

Hunter 278

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 pulsed 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.