

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 191: Cloudy with A Chance of Powershots

Jake felt like he had to make a confession after hearing the Viper explain all that stuff about arcane-mana and arcane-affinity.

He... didn't really get it. Not really. More so, he didn't really get how he had somehow created this arcane-affinity. Was it just because he wanted his pure mana to be better without compromising on purity? That he kept condensing his mana bolts instead of mixing in other affinities?

Jake voiced his confusion, with the Viper trying to explain how it all worked a bit more in detail, but Jake just got more confused. He summoned some more of the pink-purple mana and played a bit with it, finding out that it was pretty much just like his pure mana, just more potent and more condensed.

The Viper said that was because Jake's version of arcane mana was based on his intent of creating mana with "stable destruction," or something like that. Jake got that part as he had tried to make his pure mana better at destroying and breaking down things while at the same time making it less likely to blow up in his face, but he wasn't sure how that constituted a mana affinity.

Jake kept talking a bit with the Viper until he made it clear that he was running out of "divine message juice" and finished with a real nugget of wisdom:

“Jake arcane mana better pure mana. Mana bolt go bigger boom boom, but not boom boom in Jake face.”

An absolutely condescending explanation that Jake could only nod at as it finally made at least some sense to him. Sure, the entire concept appeared simple enough... but that is why it was so confusing. Why would the system recognize something so "simple" as so extraordinary?

Anyway, with that settled, Jake returned to the critical matter of calming down the sulking Sylphie that was sad he had locked himself away for three days. She kept angrily pecking his hand whenever he tried petting her but got equally angry when he stopped trying.

“Still a bit too young to go through your teenage phase, aren’t you?” he joked, as she had finally forgiven him and was nesting on his lap as he petted her. She was a real lap-bird. He couldn’t help but Identify her and see that she was actually just about to exit her teenage levels.

[Sylphian Eyas – lvl 19]

All jokes aside, he wasn’t actually sure how levels related to growth. Sylphie still couldn’t even fly yet, despite having a relatively high level. Her physical specs were up there, though, with her pecks able to easily break rock and her wind magic quite impressive.

The thought of her killing the big level 10 Irontusk Boar back in the tutorial with a few pecks and by blowing a bit of wind was both absolutely hilarious and plausible. The little bird looked harmless, but he could see her even kill a level 25 human if he or she wasn't careful.

But at least she was aware of it. While Jake wasn't sure she could break his skin with her pecks, she clearly didn't try to either. It was all playful, like how a cat didn't try to actually inflict any injury when it just nipped at someone.

"Ree!" the small bird yelled, making a noise that Jake wasn't entirely sure fit with being a hawk. She was just annoyed that Jake didn't give her as much attention as she thought she deserved. He was still too stuck in his head as he couldn't help but think of ways to possibly apply this whole new arcane mana business to Touch of the Malefic Viper.

The Viper had called it "controlled destruction" or something like that, but Jake was focusing on the "controlled" part. His current issue with trying to transmute objects with Touch of the Malefic Viper wasn't in the power department, but actually making his Touch not destroy the item.

Jake basically used mana in two ways: either as incredibly stable states: to strengthen items or create almost tangible objects such as his strings, or he used his pure mana to cause pure destruction and damage. He didn't really have anything in between that.

At least, that is what he used his pure mana control for. He hadn't tried to make mental magic, summon things that mimic the living, or any of that advanced magic circle stuff. He either just threw his mana as condensed bolts of destruction or made things tougher.

Infused Powershot was a perfect example of this. Thinking back... wasn't that the first skill he truly upgraded on his own? Not counting the basic weapon skill upgrade for knowing how to use a bow, that is. He had done so by combining power and stability... making the bow more stable and able to contain the power his body would impose upon it. He made the two energies work in concert after that, mixing and creating a powerful strike. Like most of his other skills, it was straightforward yet powerful.

"Sylphie, I am sorry, but you'll have to spend the rest of the day with your parents; I am going to have to go practice a bit on my own," he told the small hawk nestled up next to him as he stroked her still-growing feathers that was slowly replacing all the down. He reckoned she would be able to fly soon.

After a few more protests, he brought her out and gave her to Mystie, who was just chilling outside with a small magic-circle-looking thing. Yeah, he had kinda given up on learning advanced magic like that. Why make mana complicated? Just make it go big boom or make yourself not be hurt by the big boom.

Summoning his wings, he took flight and headed up to the clouds above.

Passing the many small clouds on the way, he finally spotted the giant cloud island above. He even saw the small island where he and Hawkie used to relax after their battles. It still floated there untouched.

Jake shook his head before he found another island to land on. He was going to do a bit of practice... and the last time he practiced archery, he ended up destroying quite a few cloud islands along with his long-range takedown of the Storm Elemental.

He summoned his Windsoar Bow and looked down at it a bit. He felt the mana within it, the majority of it inherent to the weapon, but a portion was his own. It was the connection that one created with any bound weapon.

This connection bound the weapon to the person using it, but it also helped strengthen the item. Much like how a living being's body would weaken significantly after dying, so would a weapon be less durable when not bound. Not to the same degree, but to at least to some extent.

When he used Infused Powershot, he didn't just push mana into the weapon but also flooded the bow's surroundings and the arrow he was about to fire. Mana and stamina would swirl around his entire body as he channeled, making him fire his most powerful attack.

Jake hadn't ever really tried to improve the skill besides just pushing more energy into it. He was afraid of breaking the equilibrium that the skill required. Now, he was actively looking to break that equilibrium and allow the skill to evolve.

He didn't have any way of making his stamina more potent or suddenly make his body more durable, but he felt like he had a way to make the mana stronger through his newly discovered arcane-affinity.

When he began making a few simple experiments, he quickly noticed that he was, in some ways, already halfway through this practice. His many days spent refining his mana and trying to create arrows infused with mana were very close to what he attempted right now.

Jake stood up on the cloud platform and took out an arrow. In a slow movement, he nocked it and focused on every action as he began using Infused Powershot. But he kept the energy output to a minimum, not caring about charging time or power - just the process.

He let go of the arrow a bit later before nocking another and starting over. Each arrow released was weak, but what was important was that he felt himself progress incredibly fast as something... clicked.

Slowly his surroundings began to change. Faint wisps of pink-purple energy began being mixed into the otherwise colorless mana, and he instantly felt like something shifted. It was like the axis determining the equilibrium moved as his stamina was immediately overwhelmed, and his body began taking the brunt force of the skill.

His skin began to sizzle as his own mana began destroying the stamina coming out of his pores and burning into his flesh. Jake instantly focused as he pushed the energy away from his skin and towards the bow and arrow. A bit reminiscent of when he used mana to walk on air or water, he tried to create a thin layer of mana over the stamina-vapors coming out of his skin, making it flow in the direction towards his weapon and lessening the damage to his body.

The Windsoar Bow began being flooded with energy, and the arrow began to turn a purple color as it too experienced a faint influx of mana. It wasn't even because the arrow was directly infused, it was only affected by the remnant energies, but even that was enough to nearly make it break.

As for the bow, it began to show strain but managed to contain the energy. It was practically glowing with mana as Jake was forced to let go of the string.

The usual explosion of mana and stamina from Infused Powershot sounded out but was far more powerful than ever before. It wasn't colorless either but had a faint pink-purple hue as the poor small cloud island beneath him was utterly destroyed by the arcane-mana in a single shot.

With a notification appearing at the same time.

[Infused Powershot (Rare)] – Stamina as fuel - mana as a guide. Unlike a normal Powershot, the Infused Powershot does not require a long charging time but can be charged in a brief moment. The higher the magnitude of the charge, the greater the stamina and mana expenditure. Charging Infused Powershot may empower the skill further. Adds a small bonus to the effectiveness of Agility, Strength, and Intelligence when using Infused Powershot.

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[Arcane Powershot (Epic)] – Stamina the fuel – Mana the guide – Arcane the power. Evolved from Infused Powershot, it now uses a higher concept of mana to amplify itself. The higher the magnitude of the charge, the greater the stamina and mana expenditure. Arcane Powershot's power is dependent on the charging duration, but due to your Arcane Mana's inherent power, the base power without any charging is significantly higher than Infused Powershot. Adds a small bonus to the effectiveness of Agility and Strength as well as a medium bonus to the effectiveness of Intelligence when using Arcane Powershot.

Jake smiled for a moment as he skimmed the notification before the pain hit. He only now noticed that while he thought he had avoided most of the damage caused by the arcane mana... he hadn't succeeded - far from it.

His arms had purple veins running through them, looking like he had been struck by lightning. It was only now he noticed several bleeding wounds on his chest, and especially his shoulders had been hit hard. There were places where the arcane mana had gathered for a fraction of a second too long before being led to the bow or at least away from his skin, causing these injuries that still sizzled with mana.

Yet through all that pain, he kept smiling because, goddamn, was the arrow he had just sent flying into the horizon powerful.

He took out a health potion and chugged it before finding a new small cloud island to sit on. He wanted to consider what he had just gone through a bit before heading back. Many ideas bounced around in his head as he considered how this new affinity could be used to make him stronger... and without really thinking much, he had already begun condensing an Arcane Bolt in the air.

“BLOCK IT!” the warrior yelled as the large beast was just about to cleave his friend’s head off. He swiftly came to the rescue and released the Powershot he had been charging into the side of the beast. It snarled in response, but the arrow barely managed to penetrate its thick hide.

The archer looked desperately around and saw that their healer was already struggling to keep their other warrior from bleeding out. The mage had managed to sear the long hairs of the overpowered beast in front of him, but nothing more.

Truly... they had fucked up by invading the small clearing this beast and its kin occupied. He Identified the absolute monster before them – one much more potent than its level would generally indicate.

[Alpha Venomfang Badger – lvl 67]

“RETREAT!” he yelled as he fired another arrow aiming for the eye of the badger. He just wanted it to leave the warrior alone and give him time to get back. The attack earlier had broken the warrior’s arm as the skill he was using to block had stopped working - the man likely out of stamina.

The archer got its attention as he threw a quick glance at their healer, his look clearly telling her to take the others and run... he would try to buy time. He was the leader of their group... today was his fuck-up, and he would be the one taking responsibility.

She nodded with grave understanding as she yelled for the mage to help her move the other warrior with the broken arm. They began running as the archer barely managed to dodge the swipe from the badger with his evasion skill. He knew it was only a matter of time... but that was fine; he just needed to buy a bit more.

The archer kept battling for the next half a minute until he made a minor slip-up and found himself taking a nasty wound from a flying log the badger threw after him. Another of his fuck-ups was that the beast was far more intelligent than it at first let on.

He smashed into a tree, coughing up blood as his vision turned black for a moment. When his vision fully returned, the beast was closing in, mischievously looking at him as it decided to stop playing with its prey. The archer just smirked as he closed his eyes, accepting the inevitable... *they should have made it aw-*

BOOOM!

The entire forest shook as he promptly opened his eyes... and saw a large red crater where the Alpha Venomfang Badger had been moments earlier. A few pink-purple wisps of energy floating in the air, disappearing just seconds later. The archer sat there for a few seconds before asking a very valid question:

“What the fuck?”

****You have slain [Alpha Venomfang Badger – lvl 67] - Experience earned****

Oops? Jake saw the notification appear a few minutes after firing the shot... as he reconsidered how smart it was to practice shooting very lethal attacks into who-knows-where.

In my defense, it isn't like I have any proper archery ranges anywhere, he thought, 100% justifying his actions.

He kept up his training for a bit as he summoned more and more Arcane Bolts through the night and long into the next day, meditating in between - only returning for the city when it was time for his weekly meeting with Miranda.

Chapter 192: Hierarchy & Doubt

Miranda was tapping her fingers on the table as she stared at the system menu in front of her. She soon noticed she hadn't actually read a word as her mind was far too distracted. She couldn't help but regret the weekly ritual she had created where she would go meet the owner at his lodge and bring him up to speed over a bite of food.

At the time, it had seemed like a good idea, but now she couldn't help but consider it incredibly silly, if not downright disrespectful and blasphemous. She had been ignorant and stupid to a level that she had only recently come to understand.

Her weeks after getting her class evolution – or more accurately getting her Divine Blessing – had gotten... longer. She would spend at least a few hours of Realtime every day deep in meditation, where she then reached out and entered the Verdant Lagoon.

The Verdant Lagoon was a mysterious and quite incomprehensible place. It looked like a giant swamp with countless islands in it, each unique. Some islands had entire cities on them, and some had huts and tents making it look like something from the stone age, while some were even winter-landscapes or deserts.

But where she found herself most days was on the central island – a place generally reserved for the three ladies that had created the Lagoon. They spoke of the Lagoon as their divine realm, something Miranda was more than willing to believe. They were gods, after all. What reason would gods have to lie to her?

It wasn't like they were the only ones she had spoken to either. Many different individuals resided in the Lagoon either with their actual physical bodies, with avatars of some kind, or through a projection-like skill, same as her.

Her meditation-sessions only lasted for a few hours, but within the Lagoon, that was more than a day. It was only in specific areas that time moved like this, and sadly – or luckily – her weird projected body was confined to these places.

Being in the Lagoon felt... odd. Miranda looked the same, wore the same clothes, and could even touch things, but she *knew* she wasn't actually there. With a single thought, she could appear back at her real body at any time, and if her real body were disturbed, she would wake back up too.

The many individuals she interacted with – some of them humans, others less so – were all unified in one thing: their reverence of the Ladies that had created the land they now occupied. This reverence and respect were then reflected onto her, as she was viewed with respect by entities far more powerful than herself.

All that she could handle. She could deal with it. She felt like she was halfway shitting her pants whenever she interacted with some otherworldly creature that politely tipped its hat to her in passing, but it was somehow still manageable.

No, what wasn't manageable was how the Ladies treated her. They acted far too friendly for her comfort. There was always a barrier that made it absolutely clear that they were superior beings, but they seemed to almost recognize her as being close to them in rank. Not power-rank but in respect to hierarchal power.

This confused her until one of them said that apparently the city owner... Jake... had *allowed* them to bless her. That thought just seemed utterly preposterous. Who was he to tell them what they could and couldn't do? Yet they seemed to accept it without question, and when she couldn't hold in her curiosity any longer, she had asked... and the answer hadn't exactly put her concerns to rest. She knew that he was friendly with a god they served, but the implications of that she couldn't comprehend... until she learned more of their master.

In the overall hierarchy of this entire multiverse – of limitless planets, worlds, dimensions, and factions – their master sat amongst the pinnacle of existences. Their master was one of the first twelve beings that achieved godhood and a creature that entire Pantheons of gods feared.

Miranda had felt the utter reverence, adorations, and slight fear the three Ladies held regarding their master. A Primordial called the Malefic Viper, an enigmatic god that could – in their own words – kill every single living being not just on their planet but their entire galaxy with nothing but a snap of his fingers. Putting in a bit more power, he could destroy the Verdant Lagoon and its three creators, and with his full power, the sisters were unsure if any but the most powerful of beings in existence could stand up to him. One thing they were absolutely sure of was that none could escape unscathed, at least. For their master was a god of poison, destruction, and corruption.

And that... that kind of being was what the owner had as a “friend.”

She... didn't get it. The thought of being friends with the three sisters didn't even cross her mind. She couldn't quite get on a good metaphor to describe the difference... there simply wasn't one with the logic of the old world. The thought of beings living trillions of years and personally wielding power to reduce planets to dust with a casual glance just wasn't something she could wrap her head around. Much less being “friends” with such a being. It was like a poor farmer being friends with the largest nuclear power on the old Earth... and even that was an understatement.

Yet the owner was so casual about it. To make it worse, he was too easy to read, so she couldn't even delude herself into believing he wasn't serious. He truly did consider the Malefic Viper his friend. Even her next logical step of concluding that he was the delusional one was shut down by the gods confirming it.

Because they hadn't asked Jake for permission to bless her. They had asked the Malefic Viper, who had then asked Jake on their behalf. They had given her a blessing only one step below that of a True Blessing – a blessing that still carried heavy implications for any god to give out, with the True one being infinitely more special. Naturally, the owner had gained the True blessing from the Malefic Viper...

So she thought it was perfectly acceptable for her to find every single meeting with the owner gutwrenchingly scary. Miranda had to watch every word and deliberate everything she did... because what if she somehow offended him? If he decided to “fire” her, what would happen? Even if that wasn't a realistic threat, could she truly do him justice?

He was the Chosen of a Primordial. He was so many ranks above her in the hierarchy of the multiverse she was like the poorest farmer meeting the emperor. She tried her best... but was it truly enough? She had progressed more than ever before over these last few weeks, gaining class levels at a fast speed, and her profession was nearly maxed out at 99.

Miranda... felt like she needed to do *everything* to ensure her position. Not just for herself but also for Hank, his family, and every citizen of Haven because she felt like they lived at his discretion and mercy. Which made all their meetings so much harder because...

“So anyway, I somehow ended up killing a badger more than five minutes after firing the arrow and getting a better handle on this new affinity-thing. It was actually a bit funny that my first encounter with a beast from the tutorial happened by accident... I did consider trying to travel to where it hit, but I honestly have no idea where it even landed. Sure, I could try and do some quick math to try and figure it out, but as my skill had just upgraded, I am not entirely sure exactly how long it kept flying,” Jake explained while eating his food.

Miranda just sat opposite him, nodding and smiling... which was quite frankly starting to get a bit boring. Jake felt like she became more and more distant over the last few weeks, and he felt like everything he said was instantly accepted without challenge.

She didn't even make any snippy comments when he began ranting...

They just sat there in silence for a bit. Miranda had already gone over the weekly updates professionally as always. She had barely eaten any of the quite frankly delicious food, and the atmosphere in the lodge was beginning to turn awkward.

It wasn't the first time either. Jake felt like their relationship was walking backward, and just when he was beginning to feel more familiar with her, she began pulling back. He had never been the best at social interactions, but he rarely had issues around friends... and he did consider Miranda a friend. *We are friends, aren't we?*

Jake put down cutlery and just looked at the woman across from him. She met his gaze for only a moment before looking away.

"Sir, is there anything you ne-"

"Why are you back to calling me 'Sir'? It's weird," Jake said, cutting Miranda off.

"I apologize, I didn't mean to-"

"Seriously, what happened?" he once more cut her off.

“I’m not sure I-“

“If you keep reminding me of the first time I went out for drinks with Jacob and his boss, then you should just begin sending over written reports. This is just too damn awkward. It may just be me, but I thought we had moved past this overly-professional phase.” Jake said, cutting to the chase.

Miranda just stared back at him, as she looked almost... scared. *What is she afraid of?*

What had he done to make her like this? It had all changed after she had evolved her class and gained the blessing.... Was it something to do with that?

“I wouldn’t dare to presume such things...” Miranda said, Jake not interrupting her this time. “If you wish to receive written reports instead of these meetings, I would be more than happy to provide them.”

“I don’t want written reports, geez.” Jake shook his head, asking the question he had just wondered about. “Is this in any way related to that blessing and all the god-business?”

She looked at him like she had just been caught doing something wrong. It reminded him of the time he admonished her when she stared at him for *hours* back during one of their first meetings. It made him feel like their relationship really had deteriorated to that level... one where he was just a powerful unknown element.

Jake just looked down, her body language more than enough to communicate that he was right. She usually could control every signal she gave off to perfection, making it impossible to distinguish her emotions outwardly.

Back during the negotiations with Phillip, she had a perfect poker face that he couldn't see through even with his sphere and instincts. But now, she was apparently so nervous she couldn't even keep that up anymore, showing that she really felt out of her depth.

Jake sighed as he began speaking.

"Gods are... different. They are old and powerful, and a fraction of one's knowledge is more than any mortal could learn in a lifetime. To see them as creatures on an entirely different level than us isn't wrong... but not wholly right either.

"All of them were once mortal as far as I know. Some that are now gods were even weaker than us as humans when they began their journey to power. They aren't that much different from you and me... at least I don't think so. I told you this once before... a god is just a really old and powerful person. Nothing more, nothing less," Jake said, voicing his genuine feelings.

Something that finally got a response out of Miranda.

"I... I have met gods... the Ladies of the Verdant Lagoon... they aren't like us. Saying they are is like believing a single ember is no different from the sun... no, even more than that. We live at the mercy of the gods; how could we not treat them with respect and-"

“Respect is one thing; submission is another. Every god is respectable in their own way. They did something hard, and that is damn respectable. But it doesn’t mean this relationship is static. If I had met Mystie right after returning from the tutorial, I would have lost to her in a fight. Now, I am stronger. The gods are no different. Sure, right now they are stronger, but when I become a god too, who says that won’t change?” Jake cut in, once more voicing his genuine thoughts on the matter. To him... godhood was truly just another challenge.

This seemed to get a proper reaction out of Miranda.

“During these past weeks, I have spent a lot of time within the realm of the Ladies. I have met creatures far more powerful than anything I could even imagine... yet not a single one of them dared show any real confidence in achieving godhood. It isn’t something you just do. Those that can become gods are fundamentally different from you and I. How can you just act like becoming a god is a given? I thought you would know about how difficult it is,” Miranda argued, actually making Jake a bit happy as she finally stopped acting so weird and was more back to her usual self.

“Well, what’s the alternative? Death? Nah, I’ll rather just become a god. If I fail, I die anyway, and if I succeed, I don’t die. Pretty simple. Isn’t achieving godhood just the natural path of progression? I have my own goals, and to achieve those, I need to become a god,” Jake explained, as he smiled confidently.

“What is your goal?” Miranda asked, for the first time showing genuine interest and not fear or exasperation.

“I wanna be the very best, like no one ever was,” Jake said in a singing tone as he smiled goofily. It wasn't the first time he had made that reference, and he did have to go into an

hour-long rant about old theme songs once when Miranda didn't recognize it the first time.

Miranda failed at holding back a giggle as Jake completely broke the tense atmosphere with his silly reference. Her mask had fallen for a bit, but she quickly tried to wipe away her smile and try to be serious again, but Jake butted in before she ruined the mood.

“I may be the city owner and technically your boss, but I consider you a friend first and foremost. Stop caring about who-knows-what god and about what others think. I don’t care about it, so neither should you; you are just making this awkward,” Jake smiled as he shook his head. “So stop calling me “Sir” or whatever else weird title. Just call me Jake like before.”

Miranda looked a bit troubled as she seemed to reconsider if that was really okay. “I’ll try... Jake.”

“See, it isn’t that hard,” he joked back as he returned to a matter that had been a big clue-in to what she had been dealing with internally.

“You can also make some kind of temple if you feel it would be a good idea. Just make it shared if that makes sense. Make it so each god can have their own statue or pedestal or whatever, and then people can just make whatever they want if they have a god that has blessed them or something like that.”

“Would your Patron be okay with that?” Miranda asked with a bit of concern.

“I don’t have a Patron, but Villy shouldn’t care either way,” Jake dismissively said.

“Villy?” she asked, a bit confused. She didn’t know anyone with that name in the city or why they would have any say in godly matters.

“Yeah, the Malefic Viper as he likes to call himself. A bit edgy, but it totally fits his style with his black scales and general tendency to cause death and destruction wherever he goes,” Jake joked. It was a joke that didn’t land very well as Miranda looked very uncomfortable like she considered if her even *thinking* it was funny was allowed.

Okay, baby steps...

At least the night ended with Miranda going back and the atmosphere between them a lot better than it had been when she arrived. They also finished with her saying that his next delivery would come the next morning.

It was a delivery of new weapons created to be sacrificed to his Touch of the Malefic Viper training. Upgrading that skill was the final item on his bucket list before reaching D-grade... and once that was upgraded, and he got 99 in his profession, it was evolution time.

Chapter 193: A Cursed Touch

Four more levels in his profession remained until he would finally be capped in both that and his class. Those four levels could be relatively swiftly gained by just grinding out poisons, but he still needed to improve Touch of the Malefic Viper before that.

It was the thing that had filled his head before this entire arcane-affinity thing came out of nowhere. He had even sat days in meditation to delve into the Sagacity skill to study transmutation and how to do that properly.

This allowed him to realize that many parts of Touch of the Malefic Viper were comparable to traditional transmutation, and he became more and more confident in his theory of using Touch to transmute weapons working.

He was determined that *this* time he wouldn't get distracted.

After Jake had returned from the cloud island and had his meeting with Miranda, he had meditated and done a bit of mana practice before his weapons delivery arrived in the morning. He went straight into it with great gusto and began breaking the smiths' hard work by infusing corruption into them.

The delivery was a cart-full of more than a hundred inferior-rarity steel shortswords with a variety of enchantments on them - all of them the most straightforward kind, such as making the blade sharper or harder or able to conduct mana more easily. All in all, they were kind of bad, but that at least helped Jake not feel that terrible about breaking them all as he began experimenting.

Instantly he felt how it had become easier than before. His discovering and subsequent practice with arcane mana had helped him immensely in learning to better control his energy, especially in the stability department.

This didn't mean that he instantly succeeded, however. All it meant was that the items could last slightly longer than before without breaking apart. They were also not so brittle that just swinging them through the air could make them shatter either.

If before today he was taking baby steps, he was now taking above-average, adult-male steps. Jake looked over his newest creation, one quite a lot better than what he was used to creating prior.

[Unstable Fungicide Steel Shortsword (Common)] – A blade made of steel that has been soaked in mana and crafted by a still-growing smith, infused with a powerful fungicide. The fungicide has increased the blade's rarity and power but made it unstable and fragile. Will break apart within 3 hours and 43 minutes. Enchantments: Fungicide Strike

Requirements: lvl 55+ in any humanoid race

Compared to before, it would now last quite a bit longer, and it was no longer incredibly fragile. It was still damn weak and not suited for combat, but it showed some promise. It was also about this time that Jake began genuinely taking notice of one of the significant issues he kept encountering: Lack of quality.

While the smiths had surely done their best, their creations were lacking. The structural integrity of the weapons was fine; the issue lay in the enchantments. Pretty much all the weapons had either Hardening or Sharpened or something like that affixed to it.

At its core, Jake's Touch of the Malefic Viper was about corrupting something, and what he corrupted was in large part this enchantment. It did so by Jake infusing a part of his own energy into the blade with the properties he wanted, and afterward, this energy consumed and took the place of the original enchantment.

If the original enchant sucked, there simply wasn't enough to corrupt, so it would have to consume of the blade's other qualities instead – such as its durability. The enchant also needed to at least be partly compatible with the corrupting effect Jake infused into it. He found that the Hardening enchantment worked well with nearly every type of transmutation, but not as well as those truly compatible. An enchant making all cuts bleed more infused with Hemotoxin was just a slam-dunk, and in the same vein, he had an enchant that made wounds harder to heal, and that worked damn well with his Necrotic Poison.

Not good enough for the weapons not to still break, but he saw the potential. However, at this point, Jake felt like he had gone as far as he could without making some drastic changes to his approach, so he began attempting something... more.

Before, he just infused the effects of a toxin, but his Touch of the Malefic Viper could do more than just mimic the effects of a toxin; it could mimic the effects of an affinity. And what affinity was more opportune to test out than his new arcane-affinity? Heck, he even had a title that helped easier manipulate it, so it seemed like the obvious choice.

Jake began his next phase of testing that afternoon.

It went as expected when the first blade blew up into countless fragments as he tried to infuse it with Necrotic Poison combined with his arcane-affinity at the same time. He tried it again with a few different blades but ended up with the same result every time. He was glad that he did it outside at least, or his house would look like Swiss cheese by now...

Anyway, he reached the conclusion that the toxin he was trying to infuse into it was simply too strong, so he tried lowering it by using the weakest poison he had, aka his own blood. Well, it wasn't really his weakest poison, but he could make it the weakest as the toxicity was very much dependent on how much mana he used when making his blood toxic.

His blood was an amalgamation of all his own Records and had insane compatibility with all kinds of energies or affinities. This was also why it was such an excellent ingredient while concocting poisons, as it could fit into pretty much everything. It was what he always used when usually just going for maximum corruption or if unsure what poison be best to infuse.

It also had the benefit of his arcane-affinity, easily integrating with it and absorbing it entirely. It only took him a few hours and a handful of swords before he had his first success. And not a "this blade will break apart in a few hours"-success, but an actual creation. It even came with a new notification he had never seen before.

****You have successfully transmuted [Steel Shortsword of Minor Arcane-Conductivity (Inferior)] – A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned****

*****DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 96 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

Jake was a bit surprised at the notification and couldn't help but make a big smile. This was the first time the system recognized anything he had done as an actual transmutation. He felt damn proud of that. The level was also super nice to get, if a bit unexpected. Then again... he knew crafting something for the first time gave extra

experience, so maybe it gave double-extra experience when he made something with an entirely new crafting method for the first time?

He checked his new “creation” and was quite pleased with the result if a bit puzzled at a few things.

[Steel Shortsword of Minor Arcane-Conductivity (Inferior)] – A blade made of steel that has been soaked in mana and crafted by a still-growing smith, infused with potent arcane-mana. The mana has changed the blade’s basic properties, making it able to absorb and release its creator’s arcane-mana far more easily. Enchantments: Arcane-Conductivity

Requirements: lvl 25+ in any humanoid race. Quasi-Soulbound

There were a few things to go over. Before Jake’s transmutation, the sword had an enchant that just enhanced mana-conductivity, one of the simplest enchants Jake knew of. He had managed to change that enchant to now instead better function with his arcane-affinity mana at the cost of it no longer working with regular mana.

This had led to some unexpected results. The first of which was the somewhat confusing requirement of now being Quasi-Soulbound. He wasn’t sure how it differed from the normal Soulbound, but he did kind of understand why it existed.

In the process of transmuting items, he found that it was way easier to do after binding them to him. Without doing that, he couldn’t get a proper feel for the movements of the energy he infused, and as his way of transmuting was pretty much just pumping mana into the item, it was hard for him not to bind it first.

So for his transmutation-method to deepen the bond between him and the item made sense. He also wasn't sure if the lack of rarity-increase was to be expected or not. To him, it was now just a better weapon, but then again, to anyone else, it was unusable trash as they didn't have Jake's arcane-affinity. By nature of it being an arcane-affinity, no one else could have it.

I guess it didn't really increase in rarity or quality based on that... it just became more specialized, Jake thought as he admired the blade. Well, the base weapon was still so bad that he had no use of it, the lvl 25+ requirement telling him that it was indeed a low-level weapon. Besides, the only benefits of channeling arcane-mana through the blade were to make it slightly more robust and maybe a bit sharper.

Shaking his head, Jake kept experimenting. He kept using the combination of mimicking his blood and using his arcane-affinity to create sword after sword. Some of them could better conduct arcane-affinity mana, but he managed to change the enchant quite a lot for some weapons.

One example was a sword where he managed to change a sharpening enchant to allowing the blade to extend nearly half a meter outwards, forming an edge of arcane-affinity mana. Due to the weapon's durability, it could only keep the edge active for a single strike, but it was progress nevertheless.

This kept on for days as Jake went through the entire stack of swords. His collection of arcane weapons became more and more impressive, and his skills increased by the hour. He didn't get any more levels, but he didn't expect to either. He was just building up his momentum and capabilities for the last big push.

The last push would come through a far more difficult transmutation than any before, on a weapon several grades above anything he had touched before - a weapon that he also happened to not give a shit about breaking, so it was perfect for experimenting on.

[Scimitar of Debauchery (Epic)] – A cursed blade made by the wicked, for the wicked. Crafted from steel that has soaked in the blood of the innocent has left a powerful curse of resentment on the blade. A curse that can be further strengthened by adding more souls of innocents. Wield with caution, for the curse does not only affect those it strikes. Enchantments: Curse of Debauchery

Requirements: Humanoid race

Jake was certain that the weapon was durable. Its former wielder had blocked Jake's arrows with it along with his Venomfang, and the blade hadn't taken any damage. He had even taken it out and tried to do some damage to it over the last few weeks and found himself unable to. And that was before he bound it to himself, which would strengthen the scimitar significantly.

He had a bit of worry about binding it to him due to the rather ominous warning and curse, but he believed he could handle it now that he had Pride of the Malefic Viper. Even then, he took extra precautions and had Mystie and Hawkie leave with Sylphie to do some early flight training and give Miranda a message on their way out about not visiting in the short term. This left the valley empty for him to experiment and be cursed as much as he wanted to.

Jake placed his hand on it and slowly injected in a bit of mana to bind it. At first, it felt just like binding any other weapon, but soon he felt something else. While he was pouring mana into the blade, the blade used that same connection to send some energy back.

Instantly he felt something invade his mind. It felt like countless cries of anger cursing him at once, and he knew the highly condensed sense of resentment was trying to pull him in and join them in their wrath. But more than rage was another far more prominent emotion: lust.

Yet, just as the emotions began trying to truly influence him, another deadly sin reared its head and crushed them both. His Pride didn't allow the curse to affect him whatsoever, and without hesitation, he squashed all the voices from within the blade and dispelled all other untoward emotions.

The blade died down, but he still felt the power of the curse buried within. Even if it didn't affect him, the blade still desired to be fed. It wanted the blood of those it deemed innocent – whatever that meant. It desired their suffering. It demanded their death to absorb their lives and make a fragment of their Records its own.

Jake studied the weapon for a bit as he considered his approach. It wasn't the first time he had thought about what to do... but it was only now he had truly decided.

The scimitar had a relatively simple design. The blade was very thin for a scimitar, and it only curved a little. It was slightly thicker towards its end, and it looked perfect for slicing. It didn't look like a cursed weapon at first glance whatsoever. It was only because of Donald's skills that it appeared to be blood-red.

Placing his hands on the blade, he closed his eyes and delved his consciousness into it.

Once more, he experienced the curse, and he allowed it to influence him even more than before. He felt the raging emotions but found them... lacking. Compared to the rage he felt from his bloodline when he believed Miranda had betrayed him, this was nothing. A large

part of it was, without a doubt, due to that occasion being his own anger, while this was just a curse trying to drag him into it and influence him.

The lust-part should have been a bit harder to deal with, but Jake found it even easier to handle. Sure, while he did find quite a few women in his surroundings attractive – especially after the tutorial made pretty much everyone into models by standards of the old world. Miranda was nice, and- *okay, fuck off curse*. He wasn't some hormone-filled teenager that couldn't control himself. In fact, he found the influence of the curse in that department utterly pathetic, even if he understood the underlying desire.

Heck, his own teenage years had been way worse, and he had managed to not act like an utter moron back then. *Wait, did the bloodline also influence me back then?* he asked himself for a brief moment before dispelling the thought. Not because he didn't believe it to be true, he just knew it wasn't something he could easily answer, and right now, understanding the blade was more important than his own teenage years.

Delving into the blade, he came to understand what the curse truly desired, and he would corrupt that desire and understanding and bend it to his own interpretation. To an emotion, he understood and indulged in far more than lust and wrath. At first, he had considered greed, but that just led him to consider what it was greedy for, so he decided to take the most simple thing one would want, so he went with that.

It was another of the deadly sins: gluttony. In the end, the curse came down to the blade *wanting* to feed. The souls wanted revenge on those that had slain it by consuming their souls as retaliation, and the curse on the blade itself made it want sacrifices to grow.

Jake began changing the energies in the blade as he infused it with Touch of the Malefic Viper. It was far more energy than ever before, and yet the sword just kept consuming it. He would allow the scimitar both to fulfill its lust and desire for revenge, but he would change it. Like with his arcane-affinity, he would simplify it down to its simplest element and amplify it. Make it pure and straightforward, removing all complications. He would

corrupt their desire down to their most primal need. Because in the end... the blade just hungered.

****You have successfully transmuted [Scimitar of Cursed Hunger (Epic)] – A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned****

****'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 97 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

It had been far easier than Jake believed... but he also felt like he *understood* the weapon far more than he found comfortable. Ultimately, he had just imposed his own will upon the blade and made it what he wanted it to be, crushing any opposition in the way – including all the souls. He Identified the scimitar as he couldn't hold back a small smile.

[Scimitar of Cursed Hunger (Epic)] – A cursed blade made by the wicked, corrupted by the Viper's Chosen. Crafted from steel that has soaked in the blood of the innocent had left a powerful curse of resentment on the blade. The curse has been corrupted, and the souls destroyed, leaving only their hunger behind. The blade craves blood and will feed on any vitality-based lifeform to nurture both itself and its wielder. The Scimitar of Cursed Hunger will wane in power if not fed regularly. Enchantments: Cursed Hunger

Requirements: Humanoid Race. Quasi-Soulbound

It was still quite ominous, but it was far more muted when he felt the curse within. For now, it was sated and didn't need any feeding, and yet he felt like it always wanted more. Jake had essentially just created a sword that could drain the health of anyone he cut with it... and he was totally fine with that.

What made it even more pleasing was that besides getting a new weapon, he also got another few notifications.

[Touch of the Malefic Viper (Epic)] – – With a single touch, the Malefic Viper has slain countless foes. Attempt to inject poison into a being through physical contact. The nature of the poison is determined by the user. The alchemist can only use toxic effects he has concocted or created prior. Can be used with all compatible types of mana affinities, further altering the effects. Some toxins cannot be used. Adds a small increase to the effectiveness of Touch of the Malefic Viper based on Intelligence and Wisdom.

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[Touch of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – – With a single touch, the Malefic Viper has slain countless foes. Attempt to inject poison into a being through physical contact. The nature of the poison is determined by the user. The alchemist can only use toxic effects he has concocted or created prior. Can be used with all compatible types of mana affinities, further altering the effects. This effect is especially effective using your arcane-affinity. Vastly increases the potency of transmutations made using Touch of the Malefic Viper at the cost of partly binding them to your soul. Some effects cannot be replicated. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Touch of the Malefic Viper based on Intelligence and Wisdom. Passively provides 1 Intelligence per level in Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your touch be the catalyst of corruption as you bend the world to your will.

****'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 98 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

Jake read it over as his smile only grew, still enjoying both the feeling of the stats increasing and the fact that he was nearly done... all his preparations were over. Now, there were only two things left to do... only one more level in his profession and then...

...then he would get that D-grade.

Chapter 194: Grades & Impatience

Jake sat on his porch, staring out over the pond as he pondered – pond-pun intended.

It felt like forever ago that he theorized that the nine stat-giving skills with “Of the Malefic Viper” in their names were actually part of a larger set, and so far, he felt like he had only been proven right time and time again. They just had way too much synergy not to be.

So when he got the ninth one to Ancient-rarity, he had expected *something* to happen. He knew skills could fuse from all the way back when Sense Herb and Sense Toxin merged into Sense of the Malefic Viper, so maybe the skills would finally merge upon them all upgrading?

Yet, no such thing had happened. Jake almost couldn’t hold himself back from asking the Viper if his skills were bugged or if he were just a moron for assuming they would merge.

Well... it wasn't like he lost anything by them not merging, and while he didn't ask the Viper about the skills, he did ask one question anyway. One that had been bothering him for a while.

"Hey Villy... should I evolve right when I can, or is there any reason to wait? Would it be better for me to work on upgrading some more skills first or maybe really diving into this whole arcane-affinity thing before doing so?" Jake asked.

All his evolutions before this he had just taken as soon as he could. He had often wondered if doing so had ultimately led to him being worse off throughout the months, especially when it came to his class. He knew that while the class wasn't 'bad,' it wasn't extraordinary either.

Jake had delved into the books to look for knowledge and hadn't found much. That is when he remembered another piece of literature he had quite frankly completely forgotten about... the small notebook Jacob had given him on the first day of returning to Earth.

He had only skimmed the first few pages and seen they were related to Pylon's and making a city and stuff, so he had Miranda read it over at one of their meetings. She had found it quite helpful but had also mentioned that the general info about classes and professions in it was enlightening. It was that little comment that made Jake flip through it... and he was pretty sure the Augur had given out some information he wasn't really supposed to.

First of all, he had written about his own class, without a care in the world. Well, it made a bit more sense when Jake read on, as he came to understand that knowledge about the Augur classes were pretty well-known, as it was a famous "archetype."

Jake's eyes bulged quite a bit when he read the stats given by the class... 32 total was just insane. His own Ambitious Hunter only gave 18 per level in comparison. Well, he did have a cheat of a profession making up for it a bit... but still.

However, as he read on, Jake began to feel quite a lot better about not being an Augur himself.

Professions and classes all came with tied-in ways of leveling them. Jake's class was all about being a hunter that liked killing stuff above his own level, so the class was made for that. He also came to realize that there likely were some hidden experience bonuses besides his Mark of the Ambitious Hunter tied to killing stronger enemies due to the class, as well as a penalty if he killed weaker foes.

In the same vein, the Augur of Hope had many rules tied into it also. For Jacob to level, he had to realize fates, stay true to his own beliefs, guide others towards paths to power, and do religious stuff... aka all things Jake would absolutely abhor doing.

And on the side of penalties, it was way fucking worse. Jacob couldn't fight at all. Not because of his class not offering any means of combat – it was a rule tied to his class. He was unable to fight back even if attacked, and if he took the lives of sapient creatures, he would be penalized, possibly even lose his class outright.

That was the reason it gave so many stats. It was to make up for the massive downsides it had. To Jake's knowledge, he didn't have any downsides to his class besides maybe that experience-penalty when killing lower-leveled foes, but that one didn't matter to him anyway.

Jake came to learn that the maximum amount of stats a class could give at E-grade was 34, while the maximum for a profession was 27. But both of those were for the ones that came with severe restrictions in place.

The Hermit Alchemist profession that Jake had seen was an example of a restrictive profession. It gave more stats than usual, but with other massive downsides.

If one wanted one without severe downsides, the limit for E-grade classes was 28, while for professions, it was 22. So, Jake had won out big time in the profession-department, getting one that nearly couldn't be better for one that isn't restricted, while his class still had a bit to go.

Of course, if you factor in the "of the Malefic Viper" skills... Jake was more than good when it came to stats.

At D-grade, all of those numbers were pretty much tripled. Max for a class would be 100, and max for a profession would be 80. Of course, they were realistically slightly lower due to the ones rewarding that much would be restricted. Jacob had even written that his Augur of Hope would give him 96 stats per level in D-grade. If Jake could get a class with more than 70 or maybe even 75 stats per level, he would be more than happy. He didn't know if he could, because quite frankly, he had no idea how good he was for an E-grade. He figured he was decent... but he didn't really have any proper comparisons.

As for the deferred stats, if one evolved a class or profession before reaching D-grade... well, you would just only get a third of the stats gained, with the rest coming in bulk after evolving. Pretty simple, actually.

Jake was thrown out of his thoughts when he felt the Malefic Viper's presence touch upon his mind as a voice echoed out in his head, answering his question about if he should evolve right away or not.

"Waiting with undergoing an evolution is a hard decision for some, but in your case, I wouldn't say it is. There is no reason to delay it even a day. While getting a lot of upgraded skills or improving yourself in other ways matters, so does momentum. Think about it like this; can you achieve as much overall growth in the next three months as you have in the last three? If not, go right ahead and evolve."

"Many spend decades if not over a century in E-grade to try and get better evolutions or simply because they were slow. If it took you seventy years to level from 24-99, it doesn't really hurt much to wait another thirty years to upgrade a handful of skills and further improve your craft. Possibly finishing off with creating your greatest creation yet before evolving. In your case, however, prolonging your evolution will only lead to you diluting your own achievements or losing momentum," the Viper said through his divine message-thing, before adding in the end in a smug faux-mocking voice.

"You have done adequately for a mere E-grade mortal, nothing compared to my magnificent achievements back then, but I guess it is acceptable for my Chosen. So get off your ass, make some poisons and get that final level."

Jake chuckled a bit as he answered. "Well, I would never dare to presume I could ever reach the levels of thee, oh my revered Patron. Thanks as always, Villy. Take care and say hi to those three witches for me... and if you could tell them to go a bit easier on Miranda, it would be nice. She seems to have a hard time dealing with all this divinity stuff."

"Jake, feeling at least a basic level of reverence towards gods is kind of the norm... just because you are weird as fuck doesn't mean everyone around you is too. But sure, I'll tell them to be more chill, but don't expect much to change, at least not in the short term. You can just hope that mortal girl learns to adapt a bit."

“But I am super reverent; what are you talking about!?” Jake joked, shaking his head. “I guess dealing with gods can be hard for some. Anyway, what are you up to these days besides answering my inane questions?”

“Oh, you know, trying to conquer the world and all that fun stuff. Went and got back a few people I had sent off to training a few months ago, and more than half survived, so that was nice. Mortals and their fragility, ya know? Actually, I think you know one of them, remember that Viridia girl? Yeah, she was one of the survivors of the little training-tour. Back on topic: I have been lazing about for far too long, so I am basically just reclaiming some stuff that used to belong to me and expanding the Order. You can come by and check stuff out once your universe begins opening up a bit, so look forward to it! But I can feel that my divine-message juice is running out, so cya around, and nice talking to ya.”

“Yeah, nice talking to you, have fun with your world domination,” Jake said with a smile as he felt the connection between him and the Malefic Viper fade away.

He was beginning to think that these divine-message-sessions actually helped strengthen the connection slightly every time, making it easier for the Viper to send longer and more complicated messages. Jake didn’t know what the implications were if that was true... but did it really matter? He didn’t see the Viper having any untoward intentions towards him because if he did, the Viper literally had all the power.

Jake shook his head as he dispelled all distracting thoughts. It wasn’t like knowing about stats, and the rules of classes and such would actually help him; it was just nice to know. No, the only thing that truly mattered right now was doing some alchemy and getting that level!

So, Jake sat down, took out his cauldron, and began producing some potions. He didn't make poisons as he had a feeling he would need to craft again shortly after evolving anyway, as chances are he could make more potent poisons and potions then. Better to just make some potions now that he could either sell or give away for others to use.

His impatience made him make a few more mistakes than usual, resulting in it taking nearly three days before he finally got it.

****'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 99 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 99 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

Jake did an internal mini-cheer as he got the two notifications. A feeling of happiness that was only amplified further by the next message.

Quest: The Perfect Evolution completed

Reward given upon evolving to D-grade

He sat there waiting for the next system message for a few minutes before realizing it wasn't coming. Some-fucking-how, Jake had forgotten that he would actually still need another level in his race even after reaching level 99 in both his class and profession.

Jake could do this by doing alchemy for a few more days... or he could do as he actually did, as he opened his wings and soared upwards towards the cloud island. Mystie, Sylphie, and Hawkie all threw him a glance as he flew off, but only the small baby-bird made a small screech, wondering where he was going, as she tried to fly up and follow him. It didn't go that well, as she fell down, much to the amusement of her parents.

On the island, Jake went on a damn rampage, slaughtering Cloud Elementals and birds in droves. This is when he, to his delight, spotted a giant bird hanging around the massive lightning tree in the middle of the island.

[Thunder Roc – lvl ???]

The result of their epic fight was obvious from the beginning.

Jake summoned an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, as he focused his mind on ending the battle as fast as possible. Once summoned, he soaked it in his poison before nocking it as he charged his newly upgraded Arcane Powershot.

He looked at the poor Roc as he channeled his attack. Power swirled around him in a vortex of energy that began slowly tearing away at the small cloud island he stood on. Arcane Powershot was a lot more powerful than his old Infused Powershot and even had extra scaling with intelligence – a stat he had just gotten a big bump in from upgrading Touch of the Malefic Viper.

The power built up both inside his body and the weapon, and his skin began sizzling a little as he took a bit of damage. Purple-pink veins appeared on both his arms and his shoulders as he poured more energy into the skill than ever before.

He planned on ending it in one shot... to see if that was even possible. It wasn't something he had planned on doing, but what harm could there be in adding one-shotting a D-grade to his list of achievements?

Jake released the string as the arrow exploded out with power. The Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter flew straight for the unaware Thunder Roc that only noticed the incoming attack when it was too late. It tried to avoid getting hit in a vital area at the final moment but found itself frozen as it felt the gaze of an Apex Hunter land upon it.

The arrow hit it right in its head as it tore into the Roc's skull before exploding – leaving nothing above its neck. It kept struggling for a while as its natural vitality kept it alive, but the poison on the arrow made healing its wound impossible even if it somehow had the vitality to facilitate that.

A minute later and the Roc that was now lying on the cloud island below stopped struggling as it expired.

****You have slain [Thunder Roc – lvl 101] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

Followed by the far more important message:

Race Evolution Requirements Met

With great ambition and drive, you have ventured through E-grade, never swaying on your path or questioning your own resolve. You have been diverse and delved into many different areas as your endless hunger to improve and explore led you both wide and deep – from embracing legacies to forging your own magics. An important decision lies before you.

Begin Evolution now?

Y/N

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

Fucking finally, he thought as he made a huge smile. He rushed over to get the Beastorb but couldn't find it for some reason. He ended up getting impatient as he just rushed back to his lodge faster than he had ever flown before, and upon landing, he only threw a single glance at Mystie and Hawkie, who both gave him an approving and knowing glance. They understood he was about to evolve... even Sylphie seemed able to detect it.

Jake entered his lodge and sat down on the bed – the same one he had evolved to both F and E-grade on before – and accepted the notification as his vision turned black.

Chapter 195: D-grade

Jake opened his eyes within a vast void of nothingness, the only thing visible being distant star-like objects. It was his third time there, and it was as beautiful and wonderous as ever. He was entirely naked, except for his mask that was still on his face for some reason.

The first time he went there had been the most wonderous as it marked the day he became able to passively sense mana, while his E-grade evolution had been a bit less exciting.

Like all the other times, the intensity of the mana around him was extreme, but after progressing through E-grade, he could now feel it much better. He felt the affinities in the mana around him, and he was taken aback... because he felt so... so many.

He noticed the space-affinity that reminded him of the mana Neil used and even the concept of his own One Step Mile. Dark-affinity, water-affinity, earth-affinity, and a slew of energies he didn't understand at all... he felt all of them. But out of them all, the affinity he felt next was by far the most surprising.

The arcane-affinity. Or more, accurately, Jake's own arcane-affinity. *How is there arcane-mana here? Does that mean...*

Jake closed his eyes as he focused on his sphere to take it all in. *Even energy reminding me of what the Malefic Viper released is here...* Jake thought as he awoke from his stupor.

Was this place... an amalgamation of all the energy he had ever used, absorbed, or encountered? Was he inside his soul, and were these all the concepts he had ever used and affinities he had explored?

As his head was filled with these thoughts... the system finally made its presence known. It was time for the evolution to begin... but instead of just being shown what he would evolve to like all the other times, this one was different.

Congratulations! You have unlocked the possibility to diverge your race and evolve into a different species. As a rarity among humans and monsters both, you must now make an important choice. Be warned not to lose yourself.

Jake was surprised for the umpteenth time today, as he quickly saw that two options were available for evolution and the first one was exactly what he had expected.

Human (D) – A human that has stepped into the mid-grades of the system. The human race is known as the most balanced and numerous race of the multiverse, being able to walk many different roads on their path to power. Stat bonuses per level: +6 to all stats, +15 Free Points per level

He looked it over and nodded internally. It wasn't like the human evolutions were a secret, and he knew the stat-gain for every level would just triple when one evolved to D-grade, going from 23 stats per level to 69. A very *nice* number.

But that wasn't the option worth noting.

Malefic Dragonkin (D) – Once a human, you embraced the Malefic Viper’s Legacy to become a race closer to your Patron. Still maintaining a primarily human form, you have replaced your soft skin with scales and have gained several other draconic properties, including wings and claws. This race is incredibly rare and only earned by those who have truly begun walking the Path of the Malefic Viper. By maintaining many of your humanoid traits, you can retain either a class or a profession. Stat bonuses per level: +20 Wis, +20 Will, + 20 Vit, + 15 Tough, +15 Int, + 10 Agi, +10 Str, +10 Per, +10 End, +20 Free Points per level

Warning: Some skills related to the lost profession or class may be lost or changed. Stat-bonuses from classes will be reduced by 10% if chosen over a profession, while a profession will provide +10% more stats per level. All current race skills will be lost.

As the initial message said, evolving into a new species was incredibly rare and difficult. It was a fundamental, qualitative change that would severely alter your path in the future. And the Malefic Dragonkin evolution was sure as hell a drastic change.

Jake had to read it over a few times before something clicked in his mind... *this has to be the result of maxing out the nine stat-giving skills.* Many of them added physiological traits such as scales or wings or making his canines toxic.

But... he also knew it had a *lot* to do with the drop of blood he had seized from the Malefic Viper himself because the description sure as hell reminded him of that bootleg half-dragon version of himself he had seen within that weird soul-realm during the Trial of Myriad Poisons.

While he already knew what ‘choice’ he would make, he evaluated the options anyway. The Malefic Dragonkin race gave 150 stats per level, with the human one giving 69 – a difference of 81 stats per level. However... becoming a dragonkin would also mean giving up one of the significant advantages of being human: having both a class and profession.

If one just looked at stats, then Jake would need to get a class providing 81 stats per level after the penalty, which was... a lot. If he got a class within the same realm as his Ambitious Hunter, it would only give 54 stats per level.

All of that is to say the Malefic Dragonkin was clearly a top-tier race. One Jake had absolutely no interest in ever picking.

He was human, and he saw no reason at all to throw that away. Jake also felt an almost palpable disgust from his bloodline at the mere thought of becoming a dragonkin. No, to Jake, the human race was the optimal choice. His entire bloodline and being was grounded in being a human, and changing his path by suddenly trying to become something entirely different wasn't on his to-do list.

Also... he really didn't want to pick between alchemy and archery. He liked both.

Jake didn't need to think anymore as he began his evolution.

All around him, the countless energies began swirling as they poured into him. He felt his body fill with strength, but he also felt himself... change. His entire body was being broken down and rebuilt from the inside, yet he didn't experience any pain or discomfort. The only annoyance was his inability to move during the process.

Instinctively, he knew that he was undergoing a qualitative change. He felt some of his organs begin to disappear, perhaps no longer deemed necessary by the system, but he also felt that those that remained mattered less than before.

Even in E-grade, losing a vital organ didn't result in instant death; it just meant that you needed a shitload of vitality to regenerate it. From now on, even these vital organs would take fewer health points to restore and be overall less critical.

Even while choosing to stay human, I feel like I move further and further away from being so... Jake thought as he felt both his liver and spleen were now gone. He knew from an objective standpoint that all these changes would only lead to him becoming stronger and more capable at fighting, but it still rubbed a small part of him the wrong way.

Outwardly, his changes were minimal. He grew only a few centimeters while the features on his face were ironed out a bit, moving him from the slightly-above-average-but-still-very-normal-looking he was after his E-grade evolution to now being firmly in the deemed-handsome-by-most-category.

Jake himself didn't really desire any significant changes to be made to his body. However, subconsciously he still had an idea like every other human about how they could look slightly better. It was natural non-magical evolution to desire to be viewed as more outwardly appealing, especially as a primarily social species, even if he was a rather anti-social member of that species.

He decided to take one final look at his status page as he waited for his body to stop changing.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (E) – lvl 99]

Class: [Ambitious Hunter – lvl 99]

Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 99]

Health Points (HP): 13860/13860

Mana Points (MP): 16475/16475

Stamina: 10150/10150

Stats

Strength: 876

Agility: 1194

Endurance: 1015

Vitality: 1386

Toughness: 882

Wisdom: 1318

Intelligence: 815

Perception: 2637

Willpower: 982

Free points: 0

Titles: [Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch], [Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer V], [Dungeon Pioneer V], [Legendary Prodigy],[Prodigious

Slayer of the Mighty], [Kingslayer], [Nobility: Earl], [Progenitor of the 93rd Universe], [Prodigious Arcanist]

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)], [Mark of the Ambitious Hunter (Rare)], [Archery of Vast Horizons (Rare)] [Descending Dark Fang (Rare)], [Limit Break (Rare)], [Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Epic)], [Arcane Powershot (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)], [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)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Touch 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 felt a weird sense of pride as he read it all over. The progress he had made since he last found himself inside this void all the way back in the challenge dungeon, shortly after meeting Villy for the first time. He had come a long way... and now his third evolution was approaching its completion, and he would step into D-grade, formally entering what was referred to as the “mid-tier” grades.

The infusion and changes to his body soon came to an end, and that was the exact moment a part of him stirred. He felt a heartbeat as the surrounding energy appeared to have a second wind as it began pouring into him again, right towards that weird metaphysical area around his heart where he knew his bloodline and the drop of blood from the Malefic Viper resided. To his surprise, a slight sliver of energy also entered his mask, but he didn't really think further on it as he got a notification.

****Bloodline Ability Evolved****

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

****Bloodline Ability Upgraded*: [Bloodline of the Primal Hunter (Bloodline Ability - Unique)] – Dormant power lies in the very essence of your being. A unique, innate ability awakened in the bloodline of Jake Thayne. Grants the Sphere of Perception. Grants an improved sense of danger. Enhances all instincts and intuition. +20% to Perception.***

This was the third time it had upgraded, and like all the other times, he didn't really take notice of any changes besides the increase to his perception, going from +15% to +20%. He did feel like his sphere expanded a bit, but he couldn't really tell, floating in a mana-filled void and all. Space was a bit distorted, throwing him off.

With his bloodline upgraded, he also saw the level-up had finally come.

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 100 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

Along with that came a title... a title Jake felt before he read. He felt warmth overflow as he experienced what could only be described as a massive influx of power. What he had felt after killing the King of the Forest was nothing compared to this... and this was the moment it truly became clear to him how large the gap between E and D-grade was. Because, unlike other evolutions, this one came with what he had theorized monsters and beasts had a long time ago – a one-time large stat-increase – the stats shown and hence earned in the form of a title.

Title earned: [The Perfect Evolution (D)]

[The Perfect Evolution (D)] – You have undergone a perfect evolution to become a D-grade human. +220 all stats.

A title so simple yet so damn powerful it was ridiculous. Jake felt – and was – stronger than ever before. He couldn't help re-check the quest to see what he would have ended up with if he hadn't completed the Perfect Evolution quest.

[Evolution (D)] – You have undergone evolution to become a D-grade human. +200 all stats.

Jake read it and nodded internally. It wasn't that big a loss if one didn't get the extra 20 to all stats, but it wasn't something he had wanted to miss out on either, especially when he saw that these stats were indeed affected by his percentage amplifiers.

He couldn't help but look at his stats page and compare it to before his evolution.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (D) – lvl 100]

Class: [Ambitious Hunter – lvl 99]

Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 99]

Health Points (HP): 13860/17590

Mana Points (MP): 20850/20850

Stamina: 13430/13430

Stats

Strength: 1204

Agility: 1521

Endurance: 1343

Vitality: 1759

Toughness: 1210

Wisdom: 1668

Intelligence: 1143

Perception: 3092

Willpower: 1332

Free points: 15

Needless to say, all the stats had experienced a massive increase. Significantly, Jake's perception and vitality had grown a lot as he had 65% amplification on those, followed by willpower and wisdom, which both had a 55% increase. The rest of his stats were still gaining 45% extra, meaning that ultimately he earned more than 50% more total stats from the evolution than someone without any stat amplifiers. It felt unfair on many levels... but Jake knew other powerhouses also had many titles and stat-amplifiers. They had to.

After Jake was done admiring his awesome stats, he went on to the last notification – a new skill. Humans really didn't get any race skills, but the few they got tended to be very useful... but he was a bit unsure about this one.

***Race Skill gained*: [Legacy of Man (Unique)] – The human race has been around since the very first Era, and has stood on the pinnacle from the beginning. This is not simply due to extraordinary individuals in your midst, but your ability to stand on the shoulders of your ancestors and pass down Records. While each human's lifespan may be short, your race's collective knowledge is perennial, and through generations, humanity will prevail. Allows you to far more effectively pass down Records and makes anyone you teach far more likely to unlock new paths.**

Jake didn't have much interest in teaching others. Not at all. But from an objective standpoint, he could see how useful the skill was. It also made sense only to gain it at D-grade as chances are the person wouldn't have anything worth passing on before then.

He had considered maybe teaching someone a bit of alchemy to make potion-production a thing, but also to have others know about herbs to help him gather materials. So perhaps the skill could be helpful for that. Besides that, the only exciting thing about it was the unique rarity. Well, it was a bit weird to call it unique when every single D-grade human had it, especially considering that humans were the most numerous race of the multiverse... but he guessed it was because the skill was unique to the human race.

The next few minutes were spent with Jake just considering things to do in the future and contemplating if he should level and evolve his class or profession first. He saw that after he evolved, he had lost the option to instantly begin evolving his class at any moment, meaning he most likely had to go kill a few things to get a bit more experience. Or maybe he would get the option back once he was out of this weird space? So many things to think about while impatiently floating in the void, waiting just to be transported back to the real world.

Finally, he felt that he was about to return as his intuition made him aware of the subtle shift of the energy around him. His vision turned black for a fraction of a second before he found himself back in the lodge and-

"ARGH!" Jake knelt down on the floor as soon as he appeared, grasping his head as information flooded into him. Not from the system or any skill, but from the overwhelming stimuli from something he thought he had gotten used to – his Sphere of Perception.

Chapter 196: Expanding in Scope

Jake's bloodline had been with him from the very first day of the system; heck, it had since his birth. It had saved his life more times than he could remember and been the catalyst that made his rise to power possible. But one had to remember that while a bloodline could most certainly be helpful, it wasn't always.

It wasn't a skill, and it wasn't regulated and controlled by the omnipotent system to make sure it wouldn't cause unnecessary harm to the user. Even the skills that could do so carried warnings such as Jake's own Limit Break.

So when Jake appeared back in his lodge, nothing was stopping his Sphere of Perception from feeding him everything within its influence – nothing but Jake and the other aspects of his bloodline.

Its range had expanded manifold after his evolution. Before D-grade, it had a radius of around 30 meters, but it was now over 200 meters after his evolution. He saw the entire valley and its surroundings; he saw beneath the earth to a small cave-system running approximately 140 meters below him, and so much more.

All of these stimuli drilled themselves into his mind as he felt sick to his stomach from the sensory overload. It was far too much for him to handle, and his mind simply couldn't filter through it all. In the void where he evolved, his sphere had already expanded, but as it didn't really see anything, he hadn't taken notice of it.

Jake grit his teeth as he tried to comprehend everything and control his sphere. Even when it was only 30 meters, it was a bit much for him at times, and he rarely took notice of everything at once, but now after it had evolved, he had lost control of it.

He knew this was a horrible development, and he was utterly paralyzed as he tried to get his head under control. The first thing he did was enter meditation to cut off all his non-bloodline-related senses. He had long ago figured out how to make his sphere way more “passive” during meditation, and he tried to replicate that once more.

It helped a bit, but the influx of information was just too much. It was like a thousand pictures flashed before Jake’s eyes at every moment in a nauseating fashion. To make it worse, every small swaying blade of grass or rustle of a leaf was picked up double as he had trained himself and his sphere to take extra notice of movement before this evolution – a decision that had now come back to bite him in the ass.

Jake knew the pain he was experiencing wasn’t really in his head but in his soul. If it weren’t, he would have already plunged a dagger into his brain to make it stop and wait for his head to regenerate, but this wasn’t that kind of pain. He did everything he could to try and filter through everything, but it was slow.

There was one saving grace, however. Ever-so-slowly he began adapting as he subconsciously began filtering out the useless information in his head, and he knew that his own instinct of self-preservation kicked in – without a doubt the most prominent and influential part of his bloodline.

Like when he was meditating, he stopped picking up *everything but* only the most important. Smaller movements were filtered out, and ever-so-slowly, his headache lessened, and he became able to get at least a semblance of bearings.

It still took him over an hour before he got up and stood wobbling on the floor. He... he hadn’t expected the effects to be so extreme, even if a part of him had hoped for the

bloodline to improve. Jake stood within his lodge as he closed his eyes and tried to focus a bit on the sphere again, and he felt a lot better about it already.

Perception skills were standard for most combat classes and even the ones that allowed some kind of spherical vision weren't that rare. In fact, Jake was beginning to suspect that the system hadn't offered him any from his class due to his bloodline, but that was a theory of his because he would sure as hell take one just to see how his bloodline would affect it.

Not that he needed a better sphere... because it was honestly just insane. When he closed his eyes, he could see everything around 200 meters in a radius around him. Perhaps a bit longer if he focused on perceiving something in a specific direction.

I guess I'll be pretty hard to sneak up on... even more than before, he internally joked as he rubbed his temple, still feeling the remnants of a killer-headache.

He took a seat in a chair as he relaxed his mind and got a good feel of his body for the first time. He felt overflowing with strength, but he also felt different on a qualitative level. It was like every single stat point mattered slightly more than before after his body had been reforged. He would compare it to having a hidden bonus increasing the effectiveness of all his stats, but by how much he didn't know, all he knew was that after the evolution, he felt nearly twice as strong overall... maybe even more. If Jake had to hypothesize, then those 200 to 220 in all stats from the title was just to set some kind of baseline of stats, even for those with weak classes and professions.

Jake was confident the evolution's effects would be more prominent in someone without his titles and high stats before evolving, but that didn't mean it wasn't a humongous gain for him.

Shaking his head, he returned to inspecting his body a bit more in-depth. His internals were still the same for the most part, with blood pumping through his veins and his heart beating in his chest... but he also got the feeling that a lot of it was for show. Many organs were gone and replaced with muscle or other fleshy things, but that didn't mean everything that remained was vital.

The brain was still essential, he could feel, but the rest were just... there. He felt like he could punch just as hard even if every single muscle in his arm were gone, even if it would expend a lot more stamina and likely even damage him to do so.

It wasn't entirely new, as he had been able to bypass many common physical barriers before. He had moved with broken bones, and even with a large part of his brain missing, he had been able to escape from the Indigo Fungus. At least half of his spine was missing back then, meaning he should have been paralyzed... he just wasn't. It was a weakness of the human body already removed at E-grade. Now, more such physical imperfections had been removed.

Jake was beginning to suspect that by C-grade or maybe B-grade, the body would be entirely for show, and he would be able to regenerate as long as just the smallest part of his body remained – assuming he had the health points, of course. Maybe he could even stay alive without his body as long as his metaphysical soul existed.

Exiting the depths of his own thoughts, he got up and finally did a bit of stretching, making his ever-the-more-useless muscles flex. He opened his hand and closed it a few times, feeling the power in it. If he had met himself of a day ago... it would be a slaughter.

D-grade was truly a divide.

He exited his lodge and instantly saw only Sylphie sitting there looking at him from on top of one of the trees. Sylphie flew down – yes, flew – and landed on his shoulder. Well, it was more gliding, but with a bit of wind magic, it was practically the same thing. He had been afraid the small hawk would be wary of him, but she just seemed happy that he had finally come out.

Jake rubbed the small bird, making her happy before he remembered something quite important. He remembered the weirdness of the mask during the evolution. How it had stayed on him in that weird realm, and how it had even absorbed some energy.

A part of him hoped it had evolved with him or something, but it didn't give him any more stats. It did keep giving 25% mana, which was great, as he knew some of these percentage amplifiers could get weaker after evolving.

After taking off the mask, he used Identify on it and didn't immediately notice anything off... but there was something.

[Mask of the Fallen King (Legendary)] – A mask born from the Records of the one once known as the King of the Forest; a mighty Unique Lifeform that died just as its path began. The mask is made of a wood-like material unique to the lifeform it comes from and does not obstruct vision when worn and regenerates itself from any damage taken. A Fallen King slumbers within. Enchantments: Living Wood. Passively absorbs mana in the atmosphere, increasing mana recovery rate by a large amount. Increases maximum mana by 25%.

Requirements: Soulbound

A Fallen King slumbers within... Jake thought, rechecking it a few times. Five words had been added that held a lot of meaning, and Jake's intuition practically screamed at him that this wasn't something he could just ignore.

Because what they implied wasn't simple: perhaps the King of the Forest wasn't truly dead.

Jake smiled as he looked up into the sky, shaking his head. It was fine... even if the King returned or the Unique Lifeform within the mask tried taking over his mind or something... he would be ready. It wasn't like he was going to be idle as the little King awakened.

He had two other evolutions to get to, after all.

"There is no shame in reaching your limits; we will all encounter that insurmountable wall one day," Jacob said as he placed his hand on the shoulder of the man who sat with tears in his eyes at a large forge.

"I just don't understand... I try my best every day, I use the best materials I can find, but I just get nowhere! What am I doing wrong!" the older-looking man said as he turned red in the face.

Jacob looked at the smith and understood his reluctance. To come to terms with your own shortcomings was difficult. The man had appeared like a promising smith, having worked in the profession before the system, and had quickly leveled up in his tutorial and afterward.

But... after reaching level 60 in his profession, he had begun slowing down, and now he had been stuck at 68 for three weeks. Jacob knew the man had reached the end of his potential, and he needed to do something drastic to break through his barrier... but he hadn't.

He said he had done his best, but the issue was that he needed to do better than his best. His forty years of experience before the system had brought him to his current level, but without developing further, he would be forever stuck where he was.

"Sometimes it isn't a question of what one does right or wrong; things just are as they are. You talk as if your creations have gotten worse, that you are no longer the smith you once were... but you are. Without you, how many people would still lack a roof over their heads? How many families would still feel unsafe without you helping build the wall? You have done so many things for us already. You don't need to push yourself to be better all the time; you are fine just as you are," Jacob said comfortingly, his many skills on full display, affecting the man in ways both he and Jacob weren't fully aware of.

"I... but why can't I go further? What am I lacking?" the smith asked, still hoping to understand.

"You need a catalyst to bring about change, one you can only hope and strive for, but never expect. You will need to risk a part of yourself to achieve more. You will need sacrifice... but is that truly what you want? There are more ways to progress than simple levels, my friend," the Augur spoke, continuing as the man motioned for him to elaborate.

"Instead of looking only at yourself, look towards the collective. You may be unable to gain a level yourself, but are you unable to make others gain strength? You have knowledge and expertise that would be priceless to countless aspiring smiths. This isn't to

say your own craftsmanship isn't needed anymore. Weapons will always be in demand, the city will keep expanding for a long time to come, and it isn't like your commissions have reduced over these last few weeks, have they?"

The smith looked at Jacob, still a bit unsure, before finally nodding.

"Things have been as usual... and I guess I have been hammering away for a while... maybe it's fine to begin looking toward the next generation, those young ones could use someone more experienced to teach em," he said with a bit of defeat in his voice, but also with newfound confidence.

"And I am more than certain they would welcome you with open arms to do so," Jacob said before bowing to the man before turning to the door. "If you ever feel troubled, just come by the church. I am sure either I or another will be able to help you, and once more, thank you for all you have done for Sanctdomo."

"No, thanks to you, Augur," the man said as he returned the bow, looking quite a bit more at peace than when Jacob had first come.

The Augur walked out and was greeted by a few guards who all bowed towards him. They used the word guard, but they were more of a police force than anything else, but thinking about it, weren't guards of old just simplified policing?

As he walked through the cobble-stoned streets and observed the city, he took in the atmosphere and enjoyed the progress they had made over the last few months. After taking down the guarding D-grade, Jacob had claimed the Pylon and gained the Pioneering City Lord of Earth that awarded 16 free points a level. A reward for being one of the first ten to claim a Pylon on their planet.

That small Pylon had served as the fundament of the city they had ended up naming Sanctdomo. A fusion of the words “holy” and “home” in Latin. Jacob served as both the nominal and the spiritual leader of the city, though he did have many assistants in doing both those things.

It wasn't easy leading a city with nearly 20 million citizens, after all.

If Jacob had to take a guess, then Sanctdomo had to be the largest city currently on Earth, and it was still expanding by the day. All those who had been blessed by gods from the Holy Pantheon had led their followers towards this city and brought along any they could on the way. There were even cases of those blessed by other gods giving way or following along, swearing allegiance. It was truly a testament to the size and influence of the Holy Church in the multiverse as a whole.

The massive growth of the city had naturally also resulted in enormous growth to himself. His profession and class worked in tandem quite well, which had resulted in him leveling quite fast... and being the first D-grade human of the city, if not Earth as a whole.

Not that Jacob saw it as any massive accomplishment himself... it was just his fate to grow as he did. He had even gone for the Perfect Evolution as his class and profession reached 99 at nearly the same time, and now his class had already reached 105, only a bit over a month after he evolved.

****'DING!' Class: [Augur of Hope] has reached level 105 - Stat points allocated, +24 free points****

Jacob's class wasn't the type to evolve like others but just stayed the same in name and function till the day his death is fated. There was no Grand Augur of Hope or Saint Augur of Hope or anything like that. An Augur of Hope was simply an Augur of Hope. He wasn't even able to choose another evolution. The day he became an Augur, he cut off all those paths to himself.

Not that he complained. While the class carried many limitations, none of them felt like such to him. Jacob did not want to fight, so his inability to do so was no handicap in his book. The stats were also as insane as before, providing him 24 in vitality, willpower, wisdom, and free points, giving him a total of 96, only 4 below the "absolute limit" he had read about.

As for his race, he had, of course, just become a D-grade human. An evolution to a different race for humans was notoriously tricky, and it wasn't even like it was necessarily better. Just different. But there was one place he did have a choice: with his profession.

And there, he had been offered just another straight upgrade to his profession.

****'DING!' Profession: [Pioneering City Lord of Earth] has reached level 103 - +50 free points****

Jacob did not feel demotivated, however. Due to the overlap of his Augur and City Lord roles, much of the experience he earned was split between them, and it also meant that the Records he relied on to evolve were shared. To gain both a supreme class and profession was difficult unless the two's paths were sufficiently different, such as a warrior with a smithing profession. Or a hunter with an alchemy profession.

Of course, it would take far longer to level both, and the individual would have to be multi-talented.

“Augur,” a woman said as she bowed to him as he walked by, finally throwing him out of his stupor. It was one of the cathedral guards guarding the city’s central building – the Holy Cathedral. She looked at him with fervor in her eyes, but Jacob just nodded in recognition as he walked through the massive gates.

He soon found himself within a large hall around a circular table with over a dozen men and women already sitting. Jacob was the last to arrive, as the smith had delayed him, yet none dared to speak up. He was the leader, after all.

He walked in and quickly took his seat in the high-chair, Bertram already standing beside it.

[Human – lvl 76]

Jacob spoke, getting their attention: “Let the meeting begin.”

Chapter 197: Keep Things Simple

”The new housing complex in the western district is nearing completion, but we have run into a shortage of stone. A few builders are attempting to reinforce regular stone to make it useable, while several alchemists are working on transmuting soil into solid rock,” the manager of the western district said.

"Sadly, the southern district has run into the same issues, and we are working on similar solutions. If the expansion continues like this..." the manager of the southern district said, with a bit of doubt.

"We cannot turn away those who come here seeking refuge, and we must keep expanding. We must hammer while the iron is hot and make sure we have a solid foundation for the future, so we must endure!" one of the three cardinals of the Holy Church said.

Jacob just sat back in his chair as he took it all in while drinking some tea. Sanctdomo was a holy city, but that didn't mean it was entirely run by the Holy Church. They were very-much highest on the hierarchy, but Jacob also believed that more mundane leadership was necessary to make a city work. This is why some of the district managers had turned out to be less religious than many from the Church would prefer, but Jacob didn't care. They were dedicated on their paths to leading the city to greatness, and that was the most important.

He finally opened his mouth, all of them looking to him to solve their dispute: "Towards the mountains in the south, hidden away in between the two southmost mountains lies a vast valley. Elementals and beasts dominate it, but a cavern shall be found, and a natural dungeon discovered once slain. It should only be braved by those above 50 in their race or have at least their class at 70. Within this dungeon, we will find the solution to our struggle."

All the people around the table looked at the Augur as they all nodded eagerly. "Truly?" the manager of the western district said. "In that case, we should send some of our parties there to secure the area... we should also make sure each dungeon group has at least one builder with a storage skill."

"I believe you will all see to it... now let us move on to the main topic at hand: the World Congress will soon commence," Jacob said before continuing. "The Undeads are expanding far to the east of us, with the Court of Shadows even further in that direction. They should not be an issue for now, as long as we keep our guard up. Several other factions have also been building themselves up, and I believe we have made contact with a few of them already."

"Indeed," another of the Cardinals said. "After securing the third Pylon, we have made contact with a collective of smaller factions who have banded together to claim one, and negotiations are going well there. But... towards the south..."

The Cardinal hesitated to speak, so Jacob gladly put his teacup down and took over.

"In all due time. When the World Congress arrives, all things will become far clearer. To all of us. For now, just try not to antagonize the Sword Saint more than necessary," Jacob spoke, with a clear warning in his voice.

The Sword Saint was no easy opponent, and his faction was powerful too. Jacob was unsure if they were related to a larger faction of the multiverse, but he had his doubts for some reason. The Holy Pantheon had not granted him any knowledge about them as they did with most other factions. It was mainly simple information they gave, as rules or perhaps just an agreement of sorts stopped them from sharing more... but he had expected to at least hear *something* based on the size of the faction.

They had claimed at least two, possibly three, Pylons already, and they were truly a force to be reckoned with. Especially their leader was dangerous... it was a man that could face down D-grades alone without evolving, and from the last report, he was close to that evolution.

To make it all the more perplexing... his divinations failed when he tried to peer into the fate of the Sword Saint. That in itself wasn't unnatural; he couldn't peek into the river of the destiny of many powerhouses or faction leaders due to their legacies or blessings... but it was precisely due to these things he couldn't.

The Sword Saint was impossible to divine by his own power. Something that made Jacob very wary of him.

"Any movement from that small settlement to the north?" the northern manager asked, making Jacob zone back into the conversation again. Because he knew what settlement they were speaking of. He decided just to drink some tea and listen in, as he quite honestly was a bit interested in hearing what his old colleague was up to.

"A scouting party returned, and it seems to be expanding a bit these days, but in no way enough to be a threat... at least not by size. It's called Haven and is led by a woman called Miranda Wells, who seems competent, but it is a bit early to tell. However, there are rumors of a city guardian or owner who actually runs it behind the scenes, one who even has several D-grade beasts under his command," a representative of the military said. "There are rumors this Miranda Wells is the mistress of this city owner and is-

"Pfft!" Jacob nearly spewed out his tea, getting the attention of everyone. "No, no, sorry, please continue, I am just getting used to the changes after D-grade, that's all!" he said, a bit flustered as he leaned back in his chair as much as he could, Bertram barely able to hold back a smile at his side.

Jake with a mistress? Would he? Well, it would be good for him, I guess. But... for some reason, I just can't see it happening. Unless she is the aggressive type, that is. Yeah, Jake has no resistance to that at all,

Jacob thought, completely ignoring half the report about Haven. What was said next did bring his head back to the talk, though.

"With their small size, shouldn't we just bring them under our wing? It's the closest Pylon to ours, and I doubt we would meet much resistance considering our more prominent size and relative pow-"

"No, leave them be, and do not antagonize Haven," Jacob said, not leaving anything up to discussion. They all just threw a look his way, nodded, and moved on to another topic. All of them had learned all long ago that arguing with the Augur was a lost cause. It didn't make much sense trying to use logic or reason against someone who could see the future and peer into fate, after all.

Jacob looked on as a large 3-D map of the planet was opened up, though the only one area was actually marked on it – the current landmass they were placed on.

Not even the gods were fully aware of Earth's geography after the system changed it, but the city had begun getting a good idea over the last few months. It helped new citizens came in from far and wide, having thousands with scouting skills and even a few hundred people working full-time with map-making skills on top of that.

What they had learned was that humanity was not spread out all over the planet - as many had believed - but had instead been gathered in relatively close proximity. Sure, the distance had increased significantly, and they were spread out over an area larger than Earth was before... but with the planet now around the size of the Sun before the system, that was still only a tiny area.

There were still thousands upon thousands of kilometers separating each Pylon, but travel had also gotten significantly faster. While moving a large number of people was still hard, a single powerhouse or powerful party could travel far in just a single day. This meant that Sanctdomo had managed to make contact with many larger factions Jacob had become aware of through his divinations already. Some significant forces were still too far away, but he believed they would reach them one day.

The Sword Saint was still too far away to scout out directly. Hence, all their knowledge came from seers with the ability to look over vast distances, divinations, or other skills, allowing them to get a general idea of their movements.

But ultimately, all of this was just the preliminary stages and a way to make connections with other factions for the big events to come

Soon... Jacob thought, Soon the 100th shall be claimed, and the congress will commence.

Heads

He flipped the coin, and it landed on heads. He picked it up, and before he even flipped it, he knew. *Heads again.*

It landed on heads.

Tails.

Tails.

Jake was currently experiencing quite a major crisis. The method that had been used by countless people to flawlessly choose between two equally attractive options was now failing him. He looked down at the small coin with contempt as he picked it up again, but before he even flipped it, he knew.... *Heads...*

And, of course, it was heads.

Thinking back... he hadn't actually tried flipping a coin since the integration, and he was quite happy when he finally got one, as he used to love using them to make decisions. Takeout or cook himself? Flip a coin. Two movies running, and he wanted to see both equally? Flip a coin.

But now his accursed bloodline made that unable to work... because he knew where it would land moments before he flipped it. It made the entire thing pointless as it wasn't random anymore...

As for the decision he was trying to make? Well, it wasn't really anything important, just the question of evolving his class or profession first. Jake could imagine that was a very important decision to most denizens of the multiverse, but it honestly didn't matter to him.

He would get both evolved anyway. Getting good or bad options wasn't really in his control anymore either... sure, he could choose not to evolve both until he was done spending years improving his skills, but who the hell had the patience for that?

He had only evolved a few hours ago and hadn't left his valley during that time, only spending a bit of the time with the birds. He couldn't help but use his sphere to Identify the small hawk sitting in one of the chairs, observing him as he kept flipping the coin.

[Sylphian Eyas – lvl 27]

She had finally broken into "E-grade," even if it hadn't really come with any changes. Jake had a feeling that Sylphie wasn't actually E-grade and hadn't been F-grade either... she was born at D-grade. She hadn't undergone any evolutions at the usual times but had just kept growing naturally.

He was a bit sad about Hawkie and Mystie not being around as he would love to finally be able to Identify them... but that could wait. For now, he had a decision to make, so he asked the only other... person... in the room.

"So, class or profession first?" he asked the hawk that just looked up at him, confused.

Jake understood as he changed the question. "Better fight or better drinks?"

"Ree!"

“Fight it is,” Jake agreed, not entirely sure what Sylphie actually wanted. He just knew that whenever he flipped the coin... he always hoped it would land on the side to upgrade his class. While he genuinely loved doing alchemy, nothing could ever truly compare to fighting a strong foe in a life-and-death battle.

The thing is... he didn't even need to do anything – the option was already there, right in front of him. He had gained plenty of class experience to get the evolution options; he had just suppressed it to evolve his race first. If he wanted to evolve his profession, he would need to do some alchemy first. He couldn't select to evolve it while in that weird evolution space, but the option was back once outside.

Jake was about to accept the prompt to evolve... yet in the final moment, he hesitated. *Have I really done enough?* he asked himself. Couldn't he have upgraded more skills? Maybe he should try and use his arcane-affinity to upgrade his Splitting Arrow and some of his other skills...

His hesitation and his stupid coin-flipping had just been him making excuses to himself.

He did know that the Viper said it would be a waste, but a small part of him was still filled with doubt. He had just rushed into evolution at E-grade and gained the Ambitious Hunter class. Sure, the class had been good enough, but after researching more on different classes and discovering how good they could actually get, he did feel a tinge of regret.

What if he had postponed his evolution back then, entered the inner zone of the tutorial, and hunted down a few beasts above level 50? While it would undoubtedly have been difficult, Jake did believe that he could have done it by dragging out the fight and relying on his poison.

Back then, he at least had the excuse of being under time pressure. He wasn't as pressured now, not even close. So he asked himself again: *Have I really done enough?*

But... would he ever feel like it was enough? There was always more to be done, another skill to upgrade, another magic technique to learn, and a stronger beast to slay. With his logic, he would never get there, so he returned to the logic that had gotten him where he was now, even if it had brought trouble with it too:

"Make things simple... and take the complications as they come," he spoke out loud, as he stopped hesitating and was greeted by the prompt.

****Class Evolution Requirements Met****

Your journey continues as your ambition has taken you far. You have hunted beasts far more powerful than could ever be expected, and you have proven yourself a true hunter. While you have chosen a bow as your weapon, you have also shown immense promise in the realm of magic, not shying away from experimenting and expanding your combat tactics - all of your powers tied together by your instincts and your simple - primal - path.

May you find worthy prey, Primal Hunter.

Begin Evolution now?

Y/N

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

He smiled as he read the small message and agreed as his class evolution officially began.

Chapter 198: D-grade Class Selection

As he accepted the evolution, he was instantly greeted by five options – the maximum. This was, of course, expected as he had done plenty of things to warrant them. He had hunted down powerful foes and even slain the King of the Forest... even if his mask now carried an ominous message.

His confidence was growing, as he did the same as always and began going through the options one by one. The first of which was a direct upgrade to his Ambitious Hunter class.

Avaricious Hunter – A direct upgrade to the Ambitious Hunter class. Your ambition to always face a stronger foe has turned to avarice as you seek stronger and stronger challenges, your desire for danger on your journey only growing. A class focused on ranged combat, mainly using bow and arrow, coupled with light options for melee such as shortswords and daggers. The class is fast and flexible, focusing on agility over strength. You persist on this precarious path, yet your resolve is strong, and your hunger for challenges persists. Just beware that your avarice does not consume you. Stat Bonuses per level: +18 Per, +16 Agi, +12 End, +12 Str, +10 Free Points

After Jake was done reading it – especially the stat gains – he was taken aback. As he had read, stats given for D-grade classes and professions would more-or-less triple, so why did the direct upgrade to Ambitious Hunter give way more than triple stats? It gave him 18 total, while this one gave 68 total... if the math of tripling was true, shouldn't it only give 54?

It wasn't that he thought the class sounded bad; in fact, he thought it was awesome. Sure, the whole thing about being consumed by your own avarice and all that was a bit on the darker side, but it did kind of fit him. Deciding to fight the King was nothing more than avarice, and his impatience to face bigger challenges was bordering – if not already – pretty damn sinful.

This made him think... he knew classes that had drawbacks offered more stats due to their drawbacks but didn't this one also have flaws? He had theorized from reading Jacob's booklet and a bit of independent research that his Ambitious Hunter had likely suffered from an innate experience-penalty from fighting equal or lower-leveled foes. This seemed even more likely to have drawbacks like that.

Well, he called it drawbacks, but ultimately, it wasn't anything that would affect him. Who would want to battle enemies weaker than yourself all the time? What was the point of that even? That just sounded boring as hell, even if it was a lot safer, which made sense as being safe automatically made it boring in his mind.

In conclusion: Great class... but only the first on the list of five, each option being higher "tiered" than the last. So with great expectations, Jake moved on to the second option – one directly rewarding his mana practice.

Prestigious Arcane Mage – A prodigy at magic, you have now begun forging your own path as you delve into the arcane. You are a prestigious figure in any circle of mages – a true caster worthy of respect. The Prestigious Arcane Mage is a class focused on magical combat, more accurately your own arcane mana built around the concepts of power, purity, and raw simplicity. The class is powerful and highly focused on magical combat, offering no physical stats. Your one-sided focus on magic shall be as pure as your arcane mana. May your path stay pure, your foundation stable, and your enemies destroyed as the power of your arcane descends. Stat Bonuses per level: +18 Int, +15 Per +14 Wis, 14+ Will, +12 Free Points **WARNING: Skills pertaining to the Ambitious Hunter class may be lost or changed upon becoming a Prestigious Arcane Mage**

If Avaricious Hunter were purely a physical combat class, this would be a purely magical combat class. Extra emphasis on the pure as that was what his arcane mana was all about. The stats were great and truly emphasized that having an arcane-affinity at E-grade was extraordinary, providing 73 per level total – 5 more than the Avaricious Hunter one.

While Jake would normally spend a lot of time going over pros and cons... Jake knew he wasn't a mage. Okay, maybe a part-time mage, but before a mage, he was a hunter. Heck, it was in his bloodline. Does being an arcane-slinging badass sound cool, and did he enjoy his time summoning bolts and obliterating Cloud Elementals? Sure, but he still liked bows more.

It was also the only one that would result in lost or changed skills. Screw that; Jake liked those skills.

So he moved on to the next one... which was instantly quite a bump from the one below it.

Bestial Alpha Hunter – You stand before the beasts like their kin and show yourself the alpha. You do not need the finesse and techniques developed by the enlightened ones but are more than happy to rely on your instincts. A class focused primarily on

melee combat, you prefer to use basic weaponry such as bows and the occasional dagger, if any weapon at all, relying on your high perception and reaction times to dominate the battle. Yet your desire does not end at simple dominating your peers; you want to stand at the apex. Your power shall grow as you stand before those more powerful than yourself as like a beast you adapt to your environment. Be careful not to lose that which makes you human. Stat Bonuses per level: +15 Per, +13 Str, +13 Agi, +10 End, +10 Vit, +10 Tough, +12 Free Points

Jake had to admit... this one sounded very metal, and if his bloodline had a dedicated class, this would be it without a doubt – short of having one just called The Primal Hunter, of course. The name was also fantastic and most certainly appealed to a more childish part of him. Who doesn't like to be called an Alpha Hunter?

The stats provided were an entire tier ahead of the two prior offered classes, giving an insane 83 stats total per level, putting it firmly in the absolute upper echelon of classes available. This was a top-tier class, no way around it, but it was also a bit - how can one say it - special.

All of the stats were in physical ones. This wasn't surprising, as the classes kind of called Jake stupid in the nicest way possible. It more or less told him that he had thrown away being smart and using proper tactics and weapons, relying nearly solely on his instincts instead, and just because it's true, doesn't mean that it's right.

Upon reading it, the first thing that struck him was how much it would synergize with his bloodline. The last time he picked a skill with "bestial" in it, it had upgraded straight from rare to legendary-rarity. He had a feeling that feat could possibly repeat with quite a few skills offered by this class.

But the class also felt limited. It ignored Jake's more magical talents and didn't make use of his newly gained arcane-affinity at all. Even worse, he was pretty damn sure it was a melee-class, considering it mentioned how he didn't even need to use a weapon. Jake

really, *really* liked his bow, and while he could still use it, he didn't want a class that wasn't significantly linked to using one. It would feel... wrong.

All in all: Awesome class, but Jake wanted something that would make more active use of his bowmanship and magic.

With all that in mind, he moved on to the second-to-last option.

Avaricious Arcane Hunter – Your path is pure, and your ambitions are ever-growing. You hunt for power through all the paths available to you, embracing any means that allows you to slay your foes, even embracing the arcane along your journey. Your perennial desire for progress has turned to avarice as you single-mindedly hunt down all those you wish to see dead. This class combines the pure path of the hunter with the pure path of arcane magic, driven by the endless avarice inherent to your being. The bow is your chosen weapon, amplified with arcane magic, but you also retain your abilities to face enemies in close combat, making all foes despair at your powerful – yet diverse - methods of attack. You will find yourself more powerful than ever as you stand before those stronger than yourself, and by decree of your path, you shall come out victorious. Stay true to yourself, strive for the top, and you shall reach the apex or face death, consumed by your own avarice. Stat Bonuses per level: +20 Per, +12 Agi, +12 Int, +10 Wis, +10 End, +6 Will, +6 Str, +10 Free points

See, now we're cooking! Jake thought with a big smile as he read the class. While it sounded less extreme and fancy than the Alpha Bestial Hunter, it felt far stronger. It also provided 86 stats per level in total. It was only 3 more, and they were far more spread out, but that was okay to him. His current stats were already very balanced, besides his ridiculously high perception, that is, and this class provided the most perception out of all of them, giving a massive 20 per level. Jake liked that a lot.

It was like a fusion between the first two classes, albeit heavily leaning towards the hunter side, which he was totally fine with. It retained the whole theme about avarice;

one could even argue it had been turned up a bit, but that also wasn't an issue. In fact, he welcomed it. While he didn't like the low stats from his E-grade class, he liked the skills it offered.

Big Game Hunter made him noticeably stronger when fighting foes at a higher level. Mark of the Ambitious Hunter increased his damage done, made him aware of where his foe was, and even gave extra experience. Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter was just straight-up awesome, and the survival instinct that turned into Moment of the Primal Hunter also came from the class, so it wasn't like he couldn't get those if he didn't go with the Bestial Alpha Hunter class.

If Avaricious Hunter offered skills in the same vein as Ambitious Hunter, it would be great, so he was happy to retain that aspect of the class. The aspect of constantly wanting to fight stronger foes, even if it came with the possible penalty of receiving less or possibly no experience from equal or lower-leveled foes. Again, Jake didn't really see that as a penalty.

To also have the class make use of his arcane-affinity just made it all better. It would allow him to make better use of all his stats, especially the mental ones. Jake didn't carry any delusions towards what kind of profession he would get, and as he wanted to remain an alchemist, it was certain he would receive plenty of magical stats from that.

Overall, the class was damn great, but there was one option left. It was a class Jake had kind of expected but was still a bit surprised at seeing it be the bottom-most one offered, indicating it was the one with the highest tier.

Hunter-Champion of the Malefic Viper – In the realm of mortals, you are the instrument to carry out the will of the Malefic One. As his champion, you use his Legacy as your base and wield poison and corruption as your weapons of choice. You do not care for your equipment as long as it allows you to deliver death upon your foes, and you find yourself adept in most combat styles, even if you prefer the bow to

be the harbinger of the Malefic One's foes. Your will and wisdom shall become the cornerstone of your path as you slaughter all who dare stand before you or your desire to carry out the will of your Patron. His will is yours. For as his champion, your path is as much the Malefic One's to define as it is your's to travel. May the will of the Malefic Viper be done. Stat Bonuses per level: +18 Will, +18 Wis, +10 Vit, +10 End, +12 Free Points, +20 Contingent Points distributed through communion with your Patron

There was a lot to unpackage with this one, but before he even began his usual analysis, his answer to it was already clear: a resounding “fuck no”.

Jake knew the class was likely great, but it wasn't what he was looking for. The stats offered weren't what he wanted, and that part about Contingent Points just rubbed him in the wrong way. He didn't believe that Villy would actually make any decisions for Jake, but there was no fucking way he would ask every single time he had to distribute points.

Also, what if Villy didn't agree to throw every single point into perception? Jake didn't want to have that discussion.

Compared to Avaricious Arcane Hunter, it only offered 2 more stats per level, giving 88 total. This firmly placed the class in the absolute top-tier, and Jake couldn't help but wonder as he read it through... how much of it actually had to do with himself and not the Viper?

It barely mentioned Jake except for the Hunter-Champion part, but even that was still a bit generic. It was truly a class solely focused on being a mortal warrior for the Malefic Viper, and every single part of it emphasized that.

Jake wasn't, and would never be, the Champion of the Malefic Viper. He would never be his warrior in the mortal realm, carrying out his bidding. Would he do a favor for Villy if he asked? Sure, that's what friends do, but he didn't want to be his employee – or worse – a mere tool. He was also certain Villy didn't want that.

The fact that he would likely have been offered his class while barely doing anything emphasized that a True blessing of a god, even more so a Primordial, was kind of a big deal. It helped Jake sympathize with Miranda. From an outsider's perspective, the whole thing about the blessing looked like a lot more than it actually was. Heck, based on what the Viper had said, it was more like an investment, and if Jake did enough great things, the Viper would get a return on his True Blessing and then some.

Jake shook his head as he turned his attention back to the class before this one. Avaricious Arcane Hunter.

While it gave marginally fewer stats, it had nearly everything he wanted in a class. It also just vibed with him way more, and he liked it. Sure, it had a bit of negativity around it with the whole “don't be consumed by avarice”-thing going on. But hey, it could be worse, and dying in an epic battle with a superior foe didn't sound like a bad way to go out.

Without hesitating anymore, he picked Avaricious Arcane Hunter.

****Congratulations, you have successfully evolved your Class****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 100 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

Chapter 199: Avaricious Arcane Hunter

Jake momentarily basked in the feeling of his new class, even if it was only a few stats gained. But as with the last class upgrade, it came with a bit more than a few stats and a fancy new notification for every new level.

It came with skills. Well, the first of which wasn't really a skill but an upgrade to an existing one.

[Big Game Hunter (Rare)] – A true hunter seeks not the easy prey but a true challenge. Having hunted bigger and stronger prey than most, the Ambitious Hunter has become more accustomed to facing higher-level enemies. Increases the user's resistance to auras and gives a small increase to Strength and Agility while facing enemies above your highest level class or race. The bonus is based on the disparity between the level of your prey and you. Limit of 1.25x your level or 50 levels, whichever is highest. May your hunt be fruitful and your ambitions reached.

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

Big Game Hunter was one of those oft-forgotten skills that just did awesome things behind the scenes. It was a noticeable buff that he experienced nearly constantly, making him faster and stronger when fighting enemies of a higher level, aka always.

He hadn't really ever noticed the resistance to auras part of the skill. Still, any increase in stats was always welcome, and now that increase had been extended to also include his intelligence and willpower. In summary: it's free stats. Free stats rule.

With the gained skill first at epic-rarity, he was already quite pleased with himself, and it only got better when he saw that the second skill was epic-rarity too.

[Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)] - A mage and a hunter both, you combine your talents as you conjure your tools of destruction. Allows the Avaricious Arcane Hunter to conjure arrows made of highly-condensed arcane mana, focusing on either destruction or stability. A stable arrow will be sharp and durable, while a destructive arrow will explode upon impact. Conjuring arrows consume mana, and the conjuration is instant. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Intelligence and Wisdom when using destructive Arcane Hunter's Arrows. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Wisdom and Perception when using stable Arcane Hunter's Arrows.

If Jake had to mention one big weakness he had currently, it would without a doubt be his shitty equipment. Sure, compared to the rest of humanity, he was doing quite well for himself, but as a D-grade powerhouse Progenitor, he was a poor sap.

His new scimitar did help a bit, but the rest of his equipment was still far behind. He was even afraid that his bow would soon become lackluster, and he would become unable to make full use of his Arcane Powershot.

Most of that gear was even rare-rarity, but some were still uncommon-rarity. The worst offender of them all was, of course, his shitty cloak – because it sucked – but a close second was his quiver. It had served him well for a long time, but all his arrows had broken on impact for a long-ass time, and he could already imagine how fragile they would feel in D-grade.

Arcane Hunter's Arrows was pretty much just a new quiver boiled into a skill, except it now scaled with him way more. He was incredibly excited to see the ability to make two different kinds of arrows. Explosive ones would surely be great at handling crowds of enemies or larger foes, while the stable ones would just be great overall.

The stable arrows even scaled with his perception, a stat he could never get enough of. His intelligence for the destructive arrows was a bit low, but it wasn't terrible, and with his new stat-gains from the class, it would surely only improve.

Jake couldn't help but hold out his hand as a pink-purple crystal-like arrow instantly appeared in it. There was barely any visual aspect at all to the skill; the arrow just appeared in his hand almost instantly, just like the description promised.

This arrow was of the stable variety, and it looked and felt entirely solid. It had simple fletching on it and a single-edged arrowhead, making it very suitable for cutting and penetrating. Perfect to deliver poisons with, just like Jake's current arrows. The mana within was entirely sealed, too, making it not affect any poison coated on the arrow at all. It was perfect.

Summoning it had consumed a bit of mana, but outside of doing alchemy, Jake had never ever been close to running out, so it wasn't an issue. Well, there was that time he bombarded that Storm Elemental, but that was a bit of an outlier.

He did a few tests and tried to break the arrow but found it incredibly resilient. To prove his point further, he took out one of the arrows from his quiver, and with only a bit of pressure, easily snapped it in half.

Next, he summoned an arrow of the destructive variety, and instantly he both felt and saw the difference. The arrow itself looked much the same, except for small purple light-bolts crackling within the crystal, and the mana it gave off was also quite a bit more than the stable version. It had also consumed more mana to summon, but it was only about fifty percent more.

He nearly wanted to go out and hunt something then and there, but he decided to be a bit patient. Mainly because he had just seen Mystie and Hawkie entering the valley from above - 200 meters above - due to the insane increase in the range of his Sphere of Perception.

Jake dismissed the arrow and closed his system menus. The class had only given two new skills, which were the same as his Ambitious Hunter one, so it wasn't exactly disappointing. Besides, he had many other skills to upgrade now that he had gained a new class and plenty of D-grade levels to get it done with.

Exiting the lodge with Sylphie, he saw the two parent-hawks landing in a tree beside his lodge and observe him closely. This was the first time they saw him after his evolution, after all, and both were very curious. Jake, in turn, observed them back and used Identify.

[Stormsong Hawk - lvl 102]

Hawkie was level 102, which made sense as he had evolved not long ago. The fact that he had even gained two levels was respectable considering his lack of proper opponents in the area and how much he stayed back at the lodge to be with Sylphie.

Jake reckoned it had had something to do with his journeys to the big tree on the cloud continent above. The hawk liked spending time up there, absorbing the incredibly potent mana the tree gave off.

[Mystsong Hawk – lvl 111]

Mystie was quite a few levels higher, but she had also been D-grade for quite a bit longer. She also clearly gained experience from just practicing her magic, and even when she was just back at the lodge, she kept making magical circles and improving.

Both of them also looked at him, and both seemed partly confused and partly relieved.

“What’s up?” he asked them and got some wing-flapping, pointing and screeching, and even a few colored flashes of mana back in return, perfectly explaining what their concerns were.

“Oh yeah, we humans don’t change much in appearance when evolving. It’s what’s inside that matters, you know?” Jake said a bit jokingly. “But if you have any concerns about the effects... how about a quick test? I would love to stretch a bit and get a feel for my body after the evolution.”

Jake rolled his shoulders as he felt the power in his every move. He really wanted to go practice a bit, and he had two true-blue D-grades right in front of him to have a quick bout with.

Hawkie and Mystie looked at each other for a minute before agreeing. They were also curious about Jake's evolution.

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched out as she puffed herself up. The three D-grades looked at the level 27 bird and shook their heads, Jake deciding to be the one to break the unfortunate news.

"Sorry, Sylphie, adults only. When you grow up, I am sure you will be a force to be reckoned with, but it isn't your time yet," Jake said, watching the small hawk deflate a bit with every word as she looked up at him with her big eyes.

He couldn't help but pet her head a bit, and even if that made her a bit happy, it clearly didn't dispel her disappointment. The two hawks jumped over and also made some encouraging yet stern bird noises, making Sylphie both deflate but also look more determined than before.

She screeched at all three of them as she jumped back, summoned some wind magic around herself, and began practicing right there and then. While Jake surely appreciated the sentiment, he wasn't so sure about seeing the ground and a few trees be cut up by green-tinged blades of wind.

The lodge is protected, so it should be fine, he thought as he shook his head. He threw a glance at the two D-grade hawks who both took to the air with him as they flew towards the cloud continent.

Jake's evolution was immediately obvious as he flew faster than ever before. He was outpacing Mystie, who was even using magic to make herself fly faster, with Hawkie still a bit faster than Jake, but that was expected considering speed was the male hawk's greatest strength.

It didn't take them long before they landed on the massive cloud continent – a human and two hawks. All the birds in the area scurried away when they saw them, not daring to get near. One D-grade was enough to scare them off, with three being enough to make them consider just leaving the island outright.

Jake stared at the two hawks that had landed opposite him as he dispelled his wings and smiled. "Aight, ready when you are."

The two hawks gave each other a quick look before they attacked with what was clearly a practiced move. Jake smiled a bit, seeing how the two hawks were clearly used to fighting together. Mystie being a grade ahead had hampered their ability to fight as a party, but now that they were both D-grade, they could do it again. It also answered some of his questions about what they had been doing when away.

Myst formed around Jake as he felt the energy press down on him to limit his movements, and a giant blade of wind crackling with lightning headed straight towards his head. Jake smiled, happy to see the two birds not taking him lightly, but it was far from enough – he could have easily handled this in E-grade, much less now.

Jake pushed away the myst-pressure with a bit of his own mana as he took a step forward, instantly teleporting back more than 100 meters. While his Sphere of Perception had given him quite the headache – literally – now that he had adapted to it far more, he could in no way discount its value.

With Jake easily having dodged the attack, he took out his bow and fired an arrow. He was actually a bit taken aback as he did it because he hadn't really thought but just moved. As he reached for the string, an arrow had just appeared between his fingers and had been nocked before swiftly released.

The arrow flew through the air towards Mystie, but it encountered a barrier of magic. If it had been Jake's old arrows, it would have broken on impact... but these weren't his normal arrows. The crystalline arrow pierced into the barrier, and after only a bit of resistance, shattered it.

Ultimately, it missed as it had been redirected slightly from the small form of the hawk, but it was enough to make her open her eyes with fright as she became aware of their power. Jake had already nocked another arrow at his point and fired it towards Mystie before moving to block another wind of blade from Hawkie.

A scimitar appeared in his hand as he cut apart the blade, parting the clouds below. Simultaneously, the second arrow arrived at Mystie, who swiftly dodged it, but the moment it was right beside her, Jake smirked as he triggered it.

BOOM!

The arrow exploded, sending Mystie tumbling through the air before she quickly stabilized herself, her eyes even wider than before. Hawkie tried to come to her assistance as he summoned a tornado of wind and lightning, tearing up the entire cloud continent in a radius of over 30 meters around Jake.

He was out of it with a single step, but the tornado quickly followed after him, Hawkie attacking with wind blades and exploding thunderbolts meanwhile. Mystie had now managed to stabilize herself, and a giant magic circle was condensing above her as she charged up a magical attack.

Jake smiled as he turned his attention fully to Hawkie, allowing Mystie to do as she pleased – already looking forward to facing her attack. He charged towards Hawkie with Jake's blade practically screaming at him to be fed. Sadly for it, today was not one where he planned to sate it.

He used One Step Mile to travel across the cloud, being even faster than Hawkie at his maximum speed, if far less maneuverable. Predicting where Hawkie would move, Jake appeared right below the hawk, quickly jumping into the air as he landed his eyes on his feathery friend.

Hawkie froze up from Gaze of the Apex Hunter as he fell through the air, and just as he was about to be able to move, an all-too-familiar net of mana strings wrapped around him. The hawk was ready, however, and released a blast of storm-mana to blow it apart, an-

The strings remained as Hawkie saw Jake throw him a cheeky smile. That is when Hawkie noticed the string binding him weren't the normal transparent ones but made up of the same mana Jake's arrows consisted of.

Jake flung Hawkie down into the air cloud continent as he kicked upwards unto a hastily constructed barrier of mana, sending him down towards the hawk. Hawkie tried to dodge but failed as a blade penetrated down into the cloud continent right beside the hawk's small head.

“My win,” Jake said as he turned his attention back to the giant magic circle coalescing in the air. He smiled as he took a step away from Hawkie, appearing nearly 200 meters away as he took out his bow again.

Briefly, his gaze met with Mystie, but he chose not to freeze her. He wanted to face her attack as Jake himself began charging his Arcane Powershot. Hawkie stayed put, even if he wasn’t really injured. While he wouldn’t have died even with a blade through his skull, it would have put him out of commission long enough for Jake to kill him easily, so he had already accepted his loss.

All the Cloud Island inhabitants watched on in fright from a safe distance as the two D-grades released insane amounts of energy. The entire scene seemed to pause for five or so seconds as both just charged their attacks.

BOOM! BOOM!

Two giant explosions sounded out simultaneously as a massive beam of highly-condensed myst-mana was fired down towards the lone human standing on the cloud continent – a human that returned a single crystalline arrow in response, arcane mana swirling around it, leaving pink-purple light in its wake.

A third explosion – even larger than the two prior – rang out as the two attacks met, making the air and the cloud island below have a huge part of it blown apart. The beam managed to hold back the arrow for a bit but was soon overpowered as the arrow continued towards Mystie. At the final moment, she managed to summon a shield of myst.

The arrow shattered the moment it hit the barrier, already weakened from the beam earlier.

Mystie was relieved until she saw Jake below – arcane mana already swirling around him as his second Arcane Powershot was ready to go.

“My win?” he asked cheekily, the Mystsong Hawk deflating not unlike her daughter had done less than half an hour earlier.

The birds and elementals gathered around the area where the three D-grades had battled, a huge crater in the cloud continent just below where the two mighty attacks had clashed. A Cloud Elemental noticed a small pink-purple spark still floating in the air from where the human D-grade had attacked, and feeling the energy within, moved to touch it.

“OOO!”

It made a screaming noise as a large part of its arm was instantly annihilated from the faint wisp of arcane mana, burning into its body before the remnant arcane mana ran out of energy.

Some attentive birds saw this and quickly designated the entire area off-limits for now, swiftly retreating to the cloud island’s outer edges, all of them thinking the same thing:

Humans are scary.

Chapter 200: A Sculptor of Haven

Felix walked out of his small treehouse and took in a deep breath, enjoying the refreshing air of Haven. One would think that having a city inside a forest would get annoying, but Felix enjoyed it quite a lot. It did help a lot that no beasts were wandering about, and the number of insects was also far fewer than one would expect.

The builders even had an enchantment of sorts that made all those small lvl 0 insects avoid people's homes, which did wonders for having the windows open even during the night. Anyone who had ever lived close to any kind of greenery knew the pain of having mosquitos and a whole slew of other annoying tiny pests enter just because you felt warm during a hot summer day.

Felix was thrown out of his thoughts when he heard his neighbor already out on her porch in another tree nearby, working on her tailoring.

"Good morning, any good progress lately?" he asked with a smile on his face, getting a nod and an answer in a stern tone in return.

"Not bad, but yarn and wool supply is getting scarce; I hope those merchants will soon return with a good batch," the middle-aged woman answered, reminding Felix of that group that had come by earlier in the week.

They had come from some city down south. It was some religious city or something, but they hadn't been overbearing, so that was fine. They had asked some questions about the city, but every new arrival did that, so nothing weird in that.

Felix himself had bought some special clay to practice his profession with along with some glass to shape, also for his profession.

Felix had entered the tutorial full of hope. A struggling artist before the system, he had been a failure both by his own metrics and the metrics of his parents and peers, so when the system arrived, he suddenly felt hopeful. He felt like it was his second chance. This time he couldn't fail.

He felt like he had done everything right in the old world. He had gone to university, gotten a degree, but yet he failed to find any success. He tried to do some sculptures – his specialization – as a freelance artist, but all he got from that was being lowballed by people who thought you could make marble bust for five bucks or people who wanted things done for “exposure”. Fuck those people.

This resulted in him falling into what he would describe as a deep depression even if his parents kept telling him he was just lazy. Every day was spent laying in his bed, staring into the ceiling hopelessly. The only thing that managed to get him up every day was his computer and video games.

Felix immersed himself in the online world, made friends, and finally felt like he had a place he belonged. He was great at games, and his creative mind allowed him to excel in most scenarios, earning the respect of his fellow players. Sadly, it wasn't to the level of earning any money, so his peers in real life still saw him as an utter failure. This only brought him closer to his online friends, as that was the only place he could find comfort.

Back then, he had always played a mage because can you ever go wrong with magic?

So, of course, when he was asked to pick a class, he went with being a caster. The tutorial itself had been somewhat relaxing, at least to begin with, and the enemies they faced were these half-robot things. It was really like a video game, and Felix went with his preferred school of magic: fire. Again, how can you go wrong with burning your enemies?

Once more, he found himself excelling. He joined a group of the peers that used to shun him, who now looked at him with awe and respect as he weaved his fire magic. It felt damn great.

When he got his class to 25, he upgraded it to become a proper fire mage, and that was supposed to be when his true rise to power would begin... until that incident happened.

All Felix had ever fought at that point was those robots. Tin cans that moved like living things, but they weren't actually alive. It was a game to Felix, a game he was good at. He loved melting his foes and seeing the levels just roll in, but sadly he would soon face an opponent unlike any before.

At that time, he and his party had been in a run-down city of sorts, and during one night, they had taken refuge in a run-down apartment building. His party had consisted of four people: a girl and two other guys, and he had to be honest that he crushed on the girl in his party quite a bit. She was a supportive caster, and could also do a bit of healing magic, so she was great without a dedicated healer in the party. The two other guys were a heavy and a medium warrior originally and were the muscle of the group. It was a new party, and Felix hadn't thought much about joining it.

During that fateful night, Felix had been trying to sleep when he heard some noise from another room – the one his crush was in. A bit groggily, he had gotten up and gone to investigate, and the moment he opened the door, his eyes went wide.

He saw his two male “teammates” press down on her with a dagger to her throat, their clothes already halfway off. She had been injured and nearly out of mana when they stopped to rest, and he saw the despair in her eyes as she couldn’t get free. Felix didn’t think as he yelled for them what the fuck they were doing; the warrior who didn’t hold the dagger just told him to fuck off back to the other room...

Felix was never going to forget the man’s tone... like what Felix had just seen was no big deal. The other warrior spoke up and said that it wasn’t like Felix couldn’t stay and wait his turn. The fire mage responded by attacking them.

A stream of flames blew the warrior with the dagger off the woman and through the wall of the building, sending him tumbling down. The second warrior cursed as he ran at Felix with his broadsword and swung. Felix didn’t know how to respond as he took a deep cut on his arm before instinctively reacting by blowing the warrior away and through several walls.

Felix desperately yelled while he threw fireballs after the warrior he had blown away, and he didn’t stop until he got the notification of killing the man half a dozen levels lower than himself. Standing there heaving, he only had a brief moment free to throw the woman a glance before he felt pain in his back.

He turned around and saw that the warrior he had blown out of the building earlier had rushed up the stairs and stabbed him in the back. He was far from durable as a fire mage, but he still managed to stumble back and turn around as he was wrestled to the ground, the warrior trying to stab him through the eye with a dagger.

The warrior sat on top of him, pressing down with the dagger as Felix exploded with fire mana. A torrent of flames sprung from his body and burned the man sitting on top of him – while also burning an unforgettable memory into Felix's mind.

To him, fire magic had always been cool. It was destructive and good against nearly all enemies... but that was precisely also why it was so gruesome when it consumed an enemy. It was one thing to melt metal and another entirely to melt a human.

The scream of pain as the warrior's skin began to blister and bubble as his blood was boiled inside his veins, his veins and flesh popping as blood poured out. The flayed skin melted and stuck together as the eyes looking down on Felix slowly liquified, and he saw the burning empty holes staring down on him instead. Felix passed out, seeing the man die a gruesome death on top of him, his entire mana pool spent.

He had awakened nearly twenty hours later, based on the tutorial timer. Alone in the apartment room. A small barrier to hide him had been set up, and he knew it had been done by the woman without a doubt, but she was nowhere to be found. Both corpses of the men were long gone too, and Felix even thought the entire thing had been a dream for a moment until the vivid images of the man burning to death invaded his mind.

Felix puked all over the floor as he sat there shaking and heaving for breath.

He didn't use his fire magic at all for over a week after that but just hid away in a camp made by other survivors, huddled up in one of the small apartment rooms. He didn't see the woman again before returning to Earth, where they only exchanged a single glance before going in opposite directions, they each going with their new respective groups. There were just too many bad memories between them.

Since that day, Felix hadn't used his magic to fight but instead focused solely on his profession. The mere thought of using his fire magic on another living thing made him nauseous as it brought memories to his mind he would prefer not to recall.

The reason why he was reminded of the tutorial again today was because of where those merchants had come from... Sanctdomo. A priest-like man led the group she had left with that day when they returned from their tutorial. He was well-known as apparently he had been blessed by a god or something, and he promised people a safe place once they returned to Earth – a promise he had clearly fulfilled.

Well, not as good as here, Felix thought as he slid down the rope that led up to his treehouse as he hit the ground, landing softly on the grass below. He lived in one of the many treehouses spread around Haven, all placed in the crowns of the tall trees permeating the forest city.

It truly was the kind of city that couldn't exist before the system. The houses themselves were actually rather large, having several rooms and built around the trunks of the trees, often fifteen or so meters up into the air, leaving plenty of space beneath.

Small hanging bridges connected pathways built around non-residential trees, making it possible to walk from house to house without ever touching the ground. The way to get up to the treehouses themselves was decided by the people who lived there, with Felix having just decided on a simple rope to hoist himself up. Another thing that would be impossible before the system, but now many people could even just jump from the ground and up to their houses.

Felix quickly went to the closest noticeboard to check for new quests. He had worked on a glassware commission over the last two weeks, putting his sculpting skills and magic to use. He refused to use his fire magic to burn anyone, but he had found other uses for his talents with the school of magic through crafting.

Skimming over the many quests, one instantly caught his attention.

Open Quest: Sculptor Needed

The City Office is looking for a talented and ambitious sculptor to assist in creating statues for the under-construction temple. The sculptor must be at least level 60 in their profession and possess the ability to adequately shape both metals and stone. The Statues will be depictions of gods or their insignias. Discretion is required.

Reward: 240 Credits per hour, extra bonus upon completion.

Felix stared at it for a while before smiling. *This one looks good.*

He had only been in Haven for one and a half months, so he had met plenty of people before coming there, a few preachers and priests included. He knew that gods were now far more tangible entities and that some could even communicate directly with them. He felt like he was more than suited for the job, his profession at level 67. Also... that reward was way above the usual. The average for a job was around 100 Credits per hour if the job paid hourly, though most trading was done just by selling or bartering products without having anyone pay you directly. He heard that the smiths had a good time selling blades to the City Lord recently... who knows what she was using them for.

Felix respected the City Lord a lot. She was working all the time, always made new good changes to the city, and had managed to put competent people in charge. He didn't believe those rumors about her only being in her position because she was sleeping with that enigmatic city owner either. From what Felix had seen of her, she didn't seem the type to do that, even if she had the appearance to entice any man. Yeah, he had to admit that he had a crush on her too, and he doubted he was the only one.

Accepting the quest, he got a new prompt saying there would be auditions in a bit over four hours, making him grumble a bit. *Should have guessed it's with an audition with that kind of pay.*

With a bit of time to spare, he went to check out a few of the small stores that had begun opening up. With so many crafters working day and night, there was bound to be an overflow of products, and someone needed to sell them, which is where the merchants came in.

Besides the overabundance of guns, because many citizens had come from a fort out in the plains that liked producing those, most products were more medieval. To be honest, it was a bit funny walking into a store seeing guns, swords, and other small trinkets sold alongside one another.

"Morning," Felix said as he entered one of the stores, the merchant in charge of it practicing by juggling with some throwing knives. A sight that would be weird before the system, but now most people did weird stuff to passively train their skills or get a bit of experience.

"Morning, looking for anything specific?" the store owner said, putting away his knives behind the counter.

“Got any mana potions?” Felix asked, already scouring the shelves behind the merchant for any signs of those small godly bottles.

“Got a few of inferior-rarity ones, 400 or more mana per potions guaranteed. 100 Credits each, but you can get five for 450.”

Not the best, but it could be worse, Felix thought as he bought a set small batch of five. A few people had been lucky to get common-rarity ones restoring thousands of mana points, but he had never used any himself. The sculptor had heard that those were really only used by elites, such as the space mage and his party.

He bought the potions for the audition to make sure he wouldn’t run out during their tests as his way of sculpting was quite mana-intensive.

Next, he went to one of the small restaurants. Well, it was more like a stall. There, he got some soup that would help boost his mana regeneration for the next day or so. The fact that it was damn tasty, did not at all play into why he wanted it.

Four hours later, he attended the audition and found it run by Lillian, the City Lord’s assistant. She looked a bit scary with her scarred face, and Felix didn’t know why she looked like that when evolving to E-grade should have fixed any pre-system issues, but he didn’t dare pry either.

The audition itself was easy, and only four others had turned up. One of them wasn’t even 60 in her profession but was allowed to try out anyway. She crashed and burned early on as she failed to keep up, and Felix easily pulled ahead.

After that, he had to go through some questionnaires and even had to sign a contract. He felt like it was a bit much for just crafting some sculptures for a temple, but he guessed it was an important task, so Felix just went ahead with things.

Because heck, what was so special about making a few religious effigies for a few gods? He was just the sculptor, after all.