome shook. The moment Jake saw the first blue vine, he marked it and jumped back around the corner of the cave, away from the fungi. He had learned that he could only mark its true body... but that wasn't the only thing.

His last fight with the fungus, coupled with his extensive research on how to slay it, had led him to have a sufficient understanding of the monster. Sufficient enough so that when he held out his hand and focused on the monster in his mind, the skill responded.

Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter

With his eyes closed, he focused his mind. Every fiber of the creature was clear to him as his Sense of the Malefic Viper fed him constant information of the toxins in its body. And as the toxins had invaded every part of its body, Jake could feel its entire being.

He sought deeper as he sunk his consciousness into understanding the fungus - every single part of not only its body but its soul. Jake didn't even notice that the fungus was ripping itself out of the ground as a massive figure rose within the biodome.

The massive monster that had made the biodome its home ever since the integration was now attempting to flee. Jake just kept his focus honed on making an arrow to finish off the fungus.

The arrow that emerged from his hand looked like nothing he had ever made prior. It seemed almost ethereal as it appeared to flicker in and out of existence. It was in an odd state of both existing and being immaterial.

Jake opened his eyes and looked at it. Looks-wise its shape was not much different from a normal arrow... but Jake felt a headache coming on by just looking at it. When he saw what resources it had consumed, he was also confused. It drained equally from his health, mana, and stamina pools during its creation.

But the confusion lasted only for a moment as he understood. This arrow would not strike at the body of the fungus but its soul.

He reached out to grab the arrow and found it extremely peculiar when he did so. His hand phased partway through the arrow, but he soon noticed it was just his gloves. It ignored anything that was not his physical body, caring not for his clothes at all.

Jake feared he wouldn't be able to nock it but was happy to see that wasn't an issue. Likely because the bow was infused with ample amounts of his mana.

He took a single One Step Mile and now stood right in front of the biodome entrance again and could once more see inside... and if the situation earlier was absolute mayhem, then now it was a cataclysm.

What he saw shocked him for a moment because it looked absolutely surreal.

It looked like a giant indigo spiderweb of roots was slowly crawling across the ground, with a dozen or so thick root-like tendrils doing most of the work. Jake instantly knew it was the creature's actual body and that it was trying to relocate.

Jake had contaminated the shit out of its home. It had absorbed energy from the earth and been heavily poisoned by the fungicide. Afterward, fungicide was spread all over its area, and Jake had even pushed in some poison mist to make even the air toxic.

In summary... it was a really shitty place to live for any fungus. It was going to try and flee the biodome to escape the environment that would end up killing it, and even if it somehow survived, the biodome would no longer be a good hunting ground.

Sadly for the Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza, it would never find a new home. An arrow that flickered in and out of existence flew through the air with unprecedented speed. It contained incredible amounts of mana, not just due to the arrow itself but because it was shot with a fully charged Infused Powershot.

Four of the robust vines began moving up to try and block, and Jake allowed it to because he knew that no physical movement could possibly stop an arrow heading directly for one's soul.

The arrow hit the creature in its vine and simply sank into its body, disappearing from sight.

For a moment, nothing seemed to happen as the entire Indigo Fungus just froze up. Suddenly, It made a spasm-like movement as one of its vines flew out and slammed into one of the biodome walls. Followed by another chaotic move.

It began thrashing as Jake kept his distance. He knew... something had broken inside it. It was already so weak, to begin with... its soul eroded and tortured for so long by the uncommon-rarity poison. Jake didn't let up, however, as he attacked.

Not with another Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, but just normal ones. He fired Infused Powershot after Infused Powershot, ripping the true form of the Indigo Fungus apart little by little.

Two times prior, he had come down to this biodome. Two times he had been forced to flee. The last time it even got dangerously close.

Yet at his third return... it was just a slaughter. In some ways, one could say that Jake had been fighting the fungus for over a month. The battle had been won not in a direct confrontation with his enemy but through careful preparation and planning to take down his foe.

Had his plan been perfect? No, far from it. But it had been adequate.

****You have slain [Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza – lvl 105] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

The humongous Indigo Fungus collapsed to the ground, looking like a giant pile of overcooked spaghetti – a fitting mental image of the accursed fungus.

“Fuck yeah!” Jake cheered goofily out loud as he got the notification but soon frowned as he looked at the aforementioned system message.

Wait, what? Jake asked himself, a bit confused as he double-checked the notification. *How could it only be 105? What?*

He was a bit stumped about how that was possible. It was barely D-grade, and it had grown even stronger between his visits... did that mean it had just reached D-grade the day he went to the biodome the first time? If not... how damn slow did it level?

Also, holy shit, it was strong for its level. Jake had killed many creatures of higher level already, but none had proven to be big challenges. The Minotaur Mindlord has been quite a lot higher than anything else, and yet he couldn't see the mushroom lo-

Actually, Jake was pretty damn sure the Minotaur Mindlord could have killed the Indigo Fungus with some mental magic bullshit – pun intended – as the overgrown mushroom had a weak soul.

Was it just the match-up? Or was it particularly strong for its level?

In pure stats alone, it *had* to trump anything Jake had ever faced before. Just the absolutely ridiculous amount of energy it had was more than all the other D-grades he had ever met put together. Well, besides the King of the Forest, but that freak didn't count.

His next notifications weren't unexpected but were still something relatively new.

****'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 97 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 98 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

He had gained two race levels because he was capped in his class. Quite frankly, it didn't mean much, as all it meant was that his next few levels in his professions wouldn't also net him race levels. Well, it would matter if he decided to level his race to 100 and evolve... but that wasn't the plan.

No, right now, the plan was to get some of that sweet loot. Because if there were one thing mushrooms were suitable for, it was alchemy!

Jake walked up to the massive creature and took out his blade. He quickly began dissecting it, already knowing what he wanted.

He started with fourteen large Lifevines of the creature. While he was dissecting it, he discovered that the monster was supposed to have fifteen, as it hadn't yet been able to regenerate the one it blew off itself last time Jake was there.

[Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza Lifevine (Rare)] – The Lifevine of an Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza. The Lifevine is a part of the main body of the fungus. Contains intense amounts of vital energy and is incredibly resilient. Can be used in a myriad of alchemical creations.

All of them went into his spatial storage to be used later. Next, he went deeper into the body of the creature, searching for something within that was giving off a strong response from his Sense of the Malefic Viper. It wasn't a toxin but something that felt incredibly pure and powerful.

Cutting away the disgusting fungus parts, he carved a small cave into the massive putrid corpse. The corpse was a nearly ten meters across big mass of condensed fungus. It was all the small veins it had spread across the whole biodome balled up into one big... well, ball.

Luckily the corpse was easily cut through after it had died, allowing him to quickly make it to his desired item. He could already see it within his sphere and used Identify on it before he even reached it.

[Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza Lifecore (Epic)] – The Lifecore of an Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza. Contains a massive amount of life-affinity mana and vital energy. Can be used in a myriad of alchemical creations. Will grant a permanent increase to the Vitality stat if consumed.

Damn, epic-rarity, Jake thought. That was pretty damn good. Reading the item itself, it got even better. A permanent increase in vitality? Nice.

He picked up his speed and cut his way to the Lifecore, where he visually inspected it. It looked like a small, rugged stone or maybe a large seed? Either way, it wasn't any larger than the palm of his hand, which was tiny compared to the massive monster it had been in. He would save the core for crafting after reaching D-grade to make full use of it. Just eating it would be a waste.

As Jake was preparing to make his way out of the disgusting corpse, he noticed something else. Despite the fungus leaving the biodome, it had still kept one connection established with its many roots. They sought deep into the ground through a hole it had completely filled with parts of its main body.

Jake frowned as he wondered what was down there for the fungus not to want to abandon it despite its horrible situation. Was there something good down there? A natural treasure, perhaps?

He could inspect it... but first, he would have to get rid of the massive body blocking the hole.

Summoning his alchemical flame, he got to work. He had taken anything that gave off a response from his Sense of the Malefic Viper already, and the rest of the body was just a big gooey pile at this point. One he gladly set on fire.

The entire creature was swiftly reduced to ashes and left behind far less than he would expect. The ashes themselves weren't anything valuable, but he hoped whatever was within the large hole now square in the middle of the biodome would be.

Actually, calling it a biodome was a bit fallacious... because Jake was now the only living thing within. As all the plants had been part of the Indigo Fungus' body, they had all withered when it retracted itself from them to try and flee.

Jake walked up the hole and looked down. Forty or so meters down, he saw a green glow. As he didn't feel anything from his danger sense, he decided to slowly begin floating down after coating his feet in mana.

His confusion only amplified the closer he got to the bottom as his sphere began picking up what was down there.

It was a room or cavern of sorts. The spot he was floating down towards was the exact center of the small cavern, from the looks of things. The center was occupied by what Jake could only describe as a large, completely blank green glowing metal disc of sorts.

The disc emanated a constant flow of potent life-affinity mana, which was doubtlessly why the fungus wanted it... and possibly what had allowed it to evolve.

Jake wondered what the disc was as he landed on top of it. A system message instantly answered his question.

You have discovered the dungeon: Undergrowth of the Deepdwellers

Requirements to enter: D-grade

Requirements to enter not met

WARNING: Only 5 challengers are allowed per party attempting the dungeon.

Chapter 190: Sensing the Arcane

Jake sat back in his lodge, happy as a clam with how the last day had gone. He had killed the accursed D-grade mega-mushroom, gotten a bunch of valuable alchemy ingredients, and to top it all off, even discovered a hidden dungeon!

Eliminating the fungus was not only a good idea for his own mental health, but based on a bit of surveying he did afterward, it was also a good thing for the city. The damn thing kept growing by the day, and it was only a matter of time before it would make its way to the surface with some of its feelers.

At that point, it would begin assimilating plants and trees aboveground and grow even faster, becoming a massive threat to the entire settlement. Jake could only imagine giant Lifevines one day bursting through the ground and begin tearing apart buildings and draining the citizens with its needle-like vines. That would be a very bad time.

But now that threat was dealt with, so that was nice.

The dungeon was just the cherry on top. Sure, he couldn't enter it, but he already felt the butterflies in his stomach as he anticipated diving in there when he reached D-grade. This is why he dove into leveling his profession the rest of the way with great vigor.

During the fight with the fungus, he felt like he was close to passing some kind of threshold with Sense of the Malefic Viper.

Based on its description, the skill only allowed him to sense what his poison had infected and nothing more. He had been clever and used Mark of the Ambitious Hunter as a way of measuring how much damage he did, but his senses didn't tell him anything on their own.

Against the fungus, that had changed. Jake had focused so deeply on sensing the effects of the toxin that he began also getting a grasp for its effects. Perhaps it was because it touched the soul of his enemy, or maybe he had just gotten better at sensing things.

However, it wasn't enough to get a skill upgrade. No, Jake needed to practice and experiment more. The issue is... he needed something to test on.

He had thought a long time about what to test his poisons on as he didn't have any giant funguses conveniently waiting around anymore. The first enemy he considered was the Cloud Elementals due to how unintelligent they were.

Jake felt bad about effectively torturing something to improve himself. But at the same time, he *really* wanted to upgrade his Sense of the Malefic Viper. Cloud Elementals thus seemed like the most merciful foe he could try it on; there was just one minor issue with that.

He didn't have any poisons that worked on the elementals. Well, his blood did work a tiny bit, but far from enough.

Something of flesh and blood would, without a doubt, be best. Jake wasn't stupid and knew that many alchemists tested their toxins on live subjects, often dissecting the corpses afterward and/or using tools to measure how the poison was rampaging the test subject.

But... doing that just didn't sit well with him. Could he go out and kidnap a few beasts to inflict with poison? Or even worse, have Miranda bring him a few citizens she didn't like? From a practical standpoint, he could; it just wouldn't feel right to him. He liked to fight enemies, not needlessly torture them. The more intelligent his prey, the more shitty he would feel.

So... he settled on the one flesh and blood lifeform he knew that would consent to willingly be put through torture for him to study the effects poison had on the body: himself.

His way of testing was pretty simple. He would take some of his own poison, coat an arrow, and stick it into his own stomach or chest. He would then focus on suppressing his Palate of the Malefic Viper and feel the effects of the poison as it moved uninhibited through his body.

Jake actually had to praise himself for the method. It allowed him to not only practice Sense of the Malefic Viper but also his Palate. Granted, it would likely be more effective to experiment on something that wasn't himself and the pain he could do without, but besides that, it worked well.

The next three days were spent exclusively in the cellar of the lodge without any disturbances. Jake did feel a bit bad about telling Sylphie that he couldn't play with her for a while, and he would have to move a dinner session with Miranda. She seemed oddly okay with that, so that had gone over easy. Jake felt like he needed to hammer when the iron was hot, and his inspiration from the fungus fight was still fresh in his mind.

Over these days, Jake went through many bottles of Necrotic Poison and Hemotoxin. While Jake had gone through the Trial of Myriad Poisons, he had never truly pondered the effects poison had on his body and how exactly it worked on a deeper level.

During those times, he had focused solely on fighting the poison, not actually understanding it. Breaking something apart was far more simple than learning how it worked, and that was exactly what Jake was currently doing.

After inflicting himself with the poison, he entered a deep state of meditation and just sat there observing its effects, almost like an out-of-body experience. He filtered out all feedback that was not from Sense of the Malefic Viper as he just looked on and learned.

He saw his own body rot and decay, his blood thin and the wounds left by the arrows bleed like never before. But more than that, he saw the toxic energies mix with the energies in his body and how the poison slowly eroded that energy.

Jake couldn't help but sometimes momentarily compare the effects he felt it had from his Sense of the Malefic Viper to how he actually felt in his body. That is when he noticed something was off with how his own toxins worked on his body...

They did damage to his body; that much was clear. However, there was an invisible barrier that stopped the poison from going deeper and doing more damage. Like the two energies simply didn't oppose each other, even if one was aligned to destroying vitality and the other was pure vital energy.

Jake couldn't understand why the poison didn't work as it should. It didn't work like it did when he used it on the fungus either, and he felt like he was missing something important.

He considered many options until a thought suddenly struck him: why could he even feel the effects of the poison to begin with?

He understood why he could feel something was poisoned... the skill did that, but not why he could better feel the poison he himself had inflicted? Why was it just what *he* inflicted and not just any poison something suffered from?

What separated poison he was the source of from anything else?

With these thoughts, he tried to better feel the poison within his own body as he focused on the barrier that seemed to be the cause of why his own poison didn't hurt him as much as it should. To do this, he activated a part of his Palate to absorb some of the poison.

It went effortlessly, as a big part of the poison was, of course, his own mana, so-

Wait... am I really just a fucking idiot?

It was so goddamn simple. It was so obvious why Jake could better feel his own poison... it included his own mana. It included a part of him. Every single point of mana, health, or stamina Jake ever used contained a part of himself in the sense that it reflected his own

Records. Even poison he didn't concoct still held some of his Records just on account of him inflicting it...

Even if it didn't contain any of his mana, it would still contain his will and intent. Pride of the Malefic Viper had made Jake aware that his own intentions held power and could affect the world, so it only made sense that any action he made infused a part of his intent into that action. It was absolutely minuscule... but it existed.

It was like something clicked in his mind as suddenly everything became clearer. He felt the poison within his own body more vividly than ever as he got a notification.

[Sense of the Malefic Viper (Epic)] – The Malefic Viper sought out many natural treasures on its path to power; it is only natural to learn to sense them. Having walked further on your path as an Alchemist of the Malefic Viper, your senses for poisons and herbs only sharpen. Gives a passive ability to detect herbs and poisons in different forms and a strong feeling of their properties and affinities. Allows you to far better sense the poison you have inflicted. Allows the Alchemist to far more easily detect affinities in the environment and detect areas optimal for cultivating herbs. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Sense of the Malefic Viper based on Perception.

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[Sense of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – The Malefic Viper's greed for natural treasures is neverending. You are following his path for your senses to see all that which you desire. Your desire for knowing the suffering you bring upon your foes has brought you even further down this path. Gives a passive ability to detect herbs and poisons in different forms and a strong feeling of their properties and affinities. Allows the Alchemist to far more easily detect affinities in the environment and detect areas optimal for cultivating herbs. Massively improves your ability to sense the poison you

have inflicted and its effects on any inflicted entities. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Sense of the Malefic Viper based on Perception. Passively provides 1 Perception per level in Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your gaze scour the multiverse for all that is rightfully yours.

'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 94 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points

'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 95 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points

Jake basked in the feeling of his senses expanding... but he felt it wasn't enough. He felt like he had just touched upon something vital as he kept delving deeper into feeling the mana in his body and in the poison.

His perception increased with the upgrade, but he felt like he needed more. He didn't hesitate as he instantly threw all his free points into the stat as his senses sharpened even more, and he could see the mana even better. He raised his hand as a mana bolt began condensing.

The mana bolt crackled with energy as always, but Jake kept pushing more into it. Not just mana, but his will, all the while observing it as closely as possible with not only Sense of the Malefic Viper but also his sphere and natural mana sense.

For the longest time, Jake had wondered what truly separated pure mana from what he had named "destructive" mana. He knew it had something to do with how you shaped it, how you packaged the bolt, and perhaps more importantly... what you intended for it to do.

And today, for the first time, he had passed a threshold that allowed him to sense *them*.

Small purple or pink wisps of energy existed within the bolt, but not just in the bolt but all the mana he had. He felt it within his body as he focused on it. His Sphere of Perception honed in on a single of the tiny wisps that were still invisible to the eye.

Even with Jake's high perception, he couldn't see them with his eyes. Without his sphere and Sense of the Malefic Viper allowing him to better detect mana affinities, he wouldn't have seen it...

The bolt floating above his hand flickered as he amplified the energy of one of the wisps. He willed for it to grow in power as he pumped in more and more mana. It kept growing in intensity as Jake felt more and more of his mana be consumed, and Jake felt like he was slowly beginning to lose control.

His body moved while his mind remained focused on the bolt. He jumped out of the cellar of his lodge and flew out of the door towards the pond. Every shred of his mind focused on stopping it from exploding. He barely managed to get out of the lodge, and just as he was about to release the bolt that was being overcharged with energy and becoming volatile... it stabilized.

The discharge of mana resembling crackling lightning stopped. The bolt no longer pulsed with energy but was now just floating there, looking like a light pink crystal. Jake saw that he had lost more than 1000 mana to make this single bolt... nearly ten times more than the strongest he had ever made prior.

Jake moved his free hand and touched the crystal-like bolt. His finger poked into it as it remained stable, as he felt the mana just flow around his skin. He waved his hand, and just like that, the bolt dispersed, turning into atmospheric mana.

“What was that?” he asked himself, confused. The bolt felt so different than any he had ever made before. He felt like he understood it more than anything he had ever created and that he could control it far more than any spell or skill he had ever used.

“That is what your pure mana is supposed to look like,” he heard a voice echo out in his mind as he felt the full attention of the Malefic Viper on him. *“I normally don’t like giving advice... but for once, I am going to be the wise old master. This one is actually quite important.”*

“Your mana is pure and unpolluted by any affinities or influences. Mana is by default uncolored and unaffected by anything. You can mix pure mana with any other mana affinity, and all it does is dilute the mana-affinity. Like when you mix purified water into a concoction.”

“But what happens when pure mana reaches a level of concentration where it can no longer be called pure? Where the intent within it makes it antithetical to its purity? When you force this mana that otherwise does not hold any pre-determined function to make your will a reality, it stops being able to merge with pure mana like before.”

“That is when pure mana ascends to become an affinity in itself. Affinities are partly defined by having inherent intent. As you know, dark mana inherently wants to consume other mana-affinities, light-affinity mana wants to spread itself out as wide as possible, and earth-affinity mana wants to consolidate and condense itself.”

“The affinity you just created is one where you define this inherent want. It wants to do what you want it to do. You can call it Jake-affinity if you want to, but we decided to just give it a unified name in the multiverse, even if the effects of this affinity vary widely from person to person. Anyway, Jake, this is the amalgamation of all that silly and extremely suboptimal training with mana you have done. Congratulations, you just discovered your arcane affinity.”

And almost as if prompted, he got a notification.

Title earned: [Prodigious Arcanist]

Jake was a bit surprised, and he swiftly checked out the title, hoping it would make things more transparent. Jake was still a bit confused about what was happening, and the title should explain what this whole arcane-affinity thing was about.

[Prodigious Arcanist] – You have proven yourself a prodigy in the realm of energy manipulation and control. Create your own arcane-affinity before reaching D-grade. Allows you to transform energy into your arcane-affinity far more easily.

It didn't.