

Hunter 192

Chapter 192: Hierarchy & Doubt

Miranda was tapping her fingers on the table as she stared at the system menu in front of her. She soon noticed she hadn't actually read a word as her mind was far too distracted. She couldn't help but regret the weekly ritual she had created where she would go meet the owner at his lodge and bring him up to speed over a bite of food.

At the time, it had seemed like a good idea, but now she couldn't help but consider it incredibly silly, if not downright disrespectful and blasphemous. She had been ignorant and stupid to a level that she had only recently come to understand.

Her weeks after getting her class evolution – or more accurately getting her Divine Blessing - had gotten... longer. She would spend at least a few hours of Realtime every day deep in meditation, where she then reached out and entered the Verdant Lagoon.

The Verdant Lagoon was a mysterious and quite incomprehensible place. It looked like a giant swamp with countless islands in it, each unique. Some islands had entire cities on them, and some had huts and tents making it look like something from the stone age, while some were even winter-landscapes or deserts.

But where she found herself most days was on the central island - a place generally reserved for the three ladies that had created the Lagoon. They spoke of the Lagoon as their divine realm, something Miranda was more than willing to believe. They were gods, after all. What reason would gods have to lie to her?

It wasn't like they were the only ones she had spoken to either. Many different individuals resided in the Lagoon either with their actual physical bodies, with avatars of some kind, or through a projection-like skill, same as her.

Her meditation-sessions only lasted for a few hours, but within the Lagoon, that was more than a day. It was only in specific areas that time moved like this, and sadly – or luckily – her weird projected body was confined to these places.

Being in the Lagoon felt... odd. Miranda looked the same, wore the same clothes, and could even touch things, but she knew she wasn't actually there. With a single thought, she could appear back at her real body at any time, and if her real body were disturbed, she would wake back up too.

The many individuals she interacted with – some of them humans, others less so – were all unified in one thing: their reverence of the Ladies that had created the land they now occupied. This reverence and respect were then reflected onto her, as she was viewed with respect by entities far more powerful than herself.

All that she could handle. She could deal with it. She felt like she was halfway shitting her pants whenever she interacted with some otherworldly creature that politely tipped its hat to her in passing, but it was somehow still manageable.

No, what wasn't manageable was how the Ladies treated her. They acted far too friendly for her comfort. There was always a barrier that made it absolutely clear that they were superior beings, but they seemed to almost recognize her as being close to them in rank. Not power-rank but in respect to hierarchal power.

This confused her until one of them said that apparently the city owner... Jake... had allowed them to bless her. That thought just seemed utterly preposterous. Who was he to tell them what they could and couldn't do? Yet they seemed to accept it without question, and when she couldn't hold in her curiosity any longer, she had asked... and the answer hadn't exactly put her concerns to rest. She knew that he was friendly with a god they served, but the implications of that she couldn't comprehend... until she learned more of their master.

In the overall hierarchy of this entire multiverse – of limitless planets, worlds, dimensions, and factions – their master sat amongst the pinnacle of existences. Their master was one of the first twelve beings that achieved godhood and a creature that entire Pantheons of gods feared.

Miranda had felt the utter reverence, adorations, and slight fear the three Ladies held regarding their master. A Primordial called the Malefic Viper, an enigmatic god that could – in their own words – kill every single living being not just on their planet but their entire galaxy with nothing but a snap of his fingers. Putting in a bit more power, he could destroy the Verdant Lagoon and its three creators, and with his full power, the sisters were unsure if any but the most powerful of beings in existence could stand up to him. One thing they were absolutely sure of was that none could escape unscathed, at least. For their master was a god of poison, destruction, and corruption.

And that... that kind of being was what the owner had as a “friend.”

She... didn’t get it. The thought of being friends with the three sisters didn’t even cross her mind. She couldn’t quite get on a good metaphor to describe the difference... there simply wasn’t one with the logic of the old world. The thought of beings living trillions of years and personally wielding power to reduce planets to dust with a casual glance just wasn’t something she could wrap her head around. Much less being “friends” with such a being. It was like a poor farmer being friends with the largest nuclear power on the old Earth... and even that was an understatement.

Yet the owner was so casual about it. To make it worse, he was too easy to read, so she couldn’t even delude herself into believing he wasn’t serious. He truly did consider the Malefic Viper his friend. Even her next logical step of concluding that he was the delusional one was shut down by the gods confirming it.

Because they hadn’t asked Jake for permission to bless her. They had asked the Malefic Viper, who had then asked Jake on their behalf. They had given her a blessing only one step below that of a True

Blessing – a blessing that still carried heavy implications for any god to give out, with the True one being infinitely more special. Naturally, the owner had gained the True blessing from the Malefic Viper...

So she thought it was perfectly acceptable for her to find every single meeting with the owner gutwrenchingly scary. Miranda had to watch every word and deliberate everything she did... because what if she somehow offended him? If he decided to “fire” her, what would happen? Even if that wasn’t a realistic threat, could she truly do him justice?

He was the Chosen of a Primordial. He was so many ranks above her in the hierarchy of the multiverse she was like the poorest farmer meeting the emperor. She tried her best... but was it truly enough? She had progressed more than ever before over these last few weeks, gaining class levels at a fast speed, and her profession was nearly maxed out at 99.

Miranda... felt like she needed to do everything to ensure her position. Not just for herself but also for Hank, his family, and every citizen of Haven because she felt like they lived at his discretion and mercy. Which made all their meetings so much harder because...

“So anyway, I somehow ended up killing a badger more than five minutes after firing the arrow and getting a better handle on this new affinity-thing. It was actually a bit funny that my first encounter with a beast from the tutorial happened by accident... I did consider trying to travel to where it hit, but I honestly have no idea where it even landed. Sure, I could try and do some quick math to try and figure it out, but as my skill had just upgraded, I am not entirely sure exactly how long it kept flying,” Jake explained while eating his food.

Miranda just sat opposite him, nodding and smiling... which was quite frankly starting to get a bit boring. Jake felt like she became more and more distant over the last few weeks, and he felt like everything he said was instantly accepted without challenge.

She didn't even make any snippy comments when he began ranting...

They just sat there in silence for a bit. Miranda had already gone over the weekly updates professionally as always. She had barely eaten any of the quite frankly delicious food, and the atmosphere in the lodge was beginning to turn awkward.

It wasn't the first time either. Jake felt like their relationship was walking backward, and just when he was beginning to feel more familiar with her, she began pulling back. He had never been the best at social interactions, but he rarely had issues around friends... and he did consider Miranda a friend. We are friends, aren't we?

Jake put down cutlery and just looked at the woman across from him. She met his gaze for only a moment before looking away.

"Sir, is there anything you ne-"

"Why are you back to calling me 'Sir'? It's weird," Jake said, cutting Miranda off.

"I apologize, I didn't mean to-"

"Seriously, what happened?" he once more cut her off.

"I'm not sure I-"

"If you keep reminding me of the first time I went out for drinks with Jacob and his boss, then you should just begin sending over written reports. This is just too damn awkward. It may just be me, but I thought we had moved past this overly-professional phase." Jake said, cutting to the chase.

Miranda just stared back at him, as she looked almost... scared. What is she afraid of?

What had he done to make her like this? It had all changed after she had evolved her class and gained the blessing.... Was it something to do with that?

"I wouldn't dare to presume such things..." Miranda said, Jake not interrupting her this time. "If you wish to receive written reports instead of these meetings, I would be more than happy to provide them."

"I don't want written reports, geez." Jake shook his head, asking the question he had just wondered about. "Is this in any way related to that blessing and all the god-business?"

She looked at him like she had just been caught doing something wrong. It reminded him of the time he admonished her when she stared at him for hours back during one of their first meetings. It made him feel like their relationship really had deteriorated to that level... one where he was just a powerful unknown element.

Jake just looked down, her body language more than enough to communicate that he was right. She usually could control every signal she gave off to perfection, making it impossible to distinguish her emotions outwardly.

Back during the negotiations with Phillip, she had a perfect poker face that he couldn't see through even with his sphere and instincts. But now, she was apparently so nervous she couldn't even keep that up anymore, showing that she really felt out of her depth.

Jake sighed as he began speaking.

"Gods are... different. They are old and powerful, and a fraction of one's knowledge is more than any mortal could learn in a lifetime. To see them as creatures on an entirely different level than us isn't wrong... but not wholly right either.

"All of them were once mortal as far as I know. Some that are now gods were even weaker than us as humans when they began their journey to power. They aren't that much different from you and me... at least I don't think so. I told you this once before... a god is just a really old and powerful person. Nothing more, nothing less," Jake said, voicing his genuine feelings.

Something that finally got a response out of Miranda.

"I... I have met gods... the Ladies of the Verdant Lagoon... they aren't like us. Saying they are is like believing a single ember is no different from the sun... no, even more than that. We live at the mercy of the gods; how could we not treat them with respect and-"

"Respect is one thing; submission is another. Every god is respectable in their own way. They did something hard, and that is damn respectable. But it doesn't mean this relationship is static. If I had met Mystie right after returning from the tutorial, I would have lost to her in a fight. Now, I am stronger. The gods are no different. Sure, right now they are stronger, but when I become a god too, who says that won't change?" Jake cut in, once more voicing his genuine thoughts on the matter. To him... godhood was truly just another challenge.

This seemed to get a proper reaction out of Miranda.

“During these past weeks, I have spent a lot of time within the realm of the Ladies. I have met creatures far more powerful than anything I could even imagine... yet not a single one of them dared show any real confidence in achieving godhood. It isn't something you just do. Those that can become gods are fundamentally different from you and I. How can you just act like becoming a god is a given? I thought you would know about how difficult it is,” Miranda argued, actually making Jake a bit happy as she finally stopped acting so weird and was more back to her usual self.

“Well, what's the alternative? Death? Nah, I'll rather just become a god. If I fail, I die anyway, and if I succeed, I don't die. Pretty simple. Isn't achieving godhood just the natural path of progression? I have my own goals, and to achieve those, I need to become a god,” Jake explained, as he smiled confidently.

“What is your goal?” Miranda asked, for the first time showing genuine interest and not fear or exasperation.

“I wanna be the very best, like no one ever was,” Jake said in a singing tone as he smiled goofily. It wasn't the first time he had made that reference, and he did have to go into an hour-long rant about old theme songs once when Miranda didn't recognize it the first time.

Miranda failed at holding back a giggle as Jake completely broke the tense atmosphere with his silly reference. Her mask had fallen for a bit, but she quickly tried to wipe away her smile and try to be serious again, but Jake butted in before she ruined the mood.

"I may be the city owner and technically your boss, but I consider you a friend first and foremost. Stop caring about who-knows-what god and about what others think. I don't care about it, so neither should you; you are just making this awkward," Jake smiled as he shook his head. "So stop calling me "Sir" or whatever else weird title. Just call me Jake like before."

Miranda looked a bit troubled as she seemed to reconsider if that was really okay. "I'll try... Jake."

"See, it isn't that hard," he joked back as he returned to a matter that had been a big clue-in to what she had been dealing with internally.

"You can also make some kind of temple if you feel it would be a good idea. Just make it shared if that makes sense. Make it so each god can have their own statue or pedestal or whatever, and then people can just make whatever they want if they have a god that has blessed them or something like that."

"Would your Patron be okay with that?" Miranda asked with a bit of concern.

"I don't have a Patron, but Villy shouldn't care either way," Jake dismissively said.

"Villy?" she asked, a bit confused. She didn't know anyone with that name in the city or why they would have any say in godly matters.

"Yeah, the Malefic Viper as he likes to call himself. A bit edgy, but it totally fits his style with his black scales and general tendency to cause death and destruction wherever he goes," Jake joked. It was a joke that didn't land very well as Miranda looked very uncomfortable like she considered if her even thinking it was funny was allowed.

Okay, baby steps...

At least the night ended with Miranda going back and the atmosphere between them a lot better than it had been when she arrived. They also finished with her saying that his next delivery would come the next morning.

It was a delivery of new weapons created to be sacrificed to his Touch of the Malefic Viper training. Upgrading that skill was the final item on his bucket list before reaching D-grade... and once that was upgraded, and he got 99 in his profession, it was evolution time.