

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 201: A Brave New World

Jake landed back in his valley with the two slightly listless hawks. The fight had been entirely one-sided, and they knew it. Sure, the two of them hadn't gone all out, far from it, but it was obvious... neither had Jake.

He had only used class skills from start to end, not even summoning his wings during the fight. He didn't use any poisons or anything alchemy-related at all, limiting himself significantly. Heck, he hadn't even used Limit Break at the safe 10%. From start to end, their little bout had a foregone conclusion – it was a fight he could have won even at E-grade, albeit with much difficulty, and he would not have come out of it unscathed.

“Cheer up, you two, while I won today, haven't you already laid the groundwork to beat me up in the future?” Jake said, nodding towards Sylphie as she was float-flying through the air, practicing her weird wind magic.

Jake saw her fly over a few trees, and the following gentle green wind passed through the tree crowns. A moment later, the entire crown was cut into thousands of pieces, making Sylphie cheerfully cry out. Jake just smiled at the small hawk, happy for her and her ability to unleash a wind attack that could kill most humans in the city.

He said his goodbyes to the two hawks as he entered his lodge, more than happy with his newfound strength. But he wasn't done yet.

Yawning, he went back to the good old porch and took out his Altmar Cauldron of Supreme Simplicity. For some reason, Jake didn't feel as much in a rush with his profession-evolution as he had with his class and race. That is until he remembered a certain dungeon hidden in a cave not far away.

Jake decided to craft mana potions mainly because he wanted to experiment a bit with his mana practice. He wanted to feel how much easier mana was to manipulate after he had evolved more in-depth because, during the fight earlier, all his energy manipulation felt easier than ever.

He theorized it had something to do with the qualitative improvements affecting his body and Jake's energy and thus, in tandem affecting his ability to control the energy. It could also just be an effect of the stat-increases and stats working better now, but who knows? All he knew was that he was better than ever at manipulating mana.

Going through the motions, he crafted the mana potion while focusing heavily on the process. He felt how much easier it was to nudge and move the energy as he wanted it to. When he added the ingredients, he instantly attacked them with his mana and once more felt the difference.

Without even noticing it, small traces of his arcane-affinity had snuck in and tore apart the ingredients, releasing the mana far faster and more efficiently. Thinking on it further, Jake realized how this really shouldn't come as a surprise to him.

He had discovered his arcane-affinity through alchemy, and the first time he had used it for real had to be during the Trial of Myriad Poisons when he thought back to when this change in his mana first occurred. The arcane mana was simply born from Jake's intent to tear apart and absorb the ingredients during the trial faster, though it had changed a bit by now, also focusing a lot more on also being stable.

Not long after, Jake was done crafting a batch of mana potions, and he was honestly surprised at how fast it had gone. Even more impressive was the amount and the potency of the mixture.

[Mana Potion (Common)] – Restores 8547 mana when consumed.

Jake knew that the amount restored by mana potions wouldn't grow as fast as one's mana pool, so to make one restoring over half of his own pre-mask-boost mana was incredibly impressive. Needless to say, these were his best mana potions yet, and it was also the batch with the most in he had ever made.

A single batch could vary widely. If it was a new creation, it was customary only to get 1-3 actual bottles worth, but Jake had just managed to pump out a massive 11 in a single craft. It was a testament to how efficient he had been and how little of the ingredients' energy had been lost during the process.

Damn, I am good, he praised himself as he, with a big toothy smile, dove right into mass-producing mana potions. They weren't even for himself; he just wanted to mass-produce because he could. At the same time, it allowed him to better experience his newfound ability to manipulate mana, and he was already looking for a way to improve it even further.

The day quickly went by, Jake a bit impatiently waiting for the level to finally come. Halfway through his second day of grinding, he finally got a notification, and just as he was getting excited, he saw it wasn't the one he had hoped for... but maybe it was a bit important anyway?`

Announcement to all Nobles: 100 Pylons of Civilization have now been claimed. In 7 days, the World Congress will begin, and anyone in possession or ruling over a Pylon of Civilization can attend, so make haste to claim one.

Quest received: A Brave New World

As the wheels of time turn and humanity has begun reclaiming civilization, clashes and disputes are unavoidable, but so are diplomacy and forming alliances. The World Congress will allow you to pursue both, as the political arena of Earth forms, and together you shall forge the future and establish the foundation of the civilization you wish to form. As an Earl and the first claimant of a Pylon on your planet, you will undoubtedly have a substantial influence on this future – may you bear this responsibility and privilege with pride.

Objective: Be within close proximity to your Pylon of Civilization and accept to join the first World Congress in: 6 days & 23:59:59. You can bring along 2 other representatives.

Reward: Participation and voting power in the World Congress

Jake read the notification over, saw the quest being received, nodded to himself, and closed all those menus. *Gonna talk to Miranda when she comes by; she should be here within the hour.*

Which proved true, as Jake only managed to finish one more batch before she came. She wasn't alone either but had brought along Lillian and even Phillip. Jake saw them coming easily with his sphere long before they even laid eyes on the lodge.

Jake Identified them one by one as they walked in, starting with Lillian.

[Human - 53]

She had gained quite a few levels, and Jake assumed most were in her profession. Either way, good on her. She had only barely reached E-grade when they met, and he doubted she had done much combat at all either, so it was impressive.

[Human – lvl 64]

Next was Phillip. When Jake met him a few months ago, he had been 59, and now he had only grown to 64. Jake didn't know why this was, but he assumed it had to do with him not really fighting in this period but had instead laid back and relaxed. He wasn't even leading people that much anymore, now just being another council member.

And last but not least was Miranda.

[Human - 81]

Of everyone in the city, Miranda was the one who had gained the most levels by far. Jake had heard that Neil was above 70 too, but he doubted anyone except Miranda and himself were above 80 – not counting birds.

He knew her profession had already reached level 99, but she had chosen to postpone her evolution. By the advice of her Patron gods, she wanted to gain the perfect evolution title. Quick math showed that her class was still only in the sixties, so she still had quite a few levels to go.

Unlike Jake, the citizens of his city mainly leveled by using the forest. Like when Jake traveled inwards to see where Mystie originally lived, Jake had already encountered many high-level beasts, and he knew that deep within the forest, even a myriad of D-grades could be found.

Walking out of the lodge, Jake gave a quick nod to the two hawks chilling up in the nest, with Sylphie already comfortable sitting on his shoulder. Mystie and Hawkie acknowledged him and had also noticed the approaching humans. They didn't appear to want to deal with it as they both took flight and headed up towards the cloud continent above.

After getting their asses handed to them, they had spent quite a lot more time leveling and practicing their magic. It wasn't going to help them with Jake only getting stronger too, but he totally understood their desire to grow anyway. Besides, it would be embarrassing if they were weaker than their own daughter within a year of her birth, and as things were looking right now, Sylphie would officially be approaching D-grade at that time.

With the two hawks gone, Jake turned his eyes towards the three approaching humans who saw him the moment they also entered his line of sight. Contrary to expectations, they all abruptly stopped, Phillip's eyes going wide, Miranda looking pleased, and Lillian with an unfazed expression, but he did see a tiny frown form on her brows.

Oh yeah...

Jake thought. *I guess this is the first time meeting any of them since my evolution.*

The three E-grade humans looked at him for a bit before Miranda finally spoke up.

"Congratulations on achieving D-grade."

The difference in grades was something everyone could detect instinctively. You didn't need to use Identify or bloodline-level instincts; it was entirely natural and even worked cross-species. This is to say, they all felt that he was a grade above them and the innate suppression that came with that.

"Thanks," Jake said, motioning for the three of them to follow him into the lodge. Phillip felt a bit nervous, it being his first time here, but he was an experienced man and quickly got himself under control and followed the scary masked D-grade inside.

Lillian didn't hesitate to go to a small tea kitchen Jake never used and began preparing something to drink. Miranda had insisted on putting it in months ago during one of their weekly meals to keep a few things stocked up within the lodge, so she didn't have to bring everything every time.

When they were finally all sitting comfortably around the table, Jake was the first to speak, Miranda clearly waiting for him to open the conversation.

“Thoughts on the World Congress?”

“I believe it will be a good chance to form relations with the other forces on Earth,” Miranda said, clearly prepared as she waved her hand as she summoned a simple green map in the air with mana, with not only Haven marked on it but also a few other points of interest such as the Fort or a city called Sanctdomo.

“The closest major city to us is Sanctdomo ruled by the Holy Church and in concert the Holy Pantheon. They already have a population in the seven digits and are growing at a startling speed. They are led much like a theocracy with a council of sorts. The official City Lord and de-facto leader being an enigmatic person known as the Augur of Hope,” Miranda kept explaining.

Damn, Jacob's popping off, Jake thought, giving his old boss a mental thumbs up. Thinking about it, I never told Miranda about him... I should do that when Phillip is not here.

“So far, they have been one of our primary trading partners, but even if they are the closest Pylon, the distance is still vast. It takes at least a few days of travel to get there, even for someone fast. Besides that, many smaller settlements are scattered around the area, with populations ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand.

“All of this is to say we have only actually made direct contact with a single Pylon-based city besides our own. This Congress will allow us to get a feel for other forces and get a better comprehension of where we stand in this new world. It will also open up many new trading partners. As for the issue of travel, I believe Phillip has some good news in that department,” Miranda finally finished off, Jake just sitting there silently listening while drinking his tea. His mind was equally occupied with the conversation and how the teacup

just phased through his mask when he drank. It was the same with potions, and he wondered how the hell he hadn't questioned it earlier. *System-fuckery for sure.*

"I have been traveling back and forth to the Fort a lot these days, and the place has become quite the hub for many smiths," Phillip said. "To avoid too much smoke and open fires in the forest, we decided that having the Fort be a large dedicated smithing operation was wise. However, we ran into the issue of transporting goods the distance between there and Haven. This is where Neil comes in.

"That young man is quite something and has been working on getting a functional teleportation circle up for the last month, and as of last night, he got it working. It can only teleport goods, but it is damn efficient and only requires mana to be maintained. With it, we can easily send materials from our mine to the Fort and the finished products back here within the same day," he explained, looking very pleased with how things were going.

Jake nodded, agreeing wholeheartedly. Space mages were excellent for that kind of thing, and Jake was even beginning to suspect the system had kind of helped a bit in having more space mages around. There were other trials and such in other tutorials focusing on space magic from what he had heard, and even that Kalloc guy who had given his Legacy to Neil had only been B-grade. Based on what the Viper said, investing in a tutorial was expensive as hell, so how could a B-grade get his entirely own tutorial? Jake theorized that the system had given a discount as it wanted more space mages in new universes.

As for the thing about the mine... well, that was what had been found in the big cave that didn't contain a huge murder-mushroom-turned-dungeon-entrance. As to what kinds of metals it contained and such things? Jake didn't know and didn't care. There were no herbs there, and he wasn't a smith, so he just left it up to people who knew more about stuff like that.

The rest of the meeting was just discussing a few basic city things, with the decision to have another meeting closer to the actual World Congress starting. Throughout it all, none dared comment on the bird that had eventually climbed from Jake's shoulder to sit on his head, being slightly too large for it not to look incredibly silly – if having a bird sleeping on your head could ever not be silly.

When they left, Jake handed Miranda over a hundred overpowered mana potions to sell in the city's stores or just to use for herself to level faster. Once they were finally gone, Jake jumped right back into doing what was most important: getting that profession's evolution.

Chapter 202: An Even More Professional Evolution

“Dum di dum di dum,” Jake sang in a humming tone as he swayed his head back and forth, both hands on the cauldron. He was naturally making even more mana potions but also doing something else equally important.

Sylphie sat opposite him, bobbing her head to the tune, mimicking him. Jake couldn't help but smile as she happily played along, even trying to make the same sounds as him. She wasn't doing very well in that department, but damn was it cute.

He barely had to focus when making the potions, and it was effortless for him to split his focus... it was actually a bit weird. He felt like he was focusing on both things simultaneously, no matter how contradictory that sounds. Maybe another gain of his race evolution? He already knew that he thought faster while under stress or fighting, so it kind of made sense... his math skills had also improved tremendously.

See, now I am focusing on three things at once, he thought, still humming the tune and finishing off the latest batch of mana potions meanwhile.

Just as the mix was completed, Jake heard the sweet sound he had been waiting for as he gave Sylphie a big smile. “It’s evolution time!”

“Ree!” she cheered back in return, getting a few head pats as Jake opened up his notifications.

****Profession Evolution Requirements Met****

To call your journey so far as an Alchemist of the Malefic Viper abnormal would be an understatement and disservice to the unique path you are walking. On the one hand, you’re a supremely talented alchemist faithfully following the Legacy of the Malefic Viper, and the other, a blasphemous heretic that does not show any reverence to the Primordial that has given you this power. Your entire existence only grows more paradoxical as your defiance and arrogance have only been rewarded by the Malefic One and not punished as his faithful followers believe it rightfully should have been. Where this unlikely friendship will take you is unknown to all, even the ones involved.

Either rebel, conform or carve your own path that has never been seen before – the choice is yours.

Begin Evolution now?

Y/N

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

Jake read through it and was honestly a bit relieved. A small part of him had been afraid of it, not even mentioning alchemy but just focusing on his friendship with Villy. The Hunter-Champion class had been a bit of an eye-opener to the significance of their relationship in the eyes of the system, and he would honestly hate to get a good evolution solely because of that friendship.

So to see it calling him talented at alchemy was good and boded well for what evolutions he would have available. Without further ado, he jumped right into it.

****5 Possible Evolutions Available****

Five as expected, he thought, and as always, started with the first and most boring option.

Renowned Expert Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – A direct upgrade to the Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper class. As a prodigy, you have already proven your talents during your early days, and coat-tailing on that talent, you are now recognized as a renowned expert, even if you no longer stand out like before. Allows one to combine the natural treasures of the world, and make potions, pills, transmute one material to another, with a slew of other mystical means to be discovered. This rare type of alchemist specializes in the production of poisons, contrary to the craft of potions. Leveraging your prestige, you have also gained the ability to sway others more efficiently and make them respect you far more. Even if your talent may wane with time, that time has yet to come as, while perhaps no

longer a prodigy, you are still an expert. May you continue to be the harbinger of death and pursue the footsteps of the Malefic One. Stat bonuses per level: +14 Wis, +10 Will, +9 Vit, +5 Tough +5 Int, +10 Free Points

Yep, this one was just as boring as he had expected. Heck, it was even more boring than that... it wasn't even a real "upgrade" over his Prodigious Alchemist as it didn't even give three times the stats. It gave only 53, which made it good but not great. Either way, Jake didn't bother lingering on it anymore as the description of the profession said all there was to say – and Jake didn't believe for a moment that his talents were waning.

Heretical Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – Most look upon a Primordial with awe, respect, and fear, but you choose to blaspheme his name and stand in opposition to his message. Allows one to combine the natural treasures of the world, and make potions, pills, transmute one material to another, with a slew of other mystical means to be discovered. This rare type of alchemist specializes in the production of poisons, contrary to the craft of potions. As an alchemist following the Legacy of the Malefic Viper, you wield his strength and enjoy the benefits of his creed as much as any devout follower, showing a powerful mind and independent spirit. No longer willing to follow on in his steps, you only seek to reap benefits, hoping to escape the wrath of the Primordial or his followers unharmed. As a heretic, the Legacy of the Malefic Viper is no longer contingent on retaining any blessing from the Malefic Viper. May you succeed in your foolhardy ways or meet your end on your heretical path. Stat bonuses per level: +20 Will, +12 Wis, +12 Vit, +6 Tough +6 Int, +12 Free Points

Oh, come on, it ain't that bad, Jake thought, shaking his head as he went through it. Was he really a heretic? Jake didn't see it that way, unless it was considered heretical to not really hold any faith towards a god you were technically supposed to fol... *yeah, okay, I think I get it.*

Anyway, this one was quite a lot more interesting. First of all, it gave a buttload more stats per level, making it quite clear this was a high-tier profession. The name was quite a bit simpler, though, even if it was so much better. It also carried some interesting complications.

From what Jake had gathered, a Legacy required one to have some kind of connection to the source, be it through an item or by gaining the class or profession through special means. There were some other rules and exceptions if you accepted the Legacy of someone dead, but Jake focused on the Legacies of the living. This also meant that the one behind the Legacy had at least a bit of power to influence the path of those that follow it, gods being the easiest example with the most straightforward way of affecting their followers – retracting their blessing.

This class would change that dynamic and make the Viper unable to retract his Legacy. He could likely still take back the blessing, but it wouldn't affect his future evolutions or skill choices. It truly was a heretical path where Jake could use a god's skills that didn't even recognize him anymore.

The stats were also interesting, as 68 was just around the absolute cap of professions at D-grade that didn't carry significant penalties. Needless to say, the Heretic one did carry penalties – such as being a heretic – but even then, it was proof of how high-tiered the profession was. And to make it better... the last three options available to him gave even more stats than this one.

Anyway, while the profession carried some interesting implications, it wasn't something Jake wanted to go with. He felt like being a heretic wasn't the right word for him, even if it did seem a bit accurate on paper. With all that in mind, he moved on to the next option – one that was the entirely opposite of being a heretic.

True Confidant of the Malefic Viper – More than a mere servant of the Primordial, you are now his most trusted Confidant. Your word carries implications for the entire multiverse as you possess the ability to influence the will of the Malefic One. With this power, it is only natural that all his followers shall bow to your every command. This profession focuses on leadership and persuasion by influencing the mind and will of those around you with every word or action, yet you also retain all your talents in alchemy to better relate to your Patron, even if it is a path you will no

longer pursue actively. Being a Confidant will allow you to understand the Malefic One's desires better and carry out his will and support his every command. As his trusted Confidant, you aim to one day stand beside him as his equal, even if you have a long way to go – but with his trust, the first and possibly hardest hurdle is already overcome. Stat bonuses per level: +15 Wis, +15 Will, +10 Vit, +8 Int, +7 Tough, +15 Free Points

No.

Saint-Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – There are many paths one can walk to honor the Malefic Viper and spread his word. To properly honor your Patron, you have proven that you excel not just in spreading his name but in walking his path as you have shown yourself an extraordinarily talented alchemist. As an alchemist, you can combine natural treasures of the world, make potions, pills, transmute one material to another, and many other means, but to honor the Malefic Viper, you will focus even further on toxins than ever before. As a saint, you can spread his word and recruit followers into following the Malefic Viper by granting baptisms or pray for the Malefic One to bestow his blessing on those deemed worthy. The profession will also allow you to better convince and influence others' will to accept the Malefic Viper's path. May you walk both path of faith and the path of alchemy to the pinnacle, all while basking in the power of the Malefic Viper. Stat bonuses per level: +16 Will, +14 Wis +12 Vit, +8 Int, +6 Tough, +14 Free Points

Alright, this one was a bit of a mix between the “super-Villy-fanboy-adviser” and “wow-he-is-actually-still-an-alchemist”-professions. One Jake, of course, seriously didn't want. For real, that “Confidant” one just rubbed him badly from head to toe. No fucking way he would pick a profession that was pretty much just saying: “be Villy's friend, I guess?”

This profession wasn't even about that anymore but instead about Jake actively becoming involved with spreading the Order of the Malefic Viper's faith and doing religious stuff. Just because he had given Miranda the okay for making a temple of sorts didn't mean he was suddenly into going full-on priest – or worse – begin acting like some god-sent saint.

Also... once again, it tried to hammer home how important it was that he was blessed by the Malefic Viper. He really didn't like it, and the only saving grace this one had was that at least it was still about being an alchemist. The stupid Confidant one even talked about giving up on doing alchemy to focus more on being a friend to Villy. How the hell does that work?

Yes, Jake was fully aware that the Confidant one was not really about being a friend but more of an adviser of sorts, but there was no way Villy would ever even want that. He was pretty sure a Primordial like the Malefic Viper had smart people just standing by to give advice at any time. If Jake was perfectly honest, then he really wasn't the person to ask about leading an Order with more members than people living on his planet.

As for stats, both this and the Confidant before it gave 70 per level. The absolute cap for professions being 80 made them both damn good from a numbers standpoint, especially considering they didn't have significantly restrictive or special requirements. They likely just required him to retain a blessing from the Viper and possibly some other stuff that didn't matter as he really didn't want either.

One mediocre option, one massive dud, and two semi-duds, please let the last one be good, he thought as he moved on to the last one on the list.

Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – You walk a paradoxical path, understood by none but you and your Patron. His Chosen, but not his believer, his ally but not of his Order, and a bearer of his Legacy, yet a blasphemer in the eyes of most. You have the ears of a Primordial, yet you choose to remain dedicated to the alchemy that first made the Malefic One known to you. Allows one to combine the natural treasures of the world, and make potions, pills, transmute one material to another, with a slew of other mystical means to be discovered. This rare type of alchemist specializes in the production of poisons, contrary to the craft of potions. As a heretic, the Legacy of the Malefic Viper is no longer contingent on retaining any blessing from the Malefic Viper, yet as his Chosen, you are closer to him than any

other mortal. May you walk your own path – be it that of a Heretic or a Chosen, or one entirely unique to you and the Malefic One. Stat bonuses per level: +15 Will, +15 Wis +14 Vit, +10 Int, +10 Tough, +10 Free Points.

Ah, you silly system, you were just teasing me, I see! Jake thought after reading the last option. What a bamboozling the system tried to pull on him, trying to convince him he would be stuck either being some shitty priest or meddle in mediocrity!

This one just had all checkmarks.

Alchemy-focused? Check

Not religious? Kinda check, balanced out by being equally heretic and chosen. Those two added together had to equal “not religious”.

Great stats? 74 per level, so more than any prior.

Ultimately, it also just felt like it fit him better than any prior options offered. From an objective standpoint, it was a class sitting at the absolute top. The absolute cap was 80, and this one gave 74. Those with 80 would even have some serious restrictions, even worse than Jacob’s Augur of Hope, yet Heretic-Chosen Alchemist gave 74 without any discernable issues, at least not on the surface.

He said on the surface... but the restriction was quite evident. It required him to remain not only a Chosen of the Malefic Viper but also remain a heretic. If he had picked the

Malefic Dragonkin evolution and gone with having a profession, he was absolutely sure he would not have been offered this profession.

Anyway, all of that is to say Jake liked it, and without thinking about it more than necessary, he picked the evolution, giving birth to the first Heretic-Chosen of a Primordial in the history of the multiverse.

Vilastromoz felt the minor shift and tug on the connection formed by his True Blessing of the Malefic Viper. He couldn't help but smile as he felt what Jake had picked, and the old Primordial experienced a bit of excitement and anticipation for the first time in a while. Who doesn't like new things, especially when an entirely new path is formed?

Their connection was stronger than ever before, yet he also felt something else oddly contradictory to that sentiment... he was no longer the sole controller of his own blessing. He could no longer withdraw it. Usually, a god could always take back their blessings, and even if a True Blessing was harder to reclaim, it wasn't something that couldn't be done.

The Malefic Viper instantly knew that now the only way for the True Blessing ever to be dispelled was through three means: the death of the Malefic Viper, the death of Jake Thayne, or the ascension of the Heretic-Chosen to godhood.

Unless, of course, his pal managed to upset his predictions again.

Chapter 203: A Heretical Chosen

When Jake got his class upgrade, not much happened, honestly. He just got some cool-ass skills, and that was about it. Yet this time, he felt something else other than skills right away... something a lot like when he communicated with Villy.

A warm flow entered his body as he felt his intelligence stat increase, and at the same moment, a system message appeared.

Your bond with the Malefic Viper is further strengthened as you reforge your karmic connection, claiming partial dominion over it. The Malefic Viper can no longer reclaim his blessing, and you have lost your ability to denounce it through all usual means.

Jake read it through and wasn't sure if he should be worried or not. His theory of one of the limiting rules of the profession requiring him to maintain his blessing had been a bit off... it was the exact opposite. It meant he couldn't give it up. Jake also instantly knew what this meant... the only way for the Viper to sever their connection when he wanted to was to kill Jake – an easy feat for a Primordial. And if Jake was honest, he felt like if the Viper wanted to, he could kill Jake solely through that karmic connection.

At the same time, he had to retain his defiant attitude towards the Malefic Viper. It truly was paradoxical... he had to both oppose and stay in the good graces of the vastly more powerful god at the same time.

A bit of a nasty restriction, eh? Jake thought, but he honestly wasn't scared. He had a feeling Villy was the kind of snake that would kill Jake if he wanted to anyway, so it really wasn't that bad. Also... not like he could do anything about it, so why worry? What should he do anyway, begin acting like an asslicker to try and not piss off Villy? Nah, fuck that.

Instead, Jake would stick to his motto: “Keep things simple, and take the complications as they come.”

Anyway, his blessing had once more been improved and was honestly starting to get damn good.

[True Blessing of the Malefic Viper (Blessing - True)] – An Alchemist recognized by the Malefic Viper himself that has now seized parts of the blessing in an act of defiance. Few throughout the ages have found themselves blessed by the Primordial, despite their desire to be so. You are his Chosen. Now even the true blood of the Malefic Viper himself is found within your very being, only strengthening your bond further. Through your powerful direct karmic and bodily connection, the wisdom, willpower, vitality, and intelligence of the Malefic Viper empower you. +10% Willpower, +10% Wisdom, +10% Vitality, +10% Intelligence. Grants access to many new paths. Only one blessing can be held at a time. Cannot be denounced or retracted.

Jake was never going to say no to extra stats, and it even gave intelligence, a stat that had just gained newfound value. With his class and profession together, he would also begin to get quite a lot of it, with 10 from every level as an alchemist and 12 from every level as a hunter. Wisdom was even more crazy, giving a combined 25.

After looking over the whole blessing thing, he finally saw the class level gained and the accompanying skill gains and changes.

****’DING!’ Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 100 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****Gained skill*: [Craft Elixir (Common)] – Potions for emergencies, flasks in preparation for the toughest of foes, and elixirs to build the foundation of power. Allows the alchemist to craft elixirs of common-rarity and below. Elixirs are able to grant those who consume it a permanent increase to stats. Must have suitable materials and equipment in order to create elixirs. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of created elixirs based on Wisdom.***

Getting used to only seeing Ancient-rarity skills from his profession, Jake was actually a bit taken aback when he saw the common-rarity tag, but on the other hand, wasn't this skill just something most alchemists got upon reaching D-grade?

Jake happily accepted it as it was the kind of skill he felt like he would want to pick up anyway down the line. Or maybe Sagacity of the Malefic Viper made it superfluous?

Well, not entirely...

Because when he thought about making elixirs, knowledge instantly appeared, just like with Brew Potion and Concoct Poison. The small stat bonus to his creations based on wisdom should also still be useable.

Either way, the ability to make elixirs wasn't exactly anything new to him but a welcome addition to his repertoire of skills nevertheless.

Moving on down the list, the next item was an upgrade to an existing skill, a bit like how his Big Game Hunter had been upgraded.

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

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

If Jake had to rate a skill upgrade between 1-10 in how boring it was, this would be a solid 9. This isn't to say the effects of the upgrade weren't great. Once more, comparing it to Big Game Hunter, this was the kind of skill that just did things behind the hood. It made all his poisons better and even helped when he coated his weapons in it to make it last longer.

The only real noticeable part of it was the ability to sometimes "buff" an item. It had only triggered twice so far – once in the challenge dungeon and once when Jake made the Malefic Beastorb for Sylphie – but besides that, he didn't really notice the skill much.

In summary, it was a great skill but a bit subtle. Either way, it was nice to have it upgraded.

He was already feeling pretty good about all his gains from the various evolutions, yet he moved on to the last skill with quite a few expectations anyway. The profession was clearly special, and a part of him had even hoped for a Legendary skill or something like that... but what he got instead was just a bit confusing.

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

Jake had a *lot* of questions about this one. The most obvious was the rarity. Unique-rarity skills were a bit weird in that their actual power couldn’t necessarily be determined. Heck, his Legacy of Man was unique-rarity, and he wasn’t sure how good that one actually was.

This one at least gave him the impression it was impressive if a bit weird.

If Jake were reading it correctly, this skill would allow him to upgrade his other skills related to the Malefic Viper more easily, more accurately the “of the Malefic Viper” ones. He had already checked the descriptions of all the skills and seen that they hadn’t changed. They still “only” gave 1 stat per level in his profession. Jake assumed he would have to upgrade them to legendary-rarity to gain more, and needless to say, that wasn’t an easy task.

Jake sat contemplating for a bit before he did something he probably should have done before choosing to pick a profession with the word heretic in it.

“So, Villy. Thoughts?”

A few seconds passed before Jake felt a presence descend on his soul. He felt its intent to utterly suppress him and bring him to his knees, but Jake barely reacted.

“You dare become a heretic and stand against the Malefic Viper himself!? A mere mortal has the audacity to display such arrogance!?” Jake heard the voice of the Primordial echo loudly in his mind.

“So you think it’s kinda funny?” Jake answered back, nodding in understanding.

“Oh yeah, equally funny and interesting,” he heard Villy’s voice answer back, and he could easily picture the god snickering as he spoke. *“But you are fully aware that if I find someone else I want to make my Chosen, I will have to kill you first, right?”*

Jake just shrugged in response. “It is what it is. Any other way to get rid of that black mark on my status menu?”

“Wow, rude, just because I can’t take it away anymore...” the Viper answered with faux outrage. “As for getting rid of it... just become a god, pretty easy actually. Trust me; I’ve done it at least once.”

“... Is that to say it’s possible to become a god more than once?”

“No, of course not, that would be silly.”

Jake shook his head, glad that nothing seemed to have changed despite the system clearly seeing it as a perilous and heretical path.

“But back to my original question, any thoughts on the new skill?” Jake asked, still having the system menu open and staring at the Path of the Heretic-Chosen in front of him.

“You are aware I can’t actually see your skills, right?” Villy answered back.

“... Gonna be honest, I kind of assumed you could. Sure, maybe you are unable to see the detailed description or something, but I had just guessed you had a feeling for the skills or something like that,” Jake said, a bit embarrassed, scratching his chin.

“I just know most skills in general and what kind of skill one is when you use it. I have no idea what skill you are even talking about right now, however. Being directly able to see someone else’s skill would be the same as peering into their Truesoul and isn’t something people just do. I never met someone who can anyway. There are ways to share descriptions, but it is honestly just easier to tell someone. They aren’t that long, after all.”

“Oh... well, it’s a skill that allows me to go on journeys and see your Legacy or something to upgrade skills. It honestly does sound a bit weird...” Jake said, once more scratching his chin. It wasn’t even itchy.

“Heard of similar skills like that, but you know there a few small important details off,” the Malefic Viper said. “Normally, the individual you get the Legacy from is aware of it, or they are already dead... they also normally need to give permission, but I guess you aren’t good at asking for that, now are you?”

“Why ask for permission when you can also just ignore asking for forgiveness because honestly, who’s got time for that?” Jake joked back. “Oh yeah, now that I have you on the divine phone, any input for that whole World Congress thing happening in a week?”

“Nope, no idea whatsoever,” the Viper answered back promptly.

“Wait, isn’t it related to why you said claiming one of those Pylons fast would be worth it?” Jake asked with a frown.

“Maybe?”

“Aight, why did you emphasize claiming a Pylon that much then?”

“Well, it isn’t like anything bad could happen by doing it, and the passive bonuses it gives when in the area are still good. As for that World Congress and pretty much all of those introductory things by the system, I am as clueless as you,” the Malefic Viper confessed.

“Really? That’s surprising. Is it because you weren’t around at the last few integrations, or are all of them just different?” Jake asked, already suspecting it was the second. Beforehand, he had been told that each new universe being integrated would bring change and new things to the entire multiverse, so it made sense that even all these post-tutorial things would be different. According to Villy, the tutorial hadn’t even been a thing back in his day but was a staple now. Maybe the World Congress was similar?

“All are different, and as the system does everything, no one can predict what will truly happen, especially not those outside your universe. All of those people divining shit in your universe will know is that it is important and maybe a very general sense of what it is about but nothing more,” Villy explained.

“Interesting,” Jake said, nodding, but he had a faint suspicion there was a bit more to it. “So you told me to get a Pylon just on the assumption that things would turn out well? It has nothing to do with anything else, now has it?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that in all prior integrations, the performance of those blessed by the gods in these kinds of system-made events will also reward the god that has blessed them, and I am most certainly not saying that the reward for me is higher because you are my Chosen. Definitely not,” the Viper said, in the most faux-innocent tone Jake could imagine.

“Well then, as your totally-not-heretical Chosen, I’ll be sure to perform to my utmost level, oh my honored Patron,” Jake said, smiling. “Though I have no idea what I am supposed to do.”

“Find out when the time comes; I’m sure it’ll be entertaining if nothing else.”

“I guess,” Jake said, shrugging. “Also, when are you going to stop doing that weird aura-thing?”

For the entire conversation, the Malefic Viper had let his full presence press down on Jake. It felt like he was actually sitting in front of the god himself without the Viper bothering to suppress his natural aura. Not that Jake particularly minded; he was just curious... it wasn’t like that whole presence thing had any real effect on Jake anyway.

“Yeah... you do know that you are a bit abnormal, right? Anyway, nice talking to you, you filthy blasphemous heretic. Good luck with stuff, and remember to have fun!” the Viper said, as his aura slowly contracted and began fading away from Jake’s soul.

“Yeah, cya around,” Jake said, as he mentally waved the Viper goodbye, a wave he apparently picked up somehow. Weird stuff that whole karmic connection or whatever.

With Villy gone, Jake was back with just Sylphie, who hadn’t bothered with him talking to himself at all as she was just sleeping on a pillow.

Jake closed all his menus but one: Path of the Heretic-Chosen.

1 use remaining?

He kept staring at that part as he shrugged. He had seven days, and his intuition told him the journey-thing wouldn't be that long. What exactly the whole journey was, he didn't know exactly, and it even had some warnings and stuff, so all logic dictated that he should try and research the skill a bit more or plan ahead before using his one limit use, especially considering how he would only get another chance in ten levels.

But... to counter that... Jake was kinda curious.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Chapter 204: The Wyvern of the Desolates

Jake closed his eyes and focused on his Path of the Heretic-Chosen as he tried to get it to activate – just long enough to make him wonder if he hadn't reached an adequate understanding of any of his skills. Which, to be fair, he could perfectly understand. Jake himself was full of doubt about what exactly he needed to understand.

Yet just as this thought appeared, the skill reacted:

Do you wish to experience the Legacy of the Malefic Viper? Uses remaining: 1

Jake didn't hesitate but instantly accepted.

Sylphie, who had been sleeping on the chair, woke up with a startle as she felt the mana in the air moving weirdly. She felt like the entire space shifted for a moment, and she barely managed to register the human disappearing into thin air.

She looked around a bit confused but soon after just lay her head back down to keep sleeping. Nothing to do about humans acting weird.

Jet-black wings blanketed the skies as a massive frame covered the land beneath it in an almost unnatural darkness. Humans, elves, demons, and many other kinds of species hid away within their houses in the city below as the beast headed towards the central tower.

It was a city of impossible proportions based on the standards of old Earth. It spanned thousands of kilometers with buildings, housing billions of the myriad races – their only solace being the trustworthy barrier protecting their home.

Yet the Wyvern of the Desolates had come anyway - a monstrous beast that had wiped out all life on one of the massive continents on their planet. In its wake always followed death and destruction, and many families of the city already began mourning those who failed to enter the safety of the barrier in time.

The entire city went into complete lockdown, and as the poison mist that swirled around the mighty wyrm encountered the barrier, it sizzled and burned but remained stable. It was put down by the city's and country's protector, a mighty warrior who sat at a higher position than even the King.

It was a being none could look down upon with his level placing him firmly as a mid-tier C-grade.

”ROAR!”

The Wyvern opened its maw as it spewed out a beam of green energy that impacted the barrier and made the entire city shake.

Yet the barrier held up.

But it wouldn't be able to do so forever.

It was made by an early C-grade companion of the Protector, and while it would hold up for a while, the Wyvern's attack was especially effective at these kinds of prolonged standoffs. With no other choice, the Protector would have to move personally.

No matter what, it wouldn't be an easy fight, for the Wyvern was mid-tier C-grade just like him.

Far above the city and barrier appeared a single figure. It was a muscular red-skinned demon wearing heavy armor and carrying a massive mallet and large tower shield. His

entire body hummed with power as his glowing white eyes stared at the Wyvern that had come to attack his home.

"What do you hope to accomplish by coming here?" he asked in the common tongue of their planet.

Getting nothing but a breath of toxic green energy in return as the wyvern attacked.

As it flew, its form became smaller, shrinking from being a several hundreds of meters long monstrosity to only about a dozen meters from head to tail. While the reduced size made the beast appear less threatening, the Protector knew it was just the opposite – because while it became smaller, its speed increased manyfold.

The Wyvern soon reached the Protector, who blocked the blow easily with his shield. He felt a pulse of poison release as the claw hit, but he shrugged it off as his armor nullified most of it. What he wore today was a set of armor he had personally made specifically for this day – for he knew the gluttonous and greedy Wyvern would one day come to claim what was rightfully the Protector's.

He countered as he swung his mallet, forcing the beast to retreat. The poison mist released from its wings blanketed the entire area already, and the Protector knew the beast relied on it to win... but it would not go as the Wyvern hoped.

Pressing further, he kept attacking, and several of his blows struck true, shattering the scales of the beast. He knew it was relatively weaker to physical attacks than magic – a trait of most winged lizards – hence his simple yet effective approach.

The beast was, in the end, but a beast. It relied on its instincts and not intelligence, making it inherently inferior. Its decision to come to his city that day would mark its end.

Their battle continued as the entire area surrounding the city was transformed. A new valley was created when his kinetic blow missed and sent a shockwave down into the ground and a poisoned swamp when the Wyvern failed to hit with its deadly breath.

The Protector had to admit that the beast was powerful beyond his expectations, but he knew he had the upper hand. It relied on its poison building up in his body, but he was prepared. Just a few months earlier, a renowned alchemist had visited his city. He was a mid-tier C-grade just like himself, and from him, he had procured a powerful antitoxin for today.

When the beast believed it had won, he would consume it and finish it off, not leaving the greedy Wyvern a chance to escape. He would be hailed a hero, and his renown would grow even further.

A single exchange later, and the beast managed to barely scrape him with one of its long fangs, drawing blood. He felt the extra-potent toxin enter his body and knew it was time. He had managed to land a mighty hit in return for the attack and broke one of the Wyvern's wings, making it far harder for it to escape.

Smiling, he took out the antitoxin and consumed the contents of the bottle. He felt the liquid enter his body as it-

What?

Blood splurged out his orifices as all the pent-up poison in his body suddenly got renewed life and exploded with power. The Protector felt his insides begin to rot as he stumbled back, nearly failing to stay airborne. Had the alchemist lied to him? He knew some could alter the descriptions, but all the potions, flasks, and elixirs he had also bought worked flawlessly... so why?

"Not a fan of my concoction?" the Protector heard a familiar voice say as he looked up at the Wyvern staring down at him with condescending eyes.

"What?" the Protector answered but soon realized... the Wyvern before him was the renowned alchemist known as Vilastromoz. From the beginning, this fight had been a setup... the antitoxin a trap he had fallen into with both legs.

But how could he possibly have suspected a mindless beast like the Wyvern of the Desolates to be an alchemist? How was it even possible when it as a beast did not possess a profession? He knew it was possible to craft anyway, but he hadn't heard of a beast doing so before...

"Cough, cough." More blood spurted out as he wavered in the air, but he activated a skill to temporarily at least stabilize himself a bit, seeing that the Wyvern was not continuing its assault even in his moment of weakness.

"It's here, right?" the Wyvern asked, its large eyes staring down at the man.

"I... cough... the city... just take it," the Protector said, before shaking his head and standing up a bit more straight. "There is no reason for either of us to risk death. I do not care what happens to the city... let us just leave it as it is and go our separate ways."

"Fine," the voice of the Wyvern echoed out. "Remove the barrier and leave."

The Protector didn't hesitate to do so. He didn't believe that the Wyvern genuinely wanted a fight to the death. In the battle they had been somewhat evenly matched, and like most powerhouses, he had methods to make a last stand if things got too dangerous. The only reason why he had any confidence in slaying the Wyvern was due to his many preparations.

Inside the city, the citizens saw the barrier that ensured their safety slowly began to disperse as they despaired. The King of the land inside the grand palace, a peak D-tier man, cursed at the Protector for abandoning them as the poison released by the Wyvern descended upon the capital. The King didn't hesitate as he began making his escape, not even bothering with his family or anyone else.

Up in the air, the Protector was about to take his leave as he saw a potion appear before the Wyvern as the beast swiftly chomped down on it. Seconds later, the broken wing had regenerated, and the beast looked to be in near-perfect condition once more.

Turning to quickly fly away, he barely managed to dodge as the claw came for him.

"You! We had an agreement!" he yelled as the Wyvern attacked him again.

"Oh, that? I lied."

Less than fifteen minutes later, the Protector fell as he succumbed to the ever-increasing poison in his body.

The city below quickly turned into pandemonium as everyone tried to flee, yet escape was impossible for most. The dark green cloud had well and truly descended on the city, and soon there were more rotting corpses than living citizens in the once grand capital of one of the largest countries on the planet.

The Wyvern turned its gaze to one side as it released a breath, with a fleeing King and a few of his guards in its crosshairs. The King took out a protective item to try and save himself, but the shield generated by the marble barely held up for a second before shattering as he was reduced to a rotting pile of goo.

Finally, with nothing else to distract it, the Wyvern dove down towards the central palace and the grand tower that adorned its middle – a mighty mage tower housing an artifact the Wyvern had come for.

With a swipe of its tail, the upper parts of the tower were ripped away as the large blue gem within was revealed. The gem had been what powered the entire barrier and was a true natural treasure.

And as the Wyvern that would one day be known as the Malefic Viper laid its eyes upon the gemstone, so did another soul. It was a silent and unnoticed passenger that was simply on for the ride - one who was just there to observe and experience the annals of history and the Records of what once happened during the first Era of the multiverse.

Throughout it all, Jake had been present. He had felt the thoughts of the Viper, the Protector, and even all the living souls in the city below. He had experienced every collision of power between the two fighters as if he was in the fight itself.

Yet it was only at this final moment Jake felt himself be truly immersed into the body of the Malefic Viper. He felt like he truly became the Viper and that the body of the Wyvern was his own. Every single small piece of energy moving within the large body was clear as day to him.

Instinctually – perhaps due to the skill or his bloodline – he knew that this was when the important moment would come: his chance.

The Viper extended its claw as it channeled a version of Touch of the Malefic Viper Jake very much recognized. The gemstone was slowly transmuted as it began turning dark green and giving off powerful toxic energy. None of this was very enlightening to Jake, but he did notice a few areas where he could improve his own ways of using Touch of the Malefic Viper. If Jake had to guess, then the skill was only still at ancient-rarity at this time for Viper, or maybe the would-be-god just focused on entirely different areas than Jake.

Opening his maw, Jake felt something inside the Wyvern's body come to life that felt both familiar and foreign. Instantly, he knew it was what would one day be named Palate of the Malefic Viper. But it was different from Jake's version in many ways. It was far more potent for one thing, but it also felt... larger?

Jake felt the skill activate as something inside the Viper's body began attracting the gemstone. The gemstone appeared to slightly shrink as it was drawn into the mouth of the

Wyvern, and Jake noticed something that reminded him of his One Step Mile – the concept of space.

Once the gemstone entered the mouth, it just... disappeared. Yet moments later, Jake noticed where it had gone.

Like his spatial storage, a small dimension was found within the stomach of the Wyvern. Within that storage, Jake felt the gemstone and what was happening to it. He felt it be continually refined and cultivated, but it happened too fast somehow. Like time moved differently within that new space created by the skill.

A time-accelerated space? Stomach? Just as Jake was considering all these things...

Time rewind.

Jake felt the Wyvern open its mouth like it was his own, and the skill activated. The gem shrunk and entered the maw before being thrown into the spatial storage inside its stomach and refined in an accelerated fashion.

Time rewind.

The gemstone was slowly made smaller as the concept of space worked to make it able to be deposited in the storage inside the Wyvern. The storage itself was not actually inside the stomach but more in another realm created by the skill.

Time rewind.

This time Jake focused not on the swallowing but the storage itself. It was truly more metaphysical, likely part of the soul. This is also why the Viper could more easily accelerate its time in a passive sense as it happened inside its own body.

Time rewind.

Not only was the gemstone absorbed, the usual effect of Palate even kept working on it. However, it couldn't help regenerate resource pools because all of the energy was passively consumed to keep the time acceleration and space alive, but something was absorbed – the knowledge of the item.

Time rewind.

While in the space, it was being refined by a skill reminding Jake a bit of his own Cultivate Toxin... could he use that as a substitute? He should be able to.

Time Rewound.

He felt that the journey created by Path of the Heretic-Chosen was about to end, but Jake didn't lose focus. He studied every single movement of energy and everything the Viper

did as it used its Palate of the Malefic Viper to absorb the gemstone. He borrowed from his own instinctive understanding of One Step Mile and Moment of the Primal Hunter to better understand how time was affected. Both only worked to influence his own body, while the Viper's Palate only worked to affect his body too, except for the whole swallowing part. But Jake was quickly figuring that out...

Time rewind.

Everything was slowly coming together, and Jake felt that the next time would be the last. Mentally he went over everything as he prepared himself and immersed his entire body and soul into the Viper.

Time rewind.

Jake opened his maw as the gemstone slowly shrank in size as the concept of space worked to reduce its size and deposit it into the metaphysical spatial storage created with Palate of the Malefic Viper. Within, it was constantly refined by a skill very similar to his Cultivate Toxin – he would have to use that for his own version - while at the same time experiencing time acceleration through the concept of time. Throughout it all, the gemstone's Records were also slowly being absorbed by the Viper through Palate as his understanding and familiarity grew to a highly intimate level.

He heard the notification sound just as his journey came to an end.

Chapter 205: An Improved Palate

Sylphie opened her eyes as she saw the human appear again back at the lodge. He had only been gone for a few minutes, but he looked like something big had happened as he instantly closed his eyes and entered meditation. She was a bit annoyed at not knowing what was going on, but she would be a good bird and not disturb him.

She was kind like that.

Jake replayed the feeling of being the Wyvern and tried replicating the same experiences in his body repeatedly. He ignored the notification for now as he just properly processed all he had gone through - not just the parts with Palate of the Malefic Viper, but also the fight with the Protector and when the Viper had used what would one day be called Touch of the Malefic Viper.

Several hours passed as he just sat there while everything was still fresh on his mind. The true gains had been related to Palate of the Malefic Viper, and it had clearly been the focus of the skill as it was only when Palate was about to be used that Jake was fully merged with the Viper, but everything else was still valuable.

No matter what, the Wyvern Jake had seen would one day become the Malefic Viper.

He didn't really think much about anything unrelated to the fight and how to improve his skills. Everything that happened then was history and couldn't be changed, even if the entire thing was a bit cruel. The Protector willingly abandoned the city, and the Viper did not even give a single thought to it as he fought.

Billions had died, sure, but they had just been at the wrong place at the wrong time. It was the unfortunate reality of the weak that didn't live under the umbrella of the truly strong. The Protector had given some thought to the citizens by establishing the barrier,

but he refused to risk his own life for the billions of lives living within his domain. The King had even abandoned the city the moment things went south.

Jake shook his head as he finally awoke from his meditation. He had gained some inspirations related to other aspects of the Legacy of the Malefic Viper, but the true gain was without a doubt with his Palate of the Malefic Viper.

Opening the notification, he saw what he expected, but he was still more than satisfied.

[Palate of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – The Malefic Viper has honed its venom by devouring myriad toxins found throughout the multiverse. In the same vein, the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper can consume toxins to learn their effects and properties. Further evolved, you can now also learn the properties of herbs while at the same time enjoying a greater benefit from all potions consumed. Grants immunity or resistance to most poisons. Passively provides 1 Endurance per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. Through consumption, may your power grow; through gluttony, may your Records expand.

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[Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – The Malefic Viper has honed its venom by devouring myriad toxins and treasures found throughout the multiverse. In the same vein, the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper can consume toxins to learn their effects and properties. Further evolved, you can now also learn the properties of herbs while at the same time enjoying a greater benefit from all potions consumed. Natural treasures can be swallowed and refined at an accelerated pace, using your current level of Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon). If the item is not a toxin, the item will still be refined but at a slower pace. Allows you to learn the properties of any treasure in your stomach as you slowly refine it. Grants immunity or resistance to most poisons. Passively provides 3 Endurance per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic

Viper. Through endless consumption, may your power grow; through gluttony, may your Records expand as you devour the world.

Jake read the changes, and everything was as expected... he felt that every part of the skill had gotten slightly stronger, but the true gain was with the new “stomach” created by the skill. He could feel it within him right at that moment, even if he knew it didn’t actually physically exist.

It was like his soul in some ways, but in a way that was a bit more... tangible. Jake knew that whatever was within that stomach would appear out in the real world if he died, just like if one broke his spatial necklace after killing him. In fact, it was like that stomach was a part of him like equipment like rings or necklaces was.

Inspecting it more closely, he felt that the stomach was quite limited in many ways. Due to the way it constantly refined and absorbed Records from the item in an endless feedback loop, he couldn’t consume more than one thing at a time.

There was also the question of what counted as a natural treasure. Jake was confident that normal items such as equipment didn’t count, while he assumed herbs would. Either way, it was something he would have to look into in a bit; he first wanted to get done with his notifications.

The next few actually surprised him a bit as he hadn’t seen that happening...

****’DING!’ Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 101 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 102 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 101 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

So, Jake had just gained two levels in his profession less than an hour after getting it. Gaining levels from upgrading the “of the Malefic Viper” skills wasn’t anything new to him, but he had assumed he wouldn’t get them when he used the Path of the Heretic-Chosen to do it.

Seems like a bit of a scam, he thought, not at all complaining. Heck, it helped the alchemist profession, which was typically slow as heck to level, to progress far faster. Who would complain about that?

The final thing he had left was to see how much endurance he had gained from the upgrade, though he kind of already knew the answer based on not feeling a massive rush of energy from suddenly gaining a lot of stats.

Checking his status screen, he saw that, sadly, the skill did not work retroactively to any levels below the triple digits but only gave him 3 endurance per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. He still had the 99 stats from level 1-99, so it wasn’t like he had lost anything, and quite honestly, he couldn’t really claim to be surprised. If it suddenly gave him almost 200 more endurance before bonuses, it would just be insane.

All in all, Jake felt pretty damn good after it all. That Path of the Heretic-Chosen skill was great, and Jake was already looking forward to the next use.

With all of his evolutions done, he finally opened up his status menu in full to get a view of things.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (D) – lvl 101]

Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter – lvl 100]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 102]

Health Points (HP): 18430/18430

Mana Points (MP): 20578/22087

Stamina: 13512/13790

Stats

Strength: 1226

Agility: 1552

Endurance: 1379

Vitality: 1843

Toughness: 1266

Wisdom: 1767

Intelligence: 1295

Perception: 3140

Willpower: 1425

Free points: 70

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], [Perfect Evolution (D-grade)]

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)], [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)], [Big Game Arcane Hunter (Epic)], [Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)], [One Step Mile (Ancient)], [Moment of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)]

Profession Skills: [Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Herbology (Common)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Alchemist's Purification (Common)], [Alchemical Flame (Common)], [Craft Elixir (Common)] [Toxicology (Uncommon)], [Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)], [Concoct Poison (Uncommon)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Epic)], [Scales 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)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)]

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

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

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

Once more, Jake took note of how damn long the thing was getting. He had gained new skills, upgrades to existing ones, and of course, a few more stats. It also felt good to finally have a legendary skill under his profession skills.

The upgraded Palate of the Malefic Viper hadn't undergone a tremendous change, but it was still one Jake felt made it worthy of being legendary-rarity. It used both the concept of space and time, and Jake had a feeling he wouldn't have gained the upgrade without having experience with those two from One Step Mile and Moment of the Primal Hunter. Maybe he wouldn't have been able to use Path of the Heretic-Chosen at all.

Jake was aware, however, that his version was not the same as the Malefic Viper's was back then. First of all, the Malefic Viper was a monster while Jake was a human. As a monster, the Wyvern could gain not just knowledge of the item but even experience and levels from consuming the gemstone, much like how Mystie had used the Mystbone to level and evolve to D-grade.

He had felt the intent of the Viper back then was to just slowly nurture and absorb the gemstone over a longer period of time. This new part of Palate of the Malefic Viper was to the Wyvern primarily a way of getting more gains out of absorbing natural treasures. Jake's was a bit different.

Jake's was solely focused on learning about the item while also refining it and improving it. He wouldn't absorb it as the Viper did. He had a feeling the Viper could also do as Jake's version did, likely even back then. It just didn't make sense for him to do so.

What truly made the skill worthy of the legendary-rarity was how insanely valuable the ability to learn about the natural treasure was.

One of the biggest challenges one was faced with when using rare ingredients was exactly that – their rarity. When Jake wanted to craft a regular health potion or a poison, he had plenty of time to practice. He could fail a hundred brews or concoctions before finally succeeding, and it wouldn't be a significant loss.

The same couldn't be said when one used incredibly rare or expensive ingredients. An example recently was Jake trying to make his first uncommon-rarity poison using the rare Lifevine of the Indigo Fungus. He was limited in his attempts due to only having a single Lifevine, and he even had to cut it up so he could have more tries.

And that had only been a rare-rarity item. What if it was one even rarer?

Jake knew that often the creations wouldn't result in a failure, just an inferior product. To completely fail was far harder than just creating a mediocre product that truly didn't do the incredible ingredient justice.

With Palate of the Malefic Viper, that all changed.

Without even harming – no, actually improving – the natural treasure, he would be able to learn about it and make it feel far more intimate to him when he would finally use it in alchemy. One of the reasons why Jake learned to craft potions and poisons so quickly was his ability to learn about the ingredients by eating them. It was an ability that made the entire profession as an Alchemist of the Malefic Viper coveted across the multiverse.

Jake was certain there was some kind of threshold to how much you could learn about a natural treasure while having it consumed, but either way, it would be a huge advantage in the future. There were still some doubts in his mind, so he did what he always did when in doubt:

He just dove right in and tried using the skill a bit, and Jake happened to have just the item for it. While it would feel a bit disgusting to swallow something that had once been a part of such an abhorrent creature... *sigh, what one doesn't do for science.*

He was naturally thinking about the rarest natural treasure he had: the Lifecore of the Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza.

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

Jake took it out of his spatial storage and looked at it a bit. He had no idea what to make with it currently, and while he could consume it directly and gain some stat points, he knew it would be a waste. Very rarely was it worth it to directly consume natural treasures, but it was far better to use them for crafting.

The Lifecore could be used for many things outside of alchemy. It would be great to socket on a staff or a wand to create a powerful life-affinity weapon, or maybe even as a catalyst in a piece of armor or jewelry to make it give vitality.

It was a mystery what he would one day end up using it for... but it would be used to test his skill for now.

Jake looked at the Lifecore about the size of his palm and took note that it was far too large to just shove in his mouth. Luckily, swallowing with the skill didn't actually require him to eat it.

He opened his mouth and activated the skill. A suction force took hold of the Lifecore as it shrunk and flew into Jake's mouth, disappearing from sight just as it entered. Jake instantly felt the Lifecore enter the stomach of the skill, and he felt all parts of his improved Palate of the Malefic Viper truly flare to life.

Energy began slowly refining the Lifecore, but it was slow as it wasn't a toxin and couldn't use his Cultivate Toxin skill. Luckily, it was helped along by the time inside the stomach accelerating to over a dozen times normal speed, far faster than Jake had predicted.

It only took a few moments before Jake felt a faint wisp of knowledge enter his mind... it was incredibly minor, just a bit about how the shell of the Lifecore was formed, but it was

something. In a day, a week, or a month, he would know far more. He did seriously doubt he could learn *everything*... but he could most certainly learn a lot.

He was also pleasantly surprised that it barely drained any mana. It was utterly negligible, and if he didn't focus on the skill draining a bit, he wouldn't know it happened. His natural regeneration – not even including his mask and the effects of the Pylon – far outpacing the drain.

Jake spent the next few hours just focusing on the feeling and familiarizing himself with the skill. He was only thrown out of his Thoughtful Meditation when Sylphie got too bored and began poking him with her talon to get his attention.

Awakening, he scratched her as he considered his next move. His quest panel made him aware that the World Congress would begin in around five and a half days.

A part of him wanted to go to the dungeon, but he knew it wouldn't be wise. He tended to get too invested in a singular goal, and he would hate having to leave it halfway. Rather just wait till after that congress. Besides... it wasn't like there were no other D-grades in the world.

Haven was located in the outskirts of a grand forest, one larger than all continents of the old planet. Jake had only gone a bit of the way in when he went to Mystie and Hawkie's old nest, and even then, he had felt the presence of a few D-grades further in, and that area had still been considered the outskirts.

Having already decided, he got up and stretched, cracked his neck, and had Hawkie take responsibility for Sylphie as he prepared to go on a bit of an adventure.

Chapter 206: A Real Shitfest

The figure leaped from atop the tree as it flew several hundred meters through the air, landing on another crown before swiftly taking off once more. A few beasts below considered attacking, but once they felt the difference in grade and power, they swiftly changed their minds.

It was far over three hundred kilometers from Haven, and the density of trees was only increasing, as well as many of the beasts now reaching around level 80. It was a bit deeper in than where Mystie and Hawkie had placed their nest back before they relocated to the city.

The figure was naturally Jake, who had decided to ditch the wings and do some tree-hopping instead. Would flying be faster? Most definitely, but making massive leaps from tree to tree just felt awesome.

One Step Mile wasn't that useable due to the sheer density of trees making it hard to travel in a straight line on the ground. The trunks could be many meters in radius and reach hundreds of meters into the air, reminding him a bit of the outer area of the tutorial.

Thinking about it, perhaps the tutorial forest was inspired by the true forest here on the reformed planet, or was it the other way around? Maybe a bit of both? Either way, it wasn't the first time he had noted the familiarity. It was quite certain this wasn't the same thing, though...

Because sadly, no lockboxes.

Jake would really like some new gear soon. His whole getup was beginning to feel a bit dated, even if it had only been a few months. The only great gear he really had were his necklace, mask, new scimitar, and surprisingly enough, boots.

Were those boots the ones with the lowest required level and still only rare-rarity? Sure, but they were also still the toughest damn things he had besides his mask, which he still hadn't managed to put even a slight scratch on.

He doubted he would find anything within this forest, but one can always be hopeful. Even if he couldn't find a lockbox, maybe he could find some good materials to use in the future.

One might wonder why Jake didn't use his newly upgraded Touch of the Malefic Viper to transmute his current gear, and the reason for that was quite simple... because he was 90% sure it would end up making the majority of his gear worse than it currently was.

Jake's version had to rely on the existing enchants, and as his many tests had shown, using Touch would ruin what was already placed on the gear. A lot of his gear had stat-giving effects, and Jake honestly had no idea how to replicate that. The only thing he would do was turn those stats into possibly making the armor poison people touching it or maybe use his arcane-affinity to make the armor a lot more durable. Oh, or he could make it self-destruct by transmuting it with a shitload of the destructive part of his arcane mana.

Quite honestly, he would prefer just to have stats over that.

The only item he was considering actually transmuting was his Windsoar Bow. It wasn't because he didn't want or like the enchant on it; in fact, he found its ability to remove wind resistance and even turn the wind into an assisting force as damn good. No, the issue was that he feared it would break if he didn't.

Arcane Powershot was not a gentle skill, far from it. While he charged the attack, the bow and his body would both be put under considerable strain, and the bow would be forced to absorb obscene amounts of energy and have the highly destructive mana also coat its exterior.

He could handle his body breaking a bit; that would heal by itself, but he couldn't handle his weapon suddenly exploding in the middle of a fight. He still vividly remembered how the first Infused Powershot he ever used absolutely destroyed the tutorial starting bow.

Without a new bow or transmuting his current one, he feared that could happen in not that long. For now, it was fine as the bow still held up, but as time went on, it would surely become an issue. Not just because he gained levels or more stats, but also just because he would get better at using the skill and pour more mana into it.

Actually... can it handle a full-throttle Arcane Powershot with Limit Break active at 20% as it is? he suddenly wondered, remembering that he had never used Arcane Powershot while using his Limit Break... *yeah, I really don't know.*

The wisest decision would likely be for Jake to stop now and just transmute the damn bow already, but he really didn't want to. His entire body felt restless, and he really needed a fight. He had yet to truly battle anything after reaching D-grade, after all. No, the fight with Mystie and Hawkie didn't count; that was just a bit of sparring.

Also... he needed to test out his Scimitar of Cursed Hunger, too, didn't he? It would be a shame if he just one-shot most opponents.

His travel continued for a bit longer as he noticed barely any beasts below 80 in the area. A few of them saw him and ran away, but some of them acted a bit more suspiciously as they began following him. They were these monkey-like creatures with an extremely long tail that they used to swing from tree to tree. They were also surprisingly small for beasts at their level, being only about the size of a chimpanzee.

[Lighttail Monkey – lvl 83]

They were called “Lighttail” but from what Jake could detect the “light” in their names didn't refer to light magic but was more related to their low weight. He noticed how even the small branches they used to swing from didn't even budge and how they appeared to float a bit through the air with every swing. It was like they weighed nearly nothing at times.

I wonder why they follow me, Jake thought a bit cheekily as he smiled. He didn't feel any danger from them, but only a strong sense of curiosity. There were more than a dozen on his tail now, with a few more joining every minute.

He also noted how they were the only type of beasts in the area of a decent level. Honestly... it couldn't be more obvious that this was their territory even if they put up glowing neon signs.

Well, their constant screeching as they followed him also made him believe they weren't happy with him being there. It was a little rude, actually, and woe would he be if security showed up with a few D-grades.

A few more minutes passed, and with every moment passing, more monkeys followed him, and Jake felt the entire atmosphere of the area change. It reminded Jake a bit of the mana released by his Pylon, but it was clearly different... actually... wasn't it a bit closer to the energy released by the giant lightning tree? Not as in it being lightning-affinity, but by how it was powerful and yet "neutral".

This energy is likely part of the reason why the beasts were able to evolve as they did... the very environment is nurturing them at all times.

Jake even saw a few trees around with budding fruits. None were ripe yet, and he suspected the monkeys ate them as soon as they were, but he believed every one of those fruits on the trees were considered low-level natural treasures.

Ten minutes later, he felt the first aura lock onto him. A few seconds later, a second and a third joined the first one. A small smile crept onto his lips as he felt that all three of them were D-grades. Finally... he had reached the inner area of the territory of these monkeys.

And one had to remember... he was still in the outer parts of the forest as a whole.

He saw the three of them the same moment they laid their eyes on him. They all looked a lot like their E-grade brethren, but they were slightly larger and had two additional tails instead of only one.

[Tri-Lighttail Monkey – lvl 102]

[Tri-Lighttail Monkey – lvl 103]

[Tri-Lighttail Monkey – lvl 105]

A bit disappointing with their levels, he thought as he saw the many E-grade monkeys surround him in his sphere, hiding in all the trees surrounding the one he was standing on. He was standing on a branch nearly 100 meters in the air, with the three D-grades only a few hundred meters in front of him, just staring him down.

Just as Jake considered if he had to open the show himself, another presence arrived. One quite a lot stronger than the other three... but far from enough to make Jake feel threatened.

[Tri-Lighttail Monkey Crusher – lvl 112]

This one was quite a bit buffer than the three others, but not much was different from that. It was likely just a more powerful variant of the other three. It had “crusher” in its name too, which was kinda cool, but it also gave away what their powerset was all about.

Weight magic? Gravity? Something like that.

Jake was excited as he summoned his wings and prepared to fight. The moment the two wings appeared, the monkeys saw it as a sign of aggression and attacked. Well, they had planned on attacking all along based on how they had clearly surrounded him; he had just sped up their decision-making a bit.

With his sphere, he saw the regular E-grade Lighttail Monkeys begin condensing some kind of substance in their hands that they promptly threw after Jake. He had a bad feeling instantly when he noticed the nature of their projectile and didn't hesitate to dodge.

The substance smashed into the tree and made a dent in the supremely robust bark, showing that clearly some magic had been used on it. It was more condensed, heavier, and more robust than it should naturally be... because Jake saw exactly what the monkey had thrown.

Did you just throw literal shit after me?

That's right, the monkeys above level 80 used their own shit as their chosen weapon... making Jake's next move completely and utterly justified.

A bow appeared in his hand in a swift motion as he turned and fired an arcane arrow. The monkey in his crosshairs didn't even have time to adequately react before its head was blown off by the exploding arrow, sending monkey parts flying everywhere.

****You have slain [***

Lighttail Monkey – lvl 81]*

Jake saw the notification that instantly appeared and on the lack of any experience earned. *Seems like my theory of only earning experience from higher-leveled or at least equal-leveled opponents is true*, he thought, as he dodged a pile of poo and retaliated by firing a Splitting Arrow.

The singular arrow appeared to split for a second, but soon the copies lost their shapes. Jake frowned as only the original arrow found its goal and exploded. Dodging a few more shit-slugs, he fired one of the non-exploding arrows with Splitting Arrow, and while it appeared for a bit longer than the shot before, it soon fizzled away too.

Splitting Arrow does not work with my Arcane Hunter's Arrows... he thought, both perplexed and annoyed. The fact that he had to consider how to make the damn skill work while dodging an avalanche of literal shit didn't help either.

He kept trying to use Splitting Arrow and figuring out what was wrong as he fought the E-grade monkeys. The D-grades still hung back for now, but Jake could see they were getting impatient at their lower-ranking brethren's inability to hit their target.

Finally, one of the D-grades moved. Its three tails moved as it sent a wave of mana towards him, and Jake instant felt like his entire body become heavier as he allowed it to hit him. It was enough to stump him for a fraction of a second and cause a bit of the damn feces to hit his cloak. Thank Villy it only hit the cloak.

The impact from the shit wasn't an issue, but he instantly noticed that something was off. It was way too damn heavy. Just the small part that hit him weighed down on him, and while it was far from enough to affect him, he suddenly understood the strategy of these monkeys.

They would pelter their target with shit, covering them in the substance that would only serve to weigh one down... and then the D-grades would move in and enhance the target's weight even more, amplifying the effect and effectively crippling the target.

It was actually a pretty sound strategy that Jake could see work well on many beasts, especially larger ones. It also allowed the entire tribe to fight together, and the D-ranks didn't have to risk their lives that often. Of course, the whole strategy did have a few weaknesses. Okay, a lot of weaknesses.

Now, while he did find out that the damn stuff was very adhesive and even resisted his mana when he tried to push it off, it wasn't impossible. He could also just toss the cloak away if it really became an issue. Or, you know, just summon mana shields or something.

On top of that, there was also the far simpler solution of just not being hit at all or fighting them with ranged attacks or a mix of both like Jake was doing. The strategy also wouldn't be that effective against larger groups of enemies.

Seeing their initial tactic didn't work, the three other D-grades also joined the fray. One of the three regular Tri-Lighttails kept sending the weird weight-magic against Jake while the other two whipped their tails his way. He wondered what they were up to until he felt the air bend.

BOOM!

Two massive blasts of force were sent after him, exploding the branch he had just been standing on. One of the two that had just fired the blast after him then retreated back as it began using some kind of magic on the big boy: the Crusher.

They fought like a team, making it quite clear this group of monkeys had battled together before. Sadly... they stood before a foe far above their own level of strength.

Jake bent backward as a massive tail swipe from the Crusher passed over him and obliterated a tree to his side. Another tail quickly came down like a scorpion stinger as the hunter stepped on the air and retreated a bit with a flap of his wings.

First that one.

He used the space he had opened up to fire a quick Arcane Powershot towards the Tri-Lighttail Monkey that was slowing him down. It tried to dodge at the last moment but found itself frozen by a glance from Jake and was hit square in the chest.

The arrow didn't explode but pierced through it, leaving a large hole and sending it flying more than a hundred meters through the forest, ping-ponging between trees on the way. It wasn't dead, but it was out of commission for now.

Next.

Chapter 207: Enhanced Splitting Arrow

The three remaining monkeys looked as their comrade was blasted away in shock, but it only made them more aggressive than before.

With one down, he turned his attention to the Crusher. It came at him with tails swinging and arms flailing, now even more berserk than before. It was pretty strong but not very fast, and Jake easily evaded its simple movements as he took out his melee weapons.

In a fluid motion, he ran his palms over both, drawing blood and coating them in Blood of the Malefic Viper. Venomfang felt oddly frail in his hand as he held it, and he knew the weapon would soon be unable to keep up with his progress... and if he was honest, he had a feeling it would soon break anyway, him growing stronger or not. The weapon had been through a lot, and he would prefer for it not to break entirely.

But for this hunt you'll be just fine, old buddy.

He blocked the clawed hand of the Crusher as he felt the weight on the blade. To Jake, it felt like the beast before him weighed tons, yet when it jumped on the trees or swung from a branch, the wood didn't even budge, showing there indeed was some magic going on there.

Being this close, he also noticed what appeared to be a passive aura of sorts around the monkey, weighing him down even further. Even the regular D-ranks in the background had this aura active.

Angling himself a bit, Jake made sure to do so the monkey releasing blasts couldn't get a good shot as he landed small cuts on the body of the Crusher. Slowly the scimitar began glowing red, and Jake felt the curse within spin to life as he felt its hunger permeate his body – and luckily for it, today it would be sated.

With every landed cut, a small stream of red energy entered the blade and Jake himself, restoring a few health points to him while draining it from the Crusher. Simultaneously, the poison quickly accumulated in its system, and the monkey soon noticed that something was very wrong.

It didn't know it yet, but it was practically already dead. The two other D-grade monkeys in the background tried to help as they also entered melee and began swinging their tails and hands. One of them even tried to grab and hold him down while increasing its own weight, but Jake was faster than all of them. While the Crusher had more pure strength than him, he had more than the regular ones.

All the E-grades attempted to throw more of their damn feces here and there, but it was difficult for them with Jake surrounded by the three D-grades.

Jake had to admit that the pressure building up from the three weight-increasing auras was beginning to get cumbersome as he moved to finish one of the beasts off. He laid eyes on all three of them and used Gaze of the Apex Hunter, making all of them freeze up as his scimitar was coated in a mix of arcane mana and the energy of the curse.

The blade extended as he swept it horizontally through the neck of the closest monkey, sending its head flying into the air.

****You have slain [Tri-Lighttail Monkey – lvl 103] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

A moment after the head left its neck, the two surviving monkeys became able to move again, and their fury had spiked even more than before.

But it was all for naught. The Crusher was already sluggish from all the poison, and the other regular one wasn't doing that much better itself, having taken a few solid stabs from Venomfang already.

Perhaps realizing they were both screwed, they held nothing back. It was as if the air shimmered, and Jake felt like he had just been thrown deep underwater as he felt the pressure mount on him, and he was forced down to the ground with the two monkeys in tow. Their two auras overlapped as they tried to crush him, and Jake even became unable to avoid the attacks of the shit-slingers.

Without hesitation, he erected a barrier of mana around himself – courtesy of many hours of practice with Hawkie – and had all the feces land on that. He felt every impact drain some mana, and he even felt that the shit could corrode the mana even faster, but if there was one thing Jake didn't lack currently, it was mana.

Also... while he couldn't exactly jump around, he could still move a bit.

He took out his bow and, with great willpower, stood up straight as he began channeling. He felt like his bones creaked a bit doing so, but his body was durable enough to easily handle it.

The purple-pink mana swirled around him as the energy began building up. Both D-grade monkeys noticed this, and the Crusher moved in to attack, moving incredibly slow as it was also clearly affected by its own aura.

Jake smirked a bit as he lifted his foot and took a step forward, and by using his sphere used it to travel nearly 100 meters backward as the ground where he had just stood exploded as the massive tail of the Crusher tried to do exactly what the creature was named for doing.

A small crater was formed as the soil was kicked up, the Crusher confused by its blow missing the human that shouldn't be able to move.

Its surprise only doubled when an arcane arrow parted the cloud of dust and blew its head off.

****You have slain [Tri-Lighttail Monkey Crusher – lvl 112] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

Jake instantly felt the pressure on him almost disappear, and he turned his gaze to the last D-grade that was just standing there, looking like it was about to shit itself. Before it got the chance to throw that hypothetical shit, Jake put it down with another Arcane Powershot, freezing the monkey as it attempted to flee.

He barely had time to spot the very last D-grade monkey peek out from behind a tree before it quickly bolted away, rushing further into the forest. It was the one he had sent flying earlier, and it had only barely managed to get its bearing to come back in time and see its comrades slaughtered.

With those gone... let's figure out why Splitting Arrow isn't working, Jake thought, moving on to more exciting things. The D-grades were honestly too weak for him... he reckoned those four together only managed to reach the level of a single Thunder Roc, even with their levels.

This wasn't surprising as often solitary creatures were more powerful individually. They had more skills to square up their own shortcomings and just more stats overall. This didn't mean that beasts or monsters in groups were weaker, though. Often they had powerful leaders, even for their level, such as... well, pretty much all the dungeon bosses from the Tutorial were examples of this.

On top of that, these leaders often had skills that allowed their subjects to level and grow faster. Jake didn't doubt that these monkeys had some strong leaders hidden away in the core of their territory, and he was very much looking forward to paying them a visit.

It would only be polite so teach them some basic courtesy, wouldn't it? Such as not allowing shit-throwing.

But before that... he had a skill to upgrade and more than a hundred E-grade monkeys still hiding in the trees all around him, thinking he couldn't see them. Joke's on them because Jake had more perception than could ever be reasonable for a level 101 human.

He turned to the side with his bow in hand and fired towards a tree nearby, trying to use Splitting Arrow, using the stable version of his arcane arrows, as he noticed before, they would persist for a bit longer. Yet again, the arrow appeared to split for a second, but just as the outline appeared, they dispersed.

Jake had only consumed a bit of stamina from the shot... and he instantly found the issue.

Arcane arrows use mana, you dummy.

The three fundamental energies for humans: vital energy – also called health points, mana, and stamina were able to act like one another, but this required a bit of finesse on the user's part. That is how he could make his mana act like vital energy and create health potions after all.

However, the transformation of energy was a time-consuming process, making it not at all viable in combat unless used with some specific technique. Self-healing spells, as an example, were often just a skill transforming a portion of mana or stamina into health points.

Jake had considered at one point if this was exploitable... you know, have a skill that effectively turns 500 mana into 1000 health, and then a skill that turns 500 health into 1000 mana. Couldn't you go infinite with that? Sadly the Viper shot that down quickly. He learned that you didn't truly transform the energy; you just allowed it to act as another kind of energy for a bit. You had to use it, or it would just disperse, like if Jake consumed a mana potion while full.

Going back to Splitting Arrow, that skill was entirely a “physical” skill. It consumed stamina to use, even if the stamina acted a lot like mana normally would as it duplicated the arrows. One could say the quiver was the same, too, as it summoned physical arrows. At least they were viewed as physical entities by the system. Jake’s arcane arrows, on the other hand, were considered entirely magical. Honestly... the easiest way to spot the difference was just what stats the skills benefitted from. If it benefitted from physical stats, it was a stamina-move; if it benefitted from mental stats, it was a mana move, and if it used stats from both camps, it had mixed cost - his own Arcane Powershot an example of this.

The arcane arrows only benefitted from wisdom and intelligence for the exploding ones and wisdom and perception for the stable arrows. Perception was a stat that didn’t really fit into either camp as a physical or mental stat, but was a bit of both. That is because, objectively speaking - according to Jake - perception was the best stat.

In summary, Jake needed to change the Splitting Arrow skill to work with his mana rather than his stamina.

However, this was easier said than done. Summoning an arcane arrow was naturally easy for Jake, considering that was what the Arcane Hunter’s Arrows was all about... no, the issue was to do it while in flight and at the same time allow them to retain their innate power and momentum.

Any attack used had inherent power in it, and not just in the form of physical momentum or force. Especially Jake’s attacks were different. All his arrows dealt damage based on distance and perception because of his Archery of Vast Horizons, so he had to make sure the arrows were still considered archery - no matter how weird that sounds.

With all that in mind, Jake went to work.

He kept trying to use the skill as he made small changes here and there. Dozens of Lighttail Monkeys fell during his experimentation, but even more of them were just perplexed at how bad the accuracy of their attacker was. A few of the shots were made with the intent of the arrow splitting, after all.

After half an hour, another small group of D-grades showed up. Two Crushers in this one, both around the level of the one he killed earlier, as well as four of the more regular D-grade Tri-Lighttail Monkeys. One of them being the one who ran off earlier.

Another five minutes after that, there were two dead Crushers and 4 dead regular D-grade monkeys. Jake didn't let any of them run off for reinforcements this time as he wanted to spend some time figuring out the whole Splitting Arrow thing and doing that while having two buffed-up hulking monkeys try and smash him was a bit distracting. He would come to them in due time.

The next few hours were spent with Jake trying different things. Around two hours in, he had partial success as he managed to split the arrow while in mid-air, but the new arrow just fell harmlessly to the ground instantly, having lost all momentum.

He needed the "physical" aspects of the skill to work, too, so he began experimenting with a mix of stamina and mana.

The hardest part of it all was to have it all work with the Splitting Arrow skill. He had an innate connection to any attack he used, and to activate his intent for the arrow to split using the Splitting Arrow skill took quite a bit of practice. If he tried to do it without using the skill as an anchor, he had no confidence at all in getting it to work. It was a good example of why skills were still valuable... they did stuff that was honestly far too

complicated than Jake could do on his own, and it wasn't even like Splitting Arrow was the most complex.

During his progress, only a single more D-grade showed up after that large group, and that one was swiftly put down. No levels yet, but he hadn't really expected any either.

Five hours into his practice, most of his time was spent considering how to improve things while looking for more prey. He felt absolutely no regret from slaughtering a few hundred monkeys, and even if he questioned himself if committing monkey genocide was acceptable, then a single shit-flinging bastard was enough to deter that sentiment.

It was on the sixth hour that he met his first partial success as an arrow was summoned and lasted for a few seconds before flickering out, and it even managed to strike a tree before doing so, penetrating into the bark deeply.

Fifteen minutes later, his improved version of Splitting Arrow passed the threshold of improvement set by the system, and a notification appeared.

[Splitting Arrow (Uncommon)] – One arrow becomes many; one fallen prey becomes a field of death. Fire an arrow that splits into several copies while in flight. Each arrow strikes with the power of the original. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Strength when using Splitting Arrow.

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[Enhanced Splitting Arrow (Rare)] – A skill most often used by archers, now usurped and reformed by the Avaricious Arcane Hunter. Allows you to clone your arrows while in flight, allowing them to retain innate magical properties. Each arrow strikes with the power of the original. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Wisdom when using Enhanced Splitting Arrow.

With the upgrade, the system assistance was entirely in place as he fired his Enhanced Splitting Arrow. It consumed both mana and stamina as he did so - quite a bit more mana than stamina.

It only split into three arrows – far fewer than before – but each struck with impressive power.

Three giant explosions sounded out as the forest shook, and monkey parts were sent flying everywhere.

Jake nodded in satisfaction as he dismissed his bow and began traveling further into the domain of the Lighttail Monkeys.

Leaving only more dead monkeys in his wake. One could even say that the monkey-tribe was having quite the *shitty* day.

Chapter 208: Dervish

Sometimes in life, one must take the good with the bad, and disappointment was an unavoidable element of existence. To be honest, Jake shouldn't really have been disappointed, though, as it was a bit unrealistic to expect it to work...

But damn it, Jake wanted his Splitting Arrow to also duplicate the poison. Was that really too much to ask?

Shortly after upgrading the skill, Jake had with much excitement tried putting his blood on the arrow – the type of poison most aligned with himself and his mana – and tried duplicating it with Enhanced Splitting Arrow. It did exactly the same as the normal Splitting Arrow, with only the “real” one retaining the poison.

No big deal, Jake had thought. He was already on a roll and had just upgraded the skill in rarity, so couldn't he just keep working on it and upgrade it again? Allow it to also duplicate poison on it?

Jake wasn't even going to be greedy... it was fine if it only worked with his blood. That shouldn't be so hard, right?

Wrong.

It was damn impossible. No matter what Jake tried, nothing worked. The poison simply wasn't at all considered as any part of the “arrow”, so it didn't duplicate. It wasn't an issue of resources or methods... the skill just wasn't compatible at all with what he wanted it to do. It was like trying to use his Brew Potion to make a shotgun...

Well, there was one consolation to it all, at least. A lot of dead monkeys. *A lot*. Even a good bunch of D-grades, allowing Jake to net his first real level in his class after reaching D-grade.

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 101 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

Jake checked the quest to see how much time he had before the World Congress and noticed that he had a bit over four days left still. It would take him a few hours to get back to the city with how far he had traveled, but that still meant he had plenty of time to explore the rest of the monkey-infested area of the forest he found himself in.

Where he was now, he nearly only saw D-grades, and almost all enemies were monkeys. The vast majority were the normal Tri-Lighttail Monkeys, but there were also plenty of Crushers and even another one called a Suppressor. Yeah... their names weren't exactly subtle. To the surprise of no one, the Suppressors specialized in suppressing things with their weight magic.

Besides those two, there was also another variant. One Jake was looking at right at that moment.

[Tri-Lighttail Dervish - lvl 123]

It was tall and slender with three tails like all the other monkeys, but its tails themselves were different. While the Crusher had far bulkier ones, the Dervish had tails that looked almost flat. Jake had wondered why they looked like that, but he soon learned the reason.

When Jake came across the group of monkeys, they were in the middle of a battle against another beast. A large bulky bear that was almost ten meters long and had to weigh many tons. Sadly for the bear, its large size became a detriment to it.

[Brownhide Ursine – lvl 131]

The beast was pelted by literal shit by the D-grade monkeys and was slowed down as its weight was forcibly increased. Its hide grew harder as it tried to shield itself, but all it did was limit its own mobility further as it got covered in feces.

It tried roaring, sending a wave of force out, but the monkeys hid away up in the trees and just jeered and laughed at it. Jake didn't like their way of fighting, but he still chose not to interfere. He didn't like interfering in the fights of others even more, and besides, the Dervish looked like it was about to make its move.

Jake saw it leap off the tree it was on, and instantly it accelerated manyfold as it quickly fell the nearly 150 meters down towards the bear.

During its descent, it spun around itself, and its three tails were rotating at a tremendous speed as it landed right in front of the bear. The three tails tore into the bear, acting like three whip-like blades, sending blood flying everywhere and making the bear roar in pain and anger.

The suppressed beast instantly began burning with energy as it entered some kind of enraged state, and for a brief moment, it managed to shrug off the weight-increasing effect and move. It attacked the Dervish before it, and when Jake saw its paw land, he thought the monkey would be done for... but instead, it was just sent flying.

Like if the bear had punched a feather, the Dervish harmlessly flew away and landed on the ground. It had a few bloody marks left by the claws, but the impact itself seemed to have barely affected it. At least it decided to counterattack immediately.

It rushed towards the bear with frightening speed, and using a weird spinning technique, it quickly cut into the far larger beast.

Definitely an agility-focused beast, Jake thought as he saw the bear slowly be finished off. The Dervish inflicted many wounds in quick succession, but it wasn't exactly a fast killer. In the end, two Crushers joined in when the bear became too weak to put up any resistance at all, quickly finishing the fight.

Just as the monkeys stood triumphantly and cheered, something descended from above.

BOOM!

An arcane arrow fell from atop one of the tallest trees, right through the skull of the one Suppressor that had been the primary force to suppress the bear. It didn't even have time to react before its life was ended, and with its demise, panic quickly spread among the monkeys.

A second arrow arrived a few moments later, hitting one of the regular D-grades right in its noggin, blowing its head off and ending yet another life. The remnant energy of the Arcane Powershot evident as the air itself seemed to vibrate.

Sadly for Jake, that was the last easy kill as all the monkeys had now managed to take cover, and he didn't have time to charge another Powershot for a one-shot. He had wanted to fly above the forest before to more easily bombard them from above but found that the crowns of the trees made it impossible. It wasn't just a question of his sight being physically obstructed either, as clearly the crowns formed some kind of barrier sealing off the forest. Like a giant naturally formed array or magic circle, the entire forest protected itself from attacks from above. Which, in retrospect, probably made a lot of sense with powerful flying beasts everywhere. Or, you know, winged humans with bows.

The trees themselves were also damn tough, especially the largest ones. Jake couldn't even destroy them if he wanted to... it was like being back in the tutorial during the first days, where just penetrating the bark with a dagger was a damn struggle.

It likely had something to do with the mana intensity being different here. Everything was just tougher, and D-grades were aplenty. Just how he wanted it.

With his wings out, he flew around the trunks of the trees and loosed arrow after arrow towards the monkeys below, every single one of them exploding whenever they hit a monkey or a tree. A few monkeys were even taken by surprise when the exploding arrow suddenly duplicated, and instead of one nearly-lethal explosion, it became three very-much lethal explosions.

To Jake, the regular D-grade monkeys just weren't worth much. They were too slow and too weak to pose any real threat, and the entire Lighttail species hadn't shown themselves very robust yet. They were a race that focused on not getting hit to begin with, while Jake was quite good at hitting stuff.

He had to deal with a total of 11 normal Tri-Lighttail Monkeys, 1 Crusher, and 1 Dervish. That is after killing one of the Crushers and a few of the normal ones, of course.

Jake had already decided to save the Dervish for last... if it allowed him to.

A single figure stood on the ground below, 500 meters down. Bending its legs, it jumped.

Wha? Jake barely managed to think as he had to do a flap of his wings to dodge to the side as two blade-like tails flew by.

The Dervish tore through the air, and just as it hit the top of the forest, it turned and landed on only a few leaves of the long branches as if it was solid ground. With another mighty jump, it once more flew like a meteor towards Jake, but this time the hunter was ready.

Jake looked up at it and used Gaze of the Apex Predator as the Scimitar of Cursed Hunger appeared in his hand. It froze up just as Jake swung the blade and smashed it into the side of the beast. He felt his blade cut a bit into his target, but after barely managing to leave a wound, he felt all resistance disappear as if he was striking something without any mass – or in this case – weight.

The Dervish was sent flying away, and just as Jake was about to take out his bow, he saw it purposefully bounce off a tree and behind another, clearly fearing his arrows that had killed several of its brethren earlier.

You don't like magical attacks, eh? Jake thought, understanding their weakness. Blunt force or even cuts did little to the Dervish, but an exploding arcane arrow was a whole other story. Well, not like the other monkeys fared that much better. Very few things weren't susceptible to being blown up.

Jake just switched to another monkey with his target lost as he began killing off the regular D-grade Lighttails below, patiently waiting for the Dervish to make its next move. He could feel its attention on him as it looked for a chance to strike.

To make it a bit harder for the quick monkey, Jake made sure to fly around the different trees to never give it a straight line of attack while he whittled down the monkeys that were quickly rushing up towards him. He had to dodge quite a few blasts of force and shrug off quite a few waves of weight-increasing mana, but he managed to get quite a few kills in return.

However, soon the monkeys had managed to climb up the trees and reach him, and he had to contend with several of them leaping between the trees and trying to hit him. A single one was easy enough, but when five came at once, shit got difficult.

Luckily, he had quite a few tricks up his sleeve to handle it.

The wings on his back began glowing a dark green color as they began emanating a dark toxic gas. Jake had mixed a bit of dark-affinity mana into the poison, and soon large parts of the treetops were covered in a layer of dark smoke.

This made it significantly harder for the monkeys to strike back, while Jake honestly barely noticed the dark cloud. He had learned quite a while ago that his perception alone made him able to peer through many magical obstructions of sight, and even if it didn't, he was quite accustomed to dark mana anyway.

Moreover, when the monkeys passed through the cloud, they were ever-so-slowly infected by the poison. The poison didn't actually do much damage, and even the effects of the dark-affinity weren't noticeable to them... no, the real value lay in Jake being able to detect them far more easily.

Sense of the Malefic Viper allowed him to effortlessly sense poison he had inflicted, and the poison fumes from his wings naturally counted. It was technically just his burned blood, after all.

Jake used everything in his arsenal as he slaughtered the entire group of D-grades. Bolts of arcane mana flew around, exploding arrows, and the occasional Powershot tore up the entire section of the forest he was in. None of them posed any threat besides the Dervish.

Well, the Crusher would hurt like hell if it managed to strike him, but Jake was never in any real danger of that happening. It was slower than even the regular monkeys and didn't have much chance of pinning him down. They kept trying to ground him by sending their weight-increasing waves of mana, but Jake countered that by constantly releasing disruptive waves of mana around himself. Was this damn draining on his mana pool? Yes, it sure was, but Jake was a bit of a cheat when it came to that.

A single mana potion restored more than 10000 mana with the bonus from Palate included, allowing his entire mana pool to effectively be above 40000. His mask increasing his mana recovery to a large amount sure also helped.

Even though Jake countered the beasts quite hard and that they were all weak for D-grades, it still took a while to put them all down. D-grades were still D-grades, and unless he landed a lethal blow with Arcane Powershot, they took quite a bit to put down for good.

The Crusher was the second-to-last to fall as only a single enemy remained. In its final moments, the Crusher had managed to make Jake dodge a direction he would prefer not to, and it put him right in the crosshairs of the Dervish.

SWOOSH!

A figure zoomed by him, and Jake failed to fully dodge the blow as the two tails seemed to extend just as it was about to hit him, leaving him a nasty cut on his stomach and chest when the beast passed by. He barely had time to stabilize himself in the air before it struck again, this time finding itself countered like the first time it tried this tactic.

Jake looked over at it and made it freeze with Gaze of the Apex Hunter. Yet the beast had learned a little as it was already spinning at high speed, effectively making itself a sawblade soaring through the air towards him.

The hunter dodged to the side as he extended both his hands out beside him, a net of mana strings woven between them. The spinning tails cut through many of them, but a few remained as the monkey was stopped mid-air.

With a slight smile, Jake infused a bit more arcane mana into the strings as stability was broken and turned to destruction.

BOOM!

The entire net exploded, searing the Dervish as it screamed in pain. Jake himself wasn't unscathed as he was also hit by the large explosion, but the scales covering his body took most of the blow. Besides, it was his own arcane mana, and he had plenty of experience being hurt by that already.

Without any momentum and hurt pretty badly, the Dervish was forced to descend to the ground as it accelerated itself downward to try and get away. Jake quickly followed as he flew only a few meters to the side and unto a tree.

Standing horizontally, he took a step as he traveled down the length of the tree, appearing on the ground just below where the monkey would land as it accelerated down towards him.

He didn't have time to fire an arrow, but he did have time to take out his sword as he met the descending beast. It had managed to notice him, too, as it spun around itself and attacked.

Cling *cling* *cling* *cling* *cling*

With his scimitar, he blocked the spinning blade-like tails, finding himself forced back a bit. Taking another step back, he exchanged several blows with the tails as the monkey hissed, and Jake felt the weight of each blade rapidly increase. At the same time, he felt his own blade become heavier with every block.

Jake took a step forward as he once more used Gaze of the Apex Hunter, a few droplets of blood flowing from his eyes at this point from overusing the skill within a short amount of time. However, it was fine as he was about to finish the fight.

He moved in between two spinning tails, the monkey unable to move them as it stood frozen for a moment longer. With both hands on his blade, he raised it high as he stabbed down towards the skull of the monkey, swirling dark mana around the edge.

Descending Dark Fang

Not unlike a giant spike of dark mana, his blade penetrated through its skull and out the other side at the base of the Dervish's neck.

The still-spinning blades managed to land a few more cuts on him, and it managed to scratch his scales a bit in an instinctive reaction, but the monkey was unable to do anything more as its life ended.

****You have slain [Tri-Lighttail Dervish - lvl 123] - Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

Jake pulled out the blade as he stumbled back, sitting down on the ground as he breathed out heavily, a smile on his face. Individually these monkeys weren't that hard dealing with, but damn, was there a lot of them.

Still smiling, he checked his notifications.

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 102 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 102 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

Another level. D-grade was quite a bit slower, but Jake knew what he was doing was exactly what he was meant to. He was hunting higher-leveled enemies, using Mark of the Ambitious Hunter on every enemy, and even killing foes more than twenty levels above himself.

Standing up once more, he did a few stretches as he leaped up one of the trees and begun his journey further into the domain of the Lighttails. With so many of them... something good was bound to be in the innermost area.

Chapter 209: Worthy Opponents

Jake opened his hand as he let the body fall, the dark green glow of Touch of the Malefic Viper fading. The body that fell was that of a monkey with a black handprint on its neck and its body already half rotten. When it hit the ground, it squashed together as its insides were already decayed and turned to mush.

****You have slain [Tri-Lighttail Dervish – lvl 128] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

Its killer took out a healing potion and drank it as the dozens of deep cuts on his body rapidly began closing, leaving only a few of the worse ones, such as where a tail had penetrated his chest. Those would take a bit longer.

The entire section of the forest he was in was utterly wrecked. The trees had deep cuts in them, the ground littered with craters, and everything had a horrible smell of death and decay as he hadn't held back on using his poisons at all. The bark of many of the trees was black from the poison mist or arrows coated in poison hitting them

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 103 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

He flew over to a branch as he sat down and entered meditation. This was the third fight since he met the first Dervish and by far the hardest. The first fight had only been a small group of normal D-grades with a single Suppressor, so those were pretty easily put down.

The second fight was a bit tougher and was a lot like the first group with a Dervish he encountered, but with his increased experience fighting the monkeys, it ended quite a bit faster.

As for the third and final fight, he had just finished; there had been two dozen enemies with three Dervishes. It had been quite the battle as the Dervishes honestly weren't easy opponents at all. They were incredibly fast, no doubt agility-focused, and combined with their weight-increasing magic, their whip-blade-tails felt like heavy as fuck razors barraging you constantly.

Jake was fully aware that if he screwed up, he could lose his life to them – which is why he found them entertaining to battle.

He also made a decision. One that may be viewed as controversial by many... but Jake felt like it was necessary. As he made the command through the system, it hurt him down to the core of his soul... but he had to. He needed the speed to keep up with his foes, and he could feel his body unable to move as fast as he wanted, so he had done it.

Jake had used free points on something that wasn't perception.

The 105 free points he had saved up since entering D-grade were all put into agility as he felt the stat increase, taking him from 1595 to 1748 after all the bonuses were applied. It was around a 10% increase, and he instantly felt the difference as he could now move even faster than before, and perhaps now he could begin reacting to even the Dervishes above level 130. The one at 128 had been a bit too fast for him, and he had to freeze it and grab hold of it to use Touch of the Malefic Viper to win the fight instead of just beating it with his blade. Fighting with his sword tended to be more fun, so he would prefer to do that, after all.

Checking the time, he still had plenty to get to the inner area, and he had a feeling he was close.

Still, he had to spend a few hours getting himself back in top condition. Between his meditation and liberal potion use, Jake's recovery was far faster than most other D-grades, allowing him to battle far more than normal.

Once he was done sitting around meditating and chugging down potions, he moved on with his day of slaughtering monkeys.

He tried to avoid unnecessary fights and encounters with small squads as those battles weren't exactly entertaining.

Just as he made his way around a tree, he spotted a small group of D-grades heading his way around 300 meters ahead of him. Not feeling like battling four regular D-grade Lighttail Monkeys, he focused a bit on staying hidden as he even used his cloak to camouflage himself a bit better.

It wasn't something he aimed for or even expected... but that small action gave him a notification.

[Advanced Stealth (Common)] – The deadliest blow is the one not seen coming. A proven artisan in the arts of stealth, you have learned to stay undetected far better than a mere novice. You now find it even easier to blend into the environment, waiting for just the right moment to strike. Adds a minor bonus to the effect of Agility and Perception while successfully remaining undetected.

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[Expert Stealth (Uncommon)] – The deadliest blow is the one not seen coming. You have proven yourself an expert in the arts of stealth, as you have learned to become a shadow that is only seen when you wish to be so. You find it easier than ever to blend into the environment, making your presence, mana, and nearly all traces of your existence hidden as you wait for your prey to be vulnerable. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Perception while successfully remaining undetected.

Jake read it over and couldn't help but just shrug. Staying hidden was never anything he really thought much about; it is just one of those things you do. The skill itself was just one of those that kind of just existed and didn't require any more thoughts than that. Not that he complained about getting it upgraded, as he knew it would make the hiding he already did just a little bit more effective.

Anyway, with a random skill upgrade out of the way, he continued his quest into the heart of the monkey-lands.

He estimated the entire domain controlled by the monkeys to be several hundred kilometers in diameter, making it a small country based on old-world standards. Still, Jake knew that compared to some other beasts, it really wasn't that impressive.

The scale of everything in the multiverse was just bigger. It made sense, though, as an area did feel a lot smaller when you can fly faster than a fighter jet or practically teleport with every footstep. Populations growing to ridiculous levels and cities becoming absolutely massive was also just kind of natural.

Heck, trees could now naturally grow to be kilometers tall, and buildings could easily be constructed to be even taller. The logistical issues with large cities were primarily eliminated by magic and the population's lower requirements for sustenance and their natural ability to survive better independently due to stats and evolutions. E-grade required way less food than a normal pre-system human, after all, and so far in D-grade, Jake had yet to feel any hunger.

Well, except a hunger for good challenges, but that is a bit of a different thing.

Back in the real world, outside of Jake's neverending random thoughts about things getting bigger, he had just made his way around a massive tree. It was one of the true behemoths in the area, and while he did consider flying to the top for fun, what he saw as he got to the other side of it dissuaded him.

Before Jake lay what could only be described as a small ancient temple with a few stone buildings placed around it. The temple itself looked like one of those old boxy pyramids like the Aztecs made them, except without that entrance on the top. There was a small entrance at the bottom, though.

If that were the only thing worth noting, he would only be mildly interested, but what was living among those ancient-looking buildings made him quite excited. Hundreds of monkeys jumped around, a lot of them D-grade, but there were even more E-grades running about.

He saw dozens of Dervishes, Crushers, and Suppressors... but what was even more noteworthy were four huge monkeys, each sitting on top of their own small ancient building.

[Tri-Lighttail Monkey Matriarch – lvl 142]

[Tri-Lighttail Monkey Matriarch – lvl 147]

[Tri-Lighttail Monkey Matriarch – lvl 146]

[Tri-Lighttail Monkey Matriarch – lvl 146]

The Matriarchs looked a bit like their brethren but were twice the size of an average monkey, with quite a bit of bulk and fat on their bodies. They looked like they could put up quite a fight, but it wasn't their primary role. Many small monkeys crawled all over their bodies with levels as low as 25, making Jake believe this was their primary breeding ground.

Just as Jake was trying to get a good count of how many baby monkeys there were, he felt something look his way. He barely managed to see a figure exit the ancient temple in the middle before he instinctively hid behind the tree he was on and focused on his newly upgraded stealth.

A few moments passed before he felt it was safe as he peeked out and saw what had just nearly spotted him from so far away.

It was another monkey, but it was quite a bit different from the others.

Like the Dervishes, it was tall and slender, but it was a bit bulkier than those. What truly set it apart was its pristine golden fur, the glowing silvery symbol on its forehead, and the five tails extending out behind it. Jake didn't doubt for a second that this beast was the most powerful in the entire settlement and could in no way be considered weak. He used Identify on it as he hid, and the level didn't actually surprise him.

[Penta-Lighttail Monkey Prima – lvl 131]

It was lower than all the Matriarchs and even many the Dervishes, but Jake knew level wasn't everything. Shit, he just had to look at himself and the pile of dead monkeys in his wake making it to this temple, all of them higher level than himself.

A smile crept onto his lips as he, for the first time, spotted a prey he found worth hunting after reaching D-grade.

Miyamoto was in his courtyard with his eyes closed as he slowly swung the blade through the air. As if dancing, he moved fluidly through the motions in a slow fashion - his blade appearing to almost shimmer with every stroke, like it was made of water.

Every movement calculated, every step pre-determined, and every fiber of his being and soul invested as he trained. To Miyamoto, there was no world outside of him and his sword at that moment.

But all things have to come to an end as he stopped. His eyes opened as he softly looked down at his sword. The old heirloom that had been proudly displayed by their family for generations no longer just a normal weapon. Oh no, far from it.

One of the tutorial rewards he had spent his points on was to make this old family blade awaken - to allow the spirits of his ancestors and their will to come to life and for the blade to become a true artifact. His request had been met, and the blade bound to his soul as it became his life companion.

Miyamoto was level 99 in his class and 95 in his profession. While it did hurt his pride a bit to not be the first D-grade as the patriarch of his clan, he would be the first to achieve the perfect evolution.

If he had chosen to become a City Lord, perhaps things would be different, but he knew he did not desire to be a leader of the people anymore. He was past that age, and he had passed the baton to the younger generation. No, he would focus on the blade and his passions as he helped protect his family as any good patriarch would do.

By following his own desires, he had spearheaded the expansion of the clan. He had fought and claimed the first Pylon, losing many family members in the process, but for the second Pylon, he had taken care of the foe by his lonesome. The third Pylon he hadn't even needed to be present as his grandson and his great-granddaughter had handled that just a week prior.

As an old soul, he had little to complain about as he spent most of his time focusing on improving himself to be a pillar of strength for the clan. He had just gone through a session of Sword Meditation, a skill he valued quite highly.

[Supreme Sword Meditation (Ancient)] – The sword is you, and you are your sword. While in meditation, regenerate stamina and mana significantly faster and more easily find inspiration and experience enlightenment in relation to all sword-related skills. Allows you to earn far more experience points while using Supreme Sword Meditation. While in Supreme Sword Meditation, you must perform a compatible Sword Dance flawlessly. Any mistakes will lead to forcefully exiting meditation and be unable to reenter it again for a short period of time. May you find your truth through your blade.

It was a great skill, and he had gotten it to its current rarity shortly after returning to Earth, while it had only been epic-rarity upon his exit of the tutorial.

He had gotten it to rare-rarity the day he reached level 25 and earned the meditation skill.

Taking a deep breath, the old man extended his sword as he began drawing in the air, as he painted with his sword. It was an ephemeral painting of water that would disperse the moment he stopped the skill, a mere snapshot of reality that he would be the only one to ever lay his eyes on.

Finesse had many forms, be it swordsmanship or painting. Ultimately, both were about control, conviction, and the ability to execute techniques accurately. All these things only became more true as the system arrived.

Miyamoto had seen many others of the older generations – people still his juniors – fail to adapt to this everchanging world. They relied on the ways of old, or their mindsets were simply not adaptive enough. It was difficult for him to understand.

Life was but a series of shifting seasons. Every new season would bring about change as the world developed, not one day the same as the last. Throughout his life, he had seen so much change, so many shifts in society.

If he had been unable to adapt, how could he ever have hoped to achieve success? If he could not embrace new technology and even be willing to try and get ahead and prepare for the coming winter as fall arrived, how could he ever hope to excel?

To him, the arrival of the system was just yet another changing season. As he lay there in his bed, he believed that it was his winter and that season would be his last. Yet spring had arrived and brought about new life and new opportunities.

And as nature cheered and blossomed to welcome the sun and the end of winter, so would he blossom and grow to make his clan experience the most fruitful summer imaginable.

The World Congress would be the first step in achieving that, the first time where he would finally meet the other leaders and patriarchs of the planet - including he who had claimed the first Pylon.

Chapter 210: Rules of Monkey Hunting

There are a few rules one must remember when invading an ancient temple and the surrounding area run by supernatural many-tailed monkeys that can use weird weight magic. Forgetting these rules may lead to being covered in unnaturally heavy feces or just be smashed or cut up by a monkey tail.

The first rule was to stay high and avoid the ground. Being able to move in three dimensions against enemies unable to fly was an incredible advantage and made it far easier to deal with issues arising from breaking the second rule.

Lighttail Monkeys aren't the strongest individually, but fighting a crowd of them is what in the hunting industry is called a very bad time. They buffed each other up while slowing you down, allowing their strikers in the form of Crushers or Dervishes to finish you off. So the second rule was to always only engage small groups at a time, and if possible, isolated prey.

The third rule was to always make sure the Prima wasn't around because the Prima was clearly the big boss. One should always save the big boss for last - this is just basic hunting protocol and best practice. Always remember: kill from weakest to strongest. It was a bit like how you don't eat your dessert before the main dish, no matter how tasty it

looks. He would have to make do with all the Beastcores he collected from their corpses after the fight so far.

Then we have the fourth rule, one quite unique to Jake. It was a rule that invalidated the prior three if followed adequately every time, even if it often was a bit difficult to follow. The rule was actually quite straightforward: always kill with a single shot.

A rule Jake was actually doing incredibly well not breaking currently.

An arrow tore through the terrain as it narrowly passed in between trees in its flight. Its target was just relaxing on a branch, keeping an eye out for any potential invaders to swiftly strike down. It was a Dervish, a creature that rarely found worthy challenges this far into their domain. It was too relaxed, too unaware... though it was doubtful if its preparedness would have made a difference.

It noticed too late as it tried to move. Tried because it suddenly felt like it had been thrown into an icy pit with a predator – nay, hunter - staring down at it, penetrating into its soul. The nearly one-meter-long arrow arrived as it penetrated deep into the creature without any issues, releasing intense amounts of destructive energy. If that wasn't enough, the arrow was even coated with incredibly potent poison and fired with the ridiculously powerful Arcane Powershot.

To strike down a beast nearly 30 levels above yourself in a single strike was a rarity, especially in D-grade, where every level mattered even more. But coupled with the low resilience of the agility-focused Dervish and the power of the attack, it was made possible.

****You have slain [Tri-Lighttail Dervish – lvl 131] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

The arrow he had used was naturally his Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, and it had been quite easily summoned the moment he tried. He had hoped the summoning time would reduce after reaching D-grade, but it had stayed the same... but that couldn't be said about the power.

Without noticing, the already overpowered arrow had gotten better. A large element of the arrow was the destructive energy it contained, and through Jake's arcane-affinity, Jake had come to understand that type of energy quite a bit better. While it wasn't exactly the same type of concept, it was close enough so that the arrow simply accepted when he poured in a bit of arcane mana.

Not too much, or it would destabilize the arrow, but just a little - a far cry from ever being enough to upgrade the skill, but more than enough to make it just a little better.

With the Dervish dead, this leads one to consider the fifth and final rule of hunting Lighttail Monkeys, one very important to remember in conjunction with rules four and two. This rule was that after making a kill: fucking run. Because the tribe would be coming.

Jake swiftly flew away as he made sure to hide behind trees and stay high as he could hear the screeching monkeys off in the distance. His way of killing wasn't the most subtle as Arcane Powershot was quite flashy by nature, so he had to quickly get away. There was even a faint trail of mana in the air between where he had fired from, and some of the more acute monkeys detected and followed that trail.

By the time they arrived, Jake was already long gone.

As they kept searching, the monkeys naturally splitting up as they looked for the intruder that had killed one of their brethren, perhaps too dumb or too confident to believe they would meet the same fate. Either way, that belief was clearly not well-founded as less than ten minutes after the first Dervish died, a Crusher found an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter striking it from behind, killing it instantly.

Another kill kicked up another uproar as even more monkeys joined the search, yet it was all for naught as Jake was already way ahead of them. He flew around up high among the crowns of the trees, constantly hidden behind thick branches and his cloak providing extra camouflage.

The only times he went down the trunks of the trees was to fire a Powershot using the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. Before going up the tree, he would place a Mark of the Ambitious Hunter on his next chosen target, using that to summon the arrow, much like how he did with the Indigo Mushroom.

Jake had to be honest that while this method wasn't that fast, it was relatively safe. The Prima spent nearly all its time in the temple itself and didn't appear to care at all what was going on around it, while the Matriarchs spent most of their time trying to hold back the weak monkeys in their care from joining the search.

At times, the monkeys got quite close to Jake, but he had a few more tricks up his sleeve to stay hidden.

Nearly three kilometers from where he was, the top of one of the smaller trees exploded with arcane mana, and the monkey that had come to investigate the source of mana it detected was sent flying. Not long after, another explosion shook the ground even further away, drawing even more attention.

Finally, a third explosion exploded right in the middle of a group of D-grade monkeys, but this one was far larger than the ones prior. The reason for this simple... the ones before were created by conjuring Arcane Bolts and stabbing them into trees, knowing they would explode within a few minutes with their unstable mana, while the last explosion was caused by three exploding Arcane Hunter's Arrows, fired with a Splitting Arrow.

The monkeys were injured but not dead, though that was just a temporary issue for Jake. An issue that was further alleviated as arrows rained down on them from a tree far away, the D-grade Monkey's bodies occasionally freezing when they tried to dodge as they were pierced. All four of them died within less than a dozen seconds, far from long enough for the more powerful monkeys to move for the human firing the shots.

This entire dynamic of Jake striking like a shadow from atop the trees continued for over a day. He consumed a potion every single hour nearly on the second as he tried to keep his resources stable. Jake quickly found that the extra regeneration from his mask was even more effective than back in his city, boosting his combat endurance to a ridiculous level.

It was after this full day of killing that one of the big pillars of the monkey community made a move. The four Matriarchs always had at least a dozen Dervishes, Crushers, and Suppressors around them to ensure their safety, making Jake choose to ignore them for now.

Besides, for every hour that passed, he got stronger. Both by being more familiar with his strength and making even more rapid progress with his archery and mana control, but also just in pure tangible levels. His notification menu easy proof of that.

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 104 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 103 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 105 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

After reaching level 105 in his class and putting all the free points he had gained into agility, the stat became his second-highest, naturally still far behind perception. Jake felt like it was worth it for now. He had also begun noticing some other peculiarities of the entire area.

The entire temple and everything around it felt... old. Ancient. It wasn't just that it was likely architecture taken from old Earth either; it was something about the mana in the air. The entire aura of the place just felt off.

But back to the whole Matriarch on the move thing... yeah, one of those massive monkeys had chosen to personally try and hunt down whatever was killing all its children. Jake at least assumed it was so, as, for some reason, it looked even more pissed than any of the other beasts like it had been holding itself back for far too long.

Followed by its entourage of guards, it made its way into the forest, away from the safety of the main temple and the one foe Jake was truly wary of. Jake did a careful count and saw 7 Dervishes, 4 Crushers, and 3 Suppressors with it at all times.

This was too many enemies for Jake to handle at once, so he would have to do a bit of picking off before engaging the Matriarch herself. He was actually thankful that she had left the small monkeys behind at the temple area, as Jake really didn't feel like killing them. He would have been able to just swiftly remove them with Gaze of the Apex Hunter... but that would just feel wrong.

Jake began carefully preparing himself as the Matriarch moved further and further away from the temple, moving slower than even the bulky Crushers.

His preparations consisted of preparing his arrows after overcoming an issue that he proved itself not really to actually be an issue at all. Jake had summoned all his Arcane Hunter's Arrows while drawing his bow before, which made poisoning them quite tricky for obvious reasons.

He had considered how to fix this, and how before he could just prepare the arrows and put them back in his quiver... which made him wonder why he couldn't just keep doing that. While it didn't work with his explosive arrows as they would explode within a few minutes of summoning no matter what, his stable arrows could stay summoned for a while with no problem.

So all he had to do was just not conjure any arrows in his old Uncommon-rarity quiver but fill it with his pre-poisoned arcane arrows. Shit, he even found that the quiver helped them not leak as much mana as before, allowing them to stay summoned even longer if he stored them in it. There was the one issue of not being able to keep them in his spatial storage like his old arrows, but that was honestly just such a minor thing.

The upgrade to Malefic Viper's Poison had even made it so his poisoned arrows would now stay nice and toxic even longer than before. When the skill was rare-rarity, the coating would only stay effective for around half an hour, while it would last over an hour now.

This resulted in Jake carrying a quiver with around 50 stable arcane arrows coated with his best Necrotic Poison. His blood was nearly as good, but not quite, so he went with the best he had for maximum killing efficiency.

The reason for all this preparation was because he knew he couldn't pick off all the monkeys around the Matriarch one by one... but he would make it into a long fight to his advantage. He had confidence in his own endurance and even more confidence in his ability to slowly poison his foes and bring them down in a prolonged battle.

Of course, as always, the first shot would be an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, though – also nicely coated in his poison. His goal for that arrow was the Matriarch herself. Not to kill her, but because he had noticed how defensive the monkeys were of her... so if he could heavily injure her, he was 100% sure some of them would stay behind and not chase him. Maybe they would even try and jump in to block blows meant for her later on... either way, he thought it was a sound strategy.

With the arrow summoned and everything ready, he did something he hadn't felt a need to do so yet in D-grade. Energy began building up deep inside as the flow of internal energy sped up, and his body began overflowing with strength.

At the same time, all effects of his hiding were gone as he practically projected his presence far and wide around him. Limit Break was only active at the safe and not-so-tiring 10%, but it was a massive boost nevertheless.

With Limit Break active, the monkeys noticed him, but he was still not within their line of sight... he had calculated his timing enough to avoid that. Jake raised his bow as Arcane Powershot began charging, and he released the string only when he felt the bow about to reach the limits of its durability.

The arrow tore through the terrain as it headed towards the group of monkeys, now many kilometers from their home temple. As it was about to arrive, Jake strained himself as he had to freeze not only the Matriarch but also 4 of the 7 Dervishes as they tried to block the attack with their bodies. Jake knew Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter would only work on the Matriarch as she was the target, so hitting it was essential to his plan.

His eyes hurt as he found the Matriarch especially hard to freeze, and she also became able to move again far faster than any of the Dervishes. Sadly, she was too slow and still ended up being hit in the belly with the arrow, screaming out in pain as it tore into her, leaving an extensive, gaping, poisoned wound.

From there, the real fight began. Jake instantly drew the string again and used Arcane Powershot with one of the poisoned arrows from his quiver. He didn't do much charging but just fired and used Gaze on a Dervish, striking it in the chest, sending it flying, and poisoning it.

He repeated this, blood already running down his cheeks from overusing Gaze, but it was necessary.

Once all 7 Dervishes were hit... he ran. His wings spread open behind him, a cloud of poison spreading in his wake. The occasional poisoned arrow or explosive arcane arrow pelting those that chased him. A blade striking from behind a tree as they thought they had caught up to him. A hand grasping a neck, teleporting next to one sitting tired on a branch.

To the monkeys, this entire area was still their domain - their home where they stood at the apex and the human that had come but another invader to slay. But this foolish

assumption would prove fatal... because what had come was not just another invader, but a hunter. And unbeknownst to them, they were nothing more than prey.