

Hunter 263

Chapter 263: "I don't like you." - Jake Thayne, Year 1, 93rd Era.

Sultan was relaxed and confident as he studied the masked Chosen of the Malefic Viper. A powerful man worth working with. He had done his research before coming and believed he had an understanding of the man.

As a Chosen, he would naturally be a reflection of his Patron, so with the limited information on the Progenitor himself, he instead studied his god and the Order his god was in charge of. He studied customs and the ethos of the Order. Their logos and their - albeit lack of - foundational pathos. Instead, there seemed to be a focus on each being in charge of their own destinies, with morals judged based on how powerful a person is. To do harm upon those weaker than yourself was no sin but a right. For Sultan to find a worthy partner and one compatible with him in this new world would be difficult, but he believed the Chosen would be his best shot.

Going into it with honesty would no doubt be the best strategy. Lies would eventually be picked apart, and half-truths would only serve to offend the Viper's Chosen. The Viper was known as a straightforward kind of god, and his Order also valued not beating around the bush.

Sultan was a bit surprised at the questioning of slavery. To his knowledge, that was commonplace in the Order. For the Chosen not to have a few slaves or at least slave-like servants would be ludicrous. Thus he would put all his cards on the table and negotiate from there. If nothing else, he was sure the Chosen would prioritize benefits over a slight disagreement.

Though that should not even be a concern. As far as Sultan knew, the Order of the Malefic Viper had quite the number of sadists within, and would their Chosen not be the worst of them all? Nevertheless, Sultan reckoned he enjoyed the show.

Because Sultan knew he did.

Jake looked down at the woman and back at Sultan. At the moment, he was 50-50 in his head if he should believe the guy. There was some evidence to his claims, though.

The kind of poison Jake had consumed wasn't easy to make. Far from it. It would take a lot of practice to learn and a lot of time. Of course, it was entirely possible Sultan had made her learn to concoct it for other means, which is why he placed it as a 50-50 kind of thing. Also, his lie would be easily disproved just by checking in with Sanctdomo. Someone who was either close to D-grade or D-grade had to have left some records.

So, let's say the story was true. Fuck Gabi. Jake would have killed her, but he also understood that imprisonment or even slavery was preferable to that for some people. Not to Jake, though.

Ultimately, Jake chose to assume the man had been honest, not because he thought him particularly trustworthy, but because it was the easiest thing to do for now. He had nothing to lose from doing so, and he would always take another more lethal approach if the man proved to be a liar.

But... there was one thing.

Jake looked straight at Sultan, meeting his eyes as he spoke: "I don't like you."

If the man wanted an honest conversation... Jake would be honest.

“And I don’t mean that I dislike you a little. I mean that I am contemplating if I should just kill you or continue listening to what may or may not be bullshit. But I’ll humor you for now. Let me make it clear; I don’t like slavery. I know, shocking. So what reason will you give me for not ending you right here and now? What purpose do you see in keeping slaves? Why not just kill them and be done with it? Are you so weak you need to force a bunch of slaves to protect you?”

Sultan looked at Jake, clearly a bit shocked at his response. It was the first time he showed bewilderment, as if Jake’s reaction wasn’t at all what he had expected. Jake was genuinely curious what the man’s arguments would be.

“That... was not at all the expected response. I appear to have made some serious miscalculations,” Sultan said, taking out a potion bottle and handing it to the woman. She instantly grasped it and drank, and shortly after, she calmed down and began breathing steadily. She backed off and gave Jake a weird look as she joined the other three women.

“For some reason, I was under the impression you would enjoy that. Is my information on the Order of the Malefic Viper and the Primordial himself that inaccurate?” he asked. It wasn’t a rhetorical question either.

“I’m not a part of the Order, at least not officially, and I am not the Malefic Viper. I have no idea why the fuck you would attribute their beliefs to me. I’m me; they are them,” Jake answered back curtly. Well, he knew why Sultan would do it, it made sense, but he also enjoyed making fun of the ego-tripping dude.

“Puzzling,” Sultan admitted as he unbuttoned the top button of his tuxedo. He was sweating a little, and the women were also tense with Jake staring down at their owner.

"I do not explicitly need them, but I do not see the value in them being dead either. To kill them would turn their value to nil besides a few experience points. It removes the values their futures could provide too. Even if we ignore their combat prowess, simply having them be crafters would be preferable, would it not? I am not saying it's a perfect solution to keep them as slaves, but I would argue it's the preferred option to simply slaying them outright. Even if they may deserve it," Sultan argued.

Jake had to hand it to him; most would back down. But Sultan clearly hadn't reached his level through backing down and being weak. He chose to meet Jake head-on.

"Right, and the torture is, of course, another just action that has to be a part of any good punishment, right? I am sure it has nothing to do with you being a royal bastard," Jake asked sarcastically.

"I understand your judgment. We as humans tend to judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their behavior. My words or justifications hold little meaning to you, so I won't even bother trying to convince you I am in the right. Think me a maniacal monster who enjoys torturing others, a hero of justice, or whatever you want in between. Just know that I hold no ill intentions towards you nor any of your comrades, and I am very selective in who I put under my control," Sultan answered.

"Lots of flowery words for someone dictating the lives of others just because he's some sadistic fuck. I guess you don't have a good reason though, you just like controlling others. Is that the only way you can get a true sense of power?" Jake sneered.

"Ah, there we disagree. I did give them a choice. One that you seem unwilling to offer. It's interesting, is it not? What is better, giving someone the choice of death or slavery? Or you just killing them outright, offering them no alternative?" he laughed. "Besides, it's a choice that remains. I do not restrict them from harming me; it is just that harming me will begin the process of their deaths. It will start a timer. If they manage to kill me within the period, they will all live. If they fail, they die. Exciting, wouldn't you agree? It helps keep me on my toes. Sadly, all four of them are too darn cowardly to take a stab at me. Who knows, they might have a shot if they attack all at once?"

Jake frowned, becoming more unsure if the man was telling the truth. But... something was telling him the guy was. Sure, he was a sadistic bastard, but at least he had been honest about it. This didn't make Jake dislike him any less; it just made him continue the conversation. He did have one burning question, though.

"You talked about releasing them... can you even do that? As far as I know, the moment someone is enslaved, they essentially become Soulbound to a person, and their owner's death would mean the deaths of the slaves," Jake asked. This part he was actually curious about.

He saw the women off to the side shuffle a bit. They likely had never heard this conversation before and were afraid Sultan had lied to them at some point about the potential to release them. If he had... well, Jake knew who was about to die.

"The method you speak of is the most potent way of binding others to you. Potent, but also limited, as you just said. It's a perfect one-way bond that has many benefits but also restrictions. One of those is the inability to release others for good. That is not my method. Instead, I use the far more regular method of using a medium. I use this," Sultan said as he took out a notebook from his breast pocket as he explained.

"This notebook contains the contracts and is an item Soulbound to me. If I die, the item will cease to exist, and thus they will be released. Alternatively, I can choose to nullify the contract, which will also result in the person being freed."

Jake leaned over and picked up the notebook without any prompt. Sultan didn't even react, while the women did a bit as they moved closer. Perhaps looking for a chance to do something. Jake knew that he would have tried to kill Sultan long ago if he were in their shoes. Well, he would never be in their shoes, because in the end, a slave contract always had to be entered voluntarily. He would never have entered it, to begin with.

He opened the notebook and saw all the pages were blank. He ripped one out to see if he could, and it went smoothly. Next, Jake just threw a glance at Sultan before he burned it with Alchemical Flame. Was it fake? No... it just wasn't a "true" item.

Sultan fished out another identical notebook and placed it on the table. Without any prompt, he turned a single page, and a contract was revealed.

"Please, this is the contract they are under," Sultan said, leaning back to give Jake space.

Skimming it, Jake quickly saw it corroborated a lot of what Sultan had claimed. The contracts specified they weren't allowed to willfully kill anyone without his permission, that they had to defend him from harm and stay close to him unless they had permission to leave, and finally, that they could protect themselves as long as it didn't conflict with any of the previous two rules. There were no terms for release or anything else - not even a rule saying they had to follow all his commands.

"So, wheres the rest of it?" Jake asked after looking it over.

"That's it. The only things not specified are the rules associated with it simply by it being a contract of this nature. Such as my ability to kill them at any point. Of course, such a death is not instant. I reckon it would take around ten minutes, and as long as they kill me within the period, they would be fine. Ah, also if they get above me in level. That would mean I lose the ability to control them. I am sure there are other ways too. The multiverse has endless possibilities after all, does it not?" Sultan explained with a casual smile. He was still sweating, but he didn't seem that stressed out anymore.

"So why don't they speak?"

"I told them not to. Nothing stops them besides their fear of retaliation. They can ignore all my commands too. That has yet to happen, by the way," Sultan said, his smile growing.

"Now we're back to the torture. Let's say everything you do is logical and makes sense – it isn't, but let's say it is – where the fuck does the torture come in? Do you think it can reform them? Make them see the errors of their ways? Would that ever work?" Jake curtly said as he turned to the women and pointed to one of them. "You, answer that. No, don't look at him. I'm the one who asked."

The woman he pointed at was the one with a bow. It was the reason he picked her. When he asked, she threw a glance at Sultan, but Jake quickly redirected her back to him.

She hesitated to say anything until she finally spat out: "He's lying! None of us have done anything wrong! We're innocent, and he's forcing us to work for him! He makes us do horrible things... tortures us... please! I beg you! Help us!"

Well, that was unhelpful, Jake thought as he heard her pleas. The three women looked slightly shocked as she yelled and had been surprisingly slow to nod in agreement, almost too enthusiastically. He would say it was a 60-40. 60 on her lying about being innocent, 40 on her actually being completely a victim. Either way, it didn't matter much for Jake; he primarily wanted to confirm if they could speak and think for themselves. Clearly, her outburst was not something Sultan liked or had expected. In fact, he frowned, and the sweat on the back of his neck indicated he had gotten quite nervous again.

"Needless to say, she is lying. Please, simply check in with Sanctdomo. I implore you to simply trust me for now until you confirm it. I am willing to talk this through, and if you wish, I could even put their release as an item on the negotiation table. Just think about it," Sultan said, continuing.

“But let’s continue the argument further. I release them. Then what? You kill them? Hope they’ve reformed? Tell them to leave and cause havoc elsewhere? Waste strenuous amounts of resources to try and keep them imprisoned? I hope you see there are no good solutions here. I merely chose the solution that benefits me the most. Is it ultimately based on my own selfishness? Yes. D-grades don’t grow on trees quite yet. These four hold far too much value to simply kill for some idealistic belief. In my view, their states are based on the choices they made. Based on a choice I made. I chose to make them slaves, and they chose slavery over capital punishment. It was all choices, the same as you can choose to kill me now and release them. I doubt I would win, and you would be able to kill all five of us if you so wished. That would be my miscalculation and my mistake. It would be unfortunate to lose my life like this, but I would only be able to blame myself,” Sultan said as he sighed.

Jake just sat back as he thought about it. Would he be right in killing all of them? Probably not. Maybe? But to be fair... he honestly didn’t care much either way. If he was perfectly genuine with himself, he didn’t care much about releasing slaves anyway. In his eyes, they were already weak failures, innocent or not. Because one thing was certain, no matter what... they had chosen slavery over death. That in itself made him dislike them.

So what would he get out of killing them? Pretty much nothing besides being able to steal some of their shit. Even then, Jake knew most merchants had a spatial storage as a skill. Which meant robbing him wasn’t really an option. He would get a boat and what they wore. Probably useful... but not by much. Meanwhile, a D-grade merchant could offer a lot...

In the end, Jake did the only reasonable thing.

He raised his hand and fired a blast of arcane mana through the barrier surrounding them. It opened a hole to the outside world that tried to close itself but was unable to due to the destructive mana. Sultan and the women all looked ready to pick up their weapons in an interesting display as if they wanted to fight together. The cowards truly preferred remaining slaves to Sultan over death.

Either way, the purpose for opening the hole was simple.

In flew a green figure that landed on his shoulder with a small annoyed screech. Following Sylpie walked Miranda, Neil, and Silas.

When in doubt... make others figure it out.

“Mister Sultan,” Miranda said as she entered. “Your reputation precedes you.”