

Hunter 391

Chapter 391 - Clearing Up Misconceptions Left & Right

Ten minutes passed, and... nothing. Besides a few drone-like machines checking them out, no movement had been made from the Fort to welcome their arrival. Reika was getting partly worried and partly confused at the lack of a response.

She was absolutely certain they had been spotted, but didn't they know who they were or where they were from? They had to know, right? Had they just caught them at a bad time? During an important meeting, perhaps? Or was something else going on that required their immediate attention, such as an emergency?

Finally, after another ten minutes, they saw a man approach. He was running across the plains rather slowly, and upon using Identify, she saw he was only level 71. Reika's frown intensified as the man made it to their vessel, and with her permission, they lowered a platform for him to get onto the barge.

The man who came up was middle-aged and looked quite uncomfortable with everything that was going on. Reika looked at him as he correctly identified her as the one in charge.

"Miss, may I know your purpose for visiting the Fort?" the man asked, clearly nervous but still speaking clearly.

Reika now truly frowned as she answered. "Is this not Haven? The City Lord should be aware of visitors from the Noboru Clan."

The official suddenly looked opened his eyes wide in recognition. "Ah! Right, I do remember that being mentioned in the briefing a few weeks ago. Sorry I didn't recognize it. I must apologize; we are currently a bit short-staffed due to the absence of the City Leader and her assistant."

"Absence? Did something happen? Where are they?" Reika asked bit concerned they truly had come at an inopportune time.

"I cannot disclose that, but they should be back within a few days at the latest. But for now, how about coming to the Fort and relaxing until someone is ready to receive you?" the official asked. "I am only in charge of agriculture in the northern plains, so I believe it best to wait for someone more qualified."

Reika nodded as she asked. "Will it be possible to visit the dome? Is the Lord in there?"

"Uh, I think he is, but you need permission from him to enter. I also wouldn't go with too many people, though. He doesn't tend to like large crowds or interruptions in general while working. Not the most social type, but damn is he good at what he does," the man answered casually, having clearly begun to let his guard down.

Reika frowned slightly but didn't voice her displeasure at the clear disrespect and underhanded insults towards Lord Thayne. This was not her city and not her rules, so she shouldn't overstep... though she would mention it to Jake once they met.

She would naturally also respect that Jake didn't like large groups of visitors, which she understood from their brief interactions earlier. He preferred smaller groups, and that was perfectly fine. At least the official did give respect to Lord Thayne's abilities.

Being led by the man, they quickly flew their barge closer before anchoring it and entering the Fort. Reika found the entire city a bit... disappointing? Then again, it had been built swiftly to accommodate the many people seeking refuge at Haven.

Once inside, they found an inn of sorts and left many of their members there, but they had to spread it out over several establishments as no single one had room for them all. Reika chose to let the others handle that as she went straight for the dome. Officials would come and handle more long-term accommodations soon enough.

It wasn't hard to reach the dome, and the official had stayed with her to function as a guide. He pointed out the teleportation hub right beside the dome, currently with circles leading to the forest part of Haven as well as one leading to Skyggen, with several more currently under construction.

Haven was a bit isolated compared to most other cities, with even a lack of minor non-Pylon settlements in its immediate area. She knew a reason for this was them migrating to the Fort over time, and another was that there were a lot of hostile beasts in the area.

Arriving at the dome, she excused the guide and walked up to the massive sphere of metal. No doors were visible anywhere, and nothing really happened when she stood in front of it, so she knocked. A pulse of mana went through the dome, and she was certain whoever was inside had been alerted to her presence. She waited a bit with nothing else happening, feeling a bit impatient as five or so minutes passed. Finally, there was movement as a small drone flew over to her from somewhere, holding a walkie-talkie of sorts.

"Hello, this the Lord's assistant speaking, may I know the purpose of your visit?" a voice came from the other end.

"I am here to visit Lord Thayne as arranged with the City Lord and the Chosen," Reika answered as she finally got a response.

"Okay, he should come by within the day if you wait," the voice answered.

"Excuse me?" Reika answered. "I was informed Lord Thayne was here?"

"Bad information, I'm afraid. Lord Thayne left a few hours ago, and Arnold doesn't want any visitors at this time."

"Arnold is using the laboratory currently?" Reika asked, a bit surprised at Jake allowing others access as he seemed very much like the private sort. Also, if he made poison, was it safe for someone like Arnold to work within?

"Yes?" the voice asked, confused.

"I understand. Where do you reckon Lord Thayne is currently located?" she then asked, thinking she could always just talk to the source himself.

"Probably at his laboratory."

"Wait, what?" Reika exclaimed.

“What?” an equally confused voice answered.

“This isn’t-“

“Ma’am, this is at Arnold’s.”

Jake was leaning back and relaxing as he read a book with Sylphie lying on his stomach, also just resting. He was on the roof of his lodge, just enjoying the sunlight as he went through one of the larger tomes “borrowed” from Yalsten related to beast rearing.

It had lots of wrong stuff in it but many good nuggets of wisdom too. Jake had already had his inklings regarding a certain skill of his, but by now, he truly understood. He had kind of been using Sagacity of the Malefic Viper wrong, or at least suboptimally. Jake usually tried to get knowledge through the drop of blood he had gained from Villy, and while what he got from that was damn valuable, it was also often incomplete or too high level for it to be of any use to Jake.

His using it only to delve into that blood also raised another question. What the hell was the purpose of the skill for someone who hadn’t managed to absorb a drop of blood from a Primordial? Jake had a sneaking suspicion that wasn’t the usual go-to.

After reading many books, Jake began to realize what others could use it for: it was a fact-checker. Okay, not entirely, but it helped give him a feel of the validity and value of information and more easily compile it into something actionable. A lot of written down methods kind of sucked, and Sagacity gave him an idea of what was trash and what was treasures as he went through the books, greatly increasing his efficiency when studying.

On that note, the books from Yalsten were damn good in general. Jake even had a suspicion the system had sorted the books a bit to remove the truly useless ones. Or maybe the vampires were just very selective in what kind of reading material they wanted on their bookshelves. Either way, it was a win for Jake.

As he laid there reading, he heard a noise from down in the lodge. It was a phone of sorts he had gotten from Arnold for the man to contact him in case something happened. Jake had no idea how long the guy had been able to make it, and quite frankly, he didn't care much. This was the first time it was used, and with a string of mana, Jake manipulated it out an open window and into his hand as he didn't move from his prone position.

"What is it?" Jake asked as Arnold's assistant spoke on the other side.

"Lord Thayne, we have just been visited by a Ms. Noboru, who is – as you can guess – from the Noboru clan. She has arrived with an entourage earlier today and was at the dome asking for you. I have subsequently sent her your way."

"Oh... did you get her first name?" Jake asked, wondering if Reika had made it there or if it was merchants or something.

"No, but she did mention she had made the agreement directly with you and the City Lord. I told her you were at Haven, so she will likely go and find you now. I apologize in advance if this was overstepping," the assistant explained.

"It's fine; I'll just wait here then," Jake agreed. This was the sort of thing Miranda usually dealt with, but Reika was as much his guest as she was Miranda's – if not more so – which naturally meant he would also have to be accomodating.

He briefly considered fetching Miranda from the dungeon but ultimately decided not to. They needed levels, and the dungeon was a great place to get them, and dragging Miranda out would disband the party. No, he could handle this one by himself.

Feeling movement on his chest, he rubbed Sylphie's feathers. Alright, not entirely by himself.

It took only fifteen minutes before Jake felt someone approaching, also confirming it was a good choice not to head to the Fort himself as he could totally see them pass by each other.

"Time to receive our guest," Jake said as he lifted Sylphie up and placed her on the roof of the lodge, getting some minor complaints, but she soon accepted her fate and just perched herself up to still look menacing. Jake jumped off the roof and landed in front of the porch as he headed to the entrance of the valley.

Reika seemed to be a bit unsure as she went through the narrow path leading into Jake's valley, and he couldn't help but chuckle as she stopped up and read every warning sign that Miranda and Hank had set up once upon a time, telling people to stay out.

He waited at the entrance as soon enough, Reika also detected him. Jake had already made his mask invisible as he waved the moment she came into sight. "Long time no see!"

With some simple magic, Reika flew over as she landed in front of him. "So this is the famed abode of the Chosen of the Malefic One."

"Not too famous, I hope. I would prefer to avoid tourists," Jake joked back as he invited her to the lodge. "Anyway, I heard you stopped by Arnold's workshop on the way here? Did you need anything from him? Ah, in case you didn't know, Arnold is this scientist guy, who--"

"I know who he is, and no, I did not need anything off him," Reika said, for some reason looking a bit embarrassed.

Jake wanted to ask why she had then gone to his workshop, but he at least had enough social skills to know that wasn't a good idea. So, he changed the subject as they walked towards the lodge.

"Oh, alright. How was the trip here? Saw something noteworthy on the way?"

"Quite a few things, in fact. The trip took nearly a month and--"

Reika began to explain the journey on a massive magical barge as Jake learned she had brought an entire entourage of alchemists, once more making him reconsider calling Miranda and Lillian for assistance. She had just begun talking about a massive lake they had chosen to avoid as she suddenly stopped up, staring towards Jake's lodge.

"What... what's that?" she asked, motioning with her eyes in his lodge's direction.

“That’s my lodge?” Jake answered, a bit confused.

“No... you...” Reika sighed loudly as she pointed. “That damn tree!”

Jake suddenly realized what she was talking about as he looked over at the good old Celerity banana-spawner, also known as the top-tier Agility-elixir ingredient provider.

[Ancient Celerita Musa (Ancient)] - This plant has been grown from an ancient Musa seed and brought new life by the advent of the system. Also commonly called a banana tree, this plant produces different sorts of bananas, a type of fruit unique to the newly integrated planet Earth. This musa has become intimately connected to the concept of time through unknown means, making its growth pattern highly unpredictable. Destroying this musa will have unpredictable effects, and using it in any kind of alchemical creation will require one to first anchor it in time. Can only grow in certain areas with intense amounts of mana.

Jake failed to hold himself back as he answered.

“That isn’t a tree.”

“What?” Reika asked, looking confused.

“Didn’t you know? Bananas don’t grow on trees. They grow on something called a musa that looks like trees but aren’t trees. Something with the stem not being made from wood or something,” Jake explained, gladly sharing that little of trivia he himself hadn’t known. A part of him also just liked to mess with Reika as she was the know-it-all type.

Perhaps his god had influenced him more than he thought...

"I... whatever. How did you find such a specimen? Also, the mana in its immediate area is very odd. Some kind of forcefield? Very peculiar," she said, looking deep in focus.

"You can't identify it?" Jake asked a bit perplexed why she hadn't.

"I can see it is called a Celerita Musa with an ancient rarity but nothing else of value. I am not an alchemist specializing in the use of herbs, so I generally can't identify any above epic-rarity," Reika explained.

"Ah, gotcha," Jake nodded in realization. It was the same as him and metals and many other materials, including many types of chemicals and what-not.

Jake already knew that while they both were alchemists, they truly did have way different paths. She was more of a chemist and pharmacist than a traditional alchemist, from his understanding. Jake was far more traditional, but not entirely as he focused on poisons over anything else, though he was far more diverse.

"How is the old man?" Jake then asked, changing the subject again.

"He's fine, already fully recovered when I left and stronger than during the Treasure Hunt, even without using that skill. It is truly both a curse and a blessing. Currently, he is out exploring the territory south of

the border of the Noboru Clan together with the former Monarch of Blood. He keeps the Legacy with him at all times,” Reika explained, very forthcomingly, adding a final part making her openness make more sense.

“Great-grandfather told me to inform you that he hopes the Noboru Clan and Haven can build strong ties for the future. He added that he would also gladly have another duel at the next opportunity.”

“Anytime,” Jake answered, smiling. The last duel had gotten him the legendary Arcane Awakening and made him grow significantly. Saying no to another such chance would be utter insanity.

“Naturally, I also hope this exchange of knowledge can also take place in the realm of alchemy,” Reika added with a smile.

“Of course,” Jake answered. “Always appreciate seeing different points of view and sparring with someone who walks an interesting path.”

Which is when the snake whispered in his ear once more.

“Man, I wish there was some massive institution meant to facilitate exactly that, maybe even something owned and run by friends with literally godlike qualifications and more resources than you could spend in a few mortal lifespans. Oh lord, where can one find such a place!? I am sure this magical place of learning would maybe even allow you to drag a few mortal friends along, such as that girl!”

The words of temptation were indeed neverending.

Chapter 392 - Off He Goes

Days passed as Jake entertained Reika, primarily through discussions on alchemy and just seeing the city. He had even given her a tour of his new alchemy laboratory, which she was quite impressed with, especially the room with the water basin in it, as well as the laboratory itself. She said that the craftsmanship was above anything anyone in the Noboru Clan could do, making Jake wonder how Arnold and Hank had pulled it off.

The best part of it all had no doubt been when they went to see the dungeon entrance and the under-construction garden, which had netted them both a big surprise.

“Why is there level 149 troll just below the city?” Reika had asked as she looked at the large troll digging through some soil with its hands. “And why is it wearing overalls?”

Jake didn’t have an answer for that as he looked at the troll wearing oversized blue dirty overalls covering its lower half as it worked. When the troll saw Jake and Reika, it waved happily at them, and soon enough, two small trolls ran over.

Reika looked a bit taken aback, but Jake calmed her down as one of the trolls ran up to him and handed him a shiny stone. It wasn’t an item or anything, just a bit shiny.

“Thanks,” Jake said, reaching up to the little guy. Yes, he had to reach up as the troll was slightly taller than himself.

The troll happily clapped and ran back to its parent while the second troll stayed and looked at Reika. It tried to poke her, but Reika backed away a bit from the dirt-stained hands of the troll. It looked sad, so Jake threw Reika a look, making her give in as he held out her hand and touched the little one’s hand.

It smiled and danced a bit in place as he held out its other hand to give her a small flower. Reika accepted that one, too, making the troll run back in excitement.

“Why did you get a flower when I got a rock?” Jake commented.

“That’s your takeaway? I’m wondering why you have a family of trolls living right beneath the city... isn’t this a hazard? And this close to the dungeon?” Reika said.

“Do they look dangerous?” Jake answered, smiling a bit. “They originally came from within the dungeon, and I chose to bring them out as I like them. The big one is also damn good at gardening; it is the one behind all this.”

The entire biodome once inhabited by the mushroom was already beginning to look a lot better, especially with the troll and its children now around to help manage things. The Cave Troll liked to dig up weeds, plant flowers, till the ground, and just generally tend to plants and just relax. It was a peaceful creature that had only been forced into conflict by the Deepdwellers in the dungeon. Now that it was outside, it could just dedicate itself to its true calling:

To be a troll gardener.

Ah, but not to misunderstand. The troll was still one of the strongest creatures in the city, and even after all Jake’s levels, he still didn’t want to take a direct clubbing.

“This is... quite novel,” Reika commented. “I also noticed Sylphie, and you mentioned her parents were also around. Are you planning on opening up the city to beasts and monsters to also live here?”

Jake looked at her, a bit confused. “It was never closed to them? If a bunch of beasts or whatever come and wanna live here, they are free to. They just have to follow the same rules as everyone else, and I can’t see the issue.”

“It may make others feel uncomfortable and unsafe,” Reika commented. “I am not saying it can’t be done, but it will take a lot of convincing, political maneuvering and campaigning as well as cultural restructuring to make it feasible.”

“I don’t see the issue,” Jake just shrugged. “That sounds like a them-problem and not a me-problem. If anyone has a problem with others living here – be they human, beast, monsters, or whatever – they can fuck right off and leave. This is my city and my rules. If any creature is intelligent enough to act properly, they can stay. I don’t see why not.”

“That is just putting people in a difficult spot... they have nowhere else to go if they find themselves forc-
“

“No one is forcing them to do anything besides not being bigoted assholes. If that is too much to ask, we are back to them fucking right off, and if they make problems or try to start shit, I will gladly make them fuck off.”

Jake was quite clear on this point. He didn’t know why, but hearing everyone talk about humans as if they were on some goddamn pedestal, making them better than everything else, just annoyed him on a fundamental level. Sylphie, Hawkie, Mystie, the trolls in front of him, Villy, the King of the Forest... were as much people as Miranda and Arnold. Shit, Casper was not a human anymore either, and his girlfriend Lyra was a spirit, which was classified as a monster, making her pretty damn far from human herself.

He didn't see race as making someone better than everyone else... except if it was a race giving better stats or something, in which case it was just better... okay, he didn't see species making someone better. It didn't even make much sense to talk about who or what was superior.

No one was superior to Jake anyway. That didn't mean no one was equal, mind you, but Jake didn't care how strong someone was or how influential or whatever. He would get as strong as they were or stronger one day anyway.

"Alright..." Reika relented after a little while, but Jake knew she disagreed. He didn't want to argue about it because he knew most thought like that. Jake understood, partly, and believed in due time, people would come to learn the world had changed. Like, how could one hate the cute trolls just minding their own business and being nice to visitors?

He didn't recognize humans tended to have more societal structures than beasts, and those structures did make Jake less willing to hunt them. In fact, anyone not showing hostility wasn't someone he actively wanted to hunt down. As an example, if Jake had entered the monkey territory back right after he was evolved and all that had happened was them handing him a banana and allowing him to chill, he wouldn't have waged war against them. It was their choice to fling literal shit at him. Did he then overreact? Maybe, but hey, he had to hunt something for levels.

This did mean Jake also held that mentality towards humans. If he entered a settlement and was attacked, he would gladly level the place. He was an equal opportunity hunter.

He and Reika had changed the subject after that and kept discussing the city, the garden, his alchemy lab, and a slew of other things. When Miranda finally came out of the dungeon, she was met with an avalanche of work as all of the folk from the Noboru clan needed proper housing in the actual city of Haven. Hank had luckily been cognisant of this happening and had already made plans for a large complex for the visiting alchemists that he reckoned he could have up and running within a week.

Something he managed to do as an entire area off to the side of Haven was prepared, and a section of the forest turned into a compound occupied by the Noboru clan. Jake had come to learn that they planned on not just staying for a brief visit but would make it a long-term occupancy. At least until a teleportation circle had been established between Haven and Saya, which would no doubt be a while due to the distance and the lack of cooperation to get it done beforehand.

Reika had brought an item from their own space mages and given it to Neil, so at least that should speed up the process. The distance to the territory of the Noboru clan was further than to Skyggen, but it wasn't that much, only about twice as far. The only reason Haven and Skyggen had one established was that both sides worked together from the beginning and were willing to offer resources to make it happen as a priority. Many other places, including the Noboru clan, were still a bit hesitant to have near-instant transportation right into the midst of their own territories, and for quite obvious reasons.

It could be used to invade other territories easily. There were safety measures such as the ability to instantly destroy the circle, but what if the other side only needed one person? If someone like Jake or the Sword Saint decided to go through a circle, they could cause disastrous damage, potentially killing everyone in power before a proper response could be formed.

Either way, it was something for other people than Jake to deal with. Something else he would also outsource was another thing Reika had brought up when she asked a very obvious question: what was the name of the troll?

Jake had considered just making up one quickly, but "Trollie" probably wasn't the best name when he didn't even know the sex of the troll. Also, the look Reika gave him when he proposed it wasn't an approving one. Well, he did find out later it was a male troll due to a member of the Noboru clan who specialized in alchemy to assist the growth of beasts and monsters of varying sorts.

The skill used to figure out the sex was one to find out what kind of virility medicine was required. Jake got the explanation that a big part of the job of alchemists like him was to make sure the beasts reproduced. Needless to say, Jake didn't like the guy from the get-go as he clearly still viewed beasts as lesser lifeforms to be exploited and used for the good of mankind. Something he more or less confessed. Jake considered just having Sylphie teach the guy who was actually in charge. He would learn soon enough that denying treats to her wasn't a wise decision, and her screeches were law.

Anyway, back to a troll name... Jake decided to put that off and ask people with hopefully a better naming sense. He would talk to some people or maybe have Miranda handle it, and he would just be the one to approve one. Well, the troll would be the one to ultimately approve if he liked the name or not. The small trolls could get named later, hopefully by their caretaker.

Because Jake also learned trolls such as the Undergrowth Cave Troll could learn how to talk in primitive ways, and even if not, he could at least learn to write a bit or communicate in more complex ways with time.

Days slowly passed like this as everything in Haven was calm. Jake mainly studied alchemy and sparred with those from the Noboru clan, enjoying finally having others to talk to who knew a bit about it. It still ended up mainly being himself and Reika, as quite honestly, the others were not quite at their level.

What was funny was that Jake got a level in his profession while teaching some alchemists how to make Necrotic Poison. He also learned that they gained a lot from the experience, including levels. Jake's Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist coupled with Legacy of Man, the unique racial skill of humans, truly made a powerful combo as just Jake showing off some basic stuff apparently had quite the impact.

Throughout this time, he had also finally fixed his Cauldron of Supreme Simplicity and could now do some alchemy himself too. Overall this time was relaxed as soon three weeks had passed, and even if Jake only gained that single level, he would say his time was well-spent.

But then... then the fateful day came.

“Jake,” a voice echoed in his head. “It is complete.”

He felt a shiver run down his spine as Jake feared the worst. “Do you seriously want me to head to some academy right now?”

“What? No, of course not, not yet. You will be outed as either a heretic or a Chosen just based on your aura alone within the first day and either be hunted down or be treated like the second coming of me, which would both make this entire academy thing a waste of time. No, before you head off, you’re gonna need another training montage. Just me and you,” Villy said.

“Train what?” Jake wondered.

“You will know once you go through the gateway and travel between worlds,” Villy answered mysteriously. “The sooner, the better! So do not dally! Onwards!”

Jake heard the call of the Viper and did as he usually did: spontaneously made a decision. He got up from where he sat and went over to the compound where Reika was to inform her he was heading out. When she asked where to and if she could follow, he just answered he was traveling to the first universe to do some stuff with the Malefic Viper, which was enough for her to not ask again.

Then he went and informed Miranda, who was busy planning with her party how to kill the dungeon’s final boss – Jake had not told them of the Altmar Census Golem part. That was a surprise. She was

surprised and asked if he expected her to come with him, but he said it was secret hidden training. He naturally also informed Sylphie through their bond, but she was already out of the city herself.

After all of that, he went straight for the Fort where he found Chris already waiting at the monument, incredibly excited. He stood in front of it and stared, not even noticing Jake's arrival before he stood right next to him.

"Lord Thayne!" Chris reacted surprised as he bowed. "It's ready! Fully charged, and the connection is established! With the assistance of the Malefic One, using it now should be simplicity itself, simply stand in the center, and I am certain the Malefic One will do the rest!"

"What the builder said," Villy confirmed. "This entire monument more or less creates an anchor on your world for me to latch onto long enough to establish a connection within it without tearing everything apart between here and your universe. This would be far fucking simpler without the system still babying your universe, but here we are, having to come up with contrived workarounds."

"Hey, if it works, it works," Jake answered as he turned to address Chris.

"Thanks for the hard work. I am off then."

Chris just looked on with excitement and a bit of nervousness as Jake went into the middle of the messed-up monument and stood on a semi-circular slab of stone. Once he stood there, he suddenly felt his connection with Villy get more powerful than before. Space began warping around him ever-so-subtly as he instinctively knew it was Villy doing it.

Jake saw space crack as pure blackness surrounded him. He felt his own body be protected by Villy as he was consumed by the shattered space. With a final glance towards Haven, he entered the void between worlds as he left the ninety-third Universe.

Chapter 393 - Designing The School Uniform

Jake had tried quite a few teleportation methods during his time in the system. The best kind was the one done by the system in that he didn't even feel it. It was just a blink, and you suddenly found yourself somewhere new.

Teleportation circles were a bit rougher but also quite convenient. One Step Mile was a bit rougher than that, but Jake had gotten so used to it the skill that he barely noticed it. It also wasn't really teleportation but more just shrinking space between himself and his target.

However... the teleportation when he was dragged from the ninety-third Universe was something entirely different from anything he had ever tried before. Jake felt like his entire body unraveled as he was consumed by darkness. He found himself within a vast void of nothingness for at least a few seconds, and while in there, all his senses went amok.

Jake was forced to close his eyes and try to seal off his senses, but while in that void, in the final moment, he felt like something else was there. Something else than Villy's attention landed on him, and Jake failed to resist looking off to the side where he saw-

Jake woke up with a start as he frantically looked around him, but a headache made him lie back down as he groaned in pain.

To his side sat Villy in a squat as he flicked Jake's forehead. "Shouldn't stare at Void Dwellers, mate."

Jake brought his hands to his forehead, now bleeding from that damn flick. “What the actual fuck was that?”

“I just told you, it was a Void Dweller,” Villy answered with a shrug. “You know, dwellers of the void between universes, eldritch beings of unimaginable power, many of which with power to rival even the most powerful of gods, including me.”

“Wait, for real?”

Villy just smirked. “Where else do you think gods and even Primordials get in a good bout? Ah, but don’t bother thinking about them quite yet; you can’t even survive in the void without being a god yourself first. Usually, you don’t even have to pass through the void like that, but as I said, weird workarounds were used to speed up the process of getting you here. Ah, but no worries, you were actually never in any danger. I doubt the system would have let you die within the void even without my protection, as that would mean an outside force – me – would have killed you. I reckon it would rather just shield your soul from destruction. Case-in-point, you didn’t die by looking at the Void Dweller. Mortals usually die when looking at Void Dwellers.”

Jake just groaned again as his headache was slowly subsiding. “Man, I am already beginning to regret coming here.”

“You were just personally invited and brought by, and to, your honored Patron god, and you complain?” Villy said, shaking his head in disappointment. “That is some peak heresy right there. At the very least blasphemy of the highest level.”

“Wow, imagine not licking ass being considered blasphemy,” Jake chuckled as he finally sat up properly. “In all seriousness, thanks for the lift, I guess? What was all the fuss about now that I’m here?”

"I need measurements for your school uniform."

Jake raised an eyebrow. "I call bullshit. As a so-called preacher of freedom, I seriously doubt you would limit the fashion and self-expression of those in the Order."

Villy protested: "We do have uniforms for members."

"That you didn't make, but they just began using over time, and you never bothered to do anything about it. Because honestly, that would just be a waste of time. Also, it was their own choice to adopt uniforms, to begin with, and there are conveniences to being recognized. I got that right?" Jake asked pointedly.

"See, now you are acting way more like a Chosen by actually understanding my teachings," the Viper grinned. "But yeah, yeah, Nah, no school uniform needed... unless you want one? I could totally make that a thing in the Academy; we could even have mini-ski-"

"No," Jake cut him off. "Just... no."

"Killjoy," Villy said with a fake sad expression. "Guess we'll just have to actually do some practice and teaching and stuff. And here I hoped we could design school uniforms together... I guess you are also against holding a school festival, even if you can be in charge of the haunted house?"

"Oh no, I am totally up for that, as long as I can throw a bedsheet over your head and toss you in there," Jake agreed sarcastically.

“You are fully aware I could just create an avatar and do that?”

“No, no, no, this will require every bit of your dedication and concentration,” Jake insisted. “We must have Duskleaf join too.”

“I am actually beginning to get on board with this,” Villy nodded. “We can even go all-out and even kidnap some actual ghosts and zombies and stuff for realism.”

“Or, even better, we can do none of that, and you can tell me what the rush was all about to get me here?”

“And the slayer of joy strikes once more,” the Viper said, dejected. “Alright, let’s move on. Follow me!”

Jake finally bothered to actually get a look around. He had kind of expected to end up where he had gone to after the tutorial, but this place was clearly different. Standing up, Jake ignored Villy for a while as he saw light coming from a hallway.

He walked into it and looked out of a window as his eyes opened wide.

“Where the hell is this?”

They were far up in a tower somewhere, and when he looked out, he saw everything. Far below him lay a city. Countless buildings were everywhere, much taller and larger than anything built on Earth had ever been. There were no architectural rules, as some were high-rises of glass, not unlike back on Earth, while others looked like mounds of dirt. Some were just large trees with buildings on, and some were medieval-looking... there was no rhyme or reason to any of it.

“On Primordial 4, within the territory of the Order of the Malefic Viper. Or, more accurately, you are in a tower connected to the Order and looking out over the city belonging to it,” Villy explained as he appeared beside him.

Jake just stood there with wide eyes as he stared into the horizon. He couldn’t see the end of the city... and mind you, this was without Jake seeing any visible curvature to the place. He saw tens of thousands of kilometers of the city, stretching infinitely into the horizon.

“How many live here?” Jake asked in amazement.

“In the trillions,” the god answered casually.

“How the... is this where all the members of the Order live?” Jake asked, amazed.

“What? No, of course not. This is where all the poor people live, and this tower only exists to lord over them while serving as a conduit of the defensive barrier and a teleportation hub. The actual Order is below,” Villy explained with a laugh.

“So, the alchemists of the Order are indeed basement-dwelling nerds, huh? Should have seen it coming.”

“Not entirely inaccurate, but I think you should see the underground for yourself before judging. Oh, and by the way, the Academy is also down there, so you will go eventually. But first, follow me and stop gawking out the window,” Villy said as he motioned for Jake to follow again.

Jake did as asked and trailed behind the god. It had been a while since Jake actually met the Viper, and he had evolved an entire grade since, but it didn't really allow him to detect jack shit. He did know the Viper wasn't actively suppressing his aura as Jake felt it, but as usual, it didn't really affect him at all.

What he could see better now was the scales on the Viper's body, and staring at them, he felt like they looked slightly different than his own scales. Even if they were based on the same thing, the scales on the Viper looked... more? It was weird to describe.

The two of them kept walking for a while until they went into a new room. Jake's Sphere of Perception was slightly thrown off as space expanded when they entered, making the room far larger on the inside.

It was a simple room with a few measuring devices, beds, and for some reason, mirrors and what looked like telescopes lining the walls and ceiling.

Jake felt the door shut behind him as the Viper turned and summoned two comfortable chairs and some pastries, as well as two bottles of beer. Jake happily dove in, but he noticed something when he opened the bottle.

“This is poisoned?” Jake asked, confused.

“First lesson of the Academy and the Order in general. Offering a poison in a drink is generally considered nice as, you know, everyone who is worth anything got my Palate skill, so all you are giving them is some novel poison knowledge. These poisons don’t need to be strong, but just interesting, and often weak variants are used. Ah, but if you do accidentally kill someone by offering them poison they couldn’t handle, then no worries. Their own faults for drinking it and not having good enough skills to detect the danger,” the Viper explained.

“Oh, I remember Sultan doing something like that,” Jake nodded, suddenly retroactively understanding what the guy had done.

“A bit sad you don’t recognize it, but a merchant of your city does. Ah, but one piece of advice, I would generally avoid drinking or eating anything offered by someone of a higher grade than you. They can often disguise the poison.”

“Eh, I’ll take my chances,” Jake said as he raised the cup. His danger sense reacted a bit as he was about to drink it, but not to a very high level, making him aware it was far from deadly. The taste was surprisingly good. Amazingly good, actually, and the aftertaste left by the poison only improved it.

The Viper looked at Jake a bit suspiciously but just shrugged. “Suit yourself. Thoughts on the beverages?”

“Damn good,” Jake said as he took another swig.

"It is a hobby of many, and even the specialization of some to create these kinds of drinks. I am sure you will have your fair share in the future. This batch was made by a D-grade student of the Academy just like you will be. A kid named Araznak," Villy explained.

Jake raised an eyebrow. "Someone of note?"

He had realized something a while ago... the Viper didn't use names. He had never said Chris, Miranda, Hank, Sylphie, Reika, or used the names of any of the other people around him. So him bothering to know a name had to hold meaning.

"One of Snappy's kids."

"... he has kids?"

"Of course he does," Villy said. "Mate, the Holy Mother, has like a thousand currently living children, and at least a dozen or so spawns of hers have become gods. It isn't that unusual."

"Oh... so do you have kids too?" Jake asked curiously.

Jake felt the mood in the room shift as the Viper's casual smile disappeared. He soon regained it as he shook his head. "I... did. But anyway, yeah, a lot of would-be brewers in the Order, and I just wanted you to have a taste."

No matter how much Jake sucked at reading social cues, he knew that asking on that subject anymore was a no-go. He still looked at the Viper and nodded in understanding, getting a bit of flinch from the Viper, who clearly just wanted Jake to move on. Jake already knew there was something there, and he wanted to communicate in some way that he kind of got it or could at least listen. But for now... moving on was best. So he did.

“Now, I don’t reckon you brought me here just to indulge in the gastronomic wonders of the Order?” Jake asked, finally moving on as the Viper looked relieved.

“Alright, alright. So, Jake, remember when I first gave you your Blessing and made you my Chosen?” the Viper asked.

“Last time I checked, I was indeed not suffering from sudden-onset memory loss.”

“But you are suffering from a severe inability to understand rhetorical questions. But what I am getting to is the skill you got with the Blessing. Shroud of the Primordial.”

Jake nodded, naturally knowing of the skill that made him immune to Identify from nearly everything and helping hide him from a lot of stuff, such as fate and karma and all that. He pulled up the skill and read it over for the first time in what felt like forever.

[Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)] - A shroud surrounds your very being, your Records masked, your status inaccessible. Scryers weep at the thought of tracking a single of your steps as you remain an enigma to their sight. Using Identify on you, but a futile effort. The karmic threads in your wake, an endless web impossible to unravel. One does not merely peek behind the Shroud of the Primordial. Hides your Records and Status from all but the most powerful of prying eyes. Hiding ability increases based on Willpower.

The description was a bit mystical but also relatively concise and mentioned actual benefits. Jake knew the skill was good, but he didn't really understand it, so when the Viper mentioned it, he instantly got curious.

"What about it?" Jake asked with interest.

"When you got it, perhaps it didn't stick out, but by now, you should know a bit more about rarities and be fully aware that divine skills aren't ordinary. In fact, pretty much the only way for a D-grade to get a divine skill is to get a True Blessing by a sufficiently powerful god, such as a Primordial.

"The skill we gods can give are entirely decided by us and are borderline always based on an existing one we already have. If not, it is an amalgamation of skills the god has. This new skill given can be modified to nearly all extents, including the innate power, the effects, and even the name can be freely edited. However, there are also restrictions.

"I wouldn't be able to give you a divine rarity attack, as an example, or even a direct defensive skill. They are always auxiliary skills, often helping to perform specific tasks or passive empowering existing skills or affinities. This last part is often done to encourage – if not railroad – the blessed individual into a specific path.

"Shroud of the Primordial is a bit different, as it can be viewed as a defensive skill, but it is odd enough to be allowed due to its limited scope. I can also reveal that what it can truly do isn't something you will learn before reaching higher grades. But what it can do, right now, isn't something you are doing," the Malefic Viper said, giving a lengthy explanation of blessings and the skills offered with the blessings.

"Use it?" Jake asked, confused. And for a good reason too.

When Jake focused on any of his skills, even the passive ones such as Basic One-handed Weapons, he got some response on how to use it if he was swinging his blade while focusing on it. The same goes for archery. He could feel or at least detect the assistance provided. But for the Shroud? Nothing.

“The Shroud of the Primordial is a veil covering your Truesoul. The ultimate defense against certain types of magic and concepts. Passively it makes you immune to the divination of nearly all beings in the multiverse, as the Records used to obscure you are my own. While it isn’t as powerful as my version, it is closer than you think. But even so... it can be used. You can move the veil. Modify it, ever-so-slightly.”

Jake frowned even more. “How?”

“I think a demonstration will be easier... try to Identify me.

Sighing, Jake thought it a waste of time. He had tried to Identify Villy many times and always just got a question mark, so-

[Human – lvl 69]

Jake stared. “Nice. You can do that?”

He tried to scout some more and was amazed that Villy even felt like a level 69 human. Without his Bloodline allowing him to assess potential foes better than any skill, he would have been fooled for sure.

To make it more confusing, the presence of Villy made him think he was standing in front of a fellow D-grade despite his level indicating he was only in E-grade.

“Yes,” Villy said with a smirk. “And so can you... with some practice, of course.”

Chapter 394 - To Feel The Shroud

Jake sat in meditation as he felt his own body. Not just the physical one, but the metaphysical representation of it. He felt his stamina, mana, and health move as he tried to trace it all back to its source – the area around his heart.

Villy was standing with him as pressure was exerted. Jake felt his physical body slowly start to crumble as his skin flayed off and turned to dust. Every resource was exhausted, and Jake felt his metaphysical body begin to distort as it turned to nothing, and as it did so, he faintly felt something.

Just as fast as the feeling emerged, it disappeared along with the pressure.

Jake wanted to ask why the Viper had stopped but noticed he didn't have any mouth... or much of anything, really. He was nothing more than a floating heart in the middle of the room, his entire body gone. Due to his sphere, he still saw everything, even when Villy waved his hand and Jake fully healed.

He opened his eyes and took a deep breath as he heaved.

“Anything?” Villy asked.

"A bit... I think..." Jake muttered.

They were already on the fourth day of doing this, and Jake had already "died" or at least had his body pretty much entirely destroyed hundreds if not thousands of times. Villy said it was for Jake to better understand his Soulshape, as he called it, which was the metaphysical representation of his body.

He needed to understand that first, to understand the Shroud that was several layers of his soul deeper under usual circumstances, and Jake had to "bring it out." It was only when his body was destroyed that the Shroud became even faintly visible, and Villy told him why: because it was the time just before death, where the Shroud was designed to extend and cover up his demise.

Jake learned that out of everything, death was the easiest to scry. So many skills, abilities, and items existed that allowed one to detect the death of someone, so the Shroud had to extend and really show off if he was to die.

The reason it extended before actual death was that... well, if Jake died, his Shroud would naturally cease to be, so it had to be ready beforehand. At least, this was Villy's description of how it worked. It was still early days, and Jake knew he was nowhere near close to being able to even grasp the Shroud, much less begin to influence it in any way.

"Any progress is good progress. We got time, and you feeling even a tiny bit of it is already faster than expected," Villy explained with a smile.

Four days may seem like a long time, and they both knew it would take far longer than just a few weeks... so Villy had done some good old time manipulation and distorted time within the room, taking a lot of the pressure off. Jake had feared this would make feeling the Shroud harder based on prior descriptions of time manipulation messing with things, but the Viper had said that luckily the divine skill was bound to his own relative time.

How much time had been messed with, Jake didn't know. All he knew was that it was even more than the last time he trained with Duskleaf and Villy.

"I think I need a breather," Jake said as he kept taking deep breaths. He tried to move a bit, but it felt unnaturally exhausting, like he had just used and deactivated Arcane Awakening and was experiencing a lesser version of the weakness period.

"Understandable," the Viper said. "It is exhausting to repeatedly have the entire body healed, especially at your grade and level of power."

"How the hell does Eron do it?" Jake asked. Hey, now that he had a god to ask, why not?

"The other one with a Bloodline on your planet? Well, he, first of all, isn't healed but regenerates himself, making it a bit easier, but he also isn't truly ever close to death. I am not sure precisely how, but I have a feeling he has multiple health pools," Villy answered with a shrug. "His methods are clearly deeply rooted in the power of his Bloodline, and like you, his Patron god has also given him a skill to hide from prying eyes."

"Good enough to block even you?" Jake asked with surprise.

"See, this is one of those interesting things... yes and no. No, in that I can still pierce it if I really want to. But also yes, in that it would alert the god who blessed him, and I am unable to do it through the natural protection on your Universe. At least not without it becoming an issue," the Viper shook his head.

“But on the positive side, I doubt he will die anytime soon, so I am sure you will have plenty of time to figure it out. Just don’t have the Fallen King fight him.”

“Oh?”

“I doubt anyone on your planet besides a select few C-grades can permanently slay that Bloodline holder... except the Unique Lifeform. A master of soul magic is the most dangerous foe to someone like that human. Well, not like soul magic is a good time for anyone,” Villy said with a smirk. “But enough delaying. Even with you weak, there is no need to slack.”

The Viper waved his hand as the thousands of telescopes and mirrors lining the ceiling and walls turned towards Jake and began glowing with mana. Jake instantly felt the thousands of signals making him aware someone had just tried to use Identify, and he promptly entered meditation again.

Every single telescope and mirror was enchanted with the skill Identify, but it would be inaccurate to say they were all merely using Identify. All of them had different versions, and their power varied widely. Some of the items were so weak it barely mattered, while others felt like drills trying to bore into Jake’s soul to uncover what he was hiding.

All of it was stopped by Shroud of the Primordial. He vaguely felt the skill “activate,” if one could even call it that, but every Identify was too weak for him to truly experience anything. That was why he experienced thousands a second.

This didn’t expend any resources... but damn, was it tiring.

Vilastromoz just observed Jake as he sat in meditation while being bombarded by the many items trying to Identify him. Many potential training methods had been considered, and if he was honest, this wasn't even close to the most effective one... at least not for anyone else.

Usually, the Viper wouldn't even begin to bother having a D-grade learn to control this skill, and if he was honest, then the initial plan had been to get an item able to mask Jake's identity as a Chosen and a Heretic. That plan was still an option, but Vilastromoz believed it possible that Jake could learn to manipulate the Shroud.

The senses the young mortal possessed were uncanny, and the Viper knew it was due to the Bloodline. His ability to know whenever he was being observed was proof that it was Bloodline related, and so was the fact that he managed to tame a curse that should, by all accounts, be able to consume even a C-grade. Some parts of him actually envied that ability of Jake's... he still remembered the days when he had lost control. But perhaps it could be said Jake was able to stay in control and not act on impulses was because of how aware he was of them... or perhaps because his impulsive self was his real self. He recognized his own emotions far more than anyone else. He perceived far more related to himself than anyone else.

And that included the movement of his own energy. The activation of his own skills. The area around him. Knowing when someone Identified you wasn't a usual ability and typically required a skill. Knowing when anyone Identified you, even if it was a god, was on an entirely new level. Feeling when Shroud of the Primordial blocked said Identification... that was the key to controlling it.

Insane Perception was ultimately the only reason Jake had any chance to begin to truly be aware of the Shroud, even with the Bloodline. Knowing when it triggered, "seeing" it trigger, and comprehending how it triggered were entirely different things. It was magic far too complex for a mortal to comprehend. Vilastromoz did not expect Jake to comprehend the skill either... but he did hope he could learn to control it nonetheless.

After all, Jake was not the sort of person to ever truly understand how anything worked. He was the sort of person to understand how it felt. To feel how it worked. Perhaps this was also a path of

comprehension. A simplistic one, but a useful one. It would allow him eventually understand the intricacies and complexities behind his skills, sometimes only after using them for a long time.

This was nothing new. In fact, it was extremely ordinary. Just not among humans. This was more something reserved for monsters, primarily those with low levels of intellect often had extremely strong instincts to guide them to use even complex magic and skills. There was some comprehension, but it was often an over-simplification of the complex. Something he also knew Jake often did, to great success.

To sum it up... Jake just had to go by feel.

And the Malefic Viper was going to make him feel everything until he understood the skill in both body and soul.

Pain was such an odd concept to Jake. He felt it, and it hurt, and he wanted to avoid it in most cases, but his reception to it varied widely. In a battle, the pain was little more than a warning from his body he had been hurt: a physiological response to damage taken.

During training, the pain was just a thing that was there. Another emotion to take in and use to properly understand what was happening, not different from any other senses like smell or sight. He did not want to avoid it or limit it as many others would. This didn't mean he enjoyed it. In fact, it was still rather unpleasant, but the gains of the pain outweighed the temporary mental anguish in his mind.

Jake understood his own senses more than anyone else. He knew what they meant. He knew if they were good or bad. He knew pain could be useful and not a demerit based on if it was truly "dangerous" pain or just "good" pain.

The way he distinguished? His sense of danger. If something just hurt but wasn't lethal, he didn't bother. In fact, it was odd how it worked at times. Jake felt his own body be broken down several times, and it sure did hurt like hell, but he never felt like the pain should be a distraction. There was no trace of killing intent from the Viper during it all. His danger sense did trigger a bit when Jake was essentially dead, but he trusted Villy to heal him, as quite frankly, it would be a shitty joke to just kill him like that.

Also, funnily enough, the near-death practice also triggered something else. Every four hours or so, as Jake experienced near-death from the Villy's pressure, time would slow down around him as Moment of the Primal Hunter activated. This would heighten Jake's senses even more and actually ended up helping to speed up trying to feel the Shroud.

It also allowed Jake to coincidentally become more familiar with the skill. Villy mentioned during a breather that the time-bending it did was at an incredibly high-level concept, even if it was simplistic in how it worked. Either way, Jake happily also began to understand that as time passed.

A week after he began the practice in the time-chamber, Jake began to feel the Shroud every-so-often whenever he was near death and every time Moment procced. Still no progress during the mass-identify part, besides feeling something being blocked.

Two weeks in, much the same, but slightly better.

A month in, Jake began to consistently feel something when near death.

Two months in, Jake now felt the Shroud every time he was near death and rather vividly when Moment activated. He also began to get a feel for something during the Identify training.

Three months in, Jake began to vaguely get a feel for something enveloping his body at all times. Something that didn't quite exist, but on the other hand, did. It was a bit like his metaphysical body as it seemed to almost exist in a dimension above his own. It neither cared for space and time, and Jake noticed how its subtle moments were unaffected even by Moment of the Primal Hunter.

Four months in, Jake felt the Shroud. He felt the "impact" on it whenever an Identify hit the unpenetrable shield. He felt how it wrapped around him and how everything that passed through was slightly different than before upon exiting. It was as if the inside of his Shroud was one world and the outside another. Anything happening within was always separated from what was outside as if going through encryption, making the source unknown.

Five months in, Jake began to experiment. He began to truly experience the Shroud, and they had entirely stopped all near-death experiments as they were no longer necessary. Villy tuned down the Identification devices, so he was only hit by one every second or so as Jake concentrated on his goal.

Half a year in, Jake experienced his first success. He sat in front of a mirror that kept trying to Identify him, the surface showing the result.

[?]

He tried again to slightly move the Shroud.

[?]

Open it.

[?]

Allow the source through. Allow the Identification.

[?]

Only the Identification... only a single layer of the Shroud would need to be altered for a fraction of a moment. Jake knew he could not fully deactivate it even if he tried, but Jake refused to believe he could not allow one single Identify through.

[?]

With all of his will, Jake felt the Identification come, as he welcomed it. He didn't know why, but this one felt slightly different. He felt a movement, a subtle shift, as on the mirror before him was a change.

[???

Jake grasped onto the feeling with a vice grip as he felt his heartbeat speed up in excitement. Half a year had led to this moment as Jake pushed his will to the maximum He felt the Shroud, the thousands, millions, billions of layers it consisted of. It was everchanging, everflowing, impossible to truly understand... and yet it moved to his will, ever so slightly nudged.

The next hundred Identification were still just three question marks, but the response came faster for every passing one. Every second led to improvement as Jake rode on a high, not allowing a single thing to distract him.

Identification number one-hundred and fifty-five had a change once more as another of the Shroud's layers allowed something through.

[Human – lvl ???]

His focus stayed impervious as a metaphysical Shroud only visible to him, and perhaps the god in the room with him slowly began to come under his will. Jake truly felt a connection with it for the first time, and he felt his success before the mirror proved him correct.

[Human – lvl 150]

Jake kept holding on to the feeling as he stayed concentrated. Success after success came in until Jake finally felt assured, and he let out a sigh of relief as he finally returned just a bit of his attention to the real world.

He only now noticed his own body. He had bit his own lips, tearing off the flesh in its entirety as he spat out his own meat in disgust. His hands were bleeding from clenching too hard, and he even discovered he had somehow managed to cause internal bleeding. Not that he cared about any of it as he looked up at Villy in triumph.

The Malefic Viper looked down at him as he smiled. "Good job, you have learned to deactivate a part of it. Now for you to learn to actually control it."

Chapter 395 - The Weight Of Time

Vilastromoz was prepared to have Jake begin the next phase of the training, but the human just displayed a satisfied smile at his success as he slowly leaned forward until he fell flat on his face on the floor, already knocked out.

"Or we can wait, I guess," the Viper said, shaking his head. This was far from the first time Jake had collapsed in exhaustion and fallen asleep, and it wouldn't be the last. To overwork yourself perhaps seemed like a bad thing, but not to Vilastromoz. It could be, but you also needed the ability and drive to stay dedicated to a singular goal for extended periods of time. Sometimes ridiculously long amounts of time.

This in itself would often end up putting a natural limit on the strength many could achieve. While stats did help, and time did slowly make one adapt better, many just never became able to focus and dedicate their entire selves to tasks for sometimes months or years in D-grade. Taking a decade to do something in C-grade was not out of the question either. A century to a B-grade was nothing. A millennium to an A-grade was the same as spending a single month for a pre-system mortal on a task.

To gods? To gods, time began to matter less. Some gods had projects they worked on tirelessly for hundreds of billions of years. The isolation and lack of additional external stimuli were maddening to some, and you needed to be the right kind of person who could handle this.

The Viper had to admit this had been one of his fears regarding Jake. He walked a path of alchemy that would require long crafting sessions, with someone like his disciple often just sitting with a cauldron for a few thousand years to make something.

It wasn't a necessity to have this skill. Valdemar would not be able to sit down and work on something for just a single year, yet he was a Primordial. But it was a valuable trait, also just to be able to deal with the concept of immortality down the line.

So to see Jake not lose focus for half a year besides when he passed out from pure exhaustion was promising. He had already done some long crafts, but all of those had been very involved and not as boring as something like this training was. Not that Jake seemed to care much... in fact, the more time passed, the more Jake insisted on succeeding.

The Viper had expected Jake to take around a year to first learn how to let Identify work on him. This was already with what many would call ridiculously unreasonable levels of expectations, but the Viper believed in his Chosen. Besides, while it seemed like a long time, with the time distortion going on, it barely mattered. Even if half a year had passed within the chamber, it had not even been a week back on Earth.

Anyway, now it was time to see if he could beat the Viper's next expectations of Jake learning to control it within five years. A practice session that would also once more test Jake's ability to persevere and focus on a monotonous task with limited short-term improvements.

Jake awoke, feeling pretty well-rested. He opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling filled with telescopes – a sight he had met quite a few times already during the last many months.

"How long was I out this time?" he asked.

"Just three days, so not that bad," Villy answered, as Jake saw him just leaning back in a chair, relaxed.

"I've been thinking... do you really have nothing better to do than sit here with me for half a year? With the Order and everything?" Jake asked curiously. He had been thinking about it for a while, but that the god had time to just stay there was just odd.

"Well, I don't really have better things to do; this is actually my immediate priority. But that doesn't mean this is the only thing I am doing. Avatars, remember? While this is my true body, I have a few avatars scattered around the place, including in my realm, working on stuff," the Viper answered nonchalantly. "I am not really doing anything Order-related, though. I guess one of the benefits of being a no-show for ninety percent of the time the Order has existed means they have become quite self-running, and what does take divine input I got the Witches of the Verdant Lagoon handling.

"Huh," Jake recognized as he joked: "I guess outsourcing organizational work counts towards me being a dutiful Chosen then, as I am following my Patron's example?"

"And taking a jab at me by stating such counts as heretical. Good to see you are working on balancing it out," the god answered with a light chuckle. "Anyway, let's move on. As I said, good job on getting the first part down. Now you have some semblance of control over the Shroud, but this is minuscule and only able to allow certain things through. We don't want that, as just letting it through makes it worse. Now you need to learn how to manipulate the output information."

The Viper began as he waved his hand and summoned two projections with nameplates over their head – it was all very MMO-like.

Both of them were humans, but one of them had a bubble of sorts around him, which was no doubt a visual representation of Shroud of the Primordial.

"So, to get this next part, let's begin with what Identify is. As a skill, Identify is just a classification of many skills, and this classification is named after the most basic skill gained by nearly anyone called

Identify. It doesn't have to be called that, as there are many other versions with varying names, but the core of what they do never changes: they scry Records.

"Everything contains Records. Be it people or items, the Identify skill allows the user using it to view the innate Records embedded in something and get a description. The description is based on your own existing knowledge and Records – often through skills – meaning one person's Identify response is often the same as another's. At least for items.

"Living beings are innately shielded due to their souls. A veil always covers it, making the information of Identify only the basic, which often boils down to just race and level. Better variants of the Identify skill may also offer information on general classes or professions, the level of danger they pose, the affinities they possess and specialize in, and a slew of other things. But know that you won't get a long description sheet even with the best of skills. This is due to the innate imperviousness of the Truesoul.

"Now, due to how "hard" it is to Identify a living thing, many skills also exist to make it even harder. These skills, and what yours does right now, do not block Identify but simply make the information gained into nothing. Sometimes only part of it, while yours does it for the whole thing. In other words, it identifies something one cannot quantify into information with one's current abilities, hence getting a question mark. This is also why you can't Identify things many levels above yourself. Also, this can be alleviated with better Identify variant skills. Either way, this is the basics of how Identify works...you get it?" the Viper finally finished his lengthy explanation as Jake sat and listened intently.

"How come I have been able to pierce some of these skills before?" Jake asked, remembering the first time he met Phillip and how Jake had been able to "peek around" whatever blocked his Identify.

"Because whatever skill used to block wasn't perfect, and everything can be overcome with enough power. Your high Perception allows you to more accurately see things, even if you still require proper context for a correct Identification. Whatever means are used to obscure it will just be more easily pierced by you," Villy explained.

“Doesn’t that mean other gods should be able to Identify me due to the sheer difference in power?”

“Usually, yes. But the skill you have is not the Shroud of Jake, but the Shroud of the Primordial. It is bound by the Blessing and bound by my own power rather than yours. As I said, it is based on my own Records. In some ways, it can be said the True Blessing is being used as the hardware for a scrambler while you do have limited control over the software. The skill is yours, not mine, so you can learn to fully control it with practice,” the god continued.

“Okay... so, on to learning control,” Jake said with a nod.

“Precisely,” the Viper said as he waved his hand again, bringing attention back to the two projections.

“As you can surely guess, one of these represents you with the Shroud and the other you without. One of them is just the usual level 150 human, while the other is that one big question mark. You have now learned to allow yourself to appear as one without the Shroud, at least to the Identify skills. The Shroud is, of course, still there with all other effects active and will continue to have these effects. You only need to manipulate that small part of the Shroud, to instead of making it disappear, just make it slightly different. Take this as an example,” the Viper said as the projections changed a bit.

The one with the Shroud over it suddenly shifted a bit as the figure inside the bubble changed color, and the level changed to 160. At the same time, the bubble expanded and became multi-layered as the Viper pointed out a specific part of it.

“When all of the information going through is scrambled and obscured, the goal for this to work is to not only to block but also selective let through some info. Let through small morsels and control it to deliver a response that says whatever you damn well want it to say. This will need to be done with not only level but also your Blessing. Turning off and on if it can detect the Blessing is something you can already

do right now towards those weaker, but that part will also need some improvement, especially towards those with skills to detect heretics.

“To put it simply – because I know you like that – you need to forge a new identity through the Shroud by feeding it false information and give what will be considered a valid response. You need to program it.”

“That doesn’t sound simple at all,” Jake sighed, not even sure where to start.

“Oh, because it really isn’t. So let’s just get started,” the Malefic Viper said with a smile as the room around him began warping as the mirrors were all swapped out with a new variant, along with the many telescopes also being switched out.

“Some of these will try to Identify only your race. Some will try to identify your profession, others your class, a fourth type the level of your Blessing, a fifth type simply your general level of power. There are between a hundred and a thousand mirrors and between fifty and five hundred telescopes for each. Your first task is to discover what every single telescope and mirror does. Simply point to one and correctly mark it. Good luck,” the Malefic Viper said as he disappeared, leaving Jake alone in the chamber.

At the same time, Jake felt the many items activate as he suddenly found himself Identified, or at least the attempt to. His Shroud was active again, so Jake focused as he deactivated it, which just made him aware he was now being Identified.

Nothing told him what kind or what information they were scrying. He already had some ideas on how to figure it out, such as beginning to filter what information came through to “feel” which ones were successful and which ones failed to narrow down options.

With that, Jake entered the next stage of the training session, only a good sleeping session after the first one finished.

“I think boiling down age or history to merely the passage of time is a mistake most make. A man who is a thousand but has grown up within a greenhouse is as much a child as the beggar’s son, no more than twenty, who had to learn to survive by himself from the moment he could walk,” the god said.

“But age and experience do go hand in hand. A man who is twenty simply hasn’t been able to experience the same as a man at fifty. Perhaps the older man has experienced less monumental events, but every small moment, every realization, and every thought has led to growth,” Miyamoto argued.

“That only proves true if he is a man who seeks such growth and doesn’t become complacent. Growth and realization take effort. It takes will. Hardship helps bring effort out in everyone.”

“Not as much as passion does,” the Sword Saint argued again.

“Is it not passion to wish for survival? To see yourself grow beyond your station?” the god said, clearly partly playing devil’s advocate based on a prior conversation the two had.

“Passion comes from within; it is not forced upon you by the world,” Miyamoto said, shaking his head at the man... god, he had been talking to for the last many hours.

“But the pressures of the world can make you realize your passions. A situation where you wished you were stronger could put you on a new path. External factors can make you try and give that first push that will only lead you to discover it was truly your passion all along,” Aeon said.

Miyamoto could only nod. Others could make you reach new realizations and give you new inspiration for the path forward. Jake had been Miyamoto’s trigger to find a new path, and it seemed the young man had once more led to the situation he now found himself in.

The Sword Saint had been surprised as he one day sat in his chair and noticed something - something not meant to be on his status screen. The Blessing he gained during the tutorial was renounced back when he had yet to evolve to D-grade, meaning when he did evolve, he was invited by a few new gods. He had chosen to dispel all of them back then, yet now one more was there when he checked. One he was certain was new, yet said it had been pending for months.

He had shared this with the Iskar, the former Monarch of Blood, and the response of the vampire had been even surprising as he had urged Miyamoto to go no matter what. Apparently, Aeon Clok was not some normal low-level god – despite the silly name – but one of the most powerful and also mysterious in existence.

Miyamoto had been skeptical but had accepted. Which had resulted in him having now spent over seven hours in a cozy living room discussing with the man before him. A young-looking man wearing a well-tailored suit and glasses, with clear human features.

Which only made sense, as Aeon had been human. One of two human Primordials, along with one called Valdemar. It had been far better than Miyamoto had expected. He had not met a god who flaunted his power and displayed wealth and grandeur, but instead just a man offering him a drink and a talk. A discussion to get to know one another.

He did not have any illusions of them being truly equal, and in many ways, Miyamoto would not see it so. He respected his elders, and he respected the powerful. What he did do was believe he also had a chance to one day enjoy such a status.

Smiling, he continued the argument.

“However, reducing passion to merely-“

Another four hours later, he found himself leaving the realm of the god with a divine Blessing and a new skill.

[Weight of Time (Legendary)] – As you walk, the weight of time ripples in your wake. Your every action will lead to a higher impact upon history and the Records of everything you interact with. Your presence will stay forever memorable. The longer you interact with individuals and items, the more your Records will influence them. This effect is increased significantly for individuals and items you have a powerful connection to. Allows you to more easily comprehend the weight of time.

Chapter 396 - Finding The Purpose

Villy, you fucking troll, Jake cursed as he finally found the problem. Holy fucking shit, did he feel like beating that snake god up with a tire iron. Jake had no damn clue how long he had been sitting there; all he knew was that the bastard had fooled him.

Five types of Identify. Race, profession, class, level of Blessing, and general power level. This was what Villy had said the telescopes and mirrors were enchanted to Identify. There were a total of thirty-seven-hundred and seventy-two mirrors and fifteen-hundred and ninety-eight telescopes present. Jake had felt them all repeatedly Identify him in waves about once every second. Not all of one type at the same time, but totally mixed up, and he was pretty sure that the exact same set of mirrors and telescopes had not Identified him twice during the entire training session.

How long it had taken till he began to differentiate between them was unknown... but it felt like months. Maybe a year? He didn't know and hadn't spared the brainpower to think about it.

After he could differentiate, he began discovering what type did what. He began labeling all mirrors and telescopes with their respective versions and tested them. At some point, Jake had marked all the ones he believed Identified race, and to his amazement, all of them lit up and correctly displayed their results.

After that, he moved on and found that Blessing was the second easiest for him to detect. He had quickly labeled all of them as he felt the faint differences between each Identify. Not all of them were identical, but Jake began to see patterns in where they hit the Shroud and how it "poked" his soul if that was the correct thing to call it.

It took him a while longer to nail down profession and class as they felt very similar. It was difficult to truly differentiate them, and at some point, Jake even began to believe they were the same, but he intuitively knew that wasn't true. So he kept trying until finally, he found something. It was a faint difference, but once he felt it, he focused on it like a bloodhound and explored it until he got results.

With time, he got all of them labeled too. So now he just needed to mark all of the rest of the mirrors and telescopes with the general level of power identification, right? Wrong. He had done that, and it had not worked, which made Jake realize he felt there was a difference between some of the final Identify items.

Okay, that actually made sense, as it would trivialize this last part if they were all the same. Jake began focusing on different ones, until he felt one he was certain was just a normal Identify. Right, so some of them were just there to mess with him and make him have to actually find the last type, right?

Wrong again.

Because there were more types. The thing is, Jake had a hard time nailing it down. He also took note that nearly forty percent of the mirrors and telescopes were still unmarked, even if it should only be twenty if there were five types. It was a possibility there were just a lot of general identification ones, though... that seemed improbable.

Jake felt frustration as time passed, and he soon noticed a flaw in his approach. What he did only worked if he knew what was trying to Identify him. What was behind it - the intent. But could he do that in the real world? What if he modified his Shroud to only hide him from known types of Identify, and he met someone with an unknown one?

But... how could he protect himself from something he didn't know what was? How could he find out what the Identify was looking for? Before, he had figured out what kind of feeling the items gave, labeled them according to those feeling, and been right, but that had clearly been the wrong way to go about it.

Villy had baited Jake into thinking this was the way to go by telling him what to find... when the truth was that the actual hard part of this training was for himself to find out what it was. The entire setup had been a red herring.

Well... not entirely. For there were still patterns. That is when Jake had the realization.

Don't try to find out what the skill is looking for... just what parts of the Shroud are engaged when Identify comes.

Rather than find out what the Shroud was blocking and what the Identify was doing or looking for... Jake would just make up his own response to anything triggering the patterns stemming from an attempted Identity.

He would simulate the Identify on his end, so it got the result he wanted no matter what skill was used... no, he would modify it a little to tailor the responses to the most obvious kinds. The unknown one would just get race every time, maybe? He wasn't quite sure yet, but he wanted to try this different approach.

Like weaving a tapestry, Jake began to engage the Shroud. He had truly become able to both feel and, in many ways, interact with the divine skill over this entire training excursion. He began mixing and shifting the skill as it responded to his will. He did not truly know what he was doing; he just went by feel. When he went wrong, it felt wrong. When he did something right, his intuition told him he was on the right track. All of this was due to the thousands of Identify's constantly making him aware of if his manipulation had any effect. Meanwhile, he was trying to create a model of how it worked in his head. How he wanted it to work.

This has to be right, Jake thought as he focused everything he had, time not being a factor.

Yeah, it was not really at all what Vilastromoz had planned on him doing. He had expected Jake to begin to recognize the incoming signals and begin to slowly adapt his Shroud to block all of them one-by-one until he discovered the type the "hidden" Identify was. Or at least for him to realize that the hidden one was touching on many of the same concepts as the one regarding total power. The last ones analyzed what affinities someone was skilled in along with just general Identification ones, and Vilastromoz was surprised Jake hadn't realized that.

He watched on as Jake began manipulating the Shroud in unexpected ways. Ways that were originally meant to be the third phase of this training session, after Jake had recognized the last kind of Identify. If he did that, Jake should be able to correctly detect new kinds on the fly, too, by recognizing what parts of the Shroud corresponded to his own Records.

What Jake was doing was instead modifying not the viewable information but scrambling it on the fly whenever he was Identified. It was in some ways a safer method as it was more adaptable and could avoid someone with a really fringe set of skills to figure out Jake's real information, but on the other hand, it was incredibly risky and required him to almost react instinctua-

Ah, the Viper suddenly thought. Maybe that can work for him?

It was interesting to see the mortal skip, not just one step, but two.

A simplified metaphor for what he was doing would be someone trying to look at a piece of paper with Identify through a window that is the soul. When using Identify, the person is looking at a specific portion of the paper to get some information.

Shroud adds a layer to that window between the paper and the one using Identify, and by default, it is designed to just make it one-way, effectively blocking all forms of Identify as the information given makes no sense. If a laser is shined through one-way glass, it won't bounce back out, after all.

Vilastromoz had planned for Jake to make a portion of the window see-through. That was the first part of training. The second would be to more or less put a fake piece of paper on top of the real one with the information Jake wanted to give. That was meant to be the second part.

What he had done was skip that step. Instead, he would change parts of the window itself. He would make it distort what one saw through it, scramble the letters, and make the other person see a fake image. They were looking at the actual paper, but what their skill registered would be fake.

This method was, as said, better. It could only work due to Identify taking a moment to work – even for gods – due to the innate resistance every living being had to any kind of Record-scriving due to their Truesouls. The problem was, as also mentioned before, that one had to adapt this window as Identify came in, only having this brief moment to tailor a response.

In the future, this was akin to what Vilastromoz would have Jake do... but he had not expected him to learn it already. Moreover, as long as he succeeded...

System assistance will take over and automate the process.

Vilastromoz smiled. If he had told Jake to do this, there is no way the system would offer any assistance... it just worked like that. Personal realizations led to far more Records and even assistance than if someone told you what to do. This is also why the Viper never told Jake what he had to do, only what general goal he had to strive towards.

Because it could lead to happy little accidents like this.

The only minor problem was... that five-year timetable?

Yeah, that had to get pushed a little.

Miranda and Reika sat in the office as Lillian brought in some ordered food before leaving the two women to discuss. In truth, this was the first time it was just the two of them together, as all other get-togethers had been in larger settings or gatherings.

The reason was that this meeting was more of a private nature. Previously it had all been about the constructed compound or the procurement of crafting materials and stuff like that, but this time Reika had come to her with questions not fit for a meeting.

“Internal discussions have been had among the members of the Noboru clan, and an unsettling question has begun to emerge the more time we spend here... what are the plans for Haven in the long term?” Reika asked as she took a sip of her tea, not touching the food quite yet.

“In what capacity?” Miranda asked, having kind of expected this day to come. She was actually surprised it had taken them this long to bring up the perceived issue.

She had to admit, Haven did seem directionless. They were not expanding actively, weren’t recruiting powerful elites or individuals with nobility titles. They weren’t even making true alliances. They just made non-aggression agreements with everyone. Their only true allies were forged due to the relationship between Jake and another city owner and Sylphie just making friends, but even that was not a true alliance. Just personal friendships.

“What does Haven strive to be in a year? Ten? What will happen as all the other factions expand their territory, claim control of more dungeons, natural resources, and influence over the populace? Haven is currently growing, but that is only due to refugees still coming. What happens when that stops? Just natural growth?” Reika asked.

Miranda was a bit surprised at the level of thought the younger woman had put into Haven’s current situation, but she seemed to be misunderstanding something.

"I find it interesting you ask what we strive to be, almost as if Haven requires change," Miranda answered, having given this subject much thought before.

"Does it not?" Reika asked, raising an eyebrow. "The Court of Shadows, Holy Church, Risen, Valhal, my clan, as well as dozens of smaller factions and alliances are expanding every day. They are growing in influence while Haven remains stale. If this continues, it will be left in the dust."

Miranda just sighed. "This city belongs to Lord Thayne... Jake. I am only in charge of managing it and leading it in a direction that is to his preference, nothing more, nothing less. While I certainly take some liberties, I am also fully aware that this place only exists because of him and will cease to exist without him. At least without him, it truly would just be left in the dust."

"I do understand that," Reika answered in understanding. "But... I say this with the best intentions at heart... Jake is a bit of a moron when it comes to anything related to managing a city, much less an entire faction. Doing things his way is questionable at best."

Laughing a bit, Miranda wholeheartedly agreed, but she also had a bit of a different outlook due to having more context and insight into the multiverse. "That may be so, but ultimately, that is not for me to question. As long as Jake is here, Haven will stand. As long as Jake is here, Haven will be powerful. Power is not necessarily measured by size. I am certain that with the Sword Saint in your clan, you understand the influence a single outstanding individual can have?"

"Naturally, but that outstanding individual still requires a support-base. Jake can't go around collecting every metal he needs himself, grow all of his herbs, take care of his home, do all of the managerial tasks. Much less would he want to. Without proper territory, how do you plan on supporting his growth?" Reika asked pointedly.

"A very valid question, but you forget one thing. Where is Jake right now?"

“He left for something training-related with his Patron god,” Reika answered as Miranda saw a sliver of understanding suddenly appear on the other woman’s face.

“He went to the Order of the Malefic Viper. On Primordial 4, a Great Planet larger than I think any of us can even comprehend. You must remember, Jake doesn’t need Haven for support. Jake doesn’t need any of us to grow in power. He has the backing of an Order with age spanning back to nearly the beginning of the multiverse, able to throw more resources at the Chosen of their Patron god than Earth cumulatively has without batting an eye,” Miranda began.

“No, what Jake needs on Earth isn’t a huge support network. He needs a base. A place to rest and operate out of. That is the true role of Haven. My job is not to create a major faction vying for control of the planet, but to build a home he bothers coming back to.”

Reika stared a bit as she considered her words before asking. “So you see yourself as nothing more than a custodian?”

Miranda shook her head again. “I am not sure there is a word for it. I just know that I am the city leader of Haven and resident Verdant Witch.”

“That brings me to my second question, which seems more pertinent now than before. What are the intentions of the Patrons gods you two serve towards Earth? The Court, Church, and every other faction are making their cities outposts of their larger organization. Will Haven be the same? A branch of the Order of the Malefic Viper?” the young lady of the Noboru clan asked. Very much straight to the point, which Miranda appreciated.

“First of all, a bit of a misunderstanding. Jake isn’t really serving anyone, and neither am I solely serving my Patron gods. Jake is still my superior above even the gods, and from my understanding, the relationship between Jake and the Malefic One is far from one of servitude. It is difficult to understand or explain,” Miranda answered, clarifying something she felt like she had done more times than she could even remember to other officials and traders.

“Secondly, no, there are no plans to make Haven linked to the Order more than is unavoidable. This is why the temple allows any god to display a statue there as long as they follow our rules. We are aiming more to be a truly neutral force that also happens to have a very powerful backer. Something that is likely a necessity to stay neutral, to begin with.”

“I see,” Reika answered. “You are blessed by the Witches of the Verdant Lagoon, correct?”

Miranda nodded in confirmation.

“And to my understanding, the witches serve the Malefic Viper and the Order. Does that effectively make you Jake’s witch to the Viper’s Witches?”

“You can see it like that,” Miranda answered. That was also how her Patron gods had phrased it to h-

“Does that mean you also serve Jake’s “other” needs?” Reika asked, clearly teasing.

“No,” Miranda quickly clarified. “He is my employer. Don’t get it twisted.”

“You sure? There are rumors...”

“Oh, I know, I heard them. Something about the young lady of the Noboru clan spending all day down in the alchemy laboratory together with Lord Thayne,” Miranda teased back.

Reika was about to protest, but she just shook her head instead. “Fine, fine. Anyway, when will he be back? He has been gone for what, soon one and a half months?”

“I have no idea. All I know is that Jake is doing some important training and to not disturb him,” Miranda answered with a sigh.

The witches wouldn't even give any details, which Miranda suspected wasn't because they didn't want to tell her. They just genuinely didn't know what Jake was up to either, much less when he would return.

Chapter 397 - A Shroud Of Stars & School Life Dangers

Jake's perception-related abilities, primarily courtesy of his Bloodline, were quite mysterious and odd at times, even to himself. As he sat there in meditation and felt Identify after Identify hit him as nothing more than a background stream of information, he constantly felt how the skill worked.

He had the ability to know whenever someone looked at him. Jake always had that skill. Perhaps it was an extreme version of that sixth sense every human seemed to have, which made one aware someone was looking at them even when one shouldn't.

This was merely intuition and instinct. The same was true for Jake detecting danger... detecting anything related to anyone, really. But he also took it to the next level. While others could perhaps get a feeling someone was looking at them, Jake could feel where they were looking and sometimes even had an intuitive sense of what they were looking for.

Why this was relevant for programming the Shroud of the Primordial quickly became apparent the more time passed. For every passing moment that Jake just focused on sensing it and understanding it, the more powerful his bond with the Shroud became. The more the skill became familiar to him, the more control he could exert. It was like any other skill: the more you used it, the better you got at using it.

Now, Jake had to admit that, like with other skills, he had tried all his tricks to somehow make the skill more “his” but failed at every turn. No amount of arcane affinity could affect the Shroud, at least not at Jake’s current level of ability.

All of his other tricks were also in vain as Jake just kept trying his tactic of slowly figuring out whatever parts of the Shroud were triggered by Identify and then proceeded to control those. He slowly began forming a map and model of the Shroud and what parts were affected in his head. As with most other things, it was just a metaphysical representation that only really made sense to Jake... but that was fine. It wasn’t like Jake planned on teaching anyone else to use the skill.

Like this, time passed. Days turned to months as months turned to years. Jake barely registered any of this as he was too busy forming his model. Within his Soulspace, he looked towards the sky that was now no longer black, but filled with countless stars, forming hundreds of constellations. This was his metaphorical model of the Shroud... the sky that covered his soul.

As he stared up at them, certain stars repeatedly lit up as an Identify triggered them. He began rearranging the stars, creating new constellations out of them, or simply using the same stars to form identical constellations corresponding to another form of Identify.

Most of his time now was spent within his Soulspace by now.

The only reason any of this was possible was due to Jake feeling the Shroud so vividly now. It was to his soul like an atmosphere protecting a planet. The Shroud did not only create something new, but it also empowered some existing parts of the natural protection of Truesouls. All of it used concepts and levels of magic that were truly outside the scope of comprehension for someone like Jake.

This is why it was the stars in the universe. If the usual protection to a soul was the standard atmosphere, the Shroud of the Primordial constructed an entire galaxy of protection. And slowly, Jake was now beginning to comprehend many of the stars inhabiting that galaxy as he got nearer and nearer to his goal

Vilastromoz stared at Jake as Duskleaf appeared by his side.

"You called me... but he is not done?" his disciple asked.

"Nope."

"It has already been a bit over three months, hasn't it?" Duskleaf asked.

"To you, maybe. To Jake, it has been thirteen years, give or take," the Viper answered with a smirk. "But I have a feeling he is nearing comprehension."

"Partial comprehension of a divine skill in only thirteen years?" Duskleaf asked, nearly in disbelief. "Doing so in less than a few centuries in D-grade is remarkable."

Vilastromoz looked at his disciple as he raised an eyebrow. "I am surprised you aren't questioning a mortal who was less than thirty before this began how he could spend thirteen years sitting still in meditation."

Duskleaf just shrugged. "Wouldn't make any sense to? It seemed like it would be hard to do, so of course, Jake was all for doing it. He would probably have spent even longer with the alchemical puzzle box if he wasn't on a time limit back before the Trial of Myriad Poisons. I am more questioning if it won't be harmful to him to spend this long in distorted time. The utter backlash when he returns to Realtime should be enormous."

A valid concern. Besides the negative effects on Records, spending time in areas with dilated time did have the benefit of less or more Realtime passing in the rest of the multiverse, but to change back and forth was a process, not unlike diving deep beneath the water and going up again. This process was often slow, or the backlash would leave someone crippled as their bodies and souls slowly acclimated themselves. This was actually a method many chronomancers used to attack, primarily just to cause heavy confusion and disorientation.

However...

"Jake's affinity to the concept of time has only grown since last. This level of dilation was chosen not because it was the most he could handle, but because it was the most I could do without it having any backlash."

The constant actions of Jake's time-slowness trigger skill were odd in every way to the Viper. Primarily because it didn't make any sense at all. Vilastromoz had seen it activate hundreds of times already and had become clear on one thing – it consumed no mana, stamina, health, or any other resource. It was a skill that only consisted of will and conceptual manipulation.

It was Jake forcefully imposing his will upon the concept of time to temporarily create a relative time slowdown. Not because he made the world around him slow down, but because it untethered Jake from the usual rules of time to, in essence, be faster. This was not something a mage could learn... it was no spell or even a real skill in the Viper's eyes. In fact, based on the Viper's theory, it was only a skill because the system had forcefully made it one.

Vilastromoz knew of this skill a bit as Jake had spilled the beans about it when he explained his Bloodline. He had told how the system had upgraded it from rare to legendary and created a new one that even carried the same name as his Bloodline. Which meant Jake was the true Origin of the skill, or more accurately, his Bloodline was.

This meant the system had made it. Based it on something a Bloodline had done. A Bloodline existed outside the system much like a Transcendent skill, so what happens when a Bloodline does something that would break the rules and create a Transcendent skill under normal circumstances? There really was no unified answer, but the Viper was sure of one thing.

In Jake's case, it had chosen to limit the skill. It had capped it at Legendary. The internal cooldown of the skill was arbitrarily imposed, the actual slowdown and duration probably less than it truly should be. The reason?

Probably that Jake could, in theory, keep the skill he referred to as Moment active near-infinitely or at least every time he was attacked. Well, he would do so until he just outright died due to over-exhaustion if someone or something kept triggering the skill. However, it had removed this activation cost in trade of the cooldown, breaking another fundamental law. This meant the skill served both as a limiter and a protector. But it also meant it had plenty of room for growth, coupled with giving Jake a high affinity to time magic. Ah, but not necessarily using time magic, just tolerating it through continued exposure.

Now, there was the question: why did the system not just remove the skill? Vilastromoz was very clear on that one, at least. The system would never take away a skill given during a level upgrade unless you yourself chose to give it up through some upgrade. It also seemed like the system had chosen not to

offer him a skill he could similarly upgrade again to perhaps balance it out a bit. Of course, it was only a question of time before another one appeared anyway based on the ridiculous power of his Chosen's Bloodline.

"So, when he goes to the academy, should he learn some time magic?" Duskleaf asked.

"No, but he should learn about the concept of time and to control time energies for crafting purposes," Vilastromoz answered.

"Alright. By the way, I have been looking into tailors for the school unifo--"

"Jake was against that idea," the Viper cut him off with deep sadness.

"Oh..." Duskleaf said as he stared back at Vilastromoz. "You knew he would be against it and still made me figure out how to make the uniforms as well as embarrass myself by showing off those ridiculous designs? You told me Jake would no doubt want it as it held significant cultural importance to Earthlings. I should have known it was untrue... those clothes were borderline lingerie."

"You're just conservative; Jake is from a free-spirited world," Vilastromoz protested.

"I am not even--"

Suddenly they felt a change from the chamber Jake was in. Inside, Jake opened his eyes as if he had just awoken from a dream. Vilastromoz smiled as he felt the change, and Duskleaf at his side frowned deeply as he muttered.

“Level 169 Malefic Dragonkin?”

Jake suddenly felt everything click into place. Like a clockwork with thousands of gears all turning independently or in small groups linking up together and working flawlessly. Jake could almost feel the evident system assistance as he now had a clear sense of control over his Shroud of the Primordial.

Within his Soulspace, the sky of stars was fully alight, with endless patterns and constellations ready to form at any moment to give a response to an Identify. Something he had done right away as Duskleaf used the skill on him.

With a thought, Jake changed the default Identify to say he was a level 169 Malefic Dragonkin – the evolution he had skipped over. As for the level? Well, because he thought it was funny and he had childish humor.

He actually did want to make it 69 but found that he couldn't. He was still confined to his grade, it appeared, but within that, he could freely make himself appear to be any level from 100 to 199. He also instantly modified the part related to his Blessing and made it appear as if he had a Divine Blessing like Sylphie and-

“Jake, go lesser Blessing, or you will stand out a lot,” Villy said as he appeared in the room.

Jake did as told as he changed it, so it looked like he had a lesser Blessing. He also instantly cleaned up some of that heresy stuff by just blocking it in entirely. He hoped it worked, and luckily he didn't have to wait long before finding out.

Dusleaf also appeared in the room as he nodded in interest. "I can't even feel that overwhelming aura of a heretic anymore."

"Wait, you could feel I was a heretic all along?" Jake asked Dusleaf. "Also, hey, long time no see."

"Not that long," Dusleaf commented. "As for knowing you were one? Of course. It took a bit of time to build up, though. When you came here after the Tutorial, it was faint, but feeling you here practice made it obvious you were a high-tier heretic."

"Huh," Jake said. "And you never said anything?"

Dusleaf just shrugged. "I didn't see it be relevant."

Jake just looked at him a bit before shaking his head. He had nearly forgotten how little Dusleaf seemed to care about things unrelated to alchemy.

"Anyway... what now?" Jake asked Villy,

"Now, you need to get your affairs in order. Go back to Earth, handle things on that end, and prepare for your absence. Make sure there are no immediate disturbances, and then come back. Then... then it will be school time!" Villy said with a huge grin.

Jake had already resigned himself to his fate as he nodded. For some reason, he saw Duskleaf sigh in relief at this, making him realize the poor alchemist had been put through a lot of stuff without knowing if Jake would even attend.

"Is there anything I should know before going?" Jake asked.

"You will be informed of all the important stuff upon getting there. But there are a few things that no general orientation will tell you. With Shroud of the Primordial under your control, you can now disguise your level, Blessing, and the fact you are a heretic. For the level, I would recommend putting yourself well above your current one. A level 150 human being able to do what you do is suspicious. Also, you are at least centuries old if someone asks, okay?" Villy asked.

"Sure, I guess. But only one century old. I don't wanna look like a slow-ass weakling in front of the other kids," Jake agreed with a smirk.

"Fine, and I choose to ignore you just insulted more than ninety-nine percent of D-grades in the multiverse. Anyway, there is still one final thing to address. While the Shroud can hide nearly everything, it cannot hide your Bloodline. Anyone with a Bloodline will be able to feel you have one, and there are even special items made by many of the more powerful factions of the multiverse able to detect them. This works through anything. Unless you have a Bloodline that revolves around being undetectable or a Transcendent skill to hide it, any Bloodline holder will be instantly identified," the Viper explained.

Jake frowned. "Will this cause any problems?"

Maybe he could try to suppress his Bloodline like he had done before the system? No... that would also make it inactive or weaker, wouldn't it? That is considering he could even do it, which was a big if.

"That depends. Bloodlines are rare in the wider multiverse, but in the Order, many have them. Primarily because they come from ancient clans and families with an ancestor possessing one, having passed it down for generations. What you need to watch out for is being identified as a Bloodline Patriarch. Even if this is discovered, which it has a good chance to, remember to hide the actual specifics of your Bloodline."

"So... I have one giving me resistance to presences and some suppressive effects while amplifying my own in some form?" Jake asked.

They were parts of the Bloodline he had no way to hide. He couldn't fake being suppressed by someone more powerful than himself even if he wanted to, as they no doubt could detect him not being affected. His own aura also wasn't something he could hide, at least not in the long term.

"Yeah, and even then, that is no simple Bloodline. It will already cause some issues for you. You just have to take care, or you may be hunted down," Villy warned gravely.

Jake also turned more serious. He knew being powerful or standing out could lead to danger, and having a Bloodline was no doubt something that made him stand out. But it really didn't make any sense either.

"Will people within the Order really hunt me down for my Bloodline? What benefits would that even give them? And isn't it kind of stupid for those with powerful Bloodline to get killed?" Jake asked skeptically.

Villy suddenly completely changed his mood as he made a goofy smile. "Who said anything about killing?"

"What?" Jake asked, confused, catching Duskleaf facepalm off to the side.

"A strong young bachelor with a powerful Bloodline with seemingly no ties to large existing factions... you will need to be wary at all times," the snake god grinned.

"Wait... are you serious?"

"Hell yeah," Villy said, giving him a thumbs up. "Just try to keep it in your pants when it comes to the crazies, and if you do find yourself cornered, avoid making any kids or commitments and just keep it casual, okay?"

Jake once more began reconsidering that entire school thing.

Chapter 398 - School Preparations

Jake felt himself once more pulled through space. This time he focused on not trying to look anywhere or spread out his senses as he passed through that weird void. It went a bit faster than the first time, and Jake promptly found himself back in the middle of the grand monument.

In front of him stood Chris, who had clearly been doing some maintenance work. "Lord Thayne, you're back!"

Waving to the guy Jake suddenly got an idea. "Can you Identify me?"

"Sure!" the young man agreed without question. "It says human, but I can't see the level."

Jake nodded as he confirmed it worked as he intended. It would be a bit suspicious if people too low level to detect his façade would suddenly be shown a number they otherwise shouldn't be able to.

"Thanks, man, I got some stuff to handle back in Haven. See you around, and good job on the teleporter. Worked as intended."

"All according to the will of the Malefic One," Chris said in a tone giving Jake the creeps.

He headed out as he began flying towards the teleporter and back to Haven.

He had been told to wait a week before heading back again and going to the academy. He would use this time to make sure nothing bad had happened in his absence as Jake discovered he had been gone for months. He already kind of knew seeing how many levels Chris had gained, and he even felt the general level of power from the Fort had increased.

Flying over, he did notice something weird, though. He was faster than before. Jake frowned as he wondered what had happened, but he hadn't had any stat changes. One could say Jake had not progressed at all, for what he discovered was nearly fourteen years total – about ten times longer than he could even imagine it had taken.

But he quickly discovered this wasn't true. As he moved his wings, the energy moved through them more efficiently and controlled than before. This was without him even thinking about it, but just purely passive improvements. He couldn't hold back his curiosity as he tried to make an arcane bolt, but not much had changed there. He then tried to move some internal energy or even internal mana and found the process easier.

It appeared that spending that long comprehending his own Soulshape and the Shroud had led to unexpected benefits. Surely something to explore later.

Quite a bit had changed back at the Fort during his absence, primarily in that Arnold was done with his sphere, and from the looks of it, he had even expanded it a little. Jake would bet on the dude expanding downwards soon too.

Going to the teleportation place, Jake noticed two more had opened up. One led to a city run by an independent faction at the direction of the Noboru Clan, and the other was one that surprised Jake – it was linked directly with Sanctdomo.

He did discover that one was not active yet, though. Not that Jake had anything against them coming. In fact, he could recognize the gain in the trade connection. Ultimately, he would have Miranda decide how to handle it.

Teleporting back to Haven, Jake went straight back to his old lodge. He had already mentally informed Sylphie he was back and knew she was heading back with her parents. Jake didn't even have to stop by Miranda's office as she seemed to already know and had headed for his lodge.

Probably those tattling witches.

Jake flew into the valley and landed right in front of the porch. Miranda was already sitting there with Reika and Lillian, clearly waiting for him.

"Hey there," Jake said in greeting to the three women.

"Welcome back," Miranda said. "I hope it was a pleasant trip?"

"Yeah, it was," Jake said with a smile.

"How... how is this possible?" Reika said, confused. "How can you only be level 100? What did you do? Wait, why can I-"

"And now you just learned what I have been doing," Jake said as his level instantly changed to 180, getting a funny reaction from Reika, who looked even more confused.

"So, a method to hide your true identity when you go the Order of the Malefic Viper?" Miranda asked rhetorically as she nodded in understanding. "A wise decision that should avoid a lot of issues."

"That is the plan at least, and the Viper proposed another thing to make it look less weird," Jake said as he turned to Reika. "What would you say to come along to the academy run by the Order of the Malefic Viper?"

“Pardon?” Reika said, her level of confusion growing by the moment. “I doubt that would be a good idea. I am not a member of the Order and no believer of the Malefic One. I don’t see how it would make sense and if I would even want to go.”

“You complained about not having equal minds to spar with. The Order will have those in spades,” Miranda inserted herself.

“Yeah, and I would even advise you to pick a few of the best D-grade alchemists you brought with you from your clan. As for not being a believer and all that? It should be fine. At least the Viper said it would be as long as you don’t try to start some heretical movement. Also, finally, think about the benefits! I plan on using this, and I am sure we will get some good stuff,” Jake explained as he took out a certain token.

[High-tier Alchemy Token of the Malefic Order (Legendary)] – A token created by the Order of the Malefic Viper. This token represents a deal made with the Nalkar vampire line to grant a set number of the Nalkar Clan vampires membership to the Order and includes a set number of benefits. This token has never been turned in, and doing so may lead to certain rewards. Gives off an aura that encourages growth in toxic alchemical products.

Everyone looked at it for a moment before Reika brought up a poignant point. “It says it is only for Nalkar vampires.”

“Will be fine. We got it from the system event to explore Yalsten,” Jake said.

“... Won't that be extremely suspicious?”

Jake shook his head. "We will be either way. We would stand out for a plethora of reasons, but the biggest one will be that we all have Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races, making it obvious we are newly integrated into the multiverse. While apparently my existence as a Chosen has been kept a bit under wraps, the fact that a newly integrated individual was the cause of the Viper becoming more active again has been spread. So me suddenly showing up will be suspicious as hell. But what if a bunch of humans comes from an integrated universe with a token from an ancient realm? We will stand out, yes, but for a different reason."

"That does make sense. However, you will still be the only one blessed by the Viper," Miranda cut in. "Unless you are bringing Chris?"

"Nah, that would be a dick move considering he isn't even an alchemist," Jake said, shaking his head. "I will just be the leader who got the token and brought some of my fellow humans. It makes sense I would be the only one who got blessed for getting the token and to act as an ambassador. This is also the narrative we will spin."

"I am not certain me and others going will be a wise choice. Just some preliminary research makes it clear it may be dangerous. I even heard about some poison-sharing ritual or something," Reika voiced her concerns.

"Yeah... that..." Jake recognized. "I think it is obvious you won't have the professions related to the Viper, so just avoid drinking stuff, and honestly? If someone of a similar grade and level of power can make a poison able to outright kill you, then you honestly just suck a bit, you know? So just tell people not to be idiots."

Reika looked a bit offended but also seemed to get his point.

"So how many should go?" she asked. "And will Miranda come along also?"

“No, I think I am more well-known and recognizable than Jake in the Order. I have interacted with several members in the realm of the Verdant Witches, and I have a divine Blessing I am unable to hide. My presence would be a dead giveaway,” Miranda explained.

“Wait, doesn’t that mean you know more members of the Order than me?” Jake asked in realization.

“Naturally. But it also means they don’t know you, and not much information has been shared. Not even your grade, race, or anything directly related to you. None of the other factions have shared much either. It seems like there is a huge need-to-know-basis view of information in the multiverse,” Miranda answered.

Jake chose to not consider the bizarreness of the situation but just referred to Reika again. “So, thoughts? Also, you can bring ten people tops.”

“I will need to go and consult the others,” Reika answered, clearly unsure. “Will it be possible if we go to return again if it isn’t deemed suitable?”

“I don’t know,” Jake answered. “But while it may be possible, I would choose based it on it not being easy. Choices without easy takebacks are more fun anyway.”

Jake naturally knew it would be possible, but if he was being honest, he didn’t want to drag people along who didn’t want to commit.

Reika nodded in understanding as she left to consult with the ones from her clan. Miranda had stayed together with Lillian, as they still had some business to handle. But first:

“Do you think she will go?” she asked.

“Of course,” Jake answered with a smirk. “Even if she is doubtful and isn’t sure it’s a wise choice, she is starved for knowledge. This isn’t an opportunity she will pass up. The only thing holding her back is that old dilemma of personal benefits over what is best for the clan.”

In reality, Jake offered it as much for the benefit of their clan as for her. The Noboru clan did not have any real heritages besides the newly obtained vampire one, meaning they had far less to work with than others. Jake wanted to at least give the old man a helping hand by training a few alchemists for him. He was fully aware they probably wouldn’t hold any loyalty towards Jake and the Order, but he really didn’t care.

Neither did Villy, who had proposed this entire scenario.

“Alright,” Miranda said. “Now for a breakdown of what happened in your absence and future plans while you’re gone...”

The next hour consisted of Miranda bringing Jake up-to-speed about the state of Haven and its inhabitants. Many more D-grades had appeared, and the forest had become a common hunting ground. Entrances to the underground had also been found spread out throughout the forest. Maps were being drawn, and everything was just expanding.

On the topic of the teleportation circle to Sanctdomo, Miranda had not activated it due to Jake not being there to approve it. Which he promptly did, not seeing a huge reason not to. He doubted they would create any unnecessary trouble, and if they did, there were still people back in Haven, and Jake was never more than a teleportation away.

Not that he thought his presence was necessary. After all, Arnold and Sylphie would be there, along with people like Sultan and even Miranda, who he could feel was no slouch either. Witches were notorious for being difficult to fight in their own territories and coupled with her abilities as a City Lord, she was a defensive powerhouse.

They kept talking a while longer, and Sylphie also soon came. She wouldn't come along to the Order even if she could, mainly because Jake knew she would be bored. Better she stayed on Earth and hunted, even if it looked like she would soon surpass Jake's own level.

Not to worry, he would catch up.

Considering he hadn't seen the big guy in a while, he also went down to check on the Cave Troll, where he found a sprawling garden. That is also where Jake came to learn what the troll had been named. Miranda had come along and said that to the surprise of everyone, the troll seemed to have named itself Rick. A few builders had been around the cave to help with the garden and mainly spoke to the troll for fun. The troll had become able to speak a few simple words due to that and kept pointing at himself while saying Rick.

Jake came to learn he was actually trying to say rock because he wanted certain rocks for the garden and his cave, but by the time anyone found out, the name Rick had stuck. Miranda said it wasn't that bad, though, as when they did a vote among construction workers, the winner was Trolly McTrollface, which even Jake thought was a bad name. It should at least have been Trollie and not Trolly.

As for the garden, the troll was doing a banger job. Jake had mainly planted herbs not requiring much assistance to grow to begin with, and he was amazed at the troll's care when handling them. He considered getting Rick some gardening tools or something, but it turned out the troll really didn't need any help with magic being a thing.

After everything in Haven was handled, there was still a week before Villy had told him to return with potential followers, and Jake decided to spend that time just relaxing and touching base with some people.

He took a trip to Skyggen through the teleporter to spend a few days with his parents as he would probably be gone for a while. Not that he hadn't just been gone for a while already, so it was a good time to visit. Like everywhere else, Skyggen had grown even more, and Jake faintly felt that the Umbral Lotus deep beneath the ground was closing in on being a high-tier legendary item.

Caleb was not around but was out hunting and leveling up with other elites, so it was just Jake, his parents, and Maja for the three days he stayed there. Jake did still do a bit of alchemy while there, but only just to make some potions and stuff to leave for Skyggen and Haven while he was gone.

On the third day at Skyggen, Miranda used her skill to contact Jake and said that Reika had chosen to follow him with eight other D-grade alchemists, meaning they would go as ten. Villy had said the maximum would be twelve, so ten was a good number.

When he got back to Haven, he had a brief talk with Sylphie before she dove into the dungeon beneath the city to have some fun down there. She was going alone for the rewards, while her parents would do it the two of them at a later point. He then returned to his alchemy lab and began popping out potions until the day to leave arrived.

Reika had gathered with the other alchemists in front of the monument that served as a teleportation circle. She was together with eight other highly-talented alchemists from the clan, all of them in the D-grade, even if some had only evolved recently.

They had debated long and hard if going was a good idea and ultimately decided to go. Reika knew that even if she was talented herself, she was only one alchemist and couldn't support the entire clan. She was also specialized, making her not able to make many of the commonplace products.

So even if it was dangerous, they had to go.

A few minutes after they arrived, so did Jake and Miranda.

"Hey, you're all here," Jake said. He had shown up in his usual equipment and was wearing his mask, making it obvious he planned on keeping up his relative anonymity. On that subject, they had discussed if they would have to sign a contract or something to ensure they would keep it a secret, but Jake had called it unnecessary. Who would believe them anyway if they claimed he was the Chosen or anything like that? A being of a higher grade would trust their own senses far more than the babbling of some weakling.

"We are all ready," Reika answered with a nod.

"Great," Jake said. "Just a heads-up, the teleportation can get a bit wobbly, but there shouldn't be any real danger; it just feels weird."

Reika and the others nodded as they all got in position, with Miranda having the final word.

"I will contact you if something comes up, and of course, when it is time to return. There is still a bit of time till the second World Congress, and I naturally expect you to attend that," she said.

"Naturally, we will," Reika echoed. She wasn't sure if they could return, but Miranda clearly believed it possible, which was reassuring. But for her question... who would ever forget something as important as the World Congress and not make it a priority?

Jake had totally forgotten the World Congress was a thing.

Chapter 399 - A New Era

Another trip through the void, and Jake found himself back in the tower. At the same time, nine other people appeared. Two of them fell like puppets with their strings cut, another fell over and began throwing up, and three people fell to the floor as they screamed and held their heads.

Reika looked pale as a ghost as she breathed heavily and looked around in fright. Jake and one other guy were the only ones who seemed completely okay. Tossing the other guy a look, Jake recognized him as one of the space mages, so it kinda made sense.

"Why was it so...?"

"Rough? It just is, but it gets better with every teleport, no worries," Jake explained as he kept looking off to the side. As the only one, it seemed.

"Villy, what are you doing?"

“Showing you where the teleporter to the Order is,” the Viper said as he stood right beside Jake.

“And why am I the only one who knows you are here?”

“Because that is nicer than knocking out everyone else by unleashing a bit of my aura to talk to you while not hidden? Besides, you got that whole telepathy thing down already, so it doesn’t really matter, now does it? Anyway, gather up the cannon fodder, and let’s move on,” Villy answered.

Jake frowned a bit but relayed the information, acting like he knew where to go while just following the Viper. At least he tried to, but they went through the same hallway Jake had and faced the windows displaying the city.

“How...”

“Is this?”

“Wha-?”

Reika didn’t say anything but looked questioningly at Jake.

“Big city, probably in the trillions,” Jake just said.

“So this is the Order of the Malefic Viper?” an alchemist asked, gawking out the window.

“No, the Order is located beneath the ground. We will get there through teleportation,” Jake answered.

“How large is this... place? Is it even a planet?” another alchemist came in.

“It is a planet, and as for how large? No clue, but super big. Not sure about the details. It isn’t like I have a god standing beside me who could answer all these questions,” Jake said with a smirk.

“Heh,” the Viper snickered. “Would be boring to just tell you, but let me share this... the mantle layers contain galaxies.”

“How the hell does that make any sense?” Jake asked skeptically.

“By it being a celestial object larger than something capable of comprehension by the mortal mind? It may seem overwhelming now, but to a god, it is manageable,” Villy shrugged.

The other alchemists kept discussing a while, still gawking out through the windows as they approached the teleportation gates. When they got close to the room with the teleporters in them, Jake felt a presence within. At the same time, Villy also turned to him.

"I will leave you here. The guide should take you to where you need to go and handle things from here. Good luck with everything, and have fun!"

With that, the Viper disappeared, as Jake relayed: "See you... even if I know you are still watching."

"But I am always watching, so this doesn't count," Villy sent back.

"Heads up, people," Jake said as they approached the gate.

Instantly they all quieted down and became alert. All signs of casualness were gone as Jake took the lead, acting as the leader based on their plans. It also only made sense he was the leader as he currently made himself appear to be a level 181 human, 31 levels above what he actually was. According to Villy, this made Jake still considered very powerful for his level, just not ridiculously so.

The group made it up to a gate, and they entered with a final look exchanged between him and Reika.

When he opened it, he finally laid eyes on the individual that had been waiting. Before Jake stood a creature with deep red skin, yellow pupils, two horns growing from his head, but with a humanoid shape. He was even wearing a well-made dapper suit and a hat while carrying a small crystal tablet.

Is that a god damn demon?

[Demon – lvl 199]

It was a god damn demon.

Jake had never seen one of those before, and the cogs in his head instantly started turning. Were demons considered monsters or enlightened? Did the dude in front of him have a class and a profession or only either? Maybe neither?

Unluckily, it wasn't a good time to ask as the demon spoke.

"Ah, welcome. Place of origin?" the demon asked in a deep voice, making it sound slightly inhuman, like using a voice changer to make the voice deeper.

"Ninety-third Universe, Earth," Jake answered promptly.

The demon manipulated the tablet a little. "Ah, here we are. Let me see... a token, huh? Can you please present it?"

Jake did as asked and took out the high-tier token to show. The demon looked at it for a while, actually showing a bit of emotion for the first time. "Impressive job acquiring it. However, we cannot accept it as the promise associated with it has expired, and you not being of the Nalkar line. I would instead suggest presenting it to the Nalkar house within the Order for compensation."

“I was told the token was required for entry?” Jake asked. He knew it wasn’t but just wanted to act the part of someone ignorant. Well, more ignorant than he actually was. Also... there was a Nalkar house?

“Partly, but it is primarily the act of obtaining it the Order places importance on, and the Blessing of the Malefic One is the true proof anyway. Now, if you will, please proceed to the second teleportation circle where you will be taken to the others,” the demon continued.

Others? Jake asked himself as he followed the instructions.

Vilastromoz saw Jake go with his little mortal followers as he teleported away. He smiled as he now had his own matters to deal with, even if these matters were partly Jake-related.

The entire situation with him attending was a tricky one for sure. Vilastromoz had wanted Jake to come to the Order from the beginning and made plans to make it possible. For how long had he made plans? Well, since the day he gave Jake the Blessing for the first time.

Earth was not the only planet in the ninety-third Universe, and from that day on, the Viper had begun spreading his influence. He had already blessed hundreds of other individuals on other planets and began establishing himself. Earth was, in the end, just a small blip in the broader world, even if it stood out.

All sorts of enlightened races like humans and elves had been blessed, but why would the Viper limit himself? One had to remember, Vilastromoz was a beast, not a human or any other enlightened species. This meant the majority of his Blessings had gone out to other monsters.

On all planets, beasts and monsters had many advantages in the initial stages. Natural treasures of extreme power allowing them to jump grades in only a couple of months. This did come with restrictions, but these restrictions only counted for their own planet and universe.

What did this mean? This meant they could freely leave. Additionally, C-grade was when all monsters got access to the Polymorph racial skill, allowing them to make changes to their bodies. This change was often just small edits to claws, morphing to remove some natural weaknesses and such things, but the unique rarity skill could do so much more.

When Vilastromoz had been C-grade, he had begun experimenting with the skill and learned to turn himself into a humanoid form. The same knowledge he had now passed down to those beasts, meaning that more than a hundred C-grade beasts and monsters with his Blessing had already entered the academy. Not all of them had anything to do with alchemy, but that didn't mean the place wouldn't have value for them.

Now, what did this have to do with Jake going? Well, this was a damn powerful shield. Vilastromoz already knew the basic assumption would be that his Chosen would be a beast considering he had been one himself. This is what most gods did, after all. No one would expect it to be a human, that was for sure.

Coupled with all the other things planned, it should at least slow down his discovery, even if some of those obfuscation methods did have issues.

Faking age was a bit more complicated than other things, but the Viper had ways, and reasonable doubt was all one needed. Time dilation was plentiful, and sometimes it was better to not speak any truth or lies but simply leave things up to ambiguity. Everyone knew certain natural realms existed where time moved differently. Everyone knew system events would distort time, and while some events were for everyone, it was possible to enter more personal challenges, like system-made Trial Dungeons with changed time.

People would also ask if Jake had gone to Nevermore or not? Had he spent all five or so years there in D-grade already? Most would assume yes just based on his level.

So many things he had done could be explained away with handwaving or simply that he was a genius picked by the Viper. Perhaps the best genius of the bunch, but was he a Chosen-level genius? What even was a Chosen-level genius?

Jake would still be a primary suspect. But the thing is, while it would make people treat him better, it would not make anyone treat him as a Chosen. No one would simply dare assume he was the Chosen as that would be disrespectful in itself.

But as said, all Vilastromoz needed was enough reasonable doubt. A seed to be planted with more than one candidate. That is, assuming the Chosen was even at the academy. No one could know if he was or wasn't, and rumors had even been spread that he wouldn't go but was trained by the Viper himself. A partial truth spread with the Viper's ushering.

Besides, the majority of the focus would be on the C-grades, not a bunch of humans who had arrived later than others.

Finally, perhaps the biggest point: no one would expect the Chosen to hide his identity at all. Why would he? Everyone in the multiverse tended to be overly invested in status, and what was bigger than the Chosen of a Primordial? Also, why would the Viper not want his Chosen discovered? The entire logic of hiding would be lost on most.

But... Vilastromoz truly believed this was best for Jake. Also, he knew his pal would leave if he got too overwhelmed with attention, and as much as the Viper didn't expect anything from Jake besides

growing powerful, then he still would prefer him to study and get involved in the Order. Both for the Order and Jake's sake.

The day he met Jake, the Viper had resolved himself to return to the multiverse at large. He had begun expanding the organization once more, bringing in hidden gods who had once been aligned with him, and made one thing clear: he was fully back and would reclaim his status.

Before his return, the Order of the Malefic Viper had only one official god as part of it. The Lord Protector, Snappy, was just a caretaker who ensured no one would dare try to eliminate the Order, but he was just there to keep it running, if barely.

Duskleaf had hidden as well, not caring about the Order as an organization. It was a hollow shell, and even if that hollow shell had managed to retain some semblance of power, it was feeble. However, this decline had not come instantly. So one question was very obvious:

How many gods had ascended during the many years the Viper had been in isolation?

The number of gods who had stayed was zero, but that didn't tell the entire story. Nothing had been done to keep any of them after becoming gods, and while he was disappointed none had stayed to strengthen the Order, he couldn't truly blame them. They had spread out across the multiverse and done their own things as the Order no longer offered them much. In many ways, it was to be expected.

But... now he was back.

He had called upon the Hidden Ones. Friends, allies, and comrades of the past. Loyals who had stayed such for eras. Individuals who had been part of the Order and still held loyalty towards it or Snappy.

With a single step, Vilastromoz pierced the void as he appeared before the realm of Snappy. With another, he entered, and a third, he appeared on the highest platform that also held the monument he had made Snappy so long ago – the one that had made his friend aware of his return.

Vilastromoz smiled as figures began appearing around him. The void repeatedly splintered as auras descended one after another. The first ones were triplet witches with the auras of Godqueens, and naturally, Snappy himself giving off an aura surpassing even that.

Dozens more appeared, taking on a myriad of forms. Some were mere shadowy specters, some were anonymous avatars, and some had chosen to come with their true bodies, showing their loyalty by willingly entering the realm of a god more powerful than themselves.

After a few seconds, the last arrival was there, as more than five hundred gods waited with bated breath.

“It has been a while,” the Malefic Viper spoke. “Many familiar faces in the crowd and a few newcomers.”

He spoke as he infused his voice with power as the entire realm vibrated.

“Firstly, you have chosen wisely to show up today. I do notice a few glaring absences, but no worries, I am sure it was genuine mistakes on their parts to not even make their unavailability clear.”

The words were said jokingly, but the threat was clear. Vilastromoz knew that he needed to show power after being gone so far. Confidence. He needed to prove he was still the Malefic Viper of old. Killing the Brimstone Hegemon had been a start, but far from enough.

“Secondly, I welcome all of you back. Too long have I been gone. Too long has what once was withered and decayed. Too long has my name been forgotten, and my influence disappeared. So if my actions have not made it obvious already, then let my words make it clear: the Malefic Viper is back, and the Order shall rise once more.”

For the first time since his return, the Malefic Viper released it all. Every shred of his power and presence flared out as the realm shook, and more than half of the gods present buckled and fell to their knees. Their projections flickered, and the shadows began losing form.

Only a few could stand putting up a front to appear unaffected, but all of them had the same expression.

“Thirdly, rumors have been spread far and wide. The Malefic Viper is no threat anymore... his power has waned. He has stagnated. The moment he is out of his realm, he is nothing than a target for those who wish to claim the title of slaying a Primordial.

“I find this all so interesting. Who the fuck do they think they are talking about? Stagnation? Waned power? Do they think I have done nothing for eras on end? Do they think I have merely wallowed in despair? I pity such fools. So let me set the record straight: there is still no god in existence I fear. There is still no god in the multiverse that dare claim they can defeat me ... and if there is, I would gladly prove them wrong.”

He felt the auras of many of the gods flare up around him as the Viper grinned. A projection of a snake appeared above him as he opened his arms and declared.

“It is time to come home to the Order. Time to rebuild and reclaim what was ours. For the Order of the Malefic Viper to not only become what it once was but something far greater. I am not returning to be satisfied with what I once had, but to take whatever I desire, no different from the past.

“Let the ninety-third Era of the multiverse be the Era of the Order of the Malefic Viper!” Vilastromoz declared as he felt the auras of the gods flare up around him. Shadows were replaced with true bodies, and avatars swapped for the genuine product.

The auras synchronized, and no words were spoken, but the intent was clear. The Malefic Viper grinned as he felt the gazes of worship upon him once more.

The Era of the Malefic Viper... and his Chosen, Jake Thayne.

Chapter 400 - A Diverse Crowd

Jake was transported once more together with Reika and the others as they went onto the teleportation circle pointed out by the demon. He hadn't even gotten the name of the horned guy but assumed they would probably meet again sometime in the future if he was in charge of the teleportation place.

When he and the others arrived at the other side of the teleportation circle, they found themselves in a new hub of sorts. They walked a bit forward as they all stopped and just looked around.

“Move,” someone said, as Jake and the others just stood there. Jake looked up and saw a large figure around four meters tall with an incredibly bulky build. Jake used Identify as he stepped to the side, the others hurrying after him.

[Ogre – lvl 178]

The ogre grunted and went on the circle they had just gotten off. Jake didn't like the attitude of the ogre but didn't wanna start shit five seconds after arriving. Instead, he hurried the group forward as someone walked up to them.

"New arrivals of the ninety-third Universe for the academy?" the person said as Jake confirmed it was yet another demon.

[Demon – lvl 192]

It was a woman with red skin and glowing orange eyes. She was wearing close to nothing but had at least covered the essential parts. She had two wings on her back and a tail as well as two small horns, with her proportions on the plentiful side, and Jake instantly knew.

It's a gosh darn succubus!

The group behind him looked a bit uncomfortable, but Jake just answered. "That's right, we just arrived."

"Great! Please follow me. You are the second-to-last group we expect today. Oh, and be advised that no violence is allowed within the meeting room and will be met with swift execution," she said with a bright smile as she led them towards a wall with a magic circle on.

She took out a token that flashed with light as the magic circle was replaced with a magical rectangular gate leading into what looked like a large leisure room. “Just through here.”

Jake took the lead as he gave her a nod and thanked her in passing, Reika and the eight other alchemists following behind closely. He noticed Reika and the others looking around with expressions of fear, interest, and curiosity, but most of all carefulness. Jake himself had also been rather curious as he saw many interesting creatures, but maybe he was a bit more used to it than other humans?

Going through the gate in front of them, Jake instantly felt the warmth hit him as the interior was quite cozy. It was a large space, and Jake saw it already contained around two hundred people. All eyes landed on Jake and his group when they entered, at first with little interest, but in tandem with Jake feeling the Identify's hitting him, their eyes lingered.

It made sense. Currently, Jake was showing himself to be level 181, which made him instantly stand out. As he inspected them back, the first thing he noticed was just the sheer diversity. He saw all kinds of races, all of them of humanoid build, but their power and appearances varied greatly.

There were several smaller groups, which Jake guessed were groups that had come together. He quickly Identified a bunch of the leaders of the groups and saw their levels.

[Elf – lvl 142]

[Human – lvl 138]

[Dwarf – lvl 135]

The levels were relatively high, though lower than Jake's by a fair deal. Also, one had to remember Jake had really not progressed as much as he probably should in recent times. As a reference, Reika, who walked with him, was comparable to these leaders at level 139.

However, he quickly noticed a discrepancy. The room was split into three parts. One part was with these leaders in it, but the further in there was another part slightly elevated by walking up some stairs, with a final smaller part at the top. Up at the second level, Jake felt the auras of those present and instantly knew that every one of them was powerful. Definitely good enough to give him a good fight.

The first of which was a scaled man, but not the usual scales. It was fish scales, and at his neck, he had gill-like growths. His body was dark blue, and Jake's Identify made it clear it was quite the exotic race.

[Gillkin – lvl 165]

Jake had no idea what a Gillkin was before today, but hey, now he knew. The gillkin was one of five leaders of groups in this elevated area, with the next two a bit more human.

[Human – lvl 159]

[Elf – lvl 166]

They were a bit more human in that one of them was literally a human, while the other was an elf. Seeing the elf confirmed to Jake that elves were just humans with pointy ears. They were also perhaps a

little bit thinner, but nothing really noticeable. Either way, these two were not overly interesting. The human was strong, sure, but compared to someone like the Sword Saint? Eh.

He was probably about the level of Caleb or Carmen, maybe? Probably not even that, if they were equal levels. The next three leaders were a bit more interesting.

[Risen – lvl 149]

First of all, a Risen. It was a man who looked very human, but Jake felt the man's aura, and instantly one thing was clear... he was blessed by the same god as Casper. Why would someone blessed by the Blightfather be here? Also, how the hell do I know that he is blessed by him?

Not questioning it more than necessary, Jake regarded the last one on the second level of the hall.

[Harpy – lvl 168]

It was a woman with feathers growing on her body and two wing-like arms. So, yeah, a harpy pretty much as described in most fiction. Jake had to admit she did look a bit off with a beak for a mouth, and the claws on her hands made it look hard to do proper alchemy, but what did he know?

These people on the second level had all been interesting in their own right, but the one who stood out the most was the man who stood alone at the highest section of the room. A reptilian figure with black and dark green scales that instantly gave Jake certain flashbacks, and he had to admit... he was taken by surprise.

[Malefic Dragonkin – lvl 185]

Jake stared up at the man who looked back and met his gaze. For a moment, the world stood still as they sized up each other, and Jake was certain.

Strong...

Incredibly strong. The aura he displayed was on another level from anyone else present, and moreover, Jake felt something more impressive. A Divine Blessing, given by Villy himself. A cursory glance made it obvious that if anyone in this room was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, it was the guy in front of him.

Jake couldn't help but wonder where the hell the guy had come from.

"Villy... who is this guy?" Jake asked.

"Someone who got very close to becoming another Progenitor and one of my better investments so far. Comes from a pretty small and shitty planet, though, where relative peace has already been established as the few C-grade beasts reached a stalemate. The guy was originally some weird moleman or something, and I must admit I like the dragonkin look more," Villy explained casually, adding on. "And before you ask the obvious question of how all these people managed to teleport here when I said it was so difficult to you, the reason is that the monument is a two-way teleporter. These people went on a one-way trip and have effectively abandoned their planets for good."

Jake listened and acknowledged the Viper's words as he kept staring at the Dragonkin. The man stared back as Jake smiled beneath the mask. He teleported across the room with a single step, and another took him up two flights of stairs as he appeared right in front of the menacing figure at the highest level of the room.

Two auras flared in the room as the Malefic Dragonkin tried to exert his dominance, but Jake just smiled as his legendary Pride of the Malefic Viper activated to boost his own presence. Jake felt the attention of someone who had been observing the room but paid it no mind as he expected it to be some peacekeeper. The attention was not hostile but more curious at what was happening.

With Pride, Jake was ashamed to admit that his own presence barely matched the other party. He was naturally still unaffected by what the other guy did, and he consciously tried to avoid mixing in anything Bloodline-related, but still. The two of them stood there for a few seconds as both their auras flared before they both calmed down, ending the metaphorical dick-measuring contest.

The dragonkin looked at Jake as he smiled. "Draskil."

Jake, assuming it was the guy's name, answered in kind. "Hunter."

With a small change, of course. Jake had decided to not go with his real name but just went with Hunter. Hunter was a real name anyway, so it should be fine, right? Heck, he had a kid at his school called Hunter while growing up, so it wasn't that weird.

The dragonkin just nodded as Jake felt the gazes of everyone present upon them. Jake knew this wasn't a good strategy if the goal was to stay inconspicuous, but he also knew that was never going to happen. He wasn't good at acknowledging authority, and with his level displaying himself at 181, it didn't make sense for him not to stand at the highest level either.

Even non-chosen geniuses would be a bit arrogant, right?

He did feel a bit bad about leaving Reika and the others at the lowest level. She didn't even try to follow but just led the others to stand at a nearby wall.

As he stood there, the dragonkin turned to him. "Challenge Dungeon?"

Jake was a bit surprised but nodded. "Yeah."

"Met god?"

Jake nodded again. "Yeah."

"Scary god, but powerful," Draskil said, and by now, Jake was sure of one thing.

"Villy... is this guy... you know?"

"Simple? Hell yeah. He was a half-beasts-like creature just half a year ago, and the mole people's language was very simplistic. But don't misinterpret him as stupid," Villy answered.

“Also, you had more challenge dungeons?”

“I had a bunch of old ones stashed away that I decided to toss out there after I decided to return the multiverse, and the system happily accepted them. It likes to spread powerful legacies to new universes, and mine were pretty scarce,” the snake god answered.

Jake mentally acknowledged this as the teleportation gate lit up again, and a crowd of people walked in. It was a mixed group of humans and elves, with the strongest two, a human man and an elf woman, at the front. Both were only around 140, so nothing interesting there.

With them also entered the succubus from before. She threw a look around the room and lingered a bit on Jake and Draskil before regarding all the others too.

“Alright, with everyone here, let me begin the preliminary instructions. First of all, have one of these each,” the succubus said as she waved her hand and sent crystals flying out into the room. “On those, you will see the rules of the academy and some other practical information. Regard it in your own time.

“Before you enter the academy, there will be a test. This test will take place within a dungeon designed specifically to perform these tests for outsiders and will give the Order an understanding of you. This trial is performed on an individual basis. You will get a final score from the test that will determine your placement in the academy. Ah, but don’t fret, you can’t fail this test per-se, so even if you perform horrendously and manage to complete the dungeon, you will still be allowed access to the academy. Note we only do this as you are natives of a newly integrated universe, so you all have it a bit easier.”

Jake nodded along as he listened, not sure if he should be surprised at the use of a dungeon to perform the test. Because damn, was that smart. With the dungeon’s ability to have a “save state” of sorts,

everyone would enter with the same premises. It was a bit like the Altmar thing in the dungeon under Haven, actually.

This also made him consider what more ways the system could be made use of. He already knew a lot of architecture was based on spatial expansion, and teleportation seemed quite commonplace. Man, what else was there?

He was starting to get a bit excited to see what kind of trial or test the Order could have conjured up.

“Now, please follow me to the location of the dungeon,” the guide demon said as she took out the token again, and the door they had entered from initially lit up with runes as a new gateway opened.

As he looked on, Jake began to have a feeling teleportation circles and gates were more commonplace than actual doors within the Order.

An earthquake struck the area as the entire mountain shattered from the pressure. The screams of beasts a symphony of his making. The large, pathetic worm rose from the ground as it squirmed, attempting to hold onto life. A futile attempt as the power difference was too massive. Nearly as massive as the difference in size between the creature only slightly larger than a man and the worm over two hundred meters long.

Flesh was crushed as the beast fought back. Earth moved as the world became a weapon, pillars of earth rising as if to spear the sky. Yet when they hit the impenetrable shield, they shattered like feeble sand.

The body of the worm hardened as the telekinetic power was interrupted, sending the beast falling to the ground. A worthwhile effort that was ultimately futile as his claw turned golden. A flash lit up the

environment as the massive beast received five gashing wounds in its side, creating a torrent of blood that made it rain crimson.

Perhaps it was time he got done playing around. Another ivory claw was raised as the world was enveloped in gold that soon collected itself into a singular golden orb crackling with energy. With a simple motion, it was crushed as a beam shot out. The worm tried to block as a new mountain of rock appeared, but it mattered little when it faced supreme power.

You have slain [Earthern Wormlord – lvl 198] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

Levitating down to the ground, he used a simple motion to disperse all the soil and dust, revealing what had been hidden and protected within the mountain. A single crystal that had served as little more than a nurturing natural treasure. Truly a pathetic underutilization.

The ivory claw touched upon the now unbound Pylon of Civilization as a new master had claimed the territory. The environment instantly changed as the authority of a King was established. A level was gained as he walked his path of conquest and took yet another domain under his control.

Just one of many for the Fallen King to rightfully claim.