

CHAPTER 63 – EVOLUTION QUEST

Luke went to work crafting the next conduit rune. The horned horrors had dropped some high-flux equipment, so he had more flux than what he knew to do with at the moment.

If he had more time, maybe he could try out some new things, but he needed to prioritize getting back into the Gordian.

Luke was so preoccupied with his urgency to get back into the Gordian that his focus wasn't completely concentrated on his first attempt at the conduit rune.

The flux's fire mana went out of balance, catching fire to the paper before Luke hastily snuffed it out.

It took a few more times before Luke was finally successful. The sting of messing up something so basic was soothed somewhat by the level up.

You have successfully crafted [Conduit Rune (Common)]. Extra experience gained for crafting a recipe above your level.

Level Up! Your [Shadetouched Runegraver] Profession has reached Level 11.

Stat points earned: +9 Arcane, +9 Wisdom, +3 Dexterity, +3 Perception, +3 Vitality, +3 Free Points.

The invigorating power from a level up was certainly welcome.

“Better than crude-rarity too,” Luke remarked, referring to the conduit rune.

It was interesting that the conduit runes were considered of such high difficulty that they were still giving him extra experience at level 10.

If he had more time, he would have tried to make another to see if level 11 was also below its level, but he was worried about Alfair and Yindferl.

With the rune done, he rushed into the Gordian's room. Luke searched for a pylon he could tap into that wasn't already overtaken by the explosion.

A quick count told him that 3 more had been destroyed by the expanding field of death. Glancing at his ranking within the assessment leaderboard was somewhat depressing considering he wasn't able to gain any LP.

It did, however, illuminate something he was now sure of. Each node granted him roughly a day inside the Gordian. He was now rolling over into day 12 of the assessment. If it wasn't for the timer on the leaderboard, he would have no idea how much time was passing.

It was almost as good as having a clock.

More importantly, it told him that he had absolutely zero hope of getting any additional rewards. He didn't even know there were that many people in the test.

[Assessment Rankings]

Time Remaining: 18 days, 19h:14m:46s

[Current Points: 144]

4,100. Micheal Abbott

4,101. Nellie Shafer

4,102. Mitch Lawson

4,103. Lucy Delaney

4,104. *Luke Solus*

4,105. Sandi Livingston

4,106. Karla Parks

4,107. Alyssa Mathis

4,108. Chelsea Grace

Luke shook his head, picked up a node, and entered the Gordian.

Jerry Lawson, age 27, was a rising star as a junior member at his law firm in DC. Everybody had told him he had the makings of a senator, or a congressman at the very least.

He came from a good family, well-bred and respectable. Family drama was minimal, a brother who was a little odd but otherwise a good egg. All he would need was a pretty wife and his ticket would be sealed.

That was before the world imploded.

Now he was... something else. Something far better.

Jerry was evolved.

Glancing at his quest, he grinned to himself in the dark abyssal bowels below the ruins above.

Evolution Quest: The Gathering

A malformed power of insatiable hunger and rebirth lurks within you. Feed upon your fellows to awaken the might of your festering blood and take the next step towards your ruddy transformation.

Evolution Completion: 78%

As much as he had wanted to bite out Marcy's throat and taste that sweet, sweet nectar that pumped through her veins, his self-control was richly rewarded.

Not only had she pointed him at a number of delicious targets over the past days, but she seemed to understand precisely what he needed before he knew it.

That made them fast friends, or at least as fast as you can get with a potential meal. It was an arrangement of convenience, the sort of things he was expected to do in the senate if things had turned out differently.

Here, however, there was no subterfuge needed. He was what he was, a beast of inordinate strength and power. When the choice had been to step up to the Big Show or die in obscurity, Jerry had taken his chances.

It was his brother who thought there was something wrong with him. Oh, how wrong he was!

Jerry would show him the light. He owed it to Todd. But not yet. No, he needed to complete his transformation. Once he was reborn, then he would return.

For now, he did Marcy's bidding. And she had one final task for him that promised to be the most rewarding.

Jerry was already familiar with the sewers and pipes below the ruins before this, but now he was becoming intimate with them. The beasts and creatures hiding down here fled before him, but he wasn't interested in them.

Monsters were wary of him, as well they should, but people... people were much slower on the uptake. He always thought the way people acted in zombie flicks was strange. Too trusting, too concerned with an obviously diseased or disturbed person.

But it had clearly been true.

Jerry found no end to the huddled survivors lurking in the shadows. His hands had turned into sickle claws that rended flesh from bone and made it so easy to sup on the fine delicacy that was the human form.

The change came over him in fits and bursts. His teeth sharpened and grew jagged, perfect for tearing and slicing. His limbs elongated, making him look a little more emaciated than he would have liked, but otherwise aided him in speed and strength.

With long levers for arms, he didn't need much Strength to hit far harder thanks to the miracle of physics. He could jump farther and squeeze into the tightest spaces that even the diseased rats struggled to get through.

Lifting his long, ruddy nose, Jerry scented the air. Drifts of colored gaseous trails swam through the air as his eyes adjusted to the sensory overflow, sorting prey from distraction.

There it was.

A shimmering purple-black trail. Jerry loped after it.

When Marcy had given him those flakes of blood, Jerry had nearly gone into a fit of ecstasy when he tasted them. The person she wanted him to hunt was touched by a power he didn't understand, but one that he *craved*.

The blood was strong, but it was old. If Jerry had met his target when the blood was fresh, he would have been just a normal human and easily killed.

But now? Now he yearned to see what that delicious blood turned into. Like a fine wine, it would have aged and matured, gathering more strength and power until it was ripe to bursting.

Jerry could almost taste it on his long, prehensile tongue.

Pale and gaunt, he sped through the sewers in a blur, tracking his prey.

He didn't care that he couldn't earn LP anymore. Not from slaughtering monsters or slaying humans. Apparently, he was becoming something more than the Company could handle. He didn't fit into their rules that everybody else tried to play by.

All that really mattered was what the strong did. Life had always been this way, but it was festooned with pomp and pageantry.

Such things obfuscated the singular, universal truth: the strong ruled, the weak cowered. There was nothing else to life, no matter if you were part of a great civilization or stranded on a desert island.

If you weren't strong, you could not enforce your views or your preferences. All the good will in the world mattered for nothing if you couldn't *force* people to do what you wanted.

Jerry was one of the strong.

And what the strong did best, was eat the other strong so that they could continue to grow. Only the bottom feeders ate the refuse and the weak. He could feel the gibbering minds of those who had taken a similar path to himself down in the sewers.

People pushed to the brink, forced to survive in the most inhuman ways possible. They had taken that first delicious step like he had, but unlike him, they chased after the weak and defenseless.

He had eaten one of them and promptly thrown up. Their flesh tasted... tainted. Wrong. Like ash. In that floundering moment, the man he used to be resurfaced. *Is this what I've become to survive? I'm a demon!*

Jerry shook himself out of it, crushing that remnant of who he once was.

Jerry hurled himself into a large open room with dozens of diseased-looking rats. They looked at him warily, eyes glittering in the dark that he could just barely see in. His eyes worked best in low light. No light was just as bad as bright day.

He could barely see more than faint shapes, but they were respectfully bowing and backing away in frantic jerks and stops.

Monster meat was an acceptable meal, but it didn't fill the gnawing void in his middle. It merely quieted it for a time.

The room was large, arched, and at the far end angled down into some sort of stone slope. Jerry could smell trash and refuse here. A steady trickle of foul water washed through the middle of the room and out the other side.

Through all the filth, he could still smell his prey's blood. It lingered in the air tantalizingly, taunting him.

Snarling wordlessly, Jerry sprang down the slanting stone walkway that bordered the river of filth. He passed a few bloated and grotesque bodies, had himself a little light snack, and then saw the trail drop into the massive hole.

The stone walls proved to be no barrier to Jerry's claw-like hands. His nails, hardened like iron, gripped the stone amazingly well. He crawled on all fours after his prey's trail.

It had taken him three days to find the trail. Now he was hot on his prey's heels. He could picture the man somewhere ahead, looking over his shoulder and panicking at the thing hounding him.

Jerry liked it when they panicked.

Moving with speed, he found another trail, one that was intertwined with the purple-black one. Jerry ignored it as beneath his notice.

Passing through countless tunnels, over a wide creaking bridge of lashed driftwood with bloated watery monster-men that threw fire and slings at him, Jerry made it across the expansive gulf following his prey's trail.

With a monstrous effort, he wrenched away the sluice gate at the far end of the half-burned bridge and slipped inside.

He followed the trail all the way until it stopped at a slab of unremarkable stone.

Jerry stared, confused and angry. Snarling, he raked his claws against the stone, creating deep gouges that revealed nothing to him. He was *so close*.

The trail was dead.

That was impossible.

Then he heard the chanting somewhere deep below. He might not be able to get at his prey right now, but he would not be deterred. The locals might know something. What other use was [Mother of All Tongues] if he couldn't converse with the local monsters?

Slipping through pipes no wider than a foot across, Jerry slithered his way deeper and deeper. Far beyond places that no human had ever been. Lightless places, foul places.

And then... a faint blossoming flower of magnesium-white light like the north star drew his attention to the dark pits of despair that he found himself in.

Jerry prowled around the walls, unaware that he had found his way into a holy sanctuary of a people of antediluvian descent. He could hear their burbling voices as they chanted and moved in the actinic glare of that singular torch.

A staircase 20-foot wide rose through the darkness. Jerry had the impression that there was nothing below, only darkness. *No matter what you do, you must never fall*, some small survival-oriented part of his brain gibbered at him.

Creatures, humanoid though strangely different, gathered around a stone door larger than anything Jerry had seen before. The doors would have dwarfed an airplane hangar's.

A stone circle with chanting, kneeling forms was set before the door and the white glare of that single torch high above at the apex of the godly door.

Crawling above the door and the light, making sure to keep the glare between himself and any watchers, Jerry crept closer to inspect his new prey.

Monument Discovered: The King in the Deep

New Assessment Quest: The Four Kings

Hidden to all but those with a gift for plundering the deepest depths and exploring every nook and cranny, the Four Kings reside in the places of their ancient birth. The First, born in ash. The Second, hidden in the deep. The Third, steeped in rancor most foul. The Fourth and final, filled with the wrath of the heavens. Defeating all Four Kings yields a prize unlike any other, but the risk is great. They are Kings for a reason. Few have stood against them and lived. Awakening one of the Kings will drastically change the assessment test and cause untold collateral damage.

Jerry licked his lips and grinned. He found new prey.