

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 271: Memories of (Questionable) Past Deeds

Jake returned to his lodge as if nothing had happened. Barely any time had passed in the real world during his journey through time and space. It had been another great showcase of the higher level of power, even if it all had gone past fast, and to be honest, not much had happened. Besides, it wasn't like just seeing someone summon a huge barrier taught Jake how to. If it did, wouldn't the easiest way to make new powerhouses be just to have them participate in movie marathons.

No, the reason why the Path of the Heretic-Chosen skill was so good was that Jake could directly experience everything from all points of view. He could feel the flow of the energy, and it was even partly adapted to his body. It was a shortcut to an upgrade and pretty much told exactly what he had to understand and do. That didn't mean Jake always got it – he nearly hadn't with Palate – but it was an incredibly useful experience. Shit, even if he had failed to comprehend Palate, he would still have gotten hints or just used a second attempt of the skill to “get it.”

This time around had been far easier. Perhaps it was because it was simply doing things he already did and merging those things to make something better. This new ability was just infusing his presence with will and mana. Super simple stuff that one, that probably came far too easy to Jake.

Looking at the skill upgrade, he had to admit... the description was getting stupidly long. Would all his legendary skills from the Malefic Viper end up being like this?

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

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[Pride of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – The arrogance and strong will of the Malefic Viper is known throughout the multiverse, and all of existence is made to quake in fear in his presence. Now, you have learned to take after him, your own pride a tangible weapon as you demand of the world to bend in your presence. Allows the Alchemist to far more easily force their will upon the world. Significantly increases the effect of all Words of Power spoken. By channeling mana, you can make your presence no longer simply a warning but a weapon to target the psyche of your foes directly, and during this time, forcing your will upon the world in any area affected by your presence becomes even easier than before. Your pride increases all resistance to any kind of mind-affecting effects but be warned that it wanes in despair. All effects of the mental attack increase based on the target's vulnerability, the nature of your mental attack, and the disparity in Willpower between you and your foe. Passively provides 3 Willpower per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your will be truth, your pride eternal.

' DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 121 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 125 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points

****' DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 122 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points***

Jake had to admit that the two levels also came as a slight surprise, a welcome one. Upgrading skills had always earned him experience points, but this one just felt too easy.

Another thing that surprised him was that Pride had been the skill in question to be upgraded. Jake hadn't even thought that an option. He was sure Sense or maybe even Blood or Sagacity would be the next ones to upgrade. Perhaps even Touch if he kept transmuting stuff? Pride hadn't even been on the radar.

As for what the improved skill could now be used for? Well, it was a mental attack, pure and simple. But not only that, the part about forcing his will upon the world affected by his presence was perhaps even more valuable. All it effectively meant was that Jake could do magic faster outside of his body. At least that's how he read it.

Something to test for sure.

In fact, he had a lot to test. How much mana would it cost? How effective was it? The skill also didn't directly mention any stat-scaling, but considering how it basically just made Willpower more effective, that kind of made sense. Well, it did say when it came to the mental attack specifically, but not any of the other parts.

He really wanted to go test shit, but he was interrupted before he had the chance.

Jake felt Villy's presence descend, and he could already feel the curiosity of the god he had just seen a flashback of.

"So, how did it go?" Villy asked, with an emotion Jake couldn't quite place. "Anything interesting? Did you get an upgrade?"

"Wow, one at a time. Yeah, it went well, yes it was interesting, and I upgraded Pride to legendary-rarity. Something about infusing my presence with mana, making it stronger, and doing mental attacks and stuff. Oh, and easier application of my will within my presence during this infusion," Jake explained.

"Ah, I see. I guess that's good to get, though it isn't exactly anything new now, is it? You also seem to be using your bloodlust and presence as a weapon quite effectively already," Villy answered.

Jake frowned, a bit surprised. No, he didn't?

"No, I don't?"

"Yeah, you 100% do. All the time. When that space mage attacked your little lodge is perhaps the most prominent time. It isn't the most effective weapon, but you sure do use it to throw your opponent off and intimidate them. It's pretty normal to do, and it makes sense Pride got upgraded. It wouldn't have surprised me if you got it before Palate either, with or without the Path of the Heretic-Chosen skill."

“That’s not an attack, though; that’s just something that happens. I see others do it too. Everyone gives off a passive presence. The Sword Saint’s felt sharp and intimidating; Jacob’s felt warm and inviting. Everyone just has them,” Jake countered.

“True, to some extent. The Augur’s is due to a skill, though, so you can’t really count that one. As for that Sword Saint? He is a little monster just like you, so that’s why he has one so prominent,” the Viper answered.

“Huh...” Jake mumbled, scratching his chin. Was it really just something he did? “So, it’s a bit of a waste besides the stats? Not that I complain about free upgrades.”

“No, far from a waste. Jake, skills that boost stuff you already do are great, especially if they don’t take a skill slot. Why do you think mine do so many different things? Also, it employs some concepts your crude intimidation doesn’t. But, trust me, it’s a good one, and that presence-skill helped a lot throughout my years as a wee little dragon.”

“Speaking of you as a wee little dragon,” Jake begun as he snickered. “Saw your fight with some people who called themselves council members. Early B-grade, crystal planet. I heard your speech to scare them... not gonna lie, kinda cringe.”

“Oh... that time...,”

the Viper said, sounding a bit reprehensive. *“Yeah... not many of my proudest moments in those times. Sure, I grew in power rapidly, but it’s a moment of my life I don’t really look back at fondly anymore. I had some issues at the time, I guess.”*

“Issues besides being a bit of a dick and killing anything you come across?” Jake asked. “Actually, why even do that? What purpose was there behind destroying that crystal planet?”

“Purpose... there was one, but it wasn’t a good one. As I said, I didn’t do it for reasons I am now proud of. Really. I guess some context is in order. Remember that mural that depicted when I first entered B-grade and became a dragon?” the Viper asked rhetorically before continuing.

“I hadn’t just been sitting there for a bit. Towards the end of C-grade, I managed to effectively destroy my planet. I consumed all the natural treasures, killed all creatures I came across until all that remained were the occasional weak elemental spawning. Not a single trace of biological life remained, and I was alone.”

“Why didn’t you just leave?” Jake asked curiously. “You were C-grade. Peak C-grade. I am sure you would be able to survive traveling through space as there was nothing left in your old world.”

“You are privy to the knowledge that was even a viable option. I was not. I had only ever known that world. I thought I had killed all other life in existence. I thought I would die there alone on a planet I myself had destroyed. I thought that was the fate I had created for myself. So I sat on that mountain, not just for a couple of years. I sat alone for millennia, simply staring into space, wondering if something would come. A new challenge would appear. New life would grow. Perhaps an elemental would finally become able to rival me? But no, nothing ever happened.”

Jake frowned as he heard the Viper speak, and he could hear these weren’t at all comfortable memories for him to share. It was the kind of knowledge he didn’t spread throughout the Order, and Jake doubted many knew. So he chose not to interrupt but just have the Viper speak and offload.

“During those years, I didn’t experience many positive emotions. Loneliness, self-pity, and sadness, but more than anything, anger. Anger at the world for rewarding my path so far, only to so cruelly cut me off and leave me with nothing on a broken planet to slowly wither away. Angry at the system for even appearing and taking away my choice of dying as an unknowing snake. Angry at even being forced to exist as a sapient creature. I hated the world and wished to see it destroyed... and in a twist of irony, the system awarded that. A skill upgraded, a level gained, an evolution granted and unlocked. With that race also came a skill that made me aware of other life in the world. It gave me the courage to leave... courage to cause destruction elsewhere.

“My race name? Calamitous Banespoke Dragon. The power was overwhelming. My path was set for me, but like your class has restrictions, so did my race. My entire existence. However, it was not as much restrictions as it was simply an amplification of that hatred. Every act of destruction fueled me with power and levels; every planet left a broken shell was my gain. This was my path, and at the time, I embraced it. Every movement I made, every plan or strategy I concocted was with the goal of causing more destruction. Even my alchemy fell to the wayside as I couldn’t sit still long enough to practice. I simply felt like I couldn’t coexist with the rest of the world, and rather than die; I would rather see everything else destroyed.”

The Viper finished his long explanation. There was more emotion in his voice these last few minutes than nearly all the time Jake had spent with the Viper collectively. The god had chosen to be open with Jake... perhaps he felt like his Chosen would find out a lot of these things in due time. Or perhaps... because he didn’t want to be judged as harshly. Or maybe because he wanted exactly that, considering Jake was Jake.

“That sounds like an utterly moronic mindset, even for a depressed dragon throwing a tantrum,” Jake curtly said, shaking his head. “What was the end goal? To destroy everything again like the first time? To end up sitting in an empty universe of nothingness? Sounds like a zero out of ten plan. Also, was the experience even that good from destroying an entire planet? Seems like absolute overkill and just causing unnecessary destruction and suffering.”

There didn't come in response for a few seconds before the Viper answered back.

"True. I also came to realize the path I was on didn't make sense in the long run. And if it was worth it to destroy a planet? For me back then, a single smidge of experience or a brief moment of enjoyment was enough reason to cause any amount of suffering or destruction. When nothing matters, why care about proportions? I simply destroyed and consumed like any other common beast, and the system awarded me every step of the way. Yet it also rewarded me when I stopped and began fixing my fucked up state of mind," Villy patiently responded, not at all vexed by Jake's words. In fact...

"Also, Jake, calling a god that can destroy you at a moment's notice a moronic depressed dragon throwing a tantrum could totally get you killed. Even if it is the truth. Either way, I appreciate the honesty."

"Beating around the bush never suited me well. Anyway, what put you back on the right track so-to-say? Some wondrous moment of enlightenment? Some majestic encounter with a fated person? Oh, don't tell me you came across a natural treasure that opened your eyes to the beauty of the world?" Jake chuckled jokingly.

"You may be closer than you think. Also, not telling. You can try if that skill of yours makes you see it. Though so far, it hasn't picked moments of extreme importance, just moments where the skill was deployed with an extremely high level of effectiveness. While mental attacks with the presence are good, there are equally as many encounters where it did jack shit, so be warned."

“Damn. Even if I don’t, I’m just gonna make you tell me someday,” Jake smiled as he leaned back and looked up towards the sky. “By the way, when can I leave the 93rd universe? And when can people come in?”

“Well, you can leave once you figure out a way to do so. Nothing stops you besides it being hard as fuck to get back, which is the primary reason no faction has had people leave yet. As for non-natives, I’m not sure when they can come and go. It tends to open up rather slowly, with those weaker able to enter earlier than others. Probably not overly long, though. The main challenge is still transportation as it is highly dependent on what you are capable of doing on your end,” the Viper explained, seemingly more than happy to completely change the subject.

“Wait, so I could technically leave now?” Jake asked, surprised.

“Yep, I could likely have that space mage of yours fix up a magic circle to allow a quick one-way ticket to the first universe pretty fast. Of course, you won’t be able to go back, and you will miss the Treasure Hunt and all subsequent events due to being stuck here, so I wouldn’t recommend it. Let’s talk about it after all those fun system events and when we have a nice two-way connection ready,” Villy said, half-joking, half-warning Jake to not even consider going yet.

“Relax, man; I don’t wanna miss the Treasure Hunt for the world. I’ll come by when the time is right and not earlier,” Jake reassured his divine mate.

The mood had turned a lot better with the unrelated talks, but Villy still brought it back to the main topic.

“So... you still had a use of that Path skill remaining, right?”

“Yep, I got one use left.”

“Better get it done then.”

“Nah, I can’t.”

“... and why not?”

“Doesn’t work. I poked it already; the skill doesn’t respond.”

“You poked it?”

“Super hard too. Still no response.”

“Huh.”

“Yep.”

“Well, see you then, and thanks for the chat,” Villy said as he figuratively waved goodbye.

“See ya around; I’ll get to choosing skills then. Thanks as always, and take care.”

Jake just smiled as he moved on to something equally as important.

****Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper profession skills available****

Chapter 272: Skill Choices Are Hard...



After a good conversation with his resident god, nothing was better than a new skill selection.

Jake did want to use Path of the Heretical Chosen right away again, but the skill didn’t respond. He assumed he didn’t meet that magical unknown threshold, as it didn’t feel like the skill had a cooldown or some other limitation.

Jake had gotten some inspiration besides Pride. Especially the moment all those magic attacks had hit the scales of the Viper gave him some food for thought. All of that was for later, though, because now... now it was skill-selection time!

****Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper profession skills available****

Every skill selection was exciting to Jake to see what the system had cooked up. He already knew he would avoid all the shitty religious skills and stick to alchemy. A hallmark of his profession so far had been an overflow of high-rarity skills that he thought sucked ass because they wanted him to become a priest or some shit.

So with tempered expectations, he went into the skill selection. The first one was a very familiar one but in a new and improved version.

[Transmute (Rare)] - Attempt to transmute any object into one of greater value. Transmutation is an ancient art used by alchemists since the beginning of time. Must have suitable materials. Transmute does not require any additional tools or equipment, but the skill's effect can be

amplified with the use of certain catalysts. Adds a small increase to the effectiveness and chance of success of attempted transmutations based on Wisdom.

That one brought Jake back a long time. *Man, when was it, level 10? Heh, been a while*, Jake thought with nostalgia. Ah, being trapped in a Challenge Dungeon on a timer before you will die to poison. Good times.

Back then, Jake didn't really think much about transmutation. He was a bit busy with the whole not-dying thing and had found himself too busy to pick up the skill. With all the other skills also coming along, he had never picked it up until he eventually upgraded Touch of the Malefic Viper.

Would this skill benefit him? For sure. Jake wasn't sure exactly what he could properly transmute, and his current way of transmuting things was crude as fuck and pretty much just a way of screwing up items to make them Soulbound to himself.

And to be honest, that was good enough for now. The only thing interesting about this choice was that it proved Jake had the potential to pick up old skills he passed as higher-rarity ones now. That wasn't enough of a reason to pick Transmute, though.

Hence, Jake moved on. The next skill was also a Rare-rarity one.

[Refine Core (Rare)] – Cores from beasts or many other types of monsters are one of the most numerous kinds of treasures in the world, but does that mean one must simply accept their current state? Allows the alchemist to refine cores and empower the Records within. Refined cores will, in most cases, be more effective, and you can also choose to amplify specific effects. Adds a small increase to the effectiveness of Refine Core based on Wisdom, Willpower, and Intelligence.

Now there came a skill Jake knew a lot about already. It was one he had come across in many books when studying elixirs and even other unrelated books. It was mentioned nearly everywhere. The reason?

Everyone fucking had it.

Not even all alchemists. *Everyone.*

Blacksmiths, leatherworkers, tailors, jewelers, even the damn cooks got it offered. It was just one of those skills that were useful to everyone as the use of cores was so universal. Practically every crafting profession would get it at some point, and the only impressive thing was that Jake could get it as Rare-rarity right off the bat, as he had read it came as Uncommon-rarity by default.

Now, just because something is popular doesn't mean it's bad. In fact, many things tend to get popular because they're good. Movies, games, brands, and even things like books. Of course, sometimes they only got lucky because the consumers didn't know better and kept consuming products despite the obvious lack of quality. Luckily, this skill was not one such case.

This skill was picked because it was genuinely so damn useful. Enhancing Records of anything was just too valuable to pass up on. So, if Jake was logical, he should get it just for the ability to do it himself, likely better than anyone else around too.

One thing to also note was that this skill was not one at all easily replicated without a skill. Not at all.

In summary, Jake kind of knew he would need this eventually, and it would be up to the last three skills if he just went with it or not. The next one was a step-up as an Epic-rarity skill and an upgrade to one of his existing skills.

[Arcane Alchemist's Purification(Epic)] – Your skill has evolved, and by deploying your arcane, you can stabilize the existing properties and destroy the unwanted. Attempt to purify any alchemical ingredient and reduce it to its most basic state while stabilizing it, or use Arcane Purification to eliminate unwanted properties from an ingredient, making it purer. Must have suitable ingredients. Purification does not require any additional tools or equipment, but the skill's effect can be amplified with the use of certain catalysts. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness and chance of success of attempted purifications based on Wisdom and Intelligence.

WARNING: This skill is unlocked by and will serve as an upgrade to your Alchemist's Purification.

This one just felt more like a slap in the face than an actual skill offering. What the fuck had Jake been doing with his Alchemist's Purification all this time not to get at least get one damn upgrade to it? Seriously, this skill spelled out how to improve it, and it was so damn obvious.

His arcane-affinity was all about destroying stuff or being super stable. Most often a mix of those two. So why didn't he use that destruction on Purification, considering what the skill did was practically destroying an ingredient's unwanted properties? Man, he would have to get that shit done.

Naturally, he didn't pick the skill. That one looked like one he could easily upgrade to himself without losing a skill choice. It wasn't like Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter, where he had a super-valuable skill he could upgrade, one, he had no idea how to upgrade by himself.

Jake moved on to the next skill. This one was Ancient-rarity. Surely, it would be great?

[Heretical Ritualism of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – Claim power without reverence, sacrifice to none but your own will, and-

It wasn't great.

No, just no. Fuck that; I read the last ritual skill, so fuck off already with that shit, Jake thought as he shook his head. When would the system understand he wasn't going to be a fanatical manic who would sacrifice his planet in some huge ritual?

Actually... maybe he should stop joking about doing that? Nah, it should be fine. He swiftly moved on to the last skill - a legendary-rarity one.

[Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Legendary)] – To be taught by a Chosen is an honor most would embrace wholeheartedly. To be taught by a heretic a crime most would shun away from. But to be taught by a Heretic-Chosen is to learn both the endorsed and the unorthodox heretical knowledge at once. A true paradox you can now pass unto others. Allows you to far more easily convey knowledge of alchemy and your path to others, and your teachings will have a larger impact on the paths of others. Allows those who listen to your teachings to earn experience and Records and reward you for their progress. The time to pass down your Legacy and your Records begins now, as you spread your unique path. Adds a noticeable increase to the effectiveness of Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist based on Wisdom and Willpower.

Finally, it had come. Jake had expected but also feared this would one day happen. The day where the system would try to force upon the same title as his little brother, which would inadvertently lead to teasing about Jake just being a copycat.

In Jake's defense, his brother was a schoolteacher, while Jake would be a teacher of being a dick to gods and cool-ass alchemy. If in a school context, he would be the most irresponsible chemistry teacher around, just telling

people to throw shit together and hope it doesn't explode. Also known as everyone's favorite teacher.

Back on topic, Jake truly wasn't sure what to think about the legendary skill. The reason why he felt it was expected was that... well, it was pretty much a staple of D-grade to get some teaching skill to begin offering pointers to those hopeless E and – god help us all – F-grades. Someone needed to teach them how to brew stuff good and concoct poison even gooder.

So he had known this would appear sooner or later; he just hadn't expected it to be legendary-rarity right off the bat. He quickly came to understand why, though. It wasn't just a simple teaching skill... it was one meant to pass down a Legacy. To spread a path.

The system clearly liked unique paths. It wanted Jake to spread Records about himself and teach others, even if Jake was pretty damn sure his teachings about being a Heretic-Chosen weren't the most useful. What should he do? Go up to people and go:

“So yeah, just meet a Primordial, and then don't really care about them being a Primordial. You only need to be immune to their passive presence and suppression, be kind of weird, be able to detect if the god will be open to your

antics, and hope they end up liking you and not just killing you anyway. Good luck.”

Yeah, that wasn't gonna fly. It would probably get a lot of people killed, though. Or maybe not? All the gods Jake had met so far had been pretty chill and seemed okay with him just treating them like people. But, of course, he knew this was primarily due to him being the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, so he just borrowed his friend's clout.

Anyway, would Jake use this teaching skill? Maybe. It said it helped him teach alchemical knowledge but also stuff about his path, so did that also mean other stuff? Like philosophy-stuff and the One True Path of putting every single free point into perception?

Joke's aside; Jake had a hard time imagining himself as a teacher of any kind. He was fine with giving advice and pointers here and there, but if he imagined himself in front of a classroom of hopefuls, he could only cringe. He remembered this one time Jacob had him come along to a university to talk about how great their workplace was to convince the innocent students to get unpaid internships. Jake only spoke for like five minutes while Jacob spoke for one and a half hours, but Jake still hated it.

Yet... that legendary tag. It also said it would reward Jake for the progress of those he taught. That was kind of nice. He just had to find someone to teach, or equally as importantly, someone who wanted to actually learn from him. Considering how shitty a teacher Jake would be, he doubted he could find anyone.

Despite so many reasons not to, Jake just found it hard to resist. There was also an additional reason in the form of his race. Jake was a human – a shocker to everyone – and with that came a certain race skill:

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

As a human, Jake was practically made to teach others. The system at least believed him to be.

He ended up just sitting there for a bit, mulling over the skills. He even went back a bit and saw other potential choices. Should he just take teachings? Maybe he wanted to in the future. He could see it as a new challenge, maybe? If he did a good job, it said it would reward him too, hopefully with more than just the satisfaction of seeing a student succeed.

Then again, Refine Core was a great skill. Maybe he could even find a way to upgrade it further. It would improve his elixirs for sure and have many other uses.

Skill choices are hard... Jake complained internally. In the end, he just went back to the best method – a coin toss.

Jake took out a coin.

Heads for Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist. Tails for Refine Core.

He flipped the coin as it flew nearly ten meters into the air and spun at incredibly high speeds. Jake sighed and nodded as he picked Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist.

The coin landed a few seconds later on heads.

I guess that settles it, he thought as he felt the knowledge of the skill enter his head. There wasn't much, and it wasn't a skill he would use here and now... but he had it.

Anyway.

Time to test out his new Pride upgrade and churn out some more elixirs to reach his goals before the Treasure Hunt.

While Jake was back at Haven grinding out levels, a group of three was far within the forest.

Three flying figures soared through the air, chasing a large eagle. The eagle was nearly six meters from tail to beak with long powerful talons and a bulky body. It was physically more powerful than all the three hawks chasing it combined, but what it had in brawn it lacked in magical prowess.

The three hawks were naturally Sylphie, Hawkie, and Mystie, and their foe was a Sunshade Eagle higher level than any of them.

[Sunshade Eagle – lvl 139]

Sylphie was still only level 99, so she wasn't the primary damage dealer, but just there for support and the occasional strong hit that still did a bit of damage. It was mainly Hawkie and Mystie doing everything to allow her to land some hits to help her reach level 100 soon.

They had stayed on the outskirts of the canyon for the most part but sought deeper in this time to find stronger prey. The hawk family had found what they wanted. These eagles tended to be easy to hunt down as they always stuck to themselves and weren't overly powerful. They didn't have any noticeable magic either. The Sunshade in their name referenced their ability to fly high and appear almost invisible while in direct sunlight – only leaving a shade.

It didn't take long before the eagle died to a blast from Mystie and a blade of air from Hawkie as it succumbed from its accumulated wounds. The beast impressively kept flying till its very last moments, hoping to get away. Away... or back somewhere.

All three hawks felt it - a natural treasure. The two older hawks stopped in their tracks, aware of what this could mean. They were wiser than most other beasts. They had the wisdom that comes with age and experience.

Their third member didn't. Sylphie made a beeline for the aura of the natural treasure, her parents screeching at her stop. They were already too late as Sylphie had been a bit ahead of them from the start, and they could only chase after her as the young hawk failed to restrain itself.

Hawkie caught up to Sylpie quickly and cut in front of her to make her stop, which she did. She looked confused but also a little embarrassed as Hawkie threw her a look. Mystie joined them soon after.

However, they didn't have time to dally as Hawkie motioned for them to hurry up and get away before the-

"SCREEEECH!"

- local alpha detected them.

Chapter 273: Birds of Prey

Jake hummed as he finished up another batch of elixirs. It had been a few days since he got the new skill and the Pride upgrade, and he had spent this time practicing that skill and doing alchemy. He hadn't used that teaching skill at all. Mainly because he hadn't spoken or interacted with anyone.

His practice with Pride of the Malefic Viper has been pretty simple. Infusing his presence with mana came naturally to him due to the instinctive knowledge from the skill, and the effect was quite prominent. He felt like everything around him became more familiar to him when he did it, and summoning magic around him became far more effortless. Shit, he could make more Arcane Bolts than ever while having the presence active.

There was one minor issue, though. It drained Jake's mana pool at crazy speeds. It was like a turbo-charged version of Limit Break but for mana. Well, maybe it was nearly exactly like Limit Break? Limit Break improved him internally and infusing his presence increased his control over the external world around him.

He hadn't had time to test the mental attack yet, but only practiced with magic. He would need to find an opportunity before the Treasure Hunt to not go in blind, but he had a feeling it would be effective. He especially wanted to see if he could make it more effective if he coupled it with Gaze of the Apex Hunter.

Jake had also spoken a bit with Villy about the teaching skill when the god got curious, and Villy had just told him that teaching someone could be a good move. This surprised Jake as he thought the overly-selfish god didn't really care much about other humans on Earth. That is until Villy pointed out how teaching others could be good for personal improvement and how he himself had learned a lot by going back over some of the basics while training someone else. Apparently, Villy had had quite a number of students through the times, even if Duskleaf was the only one Jake knew about.

Anyway, besides that, Jake had made another nice pile of elixirs and even gotten another level under his belt in just three days. He had nearly entered another trance again but avoided it due to diversifying things with some Pride training and the chat with Villy.

Jake began another brewing as he took out a Fungalmancer core to make another vitality elixir. He wanted to try and make a Rare-rarity one of those soon before he moved on to improving his perception version. By now, he had realized he likely wouldn't have time to make a Rare-rarity version of the perception elixir, but at least he could move up to Uncommon.

Just as he got done melting the core... he stopped.

Something felt wrong. Very wrong. Jake's gut was telling him things were off... it took him a second to realize the source. *Sylphie...*

Jake stopped the brewing, tossed his cauldron with the unfinished sludge in his inventory, and took to the air.

His presence was infused, directed ahead of him. The mana gave way as his will manifested, and a small platform of arcane mana appeared in the distance. Summoned using his Sphere of Perception and his presence working together.

He used One Step Mile in mid-air and appeared on the platform ahead of him. Another platform was summoned within not even a quarter of a second ahead of him again. This one he also stepped onto, teleporting yet again.

The upgrade to Pride had allowed this. Jake didn't even know it did before this very moment; he just had to find the fastest way to move forward. Because it was easier to manifest his mana inside his presence, it was fast enough. Did it consume a lot of mana? Yes, but right now, his primary priority was speed.

Jake had effectively just unlocked full-on air-walk-teleporting as he used One Step Mile forward into the horizon. He didn't know where it was; he just had a gut feeling about the direction. Jake wasn't even aware of what he was moving towards; he just knew one thing: Sylphie, Hawkie, and Mystie were in trouble.

A good while after he left the lodge, one of the enchantments around the time tree shattered with a bang - one of those laid down by Mystie.

Hawkie dodged the scorching white ray with a feather's breadth but was still sent tumbling through the air. He managed to stabilize himself and accidentally made eye contact with the uncaring gaze of the alpha before him.

[Goldsun Eagle Prima - lvl 144]

It was a nearly ten-meter-long golden eagle. Its radiant feathers gave off a constant glow as it bathed in sunlight, with its entire body practically humming with power and powerful energy similar to the sun above.

He knew. Their opponent barely cared about them. It knew it was above them by not just a little and didn't wish to waste any of its more prominent attacks. It was arrogant, with

power to back up that arrogance. The only one it regarded as anything worth mentioning was his daughter despite her low grade.

Which was exactly why they had told her to flee. Flee as they would try and hold back the monstrous eagle before them.

A blast of mystical mana hit the eagle from the side, but it failed to damage the radiant barrier around the beast. It was a hastily constructed attack that was unable to damage their opponent, but if anyone could allow them a chance, it was his mate.

Hawkie engaged again, attacking with a whirlwind to kick up the dust from far below. He surrounded the eagle in a tornado in sand and dust, obscuring its vision. Its mate began another ritual to summon a blast to hopefully damage the eagle enough to make it not chase their daughter.

The summoned beasts had been slain swiftly. They didn't even stand a chance and were only mild annoyances to the Eagle Prima. A mild annoyance just like the whirlwind of sand.

A golden explosion of light pushed back Hawkie as his feathers were scorched, and his mate had to summon a barrier to defend herself. A second later, she was forced to stop her attack as a searing ray came for her. Yet again, the eagle didn't press the attack but just observed them before it tossed out a few orbs of light towards Hawkie again.

Was it playing with them? Didn't it want to kill them? Why was it waiting like this? Hopefully, at least time would be on their side, though hope was slim.

His mate had already dispelled some of the enchantments back at the lodge around the time-related natural treasure, hoping the human would discover it. She had done this the moment they were discovered by the eagle. They didn't know if it could do anything, but he hoped the human who had given him his name could do *something*.

Either way... at least his daughter had to escape.

“REE!” Hawkie suddenly heard from off in the distance. A sound that made his heart drop.

He looked around and saw the green shape of his daughter be pushed back by another figure. It was a large eagle, much like the one he and his mate were fighting, but a bit smaller and far weaker. Still stronger than his daughter, who had yet to evolve, though.

[Goldsun Eagle – lvl 131]

It was the Eagle Prima's mate... Hawkie became clear on that because of the other new arrival.

Behind the new eagle, another small form flew, looking a lot like the two others.

[Juvenile Goldsun Eagle – lvl 92]

That is when Hawkie realized... just as they had gone there to help train their daughter and get her experience and teach her things, so had these eagles decided to use his family to train their spawn on.

His mate – named Mystie by the human - had the same look of despair as he did. The Eagle Prima was just weakening them with the purpose of making its spawn finish them off. They had done the same for their daughter so many times.

Their mutual look of despair quickly changed to one of determination. The situation was bad, but that didn't mean they had nothing left. The two of them had been together since before the system. They were mates for life. That didn't only come with trust but also some amount of power. The two of them both had chosen two parts of a greater skill, one they could only use when together.

One they had practiced not to face this kind of opponent but if the human ever turned into an enemy.

The Eagle Prima hadn't noticed their look, or it didn't care. It welcomed its mate with a screech, who responded together with its spawn. Sylphie, as the human had named her, was pushed back towards Hawkie.

A final look was exchanged as they began.

Hawkie began glowing in a green light that soon turned deep blue and began crackling with lightning. Mystie began emitting purple myst. They didn't need to screech or

communicate – their gazes had said it all. The purpose was not to defeat the Eagle Prima. That would be foolish. The aim was to make a way out for Sylphie.

Mystie dodged a wave of light, searing her one wing. Hawkie was blasted by a small orb. Sylphie took a nasty scratch with a talon.

They were all forced together as the Eagle Prima spread its wings. Magic in the air moved as a bubble of light was erected around them so big that it would take Hawkie nearly fifteen seconds to fly across. It was to seal them all in and damage them as the temperature within began increasing. The accursed spawn of the eagles sat outside the bubble, cheerily watching the show.

It wouldn't for much longer.

Two energies convened.

Storm and Myst came together as they mixed. A cloud of purple lightning was born as a thunderclap sounded out, and for the first time since this entire battle began, the Eagle Prima looked surprised. Mystie and Hawkie flew towards each other as Mystie turned entirely to Myst and began swirling around Hawkie.

Hawkie turned in mid-air, all his wounds now no longer mattering. He pushed his body to its utmost as he flew towards the mate of the Prima. Their young spawn was behind the second Goldsun Eagle, and it chose to defend. Foolishly believing it could.

The Prima also moved. It tried to block their path but was too slow. Hawkie fused with Mystie turned into a nearly fifteen-meter-long bird resembling a purple hawk-shaped thundercloud as they crashed into the Goldsun Eagle.

Myststorm Union

A mighty explosion sounded out as purple thunder exploded out from the impact. The fused birds didn't even stop in their track as they consumed the Goldsun Eagle and headed for the spawn behind the barrier – a dark figure with broken glowing purple lines pulsing on its body the only thing in their wake. It would be dead within minutes without assistance.

They crashed through the barrier and destroyed it, but they didn't get farther than that.

The Goldsun Eagle Prima appeared before them, more radiant than ever. Its rage was apparent as it had just seen its mate practically slain, and it opened its beak and fired out a massive breath of solar light.

The Myststorm Union was still only a new skill. It took an incredible toll on both of them and could only be used for a single attack. Most of their energy was already expended on the Goldsun Eagle and the barrier, meaning they ran on fumes when the solar beam hit them.

Myst was burned through, lightning was dispersed, and the union was broken. Two figures were sent tumbling through the air, both far more injured than before.

Hawkie had been the one infused... he should have been the one taking the brunt force of it... but at the very end, Mystie had concentrated her essence to defend. He saw her fall through the air, already unconscious and scorched black from the beam.

The only good thing was that at least they had bought time for Sylphie to-

A green form crashed into the side of the Eagle Prima, glowing green talons at the ready aiming for the beast's eyes. It waved its wing, smashing Sylphie down towards the ground.

She hit it hard, and she didn't get back up.

Hawkie saw red and charged the eagle again, hoping to do... something. He thought of maybe taking its spawn hostage but saw it was already encapsulated in a bubble of energy to defend it. He burned every shred of energy he had left and fired off a massive crackling blade of wind and lightning.

All it did was make the eagle block, and the opening Hawkie hoped would come wasn't there as a talon kicked him back – a large hole now open in his chest. It was a hopeless battle. His mate was already bleeding out somewhere in the canyon, and there was nothing left. His vision began darkening, and he heard the cries of Sylphie below as she was no doubt trying to get up and keep fighting. She was proud and brave like that.

He wasn't disappointed she hadn't chosen to flee. He was sad, but he couldn't be angry... only proud. There were many regrets as he felt himself slowly fade away, but he had done a lot. He had managed to foster a wonderful daughter and found the perfect mate. It was only too bad the journey would end here. He was reluctant to go, and he could only hate himself for failing his family.

The eagle moved in to finish him off for good. Not leaving a single chance of survival. It opened its beak to fire out a beam as Hawkie's vision gave out, and he felt as the energy that would be his certain death began to collect before it... stopped.

Everything just seemed to stop.

Then... something came. Hawkie felt it. Another being... a presence... one more powerful than the Prima by far. He didn't have time to recognize it before it arrived, but deep down, he knew. Hawkie couldn't see anymore, but he heard the arrival.

One moment, the beam was about to be fired; the next, massive explosions sounded out – two of them.

Hawkie felt his fall stop as he felt the familiar presence. A warm liquid entered his beak... one he also recognized. He felt the warmth spread in his body as he was swiftly moved through the air. He heard the cries of Sylphie as she seemed almost... panicked? There was no reason to do that. Didn't she understand?

A true apex predator had arrived.

Jake had teleported through the air. Every step faster than the one before. Limit break active at 20% as every fiber of his being was focused. Mana condensed, he stepped, and he teleported - his momentum increasing as he ran.

His speed was faster than anything he had ever done before. Every step was over 200 meters, with now more than ten steps taken a second.

He saw the eagle in the distance. He froze it. He stepped dozens of more times until the final step wasn't on mana but the back of the beast.

Every shred of momentum built up for far over a thousand kilometers was released with that one footfall. Jake felt his leg hurt as the veins on it burst while the frozen eagle was sent smashed straight down – a crack sounding out as its weak bones also gave out.

His focus wasn't on the beast, however. He felt anxious as he teleported again and summoned his wings. He caught Hawkie and quickly fed him a healing potion. A quick flight, and he reached Sylphie and gave her one too. She looked confused and afraid at his presence, screeching with warnings. Sylphie tried to make him leave. Jake just smiled as he picked her up and flew over to where he felt Mystie. She also got a potion as Jake laid down Hawkie and Sylphie beside her.

“Please, just stay here,” he said with a soothing tone as he patted Sylphie. He also gave Hawkie a nod as he saw him weakly open one eye. “You did well, mate. Now let me handle the rest.”

Jake turned around, his smile gone as he looked down the canyon to the Goldsun Eagle Prima below – his eyes burning with rage – his presence blanketing that entire section of the canyon.

He wasn't in a good mood.

Chapter 274: Beatdown

Sylphie hated herself. She was a really bad hawk and hadn't done as she was told. Her mom and dad had repeatedly told her to be careful around those things called natural treasures, but she couldn't hold herself back when she felt it. She hadn't listened... and it had gotten them all killed.

She even tried to run as they told her, but she couldn't even do that! Another of those big eagles came and hurt her and made her fly back to her parents. Their own small eagle was jeering at her the entire time, being really stupid and rude.

After mom and dad used their super move, Sylphie thought things would be fine. They defeated the big eagle that Sylphie couldn't beat on her own with a single hit and broke the barrier! She was sure the biggest eagle would be beaten too... but it had just fired a laser. It had sent mom falling down, and dad badly hurt.

Sylphie knew they needed help! She flew in and used her super talons, but it didn't work. She was struck, and everything began spinning and hurting really badly, and Sylphie didn't like it at all! A part of her knew she had to run, her parents wanted her to run, but she couldn't just leave them. She did feel bad about her not returning to help protect Uncle, but she couldn't just leave like that...

She cried a lot inside. She tried to get up and fight back. Dad attacked the biggest eagle but was hit another time. She got a really bad feeling and screeched for dad to get away, but he couldn't move... was... was dad going to die? Dad couldn't die... could he? He and mom were so strong... was the biggest eagle really so much stronger?

Her eyes opened wide, and she tried to get up as the big eagle was about to hit dad again. She knew it couldn't hit, but she couldn't get up...

And then the eagle just stopped, and everything got even worse as she felt Uncle. He appeared just a moment later and managed to catch the eagle by surprise, hitting it away.

Why? Why had Uncle come here? Mom and dad were so hurt already... dad wasn't even moving... not Uncle too...

No! He needed to run! She screamed to warn him to get away before the biggest eagle also decided to hurt Uncle! Sylphie couldn't protect him right now, and it wasn't fair that he also had to get hurt just because Sylphie had been bad... it wasn't fair.

Yet he just picked her up and made her drink one of his not-so-smelly drinks. It spread warmth throughout her body, and she felt a lot better super fast. Uncle had also given dad one, and they flew over and gave mom one too. Mom was still not awake, but Sylphie could tell she would be fine.

Uncle put her down and patted her on the head.

"Please just stay here," Uncle said. Sylphie didn't understand... why stay when they had to run? Mom and dad couldn't beat the bad guy yet; they had to get away before it came back.

"You did well, mate. Now let me handle the rest," Uncle then said to dad, and dad opening his eye and blinked slowly. Dad didn't seem scared? He just blinked with gratitude and seemed relieved. Happy.

She saw Uncle turn around... and he looked different from behind. The air around him was moving a bit weird, and he seemed very mad. Was he mad at Sylphie because she had been bad? No, he was mad at the biggest eagle...

Sylphie looked down towards the biggest eagle and was surprised. It looked back up at them, but it didn't move. It just sat there. Staring. It looked almost scared. Why would the biggest eagle be scared of Uncle?

Were dad and mom right? Was Uncle actually super-duper strong?

She got her answer when he summoned a stick. A string-shooty-stick.

Emotions were something Jake had been working on. Ever since the whole Abby-Donald-Incident, Jake had always been mindful about keeping his emotions under control. He didn't want to lose his cool or do something unintended in a moment where he got too emotional. His bloodline made it difficult, but he had managed to cope his entire life, and he could cope now.

But there were still moments where he failed to hold it back. Perhaps times where his emotions were more than well-placed. Moments where his unbridled rage was an acceptable response.

Today was one such day. A day where he didn't need to hold back. He didn't need to be mindful; he could release everything and have his target be the subject of that rage. Perhaps it was a cathartic and very healthy thing for Jake. He didn't know; he just knew that holding himself back even long enough to gather the birds and give them potions was a challenge. But now that they were safe?

Jake summoned the new bow he had gotten from Sultan and drew the string. The bow sent fire-mana down into the summoned arrow... and weakened it. He instantly detected the issues, but for now, it really wasn't something he bothered fixing. He dispelled the arrow he had summoned – an explosive one – and summoned a stable one instead. That one just rejected the fire mana, making the enchantment do nothing.

A bit of poison was sprinkled on the arrow as Jake bit his lip and spat some out onto it – a new trick he thought of just now. Mainly it was because he wasn't thinking much at all but just wanted to savage that shitface of a bird who dared hurt Sylphie, Hawkie, and Mystie.

He began channeling an Arcane Powershot, and that was when the Goldsun Eagle Prima below got out of its stupor. Of course, it was still under the influence of his presence. He didn't bother analyzing it right now; he just knew the bird was unnerved. Then again, it wasn't necessarily due to the presence; it could also just be that it was acutely aware.

Jake was stronger. From the moment his will appeared and his presence shrouded the valley, stopping not only the eagle's body with Gaze but even the magic through the presence, it became apparent.

The Goldsun Eagle Prima was around the same tier as the Monkey Prima. No... slightly lower. At level 144, it was 10 levels higher, but due to the difference in their tiers, it quite

honestly wasn't that much stronger than the Monkey Prima had been back then. And even if it was a little stronger, then Jake was *a lot stronger*

.

When he killed the Monkey Prima, he had been level 107. Now he was nearly twenty levels higher at 126. He had gotten skill upgrades, improved his poisons a whole lot, consumed elixirs, gear upgrades, and overall just grown in every single way. So while the fight against the Monkey Prima had been very even... this one wouldn't be. It wouldn't even truly be a fight.

Jake released his Arcane Powershot as the entire side of the canyon he was standing on began collapsing. The Eagle Prima tried to dodge but was frozen by his Gaze once again. It erected a barrier that exploded when the arrow hit it, sending the huge bird tumbling back.

He didn't let up as he shot another arrow and then another. He rapid-fired arrows that all split and pierced through the stones the eagle tried to hide behind, many penetrating its body too. The Eagle Prima wasn't weak enough to only be able to run and hide, however.

Its entire body began burning brighter with radiant light as it lit up like the sun. It flew upwards and spread its wings wide as it sent out a massive flare, clearly aiming to blind Jake. He felt his eyes burn but didn't avert his gaze for even a moment. Compared to the pain the beast had subjected the hawks to, this was nothing.

Besides, it wasn't like he truly needed his eyes. His Mark of the Avaricious Hunter had been on the eagle from the very first stomp, so even without his vision, he could keep up his assault. Not that the eagle could even burn his eyes enough. Perception seemed to somehow make even his borderline melted eyes function without any issues.

The eagle above didn't only aim to blind him, however. Instead, it began lighting up, and a massive amount of mana began condensing. It was clearly disturbed, and it decided to go all-out from the start. It dove down towards him like a miniature sun, the very air around it vibrating from the heat.

Jake summoned his scales and fired a fast Arcane Powershot up towards the eagle. Perhaps the eagle had hoped to evaporate the magical arrow before it could hit... but Jake's stable arcane mana was far too, well, stable, for that.

Blood spurted as it was hit by the arrow that pierced straight through the eagle and out the other side. It did nothing to stop its charge, however.

The massive burning form crashed down onto Jake. His scales crackled from the heat, and he stopped breathing to not heat up his insides. He guessed the eagle didn't want to fight a ranged battle with him. While that was a good choice... it didn't make it a smart one.

Jake jumped and took a two-handed swing with all his might. The veins in his arms burned with energy as the eagle tried not to get its head caved in at the very last moment. It managed to adjust but was still hit on the right wing and sent smashing into the ground below like a meteor – burning crater and all.

He didn't let up but raised his foot. He stepped forward unto a mana platform not far from the eagle, and with one more step, he was just in front of it. Jake had a weapon in each hand now as he summoned the scimitar and threw the long staff into the other.

One had to remember he didn't even have his Nanoblade, as he hadn't gone to get it and didn't even know if it was ready. Of his regular weapons, he only had the scimitar... and a certain item he had become fond of after the Altmar Census Golem.

The Pillar of Encumbrance smashed down where the eagle's head had just been as the large bird transformed itself into a beam of light, much like Jake's Shadow Vault. He held out his hand, and in front of the retreating eagle, a barrier of stable arcane mana appeared nearly instantaneously.

Like with his Shadow Vault, it could break through a barrier and take some damage. At least it normally could. But Jake didn't allow it to as he focused his will on the barrier to stop the beast. It smashed into the wall and was sent reeling back from the impact, clearly confused at how robust the hastily constructed barrier was.

"You're not running," Jake said as he took another step forward and appeared before the Eagle Prima again. It fired a beam of sunlight down towards him, but he sidestepped and smashed it in the side with the Pillar. It tried to strike back with a talon swipe but ended up just getting a long and deep cut on its foot from the scimitar.

"Stop fighting," he said, kicking the beast many times larger than himself on the already damaged wing. "This isn't a fight. This is a beatdown."

The Eagle Prima looked down at him, afraid but still struggling. It knew it had fucked up. All it wanted to do was run... but there was no way in hell Jake would let that happen.

What following truly wasn't a fight. It was just Jake constantly running over the possibilities of the hawks dying in his head. He knew it was a risk. A constant one. It came with the territory of seeking more power, but that didn't mean Jake liked it. Not at all.

Was beating what most would consider a boss monster half to death a logical or even reasonable response? No. No, it wasn't. The world wasn't reasonable to begin with. The Eagle Prima had merely committed the sin of pissing Jake off by going after one of the few things he would gladly kill to protect.

Hawkie had managed to stand up as his body was still slowly healing. His mate had also come to, and after the initial confusion, she joined him. They both stood on each side of their daughter, who observed the valley deep below.

Sylphie's eyes were wide. She didn't blink a single time but just looked at what was going on below. It wasn't a battle that was unfolding. No, it was a slaughter - an utter display of dominance and power. Hawkie knew the human had stronger tools to defeat the eagle. He had used it in the beginning to initially wound it... but he didn't use it now.

No, he got close. He met it in melee as he wanted it to be personal. Hawkie could feel all this, Sylphie and Mystie too. The emotions of the human were projected into his presence and weighed down on them even from so far away. His anger, resentment, and even a faint trace of reluctance to accept what could have happened.

Hawkie shared a glance with his mate. They both knew it was clear... their idea to create a possible technique to fight the human wasn't needed. Not only because the man clearly had no intentions of causing them any harm, but also because it was obvious how meaningless it would be.

The two of them were weaker than the human when they initially met. Weaker, but not to the level of being utterly suppressed. When they both reached D-grade, they hoped to at least begin approaching his level, but it was now clear that the gap wasn't closing, only widening.

They were both surprised at his power. The Eagle Prima displayed magic technique after magical technique that would stump the both of them, but the human crushed everything and simply smashed or cut the eagle again. It tried to fight him in a physical bout, but that proved even more meaningless. Its power meant nothing, and from the looks of it, it couldn't even display its full might. It was scared and scrambling from the get-go. This is what surprised them the most. Not that he won, but that he dominated his foe so completely.

But the most surprised of them all was Sylphie. Hawkie and Mystie both knew their daughter had issues believing the human was powerful. It was understandable. No beast in their right mind would sit still for so long, doing nothing that seemed in any way related to growing more powerful. If it was absorbing energy from some natural treasure? Maybe. But he wasn't even doing that.

The human could sit for so long playing with what Hawkie had learned was called a cauldron. He could create magical liquids like the one that had saved his life today, as well as the accursed toxins that were running through the body of the Eagle Prima.

For Sylphie to believe he was not a fighter made sense. Most beasts that were good at creation weren't good at fighting or at least required fighting by using preparation and planning, not just face something in a straight-on battle. They had met plenty of such beasts and monsters on their path so far, so Sylphie had concluded the human was one of those. He had tried to tell her off, but she had never truly believed him. But after today... she would.

They kept watching for a while longer. For every hit, the eagle had a harder time getting up. For every blow, its radiance weakened. It stumbled and failed to move its right wing. It tried to attack with the other, but the human stepped under it, and his blade became encompassed by two powerful energies – one dark and one that powerful mana he used – as it cut upwards, severing the entire left wing.

The eagle fell to the ground, still alive but struggling. It looked up at the human with indignation, and the human just stared back as he spoke, not to it, but the three of them looking on from above.

"You guys come down here."

Hawkie was confused for a moment but then realized. From start to end, the human had not displayed any killing intent. He had never planned on landing a killing blow from the very beginning... because this wasn't his enemy, not truly - it was theirs.

Chapter 275: Teaching the Young

Jake felt a lot better as he stared at the downed Goldsun Eagle Prima before him. The eagle's one wing lay on the ground beside it, and its radiant feathers were now no longer glowing. He had called for the birds to come and finish it off, as quite frankly, Jake had no desire to.

He hadn't enjoyed the fight at all, only the purpose behind it. The Eagle Prima hadn't been powerful enough for him to feel challenged, and this was the kind of fight he would usually try to avoid or finish as fast as possible. However, he felt this wasn't his decision to make. It wasn't his kill to claim.

If Jake turned around and left now, the Eagle Prima would live. It was already slowly healing while under the sunlight, and he had purposefully not used a lot of poison. He

wanted to leave the hawks an option – to kill the eagle or leave it alive. That’s what he would have wanted himself - a chance to come back at a later date for a rematch.

However, he knew this mindset wasn’t exactly considered normal, so he made it entirely possible for them to finish off the eagle if they so wished.

Hawkie and Mystie flew down from the cliff above, with Sylphie being a bit slower to react before she also dove down. They landed a bit behind Jake, still clearly a bit apprehensive towards the eagle. The eagle also threw a glance at them but just closed its eyes, resigned to its fate. It was not like it could do anything anymore.

“This isn’t my hunt and not really my enemy. It’s yours; you decide what to do. You can leave it here and come back later for a rematch, or you can finish it now. The choice is yours to make,” Jake told the three hawks.

He stayed close in case the eagle tried to pull out another move. Well, it did a few times by trying to summon forth a bit of magic, but Jake suppressed it with his presence and Gaze of the Apex Hunter every time – the two of them were quite an effective combo and seemed to have completely broken the Eagle Prima’s spirit.

The two hawks exchanged a look before swiftly pushing Sylphie forward. They gave her a stern look, almost as if telling her this was her job to do. She looked reluctant and looked up at Jake as if checking if it was okay. He gave her a nod, and she walked towards the Prima.

Jake could tell she wasn’t in a good mood. He wanted to cheer her up, but another part of him also knew it was important for her to learn from today. Jake didn’t need to be told Sylphie was the one who got them in trouble as he couldn’t see Hawkie and Mystie enter

an area so clearly marked by a powerful creature, and her generally ashamed demeanor made it even more obvious. Shit, he could feel the natural treasure from where he stood, and he knew she could too.

Sylphie slowly flew over to the Prima, and the eagle tried to get up and retaliate, but Jake froze it again and pressed down with his presence. It failed to resist as glowing talons penetrated it through the eye. It struggled, but Sylphie at least knew how to finish it quickly and as painlessly as possible. The eagle was too weak anyway, and once the brain took damage, it died nearly instantly

****You have slain [Goldsun Eagle Prima - lvl 144] - Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

The moment the giant eagle died, its body began glowing before turning into wisps of light that soared up into the sky. Jake was momentarily surprised until he remembered what kind of creature he was dealing with. It was a bit like the Monkey Prima in that the body disappeared, and like the monkey, two items remained in its stead.

Jake had no qualms about taking those. He walked closer and squatted down beside Sylphie. She looked down on the ground, not at all happy with the kill. She shouldn't be, as it wasn't truly hers either. It was just her taking responsibility.

Reaching over, he picked up the small golden metal fragment he recognized.

[Key Fragment of the Exalted Prima (Unique)] - A key fragment to the Seat of the Exalted Prima. Collect three fragments to form the Key of the Exalted Prima to gain access.

Oh yeah, those were a thing, Jake thought as he picked it up and threw it in his inventory. He had two of them now, though he still didn't know exactly what it was about. It did make him consider if he would have killed the Eagle Prima just for the fragment... probably not. Not before he knew what the fragments were truly for. He believed giving the choice between killing the eagle or a rematch was more important.

As for the second item, it was, of course, the Beastcore.

[Goldsun Eagle Prima Beastcore (D-grade)] – A Beastcore left behind by a D-grade Goldsun Eagle Prima, containing remnants of its Records within. Can be used as an alchemical ingredient for many types of creations but is most often found in Elixirs. Contains powerful energy related to the concept of the sun.

Jake also scooped that up as he actually needed it. None of the hawks complained either. He checked them all an extra time to make sure they were okay, and besides being battered and unable to do much besides light flying, they were fine. His healing potions weren't something to joke about.

He still decided just to let them rest there as he went to check out the natural treasure the Goldsun Eagle Prima had been guarding. There were no more threats, with the other Goldsun Eagle also dead off to the side. As for the juvenile eagle? Jake was aware of it but didn't do anything to it. If the hawks wanted it dead, they could kill it. It at least seemed smart enough not to attack him but just stayed hidden away. It wasn't that smart overall, though...

Leaving the hawks alone for a while, he went towards the treasure. It was still a bit away, and he noticed it was in a cave halfway up the side of a cliff. Jake flew up there and entered the cave. He felt the remnants of mana in the cave from what had likely been a

defensive formation or barrier or something, no doubt gone after the death of the Eagle Prima.

The cave itself was only about fifty meters deep and opened up to a slightly larger cavern. The space was only barely large enough for the massive eagle to fit in, and in the middle of it all was a large glowing rock-like thing. It looked like a fallen meteor, and Jake felt his still-summoned scales crackle as he stood before it from the heat alone.

Jake used Identify on it and saw that while it was a natural treasure like the banana tree, it wasn't at all the same.

[Suncore Fragment (Ancient)] – A large Suncore Fragment containing an immense power of sun-affinity mana. The fragment is incredibly durable and near-indestructible for anyone below C-grade and gives off large amounts of heat. Unknown alchemical uses.

It was basically just a big rock with a lot of sun-affinity energy. The name surprised him a bit, though. Back in the dungeon, Jake had gotten a Mooncore Shard, while this was a Suncore Fragment. He couldn't help but believe the two were related.

There was one issue, though. The large fragment was circular and with a diameter of around two meters. Not overly large or too small, and it should be easy to transport, right? It really wasn't. Throwing it in his inventory was already out of the question due to its constant emanation of energy. Even if he could throw it in there, it would likely fuck up everything else within. Once again, that was assuming he could even put it in there, which he seriously doubted he could.

Picking it up also wasn't an option. Jake couldn't exactly just walk around with it as he was pretty much sure most living things would take intense damage just by being close to it. He was also pretty damn sure it would kill or severely hurt most of the people he knew to be close to it. Heck, even he was taking a bit of damage just standing there, and that was Limit Break still active at 20% and all that – he hadn't deactivated yet due to the period of weakness.

But Jake still wanted it. So he did the only logical thing one can do.

He ate it.

Jake spat out the eagle eye stored in his Palate stomach and put it in his inventory. With space opened up, he activated the skill and inhaled. He felt the Suncore resist, and Jake had to do a serious push to make it move. The damn thing was incredibly heavy, but luckily that didn't matter much when you had weird eating magic.

After nearly two minutes of wearing down the natural treasure's defenses, it relented and shrunk as it flew into his mouth.

"That fucking hurts," Jake muttered as he turned around. He felt the Suncore within, now no longer able to damage him. It had still burned his mouth as it entered, though. That kinda sucked.

It didn't take him long to make it back to the hawks again. All of them were chilling on the ground, and he did spot the juvenile eagle not far away, now cut in two by what looked like a blade of wind. Jake sighed. It wasn't something he necessarily agreed with, but such was the philosophy of most beasts. Perhaps it was a mercy as the young eagle would likely have been killed by another creature that came to claim the area. The young one had

stayed in the area where its parent's killers were likely due to greed as it hoped to still keep the treasure. However, it was a bad choice as it potentially could have gotten away during Jake's pummeling of the Prima if it had been smarter.

Jake sat down with the two hawks as he deactivated his Limit Break and felt the weakness invade his entire body. He slumped a bit and laid back on the ground, relaxing. Sylphie looked worried and jumped over to him with concern. He just gave her a smile as he patted his chest, telling her to lay there.

She happily obliged as she sat on top of him.

"Sylphie," Jake said as he rubbed her head. "Do you know what you did wrong today?"

The bird on top of him froze as she looked embarrassed down at his chest. She raised her wings to hide her face, looking damn cute while doing it. But Jake wasn't going to fall for the cuteness today, even if she wasn't doing it on purpose. She was just a natural.

"It isn't even necessarily about invading the territory of a being more powerful than yourself... it's that you didn't do it properly. Scout it out a bit first, find out if you can take it, and then lay down a plan. You are small but incredibly fast and can do a lot of damage with your talons and wings with a sneak attack. What I am trying to say is to think more, okay?" Jake said to the small bird on top of him.

She peeked out from behind her wings to see if Jake looked angry or not. He didn't; he just looked back at her with a light smile as he relaxed his body. Sylphie stared for a bit before bopping her head in what he assumed was a nod.

Jake wasn't stupid or naïve enough to believe Sylphie would never be in trouble or fight again. He wouldn't ask that of her, just like he wouldn't accept if others asked him to give up fighting. It was simply life, and Sylphie had to do it. All he could do was give her advice and help her.

Hawkie and Mystie off to the side seemed to be approving of his message. They, too, wanted their daughter to grow powerful. Jake guessed that when Sylphie went through her level 100 transformation of sorts, she would be able to rival them to some extent. Possibly even exceed.

The group of four just stayed lying there for the next few hours as Jake decided to get a nap. Napping was the best way to recover after using Limit Break. He could ignore the weakness *and* relax. It was a pure win-win.

Hawkie, Sylphie, and Mystie also took this time to recover with him. The two parent-hawks closed their eyes as they focused on recovery, and Sylphie was the only one still awake and aware. She kept staring down at Jake for a while and seemed to have decided on something. She also closed her eyes as she focused on healing.

In the dark, another chain broke. Another spike ceased to be, and the stub was regrowing.

This was the second chain to break within that week.

996 remained.

He turned and inspected the fragment in his hand, turning it over and flipping it back around again. He felt an old kind of energy emanating from it, and he was looking forward to discovering the source. A sense of adventure lit up in his heart as he thought of this Seat of the Exalted Prima.

Alas, it would have to wait. For now, the most important thing was the Treasure Hunt. A bit less than two weeks remained, and they were close to ready. He himself had pushed himself further than before and taken down the strongest foe he had yet to face. A giant level 136 bull called a Prima. It had been a good match-up for him, for the beast was defensive and its hide tough, but at the sacrifice of speed and offensive prowess, something the blade of a Sword Saint did not care for.

His blade would cut through anything, and if it couldn't, he would do all he could to allow it to.

Miyamoto exited his abode as an old servant of the family greeted him. The man bowed and spoke.

“Master, the groups have gathered and are waiting for you in the western courtyard.”

The Sword Saint nodded. “Thank you, and please, this is no longer necessary. There is no need to wait on me like this. Simply leave a message and focus on yourself. Our destinies are our's to seize, so claim yours, old friend.”

“I do this by choice, not because it is a necessity, Master,” the old man said, still bowing.

Miyamoto shook his head as he went towards the courtyard. It was ridiculous for a D-grade to act like that. The old mindset still dominated the clan, and it would take time to change. Some customs were to be kept, but the personal servants who didn't focus on self-improvement were not one of them. The man from before did not even have a related profession.

The western courtyard he was going to was filled with nearly a hundred people. Most of them grouped into parties of five, but some had come alone and others in smaller groups. Not that it was any of his concern. He himself had gone alone. When he entered, the entire room became silent, and the Sword Saint wasted no time.

"First of all, welcome to Saya to those who have not been here before," he said. Some of the people in the room were not from the city or even part of the clan. They were simply people who had joined them on a temporary basis.

All of them had come for one purpose.

A dungeon. A D-grade dungeon. One the Sword Saint had already cleared as the only one. One they were there to learn about.

"The dungeon will consist primarily of beasts of the canine and bovine variety. A natural equilibrium has been formed, and you shall enter as a disruptive force. The regular beasts have levels ranging from 105-110, but variants between 110-116 also appear in these groups. The most dangerous immediate threats are the alphas at around 125. The two most powerful entities in the dungeon are the werewolf and the Minotaur, both level 135. These two will fight, and you can choose to support either side or strike down both of them. I shall explain their skills shortly. However, be aware that-

The explanation continued as the entire room listened on.

This was not a unique scene throughout the multiverse. It was normal for the first to complete a dungeon to share their experience. The first divers were often the ones taking the most risk, as they were the ones who faced down the unknown. That was why the Dungeon Pioneer title existed.

Of course, it still happened that the first one to clear a dungeon would not share the experience with others or even give false information. Sometimes they also just forgot to share it or didn't see it was important.

But one would have to be rather forgetful or callous to do that.

Chapter 276: Sylphie Gets a New friend

The group of four – three hawks and a human – arrived safely back at Haven. Sylphie stuck to Jake the entire time as he carried her on the flight. She was awfully quiet the whole way, and he was pretty worried about her.

Once they got back, she didn't leave him but stayed cradled in his arms. Jake just sighed as he went to his porch and sat down. The two parent-birds joined him as they also looked worriedly at Sylphie. Nobody said anything, Perhaps it was just Jake being callous, but he believed this was something she had to work through herself. Whatever she was working through.

In the end, she looked up at him questioningly. Jake wasn't sure what she wanted but just rubbed her feathers a bit. She blinked and made a quiet screech. Shaking his head, not understanding what she wanted, Jake could only keep petting her in reassurance as she was figuring stuff out.

“Just do whatever you think will make you happy.”

That was all the advice he gave her. She ruffled a bit at his words and seemed more content as she got up, looked at him one more time, and flew up to land on his head.

Not what I had in mind, but okay.

He just shrugged and took out his cauldron, deciding he may as well get some crafting in as they were relaxing. He was getting closer to level 130, and he would soon use the upgrade item on his boots, but not yet. While he had resigned himself to not reaching 130 before the Treasure Hunt... he would get as close as possible.

Jake had barely begun his crafting when Sylphie on top of his head just... disappeared. He was alarmed for a moment, but quickly he understood – she was going to get her stat-boost thing.

While she was already technically D-grade before, reaching level 100 remained such a spike of power, it still required one to enter that evolution space. Jake smiled, and Mystie and Hawkie also looked happy.

Go get them stats, Sylphie.

Sylphie had gone to the evolution space, but also somewhere else. She took a pitstop as she experienced something many other unique or powerful individuals did around evolution-time. Because the time for evolution was a time where access was most easily established. The foundation based on Records was expanded, and it was a great time of change.

And when Sylphie got the message, she didn't see any reason to say no. The wind – still present in the evolution space – whispered that it was a good thing, so why should she?

****Stormild has invited you to her realm. Accept?****

She did think Stormild was a bit of a weird name, though.

At first, she couldn't hear or see, only feel her surroundings. She thought it was very windy, which was nice. She liked the wind. Oh, but then it got hot. She didn't like that; it reminded her of the bad biggest eagle... oh, but then it got tingly. That reminded her of the lightning that dad made, so it was nice again.

Sylphie finally opened her eyes.

BIG!

That was her first thought as she saw the figure before her.

The wind was blowing, space burned, and everything crackled with energy. In front of her, a figure spanning the cosmos floated as it looked down at her with eyes the size of stars. The entire shape of the being was everchanging but always seemed to revert to that of an avian. Perhaps that was the chosen form the god had decided to adopt the majority of the time.

All of this was lost on Sylphie, who only cared about the bird-like thing looking big and feeling super strong. She wasn't sure if the big bird was as strong as Uncle, though. Uncle was super strong, after all. But then again, the biggest eagle would only look like a tiniest eagle in front of the big bird of wind and fire and lightning.

Uncle still stronger, she affirmed. Mom and dad had told her that how someone felt was super important. Uncle felt stronger than the big glowy wind-bird, so he had to be stronger, right? Well, this bird did feel stronger, *stronger*, but it didn't make her feel scared. Uncle didn't either, of course. Uncle just always felt strong.

Sylphie thought all this as she stared up into the big glowing bird-eyes. The bird-eyes stared back at her too.

...

...

Nothing really happened. They just stared at each other. Sylphie was the first to get annoyed as she puffed herself up.

“Ree!” she screeched, to show she wasn’t scared or anything. She knew the big birdie couldn’t hurt her. Why? Well, the weird wind and fire passing through her all the time made her know. If it could hurt her, Sylphie would have already been hurt, so it only made sense.

The big bird seemed to recognize her as it made a weird booming sound that wasn’t at all a proper bird sound. Well, it wasn’t really a bird. It was more like those cloud-things mom and dad had taken her to fight up at the tree dad liked sitting on.

Except this bird-like thing was super-much bigger and super-much stronger. And on fire. Weird fire. Sylphie didn’t really get it.

What she did get was that it was a friend-bird. Not a bad bird. So she happily flapped her wings in response and screeched back. Dad and mom had told her making friends were important. That was how they had met Uncle after all, and Uncle was great, so friends had to be great.

It made another weird sound that Sylphie totally got. It wanted to give her a friend-thing. That sounded nice, so she agreed with a few more wing-flaps and screeched. The big bird seemed nice and even asked her a few questions. Oh! Oh, big bird knew Uncle too! That made sense, Uncle was strong, and the big crackly bird was strong. Wait, she knew Uncle’s friend? That also made sense as Uncle having cool friends was just normal. Uncle was great.

Finally, the big bird raised its talons that shifted and shrunk until it looked almost to be the size of the biggest eagle. Then, it lowered the talon and poked Sylphie's forehead.

You have received a Lesser Blessing by the Primordial Stormild

WHAT!?

SYLPHIE WASN'T LESSER!

Renounce Stormild as Patron? All faith-based skills, titles, and Blessing will be lost.

YEAH!

To Sylphie, that was just rude! Stormild was the big bird's name – she just pieced that together now – and Stormild wasn't being nice! Maybe it was Uncle's friend's friend, but that didn't make it okay!

“REEE! REEE! REE!”

She sure gave that big bird a piece of her mind as Sylphie made it clear just how rude it was to do that. Finally, the big bird seemed to recognize its mistake, and after a moment of confusion, it made another booming sound. It said Sylphie would get something even better, but she wasn't sure she trusted the big bird on that.

It poked her again with a talon.

You have received a Major Blessing by the Primordial Stormild

Major... Sylphie wasn't sure what major meant. Did it mean big? Sylphie wasn't a big bird, so that one didn't suit her at all! The big bird was major, not Sylphie, as Sylphie was a small bird. What if it tried to make her into a big bird? Sylphie couldn't have that; that would make it harder to sleep on top of Uncle's head.

So she made that one go away too.

The silly bird looked confused as Sylphie didn't feel like she needed to give any explanation. Her logic made sense; it was just the big bird being a silly bird.

She did know it was a bit rude to say no to a gift, but wasn't it also rude to give a gift that did bad stuff?

Once more, the big silly bird looked sillily down at Sylphie. Sylphie gave it a good screech, explaining how she wasn't a major bird. The big bird seemed to understand that as it poked Sylphie a third time.

****You have received a Greater Blessing by the Primordial Stormild****

NO!

Renounce Stormild as Patron? All faith-based skills, titles, and Blessing will be lost.

SYLPHIE ISN'T FAT!

“REE! REE! REE! REEEE!” Sylphie angrily screeched and puffed as she flapped her wings in indignation and anger. Sylphie wasn’t a fat bird! Uncle never said Sylphie was too heavy, and she was super fast too and not at all slow! Stupid big bird was just mega-rude now!

The big bird just silently looked down on her and took her complaints in. Then it made another booming noise that made Sylphie stop. Oh. So it was like that.

Sylphie now felt a bit bad. The big bird explained these were good gifts and not bad gifts. The big bird then told her that she could get a better gift if she wanted, but not the best one. Big shiny lightning bird only had one best gift to give away and had already given it to someone else. Sylphie knew it would be rude to ask for that as someone already had it. Sylphie was not a thief.

Also! The big bird said to just call her Stormild. So big bird Stormild.

“Ree, ree, ree ree, ree?”

Sylphie introduced herself properly as Sylphie. She was polite like that. She also made sure to ask if this meant they were now friends?

Another boom confirmed big bird Stormild wasn't sure that was the right word. Sylphie wasn't sure if that was a yes or no. Either way, Sylphie understood. Big bird Stormild was still a bit silly, but that was okay because they were now friends.

Big bird Stormild then began talking with Sylphie. She asked silly stuff, and Sylphie happily answered. Big bird asked a lot about Uncle, but also about Sylphie herself. That made sense. Both Sylphie and Uncle were great, and now they were all friends, right?

In the end, the big bird asked Sylphie a weird question. Weird because why did she need to ask such an easy question to answer? Big bird Stormild listened and seemed satisfied by her answer as she moved her big foot again. Her big bird foot.

Sylphie got one final talon poke as it popped up with a new message.

****You have received a Divine Blessing by the Primordial Stormild****

That one looked okay to Sylphie, and she would have been happy with that without the explanation. Divine seemed like a nice word. She looked at it, and it all seemed nice.

[Divine Blessing of Stormild (Blessing – Divine)] – You have made yourself worthy in the eyes of the Primordial Stormild and received her Divine Blessing. What you do with this blessing or what the Primordial wishes of you, a mystery. Through a strong karmic bond, you have tapped into her powers of nature. +10% Agility +10% Intelligence. Grants access to many new paths. Only one blessing can be held at a time.

Even a nice title thing! She only had a few others of those.

[Holder of a Primordial's Divine Blessing] - Obtain the Divine blessing of a Primordial. Among the vast universe, many gods exist, many pantheons rule, but the Primordial are few. To obtain the Divine blessing of a Primordial, an unobtainable feat for all but the select few. Grants the skill: [Ritual: Union Oath of Stormild (Legendary)]. +5 all stats, +5% to all stats.

The two of them kept floating there a bit more, just talking and having fun. Big bird Stormild was nice and super smart. She told Stormild about how awesome she was, so that was great. Sylphie could do a lot of stuff, and of course, she knew that, but big bird Stormild still had some super-smart ideas!

After a while, Sylphie had to go, so she said goodbye to big Bird Stormild and went on her way, having made a new friend and gotten a nice gift.

Not long after Sylphie disappeared, elsewhere, outside Stormild's realm, a voice boomed through the cosmos.

“I knew you’d be interested.”

The void split as a figure walked out. Vilastromoz stood in space as he observed the massive storm in front of him as it bent and churned. The entire storm soon twisted and imploded into the form of a bird-like creature. Sparing thousands of planets from being consumed. For now.

“What a weird bird,” the new form said as it regarded the Malefic Viper. “Did you make her? A new alchemy thing? Same as that new Chosen guy of yours?”

“I believe calling that hawk the result of an experiment is not entirely inaccurate, yet not accurate either. The creation was accidental, at least partly. As for my Chosen? Well, he is deeply involved in this whole thing and a big part of the reason,” the Viper said with a light smile.

“It’s fine; I always liked those half-elemental, half-beast monsters. Also, she was totally immune to my presence. Not scared at all. That’s kind of awesome. Oh! Did you see how she rejected, like, all my blessings? Never tried that before,” Stormild said, clearly in a good mood.

“Heh, I reckoned you would like her. I hadn’t expected that level of blessing, though,” the snake god said, shaking his head.

“Well, she was fun. She even kept insisting her Uncle is stronger than me. That would be your Chosen, I reckon? She can’t really feel how strong I am, only my presence – which

she wasn't scared of – so does that mean your Chosen has a presence able to rival that of a god? One at least equal on a qualitative level? A Transcendence? Bloodline? Ah, I'll guess I'll figure out soon enough. I am really looking forward to meeting this Uncle of hers; he sounds pretty fun,” Stormild ranted.

Vilastromoz's smile deepened. Stormild has always been like this. An incredibly childish and immature lifeform. Elementals gaining sapience usually were like that - flighty souls who cared little for normal conventions but only cared about having fun and enjoying themselves. One could say they never really grew up, but that didn't make them stupid - far from it.

Ultimately, Stormild knowing about Jake having a bloodline or not was inevitable if she blessed the Sylphian. The hawk and Jake were too close, and Stormild would be able to put two and two together eventually. The bloodline wasn't the easiest thing to hide due to the effect on others. Both his brother and now the Sylphian had been affected. Many others he regularly interacted with were also passively building up a resistance. Stormild wasn't going to do anything, though. At least he didn't think so. If he thought she would, he wouldn't have made her aware of the hawk's existence. Also... maybe it could even act as a shield. If the immunity to presences were all they believed it did, it would still be viewed as monstrous... but it was better than them knowing the full thing. Not that he thought Stormild would share it around.

Then again, a sapient natural disaster wasn't always the most predictable of entities.

“I'm sure what the future holds is interesting. Anyway, it was nice to see you again,” he said to his old acquaintance.

“Okay! See you! I'm happy you stopped being sad. Or as sad. Still a bit sad? It's better for sure. Bye until next time!”

Stormild's form slowly spread out again as she grew in size a thousandfold every second until she was back to her true form once more – a giant cloud of thunder, fire, and wind. One that soon floated away, devouring every planet, solar system, and galaxy in its path.

The Viper smiled a bit as he shook his head. Dealing with his fellow Primordial had always been a bit complicated, but weren't they all?

His own avatar dispersed soon after. Showing up with his true form in front of Stormild rarely ended well as she tended to get a bit... excited. Besides, his other body was busy elsewhere.

Chapter 277: Union Oath

Jake felt it before he saw her. A new presence appeared a split second before she was fully back. A small bird appeared back on top of his head, having shifted from a sitting to a standing position.

"Welcome back, Sylphie," Jake said with a smile as he inspected the hawk.

[Sylphian Eyas – lvl 100]

Well, okay, not a hawk but an eyas, I guess. Level 100 and still a little kid, heh,” Jake thought, chuckling internally.

Hawkie and Mystie also jumped over, and he ended up sitting surrounded by the two hawks as they both inspected and made bird noises at their daughter. Jake kept smiling as she happily narrated something, and both of them kept making questioning screeches. While Jake was okay-ish at speaking bird, he wasn't fluent at all, so much of the conversation was lost on him. He could only really read intent and emotions.

Jake waited for them to finish as he tried to piece together what it had been about. Luckily, he didn't have to as someone else clued him in.

“So, I went ahead and got your little bird pal a blessing from my fellow Primordial by making her aware of the bird's existence, and she was very interested. So yeah, the hawk has a Divine Blessing now and is a bit stronger and will likely get a few better skills and stuff like that moving forward. The one blessing her is called Stormild and is an elemental of sorts, so do note that she may begin developing more in that direction. In case you didn't know, she is like half-beast, half-elemental,” Villy came in from the left side, dropping a knowledge bomb.

“Oh, that's pretty cool, I guess. Is Stormild nice?” Jake asked back telepathically.

“Not at all; she is a living natural disaster. But she does like all elementals and spirits, and as your little bird is part spirit, Stormild likes her. She is an interesting little thing that hawk, which sure also helped. So yeah, the bird will be fine.”

“I see. Well, as long as this elemental thing treats Sylphie properly, it will be fine. But, do tell her to treat Sylphie nicely, okay?” Jake answered. He hoped this Stormild was chill like the Malefic Viper. Sylphie getting another friend would be nice.

“No worries, you might just get the chance to tell her yourself dependent on what you choose,” the Viper mysteriously answered.

Before Jake got the chance to ask, the Viper’s presence faded. It was all very mysterious for about ten seconds... before Sylphie seemed done with her conversation with her parents. He noted they all looked at him. Mystie and Hawkie looked expectant but also a bit worried. Jake worried what the hell they had talked about to have those expressions, but he soon got his answer. Sylphie jumped down and landed on his lap.

She looked him in the eyes and began glowing. A magic circle coalesced in mid-air in front of her, and Jake looked at it a bit. Sylphie placed her wing on one side of the floating magic circle, and Jake quickly picked up what to do as he placed his hand on the circle.

***Do you wish to begin the ritual to enter a Union Oath of Stormwild with Sylphie?
NOTE: Both parties can exit the ritual at any point until the final Union Oath has been made***

Jake looked at it for a bit. It was a system-prompt. System-prompts tended to be important. The issue was, Jake had no idea what this whole deal was about.

“Okay, Villy, get the fuck back here; what is this?”

Villy swiftly came back, almost as if he had been waiting for Jake.

“So, remember when I told you about the whole bond of equals during the whole slavery thing? Elementals and spirits, in general, are the most common users of this type of bond. Your undead pal with his Blightwraith girlfriend is an example, where he entered an equal bond with the wraith. Of course, you don’t need to do something like that; the type of bond can be very customized, especially the kind the Sylphian has. So no, not slavery. More a spirit contract. Just go ahead with the ritual for now, check out the details, and figure it out from there,” the Viper said, dispelling some of Jake’s doubts.

For a moment there, he thought Sylphie was trying to bait him into a slave contract or something. Jake wasn’t entirely comfortable with the entire ordeal. He actually considered rejecting the ritual for a moment, but the big hopeful eyes of Sylphie staring at him made him unable to.

He accepted it, and then everything kinda got weird.

Jake felt himself in two places at once. His consciousness and likely parts of his soul were dragged off somewhere along with Sylphie’s, but his body remained behind, meaning he still felt his Sphere of Perception and all that. Well, it wasn’t something he hadn’t tried before, so he just rolled with it.

In his weird soul-form, he floated through nothingness for a while until he and Sylphie both came to a stop. Jake was a bit surprised at Sylphie’s form. While Jake looked pretty much the same, except a bit more transparent, Sylphie looked like an ever-changing green creature of wind that eventually settled on her old shape.

Before the two of them was a tablet without any words on it besides a title at the top.

Union Oath of Stormild

Jake looked over at Sylphie, expecting her to do something. Instead, she looked back at him, looking equally perplexed.

Sylphie, this is your damn ritual, he thought. He didn't say anything, though, but let her take her time. The reason for this was simple... everything he saw in his sphere moved extremely slowly. Like, so slow it was almost unnoticeable. This meant time in the real world was moving at a snail's pace during this whole ritual, so he would let her figure out herself.

Well, it turned out she wouldn't have to.

Two orbs of light suddenly appeared in the sky above. First, clouds spread as he heard the sound of thunder and saw flashes of lightning. Then, the entire sky appeared to catch fire as a new presence entered the weird space they were in.

It wasn't hard for Jake to guess who it was.

"Stormild, I presume?" he asked out loud.

"That's me."

The voice sounded like... a little girl? Not at all what he would expect from an incredibly ancient Primordial that had been around for billions, if not trillions of years. Then again, how was a being that old supposed to sound?

Also, it was interesting that she actually talked. It wasn't some magical telepathy or anything, but just sound. What was weird, though, was how the sound appeared or how he picked it up. Sound magic, maybe? The concept of sound? It was magic for sure.

"Ree!" Sylphie also said, flapping her wings happily.

"OOOOOHM!"

Jake heard an almost booming sound in response as he felt like everything rattled for a moment. Yet, he felt like it wasn't an attack or anything malicious. In fact, he felt a lot of... communication? At least Sylphie seemed to perfectly understand that booming sound and happily responded with even more screeches and wing-flapping.

"Are you talking elemental or something?" Jake asked. He didn't quite get what they were saying or doing, but clearly, it worked for them.

"Oh yeah. Super much better way to talk than stupid words. Actually, words are, like, the worst way of talking. Okay, not the worst, but one of the worst. I once saw this weird fishy thing that talked by writing stuff or something. It was sooo slow and bad. Also, it only worked with water, so when all their water went poof, they couldn't talk. Really silly

those ones. The small ones couldn't even breathe without the water. Another silly thing. Why breathe? Never got why so many things like to do that..." Stormild replied.

"Yeah, I agree on that one. Not having to breathe is nice," Jake nodded, ignoring how the elemental just talked about killing possibly an entire race by evaporating all the water they lived in. "Anyway, why was it we were here again? Some kind of oath or something, right? What's it about?"

"I remembered! The ritual! Right. Just agree to serve Sylphie forever and ever and do everything she ever tells you till you die, but don't die until she tells you, and never leave her and go wherever she wants, and stuff like that, okay?"

He needed to take a moment to absorb that rant. He was about to protest, but Sylphie was the one who began screeching madly first.

"Ree! Ree!" she huffed and puffed.

"Not like that? Oh... oh!" Stormild said as the form turned into a smaller form.

A bird-like creature appeared before him, still nearly ten meters tall but now far smaller. Stormild looked down at him. She looked like she sniffed him a bit, and Jake felt like her presence poked his own. Maybe even his soul? It didn't really do anything.

"It is a bloodline!" the Primordial said, flapping her wings as thunder boomed and flames were left in their wake. "I totally get it now!"

Stormild turned to Sylphie and sounded more serious than ever. “If a girl likes a boy very much-“

“No!” Jake cut in. “Just no. Seriously, what the fuck?”

Stormild looked over at Jake, almost relieved. “To be fair, I did think it was a bit weird, but I try not to judge, ya know? I never quite get you fleshies, and some have hobbies quite hard to understand. Seriously, why do you do that with your fleshy bits where you-“

“I think we should change the subject. Now,” Jake said, not leaving much up to discussion. Sylphie just looked confused between them, not quite getting what the conversation was about, and Jake would prefer to keep it that way.

The big burning storm bird looked down at Jake. “Okay, okay. So, what do you want to do an Oath about? I still think you should just do everything Sylphie says forever.”

“Yeah, not gonna happen. So how does this oath work? Some kind of contract?”

“Uhm, yeah, of course, it’s a spirit contract. Duh. Didn’t big snake man tell you? You agree on stuff, and then you become bound to each other kinda. It’s a totally cool spirit thing only spirits can do; that’s why it’s called a spirit contract. My version is even better where I am the one to make sure everyone keeps their oath because I think promises are super important. Do you know how many elementals or innocent spirits used to get screwed over? It was super unfair, so I made a better version. One where if either party breaks the oath, I fix it,” Stormild said, happily explaining what the skill was about.

“Fix it how?” Jake asked.

“Death.”

The word was spoken with an intent that actually sent a shiver down Jake’s back. Everything told him that this wasn’t some usual contract. Not truly. While a regular slave contract or contract would result in death if broken... well, that is how it was meant to work. As with many other things, there were workarounds... but if a Primordial would appear to enforce an oath? Or at least part of a Primordial? That... was something. It also kind of added a subjective interpretation to the whole thing. Jake wasn’t entirely sure about the entire thing but went with it for now.

“What are the benefits of this Union Oath?” Jake also asked.

“Usually, it’s a great way to bond. Get better at fighting together. Like, ya know, just do stuff together. Also, stuff that is usually only available to one of you as the other can be seen as a part of you. Kinda? You can even do challenge dungeons together sometimes. So yeah, become forever-friends.”

Jake frowned. This... he really wasn’t sure about this. Jake was aware of this kind of thing. It sounded a lot like a companion bond. A type of magic he had read about some classes got that allowed them to bind a beast. He assumed a spirit contract was the spirit version of that. It was usually a bond of equals that more or less made them co-dependent. Many skills and types of magic would be unlocked, and a permanent bond would be formed. It was a lifelong partnership where they would spend their entire lives never away from each other... and Jake didn’t want that.

Not to be misunderstood, he liked Sylphie. But he also liked being alone. He was a lone hunter, and he knew that. That didn't mean he could never work with others, he had a great time hunting with Hawkie, but he wasn't going to make a lifelong commitment to always hunt as a pair with Sylphie. It wasn't fair to either him or Sylphie. It would limit both their freedoms, which made it out of the question.

He looked over at Sylphie. "Is this really something you want? I am not saying we can't be forever-friends, but do we need to swear to each other we will? It will mean we will have to always be together. You will have to sit and wait while I do alchemy... do you really want that?"

Sylphie had seemed okay with everything until now, as her eyes opened wide when he mentioned that. He knew she wasn't a fan of him always sitting on his ass crafting and often tried to make him do stuff, so when she imagined having to wait for him... her distress was obvious.

"Ree!" Sylphie said as she flapped her wings in panic at Stormild.

"Wait, why would you need to do that?" Stormild asked, looking genuinely confused. "That sounds like a silly rule to have; why include that? Seems super silly. Just be friends, and all is okay and promise each other stuff and make the oath. Then Sylphie can enter the Treasure Hunt, and I get stuff just like big snake man."

She seemed very pushy as she even poked Sylphie with her ethereal wing. "You want to enter the Treasure Hunt with Uncle, right? I am sure you can find tasty stuff in there. Also, you will be able to do stuff more fun stuff with Uncle in the future if you want to. You want that, right?"

Sylphie did want that.

And Jake? Jake considered if this was really a thing one could just exploit.

“So, you mean to tell me we can just create this Union Oath, live our lives entirely independent of each other, but still have some benefits like allowing Sylphie to enter the Treasure Hunt with me? I assume this bond can even be harnessed to communicate and things like that? A bit like a blessing from a god? Any drawback if either party gets hurt or worse dies?” Jake asked clarifyingly.

“Sure, you can think of it a bit like a blessing. It’s kinda wrong, but you can. And sure, you can just get all the good stuff and not the bad stuff. Well, you won’t benefit as much as those who make a big Union Oath, but you will still get some of the good stuff. Also, it will be super sad if any of you die, right? But nah, you don’t *need* to include a rule about both parties dying if the other does. Many do, though. Dunno why.”

“What will this Union Oath need to include specifically?”

“A promise. You know, an Oath? The Spirit Contract needs that to work,” she explained.

“Alright, Villy, quick thoughts before I do something dumb?” Jake quickly threw towards the Viper.

“This is what I planned. It’s a good thing; Stormild’s contract is a bit.. exploitative. Towards the system and its rules, that is. It is the best kind there is, besides maybe some of the stuff Eversmile cooks up. To you, the benefits will be borderline non-existent with no real drawbacks at all, but it will help the hawk a lot. Be aware that you can only have one such contract active at a time, though,” Villy answered promptly, dispelling much of Jake’s doubt. He knew all of this was partly orchestrated by the Viper... but not entirely.

He had a feeling Stormild wasn’t easily manipulated. She seemed simple and childish, but his instincts told him everything she did was done with purpose and deliberation. Stormild most certainly was childish and had a very naïve outlook on some things for sure, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t comprehend the intents of others. He was pretty sure she knew what this was all about from the beginning and had fun with them. The comments and jokes just her having fun and enjoying the company. At least he got the impression she was enjoying herself in their company.

“Well, let’s get to it then. If you want to, Sylphie?” Jake asked the small hawk.

She happily screeched and flew over to Jake, nuzzling up to him. He wasn’t certain of all the impacts this Union Oath would have, but he had a feeling it wasn’t something he would come to regret.

Chapter 278: A Higher Power? No Thanks.

Jake had signed quite a few contracts during his life. It had been a staple of his pre-system work, and of course, when you made large and important purchases such as a car or a home, you had to sign. So he knew a bit about signing stuff, and there were a few things one had to always remember.

First and foremost was naturally to spend an unreasonable amount of time practicing your signature solely not to be embarrassed when you sign like a kid during an important business meeting or when the judgemental lady from the bank stares over your shoulder. All of this while being fully aware having a good-looking signature was just a stupid social construct created by archaic and unreasonable expectations in a world where digitalization had taken over, so why even bother improving your handwriting?

Anyway, the second thing one had to remember was always to read the contract closely. Jake's mom always told a horror story of how her father's brother's best friend's sister's husband once signed without reading the contract, and he ended up buying the wrong car. In retrospect, it was a bad story, but she had told it to him so many times.

The rule of reading contracts had only become more important after the system came. At least in some ways. In others, not so much. Because each contract now gave one a *sense* of what they were about. You couldn't sign it unless the system believed you understood it. But, of course, there were levels to understanding. For example, one could fail to consider the future properly but think the contract was worth it in the short term. So one had to always consider a contract properly before signing and take some time to go over it in one's head. Possibly wait to sign till the next day if possible to sleep on it.

Now, this wasn't a possibility when floating in some weird soul-space-thing with a half-elemental half-beast hawk and an ancient living natural disaster. But then again, the contract wasn't exactly complicated. The massive tablet had only a few words on it, though they were quite open to interpretation.

Awesomest Uncle Jake Thayne and Bestest Bird Sylphie agree to be Forever-Friends.

"Is this seriously enough?" Jake asked, highly skeptical of the entire thing.

“Seems fine to me?” Stormild answered, looking at him like he was stupid.

“Ree!” Sylphie agreed. She had been the one behind the wording of the contract.

“Seriously?” Jake reiterated.

“Yep.”

“So, hypothetically speaking, what would breaking this contract look like? What if Sylphie and I have a disagreement? Or maybe we just don’t meet and talk for a while? Does that mean that one day it suddenly counts as us breaking it? Also, what if either of us dies? Doesn’t that automatically mean the other party broke the terms?” He asked. Every fiber of his being refused to believe this could count as a proper contract. Perhaps it was his years in the corporate world, but this couldn’t be okay, could it?

“Uhm, friends sometimes fight, so no problems there. I am still super good friends with big snake man, and we didn’t meet in super-duper long, so that’s fine too, I guess? Oh! And you can be friends with dead people too. My last best friend, er, Chosen, died because she couldn’t figure out how to become a god, but we’re still friends,” Stormild answered, completely dispelling all of Jake’s concerns.

“Ree! Ree!” Sylphie agreed, adding on something more.

“Right on, Sylphie! Dad is still dad if dad dies, and Uncle is still Uncle even if Uncle dies, so why is Forever-friend not still Forever-friend even after death? Friendships can have

all shapes and sizes, so as long as you don't outright say you aren't Forever-Friends anymore, all is good. Oh! And you have to mean it. Sometimes people say stuff they don't mean in anger, right?" Stormild said as she flew around them in a circle, clearly in a great mood.

"Ree?" Sylphie asked.

"Of course we're friends!" Stormild agreed.

"Ree?" Sylphie then asked, looking at Jake.

"Well, big snake man is my friend, and Uncle is a friend of big snake man, so we're also friends. Oh hey! It's not often I'm hanging out with two friends like this! People normally act all weird and beg me not to kill them and stuff. Some even do beg me to kill them, which is even weirder? Oh, do you know the Primordial Church? They are super weird those ones," Stormild ranted once more.

"Ree! Ree?"

"For sure! This one time I-"

Jake just stood there and zoned out as the Primordial began telling a story about this one time she was being chased by fanatics that tried to find the planets she would pass by next to hopefully be consumed by her. To her credit, she apparently tried to actively avoid

planets with life on them... unless they were “super-much in the way,” that is. Eventually, she went into another totally unrelated story.

He had a lot to consider with this contract, if you could even call it that. Jake knew it was pretty much just an excuse to allow Sylphie to enter things like the Treasure Hunt and to give her some valuable Records. It was one-sided for sure, but Jake was okay with that. It didn't seem like this would impede him in any way but instead help Sylphie in the long run.

Considering the Viper clearly wanted Jake to become a god, and the Viper approved of this, then he reckoned it would all end fine. He also knew that Villy had become aware of the tablet's contents too and hadn't commented on it, giving his subtle approval.

“-and then he did a backflip, snapped the bad guy's neck, and saved the day!” Stormild finished, Sylphie flapping her wings in excitement, wanting the Primordial to tell another story.

Sadly, Jake was a party-pooper and brought the two distracted birds back to what was important.

“How do we go about making the Union Oath?” Jake asked, bringing attention back to him.

“Oh, yeah, let's get that done!” Stormild agreed as the tablet began lighting up. The words on the tablet began glowing with different colors as two imprints appeared on the tablet, with a larger imprint on top of it all, looking almost like a thundercloud ready to judge the ones making the Oath.

“Just touch the tablet with something and make the Oath! Then, the system will ask, and you just accept, and all is good, and you’ll be Forever-Friends!” the Primordial explained.

Sylphie didn’t hesitate but flew over and touched the imprint with her wing. Jake followed suit soon after and placed his hand on it, and the moment he did so, he felt something. He felt like a tendril extended from the tablet and into him... into his soul.

It worked its way all the way into the innermost layer as a connection was established. He intimately felt that two other connections also extended – one towards Sylphie and the other towards Stormild. It was a contract with three parties, himself and Sylphie as the subjects and Stormild the facilitator and higher power ordaining it.

Jake felt the system probe as it asked for his consent at the contract. He felt like understanding of it was downloaded unto his mind... and it truly was a vague contract. It could only be so vague because it wasn’t actually the system itself that enforced it, but Stormild herself. He and Sylphie were equal in the contract... but Stormild above him. Able to judge him. Decide if he broke it. Hold power over him. Control him.

THUMP!

A pulse went through the connection. Jake realized this contract required him to acknowledge something he didn’t like to. Superiority. Not just in strength but status. Existence. For him to recognize Stormild as an entity that was like an unreachable heaven that could bring down a tribulation upon him if he went against her will. It required him to allow her will to trump his own.

THUMP!

He didn't like that.

He didn't like that at all.

But more than anything... his bloodline – his base of existence – would never allow it.

THUMP!

The entire space around them began shaking. Sylphie only looked a bit confused, while Jake had no idea what Stormild was thinking. He wasn't particularly caring to take note either as he felt a sense of indignation boil up. Had he misunderstood the contract? Partly... but not really. At that final moment, he just realized that he couldn't accept another entity to be recognized as a superior existence.

But the thing is, he still wanted the contract. The Union Oath hadn't stopped.

THUMP!

Another pulse was sent into the tablet. Jake's symbol shook as a crack formed.

THUMP!

The crack expanded across the tablet, not seeking to destroy it... but equalize it. The heaven above – the symbolization of Stormild – was cracked too.

THUMP!

Jake felt the entire base of the skill and magic fight against him. He was breaking rules right now, seeking to supersede the intended function of the contract. His will and bloodline managed to bend the contact as the tablet responded and everything but the stated words began changing.

Yet just as they began, Jake felt an immense feeling of weakness, and his sense of danger exploded. He was trying to mess with levels of magic and power he couldn't even begin to touch upon. While he had the qualitative ability to cause change... he didn't have the quantity. He was simply too weak. Perhaps he would survive, but he would drain his own soul of energy, possibly causing harm to anything but the most vital of functions.

He simply wasn't powerful enough to do it with his own power.

But he knew someone who was.

Jake felt the ever-present connection and began tugging on it. He needed power. He needed quantity. So he got some. Normally, it was a connection one could only send requests through and ask for power to then have it given with consent from the god. But Jake? Jake was a heretic. He didn't need to ask permission.

Vilastromoz smiled as he felt the pull from beyond the void - a demand more than a request. One he initially failed to resist as the one trying to pull on his power simply didn't need to ask, which was great because this was an instance where he couldn't assist under normal circumstances. Jake had reached a stage where he didn't need to ask, just take. Vilastromos knew it was due to the profession, which was very much based on his bloodline, that unreasonable thing. Did this mean the Viper couldn't stop it? No, it didn't. But that wasn't something he was going to do as this was exactly what he wanted.

He had a plan. He opened the floodgates and allowed his Chosen to pull all he needed as the Viper cracked a grin. His gamble had paid off as he felt the information about the contract flood into his mind as he established a connection with the tablet and thus the skill in question.

"I - no, we - win this one."

A final pulse was sent into the tablet. All prior had only caused minor cracks and suppressed what was happening on the tablet, but this one? This one had the power to cause change.

Out of the symbol depicting Jake came a green slivering figure that reached towards the heavens and flew up and coiled around it. Then, everything was pulled down to the level of Sylphie and Jake both, the snake remaining coiled around the cloud., suppressing it.

Dark cracked lines of dark green energy pulsated on the entire tablet, giving off the aura of the Viper, except Jake's own symbol that kept glowing an almost reddish color. The entire tablet looked half-destroyed already.

Jake felt his heartbeat slow down as he became fully aware: the nature of the contract had been changed. He looked over at Sylphie as he felt a change. Just at that moment, Sylphie completely froze as if time stopped, while Jake remained unaffected.

"I knew you were interesting," he heard a new voice say. No, Stormild? It sounded slightly older than before... still like a teenager, though.

"Vilastromoz and his silly games. What an utter display of unnecessary control and such a contrived way to achieve his means," Stormild continued as she looked down at him.

"Doesn't seem like all of this was your plan from the start. A gamble on the Viper's part? This would regularly not be possible. Ah, the bloodline? Does it allow you to show absolute disregard for any suppression? Innate defiance and inability to be in the position as an inferior? Quite a few drawbacks too with that one, I would reckon, but it explains a lot. Of course, that's not the only thing it does either, is it? You become more and more interesting by the second."

Jake looked up at her, meeting her gaze. He felt her intent press down on him unrestrained. It was the kind of pressure that would knock out many weaker gods, but Jake stood unaffected. "I just came here for a contract between Sylphie and me; I wasn't aware it included being your little servant."

"It does not; you merely interpreted it as such because it was a possibility innate to the contract. For any Union Oath, there needs to be a higher power to facilitate it, or it becomes unstable. You have broken the basic foundation of the contract like this, and it will not last more than a few decades at most, with nothing able to break it till then, making the contents of the Oath itself meaningless. Was this your plan all along? If so, kudos to you; I didn't see that one coming. I could ask how you did it and how you

discovered a new loophole, but I won't. That would be no fun, now would it?" Stormild said, seeming not at all angry but more amused.

"As I said, I just wanted to help Sylphie along. What would the Viper even get out of this besides helping me?"

"Ah, you truly don't know? Well, I reckon you will hear both sides, but what he just did was insert himself in the foundation of the skill. I would guess he is studying it and trying to learn something or possibly even steal a few concepts. A rude gesture to further his own power, or perhaps he was simply overprotective of his Chosen? Likely both. Either way, what's done is done, and I will get my payment later. You can help make up for it by treating this interesting creature well and make sure she realizes her full potential," the Primordial said, as her everchanging form swirled around the hawk.

"Of course I will," Jake said. That wasn't even a question. He scratched his chin, actually feeling a bit bad as he knew everything being a bit fucked was his own fault. He did know that Stormild would be the one in charge of the contract... but when it came down to it and the direct feeling of being made a subject subservient to it, he innately just resisted. Without the Viper's power, he would have had to break off the contract or ended up severely injuring himself in a struggle he couldn't possibly win. Not that any of it mattered now. The contract could no longer be broken as, well, there was no one to judge if it was broken.

"Anyway, I'm sorry things got a bit messy. I hope you'll continue to be nice to Sylphie," Jake said in the end. He could put a bit of his pride aside and apologize if it meant Sylphie being treated better. Besides, it was his fault, so... yeah. Anyway, contract successfully made, kinda, though from his understanding it was now one no one could break, but would instead naturally disappear within a few decades, with no one really holding any control over it. Honestly? A pure win in his mind. It was quite lucky this innate defiance wasn't a thing before the system.... if it was, getting a car loan would have been very awkward.

“No worries, today has been very eventful and not one I regret. On the contrary, it has been quite interesting and included some new experiences. A rarity, I must tell you,” she answered nonchalantly.

“Final thing... quite the personality change, isn’t it?”

“Wind, lightning, and fire are never stable forms. The storm is never static. It bends as it meets a mountain and ascends when it encounters an updraft. Like such, I change. Sometimes a situation calls for another state of mind than another, and this one was one such case. A case that has now been concluded. The Union Oath is technically made, the connection created, and the contract established. With that, I see no need to keep you here any longer as I believe you have overstayed your welcome. Ah, but I shall keep the hawk here a bit longer. Till next we meet, Jake Thayne, Chosen of the Malefic Viper and Uncle of Sylphie.”

With those words, Jake felt himself be forcefully ejected as he woke up in the real world a split-second later with a shock as he nearly fell backward, only able to stabilize himself as he had his sphere still there and active. Sylphie nearly fell off his head too, but luckily he was quick to make sure she didn’t.

“Goodbye to you too,” he muttered, a bit miffed. Not only at being forcefully ejected, but for being forced to now explain what the hell had happened to the two anxious parent-hawks while their daughter was still unresponsive.

Honestly, it has been a bizarre day, Jake thought as he began explaining stuff to the hawks.

Chapter 279: Scorching the Plains

Hello there. This is not a part of the chapter, but I have to write it here instead of in the author's note because scalping bots don't copy those when people steal my novel and put it on pirate sites.

Reading this novel on any site where I do not officially host it hurts me both mentally and potentially legally and financially. One place where it certainly hurts me is time-wise, as I have spent the last 2 days that were meant to be my holiday to recharge instead trying to deal with it. This isn't cool.

I already publish it for free on [Royalroad.com](https://royalroad.com).

Please don't be assholes and if you give even the tiniest little shit about the novel, don't read it on pirate sites, because you doing so only contributes to less being written and me getting one step closer to being burnt out. There is a lot of nuance and complications to dealing with a pirated novel and I HAVE TO GET IT REMOVED OR GET CONTROL OF IT or I will be fucked in several ways.

Additionally, make it clear to your resident pirate site, that pirating ALREADY FREE CONTENT seriously isn't okay. We can argue about taking from certain Chinese websites (and I would be on your side), but to copy something that is already free and hurt the author... really?

To make it clear, I considered just posting this notice and not a chapter till it was taken down, but decided to be nice because of people who actually aren't assholes. So, if you want to keep an author happy (and productive)...

Don't be an asshole. Read on sites where the Author actually hosts the novel.

Trying to explain to two anxious hawks that their daughter was just relaxing with a Primordial that also happened to be a living natural disaster wasn't the easiest. They seemed more than a bit worried, but Jake kept assuring them it would all be fine. It did help that Sylphie was still on top of his head, looking to be asleep.

Anyway, the two of them got the gist of it quite quickly and overall seemed to be approving of the entire situation even if it wasn't optimal. They did get that now Jake and Sylphie had "solidified" their relationship, which appeared to be the most important aspect to them. In the end, they waited in silence for Sylphie to also wake up.

Jake also had a few other things he had to go through himself during this wait, so the silence was welcome. One of which was a notification, or rather, notifications. Ones he had gotten during his time in the space with Stormild, but he hadn't checked through them yet as he knew what they were about. It was the most random levels Jake could remember ever getting.

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 124 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 125 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 127 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

Two levels for... nothing? Or perhaps something. He decided to send a quick one towards Villy to get an explanation.

“So, what was all that stuff about? And why did I get two profession-levels for it?” Jake asked his Patron Primordial.

Villy responded promptly, having no doubt expected Jake to demand an explanation.

“I just gambled with your life to get a few personal benefits without telling you beforehand. Alright, in all seriousness, I expected the response you had there. Why do you ask? Because do you have any idea how hard it was to even give you a blessing? One that wasn’t even conditional in any way, but a pure benefit? You don’t even seem to be aware of how damn annoying it was in the first many months. I felt constant aggression through the connection. That has disappeared now after your evolution. So yeah, I put two and two together and reckoned your bloodline – and thus you – hated ever being put in a position where you have to recognize another existence as superior. The rest of it was just exploitation of a loophole in Stormild’s skill by using our peculiar bond and the opening your bloodline made. And the levels? Well, because you did something very heretic-chosen of you,” Viper said, giving a lengthy explanation.

“And what do you get out of it?” Jake also asked, accepting the rest of the explanation. Those things kinda made sense, right? But the Viper didn’t answer what skin he had in the game.

“Knowledge. Stormild has insights into soul magic I do not, and I wanted to find inspiration through her skill. I couldn’t tell you about it beforehand because then you couldn’t have

accepted the contract if you knew as you would have done so partly with the intent of breaking it from the start. As I said, it was a gamble. Honestly, what I get out of it has little relevance to you. I would have told you if it was possible, but then you wouldn't have gotten those levels or made the contract, so everything turned out fine, right?" Villy continued justifying his actions.

Jake could hear in the Viper's voice he actually was trying to justify it. It was a weird kind of apology, but Jake understood. Apologising wasn't something he liked doing either, but sometimes something was just your fault, and it was better to apologize. He also perfectly understood the Viper not wanting Jake to harbor some hidden resentment or anything like that. Hence he dispelled that right away.

"Well yeah, I guess stuff turned out fine. I reckon you knew Stormild enough to predict her reaction, even if she does seem a bit eccentric. Just give me a heads-up when you can, and if nothing else, I'll be sure to get some petty revenge, alright?" Jake answered back as he smiled, getting a weird look from Hawkie and Mystie.

"Sure thing, mate. See you around and take care," the Primordial said, sounding a bit relieved.

"You too," Jake answered out loud, still smiling. More weird looks from the hawks. Jake just ignored it as he stayed silent and waited for the smallest of the hawks, the one sitting on his head, to awaken.

Five minutes later, Sylphie woke up. Her awakening wasn't as dramatic as Jake nearly falling off his chair, but she just opened her eyes, made a cute yawning sound, and oriented herself. However, she did not appear to have any intentions of getting up but shook herself a bit back and forth to sit more snugly on top of his head.

“So, did you and Stormild have a nice talk?” he asked.

Sylphie made a small screech of confirmation before she began a bird-charade of everything they had talked about. Jake naturally didn't get half of it, but her parents were sure interested.

Jake began instead inspecting what this whole Union Oath ritual had all been about. He could vaguely feel a connection to Sylphie, but only when he really focused. It wasn't like anything he had quite experienced before, and the connection felt far weaker than the one had with the Viper. Jake had assumed this one would be stronger, but it evidently wasn't.

He did feel a certain quality to it. Like he couldn't break it no matter what, which was the same as what his bond to Villy had changed into after his last evolution. The connection was naturally of the weird metaphysical sort, so it did make him wonder if he could use it to communicate with Sylphie across vast distances or something.

It did make him consider one thing, though. One he probably should have a long time ago. The thought if he could maybe feel if Sylphie was in danger popped into his head, but he already could do that before. That is how he managed to come and stop the Prima in time. Was it just pure intuition from his bloodline? Did they have some hidden connection before already? He had no idea, and quite frankly, it wasn't something he cared much to explore. It was there, it was good. Ultimately, the whole bond was worth it just for Sylphie's ability to enter the Treasure Hunt and likely also get some Records and stuff from Jake. Apropos the Treasure Hunt...

“Sylphie,” Jake said, getting her attention as she stopped chatting with her parents. “The Treasure Hunt is in a bit under two weeks. I give you thirteen days. Thirteen days, and if you aren't level 110 by that time, you aren't coming along to the Treasure Hunt. Oh, and if you get in trouble and need help again – which I will know or have Stormild tell me – you also won't come. This is all for your own safety, so do I make myself clear?”

Sometimes a bit of tough love was necessary. Jake wanted to take Sylphie along, but he didn't want to unnecessarily take any risks or hamper his own abilities during the hunt. They would very likely be splitting up or something for a lot of the time, so she needed to take care of herself and also get used to her new strength as a D-grade. She was green in all ways when it came to fighting – and in color – and she needed to be able to stand on her own feet, even if she was young.

Mystie was the first to answer as she made a screech and motioned for them to leave. Jake shut that down right away.

“No, this is Sylphie. Unfortunately, you and Hawkie can't come along to the Treasure Hunt, and she will need to learn to fight alone. It will only hurt her in the future if she gets too used to having her parents as support and build her fighting style around that, so this time Sylphie has to go alone,” Jake explained.

Mystie answered with an angry screech, but Hawkie came in and calmed her down, agreeing with Jake. Jake threw his old bird-pal a nod, and while he felt like Hawkie didn't like it, the hawk at least understood that what Jake said was the truth.

As for Sylphie?

“Ree!”

She screeched with determination as she got up halfway through her mom's protest. All the focus turned to her as she made a few more screeches making her mom back down

and her dad look incredibly proud. Jake didn't need to speak hawk to get the gist of it. She, too, approved of his message, even if he could feel her feet shake a bit atop his nogging as she was obviously a bit nervous. She had never really been hunting enemies truly around her level or above alone before. She did kill D-grades solo before level 100... but none were able to truly challenge her.

Without wasting any time, she jumped down on Jake's shoulder, rubbed her head against his cheek, and took flight. Her parents stared after her for a moment, made a screech at one another before they also took off – in a slightly different direction than Sylphie. They clearly didn't want to be too outdone by her, even if they couldn't join the Treasure hunt.

Jake was also proud of her. He did guess Stormild had also said something, but that didn't have any impact on his pride.

Go get them, Sylphie.

He himself didn't pull out his cauldron. No, instead, he took out his bow. It was the new bow he had gotten from Sultan that during the fight with the Eagle Prima had proven to be more of a liability than anything else. Looking at it in his hand, he Identified it once more.

[Embered Bow of Scorching Plains (Epic)] – A bow made from an unknown type of wood that has been soaked in potent fire-affinity mana for a long period of time without being burned and then infused with a dozen of other valuable materials. All brought to life by an incredibly talented bowyer. The bow's structure is resilient yet flexible, the string near-unbreakable for anyone below C-grade, and the two gemstones passively absorb and transform mana into that of the fire-affinity, making all arrows fired by this bow be imbued with fire energy. The two gemstones can be emptied out of energy to release a large burst of fire-affinity mana in the form of a giant arrow that explodes on impact, scorching the plains below. Enchantments: Ember Arrows. Scorching Plains.

Requirements. Lvl 105+ in any humanoid race

Jake instantly spotted the issue right away in the description. It had a passive function to imbue every single arrow fired with a bit of fire energy, making them, in theory, more effective. This would make all normal arrows deal a bit extra fire damage and make arrows already of the fire-affinity even more powerful, which made sense if that bowyer Maria was an archer focusing on fire magic herself.

The issue was, Jake didn't shoot regular arrows but arcane arrows. Heck, the only reason his arrows played well with his poison was that it was *his* poison and not someone else's. The fire mana, in this case, was without intent and should hypothetically not mess with anything, but Jake's arcane-affinity was a bit iffy to work with, especially his more destructive variant.

With his destructive variant, the fire mana would just fight the arcane mana and end up being destroyed, expending a bit of arcane mana, resulting in a net-negative. The stable version was better in that it completely rejected the fire mana. All this did was make the fire mana disperse into the atmosphere and not have any effect.

The final part of the bow was the Scorched Plains enchant. He hadn't tested that one yet.

So, he went to do that. Jake naturally planned on transmuting the bow, but he wanted to get a bit more familiar with it before doing that. He already had an approach in mind, and his understanding of the bow was naturally one of the primary factors for how effective a transmutation he could make.

Jake took flight as he headed out of Haven and onto the empty plains. He made sure not to go where people traveled to and from the Fort, but a good distance away from any civilization. He ended up going to the area where the Minotaur Mindchief had once been, thinking that the old barn would be a nice thing to use to test it on. He also wouldn't feel bad about burning that shithole down.

When he got there, he noticed only a few beasts in the area. Most of the cows were just chilling, doing nothing. Seeing no reason to roast any beef, Jake activated his Pride of the Malefic Viper and infused his presence as he yelled loudly.

“FIRE DRILL!”

His voice was even infused with his willpower, echoing far and wide. That quickly got all the bovines' attention as they began mooing and fleeing from the area. He did feel a bit bad about scaring the rather harmless cows, but it was better to scare than kill them.

He took out his bow and started out doing some simple tests. Then, using his old uncommon-rarity quiver, he drew an arrow and fired it. As he drew the string, he felt fire mana be infused into the arrow, and he saw the arrowhead begin glowing, and the wood had fiery red lines run through it. When he released the string, the arrow flew forth and broke apart when it hit the ground, sending the fire mana into the soil.

Actually quite decent, Jake thought. Far less powerful than his arcane arrows, but not bad at all. He especially liked that the arrow didn't just explode but sent the fire mana into the target it hit – it was excellent attention to detail.

Jake kept practicing for a few more hours, just using the uncommon-rarity arrows. He inspected how the mana moved and how the two gemstones collected atmospheric mana and transformed it into fire mana—all of it with the sole intent of transforming it into an arcane variant. Jake didn't want to lose the ability to infuse the arrows with more mana, just making it all arcane mana instead.

By that time, the entire area around him was devoid of life, and he decided it was a good time to use the ultimate move of the bow.

He didn't need to be told what to do; the item allowed him instinctively to know. Jake took position on a platform of mana under his feet as he began. Raising the bow, his intent became clear, and it responded.

The entire body of the bow caught fire, and the two gems on each end began glowing. Jake drew the now red-glowing string as mana gathered from the gemstones. A long, almost spear-shaped arrow appeared on the string, more than three meters in length. It was even bigger than nearly all of his arrows from Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter if not all of them.

Both gems stopped glowing nearly instantly, and the arrow hadn't even taken a second to condense.

Letting go of the string, a torrent of flames was released as the arrow descended, surrounded by an inferno. When it hit the ground, it didn't explode. At least not per-se, even with what the enchantment said.

No, instead, it sent out an almost entirely horizontal pulse of flames that, quite literally, scorched across the plains. The fire hugged the ground as it flowed almost like it was liquid across the landscape, burning the ground in its path, leaving only ashes behind.

The barn had the fire simply snake up its sides as it consumed the entire building in moments, leaving only ashes behind.

In but a few moments, the entire landscape more than five kilometers in diameter was reduced to only a huge circular burn-mark. Not a single building remained, and everything had been flattened. The power of the strike would have likely killed most beings below D-grade before they even got a chance to respond and injured many, if not most, low-grade D-grades quite badly.

“Yeah, I can work with this,” Jake said as he smiled. He had a feeling the transmutation would turn out just fine.

Chapter 280: Bow & Blade

Jake had wanted to get transmuting nearly right away after he regenerated his resources but found that the bow looked a bit... sluggish? It was no longer glowing, and the gems also looked completely inert. He came to realize he would need to give the poor bow a break before he began changing stuff. So he put it in his spatial storage and found that it could luckily still restore its mana within there.

He considered what to do, and with his proximity to the Fort, he decided to check there first to see if Arnold was done tinkering with his Nanoblade.

The trip there was swift as he used One Step Mile to cross the plains. Of course, it wasn't as fast as when he went to save the hawks, but it was still a nice casual speed faster than the fastest fighter jet of old Earth.

Once more, the Fort had expanded. He saw that more buildings had popped up in the brief time he was not there, but the biggest change had happened at the central Fort. The courtyard was no longer used as a big smithy but was instead nearly devoid of anything besides a few larger ongoing construction projects.

Jake frowned, wondering what they were up to, but reckoned he could just ask Arnold. He did see that all the blacksmiths who used to work there had gotten their own little district. Well, they would have had to move eventually anyway due to limited space.

He flew directly down and landed in the courtyard, inspecting the construction more closely. It looked like the beginnings of some kind of assembly line. Was Arnold planning on mass-producing stuff? That would be kind of insane.

Entering the citadel building itself, he already spotted Arnold in his lab. The man was hunched over a table as he looked through some kind of microscope onto a thin piece of some material that looked like glass. Jake entered the room without the man even noticing and snuck up behind him. He wondered why all the drones flying above didn't react despite clearly noticing him.

Jake leaned over Arnold's shoulder and looked down at the piece of glass. He focused and saw that many microscopic patterns were etched into it, almost looking like veins. Maybe ley-lines? All the lines were straight and very angular, looking very sci-fi. It was some insanely precise work, and each was so small even he had issues seeing it.

“That’s some advanced stuff. Is that shard from the golem?” Jake finally asked after looking for a while.

A part of him had hoped for Arnold to get surprised, but the man just casually answered. “Yes, this particular piece is from beneath the third layer of the metal, functioning almost like a circuit board.”

Well, he is no fun, Jake joked with himself but still answered. “Yeah, those vein-like things are damn small. As I said, very advanced. But I came to ask if-“

Arnold interrupted him as the man jerked back, looked at Jake with bloodshot eyes. “What veins!? Can you see them!?”

“Well, yeah?” Jake answered.

“How?” the man asked, looking genuinely confused.

“Because perception is the best stat. Duh,” Jake answered again, totally serious.

“I am aware of its importance, and I already possess over 1700 in it, I cannot see how that could be the-“

“Casual,” Jake answered, waving him off. “Who doesn’t have at least five of the big ones already?” ‘Well, he was nearly at 6000 perception himself, actually, but no need to brag, right?

He was a bit surprised that the man had 1700 in perception, though. That was pretty good, honestly. Granted, Jake’s lowest stat was 2025 in strength, but he also knew he was a bit of a cheat, after all. Without percentage amplifiers or items, Jake only had 1190, and he even got quite a few points from his class. This meant Arnold had actually put points in perception or at least had perception-based gear, and his class and/or profession likely gave perception too. Well, his high level sure also contributed.

[Human – lvl 117]

“Can you... can you describe them?” Arnold asked after looking a bit confused. “I have been working on a microscope to allow me to view them better, but they simply don’t work as they should. The amplification distorts the patterns and interferes with the interpretation, and I need to use a vastly inferior version than before the system...”

Jake frowned for a bit but soon nodded. “Sure, but can you let me get a look-see down that microscope first?”

“Go ahead!” Arnold said, stepping back.

Jake took a look down the microscope, and... holy shit, it sucked. Like, sure, it amplified things a bit, but compared to him just squinting a bit, it was nothing. It was likely it blurred everything. Had the system nerfed observation tools?

“Do all microscopes suck like this?” Jake asked quite curtly.

“Yes, sadly. No amount of mirrors or any conventional concepts of making microscopes or even binoculars work properly anymore. I can make some tools that help a bit, but in many cases looking with your bare eyes provide the clearest image...” Arnold answered with resignation before quickly trying to get Jake back on track. “Now, please describe the patterns!”

“Fine,” Jake relented as he opened the palm of his hand and focused. His presence blanketed the laboratory, making Arnold take a step back, but the man didn’t show any other reaction than that. The reason Jake did this was that honestly... it was easier to show than to tell.

Strings sprung from his hand as he weaved an image. Jake took it as a learning opportunity to properly copy what he had seen. He even sent out a string to pick up the shard as he held it up before him with the hand he didn’t use to summon strings.

Arnold just stood silently, bedazzled by the display for a few moments before he quickly summoned what looked like a tablet and pointed it at the ongoing construction of mana strings. Jake felt that his mana was being scanned but naturally didn’t fight. He had nothing to lose by Arnold figuring all this stuff out and pushing him forward a bit.

Jake pretty much saw all this as investing in the future. Arnold seemed like a straightforward kind of dude, so Jake wasn’t scared of him suddenly running off when some other large city came and offered him a big new lab and stuff like that. Besides, if he did, Jake would just have to travel a bit further to get his stuff and make sure to get his due. Arnold owed Jake, and he knew it.

It took around half an hour to finish weaving his tapestry and Arnold to properly record it all. By that time, Jake thought it was time to ask for what he came for.

“So, is the Nanoblade done?” he asked.

Arnold looked confused for a second before he remembered. “Right! It has been done for over a week; it should be just over here...”

He shuffled to one of the many shelves and took a large case down. Arnold began explaining as he carried it over. “Using some of my newest aluabsorbant composite materials, I have coated the blade with this to actually give it proper mana conductivity and make the blade more powerful in every way. I attempted to attune it to your unique form of mana, but it was not feasible. However, I did manage to heighten the mana conductivity of the blade further, and a rarity upgrade was achieved.”

The man opened up the case on a table in front of Jake, showing the sword. It looked nearly exactly the same as before, except the blade now had a silver sheen to it. The handle also looked like it had a do-over, and overall, the entire blade looked damn sleek. Jake Identified it and was quite pleased.

[Aluabsorbant Nanoblade Sword (Rare)] – The blade is an ultrathin Nanoblade made out of Carbon Fiber, making it both incredibly durable and sharp, coated with a thin layer of unattuned Aluabsorbant. The blade itself can cut most materials effortlessly but has little to no effectiveness against magical wards or defenses. The coating on the blade allows it to have an incredibly high level of mana conductivity and can handle most types of mana. The handle makes all mana infused into this weapon more potent. Enchantments: Extreme Conductivity. Intermediate Mana Amplification.

Requirements: lvl 110+ in any humanoid race

“Looking good,” Jake said before asking. “Have you managed to apply any knowledge you gained from the golem?”

“... I am still trying to figure out exactly what kind of metal composite the exterior is made of and have begun preliminary examinations of the eyes of the golem and some of the more easily accessible components,” Arnold answered. In other words, the dude had a long time to go before any tangible progress would happen.

“Well, in that case, do you have anything else to give me or something you need help with?” Jake asked. The last part was mainly to be polite.

“I do not believe I have any other items that would be of interest to you, but I have extracted 135 more shards so far and could use your help mapping out the-“

“Anyway, nice talking to you again. Gotta go!”

Jake ran like the wind. As he went for the roof, he saw Arnold stand back in his lab, not reacting for a few seconds. The madman eventually just shrugged and returned to tinkering with stuff.

Shaking his head, Jake took flight as he headed back towards Haven again. He landed just outside the Fort, used One Step Mile to cross the plains until he reached the forest, which he just flew over back to his valley.

Jake did a quick check of his underground lab that was still under construction. Hank was really going all-out and working on making it closer to an entire underground complex. Several large rooms had been added, and he really made use of the fact that he could build in nearly unlimited ways with how much space there was and the fact that magic was a thing.

He doubted it would even be ready for the Treasure Hunt, but it wasn't like he was actually in a rush. For now, he still focused on elixirs which he didn't need a secure lab to make, so he went back to his porch as always and took out his cauldron.

It was only while waiting for the bow to recharge before the transmutation, of course.

Jake took out the bow too and laid it on the ground as he began brewing. He felt like it recharged a bit faster while in the sun. Or maybe he was just imagining it. But, honestly, it could just be the Pylon making it so that it got recharged faster, and he wasn't curious enough to truly find out.

He ended up making six more perception-increasing elixirs, all of which he consumed right there and then, getting another +18 Perception because one could never have too much perception.

The reason he stopped crafting was that the bow was ready. He chugged down a mana potion as he got to work. A plan had already formed in his mind during all his practice, and it was actually straightforward.

Fire-affinity bad, arcane-affinity good. Ember Arrows bad, Arcane Hunter's Arrows good. His goal would be just to take everything that was fire-focused and make it arcane-focused. He even planned on specifically transmuting the arrow-part to work with his own skill. Jake had a very strong suspicion that Ember Arrows was a skill the creator had herself, and that was how she had added it.

Jake thought he could transmute that to his own Arcane Hunter's Arrows. Limiting it to only work with that one skill would take less energy, and as far as he could tell, the Scorched Plains attack was bound to the Ember Arrow skill.

He has also noticed something else interesting. The fire-affinity within the two gems wasn't exactly the same but had some faint differences. One fire burned more orange and one more yellow. He couldn't fully distinguish the difference, but he did notice one flame seemed more effective against magical constructs and the other physical entities.

Jake would replicate that duality by making one gem focus on the destructive aspect of his arcane-affinity and the other the stable variant. Coming together, they would form his 'true' affinity. Granted, he couldn't make one entirely or the other as the explosive variant would be so unstable it would go boom instantly, and the stable would be so non-reactive it was immovable, so he had to find a balance.

Laying his hands upon the bow, he didn't delay. He had placed his hands with one on each of the gems to inject mana directly into those. His mana snaked its way into it as he examined the entire bow's structure one final time. He affirmed his existing goal and began. His hands began glowing with Touch of the Malefic Viper as he poured his will into the bow, and without even thinking, he did something more.

His presence descended in a small area around him as he infused it with mana, pressing down on the bow. Ultimately, Touch of the Malefic Viper was about transmuting something by corrupting it in the way you willed, so Pride did make it slightly more effective. How much more effective he didn't know, but every little bit counted.

Jake pressed his mana into the bow and began feeling the changes. The flames fought back, but his arcane was superior at every step. The bow began glowing pink-purple as it changed, and the veins on the wood were now no longer glowing like embers.

When he got to the part that was the Ember Arrow skill, Jake found a bit more of a challenge. It fought and struggled as he attempted to forcibly change it. It was a losing battle for the bow, as Jake wasn't in a rush. No, he was not in a rush at all. He slowly withered it down as he enjoyed his high mana regeneration, boosted by the Pylon and his mask. Jake would play the long game to be safe.

An hour or so later, Jake consumed a mana potion as he kept going.

He repeated this for the next half a day as the bow underwent more changes. This was his hardest transmutation so far by quite a bit. At least on a technical level, it was. But he had come a long way. He constantly adapted, and whenever he had issues, he was instantly able to spot another opening or opportunity to exploit. His ability to see all the mana move at once was a massive advantage, courtesy of his insane perception and equally insane level of energy control.

The result was obvious from the start, and it was only a matter of time. Thirteen and a half hours after he began the transmutation, Jake got the notification of success.

He went straight for Identify, hoping everything had gone as he hoped.

[Bow of Scorched Arcane (Epic)] – A bow made from an unknown type of wood that has now undergone a transformation as dense, arcane energy permeates the bow's body. Even after its transformation, the brilliance of the bowyer is still evident. The bow's structure is resilient yet flexible, the string near-unbreakable for anyone below C-grade, and the two gemstones passively absorb and transform mana into that of arcane-affinity. One gem will primarily create stable, and the other unstable arcane mana. All Arcane Hunter's Arrows shot using this bow will be amplified by this arcane mana. The two gemstones can be emptied out of energy to release a large burst of arcane mana in the form of a giant arrow that explodes on impact, scorching the plains below with the wrath of your arcana. Enchantments: Arcane Hunter's Arrows Amplification. Arcane-Scorched Plains.

Requirements. Lvl 120+ in any humanoid race. Quasi-Soulbound

Jake just smiled as he chuckled a bit to himself. Everything was coming out nicely. He had even gotten a level.

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 126 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

Jake inspected the new bow. It had changed quite a bit in the looks department. The red lines were now all pulsing pink-purple, and the top gem was almost entirely pink and the other a dark purple. He could practically feel the arcane mana pulse out of it, and he was more than satisfied.

It was a good day. Two new weapons were acquired, both of them great. Now, all he had left was a grind to consume as many elixirs as possible in the stats he wanted before the Treasure Hunt, and he was golden. He also had the token to upgrade the boots, but he was

still level 127 in his race, so he wanted to wait for at least one more level. Besides, it wasn't like anyone was in a rush to upgrade them.

With all of that in mind, Jake tossed his bow in his inventory and entered another alchemy trance as the Treasure Hunt grew ever-closer.