

I don't know why I figured the situation would wrap up quickly once the killing was done, but I was very much wrong.

It took thirty minutes to confirm that Skinwalker was dead, as soldiers had to confirm that each of his other projections had crumbled to dust and faded away. I knew almost immediately that he was gone, as my system clearly considered the mission over, and I actually got all three points. I would have likely only gotten one or two if Skinwalker hadn't tried to run, which I had conflicting feelings about. On one hand, he almost got away, but on the other, getting all three points was great.

As we waited for confirmation, a new hypothesis about his powers was formulated, though it was mostly for the record. It was clear now that he hadn't lost his ability to turn into his many forms, and that his human form was just another shape he could take. While it was impossible to know for sure now that he was dead, it was assumed that he would have been able to eventually turn into his human form again, as killing a form previously only removed it from play for a certain chunk of time, not permanently.

Either way, the PRT was now reasonably certain that the villain was dead. That meant it was time to move in again and help the people of the city. That specifically is what ended up taking a while, as I couldn't just turn my back on an entire city that was suffering.

I ended up planting and growing quite a few orchards all over the city to grow food at an accelerated rate. Thankfully, at this point, I knew how to set them up with a few enchantments to keep them healthy without having to recharge and restore them myself. In total, I grew about twelve large orchards around the city, which would hopefully make feeding the population significantly easier. It would also hopefully make their costs of living lower, so that they could work and recover faster.

The city and its people had a long way to go before they would be considered recovered, and anything I could do would likely cut months, maybe even years off that time.

Which was why I also set up a healing tent, as the city's hospitals had long since broken down, and the population was in need of help. The PRT was in the process of getting a lot of infrastructure up and running, but for now, I would donate my time. Once I made that choice, I knew I was likely in for a long few days, and I was not disappointed. Even with the PRT and Crow turning away anyone who really didn't need healing, the entire city had still been suffering for years, so a lot of people needed attention. I fixed a whole lot of old scars, improperly healed injuries, and older issues, doing my best to reduce the trauma from the last few years of living under Skinwalker's thumb.

As much as I hated it, I ignored my waiting charges and ignored my newest subject, focusing on healing and working to help the city. On the third day, the enhanced soldiers all pulled out and returned to the base where they were stationed. It was politely pointed out by Crow and Kinsey that, at this point, I had seen to all the dangerous and high-priority cases, and that it was likely about time to return home. Crow wanted me to take some time to unclench and

recover, while Kinsey was understandably eager to get back to work. I ended up staying one more full day before going home.

Once Crow and I were home, we slept away for an afternoon and night, waking up late the next morning. While I had my magic to refresh us and keep us going, the mental strain from working and being busy for more than four days straight was more than enough to put us both on our asses.

When we were both functional, Crow went off to visit and talk to our allies, while I took care of my other responsibilities in the city. There was a bit of backup at the hospital, but nothing too extreme, especially compared to what I had been dealing with for the last few days. When I returned to the forest, I spent some time with Kali, who had been a bit worried about my absence, despite knowing that I was still fine and at least in decent health. When that was all done, I *finally* settled in to spend my charges and look into my new subject because, for better or worse, it was something new.

Despite praying to whatever entity or random chance was choosing my free upgrades, I did not receive another level of alchemy. Instead, I got two levels of knowledge in something called threshold magic. As I started to explore the knowledge it contained, I couldn't help but nod in appreciation. Part of me still wished I had gotten the next level of Alchemy, as it was hard to really quantify just how much more powerful each level of that subject had made me, but threshold magic, even at only two levels, did not seem useless.

The subject was focusing on instilling effects and magic into thresholds. At just two levels of knowledge, that was usually pretty literal. Most of the magic I had access to through the subject needed to be tied to an actual threshold, made from a variety of materials, usually a stone or wood. The effects could range from buffs to debuffs, even very light healing or cleaning effects. It was, at its foundation, a homeowner's magic, something to weave into the transition between rooms, or from inside to outside.

Despite its humble beginning, judging from the stuff at the very edge of the second level of knowledge, threshold magic did go beyond the minor effects. I had some magic that could be cast into the transitions of roads, specifically crossroads and intersections, as well as magic that could be infused into boundary lines. My instincts told me that, if the power continued to grow, those ties would become even more conceptual and vague.

It was certainly interesting, and so far, all of my random subjects had at least been mildly useful, but it was hard to see the alchemy still sitting at the same level.

I was definitely not bitter, absolutely not.

For now, I planned on making a dozen stone thresholds and placing them all around the base, as part of one of the more interesting effects I could do was to reduce the effect of mental influence. It wasn't a perfect defense. As I discovered in my previous attempts to make myself immune to Masters, there were just too many ways to affect someone's mind for anything but high-level Conceptual magic, that's Conceptual with a capitalized "C", to work for everything.

That said, with a few stacked bits of magic, just walking around my base would slowly free me from being hypnotized, influenced by mind-altering substances, and free me from illusions. The effect was gradual, but just loosening the grip of a Master slightly would be a major advantage.

It was certainly an interesting direction, but I needed to see the higher levels of the subject before I would feel better about not getting more alchemy, especially since if I wanted to buy it myself, it would cost *five* charges. Sure, it was doable, but it would still hurt. It was something to consider once I finished my current plan of first getting the fifth level of grand workings design and crafting, then investing in more crafting methods.

With my path forward still set, I dropped five points into grand workings, unlocking the next level. It was now my highest subject, and with it I could draw from the full breadth of all my crafting subjects. I could tell, just from my mental space, that, for the most part, the five levels of grand workings would cover any reasonable artificer skill. That meant that, for one thing, three levels for crafting subjects was now my goal. It also meant that if I wanted to push past that and start unlocking level four of things like enchantment or ritual design, I would also need to upgrade grand workings. At least if I wanted to build with its knowledge.

Though from what I could tell, I wouldn't need to do that for a while. Level four of grand working was starting to push into larger and more complicated works, things that would definitely not be considered portable. Level five pushed that to whole buildings, structures filled with complicated artificing, all of it working together to complete grand works of magic. The possibilities were staggering, and I couldn't wait to crack into them .

Of course, I could also feel that the five levels were as starved for variety as ever. I needed to fill up several more types of magical crafting if I wanted to pull off anything really impressive.

Which was why, rather than use my four remaining points, three from my quest and one from my remaining normal charges, to unlock two levels of something new, I was going to unlock four level one subjects, in an attempt to find the best subjects to invest, ones that would work well with grand working.

My magical crafting needed variety, so that's what I would go for.

So, the first charge I dropped was into something that I was hoping would maximize my previous bump in alchemy, specifically the gem infusing and refining. Taking cues from the annihilation subject, I knew gems were involved with a lot of magic, and unlocking that potential would be a huge boon, assuming it clicked into place like I was hoping.

I focused on some of the lower-level gem creations I had made, specifically some of the powerful works I did with the annihilation rifle. I then focused on pushing that even further, beyond the general concept I had used to something more specific. After a few minutes of focusing, the subject locked into place, and I had one level of crystal thaumaturgy.

As I suspected, gems and crystals were powerful magical crafting materials, and a whole branch of magic revolved around them. Crystal thaumaturgy specifically involved using the internal lattice of crystals and gems to anchor magic, from storage to the conversion of energy types. At level one, I was incredibly restricted to what I could do, but I could tell that my use of crystals and gems so far was incredibly crude compared to what they *could* be.

Unlocking further levels would likely revolutionize what I could do, which was fantastic.

Next, I focused on something that, honestly, I should have likely focused on a long time ago. Runes were a classic type of magic that showed up in dozens of different stories, and while it was often different in each one, the naming was consistent enough that I should have thought of it before. Focusing on the idea of etching runes into something to imbue with magic was accepted as a subject so quickly that it actually caught me off guard. It functioned as I had focused on, with the added concept that those etchings needed to be filled with something to activate.

In terms of functionality, the subject was heavily focused on affecting the object, rather than having the object affect things. You apply runecraft to a bow to reduce its weight, not affect the arrow, and you apply runecraft to an arrow to help it fly true, or make its head sharper, not so that it would explode on impact. It was hard to decipher it at such a low level, as all I had access to were short bits of runes, but eventually, at higher levels, I would be able to use long strings of runes, which I assumed was where it picked up in power and complexity.

Despite being gung-ho about unlocking the early levels of four different subjects, I started to struggle to come up with something new after the second one. Thankfully, with all of the subjects that included crafting tidbits in their fields, I had plenty of places to look for inspiration. After spending around an hour scanning through various mental catalogues of information, I finally remembered that I wanted to include resonance tuning, which I had encountered in the process of making orichalcum. It was a bit on the niche side and would likely necessitate things being built in specific places, but its upper limits were high, meaning the power level of magic it could bring to bear was considerable.

Last but not least, inspired by the bits of magic I spotted inside druidcraft, I focused on sigil crafting. This was a subject similar to runecraft, but the use was reversed. Were runecraft was designed to affect the item it was being carved into, sigils were designed to affect the things *around* what they were carved into. At level one, I knew several sigil symbols and how to power them, but that was more or less it. I was hoping that as I put more levels into it, I would be able to link more sigils together for greater or more complex effects.

When I had finally invested all of my charges, I let out a sigh of relief. While there wasn't any pressure to invest them from the system itself, it definitely felt like they had been burning a hole in my pocket.

After a quick break to eat and consider my next step, I gathered the materials to make a bunch of thresholds. Since the skill was still on the low side, at least compared to my other crafting subjects, my options were a bit restricted, but I definitely wanted a mind-clearing effect

on them. I made about a dozen of them and spread them out around my base, basically guaranteeing that if I returned here, I would walk over them frequently.

It was far from a guarantee, but by stacking the deck, it was still my best bet when it came to anti master measures. I also made a few for the hospital and the dock community. I would offer the PRT some as well, as at this level, they were relatively quick to make.

I would need to emphasise that I couldn't focus my time making them for every building in the country, but I'm sure they would want some of the mind-clearing ones if I mentioned them.

When I was done with all that, I decided to go to bed. I would be heading back to the military base the following morning to discuss the success of the program and how it would affect its expansion. I eagerly awaited what the next step was, as I had a strong feeling that the clearing of Gallup had been the first real step in pushing the program to the next level.