

## Hunter 411

### Chapter 411 - A Legendary Warrior

Right away, Jake knew this time was different than any prior. The feeling he got was one not from a perspective... it was one where he was purely an observer of the world - of everything that happened. He was not bound by the figures in the Records but merely a historian gazing upon it as he experienced reality as it once was.

Before him was a vast wasteland of red rock, stretching infinitely into the distance. Pillars of sizes incomprehensible to him marked the surface. On top of two of these pillars stood figures, each spread thousands of kilometers apart, yet they spoke as if they were right next to one another.

“You really don’t know when to surrender, do you?” one of the figures said. It was a primarily black dragon but with a dark green sheen to its scales. Spikes of pure power covered its spine as it had a lithe form, yet it still looked more powerful than ever. It was only about twenty meters long, and Jake guessed this was a purposefully smaller form.

This was Jake’s first time seeing the Malefic Viper in this form. This was clearly an evolved form of the B-grade dragon, but based on the sheer difference and aura, Jake reckoned this wasn’t A-grade anymore but a fully-fledged S-grade being. Late S-grade, based on his instincts.

Across from him stood a man. Just a regular human from the looks of it with a half-burnt beard, his armor was broken now, making him wear little more than a loincloth and a simple-looking axe in his hand. It looked worse than the average one from any hardware store as it was rusty and chipped.

Needless to say, this man wasn’t just a regular human despite his looks. He gave off an aura of an S-grade, but one quite a bit weaker than the Malefic Viper. Perhaps he was only mid-tier S-grade? Jake wasn’t sure, but he had a strong feeling that was the case.

This man breathed heavily as he looked around him. "Damn, everyone else just left like that?" he muttered.

"It appears that to them, failure of the event was preferable to death. A logical choice you seem to not comprehend," the Malefic Viper answered.

"Bah, why leave when I still got fight left in me!?" he said with a huge grin.

The Malefic Viper looked down on the human as a scoff resounded through the empty wasteland. "You humans and your hubris. Forever ignorant of how inferior you are. You don't seriously think you can win, so disappear from my sight. I have wasted enough time on you already, you cockroach."

Just after those words were said, the sky suddenly parted as light bathed the entire wasteland. A golden orb descended from out of nowhere, giving off an aura that almost made Jake's mouth water. He couldn't identify it... but he was certain this was something special. An artifact? Natural Treasure? No matter what, it was what these two were there fighting for.

However, only the Malefic Viper looked up towards it as the human kept his eyes trained on the dragon before him.

"As every other human fell, only one stood before the evil black dragon that had terrorized the human race... despite how injured and how much weaker he was, he refused to back down and eventually managed to beat back this evil. Isn't that a good story? One the bards will sing songs of for ages to come?" the bearded man said as a laugh as he lifted his axe and threw it over his shoulder.

“A better tale is how the stupid human was killed by the dragon as he was too moronic to know when to quit,” the Viper said, still looking up towards the orb. The treasure was still sealed, but soon it would be released.

“I like my version better,” the human shrugged.

Finally, the Viper bothered to regard the human again. “If you want to die that badly, be my guest.”

With that, the entire wasteland suddenly turned dark green as intense mana gathered. The human responded as a golden aura emanated from him, protecting him. “Come! Let us make a legend of the ages!” he yelled as he took the initiative and flew over with speed that may as well have been teleportation.

Jake could only keep up due to the special state allowed by Path of the Heretic-Chosen, but he was still shocked as they impacted each other. A claw met the axe as a shockwave was released, tumbling thousands of pillars all around them as a crater formed underneath – the only unaffected thing being the golden orb floating above.

The clash had an obvious winner as the human was sent flying back, leaving a trail of blood as his shoulder was torn up. He instantly attacked again but was repelled as hundreds of dark green orbs of mana formed and fired beams towards him.

Yet he refused to give up as he managed to dodge them and continue his assault. The golden aura around him only intensified as he got slightly faster for every moment, and soon he managed to reach the Viper again.

They clashed once more as the winner remained clear. Jake observed intently as the claw and axe impacted one another, and Jake noted how the claw of the Viper seemed to inherently infuse poison into every blow, and he felt oddly familiar energy from the claw. Fang of the Malefic Viper... in the claw? Jake investigated this as he also kept following the battle.

The man was pushed back as another wound appeared on his arm, with the poison also seeping in. With every clash, the difference in power was obvious, and yet Jake got an odd feeling as he watched. The Viper was dominant and menacing, an absolute powerhouse with an aura that made him seem supreme, Yet...

Jake couldn't see the axe warrior lose.

It was truly odd and confusing to him. The power difference was there, wounds were accumulating, yet the axe warrior just kept going – the grin on his face not fading for even a second no matter what happened. It was as if not a single fiber of his being even viewed losing as a possibility.

The battle between the two S-grades looked simple, but the destruction they wrought was earth-shattering. The Viper was superior in every way, even if magic seemed to be his forte. Meanwhile, the human just swung his axe in a straightforward way. There was no profound feeling like when Jake fought the Sword Saint. In fact, the S-grade seemed less skilled in using a weapon than the old man.

But he just had a presence to him. One that just kept growing with every moment. Jake then felt like the fight sped up. Flashes of the two clashing repeatedly dominated his mind as the situation progressed. The golden orb that they were fighting for also intensified with every passing second as they both fought.

Time suddenly returned to normal as in a huge clash, the human was sent barreling backward as the Viper followed up with a breath of pure dark green energy. The man barely managed to block but was still smashed into the ground as a huge green pulsing crater formed.

The man got up as his golden aura was still strong, but just as he looked stable, he coughed out black blood as he fell to his knees. The poison was getting to him.

“Even a cockroach has its limits, it seems,” the Malefic Viper said. While the warrior was injured and bloody, he himself barely had a few chipped scales. “You humans never fail to amaze me. So fragile and so inferior, yet you keep trying. It is almost cute.”

“Bah, what does an overgrown lizard have to brag about?” the warrior answered as he managed to stand up.

The Viper stared at the man with contempt as he briefly tossed the orb above a look. “A human so old, yet so ignorant. Creatures and races of the system exist on a spectrum, and on that spectrum, so-called “overgrown lizards” are on another league than you pathetic humans. You are merely fodder for the progress of those competent enough to evolve away from their feeble humanoid forms.”

“Sounds like something an overgrown lizard would think,” the man said as he laughed. He raised his fist and slapped his own chest as he grinned. “But this right here? This is perfection.”

Jake wasn't sure if the guy was referring to his ripped chest or his race as a human, but the man looked confident either way.

“Skin that tears at the slightest touch, hands with nails unable to cut even the lightest of hide, teeth not made for killing a single creature. Before the system, your race could barely walk without hurting themselves. You have nothing that makes you-“

“I got this!” the man said as he raised his axe.

“A weapon? So what? Is the result not clear already?”

“And this!” the warrior also said, pointing to the broken scraps of armor still on his body. “I got everything I need already!”

The Viper looked at him, and Jake was certain that what the Viper was doing was just waiting for the orb above to become claimable. Moreover, the poison within the man was still spreading and slowly whittling him down.

“I do recognize humans have value as a collective. But you are makers, not destroyers. Your purpose is to uplift those who break the shackles of humanity and ascend. Those who toss away their inferior forms. Why else do you think you humans have professions?”

“I dunno,” the man just honestly answered as he lifted his axe. “But I do know I don’t need any of that lizard crap. I got everything I’ll ever need right here!”

The axe began glowing with energy, but the Viper didn’t bother. To him, the fight was already a foregone conclusion. So... he decided to finish it.

"A pity. You are the strongest human I have ever met, despite your shortcomings. Now die, proud to be killed by a superior being," the Viper said as the entire environment changed. Jake felt the activation of what he guessed was Pride as well as several other skills that all created a domain.

Then, he charged, clearly insistent on killing the man using his superior physique. The man responded as he lifted his glowing axe and charged. Axe met claw as they were knocked away from each other again, something that clearly surprised the Viper.

"As all others have fallen, a single man dared challenge the evil dragon," the warrior spoke as he charged. The golden aura around him intensified even more as he released power that Jake had no idea where came from.

"A hero of the day," he yelled loudly as for the first time, the Viper lost out in a clash. "A legend forever."

Jake just looked on as he saw the man's gaze and felt something he had never expected. Something straight from his Bloodline as he felt it hum to life upon looking at another human. It was not a feeling of wanting to challenge him or one of fear... but one of pure recognition.

At that moment, Jake knew who the winner would be. The Malefic Viper was a monster many levels above the axe warrior, yet that inkling the man wouldn't lose only amplified as his golden aura intensified. From the man's gaze, he didn't believe losing was even a possibility either.

The Viper was what Jake could only describe as flabbergasted as he was pushed back and a few scales broke. The dragon clearly saw and felt this as he was enraged. The Viper roared as he flew forward, smashing the man flying, but it was only momentary.

"I don't need any fancy claws."

The axe descended as the Viper bit forward. They clashed as the human was blasted away, leaving a trail of blood. But at the same time, the Viper roared in pain as a fang had been broken and thrown to the ground far below.

"I don't need any scales."

His body pulsed with golden power as he lifted his axe again and chopped. The Viper responded as he released a blast of magic, knocking the man back before snapping forward with insane speed as his neck seemed to stretch. The man dodged, but he was still hit partly and smashed down onto the ground as a claw came.

The Viper roared as he released a Dragon's Breath straight down at the pinned man. He managed to raise his axe as he shouted in response, the axe glowing gold. It released a glow that managed to block the breath for a few moments before suddenly his weapon exploded in a golden light, beating back the Viper.

"There goes your axe," the Viper said as he stabilized.

The human managed to stand as his one arm was gone, entirely eroded away, and his entire body was half-decayed, showing bone. Yet the golden aura hummed stronger than ever.



The human looked down and saw a fragment of the broken fang of the Viper he had smashed off before. He picked it up as the dragon scoffed, but he still spoke.

“I don’t need my axe.”

He raised the fang as energy went into it and carved it into the rough shape of an axe. It almost conformed to his will as he looked towards the Viper with bloodshot eyes. “I just need whatever the hell I can get my hands on.”

His body erupted as he charged forward faster than ever before. He swung with his one good arm. The Viper blocked, but his barrier magic was shattered as blood and scales spewed out. The axe warrior cut again as the Viper was sent flying, but the dragon barely managed to stabilize before he was hit with the follow-up.

At that moment, Jake felt panic. For the first time, the Viper felt fear towards the monster he was facing. He tried everything as magic collected, but nothing worked.

“I am not merely a human!”

The words echoed as the man cut down and ripped away a large chunk of flesh.

“I am a warrior!”

He hit again as the Viper was pushed back, and the golden aura covered the horizon.

“I am a legend!”

He swung as the Viper’s maw of teeth was broken.

“I am Valdemar!”

A crack resounded as the spine of the dragon broke.

“AND THIS!”

He pulled back the broken axe-shaped fang as it pulsed with energy that formed a massive golden axe.

“IS THE FANG!”

He swung as the world trembled and the ground cracked. The orb above shuddered as reality itself was cleaved in half, revealing the void between universes.

“OF MAN!”

The Viper was nearly cut in two as his chest was cleaved open, and a torrent of blood flooded the landscape.

At that moment, Jake felt the usual feeling of Path of the Heretic Chosen as he suddenly became one with the Viper. He felt the fear and reluctance as a skill was used. The two broken wings on his back instantly returned as phantasmal versions appeared and burned with green energy.

The entire broken body of the Viper turned green as suddenly his whole form shot into the distance, and Jake felt the many concepts interact as space itself parted, and the Viper disappeared.

Having fled a battle to save his own life.

Yet the thing that dominated Jake's minds was the words of the man Valdemar. Another Primordial and future founder and leader of Valhal.

Fang of man...

Time rewound as Jake returned to the beginning again.

"You really don't know when to surrender, do you?"

Chapter 412 - Fangs Of Man

Jake watched the battle again, this time already knowing the outcome, allowing him to focus on aspects he hadn't before. He observed their clashes and primarily the Viper as he kept a close eye on the claws and the poison running through them at all times.

He focused on the axe warrior and his indomitable will.

On the way that the Viper used all his skills and manipulated magic.

He focused on everything he could as time rewound again after the Viper escaped, as Jake once more intimately experienced the escape skill related to Wings of the Malefic Viper. Soon after the escape skill was used, time rewound as Jake experienced everything again.

This happened a dozen times as the Path of the Heretic Chosen skill stayed active longer than ever before. Perhaps it was due to it consuming two attempts, or maybe it was due to the way this attempt worked, but either way, it allowed Jake to learn more than before.

Fang and Wings were the two skills truly in focus, yet Jake felt like he learned just as much from Valdemar as he did the Viper. The man was what Jake could only describe as inspirational. His utter aura of dominance and willpower that didn't allow a single trace of doubt to enter his mind, as well as skills that synergized with this, made him an absolute monster. He truly never made a move believing it wouldn't work or fight, believing he couldn't win. Was this delusional? Perhaps... but it clearly worked for him.

He was the epitome of a warrior despite not necessarily being the most skilled fighter from a technical point of view. Every attack was infused with every fragment of his will, and every atom of his body radiated battle intent. Jake was in awe the more he looked on, but sadly the period of the skill was soon over.

A final time he experienced traveling with Wings as he focused on it, but he felt he was still a distance away from fully comprehending it. In fact, he had learned a lot more related to Fangs as he felt he was just on the cusp of comprehension.

But then something changed. Jake flew away with the Viper, but instead of time rewinding or the vision ending, Jake was returned to Valdemar and the golden orb. The axe warrior's weapon had broken from that final strike as he stood unarmed and looked up at the orb as he breathed heavily.

Then he took out a bottle from some spatial inventory and opened it. He went over to a pool of the Viper's blood as he poured the liquid from the bottle out onto it.

"Cheers, mates, first drink's on you guys. I bloody won," he said as he took a whisk of the bottle himself, and to Jake's amazement, his wounds stopped festering soon after as he stabilized himself from all the poison in his body. It wasn't a healing potion or an antidote he had drank but alcohol so fucking pure it washed out and neutralized much of the poison. It was not a cure, but at most a temporary fix. Not that Jake in any way thought it possible the man would succumb to his wounds, even without knowing he had later become a god.

Valdemar then finally turned his attention towards the golden orb as he flew up to it, the barrier around it fading just as he did. The orb was nearly a hundred meters in diameter, but when the man laid his hand upon it, the size reduced to fit in his palm. He looked at it a bit as he put it into his storage and just flew down and landed on the ground again as he took out another bottle of alcohol as well as two mugs.

"One for the legend made today!" he said as he poured the liquid into one of the mugs. It was a golden ale-like drink of sorts, and the mugs were both old and wooden.

“And one for those of tomorrow!”

The second mug was filled as he placed it on a stone away from him and lifted the first mug to drink.

“To victory!” he yelled as he raised the mug in triumph, and for a fraction of a moment, Jake felt like Valdemar looked straight at him before the vision ended, and the skill came to an end.

The projections were in an uproar as suddenly, without any warning, the testee had disappeared. Not just gone invisible or been teleported, but literally disappeared from existence to every method of perception they had. Nearly every method.

“His Truesoul is still anchored here,” a projection in charge of the dungeon monitoring tool said. It was only detectable due to direct system assistance from the dungeon, allowing not even the S-grades there to know what had happened.

Which meant whatever had made him disappear had to be either directly done by the system or perhaps a Bloodline or a Transcendent. Transcendent being the more probable, no matter how improbable it was for a D-grade to have one.

“Are you su-“

Before the question was asked, the human reappeared. Instantly something felt different as the Hydra also stopped up. The human turned his head towards the Hydra as he muttered: “Fangs... huh...”

None of the judges knew what he meant, but whatever had happened in the brief moment he was gone had somehow led to a change none of them was quite sure of.

The scalekin looked on as he genuinely wished for the human to win.

“He is in a state of enlightenment,” the beastkin said, as he frowned before grinning. “This might not be over quite yet.”

Jake returned to the “real world” as he processed what he had just experienced. His mind was still occupied as the Hydra stopped a few hundred meters away, looking on with newfound caution. Jake himself only now noticed he had gotten a notification quite a bit ago... about halfway through the vision.

\*Skill Fusion Detected\*:

[Basic Twin-Fang Style (Uncommon)] + [Basic One-Handed Weapon (Inferior)] --> [Improvised Weapon Mastery (Rare)]

He was surprised at it, but it quickly became clear this was merely an intermediary step as only a bit later, another one had come.

\*Skill Upgraded\*: [Improvised Weapon Mastery (Rare)] --> [Fangs of Man (Epic)]

Ignoring the danger of the Hydra being able to close in and attack at any moment, Jake checked the new skill out as he finally managed to clear away that one eye-sore of a skill from his status sheet.

[Fangs of Man (Epic)] – Humanity's natural weapons have never been their teeth, claws, or anything else innate to them, but instead the tools they wield and their ability to adapt anything into an instrument of destruction. Allows the hunter to more effectively use anything deemed compatible as a melee weapon. Makes the hunter more familiar with any weapon wielded. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Strength, Agility no matter what melee weapon you wield.

Jake still stood there as he held the broken wooden stick in his hand and Eternal Hunger in the other. The Bloodfeast Dagger had fallen to the ground a dozen or so meters away, but Jake wasn't in a hurry to pick it back up.

Instead, he looked towards the Hydra as he held the stick. It was sharp, and Jake knew instinctually that his new skill worked with it. He grasped it tighter but felt it break as Jake's grip was just too strong for it to handle. Jake frowned, and he knew it wasn't right. It didn't feel right yet.

Valdemar had flooded the fang with energy... no, with a sense of self. A sense of ownership as he truly made it into his weapon. Made it part of him. He also remembered what Villy had said of warriors seeing their weapons as extensions of their bodies through long-time nurturing. But Valdemar's was not that. To him, in that moment, anything could become the axe that was the arbiter of his will.

Jake picked up another stick as the Hydra looked on cautiously. It was still healing, so it wasn't losing out by doing so, and besides... it didn't seem smart enough to know what Jake was doing or trying to do. Not that Jake was entirely sure either.

The new stick was as weak as the one before, but Jake tried again. Not to recreate some concept, but simply to replicate that feeling. A few moments passed as a bit of energy invaded the stick, only for it to



explode, getting a bit of movement out of the Hydra that now no longer wanted to just observe passively.

It charged as Jake wielded Eternal Hunger while still picking up another stick with a string of mana. He met the Hydra's charge as the battle began again. From the point of view of the Hydra, it had only been around a minute since it had smashed Jake away, but to him, it had been hours. Hours that felt longer than usual due to his feeling of inspiration and the effects of Path of the Heretic Chosen.

This meant Jake's mindset had time to change, and the momentum of the fight had reset. An unexpected bonus for sure, but a very welcome one. Jake did hamper himself a little as he dove into the battle, not necessarily to fight to win but to capitalize on his enlightenment through combat.

The two of them clashed as Jake was slightly faster than before, likely due to the increased agility, or maybe just because he was not frustrated like before and his mindset calmer. He dodged away from the mouth of the Hydra as Jake cut with Eternal Hunger and felt the blade cut through the scales a bit better than before. It was slight, but there.

Just after landing a blow, he was smashed back, but Jake stabilized and attacked again. He ran on pure inspiration as he smashed down the wooden stick, only for it to break on the scales as he was sent tumbling back from a snapping maw.

But he saw it. A small nick in the scale.

With a string of mana, he got another stick as he dove in. He slipped under an attack as he stabbed again in failure. This kept up a few more times as Jake got more and more injured, but he also felt like he got closer and closer.

To the Hydra, it was clearly winning, but to Jake, he felt like he got closer and closer to victory as he was repeatedly retaliated only to return with new sticks to try and stab with. He was in some ways lucky that he kept getting smashed through trees to get him new materials for his self-made stick spears.

Not quite right, Jake thought as he frowned. Still not right... I need more... it needs to be like his...

Valdemar had truly made it part of himself. Like an extension of his body. It was entirely different, and Jake wasn't delusional enough to believe he could copy the skill of an S-grade future Primordial, but he at least believed he was on the right track and could make something out of it. He was not satisfied with the current skill and would take it further.

Jake went all-out as he broke nearly a hundred sticks before suddenly something clicked as he lifted a stick and slammed it down. The Hydra just ignored it by now, but suddenly that changed. A notification sounded out in Jake's mind as he felt like the stick was truly a part of himself, and to the surprise of both Jake and the Hydra, it managed to break through the scales and embed itself a few centimeters into the flesh of the Hydra.

It didn't stop there as Eternal Hunger changed even more, and Jake cleaved down as he chopped down and left a deep wound, sending blood and scales flying into the air.

Before Jake could celebrate, he was smashed back by a tail swipe and tumbled to the ground before quickly getting up, unable to hold back his curiosity as he checked the system notification.

\*Skill Upgraded\*: [Fangs of Man (Epic)] --> [Fangs of Man (Ancient)]

[Fangs of Man (Ancient)] – Inspired by an old legend, you walk a path of one yourself. Humanity's natural weapons have never been their teeth, claws, or anything else innate to them, but instead the tools they wield and their ability to adapt anything into an instrument of destruction. Allows the hunter to more effectively use anything deemed compatible as a melee weapon. Makes the hunter more familiar with any weapon wielded. As your comprehension of natural weapons grows, it allows you to truly make any weapon a part of yourself as you forcefully temporarily integrate it into your Soulshape as if an innate weapon, vastly increasing its durability if otherwise fragile. All effects related to weapon integration are more effective and easier to accomplish with Soulbound weapons. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Strength and Agility no matter what melee weapon you wield. Durability increase of weapons based on Willpower.

Jake felt the inspiration rush in as he smirked. It wasn't even close to the level of what Valdemar did, but it was progress... right?

He also felt Eternal Hunger more than ever before as the faint roar of the Chimera in his Truesoul sounded out within his mind. It was utterly suppressed the next moment by his will, not that it was necessary as Eternal Hunger was clearly on his team in this fight.

It wanted to win and to drain the life of the Hydra. The life energy within the beast was far more valuable and of a higher level than anything Jake had ever fought before, and the weapon knew that. It was a qualitative difference that was recognized.

So Jake bent his knees as he prepared to charge forward with his new weapon... no, fang, in hand. The fang of a human. And as a fang, was it not natural that something else would follow? He had experienced and realized his inspiration in relation to Valdemar, but that was not all. One more thing now dominated his mind.

This is my fang... so as the Viper could use his claws, I can use this.

The weapon itself felt like a part of his body - like his own arm - if still a bit separate. One could liken it to a prosthetic, but one he could still vaguely feel, the same as he could “feel” his nails, teeth, and hair. It wasn’t truly living or a part of him, but the system still considered it part of his Soulshape.

He knew the weapon was still below that as hair and nails and such would heal naturally while the weapon would not due to its temporary nature. Either way, it was still far stronger as he intimately felt the energy move through Eternal Hunger as he prepared his fang to strike and move his next goal.

It was time to push the second skill to a higher rarity: Fang of the Malefic Viper.

#### Chapter 413 - The Human Has Fangs

Jake finally had a proper melee skill, one already surpassing his archery skill by quite a margin rarity-wise. Jake knew this wasn’t due to him suddenly being a more skilled fighter but due to his comprehension of whatever Valdemar had done. It was a concept he could no doubt apply elsewhere too and of a high concept that raised the rarity.

One of those places it could be applied was with Fangs of the Malefic Viper.

He had already gained experience from what the Malefic Viper had done in the vision. Jake had felt the effects of Fangs of the Malefic Viper in the claws of the Viper, so why couldn’t Jake do it with his weapon if that was his “fang,” so to say?

And as before, Jake would use the Hydra as his grindstone as they brawled. The simple nature of his opponent made it optimal for this, but it was a bit problematic that he was still getting his ass handed to him even after he gained Fangs of Man. The skill didn’t magically make Jake several times better in melee, even if it did surely improve his abilities.

The Hydra kept attacking as the two snapping maws pushed Jake back, as he now at least managed to block more than before. Moreover, he did begin to see some benefits he had not expected.

Eternal Hunger was now more linked to him than ever, which meant its use was more instinctive and innate. There was a direct connection between them that allowed Jake to pour energy not just around the blade like he usually did with skills such as Descending Dark Arcane Fang, but also directly into it. At least somewhat.

This connection turned out to only be one way, if still stronger now. The lifesteal effect of Eternal Hunger was more powerful than ever as Jake managed to land a few good blows, even if he took more himself. The regeneration offered from the Scimitar of Cursed Hunger before he upgraded it had always been low if not downright negligible. Eternal Hunger was a lot better, but it was still not a massive boon and primarily useful when he was killing many weaker foes.

But now? Now Jake saw his wounds visibly heal on his arm that held Eternal Hunger as the energy went directly through Jake's arm, shoulder, and into his Truesoul around his heart with every strike. From there on, any remnant vital energy pulsed through his body to heal him with a far weaker effect, which did lead to the odd situation of his arm appearing near-undamaged even if the rest of his body was a bit of a mess.

As for his wooden sticks? Yeah, no matter how great a skill Jake had, he couldn't overcome the limits of material Strength. He could integrate the sticks, but ultimately a wooden stick was a wooden stick. Valdemar had used the Viper's fang, and even if said fang was far weaker due to it being dislodged from the Viper's Soulshape, it was still a far better raw material than some fragile marsh wood.

Due to that, Jake pulled back as he retrieved the Bloodfeast Dagger. It was far worse than Eternal Hunger, but it was still a good weapon, and he could even use the special enchantment on it to cut himself and pour blood on his foes.

The blood in his veins was a deadly weapon after all, and the venom in his own canines was an even more improved version of that blood, so if he could bi-

Ah...

Jake got an idea. He retreated further than before and flew up into the air where the Hydra didn't even try to follow. Up there, Jake closed his eyes as he dismissed the Bloodfeast Dagger and only held onto Eternal Hunger as he tightly gripped it.

With a bit of foresight, he reduced Arcane Awakening to 30% to not burn his own life away while he experienced enlightenment.

He focused on his own body and his Soulshape as he felt the wings beating on his back and the energy moving through it. He felt the scales that covered his body, but moreover, he felt how they were connected to him. The wings had veins running through them. His own veins, which was why they could bleed even if they weren't actually a part of his true Soulshape.

The scales were similar but also very different. The scales were not "living" like his wings but closer to teeth and hair. A part of the Soulshape, but the nature of the connection was different. There clearly was one, though, as he felt like microscopic metaphysical veins of his Soulshape moved into each individual scale. This allowed him to absorb energy from them after the legendary upgrade and reminded him a bit of the connection between himself and Eternal Hunger.

Years of training his Shroud of the Primordial had allowed Jake to truly feel his Soulshape. Feeling had led to comprehension as comprehension and feeling came together to form control. Control had given Jake many minor benefits, such as his wings being slightly better, Arcane Awakening becoming a bit more efficient, and overall he was just better at not wasting his energy.

Throughout the body of a D-grade's Soulshape, millions of small metaphysical veins moved that allowed energy – primarily stamina – to travel. Some were larger than others and could carry more energy, such as those that followed his actual physical veins, but others were so small they barely did anything. In fact, most were barren as running energy through them was only done when using certain skills or perhaps overloading your own body. New ones could also appear and disappear at will.

These energy veins entered each scale, entered his wings, but did not enter the weapon he held. The sword was just attached to his hand like a truly dead object... at least it would be so under normal circumstances. Because a black, almost tangible vein did go from Eternal Hunger and into Jake's Truesoul.

It was the connection formed to transfer health and the funnel of health energy. It had been further amplified by Fang of Man as many of Jake's veins now attached themselves to the funnel. But this funnel was the only thing. It was a one-lane highway only feeding Jake and the Chimera in his Truesoul.

Jake then turned his perception to his teeth. His canines. He focused and saw a peculiar collection of veins going into each, and when he used Fangs, they all activated as the venom began just magically appearing on his teeth.

This is where he was stumped... for this was not merely due to the veins, but some higher concept. Some principal magic beyond Jake's comprehension that there was no chance for him as a mere D-grade to learn. He couldn't understand it... but he could feel it.

And sometimes, in the equation of getting control through understanding and feeling, one could lean enough into one part to still succeed. Jake began slowly forming a path as he used the Soulbound connection as a basis.

Eternal Hunger gladly helped as Jake almost felt guided and assisted. He remembered the feeling the Viper's fangs gave during Path of the Heretic Chosen, and he focused on the venom he was still making inside his own mouth.

The connection was already there, connecting himself and Eternal Hunger. He just needed to expand the metaphysical highway of veins with a few more lanes to allow the toxic payload to get through. It was an arduous process as he forged the web with the Soulbound connection at the center.

But soon enough, he began feeling changes as something else vital kicked in: system assistance. Fangs of Man, his experience in the vision, and Jake's control over his own Soulshape was enough to pass the threshold, it appeared.

As it kicked in and recognized his effort, venom began to seep out of his nails as a connection was formed to them too when the web of veins reached his hands, truly giving Jake claws.

This continued spreading as the system truly rewarded his own mentality and allowed his interpretation through. It spread through the blade as invisible veins invaded it to the delight of Eternal Hunger as the blade was more tied to him than ever before. He felt the power in it as a notification came, and he felt like he himself grew stronger.

Jake raised Eternal Hunger as venom began slowly seeping out of the edge as he regarded his weapon.

No... his fang.

[Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] - When born, the Viper had limited weapons to fight with, yet it prevailed only with its fangs. Its bites the deliverer of death. As a human, you have taken inspiration and



learned to apply the same concept. Allows the Alchemist to coat his teeth in deadly venom, sharing all the same effects as Blood of the Malefic Viper in an empowered state. Additionally, all poisons you have crafted or created are significantly more effective when injected directly into the body of your foes. Passively provides 1 Strength per level in Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May you bring death in a single strike.

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[Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] - When born, the Viper had limited weapons to fight with, yet it prevailed only with its fangs. Its bites the deliverer of death. As a human, you have integrated these concepts and made them your own. Allows the Alchemist to coat his teeth in deadly venom, sharing all the same effects as Blood of the Malefic Viper in an empowered state. Allows any part of your Soulshape viewed as a weapon to function as fangs, making it possible to excrete venom through them, and passively empowers any toxin upon your fangs. Additionally, all poisons you have crafted or created are significantly more effective when injected directly into the body of your foes. Passively provides 3 Strength per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your fangs be the harbingers of death.

Out of all the skills Jake had upgraded, this was perhaps the one that differentiated the most from one of the Viper's pure skills. He had truly deviated... at least, that was one way to see it.

Another was that Jake's was no different from the Viper's. What differed was merely their definition of what was part of one's body and Soulshape and what defined a fang.

As always, Jake's evolution was further rewarded. Even if he had noticed skill upgrades in his class not doing jack shit, the upgrades in his profession always came through, as with upgrades came levels.

\*'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 150 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

\*‘DING!’ Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 151 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

\*‘DING!’ Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 152 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points\*

Jake had already felt the levels before, but he still basked in the confirmation as he felt ready. His blade hummed with power and hunger as Jake regarded his opponent down below. By now, the Hydra had mostly managed to heal itself as it now only regarded him with one head.

It likely didn’t believe Jake a threat. He had already shown himself inferior once, so it probably thought a bit of floating in the air wouldn’t change that. Quite the opposite, as it would allow the Hydra to fully heal and be able to dunk on him afterward.

Jake was keen on proving it wrong.

He felt the power in the blade as his own venom pulsed through. At the current stage, Jake was certain the best all-around poison he had available was the one on his weapon and teeth. That was something that would no doubt change as Jake improved his skills in alchemy, but for now, the best he could do was what was on his weapon already.

His Strength had also improved from the upgrade of Fang as Jake now felt more confident. Everything came together as the multiple upgrades had transformed Jake from a purely defensive fighter to one with... well, fangs.

In something out of character, Jake even went ahead and tossed the seventy Free Points he had stored up into Strength to give him more of an edge as he needed the pure power to penetrate the scales. Usually, Jake didn't need much Strength as he just needed to do enough to inflict his poison, but the Hydra had proved that difficult as Jake had to put a lot of weight behind every blow to draw blood.

He hoped he could now more easily puncture the scales. Something he would put to the test immediately.

Jake activated Arcane Awakening at full power once more as he shot down like a meteor. The Hydra reacted as it raised both heads, not letting its guard down despite the time passing and its own state improving. Jake flew straight for one of its maws as he stopped up and stepped down as he teleported down to the ground, appearing behind the Hydra.

With a thrash, it turned around and swept its heads towards him, but Jake dodged them as he landed a cut with Eternal Hunger. The blade more easily cut the meat of the Hydra as a few scales were sent flying and Jake felt the poison invade the body of his foe.

He was retaliated against a moment later, but Jake now had confidence and attempted to grasp the momentum of battle in a vice-grip, just like Valdemar had done. To never let up and let his foe rest but indomitably attack as if victory was a foregone conclusion.

That was the mindset Jake tried to replicate as he kept coming. The Bloodfeast Dagger was drawn again as the connection was formed. With the skill upgraded and system assistance in full effect, Fang of the Malefic Viper also worked on other weapons than those Soulbound instantly as he now had two highly toxic fangs, just like any other proper predator.

Jake kept diving in as he managed to land far more blows than before, and the Hydra noticed as it became more defensive, not only relying on its incredibly tough scales to resist his weapons. Jake would prefer to stab with his weapons to get the best effect, but sadly the fight didn't allow it as a stabbing attack would require far too much commitment.

He did try to use Descending Dark Arcane Fang too and found the skill better than before, but sadly he once more simply didn't have leeway to use it. He even tried to use Gaze to give him an opening, but even while frozen, the Hydra could release its own paralyzing roar somehow.

But, even so, Jake still had confidence. He felt that if the fight was long enough, he would have a chance, and maybe he could even pull a victory out of his a-

Then the entire marsh and Hydra disappeared as Jake, halfway through an attack, stood back in the same chamber he had originally entered from. He stood frozen for a moment as the scalekin projection appeared.

"Time's up, congratulations on-"

"What the actual fuck?" Jake yelled as he looked at the projection. "Send me back!"

"I am afraid that isn't possible, and the rewards have already bee-"

"I don't care about any rewards; just send me back, come on!" Jake insisted as he looked at the projection with pleading eyes as the realization sank in. He kind of knew already...

“The dungeon does not facilitate that. The trial was an hour-long one, and that is something nobody can change after the dungeon rules have been set in stone and the scenario fully implemented,” the projection explained, patient to Jake’s attitude.

Jake looked at the scalekin as he deflated. He deactivated Arcane Awakening as he plopped down on the ground. “I fucking had it, man...”

“Perhaps... perhaps not,” the scalekin said, shaking his head. “No matter what, your performance was exemplary. So don’t be too downtrodden. To fight the Lord Protector straight on is no easy feat and will be reflected in your rewards.”

“Can my reward be a rematch?” Jake asked, half-jokingly but also with a bit of hope.

The scalekin took a moment to answer as he frowned. He clearly was distracted for a second or so before he spoke. “But I have been allowed to reveal to you a snippet of information. The highest level D-grade combat dungeon in the Order contains the possibility of battling the Lord Protector just before he evolved to C-grade.”

Jake heard this as he calmed down, and a goal appeared in his mind. I am fucking coming for you, Snappy.

Chapter 414 - Academy Entry Token

Rewards were barely in Jake’s mind as he mentally went over the fight and looked forward to the rematch. Snappy had been damn strong back then if a very simplistic creature. It was also a bad matchup for Jake, but in some ways, that just made him want to fight even more. He did find it a bit frustrating, sure, but in the good way.

You know, frustrating in the same way a hard boss in a game could be. You would curse and swear while battling the boss, sure, but the moment you won, all that frustration would turn to triumph and make it all seem worth it.

This one was on the extreme end of that as it was the kind to make you want to punch through a wall and yell expletives and call bullshit to the overpowered mechanics of the boss. In the Hydra's case, its absolutely broken swallowing ability and the scales that offered utterly insane resistance to physical attacks were those bullshit mechanics.

"Alright," Jake said as he returned his attention to the projection in front of him. "What happens now?"

"You passed the test, and thus it ends here, and you will be allowed entrance into the Order of the Malefic Viper. Your final grade has been decided at four stars, level five, with five stars level ten the maximum. This puts you well ahead of the curve, but you still have a lot to work on, especially in the alchemy portion, where your overall performance was only considered slightly above average. Even then, it was only due to you excelling in some tests and utterly flunking others. Your foundation in alchemy is weak, and you have much to work on, but your talent in the fundamental aspects and your mindset are well-attuned to the profession, so keep it up.

"In the combat portion, you heightened your rating. If this rating was purely based on that, you would have gained a top mark, but as it is, it still allowed you to push it further than most of us judges expected. None of us truly have any comments on combat, as I believe it best you continue forging your own path there. Once more, just keep it up, and I believe your path will take you far.

"Finally, to your rewards. The primary one coming in the form of the Academy Entry Token."

With those words, a small black hexagonal token was summoned in front of the projection with the motif of the Order inscribed upon it, glowing a faint dark green color. Jake naturally identified it right away.

[4-star Academy Entry Token of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – A four-star token of the Order of the Malefic Viper entrance test, ranked at level five. This token is proof you have passed the academy entrance test with exemplary performance. Serves as both an identification token and can be exchanged within the Order for rewards. Contains information related to the test undergone and notes from the judges.

Before he could ask anything, the projection spoke again. “The information embedded in the token has been modified directly by the Malefic One with certain elements and descriptions changed based on the Patron’s will.”

“Oh, alright,” Jake said as he took the token. He infused some energy into it and was surprised at the knowledge within. There were a lot of notes from over a hundred judges, nearly all of it related to alchemy, and a lot of them gave small tips or just pointed him in certain directions.

“The second reward is a bit less exciting but surely still useful. It is a refined stinger of a manticore just like the one you killed. An excellent alchemical ingredient that can give birth to some interesting poisons and even be used in a weapon with your transmutation.”

The large stinger appeared, about the size of Jake himself. It looked massive and powerful, and he felt something had been done to it to make it stronger if a bit smaller than the real thing. The Beastcore had definitely been infused into it along with other valuable ingredients to make it stronger, and within, he felt several liters of the venom as well as what looked like a gland still able to slowly produce more.

[Refined Manticore Stringer (Epic)] – the refined stinger of a high-tier D-grade Manticore. The venom within is now more powerful than ever, even compared to when it was alive. This toxin is of the earth affinity and will petrify anything it comes into contact with. Slowly produces more venom when infused with appropriate energy. Has many alchemical uses.

“Looks good,” Jake said as he scooped it up. He did consider for a moment putting it into Palate, but he already had the Root of Eternal Resentment in there. Jake had put it back as, quite frankly, the treasure was just too good not to learn from. It was a unique item with – as expected – unique properties to store energy, especially curse energy, making it very interesting to him.

“With this, the test ends, and you will be admitted into the academy,” the scalekin projection said with a smile as a gate appeared right behind Jake.

Jake nodded. “Thanks for all the help. This entire thing has been very enlightening and helpful, and also quite fun. Definitely one of the better exams of my life..”

“The pleasure is all ours,” the scalekin said as he appeared to hesitate. “Before you go, can I ask one thing to settle debates? This knowledge will naturally never leave this place.”

“Shoot,” Jake answered.

“Are you the Chosen of the Malefic Viper or deeply related to him in some other way?”

“I do have the True Blessing, yep,” Jake confirmed as he saw the projection’s eyes open wide. He bowed slightly, but Jake quickly stopped him. “Ah, none of that; I am not doing that Chosen stuff. Besides, I am equal heretic, equal Chosen, so it’s all fine.”



“Heretic?” the projection asked, confused.

“Yep. Turns out being friends with your Patron god is considered heretical,” Jake shrugged.

“Friends?” the projection asked as Jake felt not only his confusion but even the confusion of the other judges gazing upon him.

“Yep,” Jake said, not bothering with the confusion. “Hey, it is what it is. Thanks for the help again, everyone!”

With that, Jake stepped through the gate before allowing the projections to react more to his antics. He was quite sure he just earned a few more heretic points, though.

“I guess you do have a future in alchemy, but your stubborn insistence on using suboptimal methods and generally weak and flimsy mindset will become a hindrance. Combat-wise, you scrape by as average, but your mindset is faulty even there. You need some proper life and death experience, that is certain. You still managed to reach a two-star level two rating, and you are young, so don’t quit quite yet. But do address your fundamental flaws,” the projection of the elven alchemist said.

Reika looked down at the floor as she took a verbal beating from the projection yet again. This entire test had been an exercise in showing her exactly how incompetent she was. The worst part was she couldn’t even argue without coming off as even more stupid and ignorant.

These projections had lived longer than the modern idea of science had even existed and done alchemy for at least thousands of years. The methods Reika believed to be new and innovative based on pre-system scientific methodology were something they were all aware of and, to Reika's surprise, looked down upon as it contained many flaws she had never imagined.

It was too rigid, too much focus on objective observations and establishing of processes and replicable results. It was too scientific and didn't consider the element of the metaphysical and the magical. How willpower and belief could somehow affect the outcome or how no experiment was ever truly replicable. Circumstances always changed, and there did not exist two one hundred percent identical herbs in the entire multiverse, making an "objective" theory only objective in the case of that one crafting session.

Reika had never considered any of this. Not truly. In some ways, she had looked down on Jake, who said he mostly went by feel when doing alchemy, but now she realized she had totally abandoned doing so. The test where one had to react fast enough to changes she had utterly failed. Reika just didn't know how to face anything emergent she hadn't already predicted and made countermeasures for, which in the name of the judges made her third-rate at best and a sad imitation of a true alchemist.

Not that there weren't areas where her mindset on alchemy was good. She would just never become great if she held onto such a limiting approach. Reika was normally proud and generally not the most receptive, but...

"Thank you for your guidance," she said as she bowed to the projection.

In this case, she would eat it up and integrate it to make herself better. She knew she had done badly and had a long way to go. Her stubbornness and pride remained. Now it would just be channeled to truly take in everything this academy had to teach.

She just had one worry: how crushed every other alchemist she had brought from the clan had to feel right now as if she had gotten slammed, then they must have gotten utterly destroyed.

Jake appeared outside the dungeon as he was once more surrounded by people. Quite a few quickly looked his way before returning to their own business. It only took a dozen or so seconds before the same succubus as before appeared from a newly opened gate.

"I hope the test proceeded as expected? Please follow me right through here as we wait for the others to arrive," she said as she motioned for him to go come over.

"I guess it went fine. How many have finished by now?" Jake asked as he walked over.

"Only about one out of five is done," she answered.

"I see," Jake said. "Is being fast good or bad?"

"Depends on the reason. Most of the extra time comes from the breaks between tests, especially the combat test. People who did well in the early levels of combat tend to be done faster, but the same is also true for those who lose early and don't have to do many fights," she explained as they went through the gateway and entered the same cozy waiting room from before.

There Jake saw a few had indeed returned. He did spot two alchemists from Earth who both looked rather depressed as they sat in a corner on the lowest level. Reika was not back yet, but he did spot a few of the stronger ones. Draskil, the Malefic Dragonkin, was not back as Jake walked to the highest area right away.

The succubus followed him all the way as she asked: "I will need to see the token you received to process the details of your admittance to the academy."

"Right," Jake agreed as he took out the token. She froze for a moment when she saw the token as she looked at him, a bit surprised. She didn't say anything but quickly took the token and held it to the token she herself always carried around. Some kind of energy appeared to be transferred as the succubus looked even more puzzled.

Puzzlement that seemed to vanish in an instant as she smiled and handed it back to him. "Here is your token, and that must have been an awe-inspiring performance leading to excellent results. I don't believe I ever introduced myself; I am Irinixis, but just call me Irin. I am the one in charge of your batch of academy members, so feel free to ask me anything or call on me for any assistance."

She said this as Jake took the token, and he did take notice of how she seemed to make sure to touch his hand as she did so. Her entire demeanor had changed. Jake sucked at things like this normally, but even he wouldn't miss such obvious flirting.

"I will keep it in mind, Irin," Jake said as he smirked a bit beneath his mask. Hey, he was a guy, and he would lie to himself if he didn't admit he found a god damn succubus attractive. For Villy's sake, being attractive was a primary trait of their race.

Irin smiled at his answer as she bowed slightly, exposing her already exposed cleavage more. "I shall go handle matters then. Please wait here till the others arrive and see you around!"

With that, she walked off as Jake looked after her. He shook his head as he sat down on one of the chairs to wait. He had no idea how long it would take, so for now, he just did the most natural thing and went over his gains.

After the dungeon, all of his wounds had healed, so he didn't even have to regenerate. He was also reminded of it being an actual dungeon when he noticed his Dungeoneer title had upgraded, giving three more stats. It was super minor but nice.

Overall, his status had improved quite a lot as he checked it out in its entirety.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (D) – lvl 152]

Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter – lvl 153]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 151]

Health Points (HP): 40560/40560

Mana Points (MP): 58225/58225

Stamina: 30870/30870

Stats

Strength: 2741

Agility: 5549

Endurance: 3087

Vitality: 4056

Toughness: 2910

Wisdom: 4658

Intelligence: 3749

Perception: 9782

Willpower: 3802

Free points: 0

Titles: [Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch], [Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer VII], [Dungeon Pioneer VI], [Legendary Prodigy], [Prodigious Slayer of the Mighty], [Kingslayer], [Nobility: Earl], [Progenitor of the 93rd Universe], [Prodigious Arcanist], [Perfect Evolution (D-grade)], [Premier Treasure Hunter], [Myth Originator]

Class Skills: [Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra (Uncommon)], [Hunter's Tracking (Uncommon)], [Arcane Stealth (Rare)], [Archery of Vast Horizons (Rare)], [Enhanced Splitting Arrow (Rare)] [Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Epic)], [Arcane Powershot (Epic)], [Big Game Arcane Hunter (Epic)], [Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)], [Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Epic)], [One Step Mile (Ancient)], [Fangs of Man (Ancient)], [Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Ancient)], [Moment of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Steady Aim of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Arcane Awakening (Legendary)]

Profession Skills: [Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Herbology (Common)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Alchemist's Purification (Common)], [Alchemical Flame (Uncommon)], [Craft Elixir (Uncommon)], [Toxicology (Uncommon)], [Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)], [Concoct Poison (Uncommon)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Epic)], [Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Ancient)], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Wings of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Legendary)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Pride of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)]

Blessing: [True Blessing of the Malefic Viper (Blessing - True)]

Race Skills: [Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races (Unique)], [Legacy of Man (Unique)], [Identify (Common)], [Serene Soul Meditation (Epic)], [Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)]

Bloodline: [Bloodline of the Primal Hunter (Bloodline Ability - Unique)]

Jake went over the list that he felt just kept growing, even if he had managed to cut out a class skill by merging two into one. Stats-wise, his Strength got a good bump as the retroactive benefits of Fang upgrading kicked in as well as him investing some Free Points. Other stats like Agility and, of course, Perception had also increased a lot.

All in all, Jake was happy with his progress. It was good he had gotten some class experience in by making Eternal Hunger and killing some termites and all that because he had a feeling he would have a lot of alchemy in the near future.

And a few fights, hopefully. If he knew Villy as well as he thought he did, then there was no way the academy experience would be a wholly peaceful one.

Chapter 415 - A Different Time

Jake sat in meditation a bit as he went over his gains and familiarized himself a bit more with Fangs of Man and his improved Fang of the Malefic Viper. Having the time, he also reached out to the Viper, who promptly answered.



“So, thoughts on the test dungeon? It is pretty old and outdated, but it still gets the job done, doesn’t it?” the Viper’s voice echoed in his head.

“Rather uninspired interior design, I must say. Very old-timey and old temple-like. Reminded me a bit of an abandoned crypt,” Jake answered jokingly.

“I would have the designer executed if she hadn’t died well over a trillion years ago,” Villy answered.

“Heh. Anyway, I think it was fine, but I don’t really have any frame of reference, now do I?”

“True. But you did at least get to fight a strong opponent,” Villy said with an obviously teasing tone. “Hydras aren’t easy foes, and this particular one sure had you countered.”

“I would have won without the timer,” Jake asserted.

“Maybe, maybe not. It did certainly become a possibility after your powerup and upgrade of Fangs. You used the Path of the Heretic-Chosen skill, right? Or have you gained some new skill or ability since last that makes you ignore cause and effect to travel through space and time?” the Viper asked.

“Nah, just the old and boring Path,” Jake answered, but he felt reluctant to get into details. The vision had not exactly been a flattering one for the Viper.

“Oh? Not spilling the beans what it is about?” the Viper asked. “Come on, you already saw my bad phase at B-grade back then. This can’t be worse.”

Jake decided to not hide anything if the Viper wanted to pry as he just said four words. “Valdemar. Fang of man.”

A few seconds of silence followed. It was enough for Jake to consider if saying it was a mistake, but luckily the Viper finally spoke:

“Was there a golden sphere involved or present?”

“Yep.”

“Ah... right.”

“Yep...”

The two of them sat in silence for a while before Jake finally broke it. “Pretty specieist back then, not gonna lie.”

“I guess you need some context?” the Viper asked. “It was a different time, you know.”

"Pretty sure I have heard that excuse before when people did some messed up shit when younger... and it wasn't like you were young," Jake said half-jokingly.

"Alright, alright. Listen, it really was a different time. There was far more antagonism back then and a lack of mutual respect. The enlightened races treated all monster races like trash and viewed them as lesser, while the powerful monsters began looking down on humans and elves and the like. It was a kill-or-be-killed kind of scenario whenever you met.

"Believe it or not, that day was the first time I faced a human lower level than myself after reaching sapience that beat me. I had lost to humans before but always when they came in groups or were vastly higher level. I still held respect for humans, however, not as fighters but as creators. They were some of the best craftsmen around, with me having learned much from them in the realm of alchemy. Valdemar was an... outlier," Villy said with resignation.

"He did seem rather unique," Jake agreed.

"You don't know the half of it. Valdemar was and still is an absolute monster. That fight back then was a humiliating loss that made me reconsider my stance on the enlightened races as a whole and began working with them more, not as servants but equals. You also need to understand that humans as a whole are far more reliant on Records and history than a beast like me. You nearly always need legacies and such to truly excel. Your racial skills even revolve around passing these legacies down. This, at least, was what I thought until Valdemar proved me wrong. The two of us both have in common that we lived during the integration of the first universe. He had no legacies but forged his path entirely on his own.

"Think about it. Humans have a way more diverse path than beasts and way more space to adapt. Legacies help expand this. Meanwhile, a beast is mostly set after evolving, with little to no skill choices during entire grades. I remember very rarely getting five options, and that was only due to me walking a diverse path, to begin with. Someone like Snappy never had a single choice in D-grade and only a handful in his entire journey to godhood. Beasts instead choose their path solely by their actions and

their evolutions. This is to say, beasts are defined by their race which is often not related to anything but their own path, while humans rely far more on their classes and professions, which are heavily defined by legacies and the experience of their ancestors and what they learn from each other. One can frame it as humans being far more reliant on knowledge and experience while beasts just need to kill, grow and improve on their own.

“To me, back then, the natural result of this was humans having a far wider breadth of power but could never reach the top as an individual, only a collective. They had forced upon them professions that result in inherent non-combat potential, something that in a beast would nearly always come with a trade-off in fighting power. If the power scale went from one to a hundred, a human could never surpass ninety, while beasts and monsters could.

“Naturally, I know now the multiverse doesn’t work like that. The multiverse is far too open to opportunities, and a set scale doesn’t matter. Too many ways to grow more powerful exist. Valdemar forged a path I could not comprehend and grasped power beyond anyone else I had ever faced at the time. He was not some paragon of his race or someone more knowledgeable than anyone else. He was just an individual. He opened my eyes to never looking down at someone for their race alone, especially not enlightened species. As time passed, it has only been confirmed again, and again the true power you can achieve isn’t defined by your race but by who you are as a person, your talent, and so many other factors. These are what is truly important.”

The Viper made the long speech as Jake listened intently. He liked the explanation even if there was not much new. In fact...

“You are actually embarrassed, aren’t you?”

To overexplain why you did something was the hallmark of someone embarrassed and Villy seemed to really want to justify and explain why he acted as he did back then. It was very relatable.

“Do you have to rub it in? I am beginning to really dislike that skill of yours that just shows you uncured shit. If someone from the Holy Church got such a skill, they would be executed promptly for being able to circumvent all the propaganda and whatnot,” Villy said, but with a tone of jest.

“Way of changing the subject,” Jake joked back. “But hey, good to know even evil snake gods can learn to grow as a person. And speaking of growing... who is stronger now? You or Valdemar?”

It was an obvious question Jake couldn't help but ask.

“I guess I should have seen that one coming... but I don't know. Do I think I can beat Valdemar? No, not really, but I don't think he can beat me either. The thing is, Valdemar only truly fights someone when he has a cause. A justification that makes him want to fight and create a legend from it. Ah, but if you speak of a duel... well, let's just say I tend to avoid them as fighting him is a pain. In a fight to the death, the most likely is either one party retreating or mutual destruction. This assumes third parties don't involve themselves and we fight on neutral ground too... all of this is to say there are too many factors,” the Viper answered.

“I see,” Jake said, not really wanting to pry more.

“Anyway, it sounds like you had quite the journey, and I will say that taking inspiration from Valdemar would be smart. You and he do have some similarities in mindset but are just as different, but if it is just about melee fighting and his application of will, go right ahead. Just don't try to mimic him too much... he has just as many places where he has absolutely no talents,” Villy said, obviously taking a jab.

“Such as?”

“His talent when it comes to manipulating mana is so bad he ended up completely giving up on it and eventually transformed it all into stamina and health somehow through sheer rejection of the resource. Also, his profession was very much neglected, which was part of the reason why he was so strong despite his low race level. Valdemar was already level 999 in his class back then and was working on his profession,” the Viper said.

“Let me guess, his profession is to be a brewer of some kind?” Jake asked.

“Yeah, that was the only thing he figured out how to really do as his father apparently owned a brewery before the system. Well, Valdemar said his father owned a brewery but later said he just made moonshine and sold it under the table,” the Viper said jokingly.

“It sounds like you two made friends later on?” Jake asked half-rhetorically. The Viper seemed to know a lot of personal stuff about the guy after all and even talked about duels.

“Yeah. That first encounter was not our last, and we butted heads a dozen or so more times before godhood. I did win some and lose some, but more often, it never got that extreme as one party had an advantage making the other back off. After godhood, it ended up being an utter stalemate. It was and still is for all the Primordials, so eventually, we ended up just co-existing and, in some ways, got close. It is hard to personally know someone for countless years and not begin to understand them and get to know them. Of course, some get along better than others, and there is plenty of healthy rivalry going on, but we can all get along in the same room as a semi-dysfunctional family,” the Viper explained.

“Sounds fun. Though you and Eversmile didn’t strike me as on the friendliest of terms and didn’t you kind of screw over Stormild with the whole Sylphie contract thing?” Jake asked pointedly.

“As I said, healthy rivalry and plenty of disfunction. Have no doubt that if both needed help with a task, they would also come to me and ask, and that both of those have also taken advantage of me in the past.”

“Fine. I’ll let you off with a warning not to look down on humans this time around, aight?” Jake thought, unable to hold back a smirk.

“I am astounded at your benevolence,” the Viper answered.

“Now, any comments on the test yourself and how I did?”

“Take the advice of the teachers there and follow what is in the token. The only thing I will add is to not take it as gospel but merely a guiding hand. Just focus on the sentiment of their teachings rather than any actionable advice,” Villy answered.

“Noted,” Jake thought. “If there is nothing else, I will get some meditation done and actually reflect on stuff. You know, like the judges in the trial advised.”

“Seeing you make smart choices brings a tear to my eyes,” Villy teased.

“Better be careful, or I shall have you taste the fang of-“

Without any warning, Villy cut off the line of communication as Jake smirked to himself. There was something profoundly enjoyable about taking jabs at a god far more powerful than himself. Also, he knew Villy could take it and, in this case, kind of deserved it as he had been an arrogant dickhead back in the day.

Well, more of an arrogant dickhead than current Villy. Not that Jake should throw stones while living in a glasshouse. He wasn't exactly the most humble either.

Anyway, Jake entered meditation as time slowly passed, and through his sphere, he felt the waiting room fill up over the next day or so. During his meditation, Jake reflected primarily on the vision from Path of the Heretic-Chosen as he knew he had more to internalize. He also considered the fight with Snappy and how he could have done better, and what to do if he met a similar opponent in the future.

Reika had also arrived by now and looked rather glum but also surprisingly determined. The same could not be said about the alchemists following her, and Jake considered going down checking on them but ultimately decided against it. They had Reika, and Jake was not going to the Order to play babysitter. If they had been crushed in spirit from the trial, now was the time to get their shit together and actually improve. He did notice one alchemist missing, though.

Draskil came into the room on the fourth day since the first person entered the dungeon, looking rather glum himself too. He had taken far longer than Jake and most others, making Jake wonder why that was. More surprising was that it ended up taking the full week as the succubus had warned them about before the final person arrived. The level 168, now 169, harpy was the last to be done.

On that note, Draskil had not leveled up, while Jake had not chosen to appear higher either.

The succubus had returned together with the harpy. Irinixis, as she was called, regarded them all as Jake felt her gaze linger on himself but also Draskil as she smiled.



"I want to congratulate you all on finishing the test. Only ten people died during the dungeon too, which is pretty good. As for the performances, the average rating was rather low at only two-stars level one, with the highest at four stars level ten, on the cusp of attaining five stars. The lowest was at one-star level one, attained by not one but three people. That, I must admit, is surprisingly pathetic," the succubus said curtly.

Jake mainly bit onto how the highest rating was four-stars level ten. That was quite a bit better than his own at four-stars level five. From the looks of it, Draskil wasn't the one to get this grade either, as they both exchanged glances when it was announced.

A few more minutes passed as the succubus talked some stuff about the test before continuing.

"Now, let us move on. Remember, no matter how well you did in the test, this is only the beginning and in no way something that determines your path. This is merely the beginning of your journeys as alchemists. You all come from a newly integrated universe, which has granted certain advantages, but also demerits, such as your lack of proper teachers and equal sparring partners. So don't fret no matter what your performance was, as now is the time to prove how talented you truly are.

"Soon, you will be taken to your residences, which will be based on your performance in the test. One and two-star performances will be in the communal dorms, while three and four-stars will get their own personal residences and benefits depending on their evaluations. Naturally, those in the dorms can also get their own residence if they perform well, with more information to follow on how to upgrade. When you get to your residences, an information package will be present. I am assigned as the attendant in charge of this batch, and once you have exchanged your tokens, the new ones will include a way to contact me. Now, please follow me to the token exchange, and let's get you all settled."

Chapter 416 - An Uncertain Future

Meira laid on the ground within the tiny cell as she took pained breaths. Every time she breathed in, the toxic gas would invade her lungs and body, burning her throat and making her wish she could just stop.

However, the wardens outside would come for her in moments if the toxic fumes didn't decrease at a fast enough rate for their liking.

Ever since the day the Brimstone Hegemon had been slain, and she had been enslaved by the Order of the Malefic Viper, she had been forced to either endure torture, been forced to do certain tasks, or confined and taught lessons they believed she would need. She had just wanted to give up so many times, but she was just too cowardly to stop trying to survive.

She hadn't heard anything about her father or the rest of her clan in months either, which only added to the torture. Her father had been captured together with her, and the Order no doubt controlled the clan she had once come from. Likely it was just much of the same for those back home, their masters having simply changed.

Soon enough, she felt like the toxins in the room had decreased enough, and just as she felt like she could relax, the cell door opened. Meira was still on the ground, her health down to less than a third as she barely managed to open her eyes.

"Is this the one?" a voice asked. One unfamiliar to Meria. They spoke the common tongue used within the Order, a language she had learned quite quickly during her capture. It was one of the things she had been forced to learn, which had actually served as a bit of a consolation. After all, would they bother teaching someone they would just kill their language?

"That is the elf. Evolved a month ago and is one of the better ones," the warden in charge of her answered. "Got high marks on nearly everything, and her class and profession are both suitable to the role. Plus, she is an elf, and they tend to be popular with humans, don't they?"

"Hm," the newcomer said as Meira felt a healing spell fall upon her. Her health was restored, and the poison nullified. "Get up."

She did as asked as she stood in her ragged robe. The newcomer that was clearly above the rank of the warden looked her up and down and held out a crystal. "Imprint the basics of your Status on this."

Meira once more complied as her status was transferred. Just basics of her race, class, and profession as well as the general level of her stats.

She had evolved to D-grade a month or so ago, having gained the Perfect Evolution. This would normally be great, but she hadn't truly been able to choose what she wanted. She had been forced into selecting a class and profession based on what the Order wanted. It was also clear that one of the reasons they had chosen to take her was because she was close enough to D-grade to mold her to their liking.

The only thing that consoled her was that at least none of her evolutions had the word slave in it... not that she wasn't offered options that did.

"Seems adequate," the newcomer bigshot said. Meira finally raised her view as she saw the robes the person wore. It was one of the people from "Humanoid Resources," a part of the Order that not only handled internal matters of members but also the slaves and servants.

The woman in front of her was also an elf, but a dark-skinned Dark Elf rather than a "pure" elf like Meria herself. These elves were far more talented in dark magic of all sorts and were most often associated with the Court of Shadows, but it wasn't really surprising to see any in the Order of the Malefic Viper either.

"Follow me," the dark elf said as she led Meira away from the "training room" she had been placed in. The purpose was for her to build up innate resistance to toxins and even upgrade skills related to

detecting and eliminating toxins. It was a cruel method that allowed her to become a test dummy for poisons. In fact, she had even gained the Palate of the Malefic Viper skill.

Meira knew a proper test dummy would be incredibly useful and even valued to a large extent. She had survived the initial training and gained the skills required with her evolution. Right now, her only plan was to gain enough value to not be viewed as easily disposable.

After she had passed the initial tests, she had even begun being taught things related to the Order, and by her own wish, she had been put on a path she believed would give her the best chances: that of a servant.

Soldiers who joined the Order would also do well, but Meira had never been a fighter. She had grown up with a profession related to mining and a healing class that also offered plenty of toughness and vitality for her to help her family in the mines. This had made her resilient enough to survive the ordeals she had been put through.

Her mother had also insisted on teaching her things related to managing the clan and matters related to the household. It was knowledge she had cursed having to learn as she knew it was due to the young master of the Brimstone Conglomerate, but now that knowledge had allowed her to get a good evaluation from the instructors of the Order.

Which was why the next words of the dark elf higher-up were not unexpected.

“You have gained a permanent position, and your training ends from today,” the dark elf said as she led her forward.

Meira felt relieved but was worried about one thing... why was someone who was clearly C-grade or maybe even beyond bothering with leading her, a measly D-grade? Much less inform her directly?

“May I ask, where will I serve?” she finally mustered up the courage to say after a dozen or so seconds of silence.

The dark elf seemed to have just waited for her to build up the guts to ask as she answered: “You will be assigned a new master who will gain full ownership of you, and you will act as the personal steward of his residence. That, or whatever else he decides to do with you.”

She spoke with an uninterested tone as she still probed Meira’s response. Meira could only shudder a little as this was what she had feared, but she tried not to display it.

Slaves like her could get many positions. They could get a job in an alchemy lab as test dummies, join larger experiments, be assigned to dorms as caretakers, or so many other places where servants were needed. The most sought-after positions were as a general caretaker or work in one of the brothels where survival was often always assured, and you even had the chance of catching the eye of someone influential.

But to become the personal servant of an individual was the worst. If you were owned by a collective, it meant no one could “break” you without repercussions. It meant you would retain some sense of autonomy as even if the institution owned you, no individual did, and this meant you could often just do your own thing as long as you did your job.

Having an individual master meant your fate relied solely on the whims of a person. You could be killed, tortured, or whatever else to sate that person’s desires without anything happening, especially as the ones getting personal servants were the influential, talented, or powerful ones. Often all three. Moreover, what happens when the master dies or gets powerful enough to no longer need you?

There was also some opportunity in having only one master... but those were few and far between. In fact, the biggest hope was the master just forgetting you existed altogether. But she knew her likely outcome was far worse. All she could do now was hope she would get lucky.

"If I may, who will my new master be?" Meira asked, a bit hesitant.

"A human that just passed the entrance test and is from the newly integrated universe," the dark elf said.

Meira was at first a little relieved it would at least be a human until the next sentence came:

"One with a unanimous vote by the judges of the trial to have the highest level of importance placed upon him, so do not disappoint."

She instantly felt herself take a deep breath but once more tried to not let it show. For someone to get such attention meant he had to be outstanding. But as a human from a newly integrated universe, he hopefully was-

The dark elf interrupted her thoughts as she waved her hand, and an image appeared, showing a masked person with two piercing yellow beastly eyes that made a shiver run down her spine.

Instantly killing all hope of her new master being an amicable person. She was already wondering what her perhaps limited future would hold as she was led through a gate towards her new "home."

Jake had discovered days ago that Sylphie could still communicate with him even across universes, which was nice as he had a constant feed of her adventures, including how she and her parents had now gone to the dungeon. Sadly it appeared the communication did not work out of the dungeon and had not worked while Jake was in his dungeon either, so for the next week, at minimum, they would be cut off. It sucked because he really liked updates from the cute little hawk.

Back in the Order, Jake was following Irin and all the others as he made his way over to Reika to walk beside her. They exchanged a glance that told Jake they were fine, which made Jake just walk in silence as they walked through the gateway.

They entered a large office with hundreds of people working, and it reminded Jake of some government branch with people running all over. Well, most just teleported or opened gates and stuff, so a magical government office?

“This way,” Irin the succubus said as she led them all over to a table with another demon sitting at. Behind him was a large black statue of sorts that looked to be made of obsidian or maybe some kind of crystal? Jake wasn’t sure, and his Identify didn’t render any results either. It depicted a robed figure with an outstretched hand with the palm facing upwards.

The demoness stopped in front of the statue, with the other demon also getting up, but it was Irin who spoke.

“This statue will serve as an exchange of your Entry Token to get a true Order Token. This token will serve as both your badge of identification and is useful, if not required, to do much within the Order and the Academy. Moreover, this token will be Soulbound to you and only you, making it impossible to use for anyone but yourself,” she said as she motioned for the male demon to speak.

He followed through as he spoke: “To exchange the token, merely place your Entry Token in the hand of the statue and proceed to infuse your energy into the statue. Do not resist the scan that then follows. This will transform your token into a true one, signifying you have become genuine members of the Order!”

Before anything else could happen, Draskil stepped forward and placed his token in the hand of the statue as he infused energy into it. A few seconds later, the Entry Token had transformed into a new one as he held it up. It was entirely black and looked like a circular-cut gem of some kind with the Order of the Malefic Viper motif on it.

The male demon looked with recognition as he smiled. Jake wondered why as Irin explained.

“The tokens are split into the ranks: White, Bronze, Silver, Gold, Black, and Dark Green, with Dark Green naturally being the highest. The tokens are also grade-specific, so each time you advance, you will need to get them re-issued, which may also result in getting a lower ranking. Or a higher one, of course. I will be honest, this color-coding is primarily cosmetic and will have little practical impact besides signifying your status to others easily,” she explained.

Jake and everyone nodded, but he noticed no one else stepping forward. Instead, a few glanced his way. It turned out that skipping queues was also a benefit of being strong as Jake gladly stepped forward and did the same thing Draskil had done.

He felt the statue scan him, but the moment it tried, it impacted Shroud. Jake was quick as he deactivated the Divine skill, letting it through. The scan still took a second more than usual, getting an odd glance from the demon in charge of it, but he quickly calmed down when it spat out a new black token.



Jake had feared he would get a Dark Green, but it appeared he would at least avoid that attention. He stepped over to where Draskil was as they exchanged another glance. Both were staying to see who else would get black tokens, and moreover, to see if they could find the mysterious one who got a higher grade than them. Also... clearly, none of them had any idea where to go.

He took this time to inspect his new token after binding it to himself.

[D-grade Black Order of the Malefic Viper Token (Unique)] – A token signifying you are a member of the Order of the Malefic Viper. This token holds info regarding your identity and details about your person, as well as a plethora of other useful functions, including but not limited to information storage, gateway access, event participation, formation control, contract services, and residence services. Requirements: Soulbound

It felt simple yet incredibly complex. Jake was also confident the token was borderline unbreakable. When he checked it further, he also felt the knowledge in the Entry Token had all been transplanted onto this new one, along with a lot more information about the Order and whatnot.

He didn't have more time to scan it as a commotion was made as an unimpressive level 111 Risen got a black token. The highest level Risen also went up right after and got another black token as four more Risen followed who all got gold ones. Six Risen had arrived at this test, and of them, two had black ones and four golden, which was far more than any other group.

The Harpy, who was the last to complete the test, also went up and got a black one as all the other leaders of the higher-level groups got golden tokens. Reika only got a bronze token, as all but one of the alchemists with her got white ones. Jake didn't know if he should be happy or sad that at least one other alchemist from Earth managed to get bronze, but oh well.

This, in the end, meant that five total black tokens were given, and the mysterious top-performer was either one of the two Risen or the Harpy. Jake glanced at all three, and his instincts were pretty clear as he met the eye of the level 149 Risen.

Him.

He was certain. It was a mere fraction of a second, but Jake's intuition was clear. Because for a moment, Jake felt a response from Sense of the Malefic Viper as he looked at him that practically screamed that the Risen before him was akin to a walking natural treasure of pure toxicity.

And not online video game kind of toxicity.

Chapter 417 - Rules & A Very Good Question

Once every person had gotten their tokens, there was just one more round of orientation before all the students would be let loose. Jake followed behind again as they were all led back to the old waiting chamber and quickly went into new "camps" of sorts based on the level of their tokens. It was a bit odd in Jake's mind to put yourself into a box based on colored crystal tokens.

"So, as a final thing, let's have a small orientation," the succubus began once everyone was back in position. "Let us start with some basic ground rules of the Order of the Malefic Viper, more specifically, the rules while part of the Academy. Do note that the Academy is but one branch of the whole Order, and entry into the Academy also means membership of the Order, so you will all have these imposed on you while on Order ground.

"Membership of the Order and Academy can naturally be rescinded at any point by you or as punishment if you break any rules."

With those words, a large screen was projected in front of all of them with a small list of six rules.

1. Guests of the Order of the Malefic Viper shall be treated as members for all subsequent rules.
2. Killing any member of the Order within common grounds is strictly prohibited. Killing any member of the Order within their own or a residence they have been allowed access to is strictly prohibited.
3. Destruction of property is strictly prohibited and will result in severe punishment partly determined by the damaged party. Slaves, pets, servants, and other auxiliary living creatures under the control of a member of the Order fall under the umbrella of property. If these creatures break any rules, the owner will be punished accordingly.
4. Theft of property from any member of the Order is strictly prohibited.
5. Unauthorized entry into the residence of another member of the Order is heavily disincentivized and can lead to punishment.
6. Any case of perceived injustice can be brought to an Order official, and it will be processed. Punishment will, if proven correct, be subjectively determined. If the plaintiff is found in the wrong, punishment will be served upon them instead for wasting the official's time.

Jake read them over and was surprised at how little there was and how basic it was. It was basically just saying not to kill, steal or destroy the stuff of others and if any of these things – or anything else you didn't like – happened to you, to just go complain to an official and hope they take your side or get fucked yourself.

“The rules are purposefully simple as honestly having a long list serves little purpose. Ah, and before anyone gets any fancy ideas, then guardians of the Order are always present and actively observing any non-residence at all times, so assassination attempts tend to not work very well. Now, any questions?” Irin explained as she asked with a light smile.

An elf in the room raised their hand as she acknowledged him. “What happens if a servant acts of their own volition and breaks one of the rules?”

“Depends entirely on what happens and how the judge in question feels that day. If they think you had something to do with it, everything from being told it was a fun idea to getting your entire homeworld destroyed can happen,” Irin shrugged.

A few hands were instantly raised at that as the succubus took the initiative to explain.

“While these rules exist, don’t think for a moment they are absolute. Punishment is entirely determined by those in power, and with enough influence and power, you can do borderline anything. You can’t all seriously think anything would happen if an A-grade feels annoyed and decides to erase some weak white token D-grade academy student, can you?”

She chuckled a bit at the sentiment, but the mood in the waiting room did not seem to agree with her as people now looked a bit more worried than before. Reika also frowned, and the only ones who looked relatively relaxed were Jake, Draskil, and the Risen.

“Ah, don’t act like that,” Irin said, shaking her head. “It isn’t like there is anything in it for some powerhouse to slap you to death, and chances are they will get a slight punishment, like paying a fine or

something and don't flatter yourself to truly think you are worth that to them. Of course, there are a few ways to more or less shield yourself from anything. Like being associated with another force of the multiverse."

Irin said this part as she referred to the Risen.

"Or, the best of all, carry the blessing of the Malefic One himself, or perhaps just someone subordinate to the great Patron."

That last part was naturally said as she motioned towards Jake and Draskil, as well as a few others. In fact, most leaders of factions had low-level blessings from the Viper, but all of them besides Jake and Draskil had only the Minor one. Jake acted like he also had only a Lesser one, but Draskil truly stood out with the Divine Blessing.

"There is also the option of finding an internal faction to align yourself with, or you could just not mess with people you shouldn't mess with. If you feel like things aren't fair or work as they should, get strong enough to fix it or adapt, we clear?" Irin said as she looked around for any other questions.

A female scalekin of some sort raised her hand and asked: "How will lessons in the Academy work?"

"Says in the information package within the token. Next?"

This led to a few seconds of silence as everyone clearly scanned their tokens not to ask any more questions, only to have them be shut down. Jake did the same thing, but only some of the surface stuff as he would dive into it later. Besides, it wasn't like he planned on asking any questions right now.

“Where are the personal residences of those with three stars or higher located?” one of the leaders with a gold token asked. Jake guessed gold meant either high-end three-star performance or maybe early four-star too? Either way, gold surely had to mean personal residence.

“Within the Order itself, but the exact location not that easily discerned as it is underground, hidden by formations and spatially expanded,” Irin answered. “Also, to answer the obvious follow-up, your token is already linked to your residences, and simply by activating any of the gates spread throughout, you can enter it. The token is also used to leave it again. Each residence is placed in a neighborhood of sorts with individuals roughly around your level, but don’t fret, each residence is individually isolated by formations and barriers.”

That did seem to answer a question many had, but someone else did raise their hand: “How will the shared dorms work?”

“You will all have individual rooms. Ah, in comparison, the ones with three stars above will have entire courtyards with several buildings, also giving ample space to house your servants or followers. It is also entirely possible for those with residences to just have others come stay with them if they so wish; it’s all up to them. And no, if you live in a dorm and expect to have personal servants, rethink your status and get a residence first,” Irin answered curtly again.

By now, Jake was just waiting for it to be over. He did throw Reika a glance across the room, but she subtly shook her head. He wanted to see if she had any interest in sharing his residences as he assumed he would get a big one, but she declined. Which was a-okay with Jake.

He had never tried living with a woman before besides his mother either, so it was good to avoid that awkwardness.

The orientation only continued for a few more minutes as some more simple questions were asked. After that, a few people began going around and talking to others, which was when Jake discovered the tokens also worked as phones within the Order to contact one another. It was truly a multi-purpose tool.

Jake naturally exchanged his number with Reika and found that the number to Irinixis was already inside. Well, Jake said number, but it was more like a token signature bound to the inherent mana and soul signature of the other person owning the token, making it far more secure and borderline impossible for anyone besides the two speaking to intercept the signal.

Anyway, Jake decided to keep calling it a number as that was just easier.

A lot of people came up to Jake wanting to get his contact info, primarily the other humans, but he declined all of them. Draskil was once more the first to leave without getting any numbers as he went over to a wall with a small magic circle on, held the token up, and made a Malefic Dragonkin-sized gateway appear. He stepped through, and the moment he did, it closed behind them.

More mimicked this as the room began emptying out. All of the Risen went together to one residence, it appeared, while Jake had a brief talk with Reika where he learned she would be with the one other bronze token alchemist while the others from the clan would be by themselves at their respective dorms. She also informed him one of them had died during the dungeon, which Jake had kind of guessed since one didn't return.

With everything handled, Jake said his goodbyes as he went over to a wall. Before he left, Irinixis quickly came over and stood beside him. "I wish you a good time in the Academy and Order, and remember to call if you need anything, okay?"

She said the last part with a wink as she scurried off again. Jake did wonder why she showed him special interest. Well, a special interest that she didn't show the other people with outstanding performances. She hadn't tried this with Draskil or any of the Risen but seemed to only focus on him. Maybe she just didn't find Scalekin or Risen to her liking?

Jake didn't bother thinking about it more as he activated the token and made a gate open. It was instinctual and easy to do with the token, and when he stepped through, he didn't feel any discomfort or even movement of space. Whatever space magic was going on was at an insanely high level.

As his head went through the gate, he instantly saw the sunlight and the lush green courtyard before him with a large house standing atop some stairs. It had a black glass façade, and Jake instantly felt a bit weird looking at it because it looked too... modern?

He looked around and saw the garden in front of it as his Sense of the Malefic Viper reacted to the herbs. Good for potions, he noted. Entire flowerbeds were lining the perimeter of the house with a large lawn of sorts with trees leading up to the house. It looked like a modern mansion.

It should also be noted that all of the observers Jake had felt while in any of the common areas were gone. In there, the only one he knew was still looking from the outside was a certain snake god. So that was nice for privacy, as at least there were no longer a dozen hidden powerhouses looking at all times. However, he did also feel something from the residence, but the aura felt weak.

Walking forward, he took in the sights and looked up to see the bright sun and a blue sky above. He instinctively knew it was not a real star, but it was really fucking close. As in, Jake didn't doubt there was an actual celestial object above; it was just made by someone supremely powerful.



Jake finally took his time to inspect the house himself as he walked closer. Mind you, he needed to walk closer as the walkway with grass and trees on each side was several hundred meters long, making his sphere not reach.

As he got closer, he saw the interior and the modern look continuing. Tiled floors, concrete walls, glass facades. He even saw modern-looking furniture, but he didn't really consider it as he also spotted someone in the mansion's entry hall - the one observing him.

He hurried a bit over and opened the large door leading into the house, only to be met with a large open hall with a tall ceiling with several large sculptures giving off light hanging from it. However, what he focused on was the person in front of him.

"Welcome, Master," she said as she knelt on the ground. Jake instantly used Identify as he frowned.

[Elf – lvl 109]

She looked young, maybe in her early twenties, though to be fair, all elves he had ever seen looked young. She had the usual pointed ears and a generally slender build too. She was wearing a white dress that didn't cover as much as it probably should, and the way she was pressing her head against the floor rubbed Jake the wrong way.

"Thanks?" Jake answered tentatively. "May I know who you are?"

He had expected no one to be present, so of course, he was surprised at finding someone there.

The elf raised her head to look at Jake as she answered. "I am called Meira, Master."

Meira, as she was called, looked a bit surprised at Jake's response, but she also clearly tried to hide it. Not very well, but she tried. Jake looked her over again, and his gut reaction was that she had to be some noble elf or something, right?

She had long blonde hair, a slender build, deep green eyes, perfect features, proportions where it mattered... she looked straight out of a fantasy, like those elven princesses out of video games. There was just one problem.

"Why do you keep calling me master?"

Once more, she looked a bit surprised as she nevertheless answered without missing a beat.

"I am here to serve in any way seen fit, so it is only right to use the title Master," she explained a bit nervously before adding. "Naturally, if Master wishes for me to use any other title, I can."

"No, I mean, why do you call me Master, and why are you here to begin with?" Jake asked.

"I was assigned to serve Master at his residence," Meira answered, but her nervousness was clearly growing.

“So you work here?” He asked to confirm, frowning.

His frown was clearly picked up just from his eyes as she answered, sounding frightened: “I can do anything Master wants, anywhere he desires.”

Jake’s frown deepened as it clicked. He took out the token and scanned it over, finding a part of it he hadn’t checked before. A contract. He briefly looked it over and saw what it was as he clenched his fists, and a bit of bloodlust seeped out.

He looked towards the sky, where he knew the god was looking. “Villy, what the fuck is this?”

Not a single part of him cared that he spoke out loud, and clearly, the Viper didn’t either as the next moment, an aura descended. Pure power coalesced as a form appeared in the sky, and a humanoid scaled being floated down from above.

Jake stood unbothered by the aura as the Viper smiled in answer. “I was not the cause of-”

“Relax that fucking presence, man, look at her,” Jake said as he motioned towards Meira, who was uncontrollably shivering while still kneeling. She looked like she was intermittently between passing out and being forcefully woken up by the Viper’s presence as tears streamed down her face and onto the ground.

The Viper responded as the aura disappeared like it had never been there. He pointed at Meira as she stopped shaking and appeared to calm down. “Fine, fine. Geez.”

“Now tell me... why the fuck do I suddenly own a slave?” Jake asked as he didn’t bother controlling his own aura or presence in the slightest.

Chapter 418 - \U0022The Positive Side\U0022

Meira waited in the entrance hall after she had changed her clothes out of the ragged robe and cleaned herself up. She had even set her hair and tried to look as representable as possible for her new master to arrive. Not a single part of her doubted the first impression would be important, so she wanted to look and perform her best.

She knew it would be a good while before he arrived, so she had gone through the mansion. There were seven buildings adjoining to it, including a large lab, two greenhouses, three more residential buildings, and a large warehouse of some sort to be customized by the new owner.

The main mansion was massive with dozens of rooms, three stories not counting the underground, and everything looked incredibly well made. It was like the buildings of the Brimstone Conglomerate and only hammered home that her new master was a person of influence.

Meira had gone through everything in preparation for him to arrive. She had located the meditation chamber, the formation control room, the relaxation rooms, and even the bed-chamber. Considering D-grades no longer needed to sleep, the use of that room was obvious, especially with a bed that large, made to accommodate several people at once.

Once everything had been gone through, she had returned and was now waiting in the entrance hall. It took only an hour more before something happened. At the entrance to the courtyard appeared a single figure wearing black clothes and a mask. She looked through the one-way glass out and the door leading into the mansion as she subtly tried to study him as he also stood still and appeared to observe his new surroundings.

Soon enough, he began walking towards the mansion. Meira had already gone over hundreds of scenarios in her head of how this first meeting would go and felt as prepared as she could when he went through the door and laid eyes on her.

“Welcome, Master.”

She said the words with as much servility as she could, making sure to keep her head low to make it absolutely clear she knew her position.

“Thanks? May I know who you are?”

His answer was unexpected, especially his tone as she felt genuine confusion. His voice also seemed very relaxed and not as intimidating as she had feared. She dared raise her head as she met the admittedly frightening yellow eyes, but she tried to keep her cool as she answered.

What followed was even more confusing as Meira introduced herself, and her new master kept asking probing questions. At first, she began to believe it was a test for her to prove she truly recognized her position, but that became doubtful as he kept sounding so genuinely perplexed.

This wasn't good. Meira's new master had clearly not expected her to be there. Meira tried to calm herself down and make it clear she would be useful, but he kept seeming dissatisfied at her presence. If he decided to throw her out...

“Villy, what the fuck is this?” he suddenly said, as an aura of bloodlust poured out, making Meira shiver. Who was this Villy? What was-

Then suddenly, she felt something else. Like the entire world stood still, and an utterly oppressive aura appeared. Every fiber of her being cried out as she shivered, her mind unable to comprehend what exactly was happening. Yet she still knew... instinctively she knew, after spending so long within the Order, seeing the statues, and being bathed in their aura:

It was the Malefic One.

Her mind was jumbled as she couldn't comprehend what was happening. Meira's psyche was in disarray as the aura weighed down on her, and she felt herself slip in and out of consciousness, but she was mercilessly forcefully awakened again and again. She felt like death was upon her, tears streaming down her face as she wasn't even able to open her mouth to beg for merc-

"Relax that fucking presence, man, look at her!"

Meira barely registered the voice of her new master, but it shocked her nearly as much as the appearance of the Primordial. How could he... how did he-

"Fine, fine. Geez."

The words sounded not like they came from a god but just a person. As they were spoken, the presence crushing her subsided as suddenly it was like the god had never been there. She almost wondered if he had left, but her master's next question confirmed it wasn't so.

“Now tell me... why the fuck do I suddenly own a slave?”

Bloodlust assaulted her as Meira shivered again. It was more than she could take as she almost blacked out from sheer fear. It was different than that of a god... if the aura of a god made you feel like you could die at any point, the aura she was currently feeling made her think she would be killed at any moment by something just as scary as any diety. It seemed the same on the surface but was vastly different. Her mind was barely able to comprehend that the bloodlust was partly directed at her and the sentiment behind the question... he wanted to get rid of her.

“Now look at what you are doing!” the Malefic One spoke.

A moment passed as the bloodlust also subsided, and for the first time in what felt like forever, Meira could breathe again. Yet she was still shivering and crying as hopelessness and confusion dominated her mind. She couldn't comprehend what was happening, but she knew she was the cause of it. She knew her new master was unsatisfied with her presence. As for why the Malefic One would suddenly appear... it almost felt like this was just an illusion, or maybe she was already dead?

“Sorry about that,” her new master said as she suddenly felt herself be helped up. Meira looked up and saw the scaled figure stand behind the masked man helping her as she shook at the sight.

“Hey, hey, relax,” her master said as she was gently pushed down, and she felt herself sit on some kind of chair. “Deep breaths, everything is fine.”

“Great, see you later the-“ the Malefic One began.

“No, we aren’t done!” the human said as he turned to the god. “Now explain to me why the hell this is a thing?”

Meira just stared as she desperately tried to understand what was going on. How could a mortal yell at the Malefic One? Why was the Malefic One here to begin with? Why did the Primordial not seem offended or to care?

She was just lost for words as all she could do was try to make herself smaller and hope to fade away as the two began talking right in front of her.

Jake had a damn headache as he shifted between looking at Villy and the poor elf that looked white as a ghost and like she was certain death was right around the corner. He always forgot how much the aura of a god really wore down others, and Villy had clearly not bothered holding anything back.

Villy looked at Jake as he explained. “I tried to tell you before, this has nothing to do with me. Do you really think I descended down and ordered what kind of slave you would get? No, my interfering would only have been for you to not get one, as it is customary for one with your performance. It was entirely done by members of the Order, following regular procedures.”

“Leads to the question of why the hell that is a procedure,” Jake shot back.

“Think about it a bit. Think about why I have no qualms descending before you and talking openly like this even with her present. Think about how no one else can observe within this residence – besides me, of course – and consider why the only assistant provided by the Order is a slave. It all comes down to the basic principle of trust,” the Viper explained.



Jake had taken a deep breath as he calmed himself a bit and let the Viper keep talking.

“As a member, you might need assistance to handle some things within the Order. Maybe you need someone to fetch you alchemical materials, deliver a message or an invitation, or a plethora of other mundane tasks not worth your time. A slave like this can also help you in the alchemy lab as a great test subject, take care of your garden, or just help you relieve boredom. The point is, having someone so close and working with you will inadvertently lead to them finding out some of your secrets and have access to valuable items you own. This is ignoring the fact that it would be annoying and stressful to constantly be on watch within your own home. A slave like her fixes all that as there is no threat of a leak or that they act against your interests,” Villy kept explaining.

The Viper seemed to be finished with his point, but Jake still stood annoyed. He didn’t like it nevertheless, and when he looked at the elf just staring down onto the ground, trying to hold back her tears and biting her own lip, he just felt even shittier.

“I still don’t like it, and I don’t see any reason to repeat an old conversation on the topic. You know my stance, and you knew I wouldn’t like it. You could at least have given me a heads-up,” Jake said. “Why not just have it be a servant who signs a contract of confidentiality like Lillian did?”

“Why warn you when you should have been able to figure something like this out yourself? You knew the Order had slaves, and I can see you even recognize why it makes sense. As for why it is not just a contract? Well, those contracts have the huge issue of being limited in scope, impossible to revise without consent from both parties, and can even be circumvented in many cases through smart wording or even just mental manipulation. Like if someone made an illusion to make them look like you perfectly, that girl on Earth could spill the beans and be none the wiser. She would still be hit by the backlash after the fact, though, once she realized she was fooled, but at that point, the damage is done. That doesn’t happen with slaves, as the limitations are far more extreme, especially the kind deployed by the Order. In fact. Even if she was fooled, she would be unable to say anything as the system itself would make her clamp up,” the Viper explained. “Oh, and finally: for her own protection while within the Order.”

Jake didn't bite into anything in the first part as he knew he had no legs to stand on when it came to arguing the efficiency of contacts and whatnot. Even the second part, Jake understood within a second. "Because of the rules?"

He remembered the wording and believed it wasn't a coincidence it had used "under control" rather than any other phrasing.

"Bingo," Villy smirked. "Attacking her would mean attacking an extension of you. Killing her would mean the destruction of your property, and dependent on how mad that makes you, it could lead to heavy punishment. Also, with the slave contract, everyone knows she would be useless to try and extract information from."

"Even if I see the logic," Jake said. "It doesn't make me like it. I don't need a slave and would rather just do all the mundane stuff myself rather than force someone else to. So just tell me how I break this thing. Just set her free and let her do her own thing."

"Sure, I could do that," Villy smiled agreeably. "But you should be nice and also just kill her right away then. That would be far kinder than release a freed slave within the Order only to be picked up by someone else with a, let's just say, lesser moral character."

"Just take her someone else then," Jake argued. "Take her back to where she originally came from, or just on some weak world or something. I know Earth is not an option, but there should be plenty of places where a D-grade can thrive."

"Probably. But why would I? I didn't cause this mess, so why would I fix it?" the Viper said without much care. "In fact, I'm going, to be honest. The moment you called out directly to me, released your aura, and didn't bother hiding anything anymore, that ship sailed. It isn't like the memories can be scrubbed from her head, and I don't trust any contract less than a soul contract that may as well be a slavery one

to keep her quiet. Even such a contract would be proof in itself of her association with the Order or at least someone powerful at one point, leading to her life being messed up as a result. So if you truly wish to set her free, just know the likely result is death or worse.”

At this point, Jake wanted to punch a wall. He looked down at the elf as he regarded Villy again. “We both know that is bullshit. Shit, you can just place her on some fringe planet no one has ever heard about, and even if she knows some things, so what? I am the one at risk here if anything leaks, which is a risk I am willing to take.”

“You seem adamant, huh,” Villy said with a smile. He didn’t look angry or disappointed or really like this conversation was of any consequence but remained oddly neutral. Like he truly didn’t care what Jake decided to do. “But how about I propose another path?”

“What?” Jake asked.

“Let her decide,” Villy smirked.

Jake turned and looked at her again. Meira had kept quiet throughout after her shaking had stopped, and by now, she just looked down at the ground with empty eyes. She didn’t move even an inch and looked more like a statue than a person.

“Hey... you can speak your mind here. Nothing will happen no matter what you say, I promise,” Jake said, trying to assure her. She finally reacted as she looked up at him. Jake tried to be encouraging and had even removed his mask to look less scary, hoping that would help.

He also did all he could to hide how shitty he felt. Jake felt like he really was the bad guy with a young woman sitting and crying beside him as he stood there arguing with his snake god friend.

“Go on,” Jake urged her.

“Master, I-“

“Just don’t call me Master,” Jake insisted. It felt like something crept up his spine every time she said it. He had barely gotten used to being called Lord Thayne, so there was no fucking way he was having any of that “Master” crap.

She looked a bit taken aback as she managed to stammer out. “My... My Lord, please allow me to serve you in any way I can; I swear I will do my utmost to prove myself useful!”

Jake felt like she missed the point. “I said you can be honest. This isn’t a test or anything like that. You have my word. Nothing bad will happen, so speak freely. Do you have any family or a home to go back to or anywhere you want to be taken?”

Meira, however, stuck to her words. “Ma... My Lord, I am speaking true. I wish to remain within My Lord’s employ and prove myself useful.”

“Why?” Jake asked probingly.

"I... believe remaining under My Lord would be the wisest, and I swear I shall prove useful by any means possible," she insisted again.

"And why would it be the wisest?" Jake also repeated.

"Man, Jake, think for a second," Villy cut in. "Even the biggest idiot can figure out you are quite the personage with everything happening, so why wouldn't she want to stay? Shit, I am sure that if people truly knew about you, there would be plenty of powerful people willing to enslave themselves to you by choice."

Jake didn't have anything to comment on that as he just groaned again. He looked down at the elven woman and saw she looked determined. In the end, he just sighed. "Fuck me sideways with a tire iron and call me a hippo... this is some bullshit."

Villy just made a huge grin as if he had won something while the poor elf just looked utterly confused at Jake's nonsensical outburst.

"Well then, I shall leave it to you," Villy said as he bowed with exaggeration. "Think about it on the positive side... finally, you have someone besides me you can be perfectly honest with and not bother hiding anything. Even that City Lord you kept secrets from, so won't it be refreshing to have someone you can vent to about your Bloodline, the annoying snake god that keeps bothering you, and even be a full-on heretic around?"

Jake looked over at him. "I thought you said you were leaving?"

"See, just like that!" the Viper said as he disappeared without a trace.

Jake just sighed for the tenth time today as he looked at the elf. She looked down on the ground again as she clenched her fists, and Jake honestly had no idea what the fuck to do or say as he found himself in one of the most awkward and uncomfortable situations of his life. He would much rather be fighting that damn Hydra again.

“Fuck me...”

Chapter 419 - Conversations Are Hard

Jake stood there thinking and going over what the fuck to do next as he heard a meek voice beside him.

“If My Lord wants to...”

He wondered what she meant as he remembered what he had just said. Instantly the situation just turned more awkward as Jake facepalmed. “No... no, I mean fuck me for being in this situation... not to actually...”

For every moment, Jake got more and more sure Villy had to have known and even looked forward to this entire shitty thing happening. Jake could practically see him sitting there laughing his head off at Jake, trying to deal with his newfound circumstances.

Meira at least looked embarrassed too at her misunderstanding, but also a bit relieved and... disappointed? Nah, Jake definitely misinterpreted that.

She clearly wasn't going to break the silence either as she sat there unmoving, forcing Jake to take the initiative and try to make the situation just a tiny bit less awkward. "Even using My Lord is a bit much. Just call me whatever you want, okay?"

"That would be inappropriate and disrespectful... wouldn't it?" she asked. The elf looked just as out of water as Jake himself.

Whatever game plan she had was clearly out the window long ago. They both had been tossed into a situation neither was comfortable with, and Jake would do his darndest to at least make it bearable.

"Where I come from treating others overly respectfully is odd, and if we are to live in the same residence, it will get old fast and just make everything weird. No, just call me by my name Jake... well, I use the pseudonym Hunter while within the Order, but considering everything that happened before hiding my name seems pointless," Jake said as he tried to keep it casual.

Meira still seemed unsure as Jake doubled down.

"Look, I call the Malefic Viper by the made-up nickname Villy and sure as hell am not going to refer to him as Lord or whatever else people use, at least not in private. If I can do that, you can call a fellow D-grade by his name, can't you?"

That turned out to be a bad idea as Meira whitened even more and looked afraid something terrible would happen. Like divine retribution was inbound. She even looked towards the sky, but nothing happened as Jake once more tried to calm her down.

“He wouldn’t have made me his Chosen and be so casual around me if he was going to smite me for that, now would he?” Jake said, really trying to hammer through he was a casual person.

“I... how can you?” she finally stammered out.

“We are friends,” Jake just shrugged. “I know it seems weird from your point of view, but I am a bit of an odd person, so don’t fret it, okay? Just relax and keep it casual and down to earth.”

He really tried to seem approachable and friendly, but Jake seriously had no confidence he was making headway, and he wasn’t only making things worse. He just wasn’t built for this kind of thing.

His words also clearly didn’t work as she looked as meek as before, now just mixed with a good dose of extra confusion. Jake thought a bit as he said: “Look, how about doing it like this. While it’s just the two of us call me Jake, and when around others, you can call me My Lord or Master or whatever else you find appropriate, okay?”

She finally looked up but didn’t even address what he said, as she stammered out: “Are... you the Chosen of the Malefic One?”

“Wait, you were hung up on that?” Jake asked, clearly not reading the flow of their one-sided conversation very well. “Yeah, I am, at least in the name. Maybe in function, too, as it is a unique title, so whatever way I act is how the Chosen acts? Either way, yes, I got the True Blessing from the Malefic Viper.”

“How?” Meira asked again.



“Eh... a bit of a long story. Actually, not that long. We met after I did a Challenge Dungeon designed by him. He was a bit of a dick, to begin with, but we ended up vibing and having a good time, and then at the end, he just sneakily gave me the Blessing,” Jake explained.

He saw her physically cringe back when Jake called Villy a dick, as Jake once more reiterated: “As the Viper said earlier, I am also a bit of a heretic, I guess? I like the Viper well-enough as a person and all, and we generally tend to have a good time, but I don’t really treat him like a god or whatever. Just know that he is fine with it. It is a bit interesting that I can be viewed as a heretic when the god in question isn’t really offended, but here we are.”

Meira fell silent again as Jake began to realize bombarding her with ridiculousness was perhaps not the best tactic of calming her down, and he didn’t feel like they were progressing much. Jake thus decided to take it as much down to earth as he could as he pulled out a chair himself and sat across from her.

“Meira, listen,” Jake said as he got her attention again. “Where I come from, slavery isn’t really a thing much anymore, and when it does happen, it is heavily frowned upon, and let me be perfectly frank: I don’t like it. At a fundamental and conceptual level, I despise it. I want to just rip up that stupid contract more than anything, not because of you, but just because of what it represents. However, it seems that would inadvertently lead to a shitty situation for everything and everyone except my own conscience, so I won’t. But that doesn’t mean I have to like it, and I swear I have no interest in treating you like a slave. As you are stuck here, we can figure out some working arrangements, but if you decide to just stay and chill in this huge mansion indefinitely, I won’t bother you. You can speak your mind whenever around me and treat me like just another person. In fact, I would prefer that over everything else, alright?”

That finally seemed to get a response as she looked up: “Please allow me to remain; I will do anything! I can-”

"I just said you can stay no matter what," Jake interrupted her as he held up a hand. "What I am just saying is that for you to stay and the both of us to feel comfortable with it, we need to compromise, okay?"

She took a bit, but she slowly nodded.

"Great. So, ignoring anything else that happened, what do you want to do?" Jake asked. "If you weren't bound by any contract that told you what you had to do, what would you be doing?"

Meira fell silent for a bit before she spoke. "I was trained and raised before that to be a good worker and able to assist someone else... I want to prove myself useful."

It wasn't an answer Jake hoped for, but he didn't want to press anything more. "Okay, so what do you want to do here in the Order?"

"Work for Mast... m..." she looked a bit lost for words as she stopped talking and looked down again. She looked almost scared Jake would do anything, which only made everything worse. What the fuck kind of training and upraising did she have to think slipping up a few words would result in anything bad?

"Jake," he said calmly.

She looked up.

“Just call me Jake, and I will call you Meira.”

“Okay...” she said as she fell silent again. It didn’t seem like she got the message.

Jake had a feeling he wasn’t really getting anywhere as she looked lost in thought again. Rather than keep pressing, he changed the subject as he hoped he had gotten his point through. At least enough for her to process it for the future.

“Alright, let’s do something else. I just arrived, so could you maybe show me around the place?” Jake asked.

She instantly prepped up, and as Jake stood, so did she.

“Naturally!” she exclaimed. “Where would Master like to go first?”

A second later, she realized as she paled, but Jake just acted like nothing as he gently corrected her: “Jake is just fine, and can you show me the lab first? I just got one made back home, and I would love to see the difference.”

She quickly nodded with relief as she led Jake forward.

Jake did have to admit he felt like he was walking on eggshells throughout the entire tour, and he did recognize the ridiculousness of the situation. However, he was confident that she would get used to him not being a shit person with a bit of time and patience.

Because damn, she had clearly assumed for him to be an absolute shitbag, which made Jake wonder how other slaves of the Order and the multiverse as a whole were treated.

Reika had used the Token together with Haruto, the other bronze token alchemist of the Noboru Clan. They had instantly stepped through a gate and appeared in a large entry hall leading into a massive hallway with doors on each side.

Several more people also followed after them as she and Haruto stepped out of the way to make space for two scalekins laughing as they went into two of the rooms a bit down the hall. In the entry hall, they soon stood a dozen or so people from the new batch from the ninety-third Universe. A few had already gone and found their rooms, but Reika had chosen to remain for now.

“Excuse me,” someone finally said as a group of three fellow humans approached her and Haruto. “My name is Jiub, pleased to make your acquaintance. I wonder if I could have a moment of your time?”

This was what Reika had been waiting for, and she was glad she wouldn’t have to be the first one to approach someone.

“Reika, pleased to meet you,” she said as she returned his greeting.

“I couldn’t help but notice you seemed to be close with the sole black-token human?” Jiub asked, just as Reika had expected. “My Lord is a gold-token himself, and we hope to make some good connections here early on to make it easier for all of us.”

Reika nodded but did correct one thing. “I did indeed arrive with him. However, we are at most allies and do not hail from the same factions back on our home planet. I would prefer not to bother him with unnecessary matters unless absolutely required.”

She wanted to quickly establish a border but, at the same time, make it clear that she did have an amicable relationship with Jake in case something untoward did happen.

This did seem to disappoint Jiub a bit, but he still smiled. “Nevertheless, it is preferable for good relationships to form. I hope that in the future, we can work together and help each other strive in the face of adversity. How about we exchange contact information?”

Reika naturally agreed, even if she knew a big part of the reason was that they still hoped for an opening with Jake. She knew others had already seen her and Jake exchange contact information, so at worst, they would get someone who knew how to contact him. At best, they would get an in with Jake and even a valuable ally in herself and the members of the Noboru Clan.

After exchanging with Jiub, a few more came up to her with pretty much the same proposal. It was primarily other humans and elves, but a few scalekins and other peculiar races also came. Reika did not feel entirely comfortable with the less human-looking ones as she wasn’t sure how to act and even found herself inadvertently revolted by some of their appearances.

Scaled beasts with beastly looks and sharp teeth lining their maws, gilled creatures where the gills flapped as they spoke without the mouth opening, and a lot of other beings Reika could only have imagined out of horror films approached her.

At least she managed to keep a straight face, but she had to send Haruto away as he seemed even more uncomfortable. As she went through the exchanges, she couldn't help but wonder how Jake seemed so completely unable to care. He had spoken to scalekins and other races without batting an eye and never even mentioned to Reika and the others from Earth that they would encounter this kind of scene.

In fact, when she stood there looking down the long hallway of dorm rooms, it became apparent that humans, elves, and the very human-looking races were in the vast minority. Sure, when it came to those coming from the new universe, they were plentiful, but in the Order itself, they seemed scarce.

After she was finally done doing the political maneuvering, she went and found her own dorm room. She could open it with the Token like it was a contact-less hotel key. If she was being honest, she didn't carry many expectations and based on the hallway, each room had to be smaller than the average hotel room, which is why she was surprised when she entered.

A large open space opened up before her in what looked like a living room with couches, tables, and even what looked like a television or a projector. When she went further in, she found doors to a massive bedroom, a meditation chamber, an alchemy lab bigger than even the one back home, as well as a door leading into a large space that was split into three sections. The left and right parts were walled off by large glass panels in what looked like two greenhouses, with the middle part just general storage. To the left was a greenhouse with what she even recognized as a very small artificial sun, and in the other was a cave-like structure with several mushrooms and moss already growing inside.

Reika stood frozen a bit as she quickly used her Token to check in with Haruto and had it confirmed both their rooms were like this. She then checked in with the white token alchemists, and while their dorm rooms were a lot smaller, they still seemed extravagant.

This was when Reika truly recognized how absolutely loaded the Order of the Malefic Viper had to be, or at least how poor she and everyone on Earth was by comparison.

Vilastromoz hung back as he observed Jake a bit longer before moving on. At least for a little bit. Duskleaf at his side just shook his head at everything that had gone down.

“You could have easily barred him from getting a slave, even subtle ways that would raise no suspicion,” Duskleaf said. “Or not stonewalled him at every point of the following discussion.”

“I could, but I didn’t,” Vilastromoz said. “I think this is a good opportunity for Jake to face some of the less simple things in the multiverse. At least it is better than him visiting someone else in the Order and seeing them have slaves all-around and instantly create chaos.”

“Could have been done in many other ways. This seems like an unnecessary extreme,” Duskleaf insisted.

“Extreme would be me agreeing to free that slave and then let her run wild in the Order only to be picked up by someone with a taste for young elves and then show him what happened to her,” Vilastromoz said.

“That would get you a punch in the face,” Duskleaf said, glaring at him.

“I know, which is why I didn’t. I am not going to micromanage the Order, though.”

“But you do want chaos anyway,” Duskleaf noted. “You just don’t want to cause it yourself.”

"I would be fine making chaos by myself, but that would not lead to any worthwhile change... perhaps in actions, but not in mindset," the Viper smirked.

"So you will use Jake," Duskleaf asked. "This was your plan all along, wasn't it?"

"Oh, come on, he is a born agent of chaos," Vilastromoz laughed as he failed to hold himself back from seeing Jake awkwardly hurry out of the bedroom during his little house tour after the elf had not-so-subtly hinted at what the purpose of the room was.

"And no matter what... I think Jake's time in the Order should be interesting, to say the least."

Chapter 420 - Blaze It!

Jake sat in the meditation chamber as he went over some basic knowledge within the Token related to the Academy as a whole. He had wondered for a while how exactly an educational institution would function in the multiverse, much less an Order of poison alchemists, and the way it worked was rather, well, simple?

There wasn't a curriculum or a set schedule of teachers and their lessons. There were no long-term lesson plans or forced subjects either; there weren't even defined grades or "years" of any kind. It was all honestly weird from the perspective of someone from Earth who had gone through any kind of traditional education. He even saw that those teaching were, more often than not, also students themselves.

Classes and lessons did exist, of course, but you had to sign up to them individually, and they didn't end with any exam or test or anything. There wasn't attendance either, but it would be stupid not to come to a lesson you had signed up to due to one other thing: Credits.



No, not Credits as in the standard system currency, but Academy Credits used to sign up for classes. Ah, but these Academy Credits could be bought using regular Credits and some other means. To attend a lesson cost these Academy Credits with the teacher getting a portion based on how much was spent by those attending.

It was a free-market capitalist dream-version of an educational institution with ample competition to get people to attend your lessons. Jake was honestly surprised at how everything worked and did question the efficiency of it, but then again... he had a feeling most members of the Order were selfish assholes, so they needed selfish motivations to do anything.

Lessons themselves were as varied as they came. Some were massive seminars where it looked like hundreds of thousands if not millions could attend, performed by powerful individuals on their own specialties, while others were one-on-one lessons and practice. The most popular form was smaller lessons with below a hundred people and often combined teaching and practical workshops.

Time was also a massive factor. Some lessons lasted a few hours while Jake saw one that said it had an expected running time of fifty years. It was one related to growing certain kinds of herbs and would seriously last fifty years based on the description without any breaks or anything in between. This seemed insane to Jake, even if he could see it really did not matter as the lesson catered to C- and B-grades, where spending fifty years wouldn't be that bad.

That was another thing. Jake could sign up for any lesson he wanted at any time, though most did have an advised grade. Shit, if he had the Academy Credits – or AC for short – he could attend the lesson of an S-grade if he so wanted. Maybe even a god at some point. Of course, it would be an utter waste as they would be speaking about way too advanced subjects, but it was an option.

As for what kind of lessons there were? Well, it would be a better question to ask what kind of lessons there weren't. Jake saw everything from rituals, potions, elixirs, all kinds of poison, everything related to herbs and natural treasures, including how to grow and find them.

There were even lessons on practical applications of poisons where one could use them on targets and observe their effects. Jake didn't like the sound of that but would rather do another kind of lesson: combat.

Yep, the alchemist academy had combat lessons too, and a wide variety of them. They were far less, and they were definitely not as popular from the looks of it, but many did also hold lessons in them. In fact, it looked like anyone could make their own lessons at any point for others to sign up for using the Token.

The Token was the root of everything and functioned as both a lesson plan and the only way of signing up for things. It also stored the AC and all the information regarding lessons. It even had a small spatial storage in it. Jake kept sitting in the room, tinkering with it a while longer as he went through some potential lessons for fun.

Oh yeah, while there weren't really any school years per-se, there were certain set periods where new members were recruited. Jake theorized this was for the ones making lessons to focus on stuff new students would need in those periods. In fact, he saw quite a lot catered towards newer students in the upcoming weeks, including topics related to general knowledge of the wider multiverse.

He also found many interesting classes on a subject that honestly shouldn't have surprised him. There were thousands total pertaining to languages. The reason why these were interesting was that he saw even E-grades who would hold these classes. Of course, with Tongue of the Myriad Races, such a thing was completely unnecessary for Jake. He and others from Earth had really lucked out there.

Jake had not decided on anything yet but would wait and probably take some of the ones aimed at people new to the multiverse. There were a few related to understanding affinities and what ones you were good at, which he especially wanted to give a go, as so far, he felt like he only discovered if he was good at something when faced directly with it.

He spent a bit longer going over stuff before he was forced to leave the meditation chamber again. Now, he was a bit reluctant to do this, as his sphere had made him aware Meira had been sitting outside the room for the last nine hours, completely unmoving as she waited for him.

Getting his shit together, he walked out. Meira stood up immediately when he exited and bowed deeply. Jake threw her a glance and asked: "I have been wondering, how much do you know about herbs and natural treasures and such?"

"I have been educated in both herbology and toxicology and possess skills related to both. In addition, I also have skills pertaining to Identifying and acquiring any kind of natural treasure requested, as well as the locations and methods of which I can acquire them within the Order," Meira quickly answered.

Jake was ninety-nine percent sure that response was practiced as he also bit onto another quirk Meira had picked up over the last day or so since Jake arrived: her ability to avoid referring to Jake in any direct way. It was honestly impressive how her way of dodging to use his name manifested as she found ways to string together sentences quite innovatively.

"Great, could you go fetch me some materials with Neurotoxin properties from the warehouse as well as some books related to neurotoxins from the library? Low-level materials and basic-level books only," Jake asked.

He had learned one other thing over these days... the only way to make any progress with Meria seemed to be to actually allow her to feel useful by making her do things. It was just small things, like asking her to show him where something was or maybe check up on the garden and make sure everything was okay or any other mundane task. Jake believed, perhaps wrongly, that with time she would learn he wasn't a dangerous person. Not to her anyway.

“Of course!” she swiftly agreed as she bowed and hurried off.

“Bring it to the lab!” Jake yelled after her as she turned and bowed again in acknowledgment before enthusiastically running off.

“Also gotta fix that bowing...baby steps...” Jake muttered as he went towards the lab. Hey, even if he was dealing with her, he would still get some work done, and one of the classes he really wanted to attend was related to Neurotoxins. Jake already used Hemotoxins and Necrotoxins quite a bit, but there were many other types.

Back before the system, Hemotoxins, Necrotoxins, and Neurotoxins were the primary ones found in nature, but with the system naturally came many more. Ethtoxins, also known as ethereal poison or soul poison, was something Jake had also dabbled in, but some toxins directly targeted mana, some that targeted stamina, and, of course, also ones for other types of energies. In fact, there were so many types of toxins it really wasn’t a surprise there were alchemists who could reach all the way to godhood focusing on nothing else.

As he went to his lab, the Token vibrated slightly in his spatial storage as he saw Reika was calling him. He swiftly picked up as he answered in his best customer service voice: “Jake speaking, how may I help you?”

“... Is everything alright?” Reika asked in a worried tone as the joke didn’t land.

“Yeah, I was just... never mind. So, how are you settling in?” Jake quickly moved on.

The Token really was wonderful. He was speaking out loud right now, but he knew it would also work using telepathy. Shit, the sound was even blocked, making no one able to hear their conversation either way.

“Things are fine here, and I must admit the accommodations are a lot better than expected. I had assumed a dorm would mean shared living space and possibly even communal alchemy labs and such, but we all have private rooms with everything one can need,” Reika explained quite enthusiastically.

“Yeah, I sure ain’t complaining either. Well, there is this one little thing, but I am working on it. Anyway, have you had time to check the lessons yet?” Jake asked.

“Oh, I have. I am coordinating with some of the others from the Noboru clan to take some lessons together. This is one of the reasons I contacted you as I wanted to relay our plans in case you wanted to join some of them too,” she asked as Jake’s Token vibrated in the spatial storage again.

He poked it mentally and saw a list had been sent. As Reika had said, it included the lessons, with most of them being elementary lessons Jake himself had looked at, along with a lot related to basic knowledge of the multiverse.

Jake wasn’t sure yet what to pick, but a few did seem interesting enough to join. He did, however, notice one thing: “How come only you and that Haruto guy will attend all of the lessons and not the others?”

“We lack Academy Credits, Jake,” Reika answered. “Those with White Tokens start with one hundred while Haruto and I started with a thousand each. We are already looking into ways of getting more, and it seems item donations will be the most straightforward method.”

Item donations were another way of getting more Academy Credits as naturally not everyone was suited for teaching or had anything worthwhile to teach. Of course, one would still require ingredients, but these could be bought with either normal Credits or through contribution points.

Contribution points could be earned by doing stuff for the Order. Fulfilling certain crafting requests, taking on quests from the Order, or holding a certain number of lessons with a good evaluation, as well as many other things. All in all, contribution points were given by contributing to the Order. Very complicated.

Honestly, Jake was amazed at how goddamn exploitative the entire system actually was. It was a bit like social media in that the users of the system were both the customers and the creators of the product. Sure, the Order did provide all accommodations, but the sheer income from donated ingredients, potions, elixirs, and all kinds of other alchemical products, had to be astronomical.

Jake had not actually checked his own total number of AC yet, and he quickly discovered an issue... he couldn't find it. He tried mentally searching the Token, but there just wasn't any registered to it or even a function to check how many he had.

He frowned a bit but chose to answer Reika either way. "Yeah, donations will probably be good. I am sure you and the others can find some niche to approach and make some sought-after creations."

"That is what I am looking into right now, but it is hard, and as much as I hate to admit it, I doubt any of us from the clan have anything truly valuable to offer as of yet. No modern knowledge or anything like that seems applicable either, so all we can do is hope our talents match up," Reika said with a bit of resignation.

"Worst case scenario, you stay in the Order for a while, learn some valuable things, and return to Earth better for it," Jake said in encouragement.

"I know," Reika said. "But it also feels like that would be a waste. This entire place is a treasure trove of knowledge and wealth. To not explore it as much as humanly possible would be a sin."

"Well, then better get learning and improving," Jake grinned to himself, perfectly understanding her thought process. The Order did indeed seem overwhelmingly abundant of opportunity. Because it was.

The two of them exchanged a few more pleasantries before they finished the call. It seemed like everyone was settling in, and besides the guy who died during the dungeon, all of the alchemists Reika had brought were bound to benefit tremendously.

Jake had already reached the lab by now, and as he checked through stuff in the Token some more, he spotted something. A special lesson would be held soon and had just been put up now. The name was dramatic and instantly caught his eye, nearly as much as the details of the teacher.

Course Name: Harnessing the flames of creations and destruction.

Description: A lesson on harnessing the flame within. Learn to control the flame born of creation and destruction to improve the use of Alchemical Flame. Through the use of Willpower and mobilizing the power found within your Truesoul, take control as your flames become a catalyst of creation and destruction alike. This course will also touch on the subject of integrating a Soulflame into your Soulspace.

Teacher: Albaromoz Emberflight (mid-tier A-Grade)

Suggested Attendance Level: N/A

Duration: 1x 10-hour session.

AC Price: 420,000

As Jake focused on the teacher named, he got a description of that guy too. This was primarily to see if the teacher in question was qualified, and Jake had to say that a red dragon from a Dragonflight specializing in fire magic seemed quite promising. He also had a good evaluation, it seemed, and Jake was honestly interested, especially as it didn't require anything to attend. There was a lot of stuff he didn't fully get in the description too, but hey, he was in the Order to learn, right?

The only thing was the price... because when he compared it to something more targeted towards him, the difference was stark.

Course Name: Blaze it! Basic application of the Alchemical Flame for combat.

Description: A lesson on the basic applications of the Alchemical Flame to damage living entities and methods of using it with combat cauldrons as a weapon.

Teacher: Vkoras (Peak-tier D-Grade)



Suggested Attendance Level: E-grade, D-grade.

Duration: 8x 12-hour lessons.

AC Price: 5

This one was taught by a D-grade, but one that had been teaching for five years or so and was quite talented in using the Alchemical Flame and special combat cauldrons as weapons. Jake would only really attend this to see how combat using a cauldron worked.

The second lesson would begin in only six hours, while the one done by the dragon would start in two days, which was quite short notice, honestly. There was overlap with the second day of the Blaze It! Course. So even if one wanted to do both, one couldn't, not that Jake thought there was a huge crossover in target demographics. It had to also once more be noted that any course was a one-time buy-in, and it didn't matter if one attended every second of it or never showed up.

Jake looked these two over a bit as he checked the prices again. He finally failed to hold himself back as he asked:

"So... Villy... how do I see my Academy Credits?" Jake asked. He actually felt bad asking the god about such an elementary question and even more stupid for not figuring it out himself. Reika and everyone else had, who why the hell couldn't h-

"You don't have any."

“Wait, what?”

“I mean, you technically don’t have any, in the sense that everything requiring those Academy Credits are free to you,” Villy explained, no doubt grinning on the other end.

“Seriously?” Jake asked a bit in disbelief.

“Jake, even if we are best friends forever, you are still my Chosen. That is something that cannot be changed, and the Order is there to serve you, not the other way around. This is also why I should make something clear: this Order is your home turf. Your territory. Do whatever the fuck you want, damned be the consequences. If someone annoys you enough, kill them. If their ancestor tries to cause trouble, then remember status and power trump all. And as my Chosen, no one besides me is above you in rank. If the veil of you being my Chosen falls, then so be it, it will eventually, just know that even before it happens, you are still the Chosen of the Malefic Viper.”

Jake sat silent for a while. He switched between frowning and looking thoughtful before finally speaking: “Well, that’s nice. Guess I’ll do the lesson by that red dragon then.”

“Do just that, I believe it could be beneficial for you to-”

“After I check out how the hell a combat cauldron works. Maybe it even includes whacking people over the head.”