

Hunter 431

Chapter 431 - Slow And Steady Wins The Race

Jake read the book in his bed as he went over the information in a crystal he had gained from a lesson he had taken the day prior. He nodded along as he found everything to be in order, and with a wave of his hand, he destroyed the crystal and scattered the dust with a blast of destructive arcane mana. After all, the fellow student he had gained it from had asked him to.

Well over a month had passed since Jake had entered the Order of the Malefic Viper, and honestly? Things were going well. He had expected way more Bloodline trouble or people trying to start shit with him, but so far, everyone was perfectly civil. Okay, he did have a run-in with one moron in a lesson where they had to spar. The dude had been an overly confident asshole when he was clearly wrong, but Jake chose to be gracious and not assume malice where it may just be ignorance.

However, where there had been most progress wasn't with him. As he was on his bed, he heard a knock on the door, and he opened it to a far more kept-together elf in a white dress as she slightly bowed. "Sir, I have brought the book you requested from the Order Library."

"Thanks, Meira," Jake said with a smile as he got off the bed and went over to accept the book. Meira smiled in response as she gave it to him. "Any issues getting it?"

"None. The librarian was very helpful there," she answered as she bowed again. "I shall return to my studies if there is no other matter Sir needs me to take care of?"

"There isn't. How are the lessons going, by the way?" Jake asked, already knowing the answer for the most part.

"I am doing my utmost and believe I am making acceptable progress," Meira answered with a small embarrassed smile. Jake just smirked a bit in response as he finally allowed her to leave as she scurried away.

Meira felt embarrassed because a teacher had sent her back with a letter of recommendation to her "sponsor." It was a letter that would allow Meira to attend another lesson taught by the same teacher for a heavy discount. The letter was addressed to Jake and had some assumptions within he had cracked up over. However, the crux of it was that Meira was quite a talented healer and had a great talent for metaphysiology – the study of the metaphysical body.

The letter had assumed Meira was an employee of Jake or perhaps just a follower of his. From what Jake had gathered, no one Meira had met during any lessons had even the slightest clue she was a slave or even a servant. As for the lesson, Jake had already allowed her to go; it wasn't even a question to him. But that she had even asked and expressed interest was huge progress.

Her coming out and saying she had a preference or a wish was something the Meira of one month ago would never do. She would just do whatever Jake wanted her to and not even voice her own thoughts. There was also the huge thing she now called him "Sir" and didn't stumble over her words to avoid calling him the banned m-word.

It was slow but steady progress, and in the end, the best method to have her get more comfortable was simply time. She also smiled more and didn't seem as nervous as before.

The only place with absolutely no progress was in the department of randomly visiting gods, AKA Viper visits. The closest to progress there was her being able to leave the area whenever he visited without passing out. Half the time, at least.

Jake himself had also made good progress. He had only gained a single level in his profession, bringing him to level 152, which came from him experimenting a bit in his own time. While that seemed slow – and was compared to Jake’s old progress – it was considered good in the Order. In fact, Jake had come to learn that leveling fast was viewed as a fool’s game, and he kind of understood why. There was no reason to try and rush through D-grade in a handful of years when you had millennia. Not that Jake would ever take that long, not unless Villy came up with another practice lesson like with Shroud.

As for what he had learned... well, a lot, most of it the most basic there was in any subject. One such area was flasks, where Jake had finally made a few, even if they were quite honestly crap.

[Flask of Minor Poison Resistance (Inferior)] – A flask giving minor poison resistance against most forms of toxins for a duration of thirty (30) minutes. Requirements: D-grade

[Flask of Fortified Mana(Inferior)] – A increasing maximum mana by 50 for a duration of thirty (30) minutes. Requirements: D-grade

The first gave so little poison resistance it was inconsequential, and it worked before his Palate as they had overlapping effects. So unless Jake made a way better version, it did nothing for him besides doing so he couldn’t consume another Flask for a full day, as that was the cooldown.

Secondly was the Flask of Fortified Mana, which was even worse as there once more was overlap with his mask. As his mask increased mana by 25%, the Flask did nothing once more as he had already reached the “cap” of how much he could increase it. He had considered making some for health, but that would take a while to learn. Overall, there were many different flasks Jake was working on, but he quickly concluded it would take a long time to learn to craft the useful ones.

There was also the problem that Jake couldn't make any flasks for those below D-grade no matter how shit they were. This was what Villy had talked about when it came to Records, and apparently, his Myth Originator title just made it worse. So yeah, he could make flasks no one wanted, not even himself.

Not to misunderstand, Flasks could be great. They fell into a category a bit like his own Arcane Awakening and functioned as temporary boosting items. The best ones came with drawbacks, especially those circumventing the equipment stat cap from gear. In fact, there was a lot of overlap between equipment and Flasks. If Jake had a helm that granted him super fire magic resistance, he could not drink a Flask giving him even more fire resistance. However, he could drink a Flask giving him general magic resistance, or instead of resisting fire magic, gave him a temporary anti-fire shield with a set absorption amount that didn't take any advantage of his fire resistance. So yeah, if you had the right Flask for the right situation, they could be amazing.

And this actually led to a great segue because the biggest competitor for Flasks when it came to alchemical products were pills. Pills were actually a big competitor to like... everything. Pills could take so many damn forms and do pretty much everything there was, for one simple reason that honestly sounded so dumb Jake didn't believe it when the teacher said it the first time:

"Pills are just Potions, Elixirs, Flasks, or whatever else liquid product condensed and turned into a solid form. The crafting method differs, but ultimately the same concepts apply, and the system recognizes them as equivalent. A healing pill will trigger the usual potion cooldown, a stat-increasing pill will count the same as any elixir, and a pill increasing your Strength temporarily will share all cooldowns and limits as a Flask."

So... yeah. This meant Jake had no interest in becoming a pill-focused alchemist even if pills had some advantages such as their smaller form-factor and their far longer shelf-life, but it often came at the cost of a near-negligible reduction in effect and a small increase in cost.

Besides that, he truly dove into the world of poisons. Neurotoxins were, of course, something he researched, but he also learned to make poison of different affinities, and he had especially two new

types of poison he would be moving forward with and actively use in combat when he felt comfortable enough with their potency.

The first of which was one making full use of Jake's dark affinity.

[Dark Shade Poison (Common)] – A poison with dark affinity properties, infecting and corroding the energies of the target. Any target infected by Dark Shade Venom will suffer reduced Perception and damage. This poison is incredibly difficult to detect and heal but deals nearly no damage and is easily cleansed by certain types of magic.

This type of poison was incredibly valuable in prolonged battles and against certain foes. It was an insidious poison that would dig deep and slip into every bit of the target and, most importantly, was incredibly difficult to get rid of once infected. This did have some hidden benefits that were a primary reason Jake was so excited to learn it.

Sense of the Malefic Viper allowed Jake to feel his own poison better, especially when it was infected within someone. This poison would function as a scanner of sorts and allow Jake to easily keep track of a foe even if they didn't notice they were infected. He was already theorizing an even better version made solely as a tracking poison, but that was a good ways away.

Secondly was a type of poison Jake dearly needed.

[Draining Lightning Poison (Inferior)] – A poison with lightning affinity properties, dealing significant damage and draining the mana of any entity it comes into contact with. This poison is incredibly fast-acting and will often expend all its potency within moments.

Jake still remembered the first time he had set foot upon the cloud island with Hawkie. How he had been utterly embarrassed by what was quite honestly a weak elemental and been forced to learn some basic magic to have a fighting chance. Back then, none of his poison had worked as he only knew hemotoxin and necrotic toxins, and they only worked on biological beings. His blood was the best thing he had, and even that wasn't good.

Even before coming to the Order that hadn't changed in the least, and even after Fangs upgraded and he got the better venom, it was still ultimately reliant on his blood. If Jake met an elemental or even something like the Altmar Census Golem, he was in for a bad time.

This type of poison changed that. The lightning affinity was the bane of mana and consumed it actively. Jake remembered briefly talking to his brother about it, and he did know that Caleb's dark lightning didn't only drain mana but all resources the target possessed. Jake was not going for that, as while it drained everything, that meant the potency was spread out.

What Jake wanted was pure lightning intent on only draining mana. A poison that would be effective against mana barriers and elementals alike. Of course, if he faced a lightning elemental, he would still be in for a bad time, but he was confident in working up another poison to fight those.

Jake had also dabbled in many other areas to shore up weaknesses, and he was still in the early stages, but every day was rapid progress.

However, there was one area in which Jake had made no progress. There was a type of poison Jake had wanted to make for a good while, and he believed he would be able to do it by now, but no matter what he did, it just never worked out.

Arcane poison still eluded him. The problem was in the very essence of Jake's affinity. His affinity was one of balancing destruction and stability - about controlling that equilibrium or willingly leaning into one part near-entirely.

The key to his issues was in the word control. His affinity needed constant control, or it would be either pure stability or pure destruction. No in-between. It worked due to Jake influencing the energy with his will, but what happened when it became an object? Well, it either turned into what was basically crystalized mana, or it drained itself instantly by turning into pure destructive energy.

No matter what he tried, he had seen no solution in sight. He did find it a bit weird he could make arcane mana potions, but quickly discovered the reason... because he didn't really? It did contain his arcane energy in a stable format, but the moment he ingested it, it once more came under the control of his will and thus could function as expected.

Well, this did mean he could maybe make an arcane poison that could only poison himself, but he didn't see any use for this. Okay, Jake had to confess he had tried to see if he could make a cheat to regen mana through Palate or something, but it had resulted in Jake still dealing more damage than he regenerated.

Jake hadn't had any lessons in formations or anything related to awakening the Pollendust Bee Queen yet, either, and he had yet to touch any combat classes. There were only so many hours in a day, and Jake was swarmed as it was. He did have a plan in mind, and as he finished lessons, he opened up his schedule. It was often a bad idea for him to continue in the same lane before fully digesting what he learned. Hence he planned on beginning lessons in formations and one on refining Beastcores once he was done with the one he did about making pills and the two about flasks.

And that was about it for Jake's time in the Academy so far. He had been busy, but so had everyone. However, soon there would be a small break-day of sorts for many of them as an event was coming up. The World Congress.

It was a bit odd, but every World Congress was at the same time. Jake had considered this weird as hell because he clearly remembered it being triggered by a hundred claimed Pylons back then on Earth, and it wasn't like every planet of the ninety-third universe claimed a hundred at the same time.

Well, it turned out the one-hundred claimed just meant you got the announcement seven days early. He discovered others had only gotten the notification a day before with not even a hundred claimed yet, with other planets getting the notification weeks before. This was primarily for planets with far more sapient life than Earth.

The reason why this mattered now was that Jake had gotten a nice little system announcement.

Announcement to all Nobles: The Second World Congress will commence in 24 hours. Any noble in possession of- or ruling a Pylon can attend, as well as any participant of the First World Congress.

Due to your presence in another universe, it is not possible to bring any representatives with you. If accepted, you will be teleported once the World Congress commences.

It was a bit longer with some fluff, but in essence, Jake was golden and could attend without leaving the Order. He had already had a brief talk with Miranda, and she confirmed she could bring along people and would have Lillian and Neil come with her once again. Neil for space mage business, Lillian for Miranda-helping business.

With the upcoming World Congress, many from the ninety-third universe were making preparations, but someone had also taken the chance now that many were free. Irin, the succubus, had sent Jake an invitation at the behest of this person. The organizer was someone pretty unknown to Jake, but he was pretty sure it was that human-elven pair based on Irin's description.

That's right, it was his first official party after entering the Order.

Chapter 432 - Party Prepping

Jake had done something he had never thought he would do. In fact, he was pretty sure no one would have ever thought the current situation that was currently playing out as possible.

He stood in a dressing room as an elf wearing a fancy robe scrutinized his appearance and talked to an attendant about getting a new type of cloth Jake had never heard of. The attendant quickly ran for it as the tailor spoke.

"No, no, you need something to truly bring forth that ferocious look of yours. One that can emphasize those wonderful eyes and mask properly!" the elf said with much fervor.

"I did like the first set quite a bit, and to truly show his personality and interests, how about embroidering the cloak it with mushroom symbols?" a fourth person said. It was a scalekin with dark green scales and a cheeky smile that looked on as Jake was getting outfitted.

"Yeah, that is never going to happen," Jake rejected instantly.

"I must agree; it would not at all go with his style!" the tailor said, fully backing up Jake. A smart man, it seemed.

The scalekin, who also happened to be the leader of the Order and a Primordial, just scuffed in disappointment as he held up both his hands. "Fine, but at least keep the snake symbol on the back of the robe."

"Naturally, anything else would be blasphemous as he holds the Blessing of the Malefic One!" the tailor said, looking offended at Villy like he had truly spoken out of turn.

"Yeah, Villy, don't act all blasphemous," Jake agreed teasingly.

"I would never! None is greater than the magnificent Malefic Viper! I cannot imagine anyone acting blasphemously, or even worse, heretically towards such a being!" Villy practically yelled, earning a satisfied nod from the tailor.

"Well said! But who would even dare to be a heretic?" the tailor said as he shook his head, chuckling.

Villy and Jake exchanged a look and a smile just as the attendant returned, bringing a rectangular piece of cloth. It was to be made into some kind of shawl, but Jake quickly rejected it. The tailor was a bit disappointed but relented as he agreed on going with what he called a "warrior look" rather than a sophisticated hidden hunter with a slight desert theme.

As for how Jake had ended up in this situation... well, the answer naturally lay with a certain snake god. Villy had told Jake he needed to look "proper dapper" if he was going to his first party and that he should go out and get a new party outfit.

Jake had agreed as, quite frankly, he did feel a bit out of place, always wearing his full equipment no matter where he went. While it didn't exactly attract attention as people honestly dressed weirdly, he

would prefer to wear something more casual at times. He was lucky he at least wore lighter armor, as he could already imagine if he was a warrior walking around in full plate armor going to lessons – something he had seen dozens of times within the Order.

The set he was getting currently consisted of a pair of nice dress pants and a weird shirt. He called it weird because while it had buttons, it also didn't have buttons. Whenever he closed a button, the cloth just melded together, while it stayed visible and open if he opened one. It was honestly odd.

Over that, he wore a weird mix of a trenchcoat and a normal cloak with a large motif of a snake on the back. He came to learn only those with a Blessing were allowed to even have this specific symbol on their clothes, and the tailor was visibly excited at being allowed to make such a piece of clothing.

His shoes were the biggest thing that needed changing, at least according to the tailor. Jake didn't know why old scuffed leather boots weren't in fashion, but they clearly didn't sit well with the fancy elf. He looked like Jake was committing some cardinal sin just by wearing them, especially when Jake said he had originally planned to wear them to a social function.

The entire set wasn't actually considered equipment, even if it was high quality. If he wanted to have it be made into actual equipment giving stats and such, he would have to pay extra as the items would need further energy infusion and crafting time.

By paying extra, Jake naturally meant having Villy pay extra. Not that Jake was poor, but more on that later.

He exited the shop looking pretty good, in his own opinion, even if he did have to discuss getting a hood added to go with the mask – yes, he would keep using the mask. The compromise they reached was the hood becoming able to meld into the rest of the neck of the coat. Jake still had no idea what kind of sorcery was going on, especially considering it wasn't even considered equipment.

"The life as a sugar daddy is hard," Villy sighed as they entered the street.

"Poor you," Jake smirked. "I have to ask, are you planning on attending the party too?"

"Nah, that honestly sounds boring. While it may look like I enjoy fucking with people for my own entertainment, I only bother to mess with people I find entertaining to do so with. A bunch of random D-grades does not fall into that category," Villy shook his head.

"Huh, not even that guy you gave a Divine Blessing? I assume you did have some interest in him," Jake asked. He knew Divine Blessings were considered high-tier, so Jake would find it weird if Villy had just given it out willy-nilly.

"Not particularly, no. He is a good seed but is ultimately just one gamble of many. If he manages to reach A-grade or maybe S-grade, I probably will begin paying attention, but he isn't worth my time as he is right now. Chances are he will die before I bother," the god casually said.

"You say that talking to a mere D-grade," Jake chuckled as the two of them reached a wall with a teleportation gateway on. They were scattered throughout the entire city and were honestly just so damn convenient.

"No, I am talking to a friend," Villy answered. He did sigh and looked a bit more serious as they went through the gateway and appeared in Jake's mansion.

"I am currently just running with the assumption you will become a god and thus immortal, and with that assumption in mind, treating the current you as immortal already makes sense, doesn't it? And who's got time to bother with mortals?"

"A bold assumption based on what you yourself said in the past about the chances anyone has of reaching godhood," Jake shook his head. "Not that I necessarily disagree. Dying to old age certainly doesn't seem like a possibility."

"Exactly, and gods can die fighting too, so it's the same thing, right? You are just a bit more fragile, that's all," the snake god laughed. "Speaking of being fragile, I have an appointment with Duskleaf, and he is gonna get mad if he finds out I split my attention between the two of you and didn't fully assist his experiment..."

Jake looked at Villy with exaggerated surprise. "You actually have productive things to do? Also, how is Duskleaf fragile?"

"How is going shopping for new clothes not productive and imperative to running the Order of the Malefic Viper? No, let me rephrase that. How is making sure my Chosen presents himself the best he can not important? As for Duskleaf, well, his poor ego would suffer, so that counts as fragile."

"Yeah yeah, now get going. I have to leave soon too, but need to make my gift first," Jake said, waving his hand.

"Sure thing. See you around," Villy said as he disappeared.

Why did we bother using gates when he can just teleport us around casually? Jake questioned as the god left.

A few seconds passed before he saw a head peek out down the large entry hall, as Meira had finally dared come out, having no doubt been waiting for the Viper to leave.

“Hey Meira, did you get the ingredients I asked for?”

As she had seen the coast was clear, she came out and went up to Jake and summoned three glass boxes with herbs in each. “Yes! They were all widely available.”

Meira had summoned the items out of her spatial necklace, as, of course, Jake had gotten her one of those. Seeing her try and stuff items into a damn oversized satchel just got silly. She had protested a bit, to begin with, but Jake had insisted. Besides, he had found out he was loaded.

You see, not all Credits were created equal. Or, well, all Credits were besides for the Credits of the ninety-third universe. Jake could not have Credits transferred to him, but he could spend it. At the same time, the Credits from his universe apparently were incredibly valuable for those walking a merchant path due to opportunities given by the integration. Especially merchant gods. This meant that the Order offered the transfer of Credits to contribution points of AC at a way higher rate for those of the ninety-third Universe.

Jake’s Credits had roughly a 1-100 exchange rate compared with other types of Credits. Jake had found the rate a bit weird in that it was so straightforward, but Villy had told him the exchange rate was set by what was essentially a council of merchant gods or something to make sure competition didn’t go crazy. Yep, it appeared the entire multiversal financial industry was effectively run by an oligopoly of powerful gods.

The ingredients he had asked Meira to help him procure were for a very specific kind of poison that one just had to bring when invited to a social function within the Order. Anything else than bringing a good bottle of tasty poison would just be straight-up rude.

Jake went into his laboratory after swiftly changing out of his new clothes and back into his usual getup as he did some alchemy for the next one and a half hours. He had been mentally planning this poison since the moment he got the invitation, and he was already looking forward to the effects it would have. Of course, he didn't try to make it lethal, but it surely wouldn't be a good time if their Palate was lacking.

Once he was done, he quickly got on his dapper outfit and prepared himself to go. He went to the living room where Meira was already waiting as Jake flopped down on a couch. Jake sighed a bit as he looked up at the floor.

"Is anything the matter, Sir?" Meira asked.

"You know... I was the type to never want to go to the bar after a house party ended, but would rather just head home and chill... and as I sit here, I remember why," Jake said.

Meira went over and sat across from him, waiting for him to continue talking.

"I don't like it. I don't like these damn social events that you can't avoid getting into. I always feel out of place, like my presence is somehow contrary to what the event is all about. There are so many norms, spoken and unspoken, making it feel like an arena with poorly defined playing rules," Jake began venting out of the blue as Meira just sat there listening patiently.

"I began to understand why I always felt so out of place all the time only after the system arrived... well, one of the reasons anyway. You see, my Bloodline is quite peculiar... I am quite peculiar. I don't tend to deal well with rules in general, and reflecting back on everything before the system arrived, I understand that it wasn't just dealing with rules, but dealing with rules set by those I considered my lessers. Subconsciously, at least, I viewed them as such. Like I was surrounded by weaklings who told me how to behave. Of course, it wasn't like that, but that is another part of me. I tend to boil things down till they become simple to the point of oversimplification, even in too complex situations."

"Sir, if I may?" Meira finally asked.

"Yeah?" Jake asked, feeling a bit embarrassed at his ramblings.

"Norms and rules only apply to those it is applicable to. I do not know how the world worked before, but at least everywhere I have been, the norms and rules are decided by those with the power to do so. If you are strong enough, no one complains. So Sir shouldn't worry, but just act like himself, and if any such norms are broken by doing so... well, then Sir can just change the norm," Meira said encouragingly.

Jake listened to her words and smiled a bit. "You do make it sound simple. While I am sure people like the Viper can do that, I am not quite there yet unless I want to reveal my identity. I have no interest in leveraging that unless I have to."

"Sir is plenty strong on his own," Meira said assertedly.

He knew she didn't truly know how strong he was. She probably didn't even know his level, yet she seemed so convinced in her belief. It was a bit flattering, and Jake had to be honest, it did help cheer him up a little bit.

“Well, complaining won’t change the fact that I am going,” Jake ultimately just sighed. This was just like every time he had to go to a gathering before the system, where he always considered just canceling last minute. Usually, he at least had Miranda to lean on and shield him, but here he would go alone. Reika was the only one he truly knew there, and he knew she had enough to deal with herself.

Meira shifted a bit in her seat, clearly still feeling his discomfort. “Sir, is there anything I can do to assist?”

That part of her had never changed. In fact, it had gotten worse. Meira always felt like in any situation where any issue existed, she had to be the one to fix it. If she could or not didn’t matter as she would at least ask if there was anything she could do.

Taking Meira along to the party was obviously not an option. She was not from the ninety-third universe, and he was sure she would be even more out of place than himself. Jake wasn’t a saint, but he sure wouldn’t put her through that.

“Just your encouragement is good enough,” Jake smiled at her as he finally got up. He stretched his back as he finally stopped delaying more than necessary and headed for the hall with the gateway circle on it.

Meira followed him, trying to be encouraging. When he looked at her, he honestly found his own social discomfort silly. She had to deal with being thrown into an entirely different world where she suddenly served the Chosen of the Malefic Viper with the god himself sometimes coming by. She had to deal with knowing Jake was both a heretic and a Chosen while also just learning how to deal with Jake as a person.

Jake could deal with a damn academy party if she could do that.

Let's go, Jake thought as he activated the gateway, and with a final "good luck!" from Meira, Jake went through.

He appeared in a massive hall already filled with people, and as Jake looked about, something quickly became clear. This wasn't just a party just for the new members of the ninety-third universe but something far more as he felt over a hundred C-grade auras scattered throughout the utterly humongous hall.

As he stood there, someone approached him, and Jake turned to see Irin. She wore a low-cut red dress that actually managed to cover more than her usual outfit, if barely.

"I am glad you could make it, and may I say, you are looking even better than usual," she said flirtatiously.

Jake regarded Irin and smiled beneath his mask as he returned her compliment.

"Thanks, you look great too. Now, this is quite a gathering, but can I ask you just one thing?" Jake asked.

He knew exactly what he needed.

"Where is the alcohol?"

Chapter 433 - The Power Of Booze

Reika hadn't even considered if she should go to the social gathering or not. It was a natural choice, and she understood that this party was as much networking as it was an actual celebration of sorts. She had talked a lot with many of her fellow students and slowly integrated herself with some who had more talented and higher-rated comrades.

The reason why this meeting was held now and not earlier was due to many outside observers wanting to get an idea of the new students. They wanted to see how they performed in the first classes, what they showed talent in, and if some were worthy of picking up and cultivating.

That's right, this entire party was one big recruitment drive. Representatives of factions of the Order were present in droves, along with several auxiliary factions working with the Order. They were all talking with those from the ninety-third universe they found worth talking to.

There were also other new students present, but the representatives showed less interest in them. Reika knew that individuals from new universes had some special properties such as their Tongue of the Myriad Races, as well as apparently a boost in Records. Or, more accurately, a boost in that they were all Forerunners, automatically giving a good dose of Records right off the bat. This is what had allowed even the untalented and unmotivated back on Earth to get level 50 or so with little effort. Needless to say, this boost of Records was far from enough to be helpful in the long run, but it could be built upon with momentum. They lacked the boost of Records one got from powerful parents, but the ones from the new universe were considered better in many ways.

Then, of course, there was the fact many factions wanted a foothold in the new universe. It was something that was usually not that big of a priority in the early days for many factions, but this time it was different. Because according to the rumors, the Chosen of the Malefic One belonged to the new universe.

Jake's existence made it essential for them to establish themselves in hopes of probably assisting him in the early days. They would gladly do this if it meant getting in the good graces of the Malefic One and his Chosen, even if it took sacrifices and much work.

Now, talking about Jake. Reika did say she hadn't even considered if she should go before the event, but currently, she was seriously doubting her own decision-making skills. Reika herself had wanted to make allies. She knew that Jake was talented in areas she was not, but she was confident in her social skills after lots of practice in her younger days.

So how the hell had Jake turned out to get along so damn well with bloody everyone?

"Ya know, I just don't get it. Why does Palate make shit taste better?" Jake loudly complained as he swung a bottle around. "This one got literal shit in it!"

"It's from mushroom extra-"

"Literal. Shit," Jake interrupted some poor early D-grade who tried to correct him.

"True!" a scaled dragonkin beside him said. "I grew up eating that garbage every damn day; no way I am now drinking it!"

The scalekin was perhaps the most popular figure present, with Jake hiding his identity. It was the one who carried the Divine Blessing named Draskil, and he was currently bonding with Jake over their shared hate for mushrooms, even though Draskil seemed to despise moss more than fungi.

They were surrounded by a whole crowd of primarily scalekin who had all gathered when Jake and Draskil, for some god-forsaken reason, decided that throwing acid to test the other's scales was a funny

side activity. To make it worse, both began laughing when Draskil's entire arm fell off from getting corroded through.

Then, for good measure, Jake did the same shit and poured acid over his own arm. It ended up still hanging on by a few centimeters of flesh as Jake celebrated loudly.

And yes, before anyone asked, they were both smashed. Reika had been afraid Jake would reveal something he shouldn't, but nothing like that had happened so far. Plenty of things Reika thought Jake should not do had happened, but it wasn't like she could tell him what to do...

Either way, it turned out that while Jake had not really made any connections with the more humanoid races, he was sure a hit among the more monstrous ones.

"Wait, you were scared of the sun?" Jake laughed as Draskil made his confession.

"All three of em!" the dragonkin responded with laughter. "You try and live underground and then suddenly get functional eyes and seek out the surface only to see three massive balls of fire! Down below fire usually meant lava, and lava meant you were about to get roasted!"

"Wait, I thought you were blind?" Jake asked. Molemen were blind, right? Jake was pretty sure of that.

"To light, not heat," Draskil corrected as he took a huge chug of a bottle. Putting it down, he looked straight at Jake. "Why the mask?"

“Loot from probably the strongest foe I’ve ever fought,” Jake responded in a serious tone.

“Hm, a treant of sorts?” the dragonkin asked with interest.

“Something far more powerful than that,” Jake smirked below his mask. Even while pretty smashed, his brain still worked well enough to not share stuff like that.

“Fine, keep your secrets,” Draskil shrugged as he raised his bottle again. “Cheers to powerful foes and the bounty from their kills!”

“Cheers!” Jake and dozens of scalekin all around them said as they drank.

Honestly, Draskil was a pretty cool dude. He could also hold his alcohol quite well, and Jake felt happy he had finally found a match.

Draskil had originally struck Jake as the silent type, but he had quickly come to learn it wasn’t quite like that. Draskil and Jake were very similar in that they both didn’t really like large social settings. Jake due to how he was, and Draskil due to the way he had lived his life so far as a solitary survivor. Molemen were a nomadic race that lived underground and had to always travel for food. They had been far more intelligent than any animal on Earth besides humans but were still not at the level of men. Perhaps at the level of ten to eleven-year-olds.

The now-dragonkin had been a bit special in that he had been smarter than his brethren. This meant he had been shunned and had to survive on his own for his entire life. He had to scour for food himself and eventually even began looting caravans of his brethren to survive. His experience had allowed him to prevail right off the bat during the Tutorial and get to where he was today.

Jake was a bit surprised at how loose Draskil's tongue was after getting a few drinks in but soon realized he had just finally loosened up. He wasn't the type to care about secrets, even if he was clearly a prideful man. Draskil had only spoken to a handful so far, and with Jake the most, as the dragonkin had more or less confessed that he only viewed Jake as a proper equal because he, to quote: "feel it in my bones you are strong."

On the note of alcohol, Palate worked weird with it. It eliminated some parts of it while it allowed other parts to function. This meant Jake was drunk; he knew that. But he also knew he was drunk, and his thought process and mind were only semi-affected. That is why he could be both clear-headed and feel the joy of alcohol at the same time, almost like he could switch back and forth at will. He was sure he could reach a level of intoxication where that was no longer the case – a few passed out scalekin sitting slumped in chairs proving this – but so far, Jake was far off that.

What did consistently work was Jake feeling way calmer and soothed overall. Also, he didn't know why, but he really jelled with these scalekin as they all drank and celebrated. Jake knew they were there for Draskil to begin with, but eventually, Jake became included.

He did also do some politics after he found out it was a political party thing. He got a bunch of contact numbers, including those of several brewers who had helped supply alcohol to the party. Yes, that counted as valuable networking too.

Anyway, around four hours had passed since Jake arrived, and finally, it seemed like everyone had come. People were delayed due to them having lessons or other engagements to handle first. With that, it seemed like the host would finally make their appearance.

"A belated welcome to everyone!" Jake suddenly heard a voice ring out, getting the attention of everyone. In the middle of the hall, on a podium of newly-raised stone, stood the elf and human pair Jake had seen on the first day he went to the Academy.

[Human – lvl 161]

[Elf – lvl 167]

The human had gained two levels and elf one. The elf was a woman who looked a bit like Meira but had long red hair, while the human had a strong build and generally what Jake guessed would be described as “heroic” features. They looked like a couple out of some fantasy game or movie, and it turned out they were.

“At the request of many of the wonderful sponsors of this gathering and influential factions within the Order, we are holding this get-together to not only get to bond with one another but to make new friends among those already established in this universe,” the human began.

“Allow me to first introduce myself. I am King Aiborn of the Twinsoul Kingdom, and beside me is my wife, Queen Eilenria. As many likely can guess, we come from a planet where elves and humans have lived in co-existence for centuries already, and we are more than happy to see the Order also be like that.”

Jake was already beginning to feel bored as he looked at Draskil, who also just grinned and shook his head. Who cared if they were kings and queens or whatever? He was pretty damn sure they didn’t have the nobility titles from the system, that is for sure.

“With the advent of change, both for us as individuals, as well as our universe, I hope that today can be the foundation of a strong working relationship for the future. For not only our own factions back home, but the Order and those we ally with to get footholds within the new frontier that is our world!”

He said it all with much fervor, and Jake did see some be touched. He also clearly felt the human had some hefty social skills bordering on mental manipulation. Not that anyone minded, not even Jake. There seemed to be a general agreement that if you were weak enough to get influenced, good riddance.

The next to speak up was the elf queen lady, who also clearly possessed some potent leadership skills. Even better than the humans.

“The Twinsoul Kingdom has already made partnerships, and we are certain there is power in numbers. Not a single force in this room will stand a chance in the ninety-third universe against powerful factions like the Holy Church, Altmar Empire, Valhal, or any other large faction I am certain have already begun planting their roots. The ectognamorphs have already begun their conquests, the Starborne empires made preparations, and the Endless Steppe armies banded together... even the demon empires and automaton stand ready to grasp this new unconquered territory. Not a single faction is not interested in claiming their own piece of the pie.

“That is why it is imperative that we each at least secure our own planets. To do that, you will need allies, and as our universe opens up gradually, we will become able to rely on these allies more and more. So please, I plead to all of you. For the sake of the Order and our own futures in the ninety-third universe, let today, before the Second World Congress, be the day we all stand side by side!”

Jake just sat back and listened to the impassioned speech, and while he was certain a few were moved, he was most certainly not. Her flowery words were nice enough, but it was clear they wanted to make themselves and their own little kingdom a center point of this new alliance of sorts.

He also saw a small group of Risen standing by themselves, all sneering a bit. Among them were two C-grades and all of the students who had arrived from the ninety-third universe. They were naturally

looking down at this entire display, and Jake had also noted the lack of mention of the entire Risen faction.

As Jake had already come to learn with the whole Emberflight debacle, then the Order didn't truly function as a traditional faction for the vast majority of members. More an overall alliance of different factions who all worked with or for the Order or were subservient to it. This did mean one could be part of the Order and the Altmar Empire or many other factions. One didn't even need to view the Viper as the greatest of all the gods – just one of the greatest.

This philosophy did have some factions it didn't jell with. The Holy Church was an exclusive faction, the Court of Shadows was one, and so were many other ones in the multiverse. High-ranking members of pretty much any faction would also only exclusively belong to that one faction.

Jake was certain the Order worked as it did due to Villy's entire philosophy on freedom. How it was the most important thing to have agency and control your own path, so of course, he didn't bother to have a faction that locked people in, at least not as a requirement.

The Order did have core members. These were the members of the different Halls, of which there was only one currently. This is where one found the true believers of the Malefic Viper and the individuals who had pledged their lives to the Order. They were the leading faction within the Order and had the backing of Villy himself, though, in reality, it had been Snappy fulfilling that role for the longest time.

Draskil, who sat with Jake, also didn't bother with the human and elf much besides the basic level courtesy of not interrupting. From their earlier conversation, Draskil was already dedicated to the Order and had no interest in joining any other faction, no matter what.

By now, most knew this, but there were still the occasional hopeful. The queen and king pair kept talking a bit more about the power of unity and the importance of conquering through the World Congress

before spreading out and making allies. They first greeted and talked with those who went up to them, but soon enough, they set their sights on where Jake and Draskil were sitting drinking together.

For the third time in a short while, the dragonkin and human exchanged a glance as they knew what was coming. The elf and human pair were even joined by a few representatives from different factions. Most of them lower-rung ones who no-doubt wanted some of that Divine Blessing clout.

Oh boy, here we go again, Jake thought as he and Draskil shared another drink before more political bullshit arrived.

Chapter 434 - Outed

Ah, politics. Jake hated doing it with a passion which is why he always outsourced it whenever possible. He hadn't liked it before the system either. He wasn't talking about the large political things like elections and such, but the small political maneuvering everyone did in their daily lives.

One example was making friends with certain other employees for their positions and then leveraging that friendship whenever needed. Jake knew it was almost expected that managers made friends with certain people in the HR department, so they had an ally to back them up on most issues.

People also did this with their bosses. In fact, the best example was how everyone was always way nicer to their boss than any other "equal" employee. How if the boss didn't like anyone, everyone else also ostracized that employee to stay in the good graces of their glorious leader. Anyone who chose to show sympathy would naturally fall into the same camp as the pariah and be shunned themselves.

Jake had always hated this with a passion. Ass-lickers and sycophants who he didn't doubt would throw their own mother under a bus for a promotion and a pat on the back from boss almighty. He knew their look, and as he saw the approaching crowd, he recognized it all too well.

Many plans were being formed in his mind on how to handle them. On the one hand, he knew offending them could lead to trouble down the road, not just for him but Miranda and others too, but on the other hand, he really didn't wanna deal with them but set a hard line in the sand.

Luckily for him, Draskil didn't have any of Jake's reservations.

"The fuck you two want?" he aggressively asked the collection of humans, elves, and a few beastkin who went over.

"I apologize, Lord Draskil. We did not mean to disturb you. We merely meant to ask if we could borrow Lord Hunter for a minute to discu-"

"No, fuck off, we're busy," Draskil sneered as he stared them down. Jake just kept his mouth shut, and when they looked at him, he just shrugged powerlessly while inwardly wanting to give the dragonkin a high-five.

"Please, I promise to be brief," the human insisted again, but Draskil was having none of it.

"Are you blind? We are drinking, so if you want to talk, grab a drink and sit down or leave us be."

Well, okay, that wasn't exactly what Jake had planned, but he guessed it would be an okay compromise. Also, he needed an opportunity to give his gift, so maybe it would work out? His only problem was that he hadn't really seen anyone give anything either – besides the boot-lickers – so he wasn't really sure if he even wanted to.

The human and elf pair exchanged a glance before eventually moving to sit down. However, behind them, an early C-grade elf suddenly stopped them by raising his hand.

“Young man, showing courtesy is a virtue. There is no need for such an attitude, and you would do well to correct it,” the elf said, not to Jake but Draskil.

The dragonkin stood up and stared at the C-grade dead in the eye. “And you would do well to know when you are out of your league.”

An aura descended as Draskil let his presence loose, and Jake had to raise an eyebrow and keep himself calm. He clenched his fists a bit as his instincts made it clear... Draskil had gotten stronger. If Jake saw him as only slightly stronger when they entered the Order, he was now far more powerful... and he even had a feeling that initial evaluations had been slightly off.

“Oh yeah... I guess I never told you,” he suddenly heard Villy’s voice. “The dragonkin killed his version of Snappy, and he isn’t really an alchemist at all. He is just a being of pure slaughter.”

Jake didn’t react outwardly, but inwardly he processed the information. Draskil beating his version of Snappy meant he killed one at level 190, 30 levels above the one Jake fought. Even if Jake believed he would have a chance now against the 160 one, he knew he would be utterly outclassed against one at level 190.

And Jake was also very sure that a level 190 Snappy would have been able to utterly destroy most early C-grades... especially if they were someone clearly not combat-focused like the C-grade attendant that had come with the human and elf.

Killing intent mixed with an odd feeling of emptiness rolled across the hall from Draskil as he towered over the elf who had seemed so confident before. However, the moment Draskil released his power, the elf clearly realized he had fucked up.

“Please do not misunderstand; I merely meant tha-”

A claw flew out and grasped the C-grade by the face before he could react. The moment he did so, Jake felt another presence appear that had been observing them from the start as a scaled figure teleported into his sphere.

Draskil looked over at the newcomer and let go of the stupid attendant who fell to the floor with blood running down his face from the claws digging in. The scaled figure saw this, nodded, and was gone as quickly as he appeared.

It appeared that even Draskil would back down when a random A-grade pops in.

However, even then, Draskil had established himself as the dominant party. Jake got up and put a hand on Draskil’s shoulder. “Chill and sit down. Ignore the morons of the world.”

Draskil turned his head and looked at Jake before just smirking and sitting back down casually like nothing had ever happened. Jake followed suit, but not before telling the elf and human pair: “I have no interest in aligning myself with any faction. Oh, and trust me, the competition you would have to beat if I was interested isn’t in your league. As for your whole idea of an alliance, I shall let time decide if that ever becomes a necessity. However, as things are back on my homeworld, things are a bit too complicated for the likes of you two to get involved.”

The two of them looked at him briefly before nodding in understanding before turning to leave again. The C-grade representative also left in embarrassment as Jake sat his ass back down and turned to Draskil.

“See, that is how rejection is gracefully done,” Jake scolded the brute dragonkin.

“Words when actions are more effective,” Draskil just shook his head.

Jake just smirked as he held out his hand towards a bottle of beer on the table and spoke: “Come.”

The bottle moved on its own as it flew into Jake’s hand. Jake was still far too weak to use Words of Power for anything useful in combat, but it was still a fun technique. “Behold, the power of words.”

“Words of Power,” Draskil corrected.

“And Words of Power is the power of words,” Jake countered.

The two of them chuckled a bit as they each enjoyed their drinks. Jake finally decided to ask something he now wondered about after seeing the display against the C-grade:

“You killed any C-grades yet?”

Draskil looked at Jake as he raised an eyebrow. “Plenty.”

“At what level were you when you killed your first?” Jake further asked.

“173 or 174. Why?” Draskil asked a bit suspiciously.

“Just curious. Relax, I am not looking for a dick-measuring contest,” Jake laughed it off.

“Why would the size of one’s genitalia matter when killing?” Draskil asked with genuine confusion.

Jake just shook his head in response. “Not going to explain that one to you.”

Mainly because he couldn’t. Who had even come up with such a stupid saying and concept anyway?

Poor Draskil looked confused for a few moments before just shrugging it off as he kept drinking. The two of them relaxed a bit more and just talked about good fights they had in the past, and Jake came to learn that he and Draskil both had in common that they were sole survivors of their Tutorials, though for different reasons.

In Jake's, everyone had been officially "killed," and it was a shitshow while Draskil had killed everyone else in his Tutorial. One thing was for sure, Draskil was not a kindhearted dragonkin, and his path so far had been one where he killed most others who got in his way. He did own a Pylon and had a position similar to Jake's, but he apparently had to go through three City Lords so far before he got one who didn't get ambitious or tried to backstab him. Jake had really gotten lucky with Miranda now that he thought about it.

As they talked, more people kept arriving at the gathering, and political maneuvering was ongoing all around. They just had their own corner where they chilled with other scalekin who sometimes joined in, and Jake learned a lot about the different kinds of scalekins – a race far more diverse than humans.

This kept on until Jake felt a familiar presence approach. Two of them, in fact. One was Irin, but she looked a bit nervous as she walked beside another figure Jake had met with not that long ago. The dragonkin Helen had also decided to pay a visit.

Jake glanced at Draskil to see if he would toss them away again, but he just stared at their approach. He seemed almost transfixed and was still just staring when they made it over and greeted them.

"Lord Hunter, Lord Draskil, I have brought Lady Helenstromoz Emberflight, who decided to grace this lowly event with her presence," Irin said. Jake at first thought it was done sarcastically, but she was one hundred percent sincere. The dragon lady had some social standing, that was for sure.

"We meet again," Jake just greeted her with a nod.

"Indeed we do, Patriarch Hunter," she greeted him with a meaningful smile.

Jake's smile instantly faded as she had spoken loud enough for Draskil and Irin as well as several scalekin to hear. Irin looked at Jake with surprise, and Draskil looked bewildered for a moment before it also clicked in his head.

Calling out his Bloodline like that was honestly a bit of a dick move.

He looked at her as he shook his head. "A bit petty, isn't it? Just because I rejected you once you come to cause trouble like a little girl who didn't get what she wanted the first time around?"

It was entirely possible she wanted to keep up a façade of ignorance, grace, and civility, but Jake didn't. He knew his Bloodline would be shared eventually, but to openly out him like this just wasn't okay and wasn't going to fly.

Helen frowned a bit at Jake's word but chose to act ignorant as predicted. "I am uncertain what you mean? If I remember correctly, our last meeting ended with you taking time to think about the offer."

"You got a Bloodline?" Draskil butted in before Jake could answer Helen.

"Yep," Jake quickly answered him before turning back to Helen. "And that thinking period is now over. I honestly liked the straightforward approach the first time around, but this manipulative bullshit isn't acceptable."

Helen looked a bit surprised at Jake's outright refusal and attitude. She stared at him in disbelief for a moment and decided to leave. "Very well, I can see I engaged you at a bad time, and you seem to have had a bit too much to drink. Let us have this discussion in a more private setting the next time? We could even go to the local Emberflight Sanctum to--"

"I think I made my answer clear?" Jake asked.

"I shall choose to allow you to keep considering the offer," Helen just said as she promptly turned and teleported away as she turned into flames and disappeared through a gate.

Did she just run away to get the last word? Now that is petty, Jake scoffed internally as he shook his head and took another drink of his beer.

Irin and Draskil both stared at him a bit towards the direction Helen had gone.

"Uhm, Lord Hunter..." Irin began. "Do you know who the young mistress is?"

Jake shrugged. "A little girl with personality issues because daddy gave her everything she wanted growing up?"

Draskil chuckled a bit as Irin looked grave. "She is the young mistress of the Emberflight Clan, born with a unique and very powerful Bloodline. She is already being nurtured by several S-grades, with even some gods paying attention... offending her and making an enemy of a Dragonflight isn't wise. I would try to mend the relationship if possible."

"While I appreciate the advice and understand it comes from a place of concern, it is unnecessary," Jake answered.

“Did that lass want to have your hatchlings?” Draskil suddenly just asked out of the blue.

Jake and Irin were both taken aback, as Draskil looked like the question was completely innocent. Jake wasn’t sure what to say but chose to just be honest. “There indeed were talks of “procuring” my Bloodline, and that she would be involved isn’t out of the question. But I have no interest at all, not with her or anyone.”

“A shame; she looks very breedable,” Draskil shrugged. “But seeing as you aren’t going for her, can I? She looks like she would give powerful hatchlings. Don’t worry, wouldn’t go for it if you had already claimed her as your mate.”

Jake looked at Draskil for a moment as he decided then and there to never talk relationships with the guy. “No comments.”

“Great,” he smiled, but it quickly turned to a frown. “Not that I know how to contact her.”

He then looked towards Irin, who shook her head. “I do not have any way of contacting her. I only met her just now as she arrived at the venue.”

Before Draskil even looked at Jake, Jake answered. “This is your issue to deal with, buddy.”

While Jake didn't care about Helen, he wasn't going to just give out the contact information of others without consent, no matter how little he liked them. Besides, he now knew he had a whole other problem to deal with as Irin finally returned her attention to him.

"So... a Bloodline?"

"It is what it is," Jake shrugged.

"A beneficial one too based on the actions of the Emberflight."

Jake knew he didn't need to answer as the actions of Helen had all but confirmed it. He also knew denying he had a Bloodline would be a waste of time as someone present was bound to report it to some superiors or backers or something who could send someone to check. Instead, he decided to just own up to it and go with the old illusion of it being a presence-based one.

Through his Sphere of Perception, he had already seen several individuals take out their tokens after Helen had arrived and outed him. Many reports had already been sent out, and Jake knew that before long, the existence of his Bloodline and the fact that the Emberflight deemed it valuable would be spread far and wide.

I need some more beer...

Chapter 435 - Political Maneuvering & Preparations

Jake couldn't help but reflect on what exactly Helen and the Emberflight Clan tried to accomplish by outing him. It was clearly a tactic of theirs, and Jake seriously doubted it was something the young mistress had suddenly decided on doing herself. It was deliberate and with a goal.

Irin decided to stick around Jake and Draskil, so he asked her some roundabout questions to get an idea, and he came to a rather quick understanding. In fact, Irin straight-up told him that he would probably be smart to make sure he had some kind of backing after today. Not to avoid getting kidnapped or some other stuff, but for anyone to want to back him.

When Jake said he already had a backer, Irin nodded in understanding and said: “Being pieces in the games of the powerhouses is never fun.”

Jake had taken a bit to understand, but it soon clicked... the Emberflight hadn’t done what they did today to get a response out of Jake; they wanted one out of his backer.

They were running with the assumption Jake had a powerful backer behind him, and that backer had to have influence over Jake, right? Helen showing up to a public meeting with several representatives from factions also clearly communicated the Emberflight Clan were interested in Jake, which would lead to two potential outcomes.

If a stronger faction became aware of Jake through the actions of the Emberflight, it would only reflect well on them. They would lose nothing besides recruiting Jake, something they maybe didn’t view as that high of a priority or as having that high of a probability. Or, maybe they just didn’t think a more powerful faction would bother.

The weaker factions would back off to not offend the Dragonflight or potentially harm a future working relationship. Jake had gathered that the Emberflight truly was considered a top-tier faction of the multiverse. They were not a peak-tier such as the Holy Church, Court of Shadows, or Altmar Empire, but were still not someone easily offended by any but the biggest of players.

They had just made one miscalculation... the Order of the Malefic Viper was considered a peak faction. The power of a faction was not decided by their size or area of influence but by their power. More accurately, the power of the god at its helm.

Now, if he thought about it, they had clearly never considered it possible the Malefic Viper was his backer. That made sense as that was so astronomically unlikely, so what they probably believed was that Jake had a powerful S-grade master who was a member of the Order. Either a true member part of a Hall or a normal member, but either way, this backer or master would no-doubt view Jake as a way to get in the good graces of another faction. Why else would an S-grade bother with a weak D-grade whose biggest redeeming feature was his Bloodline?

The backer would be made to choose, and the Emberflight were confident. Of course, not choosing would be an issue too. It would result in Jake being hounded until he made his position clear, and the backer would also find himself revealed soon enough and be pressured himself. Perhaps not directly, but indirectly. Moreover, this backer would get nothing out of Jake if he didn't become part of a larger faction.

All of this boiled down to the basic assumption that Jake was nothing more than a chess piece in the game of powerful experts. A chess piece holding a valuable commodity to be traded away sooner or later, with the backer being the primary decider of how this would be done. This was naturally completely wrong, but if that is what they believed, the Emberflight Clan's actions made a bit more sense. They never considered if offending Jake mattered or not, and even if they offended his backer, it would just be a measly S-grade.

Irin's initial interpretation of the situation seemed to be identical to Jake's, and she even admitted something as they spoke.

"I will be honest, my clan was interested in potentially recruiting you as an auxiliary member even before the Bloodline. Just due to the fact you had a Blessing, we believed it worth it. Now, with a Bloodline and a Dragonflight showing interest, I firmly believe they will back off. Our Matriarch is only A-grade, so offending the Emberflight Clan simply isn't something we can afford."

Draskil had just shrugged as his input boiled down to not caring about factions at all besides the Order of the Malefic Viper. The guy really looked up to Villy and was a true believer.

So... to summarize, the Emberflight Clan believed that what they had done today would put pressure on Jake and his backer to decide on a faction to join. As the backer would pick the faction that could offer the most, the Emberflight naturally assumed they were a popular choice.

Too bad for them. They were as wrong as can be, and Jake decided to stay away from any factions for now. Did he have the choice of joining the Order of the Malefic Viper for real in one of the Halls? Sure, but he also had the choice of just going "Oh, by the way, Chosen of the Viper right here," to get everyone off his back. If he said that, Jake would be viewed as not only a true member of the Order but the most important member besides a few people.

"Villy, any thoughts?" Jake asked after reaching his own conclusion.

"On what?" the god answered promptly.

"You know, the Emberflight putting pressure on me, my Bloodline being public knowledge within a few days, and the issues that are to follow?" he asked, knowing full well the Viper knew all this.

"Oh. That. Seems like a you-problem last time I checked," Villy said cheekily.

"So you would be fine with me revealing my identity as your Chosen and using that to make everyone back off and be treated like the second coming of you?"

"Jake, Jake, Jake. I was always fine with that. I wanted to help you hide your identity for your own sake, not mine. I picked you as my Chosen, and of course, I stand by that choice. One day it will be revealed no matter what, and when you choose to do so is up to you and you alone. You can invoke my name whenever you feel like it, as long as you want to deal with what it will bring. I will support you far more openly if you choose this, not that I think it will be needed or even wanted," Villy explained, getting a bit more serious.

Jake was silent for a bit. "So, just for advice then, any way to get around this entire Bloodline thing without revealing myself as your Chosen and not joining a faction outright?"

"Plenty of ways. All for you to discover yourself," the god answered as his presence slowly faded away.

This left Jake sitting with his own thoughts as he thought of a solution. Because damn, did he need one. He felt hundreds of gazes upon him at nearly all times from attendants all-around, as well as other students who looked like they really wanted to go up and talk to him.

Right now, he had Draskil as a shield as the dragonkin had shown himself to be less than approachable. He tolerated the presence of the scalekin groupies and Irin, but Jake knew that protection would only last for this party, so for now, he just leaned back and enjoyed his drink.

Irin still seemed genuinely concerned and continued to talk to Jake until he shot the topic down and told her to relax. He didn't know why she cared, but he did appreciate her advice that may even go against the interest of her clan.

With the matter shelved, the rest of the party went by as Jake just sat back and drank with his new dragonkin buddy and Irin, who decided to stick around throughout the entire day. Politics went on all around them, but they managed to make their small oasis of relaxation where the word "World Congress" wasn't mentioned at least every second sentence.

Not that Jake had forgotten. In only a few hours, it would be World Congress time.

Jacob sat at the high seat of the massively expanded conference room. Golden projections of men and women lined the seats all around the room, all of them nobles of different kinds, with many of them being City Lords.

By now, the Holy Church controlled close to a hundred Pylons of Civilization. They had more people within their territories than any other faction on the planet, and their strength had only consolidated and grown. Yet they knew they still faced many challenges on Earth.

The Great Famine, as the crisis was dubbed, had been a major setback. No one knew what had been the cause of the event either, and Jacob had tried to use his divination skills to find the cause but always came up blank. This made him believe it was somehow system-imposed.

Certain members of the Church came forward who specialized in curses and said they felt a powerful pulse of curse energy that day. The Church had looked into it, but it didn't appear the Risen had done anything as Casper was naturally the first suspect when it came to anything curse-related.

In the end, they quickly shut down all theories that this event was man-made or even caused by any being on Earth. The power involved, if it truly was caused by an individual, would be very concerning. That is why they had officially stated it was system-caused, the same as most other factions.

Because the alternative would only cause panic.

Jacob shook his head as finally all the seats were filled. This would be the last meeting before the World Congress and had all of the people present who would attend.

The Augur stood up as he regarded them all with a bright smile.

"Welcome to the assembly where we will discuss the Holy Church's approach in the Second World Congress."

A congress Jacob firmly believed they would gain more influence in than any other faction.

--

Miyamoto stood covered in sweat as he swung his blade again and again. The pressure upon him was unlike anything a human could normally survive, but he persisted as the nearly twenty mages all around him focused on the formation beneath his feet.

Soon enough, they ran out of mana as the pressure disappeared, and an attendant walked up to him with a towel.

"Thank you," he said as he wiped his face clean. The rest of the sweat turned into droplets that floated off his body and formed a small bubble of water that rapidly evaporated.

"Patriarch, are you ready to meet the ministers?" another attendant came and asked. Several more also entered to help the mages out of the courtyard to recover.

"Lead the way," Miyamoto smiled as he got handed a robe to cover his bare upper body. As he walked, a certain vampire also appeared and walked beside him. "It will be interesting to see what this World Congress is all about."

The former Monarch of Blood, Iskar, was a constant companion for Miyamoto and seemed especially interested in the political side of things. Far more so than the Sword Saint had ever thought. His vast knowledge had helped in places nobody in the Noboru clan had ever expected, and by now, Iskar was beginning to hold some influence.

He also helped by training those who had chosen to become vampires. It wasn't many so far, but a few hundred who felt stuck in their paths or simply hadn't found a place they felt they belonged had chosen to embrace vampirism. The clan had a stringent screening process, and far from everyone were allowed to choose this path.

"The World Congress always comes as an impetus of change for our small planet, so I too hold interest in what it will bring," Miyamoto simply said to the vampire. The two entered a large meeting hall with all those present from the Miyamoto Clan who would attend. They had shown up either in person or communicated from afar, some only using voice due to the distance.

The Noboru Clan were ready for whatever was to come, and with their expansion, the Sword Saint believed they should now be the second-largest faction after the Holy Church.

Valhal, the Court of Shadows, the Risen, Haven, and a plethora of other factions made their preparations for the upcoming World Congress. This time they knew what to expect and were far more ready than the last time. Plans and strategies were made, and new forces would participate that had never been there before. Alliances had been struck between factions all across the planet.

Arthur, Jacob's father, and the leader of a large alliance, was one such force no one knew how powerful it truly was. In pure numbers, perhaps their alliance could even match the Holy Church, while they had many experts who before never worked with others but chose to stay independent.

Eron, who none knew what was truly up to, prepared too, as even he understood the importance of the World Congress.

Every single force on Earth, small or large, prepared. Near-anyone who had gotten the invitation planned to attend, and they all were ready.

Unknowing that there was one more faction. One that no one but a single person on Earth was even aware of. And it was questionable if even he had predicted what was to happen.

The mountain range spanned into the horizon as winged beasts patrolled the area. To one side were infinite mountains, the other the endless ocean. Monsters of legends and myths were gathered towards a certain mountaintop as even the oceanic creatures made their appearance to show respect.

Powerful beast lords, creatures no human on Earth would feel confident challenging all gathered towards a certain mountain as on the top stood a structure of what looked like golden wood. A testament to the monster that lived there and one whom they all feared.

On Earth, beasts had fought for territory, and this area was one of the most sought-after. It led into the human lands while still connecting to the ocean and was part of the area C-grades were allowed to roam freely at the current time.

A land of death for most humans... yet on the mountain, several buildings were made. A small city was under construction in the valley below with no beasts harassing the humans working away. Occasionally a human would look towards the peak above with the golden temple and be in awe at the Lord who lived up there... no, the King.

System notifications were not a new thing. Quests were not new, but this was indeed a first. With an ivory claw, the Unique Lifeform waved his hand as the door was opened, and he stared out over the land that was his.

Behind him stood two humans who were to assist in this "World Congress" that was to come.

The Fallen King had to admit, it did indeed seem interesting.

Chapter 436 - Presence Of A King

Jake returned to his mansion half an hour before the World Congress to do some last-second preparations. He already had a talk with Miranda using her communication skill and agreed on a few minor things.

Contrary to the first time where Jake barely made it, he didn't rush this time. He took a shower after the party and sobered up as he smiled at remembering it. Draskil and he had been drinking until Jake had to leave, at which point Draskil also couldn't be arsed to stay any longer.

Meira was at a lesson still, so Jake just sat in the living room in meditation until the system notification appeared. He accepted it instantly as his vision went black, and he was teleported to who-knows-where – the location of the Congress.

Jake opened his eyes as he found himself in a familiar room. At least somewhat familiar as it had now expanded significantly. People teleported in all around him, and in only a few seconds, it was clear that far more than the hundred or so cities would be present this time around.

Miranda popped in right next to Jake, with Lillian and Neil following soon after.

“Hey guys and gals,” Jake greeted them with a smile. Not that they could see it, Jake would be mask-on for this Congress, just like the last one.

“New outfit?” Miranda asked, looking him over.

Jake was still wearing the party clothes as it seemed more fitting for this kind of event than his combat-getup. “Yep, what do you think?”

“Looks good, even if the snake motif is a bit on the nose and really advertising you are related to the Order of the Malefic Viper. Not that doing so is a bad thing,” she answered with a smile. “And good to see you again. I gather it goes well at the Order?”

“Eh, it’s a bit so-and-so. Lots of annoying political stuff, same as everywhere, but I made some new friends and am learning a lot. You should come by at some time,” Jake said.

"I honestly have no need to. I am being taught using my Dreams of the Verdant Lagoon skill every chance I get, which I would argue is more effective in many ways due to the time dilation," Miranda explained. "Even if I can't do anything there besides talk, at my current level of knowledge, that is what I need most. I don't doubt I will go in the future, but the time isn't right yet."

Jake nodded in understanding, and before he could check in with Lillian and Neil, the system notification appeared.

Welcome to the Second World Congress of Earth.

The World Congress is an opportunity for the newly integrated denizens of Earth to establish political connections and an arena for discussion, voting, and international politics that can impact the planet as a whole. Note that no fighting will be allowed during the World Congress. Each booth has an aura that will offer privacy to each city.

During the Second World Congress, two votes will be held with one four-hour intermission between each to discuss the proposal, after which a vote will be held. The total length of the World Congress will be six hours.

The first vote will be held in one hour and pertain to the election of a World Leader. The World Leader will automatically have their noble rank advance one stage (Up to the limit of King). Becoming a World Leader requires more than 60% of the total votes.

For a moment, Jake thought it was identical to the message they got during the First World Congress, but he quickly noted three small differences. The first was the number of total votes only being two,

which also decreased the duration of the event, and the disclaimer of sorts about those with the nobility rank of King not getting it upgraded.

Jake wondered why this was relevant for a moment as he looked across the room. He saw Jacob, Caleb, Casper, Priscilla, the Sword Saint, Carmen, Eron, and everyone else he knew appear on their respective platforms. He even saw Arthur appear on a lower-ranked platform.

Overall, Jake counted perhaps three thousand total booths, which meant three thousand claimed Pylons. Their planet had truly expanded in this time, and it was entirely possible many Pylons had been claimed with the owners not participating. However, one thing was off. Jake was not the only one to notice it either, as Jacob also looked confused when he saw the layout of the room.

The elevation of the platforms was decided based on who was on it, based on their nobility rank. Jake himself stood higher than everyone else, even if he did see some had managed to upgrade their nobility ranks above that of Lord in the lower rungs.

However... there was one platform that was above all others. Larger than all others. All attention was gathered on it as suddenly an aura appeared on top of it. A golden wave swept through the entire hall as Jake felt himself subtly be suppressed in power.

A figure rose as Jake felt his mask faintly resonate with the being that had appeared. Jake was surprised and instantly used Identify at willow figure of the former King of the Forest, who had somehow shown up in the World Congress.

[Fallen King – lvi 191]

Jake's eyes opened wide, and he instantly felt the mood of the room shift. If during the First World Congress, it had been Jake who suppressed all others and set the mood, then it was clear the King would do that this time.

He instantly also got another thought as he checked the voting rules of the World Congress.

Voting rules of the World Congress:

The number of available votes is based on the nobility rank of the attending members. The number of votes per nobility rank is as follows:

King: 1000

Prince: 250

Duke: 100

Marquiss: 25

Earl: 10

Viscount: 5

Baron: 3

Lord: 1

The noble in question may distribute their votes as they choose if there are multiple options. The noble may abstain from voting. Votes are final and cannot be appealed. Any agreements will come into effect until the next World Congress or if all included parties choose to revoke it. All tie-breakers will be decided by the highest-ranking noble present at the World Congress.

Well, fuck, Jake thought as he saw the massive number of votes the King had available. It was honestly insane, and Jake felt like something was entirely wrong and unbalanced. Jake had talked to the King and knew he had the nobility title, but this wasn't what he had expected.

The entire hall was silent, just staring up at the King. He guessed many were faster than him at checking the voting rules and seeing that the situation truly wasn't what anyone had expected. The carefully laid plans of all factions, including the ones he and Miranda had made, were instantly made null due to the appearance of one Unique Lifeform.

"Introductions are in order," the voice of the King echoed out in Jake's mind, and no doubt everyone else's too. "I am known as the Fallen King, a Unique Lifeform born in another world, brought here by certain circumstances. I believe this saying would be considered cliché, but I come in peace."

Jake was a bit surprised at the King not instantly proclaiming himself the superior being and telling them all to bow in reverence, but instead acting... reasonable? What the hell was he planning?

"Fallen King..." Jacob muttered aloud. "You being here should not be possible."

"Augur, what else but the impossible is expected of a being such as I?" the King answered, making Jake feel a bit more at ease, seeing the King still had an ego the size of the sun. "I am a born King, my nobility more rightful than anyone else present."

Jacob frowned at the response. Everyone else was silent before the Sword Saint stepped forward and spoke. "Fallen King, I can't help but notice you do not come alone?"

That is when Jake actually paid attention to the two people the King had brought along. A man and a woman, both clearly human. The King actually stood a step back as the two introduced themselves.

"I am the local mayor of a yet-to-be-named city under the control of the Fallen King, and this is the representative of our newly established crafting guild," the woman said. "We were all wanderers in an especially dangerous part of the planet, quite a bit away from any larger settlement, but were eventually recruited by the King to inhabit his lands. Currently, we are rapidly constructing our territory, but we already have tens of thousands who have sought refuge under our banner."

"A bit convenient, isn't it?" Carmen said. "A monster appears out of nothing and is suddenly all friendly to humans without anyone knowing before now. Excuse me if I find it a little suspicious."

The King turned to her as his voice echoed again.

"Do not think me foolish enough to believe I am almighty. I have learned that humans are not a race to ever underestimate, and I do not plan to do such. In fact, I want humanity to prosper on this planet more than ever before, and I believe I can make that possible," the King answered.

"How so?" the Sword Saint asked.

"Through power and my existence as neither beast nor human. I have observed the antagonistic relationship and believe this conflict will only escalate. Beasts desire the resources of humans, while humans desire the resources provided by slaying beasts. It is an unavoidable circle of slaughter, but one I believe can be managed. Sapient beasts are plentiful, and many of them do not desire conflict, and as long as humanity and the sapients work together, the feral can be controlled. But to make this happen, an entity needs to function as a mediator. One that cares not for humans, beasts, elementals, or monsters, but at the same time cares for all of them equally. Something... Unique," the Fallen King explained himself, and Jake finally understood what was going on.

The Fallen King was actually throwing his hat in the ring to become World Leader. The vote would take place in an hour, and he was had already taken the opportunity to voice his stance and make a proposal to humanity.

"Which naturally begs the question... if you don't care for any party, what is in it for you to act as this mediator?" Jacob asked. He seemed oddly thrown off, and Jake could feel his old boss really struggling internally as he tried to grasp the situation.

"A silly question you should have realized already. I am a King. I am a ruler. To rule is my Path, simple as that. A world that is not wrought by unnecessary war will reward me more, and I am not blind to the benefits humanity can bring. I even chose to harbor humans and defend them out of purely selfish ambition. I desire what humans can create. Their minds and their ingenuity. I will have to look far to find beasts worth a proper conversation, while in any human settlement, I can find plenty of minds worth sparring with."

He really had all the answers. Jake was surprised to see this side of the King. He knew the King wasn't stupid from their talks after he had awakened the Unique Lifeform, but he did not expect a being such as the King to understand things such as diplomacy and acting with moderation. The King was still overbearing, sure, but not to the point of putting everyone off. Jake also felt a very subtle aura, making it clear the King had actual leadership skills and skills most city leaders possessed.

"You are aiming for World Leader?" a man from the back suddenly asked. Jake turned and saw it was Jacob's father, Arthur, who had finally decided to join the conversation.

"None is more qualified. While you here may believe you are here to elect a leader of humanity, you are selecting the leader of the entire world. Unless you plan to suppress or annihilate all other races but your own, you will need to compromise. I am a being in the middle that can serve as that compromise," the King explained again.

"In other words, you want us to subjugate ourselves to an unknown lifeform that has suddenly appeared?"

"An oversimplified interpretation I do not fully agree with. What is the difference between subjugating yourself to another human or I? Unless you insist on trying to claim racial superiority, in which case I must disappoint. None are superior to I," the King said, allowing some of that good old arrogance to shine through.

Not that anyone who knew anything about Unique Lifeforms could object. It was a statement one could argue was objective as Unique Lifeforms were peak creatures of the multiverse.

"No, I believe you oversimplify. No one said a monarchical structure is the only valid one. We are gathered here today as a congress. Why should a single being be granted power over all others? In our

old world, we had democracy. Each individual held power, and everyone could vote equally. This ideology was tried and tested as superior to any individual leader for more reasons than any of us have time to hear,” Arthur argued.

”An interesting idea. However, it relies on assumptions no longer applicable. Equality is nothing but a dream and an ideology that can only exist if the strong permit it. Power rules all in this world if you like it or not. Even if you try to change such a system, you need the power to do so.”

It was a conversation Jake was pretty sure he had heard before, and one where he honestly didn’t bother picking a side. However, he had to admit that organizations with singular leaders were the norm in the multiverse, even if exceptions did exist. For those exceptions, it was only that way because everyone was equal in power or because the strongest member allowed it to be so.

”But it should be obvious that any World Leader elected will not deal with every issue or even have an opinion. I am not rejecting the concept of voting or having representations. I am merely saying to have one being act as the backing and facilitator of these decisions. This individual will only have the interests of the people in mind, as ruling through tyranny is simply inefficient. Unless, of course, that individual belongs to a faction with an ideology they wish to enact upon the world. Such as the will of a god,” the King said, clearly calling out nearly all of the major forces on Earth.

This led to some discussion as the conversation was officially derailed. Like before, the independent factions weren’t a big fan of organizations like the Holy Church coming in and ruling the planet for some new god. This was a conflict that had been ongoing since Earth was integrated and one Jake doubted would end anytime soon.

Jake and everyone from Haven had been silent so far, but the three of them had looked at him a bit weirdly ever since the King appeared. The reason was obvious, and soon enough, the question also came as one of the leaders of a religious faction tried to refocus the talks.

"I just have one burning question," Jacob asked as he finally mentioned the elephant in the room. One most had been waiting to ask but had held their tongue on as the flow of conversation was led elsewhere.

"Why do you wear the same mask as Lord Thayne? What is your relationship?"

Chapter 437 - Discussing The Future Of Earth

Now, honestly, Jake felt really put on the spot. He had just dealt with the damn Bloodline debacle at the Order and had believed this entire World Congress would be a relaxing time where he could chill with friends and do some voting and stuff. You know, he just wanted to enjoy it a little.

But no, the King had to show up and make everything incredibly complicated, so instead of getting a nice and relaxing break, Jake went straight from the frying pan and into the fire.

Everyone looked back and forth between the King and Jake. Perhaps some had not noticed it to begin with, but the two masks did look exactly the same. Which made sense because the mask Jake wore on his face was kind of a clone of the King as far as Jake knew. In fact, it was the "real" body Jake always had on his face, while the King before him was... well, also the real body.

Yeah, Jake still wasn't sure exactly how it worked.

However, before the King answered the crowd, Jake asked the question that had been burning in his mind. Not openly, but directed only at the King. He reached out mentally, and the King responded as he made a telepathic bridge.

"I thought you said you couldn't surpass me in level?" Jake asked first thing.

"So did I, but it appears I miscalculated, even if I just learned now you are, in fact, below me in level. You see, I assumed my Soulspace would surpass yours in power if my level did, and the two would have to be roughly equal, but it was clear my assumptions were wrong somewhere. Parts of me wondered what would happen if I surpassed your level, but my Soulspace never surpassed yours. I primarily assumed I would hit a wall, so I kept slaughtering and claiming my land as I waited for that to happen. It never did. Ah, but I am certain that advancing in grade will be impossible before you, so do not dally," the King answered.

The exchange between the King and Jake was nearly instantaneous due to its telepathic nature, so in the view of everyone else present, the King and Jake had just stared at each other for a moment before the Unique Lifeform answered Jacob's question.

"He is why I am fallen," the King simply answered.

Jacob, who seemed to have managed to collect himself a bit, continued down this line of questioning.

"I may be incorrect, but you were formerly known as the King of the Forest, the final opponent of the Tutorial that Lord Thayne and I were in?

"Correct," the King answered.

"In which case, how are you alive? To my knowledge, he gained the title of Progenitor through slaying you," Jacob asked.

Jake once more had attention gathered on him as he seriously considered if he should talk about now? Well, the King was handling it so far, so maybe he should just let him do the talking, eh, telepathy.

“We Unique Lifeforms have our own ways of survival. And can I not ask you the same? To my knowledge, you were slain too during the tutorial but had methods to stay alive. The same is true for the Risen and that other mage. There are endless methods to survive, so do you truly find it that surprising?” the King said, doing some good old whataboutism.

This led to some looking at Jacob at the revelation he had died. Surviving death was an odd concept to most, and Jake actually had a feeling it made Jacob appear better. However, it also sought to derail the conversation, something Jacob was clearly not willing to do.

“This answers how you met, not why you are standing where you are today or the nature of your relationship with Lord Thayne,” Jacob stated.

“I believe the simplest term would be that the hunter is my bane. If you wish for a balancing scale on this planet, he can fulfill that role, as even now, I hold no confidence in surviving if he sought to end my reign,” the King answered.

Jake was kind of happy he had shut up as the King was seriously spinning the truth. Jake understood why too... there were plenty of skills to discern truths, and even if they didn't work fully, they at least had to have partial effects. Downright lying would probably trigger them, at least. Of course, it was also possible the King was partly truthful for some other reason.

Jacob looked at Jake with questioning eyes, and Jake decided to also be truthful. “I have killed the King once, and I can do it again. Trust me, it wouldn't even be a fight; I know his weakness.”

Hey, it wasn't a lie? It was Jake being one hundred percent honest and not at all obscuring the truth.

"If what you are saying is true, wouldn't that just mean picking you effectively puts Jake in charge?" Carmen suddenly raised her hand and asked.

"Yes and no. It would give him veto, yes, but calling him in charge would be inaccurate as the hunter cares not for leadership of any kind. Merely look at who truly leads his city currently. His position would be comparable to that, except I would not seek to make decisions benefitting him, but everyone under my rule," the King answered.

"Let us say we do believe everything you said. Let us assume you do have the wellbeing of this planet in mind. Choosing to elect you World Leader within an hour of meeting you.. doesn't that sound like a hasty and unwise choice?" Arthur rejoined the conversation.

"It does, and it would confirm you are all incompetent leaders and not worth respecting in the long term," the King answered, getting a varied response. Some looked offended, others looked like everything suddenly made sense, and people like Jake didn't quite have time to get what the King was playing at before he continued after an adequately long dramatic pause.

"Which is why I would advocate for not selecting one during this vote. By my estimates, I hold roughly a fourth or a fifth of the total votes by myself, meaning that if I do not vote for anyone, their chances of being elected are slim. I am also aware that no other faction would have the votes even without my presence here. No, I come today to open up a line of communication and a chance to prove my competency. Let me also make it clear, no King rules alone. Even if I do ultimately get elected, none will lose their positions unless deemed incompetent, as I see no purpose in ruining what already works, and I am also acutely aware that hostile takeovers would mean war with many factions," the King explained.

Miranda nodded along as she seemed to agree with the King for the most part. There also didn't seem to be much resistance, and a few new players even joined the conversation.

"The Risen do agree that a time to prove oneself is necessary. We are not opposed as we believe inclusivity is key to a well-functioning society. I just want to confirm if the Fallen King has any thoughts on the Risen?" Priscilla asked.

"None in particular. Any creature with a soul is living in my eyes, and I shall confess, I do not even possess the usual sensory organs of you humans or Risen. To me, you all look alike aside from some faint differences in energy signatures."

This again got a varied response. Some humans seemed to frown, especially many of those associated with the Holy Church and independent factions. Jake did notice Arthur didn't seem to hold any strong opinion on the Risen, which at least was a good sign. Jacob's dad likely represented more Pylons than anyone else, and Jake had a thought the man could be quite influential when he wanted to.

"What are your thoughts on this, Lord Thayne?" Arthur suddenly asked as he looked at Jake.

Being put on the spot again, Jake took a moment to think before he answered. "Who leads Earth or not really isn't that big of a concern to me. In my eyes, the multiverse is far larger than this planet, and even if Earth will forever be my home, I only consider Haven truly mine. So as long as whatever faction or individual gets elected leaves Haven alone and lets it stay neutral, I truly don't care."

"You have no interest in spreading the influence of the Order of the Malefic Viper?" Jacob's dad further questioned.

“None whatsoever. Neither does the Malefic Viper. Not to be an ass, but the Viper has made it pretty clear he cares little for a small planet such as Earth. He cares about individuals and not dead rock if it comes down to things. Ultimately the Order is the kind of organization that doesn’t recruit by taking over territory but by people coming to join it. If the Order does take over a territory, it wouldn’t be through me trying to weasel my way into becoming World Leader, but by overwhelming force,” Jake answered truthfully.

Miranda decided to also finally join the conversation as she added to what Jake said.

“I also want to point out that Haven is still only in possession of a single Pylon and thus far have made no efforts to expand except the natural growth of said Pylon. Haven is still open to members of any faction to visit, and besides some basic rules, we welcome everyone. The only religious institution we have is a temple where anyone is allowed to place a statue as long as it passes some basic evaluations. All of this is to say, Haven truly has no desire to reach for more power or influence besides being a neutral force that hopes our independence can be respected no matter who becomes World Leader,” she said.

It wasn’t anything new, and Jake knew she had emphasized this repeatedly when talking to other factions. But hey, reemphasizing was always good, especially with new people present.

“There is just one issue,” Caleb said, also bringing himself and the Court of Shadows into play. “As of now, we are only a single planet, and while this vote may only appear to pertain to Earth, we must acknowledge that is only for now. In the context of the old world, a country was just a piece of land on a single planet, but in the multiverse, countries expand across entire star sectors.”

Jake frowned at this as he understood the implications. Caleb continued as he voiced exactly what Jake had also just realized.

“So let’s say any single faction is elected World Leader and agrees to leave every other faction alone to act independently while not allowing them to continue to expand. What happens in a few hundred years? What happens when the entire solar system is conquered? When in times to come, potentially entire parts of the galaxy are conquered? Even if a small piece of land such as Haven remains, it will be cut off. Defensive formations covering the entire country will isolate them, and I see no scenario where a true multiversal kingdom will allow so many factions to have teleportation arrays placed in its heart. Especially not opposing factions such as the Risen and Holy Church,” Caleb voiced his concerns.

“Isn’t this putting the cart before the horse?” Arthur argued from afar. “You postulate a scenario so far off I don’t see why it is relevant to discuss at the current time.”

“So far off?” Caleb answered back. “No, this is all within our near futures. The timescale of the multiverse moves differently from what we are used to. Every single person in this room will live hundreds of years more unless killed. Within that time, this entire planet will surely be conquered, and whatever factions accomplish this will surely seek to expand.”

“What are you arguing then?” Arthur asked. “That we all just fully submit to one faction?”

“No, I am not proposing any solutions, just pointing out problems. No matter who wins, the Court of Shadow will likely stay. As a known faction or an unknown one, we tend to be good at staying in the shadows. It’s kind of what we do,” Caleb shrugged. “I just don’t wanna see my home planet fall into civil war and would prefer to stay in the light. At least partly.”

“All issues I believe there will be found solutions to in due time,” the King reentered the discussion. “However, to propose one solution is to have borderline no protection besides the sheer knowledge this area is inhabited by so many powerful factions. I can understand why the Holy Church and Risen would have issues co-existing, but even so, no war shall begin. If war means not only offending one opposing faction but all those present on the planet along with so many prolific individuals, not even the Church or Risen would risk conflict. Additionally, this shall naturally serve as an aegis for the weaker factions as the aggression of any large force to usurp a smaller one will be frowned upon.”

Caleb shrugged again. "Maybe, maybe not. I still see it be incredibly risky if any faction can just teleport people in."

"They would be able to anyway, or do you truly believe any organization anyone on this planet can establish in a few centuries can match even a fraction of a true power of the multiverse? No, we would be crushed if any truly powerful and ancient being decided to descend. Unless, of course, they fear an equally or more powerful entity to descend in response," the King added to his argument.

"Making Earth such a place of high tension with so many innocent and uninvolved citizens living here seems unwise, and almost like we are disregarding their presence," Jacob said.

"It is also high tension to attempt to force everyone into one ideology. No conquest of a planet ever ends peacefully. Augur, you know as well as I that if the Holy Church were to act according to their usual modus operandi, this planet would become a homogenous society not by understanding and inclusion, but by forced assimilation and cleansing," the King said. He more or less took a direct jab at the Church; however, he also further added.

"Not that I hold much faith in any other organization or faction of the multiverse to do much better. The Court would lock the planet down and use it to recruit new assassins. In an ideal situation, the Risen would attune the entire planet to their own magic, and Valhal would turn it into nothing more than a massive hunting ground on which everything is killed before rebuilding from the ruins, just to take a few examples."

"What about us?" the Sword Saint asked with a smile.

“You, I know little about. However, the Noboru clan, as you call yourself, has the massive issue of being nothing more than a fledgling faction that will be gobbled up by other forces if you wish for it to or not. Even if you seek to stay independent, this can only happen if another faction allows you. Granted, I will not argue that the god who blessed you won’t choose to intervene and act as a shield, but in that case, what makes you different from someone like the hunter? Naturally, all of this assumes the Noboru clan are truly virtuous and seeks only the best for everyone, something I doubt based on the history of this world,” the King answered curtly.

The Sword Saint just nodded in response. “Arguing against history and your ignorance of my faction seems futile, and I will not claim any faction perfect. On the note of gods, am I correct to assume Unique Lifeforms are unable to be blessed?”

It was a question many already knew the answer to. Jake, of course, did. Jacob likely did, as well as many leaders of major factions. However, many didn’t, and while Jake wasn’t sure if the old man knew, the question would still serve as a clarification for everyone.

“That is correct. Unique Lifeforms are unable to obtain the blessings of gods, for we need no guidance nor to be shown a Path. We are to forge our own or die trying to realize what we were born to be,” the King arrogantly answered. Almost prideful at being unable to be blessed.

The old man nodded as he stated a conclusion it was pretty obvious would eventually be reached. “For the vote of World Leader, the Noboru Clan will choose to vote for ourselves with the goal of electing no one.”

“The Court shall do the same,” Caleb quickly added.

“Us too,” Miranda said, Jake naturally not disagreeing.

“Very well,” Jacob nodded.

The rest of the congress quickly followed suit as it became clear no World Leader would be chosen during the Second World Congress.

Chapter 438 - Paths To A Better Future

Results: No individual obtained at least 60% of the total votes. No World Leader will be elected during this World Congress. Note that a World Leader must be elected within the first 3 World Congresses.

The vote ended as everyone expected with no World Leader elected. Jake had decided to just vote for Neil for fun, getting a weird look from the guy afterward. It had actually gone about as Miranda had theorized before they entered the World Congress, with, of course, the small change of the King being present.

Miranda had not believed any World Leader would be elected due to how many dissenting opinions still existed. The Noboru clan and Holy Church alone opposed the other gaining power, the Risen would want neither but prefer the Noboru clan, the independents wanted neither of them, and Valhal wanted who-knows-what.

The Court of Shadows and Haven didn't really matter much anymore voting-wise as they were beaten out by sheer numbers. However, their opinions could still sway some, and not having their support would potentially only lead to trouble down the line. The same was true for Eron, who had been oddly silent since the entire event began, almost hiding away.

Determining who was happy or not with this conclusion wasn't hard determining either. The Holy Church seemed disappointed, and the Noboru clan also appeared to hope that they would have won the vote. In fact, Jake got the feeling the Noboru clan and many of the independents associated with Arthur had made some kind of agreement.

However, it seemed like most had assumed this vote would end in no winner as a foregone conclusion. Getting sixty percent of the votes was no easy task, and no faction had confidence in achieving it as things currently were on Earth. In fact, Jake was unsure a real agreement of more than sixty percent would ever be reached.

This is why both he and Miranda had agreed that all of this was just planting the seeds of the next World Congress, where according to the rules, a World Leader had to be selected. No one knew how the next election would work, but the best guess was that it would simply be the individual with the most votes who wins.

With the end of the first vote, a new one instantly began. Jake had wondered what the next vote would be about. A new shop of some kind? A system event? Something entirely different? Well, it sure did turn out to be different than Jake had expected.

The second vote of the World Congress will relate to allowing those who have yet to find their Path to do so.

As the world progresses and many begin to find their footing, some stumble as they fail to find their Path. They reach an impasse as their progress stops and their motivation dies. This event is one that will allow those who faltered to reignite their inner fire and discover their true Path. At the same time, members of the World Congress can decide which direction they wish for their planet to go.

The voting options are as follows:

1. Paths of the Unusual Unions

2. Paths of the Heretical Few

3. Paths of the Devoted Ones

4. Paths of the Lonely Souls

5. Paths of the Independent Worlds

6. Paths of the Recognized Supremes

7. Paths of the Submissive Realists

Additionally, an event will open up for those overqualified to participate in this system event known as the Path of Myriad Choices. This event will allow those able to enter to explore another potential Path they may have followed and seek inspiration from it, or perhaps choose to change their Path entirely. Further information on how to qualify for this event will follow.

All of these events will potentially allow participants to change their current class, profession, or race based on the nature and their experiences during the event.

Voting will begin in: 3:59:59

Jake carefully read it over, and he had to admit... it was not what he expected. He also tried to poke the options a bit, fishing for a response, but it did nothing. In other words, they would have to vote purely based on the names of the seven paths and what they could deduce from them.

The entire congress hall was silent as everyone read the option and description. Jake frowned a bit the more he understood what this was about and how it wasn't directed at him besides that extra event. Jake knew his own Path, and this event seemed to be aimed at those who didn't. It was an event to boost up not only the elite but was for everyone.

He saw Jacob smile out of the corner of his eye, the Sword Saint nod in approval, and many of those at the independent factions also look at it with great interest. Jake was still interested as he wanted to see what that extra event Path of Myriad Choices was all about.

"Interesting proposition by the system, alas a vote in which I will recuse myself from participating, even if I do have my own opinions on the matter. This seems to be for you humans more than anyone else, and no matter the choice, it will benefit other races if they can participate," the King said, being the first to speak.

Jacob chose to take the opportunity to follow up as he spoke. "Rather than argue what is the best choice, can we agree to exclude some initially? I believe there are some that should naturally be disregarded."

"Why? Becoming a planet of heretics seems like a great way to get it blown up," Carmen joked in response.

“Indeed it would be. Hence why, I believe it a natural one to exclude. While we have no details on each option, I also believe excluding Paths of the Lonely Souls just based on the name would be wise. Humans – or beasts for that matter – do better in groups than on their lonesome, and this entire scenario is clearly aimed at the masses and not the powerful individuals. The lonely souls have already found their paths; they do not need this,” Jacob added, getting primarily approving nods.

“The independent factions would also vote to exclude the third, sixth and seventh option for obvious reasons. Devoted Ones reek of recognizing a singular religion or turning our world into a theocracy. Recognized Supremes appear like one where the paths are all about assisting those already at the top, and the seventh option should be excluded by name alone,” Arthur argued, his words rather similar to Jacob’s.

“There is more to devotion than recognition of a god. It can be a devotion to a good life or the community. Even if it is aimed at factions with religious leanings, that does not necessarily mean it is only for them,” Jacob said as a counterargument.

“I don’t remember you being openly ignorant to reality,” Arthur answered as he looked sharply at Jacob. “I am more surprised you didn’t argue for selecting Submissive Realists as that seems to describe the Holy Church more than anything.”

“Submission is a choice that should not be made out of fear or recognizing it as the only realistic option remaining, so naturally, I disagree with that option. I am surprised you didn’t instantly argue that we should choose the Lonely Souls options. You seem to have quite the talent for pushing people away,” Jacob answered with a smile. You know, the kind of smile that wasn’t really a smile.

Jake felt like this pretty much confirmed there was some kind of beef between the two of them. This was a bit surprising as Jake remembered the father and son seemed quite close before the system. Did Arthur just not agree with Jacob taking up the mantle of Augur? Or was Jacob disappointed Arthur directly opposed him?

"Independent Worlds and Unusual Unions," the Sword Saint cut in, stopping the two men from airing their personal grievances of the other. "I do believe there is much positive to be said about independence, but so is there for unions. To call the current situation on Earth an unusual union would not necessarily be an incorrect description. The only question is, are what we are seeing on Earth truly a union or merely a temporary moment of peace? Not that independent Worlds is that much better as we are all but independent forces many of us."

"This vote is clearly as much about what we want Earth to become as what it currently is," Caleb said. "The Court of Shadows have little input on these options, but the prior conversation about the future of Earth is very relevant. Do we want it to be an unusual union of forces or an independent entity capable of functioning regardless of the factions? In many ways, was the goal not to become an independent world through an unusual union, mixing the two a bit?"

"That is one interpretation," Priscilla said. "The Independent Worlds choice can also have an emphasis on the "worlds" part. As it currently exists, Earth is but one world, but there are ways to make several smaller dimensions or even small worlds within the same area. I do find it entirely possible this choice is not about uniting the factions in any way but having each capable of properly isolating themselves from each other."

"Fair enough," Caleb relented with a nod. "In that case, is that truly something we want? It would also inevitably result in only one faction ruling the true space of Earth with little interaction between each force."

"It is a safer choice if that is truly what it is about, but we also have to question what exactly these Paths the system offers will be about and what the majority of the denizens of Earth would resonate with," Jacob reentered the conversation. He was clearly done with the useless bickering with his father, and besides the two throwing sharp looks the other's way, they stayed civil.

Definitely something there, Jake nodded. Now, what was Jake's opinion on this vote? Well, to be perfectly honest, he didn't really care much. He was clearly also the only one who would even be fine with the heretic choice. Speaking of which, it was interesting the system even offered such a path. Then again, it was just one extreme end of the spectrum, and so far, it felt like the system was impartial on the topic.

Miranda also began participating as Jake listened in but ultimately knew this truly didn't concern him. As Jacob had said, this choice was as much about what would resonate with those of Earth, and Jake hadn't even been on the planet for the last couple of months. He would leave again the moment this World Congress ended, assuming where he currently was could even be considered on Earth.

To believe he had any fucking clue what those who couldn't find their Path needed or wanted to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" would be stupid even for him. Jake was privileged and knew his own Path already near-perfectly, and he had his own goals. In nearly all ways, this entire vote had nothing to do with him.

Luckily, it appeared the discussions soon reached an impasse, and it was decided for the factions to spread out and have some more intimate discussions and deal-making. It was also an excuse to have all the space mages become able to group up and discuss space mage stuff and a lot of merchants to meet up. Lillian went with the merchants, and Neil was, of course, a space mage.

Miranda went over to the Sword Saint right away, and Jake considered what his plans were for a moment before he decided to head over to the only other person who looked about as bored as he was: Carmen.

Also, he had noticed her throwing him the occasional glance during the meeting before. She looked like she wanted to talk to him, and as he had nothing better to do, why not?

Jake went up to her and waved. "Long time no see."

"Hey," Carmen greeted in return. "How is Sylphie?"

He should have known. Sylphie had talked about Carmen a few times, calling her the "nice punchy lady," and it seemed like Carmen also liked Sylphie equally.

"She is doing fine. Had some fun doing a dungeon and is otherwise just flying around in the forest and hunting things. That, or she is hanging out with her parents, probably still hunting things for some quality family time," Jake answered with a smile.

"Her parents?" Carmen asked, interested.

Jake realized Carmen truly only knew Sylphie from the Treasure Hunt and seeing how they had the time...

"Oh boy, let me tell you about the time I was attacked and taught how to fly by a random hawk just after getting my wings and said hawk decided to bring me to his and his mate's nest to make a super baby hawk."

The two of them ended up heading for Haven's booth and isolated it as they just chatted while everyone else was working. Jake had considered doing alchemy during this period, but he was currently working on poisons, so he wasn't sure he could attempt to concoct something during the World Congress lest the fumes count as attacking others.

Carmen also shared what she had been up to in recent times. Primarily that she had focused on her profession like so many others and was currently forging her “weapons.”

Jake was a bit confused at what the weaponless fighter meant until she took out a dagger and jammed it down onto her own palm, only to see the blade be deflected, unable to even scratch the skin. “The Path I walk is one where my body becomes my weapon. I am good at punching people, that is all I am good at, and while I could use gloves before to somewhat alleviate damage to my fists, I recently became able to refine them.”

“Wait, how strong can you make them?” Jake inquired.

“Remembering your battle with the Sword Saint at the end of the Treasure Hunt, I am pretty sure I would be able to directly block the blade with my fist once refinement is complete,” she explained with a confident smile.

“How exactly does it work? And... well, can I do it too?”

Yeah, Jake was shameless, so what? Seriously, he had his gloves which became incredibly durable when infused with mana, but the mana expenditure was great and only grew the more powerful a blow he blocked. To passively have his hands be as tough as an actual weapon? Oh boy, he could only imagine his Touch of the Malefic Viper-powered punches.

“Well, probably not. It is tied to my profession and is expensive as fuck. Moreover, it doesn’t work if I use weapons,” she explained, putting a dampener on Jake’s hopes and dreams.

“Well, that’s too bad. Speaking of which, what god is it that blessed you?” Jake finally asked. He didn’t actually know.

“Well, Gudrun. It was first another guy who seemed cool enough, but he quickly said I didn’t really fit his teaching anyway, so instead, I got blessed by Gudrun. She is apparently the wife of the bigshot of Valhal called Valdemar,” Carmen answered. “Gotta be honest, doesn’t feel good to be tossed from god to god like that, but Gudrun has been great so far, even if she is a bit hands-off, and I mainly get advice from C-grades these days through some rituals from my profession.”

“Huh. Gotta say, sure are a lot of Primordials hanging around Earth,” Jake chuckled a bit.

“All your fault, oh mighty Chosen of the evil ancient snake god,” Carmen snickered.

“Hey, it is what it is. He is a friend, and that is that,” he shrugged.

“Sure,” Carmen just shook her head, changing the topic. “Remember when you said you owed me a favor after that thing with Limit Break during the Treasure Hunt... were you serious?”

Jake sure did remember and nodded. “As long as it isn’t anything ludicrous.”

“You are a hunter, right? Do you know how to track people? Not now, but when I am done with my refinement, and you got time.”

"I can do a bit of tracking, but it really depends. I do have a tracking skill, and my Perception is decent enough. Moreover, I am always up for a challenge. Why? What do you need to track?" Jake asked

"Not a what, but who... I wanted to ask your help to track down my family. I think it is about time for a proper reunion," Carmen said with an odd smile that Jake wasn't quite sure what to make of.

Chapter 439 - A Good Chat & Hidden Agendas

Jake knew he wasn't exactly a tracker. He could track a little, and his senses were sharper than ever. With some clues, his tracking skill would allow him to chase mana signatures and other signs, though, of course, there were many who were significantly more qualified. Jacob was probably the best on the planet, but there had to be many more who were far more effective than Jake. Something he felt like he did need to voice.

"While I can track, I am not exactly good at it compared to others. I am sure you can ask some seer or something who is far better at it," Jake said.

It was primarily that she wanted to find her family, which meant it was solely a tracking job. Jake had kind of assumed she needed help tracking some powerful beast or something, but if it was just some humans, she could find far better. Jake had kind of assumed she asked him because fighting strong stuff would be involved.

"I am already on it and have worked with some to boil down the general area. However, it looks like they are on the other side of a large body of water. Based on some space mages from Midtgaard, it is probably around where that guy Arthur and many of the independent factions are located," Carmen explained but still didn't address one point.

"I am still sure you can find better once you get there, and if you wanted assistance getting across this body of water, you could have just asked for that," Jake answered a bit suspiciously.

Carmen just sighed. "Yeah, but I want someone to help who isn't affiliated with Valhal or anything like that. This is purely a personal thing."

Jake finally nodded. "Okay, fine. Do you have any plans on when you want to go and how we are supposed to get there? You know, all the logistics."

"No fucking idea quite yet, but from what I hear, the space mages in a nearby port-city should soon have a circle up and running. Once that works, I can get word to Miranda, and she can contact you about getting to the port? It will be a bit from Haven, but hopefully, the teleportation network will reach there by then, making the journey not too annoying," Carmen answered. "I know you are currently busy elsewhere, but you can return to our universe, right?"

"I can," Jake nodded. "How do you know I am not on Earth currently? And does everyone know?"

"Miranda told me, and no, I don't think others know. Apparently, you are super hard to track. Ah, but don't blame her for telling me. She did it after getting permission from those gods who blessed her. By the way, how does that work? I thought you could only be blessed by one god at a time," Carmen explained, quickly derailing herself into a barely tangentially-related question.

"A mix of god stuff and system-fuckery, I reckon," Jake answered incredibly accurately.

"Makes sense," Carmen nodded, not a hint of sarcasm in her voice. Well, it did make sense as much as any other answer. "We have an agreement then? I will tell Miranda, and then she will send a response back? Don't worry, I already got ways of contacting her. Or, well, she's got ways of contacting me with her weird witchy magic."

“Miranda does have weird witchy magic,” Jake nodded in understanding. He had to admit, he had no fucking clue how any of her skills worked. Even as he began learning a bit about formations and such, he only came to realize her magic was even more complicated and reliant on an entirely different school of thought than the kind of magic Jake wanted to learn.

The two of them kept talking a bit longer about random stuff as Jake learned how Carmen was taught. Apparently, she could set up virtual battlefields of some sort and fight echoes of individuals located pretty much anywhere, even in other universes. The echoes had corresponding magic circles on their end set up by Valhal to facilitate all this, with Carmen essentially being a summoner. These echoes couldn’t actually interact with anything non-simulated outside the battlefield, but it was still an incredibly valuable tool.

Valhal was an organization all about war. Not just the act of fighting but war as a concept, which had also led to Valdemar being called the God of War. Legends spawned from war, the songs of bards, the concept of morale, armies clashing, celebrating after a victory, or dealing with the emotions after a lost battle. All of this was part of what Valhal stood for, and in many ways, they were a truly neutral faction in the multiverse in that they didn’t truly have any enemies.

Because an enemy would mean war, and Valhal had never lost a war. The mere thought of Valhal declaring war on a faction was almost like a scary story one would tell their kids. The tales of the times it had happened where Valdemar had picked up his axe and led what was known as a Warband into battle. Individuals of all grades, hundreds of gods, descending all at once with no regard for their lives, caring for nothing but a good battle and to die with honor.

Other factions were constantly at war. The Holy Church and the Ghostlands – the land of the Risen – were at constant war. Several factions not fans of the Court of Shadows had declared war against the assassins. Jake also learned that the Automata and the Endless Empire were also at war and had been for the last thirty Eras. The Endless Empire was a faction Jake had never heard of before and consisted of some of the most powerful Ectognamorphs in existence, led by a large coalition of powerful Hive Queens. Insect Queens who had ascended to godhood and commanded armies of unprecedented scale. They were, in general, incredibly warlike as they viewed it as a healthy way to constantly thin their herds and grow in power by weeding out the weak.

Yet not even they wanted a war with Valhal.

And if Jake was being honest, he totally understood why. It was a bit similar to why no one wanted conflict with the Order of the Malefic Viper. Most wars only involved the mortals, but if Valhal went to war, they pulled out all the stops and made it a war where one side was annihilated. Meanwhile, Villy would ensure that even if the other side won, it would bring about so much devastation and death upon them it wouldn't be worth it.

The reason for this was simple enough... Villy didn't care about having a controlled war, and Valhal viewed war as something where a side had to win. They still wanted to battle, of course, and members of Valhal were primarily known as incredibly powerful mercenaries who joined the side they agreed with the most in a conflict. Carmen even told Jake it often happened that two members of Valhal found themselves facing each other on a battlefield. The result of that would nearly always be one of them dead and the other one having a toast for the fallen comrade he had just slain.

So yeah, Valhal was a paradise for battle maniacs, and Jake felt like he would have fit in pretty damn well. Carmen also seemed happy with it and had an interesting perspective on fighting former comrades or people from the same faction.

"Fighting is fighting. I used to do boxing, and it was normal to fight friends or former colleagues. I was in quite a small town with only one noteworthy gym, and I often ended up fighting people in tournaments I had trained with and gotten along with before. That didn't mean I would show the slightest restraint in the ring, though. The same is true for the warriors of Valhal... in fact, holding back when you see another member on the opposing side would just be disrespectful. Valdemar allegedly once said that dying in battle is an honorable death, and an honorable death is a good death. A good death means it was a worthy life, and all worthy lives are worth celebrating and remembering."

Jake had once more found himself nodding along. Jake had a lot of rather infantile views on honor in his early days of the system. He remembered burying the guy Nicholas as he had put up a good fight, and he had refused to loot entire beast corpses as he found it disrespectful. His opinion had eventually been refined, and Jake now no longer cared as much about a concept such as honor. He had his own rules of sorts, and while those rules may be considered honorable by some, Jake didn't particularly care.

They did agree on a good death being a worthwhile death. Jake viewed dying to anything else than a good fight as a nightmare. Carmen was like him, also a battle maniac, and as they talked, they both looked back on the fight with the Monarch of Blood fondly, even if Carmen had found the conclusion of it incredibly frustrating.

"By the way, is it fine for us to talk in here? People may start rumors we are plotting an alliance or something," Jake suddenly asked jokingly. "Not that I am complaining. I am sure Miranda will view this as good diplomatic work."

"Nah, who cares. Sven also kept insisting I should get closer to Haven and the old swordsman, so I guess this counts," she shrugged.

"Where is Sven, by the way?" Jake asked. He wasn't at the World Congress, which was a bit weird.

"In a dungeon, I think? He entered with his party a good while ago and has yet to get out. Who knows, maybe they all died," Carmen just shrugged. "Not sure if people can enter the World Congress if they are in a dungeon or if they were just too busy doing other stuff. He is there with a party of five, and he would only bring one of them if he went to the World Congress, so bailing on more than half the party would also be a shitty move. Sven had at least made plans in case he and the others would not be back in time.

"Huh," Jake nodded. "You done the dungeon? Is it any good?"

Yeah, probably not the part he was supposed to bite onto. Jake hadn't found any good dungeons in a while, and he knew his class was probably going to get a bit behind his profession if he kept focusing on alchemy within the Order. So a good dungeon would be a great way to catch up on some levels.

"Eh, I have been in there once but didn't clear it. It seemed okayish. It was a plant dungeon, and most of the enemies were around level 140. It was not that hard, honestly, and I saw nothing that could take down Sven and his party at all, but it was large and annoying to navigate as the entire dungeon seemed to rearrange itself constantly with a lot of ambush predators lurking about," Carmen answered.

"Aight," Jake nodded, not sure if he wanted to even do that dungeon if he could. 140 was way too low for him, though it was possible more powerful foes would appear further in.

"Speaking of challenges... how the hell did you beat that masked monster?" Carmen finally asked.

"Oh man, that is a long story, but to make it short, a bunch of overpowered bullshit items meant to specifically counter him, a lot of luck, me being awesome, and then another massive dose of luck to tie it all together," Jake semi-joked.

"And you are confident in winning again? I will be honest; I don't trust that masked freak for even a second. He may have the King title, but that doesn't make him a good leader. Shit, you are an Earl, and I wouldn't want you leading even a children's football team," Carmen shook her head.

"Hurtful, but yes, I am confident in bringing down the King if he gets out of control," Jake confirmed.

Carmen nodded. "For the record, I am also a Viscount, but that doesn't mean I think for even a second I can lead."

"I guess the primary qualifier for being a noble so far is one's ability to kill stuff," Jake joked.

"Kind of fucked up when you think about it," Carmen noted.

"Sure is."

Greg kept an eye on the booth and noticed that the female leader of Valhal and the Chosen of the Malefic Viper hadn't exited for a long time. He wondered what their meeting was about as he tried to comprehend the web of deceit and planning this Chosen had deployed.

Before the system, Greg had worked as a professional investigator running his own online blog, where he uncovered corruption and government secrets. Some people called him a nutjob, but Greg knew one couldn't trust the masses of sheep who were always blind to the truth and willingly rejected what was right before their eyes.

Many people thought this Lord Thayne was a simple man, but Greg knew differently. The masked man was far from simple and only wished to be perceived as such as he puppeteered the City Leader behind the scenes.

Lord Thayne, if that was truly his real identity, also hid from all kinds of scouting at all times. None of Greg's investigation skills worked, and no divinations or tracking spells had worked when Greg had sought assistance.

Greg had worked in the industry long enough to know that only people who had something to hide would go that far to hide it. It was obvious, and Greg wanted to get to the bottom of it even if it was the last thing he did. His former colleagues and friends all called him paranoid and that he was overthinking things, but could they not connect the dots? All of them led to the same source: the Chosen.

The Augur was the former "boss" of the Chosen. Greg was sure it was backward, but their connection was obvious. The same was true for the influential undead called Casper. They clearly had some kind of relation, and Lord Thayne had influence over him.

Not to get started on the fact that his brother was the leader of the Court of Shadows. The Sword Saint was friendly with him – something Greg theorized was due to the old man also recognizing the threat this man posed to their planet.

Valhal had clearly already fallen under their thumb based on how that woman Carmen had submitted herself and sought him out. He even heard odd rumors that the Chosen had used animals to get closer to her, something that Greg would have found questionable if not for all of the other extreme methods the man – if he was a man – had prepared.

And now... now this Fallen King had suddenly appeared. Finally, he had revealed another of his many hidden cards. A powerful lifeform to function as his puppet to lead the planet into the destiny the Chosen and perhaps even the evil god known as the Malefic Viper desired.

To Greg, the most maddening thing was that no one else could see this. How no one else could put all the data together and reach the same conclusion that the monster known as Lord Thayne was a true

master manipulator. A puppeteer of unholy talent and power who controlled nearly every faction from the shadows.

No... maybe people knew but feared speaking it. Maybe the Chosen was so talented that any who realized or spoke openly were removed from existence. His brother did lead a cult of assassins.

As an investigator, Greg had covered many things throughout his life. Uncovered secrets hidden by the elites. But he had never faced anything as intricate, and as grand as the web of lies and pure manipulation the Chosen had spun. Lord Thayne was no doubt the most cunning individual Greg had ever come across... perhaps the most cunning throughout human history.

It was intimidating.

He had already noticed the fallout and influence this “man” had over others. Greg had noticed that a lot of people had stopped talking to him with complaints that he spoke of nothing but his “mad conspiracy theory,” and while some may write that off as Greg just being annoying to be around, Greg knew better. They feared the knowledge he held and what dangers it could bring them.

But Greg would keep fighting. He would prove the truth to everyone else on Earth... he just hoped that the Chosen wouldn’t realize his grand design before it was too late.

However... first he had to find out what this grand design even was.

Chapter 440 - A Case Of Bad Communication

The hours quickly passed as Jake just sat back and chatted with Carmen. After a while, the two of them went to talk a bit with the old man too, but he was busy being the leader of the Noboru clan and all that. Honestly, Jake wasn’t a big fan of this entire World Congress as there were two votes that didn’t matter

at all to him personally. He was also annoyed at so many people staring at him constantly, including this guy who kept trying to be sneaky about it and even used some weird scouting skills.

Nevertheless, he was still glad he had attended due to the appearance of the King, and he still had a good talk with Carmen, but he sure wouldn't classify it as productive or a good way to spend his time. Once the political maneuvering was coming to an end, Jake gathered with Miranda and Lillian again, with Neil still busy with other space mages, having occupied a booth by themselves while not allowing others to interfere.

"So, what is the expected outcome of the vote? And what should I vote for?" Jake asked Miranda once in their booth, and they had isolated it properly.

"This one is hard. Many want the Independent Worlds, some want the Devoted Ones. Many also want the Unusual Unions, but it is honestly hard to get a feel for the room, and many keep their cards close to their chest. I have a feeling no one can truly know before all the votes are cast," Miranda answered, shaking her head.

"What do you want?"

"Honestly, if I am truthful, the Paths of the Recognized Supremes will probably be best for Haven, considering your presence and just overall what we are going for as a city. We focus on the powerful and the influential, not the masses. Most who want to live in Haven are those who do know their Path already, and those who don't would probably do best by taking advantage of your Records, or maybe even the Records of Arnold or me," Miranda answered.

"I have a feeling not many other factions shared this sentiment," Jake said, shaking his head a bit.

"No, in fact, it was futile to even bring up, so I didn't. The second best would probably be Unusual Unions based on the general interpretation of it, and that is a fine choice for us. It is also a popular one. It may even be the most popular."

"So, we voting for it?" Jake asked

"I believe that would be the wisest," Miranda nodded.

"You talked to the King about it?" Jake then also asked. Hey, a thousand extra votes were always welcome.

"I only heard that he would abstain... Jake, what exactly is your relationship with that... thing?" she asked a bit nervously. "You told me about your Tutorial, and I have put together that was the former King of the Forest, but didn't you kill him? And if you did kill him, how did he come back to life?"

"Remember that Soul Renewal from the Auction event? Well, the King managed to survive by hiding a bit of his soul within my mask that I got as loot from him, and using the Soul Renewal, I then healed that part to fully revive the King, who has now changed from the King of the Forest into the Fallen King. I am pretty sure the name change is due to some Unique Lifeform stuff," Jake explained.

"Wait... why would you go so far to resurrect a Unique Lifeform that you have slain prior?" Miranda said as she looked at Jake critically. "The mere fact the King didn't try to kill you first-thing is already a miracle, and who is to say he won't try and get rid of you subtly now? Moreover, even if he leaves you alone, what exactly do you have to gain besides putting an extremely powerful new contender into play on Earth, that may or may not negatively affect Haven and everyone else?"

All good questions Jake honestly had no answer to. He was silent for a bit before answering.

"I did not know about the nobility title before the resurrection, and as for what I get out of it... well, a good fight for one, and as I still have the mask, I made a gamble it would improve the item. Even though it didn't turn out that way, I don't regret resurrecting him. I don't think he is an enemy, let me just say that, as he can't really kill me or make me too pissed for reasons I won't share," Jake just said.

"It was questionable at best," Miranda just sighed. "You took a massive gamble... wait... the King was resurrected shortly after the Auction, wasn't he?"

"Yeah?" Jake said.

"How long after?"

"Not that long. It was shortly after I left for the Insect Plains I decided to do it. I did think enough to do it outside the city, and away from any settlements in case things went south," Jake explained a bit defensively.

Miranda frowned deeply. "That is about the time the Great Famine arrived... could it have been a response somehow to the King's reawakening? The timing seems too convenient."

"Great Famine?" Jake asked, a bit confused. He hadn't heard of this.

“You know, whenever everyone suddenly began to become gluttonous,” Miranda said, making Jake realize what she was talking about.

Now that he remembered... he had never told anyone he did that. Based on Miranda’s words, he also seriously doubted if he should tell anyone he did. Well... anyone besides Miranda and Lillian. Miranda was the City Leader and blessed by those Verdant Witches, and Lillian was bound by a contract, so it was all good, right? Not that he really wanted to explain it

“I may or may not know how it happened...” Jake said a bit meekly as he explained what had happened as he made Cursed Hunger.

Miranda looked at him surprised in the beginning before her surprised face turned into a frowning one before finally looking rather pissed.

“What the hell were you even thinking?” she eventually blurted out when Jake was about done explaining how he had gotten the curse under control. He didn’t go into details, but Miranda clearly knew enough about curses to know how risky it was.

“I was confident I could make it work... and that even if I fucked up, I could handle the consequences,” Jake defended himself.

“Based on what? Pure ego? Jake, that was not risky; that was just downright moronic. The amount of energy in that curse was not something you could have any reasonable confidence level in handling. And then you even decide to seal away a portion of the curse within your own soul... it is just a matter of time before it awakens some kind of ego or basic instinct if you keep in there,” Miranda scolded him.

Now Jake really didn't want to share Eternal Hunger already had this basic instinct and had taken the form of a chimera within his Truesoul. Though to be fair, that wasn't Jake's fault but the Chimera Weapon he had used as a base to fuse the curse into.

"I know it was risky, but I had my reasons to be confident, okay?" Jake said a bit sternly. "While I will admit I did not know the global effects my crafting session would have and that and that large parts of the crafting process were unintentional, I will not apologize for the outcome."

"What Miranda is trying to say is that your stunt had a negative effect on every single individual and faction on the planet and that if it was discovered you or Haven were in any way involved with it, our diplomatic situation on Earth would become a lot more complicated. Our talks of neutrality would go right out the window as we had effectively just launched unprovoked attacks on every other faction. Intentionally or not," Lillian said. "And to do something so massive and then not inform us of any of that is a shitty thing to do if you expect us to handle Haven. What if someone knew it was you? In fact, does that Risen Casper not know? He asked how you were doing as if a bit worried just now, and considering his proficiency in curses, it wouldn't be surprising he put two and two together. Not to mention how your friend Casper nearly got blamed for what you did."

Jake stood with his mouth open a bit as he took the words in. He wanted to argue but didn't really come up with any good arguments that wouldn't make him come off as either an idiot or an apathetic asshole.

"Jake, I don't care much what you did, but that you didn't at least inform us you would do it, or even just a quick update after the fact. Even if it hadn't helped us, it would have allowed us not to spend time and resources trying to discover the source. A single sentence could have saved everyone from a lot of work and even allowed us to potentially help obscure what had happened if someone came close to finding out. I had an idea it was maybe you behind it, but when you never mentioned it made me reconsider. The only thing you told me back then was that you were "handling it" or something to that effect," Miranda added further.

He felt more and more shitty the further she got. It really felt like he got scolded, and the worst part was that he had fucked up.

The weekly meeting he and Miranda had in the start had stopped all of this from happening. She had always been updated about what he was doing, and Jake had been updated on everything related to Haven. But recently, they had drifted a bit apart, with Jake having so many of his own goals and Jake's presence in Haven no longer being a necessity.

"I fucked up," Jake just recognized. "Sorry... yeah, it just slips my mind. It is no excuse, but I tend to just focus on other things and not even think about informing you unless directly asked or anything like that..."

That they hadn't even talked about the Great Famine properly was an obvious sign of bad communication. Miranda had known a bit, but Jake had been dismissive back then and hadn't wanted to explain as he was busy dealing with the curse. He had just brushed her off to deal with it and then never brought up the topic again, and Miranda had no doubt felt his unwillingness to talk about the topic.

"Would it be possible to reinstate those weekly meetings?" Jake finally asked. "I know it is a bit harder, but if you can contact me with that ritual, can't we set something up? If you need materials to do the ritual, I will naturally cover the cost."

Miranda smiled a bit as she answered: "I think the weekly meetings are a good idea. We can even make them monthly or bi-weekly if we are busy. As for covering costs, those altars from Yalsten more than cover everything."

"We got an agreement then," Jake nodded. "And while we wait for the vote result... let me tell you about the newest drama in the Order of the Malefic Viper."

Jake decided this would be a good time to finally mention one secret he had kept from them both so far: the fact that he had a Bloodline. The entire Order would soon know, and it would be odd for Miranda not to. He would still keep all details a secret, but he did reveal he had one and that it was related to presences. He even used it to explain away a bit of how he controlled the cursed weapon.

She was surprisingly not very surprised. In fact, she said she had already guessed he had something like that, especially as she knew Eron had a Bloodline and that Jake seemed to “get along” well with him, if that was the right phrase.

Overall, Jake realized how dumb it was that they had never actually discussed it before, but it was good to get it all out in the open. She did show quite some schadenfreude when Jake told her about the many people who would be hounding him in the Order but did give him one good piece of advice.

“You need to move the target off your own back, and the fact everyone believes you have a backer is a great way to do that. Just make it clear that you cannot make the decision on your own but need the permission or maybe even command of your mysterious backer. Make it clear that convincing you is a waste of their time and that they should aim to convince the backer instead, as without his involvement, you are unable to choose.”

“But my backer is the Viper...” Jake began as it clicked. “Who no one can discover, and even if they think they find out, they won’t actually believe it possible for the Malefic Viper to be my backer. So I would just put them all on a wild goose chase while everyone else leaves me alone to not further annoy me.”

“Which will at the very least buy you some time until they find out your backer is too hard to find, begin to believe you somehow never had one, or do realize it is the Viper, in which case I am sure you have progressed enough to handle that. I am certain it will leak at some point either way,” Miranda said.

Man, those meetings were going to be a good thing. Jake wanted to ask her about Meira too but was interrupted as the system said they only had a minute left to vote.

“Unusual Unions?” he quickly asked.

Miranda nodded as Jake placed all his votes on it. A minute swiftly passed as the second and only “real” vote of the Second World Congress ended.

The vote for Paths has concluded!

With 32% of the total votes, the chosen System Event is the Paths of the Unusual Unions.

The event will begin in 1 month (30 days), and all eligible participants will be invited at that time. Additional information will follow.

It was short and simple with nothing concrete. A bit like the Treasure Hunt. It seemed that the votes had been damn tight, with the winner only taking 32%. It was clear many factions had tried to go for something else. The overall percentage of actual votes probably also went down due to the King abstaining. Either way, this was not an event Jake would participate in, but the next one sure was.

System Announcement

Quest Received: The Call of the Exalted Prima

As the world progresses, the Prima Watcher of Earth has been observing. Soon the Seat of the Exalted Prima shall appear on Earth and invite in all those who have managed to form keys to allow their entry. Anyone entering the Seat of the Exalted Prima can participate in the Path of Myriad Choices event, as well as gain access to the other benefits offered within the Seat of the Exalted Prima.

However, beware, for the Seat holds dangers that the current warriors of Earth may not be ready to face yet. Should they unleash this danger and come out victorious, it shall reward the entire planet, while should you fail, it may fall to ruin.

The Seat of the Exalted Prima will appear on Earth in three months (90 days). Be prepared.

Objective: Obtain a Key of the Exalted Prima by combining three Key Fragments of the Exalted Prima.

Current progress: 2/3 Key Fragments of the Exalted Prima

Jake read it over and only thought for a moment before he pulled out two small items he hadn't thought about for a very long time.

[Key Fragment of the Exalted Prima (Unique)] – A key fragment to the Seat of the Exalted Prima. Collect three fragments to form the Key of the Exalted Prima to gain access.

Well then, I guess Prima hunting season just started.

