

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 251: Stats, Tables & Gear - all the LitRPG!

Vilastromoz smiled as he considered going on a bit of an expedition. He hadn't been to the Altmar Empire in... well, since he went into seclusion in his realm, so it would be interesting to send an avatar there to check things out. There was no way he would go in person with his real body, as quite frankly, that would just be a needless risk. Even he didn't take the perhaps most powerful empire of the multiverse lightly.

The Altmar Empire rose to power during the early parts of the second Era. While Vilastromoz wasn't certain, then there were good chances the leader of the empire was the first few gods that rose to power after the 12 Primordials from the first universe. At least he had been born in the first universe and went to great lengths afterward to wipe out details of the exact time he attained godhood.

While the Altmar Empire was run by a council that did everything, the leader of the council was the one truly in charge. Known as the Autarch, he and the council ruled with an iron fist, and through his leadership, they had created one of the only race-led organizations of the multiverse. While they did have "guests" from other races among their ranks, every single council member was an elven god.

"To make natural dungeons like that... I wonder how they did it," the Malefic Viper wondered out loud. He had never been much into dungeons. That had always been more the Wyrmgod's field of expertise. Of course, the Wyrmgod was busy with his namesake Nevermore to care about somehow creating artificial-yet-natural dungeons.

Still unsure if checking out the Altmar Empire right now was worth his time, he instead did a quick inspection of the Order and saw that preparations were coming along nicely. Jake had joked about hoping never to do any more exams after university. He was lucky in that Villy had no intentions of making him take any.

Too bad for him, he wouldn't be able to dodge education as a whole, though. The Order's academy was still preparing for the next admittance. The notices had been sent out, not just to the factions related to the Order but also to a few other organizations. Today he had just decided to send the Altmar Empire one too. It was a notice for them to send their talented young alchemist to learn at what had once been known as the greatest academy for poison-based alchemy in the entire multiverse.

To come, learn, and see that it was still the best.

Jake appeared on the metal disc that led into the Undergrowth. While he was in a generally great mood, he still sighed as he looked down at the platform. He felt a bit sad about failing to bring the Cave Troll and its two kids out with him.

"Sorry, bud," he muttered as he jumped out of the hole and up to what had once been a biodome. He saw that quite a few plants were growing there now, and if left untouched, it would surely turn into a biodome once more. For now, he would just let it grow naturally with the hope that something valuable would appear, so he made his way back to the lodge.

On the way, he checked his status and saw that his two dungeon-related titles had been updated.

[Dungeoneer VI] – Successfully clear a Dungeon suitable for your level. +8 all stats.

[Dungeon Pioneer VI] – Be the first to clear a dungeon suitable for your level. +24 all stats.

The basic Dungeoneer had increased by 3 to all stats while the other one had increased by 9. That was 12 to all stats in the bag. Both bonuses had tripled as Jake had expected. It did make him wonder how high the title counted for D-grade... well, he guessed up to 10. Hopefully, he could find four more suitable dungeons while still in D-grade. Fingers crossed.

Once he got back, he saw a small magical note on his door simply stating that Miranda had been by and when she could return. It also let him know that she had left the city for a while to make her own push for D-grade and not to worry as Neil's party members only needed their professions for their own perfect evolutions and were all staying back in the city themselves to level.

It also included that Neil had evolved to D-grade while Jake was gone – evolved, and gone straight to the Fort to try and improve the teleportation circle there. This reminded Jake that he should pay a visit to Arnold again. But not now.

Now... now it was math time and stat-allocation time.

The first thing he did was take off the things he would replace. His shitty cloak was replaced with a hopefully-not-shitty invisibility cloak. At least, that is what he thought it to be from the description. This didn't change his stats, as neither gave any. He was beginning to think cloaks didn't give stats at all, actually.

Next up were the pants. Jake removed his old Badger Pants, losing 25 endurance and 25 agility, as well as the absolutely vital technique Badger Jump. He wasn't sure what he would do without the critical ability to jump higher by infusing his legs with stamina – a technique he totally hadn't figured out how to do without a skill a long-ass time ago.

Putting on his new pants, he bound them to himself and felt the influx of energy rush through his body like a warm flood. It was a sudden spike of 200 extra stats, making him instantly feel great. He also got a basic understanding of what that whole Life Burst ability was like.

It really was a bit like an extra health potion, but it wasn't as controlled or system-assisted. Instead, it just flooded his body with life-affinity mana, and Jake would have to direct it himself to heal his body. Meanwhile, a health potion did everything for you, and while you could control the vital energy somewhat, if you didn't, it would just automatically prioritize what it deemed most important.

If he didn't direct the life-affinity mana from the Life Burst ability, it could end up just turning into a big tumor or be wasted entirely. So he would have to be a bit careful with it.

The Aura of the Undergrowth he couldn't really test, but at least he didn't instantly see moss begin growing in or around his lodge after putting them on. He did feel like the grass outside looked a bit... happier? His Sense of the Malefic Viper also let him know that the area around him was more suited for growth.

Weirdly enough, Jake actually didn't give off any energy. It was more like his mere presence encouraged the plants. As it didn't seem to have any inherent affinity to it, Jake even hoped it would work on stuff like death-attuned mushrooms.

They even felt nice to wear. The pants had a very solid and tactile feel to them yet didn't impede movement at all.

With new comfortable pants, Jake came to the most important thing: the ring.

He started out by choosing which ring to discard. The first gave +30 Strength, +20 Perception, and +20 Agility, while the other ring gave +50 Intelligence, +50 Wisdom, and +35 Willpower. While he likely needed the stats on the first one more, there simply wasn't any competition. One gave 70 total stats, and the other gave 135.

Jake put the first ring in his inventory and took on the Altmar N-Signet. He bound it to himself, and instantly he became innately aware of his ability to redistribute all the stats. He had to hold himself back for a moment from just putting them all in perception. It was tempting as fuck, but he forced himself to be a bit smarter about it.

There were two things that had to be remembered when it came to rules related to gear:

The first was the maximum possible stat gain from items – which was 20% in a single stat, and how you could only get a total of 15% total extra stats from gear. This was a hard cap as far as Jake was aware of, and there was no way to get around. One also had to remember that these stats from items didn't benefit from percentage amplifiers. Well, they did by the number of stats possible from items increased due to the amplifiers. So essentially, one just didn't double-benefit.

To put it in the simplest terms, the legs Jake just got gave him 150 vitality. He didn't get more just because he had titles giving him a percentage amplifier.

Jake played around a bit with his status menu and consulted the one about items. He opened it up and took a look as he considered where he could distribute the stats.

As could be seen, he had plenty of room to grow in every single stat. Some more than others. He felt like it was absolutely atrocious that he didn't get a single stat point in perception from his equipment after taking off the ring. Taking it off also meant he didn't get any stats to strength at all.

So... he could put 981 of the stats from the Altmar Signet into perception. Heck, in a couple of levels, his hard cap would be a thousand, so he could totally throw them all in there. However, his logical side stopped him. Something annoying stopped him. Math.

Because to truly figure out where it would be smartest to put the points, one had to look at percentage amplifiers. This was the second big factor Jake had to take into account. To do that, he had to refer to the expanded stats page:

Jake had some really great percentage amplifiers. 54,21% extra stats in total, but of course, they weren't equally amplified for all stats. Perception was the top stat, along with vitality, with 65% amplification each. This essentially means that these stats would be the worst to increase with items logically and mathematically.

The reason for this was due to gear not amplified from the amplifiers. So it was instead better for Jake to increase these two with natural treasures or free points as he got a higher net total through that. Of course, with how the caps worked, he was pretty much forced into getting some points in either, and as he couldn't pick and choose gear currently, he already had a lot of vitality-giving gear. Heck, it was his most increased stat from gear due to the new pants.

Now, his four least-increased stats – and thus technically the best to get gear for as he shouldn't spend free points on them – were agility, strength, endurance, and toughness. All sat at 45% stat-amplification. Naturally, this did mean that Jake wasn't min-maxing properly by eating the time-bananas, but that is where another very crucial factor of this entire math puzzle came in.

Jake didn't really give a shit about min-maxing.

If he did, he would just call up Villy and ask him or even ask his divine friend to hire a stat consultant for him or something to find the absolutely most optimal distribution possible. Honestly, that just sounded like a boring way to live, and Jake would rather just do stuff his own way. This didn't mean he would completely disregard min-maxing and mathematical logic. They just wouldn't necessarily be the primary reasons behind his decision-making.

Yet, for once, he would play it smart. Jake knew that right now, he needed some stats more than others. He would hate to put free points in some stats, so why not shore up some of his shortcomings with gear? He could increase a single stat by 20% after all.

Firstly: strength. It was a stat Jake really hadn't focused on as much as he should, and it was his lowest besides toughness. With how much time he spent in melee and how much it would likely also help with his archery, he needed a good boost.

Jake could get a total of 324 more from gear... so 300 strength from the ring seemed like a good idea. That would be close to a 20% increase in the stat, which should be massive.

Secondly was agility. Jake was already eating bananas and had thrown some free points into it. Quite a lot of free points, actually. 367 in total. It was a bit of a waste as he honestly preferred just to throw everything in perception.

Either way, agility was a good choice. He could get around 400 more there, but he chose to settle on the ring giving 300. He wanted some space for other pieces of gear to increase it too. Plus... he still planned on eating bananas.

That was 600 stats planned out - 400 to go.

Now, with the logic of where the amplifiers were, endurance or toughness should be next. Toughness... well, Jake wrote that off right away. While it was always nice to be tougher, Jake, in general, preferred not to get hit, to begin with. He knew he was already quite tough for an archer as it was and that he was capable of taking hits when needed.

Which left endurance. While Jake could see the value in increasing it, he had noticed that his stamina drain honestly wasn't that immense. A big reason for this was that most of his skills also used mana. Limit Break was the only major drain.

While it wasn't a top priority, he still chose to put 100 points into endurance. It would still help.

300 to go.

He decided to put 100 into intelligence too. It helped his arcane magic immensely and made things like his explosive arrow better.

With 200 to go, he failed to resist.

200 to perception.

He needed some points there, okay? That 0 stuck out like a sore thumb. He had to do it.

Feeling a bit guilty, he mischievously smiled as he distributed the stats in the ring. Once he was done, he mentally accepted – and then he felt a massive flood of energy enter his body. It felt fucking great, and he basked in it for a few seconds until it went away. He identified the ring again and saw that it had indeed registered the distribution.

[Altmar N-Signet (Ancient)] – You have been judged by the Altmar Empire and found worthy. This ring is made of unknown metal with an unknown gem embedded in it. This signet is proof of your performance and contains an identifying script designed to only be readable by the Altmar Empire. Yet even if this ring is primarily a display of status, it is far from just a showpiece. For with great status comes great power. This ring has been customized by its owner to grant him the distributed stats he desires. Stats cannot be redistributed once set. Enchantments: +300 Strength, +300 Agility, +200 Perception, +100 Endurance, +100 Intelligence

Requirements: Soulbound

He admired the ring for a bit and took note that the requirements had changed to Soulbound just as it had said it would, and the description had also changed a bit more besides that, mainly by removing a lot of the stat-distribution text.

Looking at his full status after everything was done, he, of course, noted his stat growth.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (D) – lvl 118]

Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter – lvl 129]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 107]

Health Points (HP): 19871/23050

Mana Points (MP): 25671/31462

Stamina: 13967/21120

Stats

Strength: 1921

Agility: 3014

Endurance: 2112

Vitality: 2305

Toughness: 1511

Wisdom: 2517

Intelligence: 2196

Perception: 5108

Willpower: 1995

Free points: 0

Titles:[Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch], [Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer VI], [Dungeon Pioneer VI], [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)], [Basic Twin Fang Style (Uncommon)], [Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra (Uncommon)], [Hunter's Tracking (Uncommon)], [Expert Stealth (Uncommon)], [Archery of Vast Horizons (Rare)], [Limit Break (Rare)], [Enhanced Splitting Arrow (Rare)] [Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Epic)], [Arcane Powershot (Epic)], [Big Game Arcane Hunter (Epic)], [Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)], [Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Epic)], [One Step Mile (Ancient)], [Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (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)]

Strength and agility were the biggest winners with the ring, of course. It was a thousand fucking stats he had just been “missing” before. After this dungeon, he had decided.

Before the Treasure Hunt, he would get some gear upgrades.

Chapter 252: Something Long Overdue



He now realized he had truly neglected his gear for far too long. Jake hadn't made proper use of humanity and their ability to create items. Arnold had given him the Nanoblade, a far better weapon than his old Venomfang. Why not also get gear in his other slots? He had replaced everything from the first dungeon with the Badger Pants gone, but he had more subpar equipment to get rid of.

Actually, Jake still had the two pieces of equipment he earned from the challenge dungeon, which was technically his first-ever dungeon. He still had the Boots of the Wandering Alchemist and the Prodigious Alchemist's Necklace of Holding. The necklace had his spatial storage within, so replacing that was impossible. The fact that only gave 25 wisdom was a bit offputting, though.

Jake knew there had to be ways of upgrading Soulbound equipment somehow. Perhaps he could find a talented jeweler... but to be perfectly honest, he didn't really want to. He needed someone he truly trusted both as a person and their ability before he would ever risk them trying to improve the necklace.

The second piece of equipment he still wore from the challenge dungeon was, of course, his trusty boots. Now, did they only give 20 endurance and 15 agility? Yes. Had the enchantment to reduce stamina expenditure been useless for many levels? It had been. Did he still love the boots? Fuck yeah.

They were just too damn comfy and durable. They looked as worn and old as the day he got them, which was the point – they looked just like the day he got them. Without any self-repair, enchantment, that is. They had survived being blasted by mushroom-mega-beams, blown up in dozens of different types of

explosions, and a slew of other things... but nothing had managed to leave a mark.

Their comfort was also on an entirely different level. The boots were snugly and just felt good on Jake's feet, and in the end, isn't that what's most important when it comes to choosing footwear?

Okay, he would try to upgrade them if he ever got the chance... but who could upgrade them was the issue once more.

But even if Jake didn't want to mess with these two pieces of equipment, for now, that didn't mean there weren't other places to improve. His second ring, chestpiece, bracers, and gloves. These were the pieces of equipment he would seek to improve. The ring and chestpiece were okay for now... but he knew he could do better.

As for other "gear slots?" Villy had told him that humans could have ten pieces of wearable equipment bound at once. With Jake's two rings, necklace, chest, legs, boots, bracers, mask, cloak, and gloves, he had those ten. This did mean Jake could toss away one of these things to potentially put on something else. Different humanoid races naturally had different pieces of equipment.

Jake himself could, for example, wear some earrings instead of rings or a hat or helmet instead of the mask. The gear was still bound to the parts of the body they went on, though. Also, based on their effects to some extent. Aka, Jake couldn't just wear four chestplates or two pairs of boots. He could wear an undershirt of some kind and a big chestplate on top, though, but that would mean he couldn't bind a cloak.

To be perfectly honest, it seemed like yet another place one could really min-max and optimize, even if young geniuses from other universes tended to be stat-capped anyway. Jake had absolutely no intentions of doing some major do-over of his getup – he just wanted to replace some of his old shit with new shiny treasures.

He liked most of his current things. Especially the mask. Not just because of its legendary-rarity and indestructible build, but because it was a mask. Jake had found that he actually really loved wearing a mask, and he found it sad he hadn't discovered the comforts in wearing one before the system.

Then again, if he ever walked into a bank in a wooden mask with only eye-holes, he would likely have been arrested.

Also... it was probably about time he addressed what lay beneath. No, not in any philosophical way, but literally what lay beneath his lodge now. He went over and entered the cellar, and down there, he found a new door installed. It wasn't a wooden door but one made of thick metal.

Beyond the wall was a hole. The entire hole looked a bit like an old mine-shaft. Wooden boards entirely covered the walls with metal plates in between to fortify and isolate the tunnel as a whole. It was nearly three meters wide and across, and one could easily fit a large elevator in there if they so desired.

And if it were before the system, one would be sorely needed.

The hole went down a bit over 100 meters, where it opened up into a large and empty chamber that still looked to be under construction. There were beginnings of cutouts to other rooms. Jake also saw that a marking had been made in the direction of the cave with the dungeon. He had mentioned to Hank that he might have wanted to link them up, and this seemed to be the beginning of that.

Really, Hank had gone a bit above what Jake had expected. He just wanted a cave a few dozen meters below the lodge, but what he instead got was more what looked like an underground bunker 100 meters below. Heck, the

underground complex would be even larger than his lodge above by a good margin.

As he stood there, he felt oddly comfortable. It reminded him of the tutorial dungeon... a hidden livable chamber away from everywhere else. Now he just needed a spatial pocket with a garden in it.

Seeing as things clearly weren't done in his soon-to-be alchemy cave, he made his way up to the lodge again. He had a feeling they had stopped to wait for him to ask for input. Their plans had been quite rough the first time around, and Hank probably wanted some clarifications.

Jake had already decided he needed new gear, and how he also wanted to visit Hank and ask him about things. He didn't really want to do alchemy down in the cellar in case builders would head there again soon, and he didn't really have anything else to do.

So Jake went on a quest. To his own city.

As much as he hated to admit it... this would be his first time actually entering his own city and exploring it. All he knew about Haven came from him

stealthily checking it out when he went in and out of the city. He had never walked the streets or seen the shops. It was about time he did so.

Jake wore his new cloak over his armor and pulled up the hood. He instantly poured in a bit of mana, and the cloak began changing color until it was black. That projection had said it would take some practice learning to control the colors freely, but that turned out to be bullshit. You just had to make those small metal pieces act as mediums and impose your will while manipulating the mana in the cloak. Took like ten seconds.

He decided not to fly but just walk and try to stay as inconspicuous as he could. The valley was not that far from the relatively bustling city of Haven, yet it seemed nicely isolated due to its nature as a valley. There also weren't any people walking in his direction at all.

Haven didn't have any walls or large defensive barriers constantly active - a rarity as far as Jake knew. Wayward beasts, especially of the flying variety, were hazards to most other settlements, and the occasional alpha beast trying to lead its flock to take down a city also wasn't abnormal. Heck, the Fort had to deal with the occasional attack. Luckily at least none came from the forest where Haven was located, and the Mindchief still had left its mark on the area it was from.

Jake had also been told that his bird buddies occasionally made their way to the Fort, which served to scare away any opportunistic beasts. A pair of D-grades was far more than most beasts – even D-grades - could handle. Speaking of birds... he was a bit sad he hadn't seen them upon his return. He missed Sylphie, that adorable little murder-hawk.

Well, everything at the Fort should be fixed by Miranda reaching D-grade and also claiming the Fort as officially recognized as part of the area influenced by the Pylon. That would make it clear to all beasts that – like Haven – it was the domain of Jake.

Beasts had the common sense not to invade the territory of a hunter.

As he walked closer, he focused on his hearing as he heard the city's noise far ahead of him. Jake had learned a long time ago that while perception also increased all his other senses, it really wasn't that effective most of the time. Hearing everything far louder was nice in some situations, but it could just as well be a distraction during a fight.

Improving his sense of smell would be nice, but again, it wasn't really something he focused on. Jake had also noticed that the atmospheric mana made smell kind of useless as the mana just kind of ate up all smells, making them not linger that long. Unless it was a magic smell. But those kinds of

smells were most often placed because the source *wanted* you to smell them. He reckoned there were ways of using smell based on the many monsters he had encountered that used the sense. Jake just hadn't learned how to yet. Or maybe humans just couldn't.

Anyway, he heard the noise of the city - people talking, arguing, someone landing on the ground with heavy boots on, someone yelling as they dropped something, and even the sound of kids screaming. To be perfectly honest, it was overwhelming. Like an auditory version of his sphere, he felt like he got overloaded and quickly stopped focusing on improving his hearing.

A minute later, Jake saw the first treehouse. A guard sat atop it and was looking not towards the valley but the city. He even saw a sign on one of the trees saying the valley ahead was off-limits. The guard was likely there not to keep people out but keep them away from his lodge.

The guard never even noticed Jake as he passed underneath - Expert Stealth on full display and his new cloak making him appear almost invisible. Coupled with the guard not looking specifically for him or using any perception-related skills, it really wasn't a surprise he missed the powerful D-grade passing by underneath him.

Curious, Jake made his way to where the true city began. He saw the trees above filled with treehouses, sometimes with accompanying buildings on the ground. More trees seemed to have staircases on them than not, and he even saw hanging bridges connecting many wooden platforms above. Haven was quite the vertical city.

He also didn't need a mega-perception-boosted smell to pick up on the sweet scent of grilled meat. He hadn't eaten for a good while with the dungeon and all. Not real food, at least. And while he didn't *need* it, he still wanted some.

The cause of the smell was a small booth at the base of one of the trees. There was a single large man inside working it. He had a big rack of skewers in front of him with sizzling meat on it, and he smiled as he cooked, clearly enjoying himself. Jake saw the man infuse some herbs and spices with mana as he carefully seasoned some skewered meat before he put it on the grill.

It looked simple, but Jake detected some respectable mana control from the man. The metal rack was infused with mana as the man controlled the heat and poured mana into the food. There was already a small line in front of the booth, waiting for the latest batch to be ready. Jake joined them as he deactivated Expert Stealth and also made sure his cloak didn't passively hide him anymore. Naturally, he still had his hood and mask on, but he at least avoided people overlooking him.

This would 100% have happened based on the man in front of Jake nearly jumping in fright as a figure appeared behind him. The man turned around and looked at Jake. He stared for a second before just giving him a nod and facing towards the booth again.

Jake smiled beneath the mask. He had felt the attempt at Identify. Could he feel it before? Jake wasn't sure, but he could now. Maybe it was due to the sheer level-disparity or Jake's increased perception stat. Hard to tell.

It took ten minutes before it was Jake's turn. He stood patiently in line the entire time, just taking in the atmosphere and inspecting all of the city he could see within his sphere. It was actually great practice. Not looking at everything, but figuring out how *not* to look. He didn't feel comfortable peeking into people's homes, especially not after he saw someone in a bathtub.

The cook looked at Jake but didn't try to Identify him. A real professional that one. He was also level 61, which was pretty damn good.

"How many, chief?" the cook asked Jake with a friendly smile.

“Three,” he answered. There was a small sign saying you could only get three, so... he took three. Also, there was a sale. It was forty for one and a hundred for three.

“That’ll be an even hundred,” the man said with a big smile as he wrapped up the three skewers.

Jake was damn happy at this moment he wasn’t the only one in line, allowing him to see how payment worked. There was a small metal plate at the front of the booth where everyone placed a finger and paid through.

It was a good system. The plate confirmed payments were made to both parties, as while Credits could be transferred directly, it was an entirely hidden action to all outside observers. This meant it would be borderline impossible to enforce scammers as it would just be one word against another. Furthermore, the plate seemed to record all transactions, and Jake wanted to bet his ass the city itself could see all transactions taking place through the plate. Clearly, there was some system-fuckery going on with it.

Jake didn't place his finger on the plate but just touched it with his will. He didn't even need to make a mana string. He didn't get why others didn't just pay like that, but he assumed most hadn't figured out how to impose their will on stuff. Honestly, it was only so easy as it wasn't anything that required power but was just a system interaction.

This action did earn him a stare from both the cook and the ones behind him. While none of the others waiting in line asked anything, the cook didn't have any reservations.

"Neat trick. You new around here? I haven't seen you before. I am darn sure I would have remembered you as you're sure a memorable type," the cook said with a slight chuckle, wrapping up the last skewer.

"I've been around," Jake answered as he accepted the skewers once they were all wrapped up. He used Identify on them meanwhile.

[Seasoned Mixed Meat Skewer (Common)] – A skewer of different mixed meats from high-level E-grade beasts, grilled by a skilled chef and seasoned with herbs and spices. Gives a minor increase to stamina-regeneration while not engaged in combat for the next 24 hours. Restores a small amount of health upon consumption.

“This is some good stuff,” Jake continued. “Could you tell me the direction to where the bosses of the builders are these days?”

“Either in the guild or the Fort. Pretty sure a big group went to the Fort the day before yesterday. I would check out both places. Caravans are traveling to the Fort nearly once every hour... though I have the feeling, you’ll be fine on your own,” the cook chuckled.

“Alright, thanks. How’s business anyway? The city treating you well? Also, did you get access to the system store?” Jake asked curiously.

“Business is good, and Haven is a nice place. Very cozy. Most of my ingredients for the seasoning and all the herbs used I got from the store with the help of the city office,” the cook answered patiently before adding on a bit teasingly: “Now, can you stop holding up the line? And enjoy the food!”

This was when Jake realized the gazes boring into his back weren’t one’s of curiosity and due to his trick when paying but pure annoyance and impatience.

“Sorry,” Jake muttered, a bit embarrassed as he hurried away, mumbling under his breath without thinking: “You too...”

“Have a nice day!” the cook yelled after him, a big goofy smile on his lips, just making Jake even more embarrassed. Why the hell had he said: “you too” ... *shit, so embarrassing.*

It didn’t help that he had no idea where the hell this mentioned guild was. He remembered Miranda had talked about some profession-archetypes making guilds... but that’s it.

I’m sure I’ll find it in a jiffy.

Chapter 253: Leatherworkers

Jake didn’t find it in a jiffy. In fact, he didn’t find it at all. In his defense, though, he wasn’t really looking that hard. He was walking the city and checking different things out instead. The number of shops was insane, but even more so, he noticed the average level of the people around being quite a bit higher than he would have expected.

He saw many above 50 and even a good number above 60 managing the shops. Even more impressive were some of the people looking to be more combat-orientated, where he noticed a few around level 80. A strong party like them could likely escape a weak D-grade alive, making them quite respectable. Granted, they would still get fucked up by a single decent D-grade, but at least they were working hard.

Failing to hold back his curiosity, Jake checked out a few more shops. Some sold equipment, and some sold small interesting baubles. Other places had more regular clothes or food, making it seem more like a normal city. The clash of a large shopping window with a modern-looking dress behind it and the entire magical forest theme was also immensely entertaining.

Having already decided to improve his gear, Jake also decided to check out some stores selling equipment. Unfortunately, most had been a big disappointment. While he did find some leatherworkers with decent stuff, he hadn't come across anything he particularly wanted. Most were inferior-rarity still with a few common-rarity items here and there. While some of it had higher level requirements than Jake's current items, the rarities were just too low in comparison.

Just as he thought his quest was in vain, he noticed another leatherworker. This shop was quite a bit larger than any prior, but more importantly, was the level of the shopkeeper.

[Human – lvl 83]

It was a woman who was currently cleaning some leather with a rough piece of cloth. The entire shop didn't have a single customer and didn't exactly look inviting either, and the woman didn't even turn around to regard Jake when he entered.

Jake didn't go up to her either. His target was something else. On a wooden holder was a vest of some kind, giving off an oddly familiar aura. Using Identify, he quickly saw why.

[Vest of the Tri-Lighttail Dervish (Common)] – A vest made from the hide of Tri-Lighttail Dervishes, a monster known for its agility and weight-magic. It has been created through the collaboration of two talented leatherworkers. This vest contains some scarce remnant Records of the Dervishes and has even been touched ever-so-faintly by the concept of time. Enchantments: +100 Agility, +25 Strength, +25 Endurance

Requirements: lvl 75+ in any humanoid race.

He was honestly surprised. Who else had managed to hunt down Dervishes? Those monkeys were often around level 130. Shit, he was also surprised they had even found any, as Jake was pretty sure he did a number on the local Lighttail population.

Just as he was considering who possibly have hunted the monkeys down, the shopkeeper came over.

“A good piece came in yesterday. It ain't cheap, though. It comes from a D-grade beast. But you look like you ain't strapped, so don't try to pull a fast one; I know what it's worth,” she said, speaking a rough tone.

“I know. Where did the creators come across these hides? Who hunted them down?” Jake asked curiously. Having evolved to D-grade, Neil could maybe do it with support... could the birds handle one? They should be able to if they worked together. Hm...

“Hah, a bunch of scavengers brought the hides, and I made the vest with my partner. The scavengers caught a lucky break as they explored the forest for valuables, primarily herbs and such, at the request of the City Lord. Heard they came across an area where some beasts had fought. Shit was torn up, according to what they said, and they found a shitload of corpses of D-grade Tri-Lighttail Monkeys of different variants. The beast that killed them took all the cores, though. Honestly, they were just lucky bastards, coming across the leftovers of some beasts battling. They made a shitload. Some of those beast corpses were mid-tier D-grades, for god’s sake,” she said, a bit of annoyance in her voice.

Jake just stood there, feeling his ears heating up as she went on. He didn’t dare say anything as her rant continued, getting progressively more irritated.

“For fuck sake, who gets that lucky? Luck isn’t even a stat, yet they just stumble into it so close to the city. Also, what kind of beasts just fucks up an entire horde of monkeys and then leaves their corpses behind like that? Well, I guess for anyone other than leatherworkers or cooks or whatever, the corpses aren’t worth much, and only the cores matter, but the beast could at least have made them all into rotten mushes. It did it with some of them, completely ruining the hide and meat. Some fucking solidarity would have been appreciated. Guess you can’t expect better from some stupid beast that can’t even clean up after itself,” she ranted before finally stopping and looking at Jake. “Anyway, wanna buy it? Make an offer.”

His face below the mask had quite the grimace, but luckily she couldn’t see it due to the mask. At least she didn’t show any signs of knowing. As for if he wanted the vest? No, not really. It was an upgrade but a minor one. The embarrassment of wearing it and the constant reminder of this day simply wasn’t worth 25 extra total stats.

“Hah, yeah. Lucky. Sorry, this wasn’t exactly what I was looking for, but it’s good craftsmanship,” Jake said, praising the product. No matter how bad it made him feel, he couldn’t deny its quality.

He didn't really regret not taking the corpses, though. He didn't want to fill up his spatial storage with stuff he didn't truly need, and he did take all the far more important cores. It also just felt kind of weird to him to know he carried around a bunch of corpses around his neck at all times.

Now, this only counted for the regular enemies... if he met a strong foe, he would sure as hell take the corpses now, like with the Altmar Census Golem. He didn't really get any other valuable corpses in that entire dungeon, as his poison did have the habit of destroying corpses. His arcane-affinity too. This is likely why a small vest was made from the hide of several Dervishes.

"It's good, right?" she smiled at his praise of her handiwork. "Too bad we didn't have the compatible cores. Can't really infuse them properly with Records without, so we had to make do with just going quantity over quality. Ah, I guess that would be a bit too much to ask. I reckon the beast that tore through their territory did it for those cores, to begin with."

"Ye... yeah. I guess that's why the 'beast' went through... you wouldn't happen to have any gloves, would you? Good quality ones. Price isn't the issue," Jake said. He nearly felt like he had to buy something with how much time he had spent in the store... it had nothing to do with how awkward he felt about the origin of the vest.

"Those over there," she said, pointing towards a table. Jake had already checked out that table with his sphere and seen that none of the gloves were better than his current ones.

Reading Jake's body language, she added on. "But we could custom-make something by commission. My partner is just out with a delivery of some pants. Do you have any idea how often people ruin their pants these days? People are good at defending their chest but

suck at defending from attacks coming from below, so their pants and legs get ruined damn fast. And before you ask, no, we're still working on making that self-repair enchantment. That shit ain't easy."

Jake just nodded along once more, allowing her to rant. She continued on about how people expected the Self-Repair enchantment just because tutorial equipment had it and how it was clearly an easy low-level enchantment due to that. She cursed the system, the customers, the leather and hides, and even ended up throwing in a few off-hand comments towards those scavengers again. The number of times she mentioned the "moronic beast that killed the monkeys" also wasn't just one or two.

He wanted to leave a few times but thought it would be rude as he technically had been the one prompting her to speak. Luckily he was saved. He spotted someone he recognized approaching in his sphere.

"Hey Olivia, stop bothering the customers wit –"

She stopped up as she looked into the room and saw who the customer was. Jake also looked back at her as he waved.

"Hey Eleanor, long time no see," he said. "Making good progress, I see."

It was the archer of Neil's party that was the partner of this Olivia woman. Yes, Jake also just realized now he hadn't ever gotten the shopkeeper's name. As for Eleanor, she truly had made good progress.

[Human – lvl 96]

Great even. Eleanor was getting darn close to D-grade and with plenty of time to the Treasure Hunt to spare. She was going for the Perfect Evolution, too, as far as he knew, meaning she likely would be D-grade already if she didn't.

"Lord Thayne, I didn't expect you here," she said, clearly taken aback.

Jake didn't fare that much better. Had she just called him Lord Thayne? What? When had he shared his name, actually? Also, what the hell was up with it being so overly formal? Well, it was better than calling him the Owner or whatever, at least.

"Wait, this super-edgy dude is that Thayne guy?" Olivia cut in, looking at Jake skeptically.

"Rude..." Jake mumbled before looking back at Eleanor. "And just call me Jake, no reason to be so formal. I didn't know you made a leatherworking shop?"

"It isn't mine, it's Olivia's. We just work together on most projects. We have different profession-variants, and mine is better at handling some animal parts while hers is better at others," Eleanor explained before changing the subject. "Anyway, how come you're here? I heard from Neil you were in the dungeon."

"I was; I'm done with it. A truly nasty place that one. I wouldn't go with your party right after you all reach D-grade. You will need some solid anti-healing measures when you go, too," he quickly explained.

“What type of monsters?” she asked, and Jake quickly caught on.

“Hairless blind humanoids that look kinda creepy and have mushrooms growing within them. Nothing to skin there... unless you’re one sick bastard,” Jake told her.

“I see. So did you come for anything in particular?”

“Mainly just checking out the city. I am looking for some new gear, but I may just have Miranda look for something. Maybe have Lillian do it. Not sure. Anyway, it was nice seeing you, and I was actually on my way out. I may come by with a commission sometime in the future! Take care, see ya,” Jake said as he hurried out. The reason was simple.

He had seen Olivia begin to look very impatient, as if she was about to go on another rant. About what? He didn’t want to find out.

His only regret was that he forgot to ask about how they knew his last name. If they knew that, he assumed they knew his first name too. Another thing to ask Miranda about. All of that could wait, though, as he kept exploring the city. There was especially one place he wanted to check out – the largest structure in town.

“Seriously, that was that Lord Thayne guy? For real? I didn’t know you knew him? When did you meet?” Olivia asked Eleanor.

The archer just sighed and said. “Yeah, that’s him. I told you our party was one of the first groups to make it here. He saved Neil and the rest of us when we were in a pickle. Neil still thinks we owe him, and I kind of do too.”

“Damn, friends in high places. He doesn’t look like much, though, does he? He looks straight out of a videogame or something. That mask and cloak don’t make him any less conspicuous in the least. Heck, I think I know like half the people in the city, anyone trying to look anonymous and mysterious like that stands out like dog shit on a newly mowed lawn,” Olivia ranted again.

“Not sure we’re friends. I just know who he is. I’ve barely spoken to him more than a handful of times, and I don’t think we’ve interacted since that time with the bovines and the Fort. Also... you may judge his appearance as much as you like, but don’t do it in front of him,” Eleanor warned her friend.

“Why? Is the big bad Lord Thayne gonna eat me up? I’m sure I won’t have anything to worry about with you around,” Olivia chuckled.

“I am not joking, Olivia. The first time we met, he killed people without any hesitation and near-effortlessly killed two people who my party and I didn’t stand a chance against. The next time at the Fort, he slaughtered some D-grade that herded an army of thousands of cows. Today he just returned from a dungeon filled with D-grades. If he wanted to, he could kill every single person in his city,” Eleanor said rather gravely.

She didn’t have even the faintest hint of jest in her voice.

“That’s some heavy shit... but Neil also reached D-grade, didn’t he? Can’t he-“

“I doubt Neil can even handle those two birds of his alone, much less Lord Thayne himself. He isn’t normal. Just be happy he is on our side, and don’t piss him off. He seems to place a lot of trust in Miranda, so let’s hope things stay stable in the future,” Eleanor sighed once again.

“Enough about all that stuff. That Thayne guy is some monster, but he’s on our side, so who cares,” Olivia said a bit dismissively. Clearly, the topic was making her a bit uncomfortable. “Did that old guy like the pants?”

“Oh yeah, he liked them. I also stopped by and talked to Silas on the way. He seems to be settling into that school quite nicely and enjoys his job. He makes a good teacher, and he seems to like it. It also levels his profession damn fast,” Eleanor smiled, more than happy to change the subject.

“How about Levi and Christen?” Olivia asked. “Those two stopped slacking?”

“Both working in the smithy like there’s no tomorrow. That system store sure did them good. Too bad the leather wasn’t voted for. I reckon we will all reach D-grade within the next three weeks to a month max. Then we should still have a couple of weeks until the Treasure Hunt to get a few levels in. All of us with Perfect Evolutions, too,” Eleanor said proudly.

“Aw, you’re already perfect as you are,” Olivia said teasingly. “Anything else interesting happened?”

“Oh damn, I nearly forgot. It’s actually related to Lord Thayne. I mentioned those Tri-Lighttail Monkeys to Silas, and he said that Neil was pretty damn sure Lord Thayne is the one who hunted them all down. Apparently, he came straight from hunting them when he entered the World Congress. Quite the coincidence that he came by today and saw it, don’t you think?” Eleanor said.

“Yeah, that’s pret- oh... oh shit,” Olivia muttered.

“What?”

“I may or may not have spent five to ten minutes shit-talking whoever hunted down those monkeys...”

“Oh...” Eleanor said, lost for words.

She hoped Lord Thayne kept having a good day.

Jake had done all he could to repress the memory of the leatherworking shop and what transpired within. He now instead stood before a quite frankly massive structure. He could see it was cross-shaped and was the biggest building in Haven by a fair margin. The logs used to construct the walls had to be hundreds of meters long, and it was over a dozen meters tall.

People were buzzing about at the entrance, exiting and entering all the time. They spoke in loud voices, and he noticed that the majority were wearing robes.

The building had some serious enchantments placed all over the walls, and it looked damn hard to break into. Jake had a slight urge to try and fire an explosive arcane arrow at the wall to test its durability. He, of course, didn't. He just wanted to a little bit.

What he stood before was naturally the Temple of Haven – the next stop on his journey to explore his own damn city.

Chapter 254: Personal Improvement

Jake stood looking at the large temple, deep in his own thoughts. He stood over to the side, and no one particularly bothered him. He got a few glances, but that was only to do with him looking a bit suspicious. He was a bit more self-conscious about it now, but nothing that really irked him.

It had nothing to do with him hearing Olivia's words before he left. If he took off his mask and cloak and just walked around like that, he would likely get far fewer stares... but if he was honest, then wearing the mask and cloak wasn't about going unnoticed or being inconspicuous.

Instead, it was about separation. To put a mask between Jake and anyone he had to talk with. To make sure none could read his expression and for he himself to feel comfortable. It really had nothing to do with anyone else but him. There was power in a persona, and Jake knew that. It was how he had learned to survive his entire life. Granted, him being away for weeks at a time in dungeons that were all about killing didn't do him any good either.

To summarise... Jake just felt less exhausted when wearing a mask in public. He would keep his bare face only between him and friends. He just felt more comfortable that way.

It wasn't like not being recognized was an option either. Jake had hoped not to be recognized as "Lord Thayne" but just as a mysterious masked guy. He would be recognized as "someone standing out" no matter what happened. He hadn't learned to hide his D-grade aura after all, as everyone could feel it, so he would get the glances no matter what.

Well, he could have gone full-on stealth, but he still wanted to explore the city in a more "normal" way. Or at least as normal as he could be. At least people seemed to have some tact and just acted friendly.

Also... being masked and scary-looking made people only look and not actively seek him out. None of the shopkeepers had given a damn either. In fact, most seemed to be happy when he entered as they picked up on the D-rank aura. D-ranks were bound to have a lot of money.

He did attract a bit of unwanted attention in the form of a few rifle-bearing men who he saw check him out through binoculars from a distance. They never directly sought him out, though. That was nice. It would be awkward trying to explain that wearing all-black and a mask wasn't against the rules of Haven. Jake should know. He had just made up that rule, after all.

This didn't mean no one ever approached Jake, though it tended to be people who recognized him. Pretty much everyone from the Fort knew how he looked due to his presence back then, and a few had walked up to thank him for back then. It was a bit awkward, as Jake wasn't used to it, but he accepted their gratitude nevertheless.

As he stood there, Jake felt another person's eyes land on him, and this one lingered. He looked back at who it was and recognized his observer. It was a young man with short hair and a strong build. The young man walked over towards Jake, a big smile on his lips.

"Lord Thayne," he said when he had walked over, practically bowing.

"Chris, right?" Jake asked.

It was one of the people from Abby's group back then. The first one to speak up against Donald. That is what had put him on Jake's radar and made him worth remembering. At that moment, he had chosen an opportunity to get revenge against Donald and Abby over his own safety. That was respectable.

"You remember me?" he said with a mix of surprise of happiness.

"Well, yeah. I asked your name, didn't I? That would be silly to do if I wanted to forget it," Jake said, shrugging. The young man looked healthy and more full of life than last time. Back then, he had been full of resentment and grief, while now he looked more put together. His level was also pretty good.

[Human – lvl 57]

"I guess," Chris said, scratching his hair before asking: "How come you're here at the temple? Are you here to visit? I heard the City Lord's statue recently got made, and it has already been infused... it's the only one in the grandest hall at the moment. Ah, I'm sure

you already knew... sorry, I just got a bit excited when I saw you. I came to see the statue today myself.”

“Oh, Miranda got that statue made already? I guess I should go check it out. I haven’t heard many details of the temple. I just came by to check it out today,” Jake said.

“If... if that’s the case, should we go together? I kept up with news, and I helped build the temple... I could be a guide or something?” he asked. No matter how dense Jake could be, it was apparent the young man desperately wanted Jake to agree. Not like he had any reason not to.

“Sure thing,” Jake agreed, smiling beneath his mask. While he didn't exactly crave social contact... he felt like having some outside people like Miranda would be good. After killing for so long, it would do him good to socialize a bit to not completely lose the ability to do so. “So, you’re a builder, eh? You get along with Hank?”

“Yeah, he’s great! He has taught me so much and-“

Chris kept talking as the two of them entered the temple. A young chatterbox and an ominous-looking masked-wearing cloaked D-grade.

Miranda leaned back against the tree, breathing heavily. One of her arms was mangled, and she had a fist-sized hole in her stomach. She had to admit that she may have been in trouble without Jake’s health potion, even with all her preparations.

Green wisps of energy still floated in the air as remnants of the battle. The atmospheric mana in the area was soaked in Verdant mana from the formation that had been active until not that long ago - a formation that had covered an area nearly 500 meters in diameter.

The formation took the form of a pentagram made of staves with now-cracked orbs on their ends in all the corners. The magic circle on the ground in the clearing had also helped immensely, as well as many of the explosive runes she had blown up.

Four entire days of preparation, all coming after more than one and a half months of killing the damn Oakwood tigers to make this a one on one fight, had led to this day. Miranda had never thought she could do it, but with encouragement from her Patron gods, she had given it a shot and succeeded – succeeded in solo-killing a D-grade before her evolution.

****You have slain [Oakwood Tiger Alpha – lvl 103] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

The corpse was lined with glowing veins of Verdant Energy that had invaded its body. She had bombarded it with more regular spells too, but in the end, she had only stood a chance due to her immense preparations.

Miranda didn't think of herself as a vindictive person normally, but that didn't mean she couldn't bear a grudge. The Oakwood Tigers had scared her for a long time as she, Hank, and the kids had nearly died to one. It had taken her a long time to build up the courage to defeat one... and now she had nearly succeeded in wiping out all the Oakwood Tigers near Haven. Including their Alpha.

She had done it to face her fears, and it felt almost cathartic when she finally killed the Alpha. It was like a perfect circle of her journey to Haven had been made. Half a year ago, she had found what would end up being named Haven while being chased, and now she was one chasing and killing the leader of those same monsters that hunted her.

To truly drive home that the circle was complete, she also reached the level threshold from the kill.

****'DING!' Class: [Neophyte Verdant Witch] has reached level 99 - Stat points allocated, +3 free points****

Which meant it was D-grade evolution time. Miranda began making her way back to Haven with difficulty as she went over the fight a few more times in her head. She had only won because she planned everything. She had studied the beast and how it hunted and learned about all its tricks. Countermeasures for every skill were made, so the entire fight was more a play than an actual battle – and she the scriptwriter.

What little improvisation she was forced to do resulted in a mangled arm, vine-attacks penetrating her stomach, and she even had one also go through her chest. She used a health potion to make it through that one.

Miranda had gotten better at dealing with pain. However, when she began leveling her witch class, she couldn't handle it at all. She failed to focus while using skills if it hurt, and any wound practically paralyzed her for half a second from the pain. It had taken her a long time to build up her tolerance to an acceptable level. Without it, she would be dead.

The thought of risking her life wasn't pleasant, but she had felt forced to. She desperately wanted to try and keep up with Jake and the city as a whole. Neil reaching D-grade had truly pushed her. He and his party had also killed a D-grade before evolving, using their teamwork to bring it down.

On her way back, she checked out her old profession. It had been the start of her journey to finding the place she belonged in the new world, and a part of her felt sad knowing it would change.

Principal City Lord of Earth – The City Lord employed by the first human to found a city on Earth. Now on a path to create a haven for the survivors in the new world. A home to defend. City Lord is a profession focused on managing and guiding a city to glory. Grants skills related to management, economy, leadership, and control, as well as paths to protect your new dominion. However, be warned that should the city fall, you will not escape unscathed. Stat bonuses per level: +18 free points.

The profession had been great. Likely one of the better ones on Earth as a whole. She had put a lot of thought into the placement of every single free point, and after the Ladies of the Verdant Lagoon blessed her, she had begun making use of her Dreams skill to consult the other residents of the triplet-gods realm.

There were plenty of loyal subjects of the Godqueens that would gladly help her with anything she needed. Humans among those too. They had given her advice, and with that, she had what she hoped was a very optimal free point distribution. It was pretty standard to do this... and while she wanted to say that she was sure Jake put just as much thought into placing his points, she was pretty sure he didn't. He probably just placed them wherever he felt like. Miranda wished she had the confidence to do that.

When she re-entered Haven, she stayed hidden and went straight for her home. Well, it was also her workplace, but she did have privacy in some parts of the large building. Once there, she evolved to D-grade without hesitation.

The first thing she did after evolving wasn't to upgrade her profession but instead to take a shower. Did she need it? No, not really, but she really wanted one. It also allowed her to properly identify some of the changes the evolution had brought.

Neil was already a good-looking young man before becoming a D-grade but was at old-world actor standards now. He had joked about maybe finally being able to land a partner with his improved looks, but it had led to some questions. Why had Jake barely changed when he became D-grade?

She had ended up asking a C-grade human within the Verdant Lagoon. An absolutely gorgeous woman who had explained how evolution worked in more depth. How it brought your appearance and some other things about yourself closer to your own ideal version of perfect. Did that particular mole bother you? The evolution would remove it. Did you like the mole or didn't care about it? It would stay.

This had inadvertently resulted in all humans looking quite a lot better... but it wasn't equal. You had to want it. Often it was just subconscious wants, out of one's control. Everyone had small parts about themselves they wanted to improve if they could. Some more than others. She had learned that Jake was one of the people who didn't truly wish for any significant change.

He had gotten a bit taller, and his features had been ironed out... but that's it. Not to misunderstand, he looked handsome, but he had done so since the first time they met. A bit average, sure, that coupled with his entire presence was a charming mix. To be honest, Jake's confidence made Miranda feel vain as she stood and stared at herself in the mirror. While she had always put effort into her appearance, it was nothing compared to the makeover an evolution could bring. She felt like she looked like some of those internet influencers, except her mirror image wasn't photoshopped.

I blame the unrealistic beauty standards set by firms and the advent of photo-editing technology,

she joked with herself as she dried her long orange hair. The evolution had even made her hair feel more comfortable to touch... why the hell had she wanted that?

Shaking her head, she put on her clothes again. She felt them magically fit her slightly changed body, giving room or shrinking where needed. What was it Jake called that? System-fuckery, was it? There sure were some shenanigans going on.

Once dressed, she went and sat down as she began her profession-evolution. She couldn't evolve her class yet due to needing that extra level, but her profession had been capped for a long time.

She had a selection of five different professions on the list. When she evolved to E-grade, she had only had four. One of the new options was a straight upgrade to her existing one, not really adding anything new except tripling the stats, which wasn't bad at all, as it would offer 54 per level.

Two of the options were unrelated to her role as a City Lord, so she disregarded them instantly. One was related to her blessing from the Verdant Witches, and the other was some general social-type profession. Neither of them better than just the straight upgrade.

Which left two remaining. Both were better than the straight upgrade to Principal City lord, at least stat-wise. The first of which gave 55 stats. But...

Steward of Jake Thayne – You have sworn your life to uphold the interests of Jake Thayne and will serve him i-

No! No way! Next!

Mistress of Haven – You are the leader of the first city founded on Earth by the Progenitor and Chosen of the Malefic Viper, Jake Thayne. Haven had many expectations as the first city, and most were met, not through rapid expansion but by focusing on quality. More importantly, you have managed to stay in the good graces of Jake Thayne and keep your position. You are now more trusted than ever, as your bond with your benefactor strengthens. Grants skills related to management, economy, leadership, and control, as well as paths to protect your new dominion and remain in the good graces of the owner of the city. However, be warned that should the city fall, or if you fail up to live up to the expectations of the city owner, you will not escape unscathed. Stat bonuses per level: +59 free points.

Way better, if still a few implications I am not sure what to think about.

“Louise even helped bring food this one time, and we talked about old times. We even liked the same TV shows from before the system! Recently she began wearing this new dress; I think it’s pastel-colored? I’m not sure. I suck at colors. She looked really pretty an-“

Jake walked beside Chris, who was enthusiastically talking about his obvious crush on Louise. The young man wasn’t even trying to hide it and had begun after he probed Jake a bit. Jake had admitted that he had a girlfriend before, and that made Chris believe Jake was some expert when it came to the opposite sex. He hadn’t even gotten the chance to tell the young man that his first relationship didn’t exactly end amicably.

It was honestly enjoyable. Chris was a nice guy if a bit naïve and overly outgoing. Just as Jake was thinking this, he felt the change.

The atmosphere underwent a subtle shift. The mana changed. Jake was clearly the only one who noticed it as it was so minuscule... but it was there. And Jake also instantly knew the reason – Miranda had evolved her profession.

Jake kept walking and talking with Chris as the young man introduced all the different statues they came across of weird gods. They had decided to save the main chamber with the Ladies of the Verdant Lagoon in for last. None of these gods were infused by someone blessed, and yet they still had odd auras around them. Likely due to the sculptor infusing some inherent magic.

He kept thinking about Miranda's evolution and how he should go check things out a bit later once he was done at the temple. It turns out that wasn't necessary.

Jake felt something. A probe of sorts. Something tried to connect to him, and it felt ever-so-slightly like when Villy contacted him. Yet it was blocked. It encountered an impenetrable wall - a wall that seemed to be both grand and disconnected from Jake. He couldn't even comprehend it... and without the system letting him know, he would never notice it.

No... it was more a veil - a cloak... a shroud. Just as Jake felt the attempted connection fade, he let it through. Instantly he lost all feeling of the shroud as the system stopped making him aware of it, as Miranda's voice echoed out in his head.

"Hellooooo? It should be working? Is my skill broken? Hellooo?"

Chapter 255: Temple & Blessings

"Message received, over," Jake responded mentally to Miranda. "Another merchant god? How many damn merchant gods are there?" Jake also asked Chris as they stood before an overly gaudy statue made of what looked like gold.

"Finally, I was beginning to think the skill didn't work... Anyway, hey Jake, I evolved to D-grade and upgraded my profession, which got me a skill to contact you through some formation for communication. I was lucky I had the ingredients required on hand. It isn't cheap, but I wanted to test out if it worked," Miranda explained through the odd telepathic connection. A bit of karmic magic in there, too, Jake reckoned.

"For some reason, there seems to be a buttload of gods who do trade and money stuff. I heard from some people it has something to do with faith, but I'm not sure. All I know is that, yeah, there are so many. Maybe it's because they're more into investing in young talents? That's business-like, right?" Chris answered Jake.

Holding two conversations at once was a bit weird. Especially as one was in Jake's head and the other with the young man beside him. It was some next-level multitasking, and Jake couldn't help but try. He found it challenging to do... which was reason enough for him to do it.

"You forgot the 'over', over," Jake responded, teasing Miranda. "That makes sense, I guess. Our world revolved a lot around economics before; it makes sense gods who focus on it found many worth investing in here," he also answered Chris.

He kept up this dual-conversation, neither of the two people he spoke to wiser to that fact. It did help that Miranda only spoke a few more times, though. She quickly gave a rundown on things and said she would be by the lodge the next day, which left Jake plenty of time to continue wandering about and even throw in a visit to the Fort.

“The range of this skill should be quite extensive. It’s rare-rarity and only works on you, so it has to be decent. I can’t even contact Lillian with it, though she already has a skill to do that, so it isn’t a problem. Also, I’ll be sure to bring some food from this new place when I visit. The System Store having foodstuff has added to the palate of the restaurants even more than before the dungeon. Anyway, see you then... over,” Miranda had finished, making Jake able to focus all his attention on Chris. Jake felt Miranda would have to cut off soon anyway as her voice was beginning to feel a bit faint, making him guess there was a limit to the skill on communication time.

“Wanna go to the east wing now? There are a few infused statues there. They have this insane aura, and people can even pray to them and get temporary bonuses... I even heard someone got a profession-upgrade due to one of the statues as well as a blessing,” Chris explained, as they were about done in the west wing.

The west wing had only non-infused statues. Quite a lot of them, even. Jake also noticed they all had some similar aspects, so he couldn’t help but ask: “Are all these made by the same sculptor?”

“Yes! They’re all made by Felix, a really great dude if a bit weird. He spends all his time making statues and has a backlog of ones to create even now, as far as I know. He even evolved his profession at level 100 and made the statue in the innermost chamber after that. The one with the Ladies of the Verdant Lagoon,” Chris said, delivering some nice exposition.

The two of them walked through the crowd and entered the east wing. While the west wing did have some people in it, it wasn't that many. The east wing, on the other hand, was absolutely packed. Jake easily saw the reason why.

At the end of the room were eight statues giving off powerful auras. Divine auras. Jake saw Chris beside him unconsciously lower his head a bit as he entered the room. Most of the people in there were praying and stuff like that, but there was one group that stood out.

Over to the side of the chamber was an area with what looked like yoga mats. Around 20 people sat on their own respective mat with their eyes closed and sweaty brows. Most of their heads were held high, but they looked to be struggling.

Finally, one of them breathed out heavily, opened his eyes, and lowered his head. After a bit of labored breathing, he walked out of the room with unsteady steps. People made way and gave him a fast lane to get out, making Jake think it was a usual occurrence. On closer inspection... Jake was pretty sure two of the nineteen left on the mats weren't conscious.

"What's up with that?" Jake asked, nodding towards them.

Chris looked up at Jake, a bit confused, before answering: "They're training their resistance to auras. Mental states or something. They try to resist the aura to build up a tolerance when it's easier just to let it affect you."

"I see," Jake nodded. Well, he understood what they were doing even if he couldn't relate. The auras weren't an issue for him at all. Heck, Villy couldn't bring him down with his aura, so how could a bunch of statues from weaker gods.

The auras were weirdly clashing in the room. Each statue was ten or so meters apart, and each had an area of influence around them roughly based on their level of power as far as Jake could tell. Some statues had auras extending further than others. It could also have something to do with the one who infused it? The level of their blessing? A combination, perhaps? Luckily he didn't need to figure that one out himself as Villy came poking. Jake felt like he was beginning to have too many people in his head these days...

"The statues possess an aura both dependent on the god and the one who infused it. The higher the rarity of the blessing, the more 'juice' is packed into the statue, while the god is the quality of the juice. By the way, wanna do something funny? I promise it will be interesting?" Villy said in a teasing tone.

"Will it include the death of one or more people?" Jake asked back to clarify. Half-jokingly.

"Nah, no one will get hurt permanently. But it will be funny and interesting. Promise," Villy insisted.

"No destruction of property either," Jake stipulated. He already had an idea of what Villy was planning. Jake wasn't sure it was a good idea; in fact, he was quite sure it was a bad idea, but he was curious. He wanted to see what would happen... which is why he also didn't resist when Villy's presence amplified.

"Deal."

It was a bad decision... but... a bit funny.

An aura descended on the entire east wing. Instantly, the eight statues were suppressed, and every single person – except Jake – fell to their knees and couldn't raise their heads. Jake, playing along, also crouched down.

It only lasted for around five seconds until the aura disappeared as if it had never been there. It took another ten seconds before the statues began exuding an aura once more and nearly half a minute before people began standing up, looking around confused and afraid. Some didn't get up at all but lay unconscious on the ground.

The 17 people who were still awake before on the yoga mats were all knocked out cold. Silly people tried to resist.

Panic seemed to overtake the entire wing as people began yelling and looking around. A few gazes landed on Jake, but with how many wore robes or cloaks in there and him staying crouched, he didn't stand out that much.

"What exactly was the purpose of that?" Jake asked the clearly bored Primordial.

"Shameless flexing. Those gods all felt it on their end. Just wanted to take a good wee all over my – well, our – territory to make them clear that while they got statues here, they ain't shit. Oh, and another small thing that you will find out about in a bit," Villy said. That last sentence sounded way too amused for Jake to feel comfortable.

“Wha... what was that?” Chris muttered, having managed to stay conscious and relatively put together. He did look a bit wobbly on his feet, but otherwise, he took it well. Jake was a bit proud of that; Villy’s aura was quite something, after all.

Not that Villy used his full aura. Jake remembered feeling it back then in Villy’s realm and back during the evolution of his profession. What had just been done felt like... nothing.

“How Villy, toss me a percentage. How much ‘juice,’ as you say, did you put into that one?” Jake asked.

“We aren’t in the percentage points yet. I can’t really unleash it all even if I wanted to. Well, I could still pour in enough for me to kill anyone, not at least in D-grade within a few hundred meters of you, but it really isn’t worth it. It’s tiring as fuck to do, and anyone it has any effect on you can fuck up yourself. So no, not applicable in combat at all,” Villy explained. Jake himself decided to stay in the real world.

“Must be something to do with those statues. Can you tell me about them?” Jake said, changing the subject.

“Oh... probably was just them... I don’t really get how these things work. Anyway, the statues depict-“

To summarise: the statues depicted a bunch of weaker gods or subordinate gods from larger organizations. Nothing interesting or fancy going on at all. Of course, to the populace of Haven, any god was an absolutely insurmountable existence. It kind of made sense. To a regular human. It didn’t matter if a black hole was small or large; it could rip you apart atom by atom no matter what. If atoms were still a thing after the system.

Probably not. Did black holes still exist? Probably. Jake couldn't wait to go see one. Event horizons looked dope in pictures, and seeing one in person would be awesome.

After Chris was done, he hesitantly asked. "Would you like to go pray at one? It offers a temporary buff to your status menu... it's quite good..."

"You go. I already got a blessing," Jake answered nonchalantly.

"Oh... you do? Well, that makes sense; I heard the best got them offered... I'll be right back, okay?" he asked Jake, waving him off to go get his blessing. Chris was clearly anxious Jake would leave while he was gone. An unfounded fear for sure.

"Okay, one last trick. Have the kid come back," Villy butted in unprompted. "Those stupid gods aren't the only ones who can play... well, gods."

"Actually, come back here," Jake said just as Chris had taken a single step.

"Yes?" he asked and was already back before Jake again before Jake even had a chance to answer.

"Place your hand on the guy's shoulder or something."

Jake did so and placed his hand on the confused young man's shoulder.

“Now, just want for him to get a temporary blessing and pour in a bit of mana.”

Following the instructions, Jake poured in a bit of mana, and he felt Villy also pour in something. Chris looked confused until he felt the energy enter him. He gaped for a while before making a huge grin.

“For real!?” he asked, excited.

“Yeah, go for it,” Jake said, smiling beneath his mask. Villy thought he was pulling a fast one but didn't know that Jake already knew what he was doing. He had seen it mentioned in Jacob's small booklet a long time ago.

Anyone with a certain level of blessing can, with the permission of their Patron, give out blessings themselves. In fact, the whole “meeting through evolutions” part of giving blessings was a rarity. Well, it had been a necessity for the new universe.

Jake understood why this was a thing. Gods shouldn't waste time giving out every minor baptism or insignificant blessing themselves by meeting every prospect. So they had delegated that shit. And now Villy was having Jake act as a religious figurehead, blessing Chris.

As for why Jake let him? Because why not? Chris seemed like a nice guy, but blessings didn't grow on trees. It would help the guy out, and also... it was kind of interesting, wasn't it?

"Is this the first person on Earth besides me you blessed?" Jake asked the Viper.

"Ah, this is way less fun when you know. As for if you are the first... not telling," Villy said, trying to tease Jake, but...

"So that's a no. Good to know. Be nice to Chris, by the way. I don't think he could handle you messing with him."

"Talking directly to those you blessed isn't just something you can normally do this easily. I can because you're my Chosen. Also because it tends to fuck up the blessed person if you talk too often. Their feeble souls cannot handle it without dedicated skills for communication. Before you ask, yes, you are a freak of nature, and also, yes, I still want that sacrificial array deployed. We can compromise and go with a continental one except for a planetary?"

Jake wanted to respond with a quip, but before he could, something unexpected happened. Two arms wrapped themselves around him as Chris gave him a big hug. "Thank you so much! I can't even begin to tell you... I'm just... what do you need me to do? I know nothing comes for free, and I swear I will do anything I can to make it up to you."

"It's fine, no pressure and no expectations come with it besides for you to do your best. So just... let go, please?" Jake said, Chris still hugging him tightly. It was very awkward.

“Sorry...” he muttered as he reluctantly let go.

“It’s just a lesser blessing. I already got my investments worth tenfold with that hug,” Villy laughed. Jake cut off the super rude snake god as he and Chris made their way out the room and headed towards the main chamber where only a single statue infused with energy resided – the Ladies of the Verdant Lagoon.

They came, they saw, and Jake had to say it looked great. He also noted that the aura didn’t affect him at all, as in, it didn’t even try to affect him. Chris also looked surprised and said he didn’t feel anything. *Something to do with them being groupies of Villy, I guess.*

To be honest, the main chamber wasn’t that interesting, yet it was even more packed. People prayed to statues that weren’t even infused, which to Jake just looked silly. Especially the one Jake assumed was meant to depict the Holy Mother – or at least her symbol, which was also the symbol of the Holy Church – was super popular. For the record, her symbol was a pair of wings. A bit boring... though Villy’s was just a snake. Both a bit boring.

Jake didn’t want to stay long, and neither did Chris. Well, Chris just wanted to follow Jake. As he exited the main chamber, still thinking about where to go next, he saw someone approach him in a hurry. The moment he saw Jake and Chris, his eyes practically lit up, and he rushed over even faster.

“That’s the sculptor Felix,” Chris muttered just in time.

“You! You’re blessed by a Primordial, aren’t you? I felt it! I felt the almighty aura of a Primordial, and I still feel it linger even now! Haha! I never thought I would truly encounter one blessed by a Primordial this soon! Please help me in trying to display even a fraction of the brilliance of a Primordial with my meager skills!” the sculptor named Felix yelled at the entrance to the main chamber, drawing attention from all around.

Felix's eyes were directed straight at the one blessed by a Primordial:

Chris.

Chapter 256: Servant & Territory

Jake was confused, Felix excited, Chris super confused, and Villy was laughing hysterically in Jake’s head.

It took Jake a moment to realize that Villy had seriously just blessed someone just to fuck with him as a setup for this joke. Along with the hug, the old snake god seemed to have one hell of a time. Too bad for Villy... two could play that game.

Felix looked expectantly at Chris, who looked nervously up at Jake for guidance. They had attracted quite a lot of attention as Felix seemed to be a bit of a local celebrity. Now that same shine was put on Chris, who everyone looked at. Only a few gave Jake a glance, which was actually quite nice.

Jake took charge and said: “Please, let us take this somewhere more private. His lordship does not wish to flaunt his position.”

This earned him even more confused glances from Chris, but Jake just looked at him back, trying to convey the young man should play along with the joke.

It didn’t work. The young man still looked panicky.

Felix shifted his attention to Jake and mumbled. “Yes... I understand. Please follow me!”

Putting a hand on Chris’ shoulder, Jake led him to follow him and Felix into a side room. A large enchanted door separated the room from the rest of the temple, and upon entering, it was clear this was a workshop. Tools lined the walls, and two half-built statues stood in the center of the room. Enchantments also seemed to nicely isolate the room from the rest of the temple.

“Now! Please, I must know... I felt the aura... but... which Primordial blessed you? Was it Stormild? Wyrmgod? No... you’re a builder... the Starseizing Titan? Rigoria? Please, I must know!” Felix said with fanatic fervor.

Yep, this guy is a loony, Jake thought. Had the dude been making too many statues and now found his mind broken by godly auras? Or was it something else?

“Before answering, please let us know why you desire this information?” Jake said, continuing to play his role of bodyguard or assistant or... well, he hadn’t really decided on a set role. He was improvising.

“Yes... sorry I was just too excited. Allow me to introduce myself once more. I am Felix, a newly joined member of the Primordial Church and blessed by the Eternal Servant. Sculpting is my creed, and after being shown the magnificence of the Primordials, my life goal has been to depict one... naturally only with the approval of one blessed by them,” Felix explained, clearly putting in the effort to stay calm.

“I... I think there is a misunderstanding,” Chris said, as he had built up the courage to explain himself. “I just received my blessing a few minutes ago from Lord Thayne.”

He pointed at Jake – that little snitch – forcing him to stop the play... and enter another role. Villy wouldn’t get off cheap.

“You’re... but I feel no aura? I should be able to... I have a skill to see, so...” Felix said while looking at Jake, unsure if Chris was telling the truth.

“Chris, you tell him,” Jake said. Totally not because he wasn’t sure how to explain the situation and make himself seem cool and mysterious meanwhile.

“Lord Thayne touched me and gave me a blessing related to the Malefic Viper... he was the one with it first,” Chris explained. Granted, the kid didn’t know much, but apparently, just the mention of the Malefic Viper was enough.

Felix looked to be flummoxed for a moment and didn't respond. He paused. Looked almost to be in a trance for several seconds.

Then... another aura appeared. Felix's eyes glowed a deep blue for a split second. One of his eyes returned to normal, but the other kept shining, and the aura remained... the aura of a god. Tears began pouring out of his eyes as he fell to his knees.

"This servant greets the Chosen of the Malefic One," he said. Or perhaps they said, would be more accurate. His voice echoed, first with that of Felix's and then with that of the god. His body appeared to be half-possessed...

On a side note, Chris was knocked out cold the moment the god's aura appeared.

Jake was, needless to say, surprised. By several things. First of all, could gods possess mortals like that? Secondly, whatever god did so clearly knew his identity right away... and third...

The aura of the god possessing Felix felt awfully similar to that of Villy – both in signature and power.

"Who are you?" Jake asked.

"*Jake, give me some mana here,*" he heard Villy's voice say. Jake didn't think much but poured out nearly ten thousand mana in a fraction of a second as a faint outline of a

glowing green eye appeared. Turns out that's all the physical manifestation Jake could possibly facilitate.

One thing that did remain in full force was his presence.

Felix – or the god possessing him – looked at Villy with wide eyes as he practically prostrated himself. “This Eternal Servant greets the Primordial.”

“I guess it’s been a while,” Villy said. His tone was odd, and Jake picked up on it right away. He sounded more formal... and annoyed? At least he didn’t appear to be in a joking mood. Had he not predicted this would happen? Jake assumed he had...

“Far too long, Malefic One. I have no words to explain my elation when I felt your return... the world has been incomplete for far too long,” the god in Felix said with an echoing voice. Jake didn’t really want to butt in, but...

Felix seemed to be breaking.

“Yo, better get the fuck out that guy’s body, or he’s gonna die,” Jake said in a scolding tone.

“Ah, it’s is of no concern; it is merely another vessel... I shall bring another to-“

“I wasn’t asking,” Jake said, staring into the eyes of the possessed Felix. He felt the god stare back at him with a hint of surprise. Jake felt like he looked into an infinity ocean of light, and he saw twelve figures upon mighty thrones for a fraction of a second. The vision appeared as fast it had come, and the possessed man smiled.

“Truly worthy of being the Malefic One’s Chosen. I shall oblige,” he said, his smile widening. Felix’s lips cracked due to the smile as blood began leaking out. Blood also began pouring out his eyes, ears, nose, and his skin cracked several places.

“It shames me our meeting was cut short... please never hesitate to call upon me, oh Malefic One.”

With those words, the aura faded, and the eye stopped glowing. Well, it didn’t really stop glowing as much as it disappeared as there now just was an empty eye socket where it had been. Felix was on the brink of death, and Jake didn’t hesitate to go forward and make him drink a healing potion.

All of these weird events left Jake in a room with two unconscious people and a floating green eye belonging to Villy.

“So... who the fuck was that?” Jake asked.

“The Eternal Servant... I honestly don't wanna say much about him. He is what happens when fanaticism is taken to such an extreme it resulted in godhood. He is from the second era, born in the first universe, and he is a bit... much. Yeah, just thinking about him is annoying. Man, I hoped to fuck with you by having a fanatic from his “church” meet you, but now it just got weird,” Villy said through the weird floating eye.

“So, what is this Primordial Church?”

“A fucked up fan club of all the Primordials led by the biggest fanboy of the multiverse. I am not joking. Seriously, the guy exemplifies why the word fan comes from fanatic. He is bat-shit insane, and anyone who joins his church is pretty damn crazy too. Well, they can be normal most of the time, but confront them with anything Primordial-related, and they go mental,” Villy said. Jake was sure there were a lot of stories for him to hear in the future.

“Sounds like a lot. Will the dude cause issues for me?” Jake asked. “Also, what the hell was he doing with this Felix fellow? He nearly died.”

“Besides possibly getting a meltdown due to the paradox of you being both a heretic and a Chosen, I doubt he will ever be an issue for you. He may be an annoyance. As for that mortal human... he is just a mortal human. Another instrument for the Servant to do his work. Why would a god care about the death of a single E-grade follower? To him, a single nanosecond more in the presence of a Primordial is worth more than that guy’s life,” Villy explained curtly.

“Okay, dude is fucked up for real. Is that kind of divine possession normal?”

“No, not at all. The one being possessed has to accept it, and as you saw, it isn’t exactly healthy for the one being possessed. This guy must have a skill related to the Eternal Servant to do it, which is why I hadn’t seen this shitty situation coming. But you can meet people who can do it, and some possessions or partial possessions also have combat effects. You don’t even need to do it with a god, just someone quite a bit more powerful than you. Often it isn’t even an individual possessing the person but a Record Fragment. It’s just integrating a part of a superior being’s Records for a short period to empower yourself. If you had taken a class to become my Champion, you would have 100% gotten one like that.”

They're basically just another form of temporary boosting skills with all the associated after-effects," Villy told him.

Jake nodded along, not at all unhappy he didn't have some weird possession skill. He didn't like the thought of being possessed at all. Why Felix was fine with it, he didn't get either, but the dude did seem a bit broken.

"Thanks for the info, mate. I guess I'll see you around? Also, you majorly fucked up, eh? Don't worry; I'll make sure to get you an absolutely *wonderful* statue that will truly show off your awesomeness," Jake deviously smiled as he saw the floating eye about to run out of mana.

"See, this is why you got that damn heretic part of your profession,"

Villy laughed as the eye slowly faded away. Not mad at all, but just bemused. Jake himself just chuckled. He wasn't going to do something overly obscene... but he would have some fun with it.

Now, there was just one minor issue.

The room had changed from two unconscious people plus Jake and floating-green-eye-Villy to Jake alone with two unconscious men.

Jake sat down in meditation as he began weaving some mana strings into the shape of a statue to pass the time and wait for them to wake up as he muttered to himself: "Now, how much can I get away with..."

While Jake was fucking around and being childish with the Malefic Viper, the rest of the world progressed towards the Treasure Hunt. But it wasn't all smooth sailing. A month after the World Congress, around the time Jake entered the dungeon, the barriers went down.

Barriers sealing in the many D-grades bound to the unclaimed Pylons of the world. Variants and groups of D-grades were freed, and many of these were not as docile as the usual beasts. They weren't all natives of the 93rd universe, far from it. Some of them were even sapient like the King of the Forest with their own ideals and goals.

Even more so, when the barriers disappeared, the Pylons spawned. Spawned, ready for the taking. But... not only humans could claim them. The only reason no monster had claimed one yet was due to one always spawning after a human or a group of humans killed the guardian. The only exception to this was Jake's, which beasts had tried to claim, but they could not due to Jake's quest.

Now, nothing held them back, and all across the globe, monster nobles appeared. They claimed territories affected by the Pylons and made them their own, dominated other beasts or creatures in the area, and they themselves experienced massive growth as the Pylon sped up their progress.

This led to some of them being greedy. To want to claim more Pylons and grow more powerful. Other monsters were displaced as they lost the bout to claim a Pylon and went looking for another. The vast majority ended up in conflicts with other monsters. One must remember that humans were all concentrated in a small area, while the rest of the planet still existed, dominated by other creatures. These creatures now fought as they also struggled for dominion – just as humans did in their own smaller area.

But, of course, some found their way to human settlements. Packs of D-grade beasts that sought opportunities, solitary powerful D-grades that were ousted, or entire armies led by a powerful leader. All of these were now something humanity had to contend with on top of the usual native beasts of Earth.

Naturally, the beasts of Earth also had to contend with these newly released invaders. In fact, many Pylons were claimed by natives as they dominated the territories of these Pylon monsters and claimed them as their own. Many didn't due to them already living in areas suitable for their growth, but some monsters would always wander.

Humanity faced this new threat head-on. Many cities were prepared and had defenses in place, at least one D-grade around to defend the city, or powerful parties or formations to at least hold back any invaders.

The more powerful cities didn't have any major issues. The Court of Shadows, Undead, Holy Church, Noboru Clan, Valhal, and many others handled these invaders easily. All of these factions had multiple D-grades in their ranks by now, and just the size and power of their permanent defenses were enough to deter any opportunistic invader.

No, those that truly suffered were the smaller settlements. Those who had a Pylon but no major fighting force attached. Sure, all had to slay a strong D-grade to get the Pylon, but the killer of the D-grade hadn't always stayed around. Or at least they couldn't be around all the time. The moment the strongest fighter left, the city would fall, and many of the invaders weren't stupid monsters but intelligent beings. They waited, they plotted, and they seized the moment when opportune. This inadvertently led to even more growth for both parties involved, as many humans were forced into leveling their otherwise neglected class.

Gods were also involved. Humans were not the only ones who could be blessed. Some gods even began to place bets on beasts or monsters, blessing them and giving them guidance with the hope that they could take over the planet. These deities were not silly

enough to think they could kill all the humans... simply make them run away from the planet in due time, or have their blessed one leave themselves if it got too dangerous.

It was a new paradigm that resulted in far more beasts or monsters attacking cities as they were displaced. No city went unnoticed by these monsters. Some, they chose to steer clear of, however.

Those too big, like Sanctdomo, Saya, or Skyggen, were natural places to avoid. Others had powerful defenders. All of them were avoided after long consideration and scouting from the monsters – especially the sapient ones.

All but one.

During the time Jake was in the dungeon, and Haven lay undefended, some monsters did come by.

A gargoyle looked down from far above towards the forest below. Its red gem-like eyes stared down for a long time. It stood on a large horizontal tower that floated through magical means – nearly ten kilometers long and five hundred meters wide.

The gargoyle was the leader - a powerful monster that saw few equals in this new world. Yet, it had been pushed away from its Pylon and was forced to flee by a powerful native beast. The inner parts of the forest were not somewhere it could safely exist. So, it had taken its army and tower with it as it retreated, looking for a new opportunity. It had fled from deep within the forest... and the closest Pylon was in the outskirts. It had felt it due to its magical sensitivity.

It led an army of over a thousand gargoyles. Several D-grades among them, and as the leader, it was already a mid-tier D-grade at level 131. Its royal guards were all D-grades above 120. The city should be easy to claim, as all the readings indicated they had every advantage. No D-grades either, according to their devices. It should be easy...

But...

“This place... is not ours to claim,” the leader said as it commanded the tower to turn, and their journey continued as they went to seek out another Pylon.

It was not the first monster to come across Haven. It would not be the last either. But so far, none had dared enter. Sapient or instinctual. Smart or dumb. They all felt it – they all knew – that one does not simply walk into the territory of a powerful entity.

Much less the territory of the Primal Hunter.

Chapter 257: Will of the Chosen

Hm, should I go for human-form Villy looking silly? Nah, that would be boring. Small snake eating a mushroom? That could be funny. Oh, what if I added a plaque below saying ‘danger noodle’? Yeah, that could totally be funny, Jake thought as he considered his options while waiting for the two men to wake up.

His hands were weaving different figures of stable arcane mana as he tried out a few shapes he thought could be funny.

After fifteen minutes, Chris woke up. Felix was still out, as it seemed like being possessed by that god had done a number on him. Without the healing potion, he would have 100% died. Again, that Eternal Servant guy was a major asshole.

“What happened?” Chris asked as he woke up. He didn’t even try to stand up right away but stayed on the ground as he rubbed his head.

“Felix got possessed by a god, and the aura knocked you out. I heard that can happen, so no reason to feel bad about it,” Jake explained.

“Oh...” Chris answered. He sighed as he sat up and stared at the floor as he muttered: “Why do I keep being mentally assaulted and knocked out all the time today?”

“Sorry, that’s on me,” Jake apologized. “On a positive note, that should be the last time. I hope it is, at least.”

Chris nodded. He looked at Felix also lying on the ground and saw the bloodstains from the possession earlier. The missing eye was still being regenerated, but it wasn’t exactly visible. “What happened to him!? Is he dead!?” Chris yelled as he got up in a jiffy and backed away from Felix.

On a second look, he did look like a corpse. His entire body was bloody from his cracked skin, blood had flown from every opening, and he didn't look healthy at all. If one looked a bit closer, one could see that no actual injuries besides the still healing eye were present, but Chris hadn't done that.

"I told you, divine possession. Apparently not the healthiest of things to engage in. Don't worry, Felix should be fine. Physically at least. I think he's already a bit out there mentally," Jake patiently explained. Not like he had anything better to do, and Chris was a nice guy who just seemed to accept all the fucked up shit he told him without question. Quite refreshing.

"I hope he's okay," Chris said, clearly worried about the sculptor.

"He'll wake up eventually. Anyway, while we wait, do you know where Hank is these days?" Jake asked. He had been meaning to ask for a while, but things kinda happened.

"Hank and Louise went to the Fort. They're always super busy there, and he needed to help them out and handle some issues. There are a lot of new settlers because of the increasing presence of beasts, and people feel unsafe due to the lack of a physical barrier between the outer parts of the Fort and the surrounding plains," Chris explained, sounding more confident than before.

I guess it helps to talk about things you actually know about, Jake chuckled internally. "Has there been any major issues with beasts?"

The Minotaur Mindchief was still on his mind, and Jake wondered if something similar had happened. Anton and Neil were there, both D-grades, so they should be able to hold

enemies off. Neil, at least, should be able to put up lots of resistance. Jake didn't know if Anton could really fight, but he had a feeling the man wasn't defenseless.

"Not as much as elsewhere. I heard a lot of the smaller settlements are struggling, but the attackers only hit the places with Pylons. Apparently, Neil is in communication with some other space mages, and they let us know. I'm not sure about the details, though..." Chris said, looking apologetic.

"I'll just have Miranda fill me in; we're meeting tomorrow anyway," Jake waved it off.

The two kept talking for a while, and Jake came to learn a lot about the young man. He looked a bit meek and nice, but he was also headstrong and determined. Jake learned even more information he frankly didn't need or want to about Donald and Abby, and it only helped confirm how absolutely shitty people they were.

Chris had stayed with them with the goal of one day getting his revenge for what they did to his sister. He had outwardly looked loyal, but when he talked, Jake saw the pure hatred in his voice, coupled with the elation when he spoke of that one time he got one of the people loyal to Donald killed.

He was a scheming man who didn't even flinch when he mentioned stealthily throwing a dagger at someone's calf as he tried to dodge a charging beast. Jake liked him more and more as they talked. However, there were some things that made Jake uncomfortable.

Chris had been prepared to die. He had already written his life off, so when Jake had ended up 'saving' him, Chris had decided that he would gladly use his life to repay that favor. It wasn't normal at all, but the man had clearly been fucked up mentally by what he had gone through and had a weird mindset now... no matter how normal he could seem

most of the time. Jake was beginning to think Villy hadn't just blessed him as a joke. Chris was loyal to Jake to an unhealthy level.

"What do you want to accomplish, Chris?" Jake finally asked.

"Um, why do you ask? What do you mean?" the young man asked. He looked genuinely confused by the question.

"You just got a blessing from a god, you don't seem incompetent, and you are still only in the middle parts of E-grade. You're gonna live a long-ass time, and that lifespan will only increase as you level up. While you're still in your early days, you can change what you wanna do still. What you want to be. So, what do you see yourself doing in a decade? A century?" Jake asked. It was something he had been meaning to ask, because besides "repaying Jake," Chris didn't really seem to have any other real goals. He just trudged along and worked as a builder. Well, he did have a massive crush on Louise. Did that count as a goal?

"I'm not sure what you mean?" Chris asked, his confusion growing. "I'll just keep working, I guess. Do my best. I think I'm pretty good at my job and-"

"Yeah, that's what you *could* keep doing, but what do you *want* to do? Seriously, nothing's holding you back. Do whatever you want to, and as long as you don't piss off people you shouldn't piss off; no one that matters will judge you for it. So I ask again, what do you want to do?" Jake reiterated. He himself had thought a lot about it. He knew exactly what he wanted to do and the way to reach that goal. Even if it was as simple as fuck plan, it was a plan nevertheless.

“I...” Chris said, staring down onto the floor. He was silent for several seconds as he looked deep in thought until he looked back up at Jake with a serious look. “I don’t know?”

In retrospect, maybe it was a bit much to expect the young guy to figure out his entire path of life on the spot like that. Jake should have known better. Of course, that kind of thing is only okay to do with teenage students choosing higher education.

“Well, I guess your first goal should be to figure that out. Also, if you’re worried about the whole god and blessing thing... the creed of the god that blessed you is to pursue freedom above all else. Be your own man and have your own goals. You don’t owe me anything. I helped you because Donald and Abby were pieces of shit and invaded my territory. That you also got helped too was just a happy little accident,” Jake curtly said. He didn’t wanna mince words with Chris. He had potential, but his mindset was just not something Jake could agree with.

He wasn’t comfortable with the young guy being so reverent towards him. Chris was already awkward enough before Jake inadvertently helped him get a blessing from a god that the title description made clear was very powerful. Now he was even worse. Jake didn’t want that; he wanted Chris to be his own man. If he then decided to still be on team Jake? At least that would be his own decision, not made due to some odd sense of debt.

Chris didn’t answer but just sat there in thought. Jake kept playing with his mana strings, making small funny-looking miniature statues of Villy as they waited.

Silence overtook the room for a few minutes until a groan was heard from Felix. The resident sculptor looked to be in immense pain as he struggled to sit up. His one eye was still regenerating, and his body was a mess. Jake wouldn’t blame him if the guy asked them to lea-

“Oh, where are my man-“ halfway through the sentence, he got a coughing fit, spitting out a glob of blood, before continuing: “-ners... I apologize for the unsightly appearance.”

“Relax. You nearly died by being possessed by your Patron,” Jake said, shaking his head.

“I know! A meager sacrifice to learn I am in the presence of a Primordial’s Chosen! Please, let me know of any way I can be useful! I shall do my utmost in creating a sculpture to the best of my abilities! Even if it isn’t able to display even a fraction of a Primordial’s magnificence, I must do it! I beg of you!” Felix managed to get out between spitting blood, coughing, and generally looking paler and paler.

“Just focus on healing for now; we can discuss the sculpture later,” Jake said. But he had made a mistake. For between his hands was a miniature sculpture. One Felix saw.

“What could that be you are conjuring?” he asked as he looked at Jake’s mana sculpture intensely.

“Eh, just playing around with sculpture ideas, nothing you shou-“

Jake didn’t get further than that before Felix prostrated himself on the ground, as he proclaimed loudly. “The depiction of a Primordial!? I’m so sorry for my arrogance and disrespect! To not be kneeling... I... I swear I will depict it just as shown! Have no doubts; it shall be as perfect as my meager skill allows! I shall-“

Felix didn't get further before he let out a big cough, spat out a large amount of blood, and passed out again.

Jake and Chris just looked down at the sculptor who had managed to knock himself out again.

"Is he dead?" Chris asked after a few seconds as it became clear Felix wasn't getting back up any time soon.

"No."

"That's good."

"Yeah."

They stayed there for a few minutes more before Jake just shook his head, took a health potion out of his inventory, and put it down in front of Felix. "Let's just leave. We can come back another day."

"That's probably for the best," Chris agreed, undoubtedly wanting to leave himself already. "Is it okay if we split up here? I have to finish some work at the eastern side of town before Hank gets back."

“As I said, do what you want to. You don’t need to tell me everything you do; I don’t own you. So yeah, see you around. I’m gonna head to the Fort myself,” Jake said with a wave.

Jake began walking out of the room as his cloak shimmering and the light around him appeared to refract as his body disappeared. Expert Stealth activated, and coupled with his cloak, he became nearly entirely invisible and even unnoticeable to magical means.

Chris looked after him in awe, making Jake feel at least a tiny bit awesome. His new cloak was not shit, that’s for sure. Because Chris wasn’t looking at him, but only his direction even when Jake was only ten meters away.

The young man exited after Jake and walked off, drawing quite a bit of attention that Jake thankfully avoided. Chris looked to be deep in thought as he began walking away from the temple. Jake’s words had clearly had an impact.

Jake saw all this through his sphere as he himself stood atop the temple. Everything inside had returned to normal. It had been a nice visit to town, and Jake had seen and learned a lot about it. Having Miranda tell him about how everything was developing and experiencing it yourself was entirely different.

Summoning his wings, Jake took to the air as he began flying out of the forest and towards the Fort. Once he made it to the outskirts of the forest, he landed and began using One Step Mile to travel even faster. It wouldn’t take him long to reach there at all.

Guess I’ll go talk to Arnold first. It has nothing to do with me not knowing where Hank is specifically.

Felix woke up inside the temple. A splitting headache dominated his senses, but a feeling of elation quickly overtook that.

The first thing he saw was the potion on the ground. Felix instantly knew who it was from, as he picked it up and cradled it. The generosity of the Chosen... a gift... he would make sure to save it. The thought of drinking it didn't even occur to him for a second.

The sculptor had been lost only a few months ago. He had no purpose. Death and flames scared him beyond anything until the Eternal Servant had offered him another path. One where pain and hurt were but a matter of perspective. Where purpose was found not through personal accomplishments but by recognition of a higher power – the Primordials.

It was their job, not just to do what the Primordial's wanted, but what they needed. To carry out not only their words, but also understand what was left unsaid and do what would be best for them. This was why Felix understood. The Chosen had not needed to tell him. He had seen the statue the Chosen desired, and he would sculpt it - the form scorched on his mind.

While it was true the sculpture itself made him confused, who was he to try and truly understand the magnificence of a Primordial? Who but the Chosen who had met the Malefic Viper in person could display it so accurately? Who was he to question it? He was just a simple sculptor.

Felix walked over, and with a wave of his hand, the two sculptures under construction shattered and turned to dust. Even in their half-made forms, it would be unsightly for other statues to be in the presence of a Primordial's while under construction.

Yet, he didn't begin working right away. Instead, he sat down and meditated. He wanted to get started immediately, but the Chosen had ordered him to recover first. The Chosen said they would talk later, but he didn't need to waste the Chosen's time more than necessary.

He swore to himself. He would not leave that room until the sculpture was perfect – and just as the Chosen had shown him.

Chapter 258: Jake the Corpse Merchant

As expected, Jake didn't take long before he made it to the Fort. On the way, he took note of one thing in particular... he never left the influence of the Pylon. Even when he stealthily entered the outskirts of the Fort, he was still within its range.

The Fort had expanded even more than before. Jake could see why Hank had to be there. If construction in Haven was rapid, the expansion of the Fort was just insane. He knew a lot came from caravans or smaller settlements that chose to integrate themselves, but this was far more than expected.

From what Miranda had told him, one of the major reasons why so many came was the lack of regulations yet still-ensured safety. Many other cities had a faction ruling them, and that faction wanted to at least ensure a modicum of loyalty, or at least an assurance a group or a powerful individual wouldn't work against them.

Miranda had asked if they should do something similar, but to Jake, that wasn't needed. Sure, there were some basic rules that pretty much just boiled down to: don't start fights, don't be an asshole, and if you piss off the leadership of Haven, get the fuck out. If you choose to stay anyway? Well, that luckily hadn't happened yet. Jake guessed this was where he would possibly have to come in as the owner to take out the trash.

Jake thought it was nice he hadn't needed to do that yet. Phillip was apparently the guy in charge of security, and considering the man had half a rifle-bearing army already, it made sense. Should he go by and check up on him too? Nah, no need. He was pretty sure Phillip wasn't a huge fan of Jake anyway.

Having the Fort now be actually a part of the Pylon's area after Miranda evolved was great news to everyone involved. It would allow the people of the Fort access to all the system-stuff City Lords made possible and Miranda to get a better handle on all those who lived there.

Sneaking through the outskirts of the settlement, Jake became aware of exactly how much construction was going on. Brick houses were being made by the dozen, and hundreds of workers were visible within his sphere at any time.

It appeared that Hank had gone for a more normal look for the Fort. Brick houses, stone, and even something that looked a lot like concrete. If Haven was the city of wood, this would be the city of stone. Which, in retrospect, probably was most cities, also in the old world.

While Jake enjoyed looking over the city, he still prioritized getting to the central Fort itself.

No one noticed him as he jumped over the walls and into the courtyard that was a wealth of smithing and crafting as usual. The gun production was still going strong, and Jake noticed that the level of the crafters had increased yet again. Maybe some of them had evolved their profession already... if not, they would soon.

Entering the building, Jake saw all three people of note instantly. Arnold was in his workshop as always, while Neil and Hank were in the same meeting room he and Miranda had gone to back when they first came to the Fort. Seeing them all together made everything a lot easier. Being a bit cheeky, Jake marked both Hank and Neil with Mark of the Avaricious Hunter as he went to talk with Arnold – just in case they left.

Jake tried to sneak into Arnold's workshop but found something odd at the door-entrance. A shimmer of sorts covered it. He could see it both in his sphere and with his eyes ever-so-faintly. Jake didn't know what it was exactly, but it didn't give him any feeling of danger.

Now, Jake did also notice one other thing. A doorbell right beside the door. It took him a few seconds to decide between trying to sneak in and just ring the damn doorbell, and in the end, he decided on being polite.

In one smooth motion, he rang the doorbell, opened the door, and used One Step Mile to the other side of the room where he crouched down, focusing on the stealth-functionality of his cloak and the Expert Stealth skill.

He saw Arnold turn around towards the open door, looking confused. He then took a quick look around the room suspiciously. Jake, being childish, tried to sneak up on him as he began moving forward, but at that moment felt that he had been detected.

“Ah, you, great to see you back. How did the field test go?” Arnold asked nonchalantly, not even questioning why or how Jake had tried to sneak in. Shit, he didn’t even turn around but kept tinkering with something on the workbench.

Jake looked up and saw his detector. A floating eye-ball-looking machine was suspended at the ceiling, looking straight at him. He had to admit, Arnold was very industrious and had quite a number of different machines...

“It went okay; the grenade exploded with pretty good force. Could deal noticeable damage to D-grades around level 130. Not that effective against the variants, though,” Jake answered, deciding to stop messing around and just get down to business.

“Hmm, so that hypothesis turned out to be accurate,” Arnold said as he wrote down some notes on a tablet-looking device. “How would you compare the intensity of the mana released compared to your usual output?”

“About the same, I guess,” Jake said. He had noted the explosions were roughly the same as his explosive arcane arrows, after all. Considering the spheres were slightly bigger than an arrow, and the arrow was from an epic-rarity skill while the metal grenade was common-rarity, that made sense in his head.

Arnold nodded as he also noted that down. “I noticed you have a spatial storage. How much energy dissipated before you used them? And how long went between getting them and using them?”

This went on for a while as Jake was interviewed. He went along with it as he had kind of agreed to it when he took the metal balls to begin with, and the devices had been helpful.

Also, the Nanoblade was nice, and Jake believed that staying in the good graces of Arnold would only be beneficial.

Jake learned that his grenades had been substantially more powerful than the ones left behind for Arnold. Arnold could only cause some minor damage to a D-grade, and it had taken dozens of them along with dozens of other attacks for the man to kill some. Yes, apparently, Arnold had been killing D-grades to test out his stuff. It suddenly made a lot more sense why the man had managed to reach D-grade. His class wasn't as low a level as Jake had expected at all.

He badly wanted to see how someone like Arnold fought. Well, he did have a good idea based on all the drones and different robotics around. If he had a class that synergized and allowed him to make better use of all his creations, it would all make a lot more sense.

"The resulting damage was lowered further when a level 41 soldier threw a sphere too. Quite drastically, I might add. Suggests even consumables items like these have inherent scaling to the level of the user. Quite peculiar how the same item can have such a massive difference in effect just based on who threw it," Arnold said when Jake asked him about some of the other field tests he had done with Jake's arcane grenades.

"Do you need more?" Jake asked. He could do a few if it was, but...

"No need. The biggest issue wasn't the effect but the leakage of energy and annoyance in handling them. The nature of the mana infused makes it inherently highly unstable and destructive. The leakage also only makes them more unstable but overall less destructive. Yours reduced in effect at a substantially slower pace. May be due to you being the infuser or due to the unique properties of the affinity," Arnold explained, shaking his head. "I decided to settle on pure fire-affinity mana instead. Far simpler and equally if not more effective in most cases."

That one hurt Jake's feelings a bit. Did Arnold just tell him his arcane-affinity was worse than regular-fire affinity? Thankfully, he didn't do that. Lucky man. If not, Jake would have had to 'discipline' him.

"The ones with your mana are more effective within the first 31 hours and approximately 40 minutes, while after that, the pure fire-affinity becomes more effective due to the lack of natural energy leak and decline in power," Arnold said, saving himself from Jake's untold wrath.

Arcane-affinity is still better. Though I wonder, could I do fire magic? Jake thought. He would have to test that out for fun a bit later. He figured out dark mana, so he should be able to figure out fire mana. If he had the affinity, that is.

"Anyway, Arnold, I am in search of some new equipment, so I came to you as you seem to be one of the best crafters. I understand you aren't a typical craftsman, but I thought to ask anyway as the Nanoblade is great. So if you have something, I may just have something for you too," Jake finally said with a smile, turning the conversation to what he had actually come for. He was quite sure Arnold wanted what he was peddling.

"I have some projects that may be useful to you. If adequately compensated, I may trade them away. For the record, I am not in need of Credits. I have sold a few choice items to traders and on the system store and have more than adequate funds for now," Arnold said.

It was as Jake had expected. Thankfully, Jake had something far more valuable than a few Credits.

“Before I show you, be aware that this won’t be a fair trade no matter what. I am certain what I offer has more value,” Jake made clear.

Arnold looked skeptical but nodded in agreement.

Jake made a motion, and an odd-looking piece of metal appeared on the ground. It was a head and a torso made of metal. Both of them looked badly battered with dents and scratches, as well as many signs of Jake’s arcane affinity having burned into it. The neck even had signs of what looked like rust from Touch of Malefic Viper.

Walking closer, Arnold frowned. “What is this?” he asked as he knelt down and placed a hand on the torso. Jake saw his hand emit some mana as a pulse seemed to try and go through the corpse of the Altmar Census Golem.

He stayed kneeling for several seconds without moving or saying anything. The frown on his face grew by the second until he finally stopped infusing mana but didn’t get up.

“This is way beyond me,” he said, shaking his head. “Even while inactive, its core is protected, and all my attempts at scanning are completely blocked. I have no way of even researching it beyond the surface without trying to split it apart, and even if I do so, there is a chance it was built with some innate self-destruct features or something similar.”

“Doubt it will explode or have any other issues due to where it comes from and how the creators wanted it back. Either way, does that mean you aren’t interested?” Jake asked

teasingly. He already knew the answer. He saw the unabated greed in the man's eyes as he stared at the battered golem.

"Of course I want it. What do you want?" Arnold said without any hesitation. His hand was still caressing the metal. He was already looking towards the head too, but Jake quickly came in and scooped it up.

"Depends on what you have to offer. I need equipment or if you have any other cool gadgets," Jake answered, tossing the head up and down, taking way more pleasure than he should in Arnold looking nervously at him.

"I have more Nanoblades? Two of them if you need," he started with.

"I don't need more than the one I got. Come on, I know you got better stuff," Jake pushed him.

"Follow me," he relented as he went over to something that looked like a safe. Jake noted it had quite a number of magical enchantments to protect anyone from snooping or breaking into it. He wanted to look inside with his sphere but held back as he wanted the surprise. Besides, Arnold was explaining:

"During my research of the mana inside the metal spheres, I noticed faint traces of stability within the destructive energies. This is what kept it from just blowing up or consuming itself. I attempted to take this stable aspect and increase it to create a tool to somehow make better use of the explosives," Arnold explained as he began opening the safe.

“This proved far more difficult than expected. I couldn’t properly manipulate this energy, but I found a way to isolate and stabilize it. I had a tailor create a pair of gloves from a synthetic material I made using a few choice items from the System Store. A material with a close to flawless ability to absorb mana. Most of the materials combined to craft the material were uncommon or rare-rarity. It was not cheap. I was satisfied with the workmanship, and I even got some worthwhile enchantments as I wanted to use them myself. They did return to me as uncommon-rarity still. I made more modifications and infused mana from the orbs and an Epic-rarity item I had acquired from some travelers. The man claimed to have bought it in the tutorial store. I am not certain about this claim. Anyway, even after it all, there are still major issues. I think it’s best you see them for yourself.”

Jake saw him take out a small box. When he opened it, Jake saw a pair of gloves within. They looked thin and to be made of silk or something like that. Yet, he felt a very familiar energy from them. He used Identify and instantly saw the reason why.

[Gloves of Sporadic Manifestation (Rare)] – Gloves made from a powerful synthetic cloth. These gloves are incredibly thin and nearly unnoticeable and are incredibly resilient against all magical attacks. Relatively fragile against physical attacks. These gloves contain a large amount of arcane-affinity energy, but the energy is directionless and cannot properly manifest its properties, yet the arcane energy still manages to amplify the existing enchantments through a powerful catalyst. All mana constructs created with your hands will last for longer due to the inherent power of stability within these gloves but become unstable if they come in contact with any other types of energy. Enchantments: +100 Intelligence +75 Wisdom, +50 Willpower. Sporadic Manifestation

Requirements: lvl 105+ humanoid race

He read it over and was impressed. Yet he had one major question:

“Won’t all mana manifestation be useless by default? There are other types of energies in the atmosphere all the time,” Jake asked, a bit confused.

“Yeah. That’s the exact issue. The gloves are useless to me as they are only worth it for the stats, but wearing them would cause too many issues. If you can fix them, you can have them. I will even throw in that if I ever make anything useful based on my research related to that body, you will be the first to benefit. Also, take this with you,” Arnold promised and handed Jake a small stack of papers from within the box the gloves had been in.

Considering Jake had nothing to use the Altmar Census Golem for at all, he saw no reason to refuse the trade. Yet he still kept it cool and frowned at the opposition to make it seem like he was really losing out. It worked.

“...I may also be able to upgrade the Nanoblade...” he said, looking like the offer physically hurt him. Jake didn’t bother questioning why he was so reluctant but just smiled. “Deal.”

After some good business, Jake even offered to let Arnold watch as Jake tried to fix the gloves but got the response that he was “done messing with that unreasonable affinity” and just ushered Jake out of the workshop after having him hand over the Nanoblade. What was the deal with the whole questionnaire if the guy didn’t care about Jake’s arcane-affinity anymore?

Not wanting to get a headache from trying to understand Arnold, Jake just went on his way. He saw that Hank and Neil had both left the building too. Seeing no reason to track Hank down here and now, as the guy seemed to have headed to another construction site, Jake turned his attention to the new pair of gloves. He went into one of the closed-off

meeting rooms in the central building of the Fort, sat down on his butt, holding the gloves on the palms of his hands.

Transmutation time!

Chapter 259: Taking Advantage of Mistakes

It had been a while since the last time he used Touch of the Malefic Viper on an item to transmute it. The last item he had transformed was his bow. Actually, that one could have gone better. Sure, the bow got better overall, but the change from Windsoar Bow to Windsorrow Bow made him feel a bit like a baddie.

Before he began the process, he took out the notes Arnold had made on the gloves and read them over. It was a meticulous list of how they had been crafted. What items had been used, what methods were applied, and which people had been involved.

Jake skimmed it mainly for fun but had to stop as he saw the sheer amount of ingredients that went into them. Three different types of spider silk, a couple of uncommon or rare-rarity metals turned to dust and sprinkled in, crystals containing mana, and even a Beastcore from a D-grade beast.

And that was just for the gloves themselves before Arnold really went ham.

After that, Arnold had infused it with some filtered version of Jake's arcane mana. To store it, he had made use of an epic-rarity... oh shit, it was a Crystalized Essence? An

unattuned version? Jake had encountered a Crystalized Essence once before during the Valley of Tusk's dungeon. It had been the cause of all the Soilwater in that pool, and that one back then had only been rare-rarity.

How exactly a big crystal had been merged with those small and thin gloves, Jake didn't get, but somehow it had.

Jake couldn't help but think that shit had really been wasted. He didn't understand how they could only be rare-rarity with so many great materials in them. Natural treasure even. Who the hell would waste a Crystalized Essence on a pair of gloves?

But... was it really all that bad? Because when Jake inspected the gloves and bound them to him, he felt the energy within them. So much untapped potential for him to exploit. So much fuel to burn and transform and bend to his will.

The last time he had met a Crystalized Essence, it had resulted in his Touch of the Malefic Viper upgrading to epic-rarity. The first time he encountered massive success with his transmutation, he upgraded Touch to ancient-rarity.

What was more fitting than then using both those experiences to possibly make his best transmutation ever?

He knew the Crystalized Essence was key. It was a powerful natural treasure with the ability to absorb and transform energy. To use one on some gloves was a waste, hence why the effects were wasted. Jake reckoned Arnold had gotten the deal of a lifetime on the Essence, yet he also understood why the man had been so unwilling to part with it.

It hadn't been cheap to make. However, chances are the man could still salvage them and make them useful down the line, so giving them to Jake like this was a risk. Well, in the end, the machinist still won out as the Altmar Census Golem was quite the find.

Jake sat down in the room he had found, and with the assumption that no one would come to bother him, he entered meditation and went to work. Thoughtful Meditation activated its effects, making him even more focused than before as he dove in headfirst without any more preparations.

He felt the gloves in his hands. They felt thin and frail to his touch, but when he dove his mind into the connection he had to them, he felt something entirely different. A directionless space of energy was within, a metaphysical crystal floating in the middle. At least that's how he interpreted it.

It needed direction. Stability.

Arnold had just infused the space with arcane mana and attempted to make the crystal serve as its guide to make it stable. Yet, he couldn't. He had tried to make the Crystallized Essence into that of the arcane-affinity, possibly to get a source of arcane energy himself to craft orbs without needing Jake or to keep the spheres fully charged.

The man's approach had been logical, and even if Jake was a bit annoyed the guy hadn't told him the truth of why he had made the gloves, he still understood why he had done it. He was even a bit flattered. The man had tried to find a way to replicate Jake's arcane-affinity, but ultimately Arnold had failed.

Because there was a crucial flaw in his equation. He couldn't just think of Jake's affinity like the fire-affinity or water-affinity or even more advanced ones like space or time. All of those were natural. Jake's wasn't. The only natural occurrence of Jake's arcane-affinity was Jake. He himself was a core component, and without his will, his arcana couldn't exist.

So when Jake entered the gloves and provided them his arcane energy, they almost hummed in satisfaction. Touch of the Malefic Viper dug in with his arcane-affinity as Jake took control of all the energy. His will and power became the maestro of the directionless orchestra of energy as it all began moving to his will.

The gloves began glowing in his hands as they crackled with energy. Purple veins coursed throughout them. These didn't disappear as it looked like the gloves had torn, yet thin strings still held them together. They pulsed with energy, but Jake didn't let up. They could still take far more.

Time kept ticking on as Jake kept up the work. One would think it should be difficult, but it was actually surprisingly smooth. The groundwork had all been laid, the ingredients supplied, and all preparations carefully made. All it took was for Jake to do the legwork and give the entire thing direction. Time-consuming, yes, but not particularly hard. Naturally, he still had to focus throughout it all, but that had never been an issue for Jake.

The process still ended up taking him nearly thirteen hours. He had to chug down three mana potions during the process and a single stamina potion. Jake was tired and sweating, but the result wasn't anything to complain about as he read the notifications.

****You have successfully transmuted [Gloves of Quintessential Arcane Manifestation (Epic)] - A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned****

****' DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 108 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

Jake smiled to himself. Epic-rarity. It was as expected, but he was still happy about it. With the materials put into the gloves, them only being rare was a travesty. One he had thankfully corrected as he Identified the new and improved gloves.

[Gloves of Quintessential Arcane Manifestation (Epic)] – Gloves made from a powerful synthetic cloth. These gloves are incredibly thin, nearly unnoticeable, and are incredibly resilient against all attacks. Will become immensely more durable if infused with arcane energy. The Crystalized Essence has been fully integrated. All constructs using your arcane-affinity and your hands will last longer and be more potent. The gloves can store a large amount of arcane energy that can be released immediately. Channeling unattuned energy into these gloves will grant it your arcane-affinity. Enchantments: +125 Intelligence, +75 Wisdom, +50 Willpower. Quintessential Arcane Manifestation.

Requirements: lvl 115+ humanoid race. Quasi-Soulbound

Never before had Jake been so happy that someone else had majorly fucked up when crafting an item. Arnold had tried to make the item Jake just had. But as always, it had the issue of being Quasi-Soulbound, making it useless to anyone but Jake himself.

Jake naturally put them on and took the old ones off. That made him lose 35 intellect and the mana blast ability. The 35 intelligence were replaced with 125, so still a gain of 90, plus of course, the 75 wisdom and 50 willpower. As for the mana blast? Jake could do that shit easily himself by now. The gloves made it easier and a bit more effective, sure, but he doubted these new ones wouldn't also do that.

Feeling the influx of stats was always nice, and he couldn't hold himself back from instantly experimenting with the Quintessential Arcane Manifestation part of the gloves. First, Jake summoned an arcane bolt to float above him. He felt it was exactly the same as before, besides the increased potency from his increased stats.

Next, he held out his hand and conjuring a mana bolt in it by channeling mana through the gloves. This time, he felt it coalesce a bit faster than before, and upon closer inspection, it even felt a bit more potent and stable. It was just a small amount, but it was there.

After that, Jake got up and summoned an Explosive Arcane Arrow. To his disappointment, he felt that it was the same as before, with the gloves doing nothing. He frowned and tried again. It still failed. He used his hands to do it, and he believed it had to work.

He knew the issue already. He didn't channel the mana through his gloves at all, not allowing their effect to work. Jake kept trying a few more times but kept failing. He found that the issue was in how the arrow instantly appeared. He couldn't hold onto anything and channel it. The automatic parts of the skill overtrumped his own control, and if he had to channel it through the gloves, it would make summoning arrows slower...

Yet, he refused to give up but kept trying. The gloves said it would be all constructs, so what was he missing? Closing his eyes, he considered what he was doing wrong as he held out his hand and summoned arrow after arrow. That is when he got an idea.

Jake drew his bow. Not to shoot anything, but to make it feel *right*. He moved his hand as if he drew an arrow from the quiver. He imagined feeling the arrow be drawn as he pinched it with his fingers. The skill responded, and one appeared... with the bonus effectiveness from the gloves now working. It just worked the first time he tried this.

He shook his head, not fully comprehending what the issue had been... was it because he didn't summon it in his hand before as an outgrowth of his hand? It all felt so arbitrary, and quite frankly, Jake didn't want to waste time on it.

Instead, he kept experimenting with the gloves and tried to get a good estimate of the effectiveness of the enchantment. He concluded the increased effectiveness was small but noticeable. A few percentage points in the low single digits increase, perhaps. It didn't seem like a lot, but for someone like Jake, every bit counted.

He also tried to channel stamina through the gloves as it said it would transform *any* energy into arcane energy. Unfortunately, that one didn't work as he hoped. In the process, he also experimented with channeling mana into the gloves to make them more durable. This was clearly from the stability-focused part of his arcane-affinity, and the effect was more than noteworthy.

The gloves became so tough he couldn't even cut them with his Scimitar as long as he kept supplying a stable source of mana. Jake was already imagining dozens of ways this could become useful in the future.

This experimentation went on for hours until Jake was thrown out of his focused state of mind and back to the real world. He had been so engrossed in his practice session he hadn't noticed the people walking down the hall outside towards the meeting room he was in. He recognized Hank with four other men he didn't know.

Jake semi-panicked for the moment. Not just because of his presence there, but because of what he had done to the room. He had chosen the room because it was isolated - It sealed in things, including sound and energy.

Now, Jake spending nearly an entire day inside the room hadn't left any real physical signs... but the atmosphere of the entire room was soaked in his arcane-affinity. It was overwhelming. He considered for a moment if he should just leave but decided against it. Instead, he would get his meeting with Hank out of the way.

Miranda had told him long ago to try and keep up the mysterious defender of the city persona. This could be an opportunity to look imposing in front of some of the new leaders of the Fort. He assumed they were new leaders because Jake didn't know any of them, and he remembered all of the leaders back when Phillip was the top dog around.

Jake sat down in the chair at the end of the table as he waited for Hank and the others to arrive. He did his best to act like the oppressive atmosphere was entirely on purpose and not because he had been flooding the room with arcane mana the majority of a day while practicing.

It only took a few seconds before the door opened.

"I was saying that switching t-"

The man in the front abruptly stopped the moment he set foot in the room. His eyes went wide, and his legs began shaking. With fright, he looked at Jake, who sat in his cloak and mask at the end of the table. Jake just hoped he hadn't scared the man too much.

Jake had definitely scared the poor guy way too much. Hank felt the aura the same time as his companions. The sheer presence of the room. He had felt something similar, if not as

intense, when he entered a room Neil or Miranda had an ongoing ritual in and, because of that, managed to stay relatively calm. The four others didn't.

The first one shook and took a step back. One of the braver souls pointed at Jake as he stammered: "Who... wha... are you?" he said, not even able to form a complete sentence. The two last men just stood frozen as they stared at the ominous-looking cloaked figure at the end of the table. The owner was sure good at looking scary; he had to hand him that. Hank only thanked the heavens he hadn't also decided to summon his wings.

"Lord Thayne," Hank spoke, bowing slightly, aware that he had to be as cordial as possible in front of others. To keep Jake mysterious and feared was beneficial to everyone. One would think the revelation of who the owner was would make him seem less mysterious... but his brother turned out to be the leader of the Court of Shadows. And that was the only available information people knew. Hadn't exactly hurt Jake's image.

"That's...?" one of the men beside him muttered but didn't get any further.

"Hank. I came by to ask about updates on the project." Jake stated, doing a damn good job at being oppressing. If Hank didn't know that Jake could be odd and easygoing, he wasn't sure he would have managed to stay confident.

"Yes, I planned on coming by for a meeting when I return to Haven. There are things I need to consult you on," Hank said, still keeping it as professional as he could. He didn't want to discuss details with others around... and talking to Jake like this was just weird. It was way more relaxed when it was just him around. Maybe Louise or Miranda present too was fine.

“Good. Keep up the good work,” Jake said as he got up and began walking out of the room. “All of you.”

He said the last words as he passed them, and as he was only a few steps down the hall, he teleported to the end where the air around him shimmered, and he disappeared.

Hank looked after him, nodding internally. He had sure come off as mysterious and powerful. He did a quick take of the men with him. Yep, the four of them were scared shitless.

Looking into the room they had planned on using, he muttered:

“I guess we’ll need to find another meeting room.”

Chapter 260: Keeping It Friendly

Jake waited outside the building for a few moments as he looked through the Fort using his sphere. Hank and the four others went to another meeting room while Arnold looked busy with Jake’s Nanoblade. Arnold had it suspended in some device and was firing a laser or something on it. Jake wasn’t a craftsman, so he just shook his head and went on his way.

It had been close to a full day since Jake had been back in Haven, and it was approaching evening time. He had a meeting with Miranda planned, and while he could get engrossed

in his practice, he hadn't forgotten it. He would have to come back to the Fort again in a few days, but it was time to head home for now.

The return trip was swift as Jake didn't have any other side objectives on the way. He was back in Haven before anyone even knew he had left the Fort – assuming they were aware he had been there to begin with.

When he got close to his valley, he noticed there was activity within. Jake frowned for a moment until he felt the auras of who it was.

The hawks were back.

He had barely managed to get into the valley before a large green projectile hit him in the chest. The projectile turned out to be a squishy bird that nuzzled itself against his shirt as Jake held the bird and rubbed her head.

“Hey there Sylphie, how have you been?” Jake asked while hugging her as she playfully squirmed in his grasp.

“Ree!” she replied, telling him it had been all good. While Jake was grinding alchemy and the dungeon, Sylphie had really entered her growth phase. She had been hunting actively, and coupled with her still naturally growing, she had gained quite a few levels.

[Sylphian Eyas – lvl 83]

It had been around one and a half months since Jake last saw Sylphie, and in that time, she had managed to go from 41 to 83. She had more than doubled it. One had to remember she was only a few months old, and she was nearly already a fully-fledged D-grade.

Jake wondered if she would reach D-grade by the time it was time for the Treasure Hunt. Sadly she wouldn't be able to enter on account of being a beast and not a part of the enlightened species. Still, it made Jake happy.

While he hugged and nuzzled the young hawk, he also checked out Hawkie and Mystie. Neither had been slacking either during this period. Hawkie had been 109 and Mystie 116 back then, and now they had both gained a good amount of experience.

[Stormsong Hawk – lvl 120]

[Mystsong Hawk – lvl 126]

While they were slow compared to someone like Jake or Sylphie, the speed was still respectable. Especially considered that they protected Sylphie during all this time and focused more on her progress than their own. He couldn't help but chuckle a bit when he imagined the little featherball reach the same level as her parents.

"You guys doing well too?" Jake asked his bird buddies. Both of them gave affirming sounds as they also assessed Jake. He saw a small trace of defeat in their eyes as they saw that he had grown as much, if not more than them.

He kept talking to them a while, having a one-sided conversation as he played with Sylphie. He felt that she was a lot more powerful. It was quite natural, of course, with her leveling so much, but she felt *too* strong. In fact... she reminded him a bit of himself back then. Jake imagined that if the level 83 Sylphie were put against the level 99 Horde Leader... she would win.

That is when he noticed his weird-ass time tree do something. Jake was a bit annoyed that no one was there to look out for and eat the bananas like he had told Hank, but quickly noticed why. He saw a banana ripen, and at that exact moment, a small magic circle activated as a tendril of myst fired up, wrapped around it, and pulled it down to the ground where it was covered by some kind of energy. All while staying within the area of the tree.

Jake looked over at Mystie, gaping. “You made an automatic magical banana retrieval system.”

Mystie had once more amazed him. She had put down a magic circle at the base of the tree that Jake hadn’t even noticed when he came back from the dungeon. It was so subtle. It just pulled in the banana and somehow stabilized it until someone came to eat it. Had she saved some for hi-

Sylphie struggled herself free from Jake’s hug and, with impressive speed, zoomed over and scooped up the banana.

“Hey, that’s mi-“

Sylphie gulped it down, peel and all.

“-ne,” Jake finished in defeat. Now he at least knew where all his bananas went.

Without any sense of shame, Sylphie flew back and landed on Jake’s shoulder, happy as a clam. She even had the audacity to nuzzle up to him. He could smell the bananas on her. If it were anyone else, Jake would be mad, but who the hell could be mad at Sylphie?

“Good girl,” he chuckled as he praised her and petted her head. “But remember to share. Maybe I can make them even better? Make them into some kind of drink that makes the bananas taste even better?”

“Ree!” Sylphie agreed. Though Jake had a feeling, it would be an uphill battle. She seemed to enjoy bananas a lot, and he didn’t have the heart to actively try and keep her away from them.

I guess it’ll be a competition when she is here, Jake chuckled internally. The birds seemed to want to hang around since Jake was back, and he didn’t complain.

They ended up playing with magic until Miranda came back. Jake fired small arcane attacks, and the birds blocked or deflected them. Jake also blocked their blows as he practiced, and he even had a few games of tag. Hawkie was still damn fast, and Jake needed to predict his movements to have a chance to catch him. In a straight-up chase through the air, Jake would lose every time.

Sylphie was still the weakest, of course, but she had some fun tricks too. Jake called it tricks mainly to make him feel better because he didn't understand what the little hawk was doing. He was embarrassed to admit he had no idea what the hell her magic was about.

Clearly, it was wind magic... but not really. It cut like wind and was speedy like wind, yet it seemed to be *more*. How exactly that was, he couldn't pinpoint. All he was certain of was that it was powerful and in no way a low-tier concept.

Her offense was noteworthy, but her defense was even more potent. Jake felt as his albeit playful arcane bolts were sheared away by her green winds, and those she didn't just blow away failed to have any effect as she made a green bubble of sorts around herself.

Just as Jake was beginning to think that was all Sylphie had – green wind and a green bubble, she pulled out another attack. One Jake hadn't seen coming.

He didn't know why he hadn't expected it. Maybe it was because of Hawkie and Mystie and how they fought. The small frame of the hawks. Their usual use of magic. All of it had made Jake not expect the hawk to do the most obvious of things – attack with her body.

Jake felt her fly by first, her wing glowing green. The wing was like a razor-blade, and Jake managed to avoid it as it cut through the air, making odd sounds. In a swift turn in the air, she came back with another attack, this time using her talons. Jake was curious and raised his arm to block. He allowed her talons to strike... and the result surprised him.

Both of them, it seemed.

He had to spend the next quarter of an hour consoling Sylphie after she had nearly ripped his forearm off. Her talons begun shining as she struck and had penetrated straight through the armor on his arms. It had then gone through his skin with only a tiny bit more resistance, drawing plenty of blood. Finally, the talons had clamped down and cut into his arm even more, and the only thing that she failed to cut through was the bone. Even that had some clear marks, though.

It was nothing a healing potion couldn't fix, but Sylphie still felt incredibly bad about it. She kept making apologetic screeches and nuzzling up to him, throwing glances at his already healed arm. The skin still looked a bit tender there, and his armor was still repairing itself. Jake was sure she would feel better when all signs of her overeagerness were gone.

As for Mystie and Hawkie? They just sat on the side, looking like the proudest parents in the world.

She seemed to cheer up a bit at Jake's constant reassurance that all was fine and his praises of how strong she was. He had to admit he had underestimated her. Those close combat attacks were powerful. He couldn't help but imagine how strong she would be at level 100. What tier was she in? The same as the Prima? Above it? Census Golem level? He couldn't be sure.

Sylphie was still rather fragile if one did manage to strike her. Her small frame also made her susceptible to many of the same attacks that took down Hawkie. Her means of attack also weren't *that*

varied, but things like that could be shored up with time.

Shortly after, Mystie and Hawkie wanted to take Sylphie along, likely to continue hunting, but the small hawk refused to leave. She kept nuzzling up to Jake, and when her mom gave a stern screech, she just tried to hide away under Jake's cloak.

"It's fine; I'll keep her company. You two go have some quality time together," Jake said with a smile. He could be the babysitter of the little murder bird while the husband and wife hawks could go enjoy a nice date killing stuff together. He was such a romantic.

Jake and Sylphie kept playing – no fighting this time – until evening arrived.

Miranda had picked out the best she could find for dinner. She was afraid she had brought too much, but it should be fine. Even if there were some leftovers, she could just take them back with her or give them to someone else.

She entered the valley with a smile on her face. She didn't carry anything as she had gotten quite the upgrade since last. A ring on her finger held a small spatial storage of about 27 cubic meters. It even appeared to freeze time for everything within. At least it kept the food hot. The ring had come from Neil trading it with one of his space mage buddies, and she could only wear it now that she was a D-grade due to the level 100 requirement.

In the distance, she could already hear Jake. It sounded like he was doing some kind of practice as she heard the sounds of things flying around. Telekinesis practice? She still remembered the first time she saw him lifting those stones at the pond.

Yet what she saw instead was the smaller of the hawks shooting small bolts of semi-transparent green mana at stones that Jake threw up into the air. He cheered every time the bird hit one and turned it into dust, with the hawk happily flapping its wings.

She had to admit, she didn't know much about the hawks. The two adults were both D-grade and more powerful than her, and she couldn't really "communicate" with them like Jake. How the hell he could hold a borderline conversation with them was still insane to her.

Though she had to admit, the small green one was quite cute. Jake also clearly liked it a lot. A feeling that was reciprocated as she rubbed up against his hand as he scratched her.

Jake turned around as she got closer, and he greeted her with a smile – his mask already made invisible: "Oh hey Miranda, I-"

He paused as he did a double-take before shaking his head. "Congratulations on your evolution," he said with a smile.

"Thanks," she answered happily, wondering about the holdup earlier. Maybe Jake was a bit surprised with her evolution? Thinking about it, she probably was the first person Jake regularly interacted with who he had seen evolve.

"So... should we go in and eat? And is it fine if Sylphie comes along?" he asked, looking a bit embarrassed. Without a doubt, due to wanting the bird to join them.

Miranda naturally agreed as they headed inside the lodge. There was plenty to talk about.

Jake walked inside with Sylphie, a bit flustered. He knew evolutions could bring changes... but he hadn't really thought about it much. He had seen Arnold before and after evolution, and that guy had barely changed. He himself had barely changed. Jacob had always looked good, so his evolution hadn't done much. And while Miranda had been nice in her own right, the evolution had sure done a lot.

He honestly felt shitty about it... he had always been bad around overly attractive women. Jake couldn't even properly talk to Caroline back then. Miranda had been attractive before, sure, but now she had moved up a level. If it were in a larger social setting, Jake would be fine, but right now, he was alone with only her and a bird. But... it was just Miranda, right?

Yeah. Jake shook his head as he got inside, Sylphie looking up at him, a bit puzzled. He gave her small head a pat as he went to find some cutlery and plates. Honestly, feeling weird around women... wasn't it about time for him to get over that?

Miranda was Miranda. The same person, just slightly "improved," if that was even the right word. Probably missing a few organs now, too, just like him. Really, his complex was just silly. Jake had many issues in the past. He still did. But now that the world had changed, he had thrown off so many burdens. So many parts of himself that he perceived as his own weaknesses.

Evolution was meant to push you towards perfection. At least physically. The mental work Jake would have to do himself. He recognized it as a flaw and chose to see it as another challenge to overcome it. He would do his utmost to have a nice dinner with Miranda and get through the meeting with Miranda without acting weird. A part of him thought it was lucky Sylphie was there to help distract him and keep the atmosphere a bit more relaxed. Moreover, he was Miranda's boss as well. He had a responsibility to act appropriately. But more than that, he was her friend. So he would keep it friendly.

Just keep things simple... and take the complications as they come. Stop treating people differently based on how they look. In the end, everyone's kill notifications look the same anyway, he reminded himself as he set the table and threw Miranda his usual smile.

“So, tell me about that profession upgrade.”