

Hunter 441

Chapter 441 - The Right Path

"Do you have any of those keys?" Miranda asked Jake first thing after she had also read the message. It appeared she had gotten the quest too.

"Nope, but I got two fragments, so I think I can get one more quite easily," Jake answered. "But hey, we got the vote we wanted. Well, kind of wanted."

"It is indeed one of the better options, though, to be fair, most would be good options," Miranda nodded approvingly.

"Speaking of options," Jake said as he removed the isolation around their booth to hear all the discussion going around in the hall.

"This is a blatant attempt at forced integration!" someone yelled.

"It says Unusual Unions, not Forced Integrations. A union takes at least two willing parties to function," another guy yelled.

"Mere semantics. Unions can be forced as much as they can be voluntary, and for a union to function, the parties need some level of equality!" the first guy repeated.

“Then work on getting good enough to be recognized as at least worth looking at and stop being shit?” Carmen suddenly joined the discussion.

Jake couldn't help but smirk at the bickering going on. People unsatisfied with the vote appeared to be aplenty, but that only made sense considering the low percentage that the winning choice had. He didn't really bother listening in much, as he noted there was an hour till the Second World Congress would end.

Ten or so minutes more passed with senseless bickering and useless complaining until, finally, the conversation switched a bit towards the quest. It was a quest that it appeared far from everyone had gotten. In fact, it looked like the vast majority of cities had several, if not all members, not receiving the quest based on their confused responses.

As they talked, Jake and a few others made eye contact as they gathered. They had an hour, and the quest contained things that pertained to them all collectively. They decided to gather on the platform of Sanctdomo, and Jake saw that even the Fallen King decided to float down from his mighty booth and join the lower rungs of nobility.

Jake, Jacob, together with Bertram, Fallen King, Carmen, Sword Saint, Casper, and even Eron came together to discuss it. It was the group that had also faced the Monarch of Blood, plus Jacob. Eron looked a bit out of place, too, as he stood as far from the Fallen King as he possibly could, something they all noticed.

“Relax, human, I do not seek to end your life despite your past transgression of overstepping your boundaries,” the Fallen King said to Eron, the man freezing up a little. That is when Jake understood why Eron was afraid of the Fallen King. It was the same reason the man didn't want to mess with Sultan... they countered him. The King more than anyone else.

The Fallen King could kill him. Permanently. Jake had theorized Eron more or less had an infinite health pool, but even an infinite health pool wouldn't matter if you had your soul crushed. It was the difference between someone slowly draining the water from a jug and someone just smashing the jug altogether. The King could attack the container of health while everyone else only attacked the inside.

"I apologize for past misunderstandings," Eron said as he bowed. "I misread the situation and allowed curiosity to get the better of me, and for that, I seek your forgiveness."

Jake felt like the apology was a bit out of character. Like it was practiced somehow. However, it appeared the King truly didn't care as he waved his ivory claw dismissively.

"An action done cannot be retracted, only acknowledged as misguided or wrong. I accept your apology and wish not to dwell on it further than is necessary," the King dismissed him outright as the group could finally move on to the real topic at hand.

"So, let's do a tally. How many keys or fragments do you all have?" Carmen asked the group. "I got two fragments."

"One fragment," Bertram said. "Others in Sanctdomo or the Church may have more. We will do a survey when we return."

"Zero fragments or keys," Eron said with a tone making it clear he had never cared about collecting them.

"One key, two fragments," the Sword Saint answered. "I know others in the clan may have a fragment or two more."

“Two fragments,” Jake answered, feeling a bit embarrassed answering after the Sword Saint flexed on all of them.

“One key, zero fragments,” the King said, making Jake feel even worse. The damn Unique Liveform had gathered more than Jake had in a few months. Damn.

“A single fragment,” Caleb said, making him a little happy his little brother hadn’t beat him.

“In all cases, it looks like most of us, if not all, are going to attend this event,” the Sword Saint said with a smile. “Assuming a few people here can scrounge together the fragments.”

The last part was said primarily towards Jake for some reason despite others having less than him.

“I am just wondering,” Jacob said, “how many people will each key give access to? Only one seems unrealistic, and an entire city would also be too much.”

“Maybe just a party of five? Like a dungeon?” Carmen asked.

“Potentially,” Jacob nodded. “However, even that would be low unless this event is truly aimed at the elite and the elite only. Additionally, these creatures with Prima in their name are not that easy to find, but I believe it will be possible to locate quite a few.”

That is when Jake realized something. While he had confidence in killing Primas, he still needed to find them. Meanwhile, he had a living cheat in front of him when it came to finding stuff. Something he clearly knew.

"I shall focus my efforts on locating these Primas and ensure that we can get as many keys as possible in the next three months," Jacob smiled. "For all of us. The vote was for us to become an Unusual Union, was it not?"

"And I assume you are doing this out of the kindness of your heart?" Caleb asked with a wry smile.

"Now, while there may be much kindness in my actions, using my divination abilities does not come cheap for me. I simply cannot justify sacrificing for others and burdening my faction without proper cause," Jacob said, returning the smile in kind.

"Man, you remind me of those damn soothsayers on the streets looking for naïve tourists," Carmen commented.

"Except my abilities are real," Jacob answered. "We can discuss potential partnerships for any who wishes to enter one. I will be in Sanctdomo waiting."

"Sure, that sounds like a good idea; let me just enter a city that literally burns me to be within," Casper commented sarcastically.

That turned the mood a bit awkward as Jake learned Risen got burned by entering a holy city. It was almost like those old tropes. "Better avoid holy water," Jake joked.

"Well, yeah, holy affinity liquid does sound an idiotic thing to touch," Casper said with a deadpan face.

"Anyway, it's been nice seeing you all again," Carmen said as she turned to the Fallen King. "Besides maybe you, as I am still not sure if you are some evil entity who plans to lead the world into ruin."

"I believe such would be meaningless, and I would face all those gathered here, something which I have no interest in doing nor believe is a wise choice. Not that more than the hunter is needed," the King answered, not properly getting Carmen was semi-joking.

"Yeah, if he gets out of line, I got this," Jake answered as he gave a thumbs up. "His weakness is so obvious you will all kick yourselves for not realizing it earlier."

"Overwhelming power?" Casper asked.

"That would work," Jake approved.

The mood after that was a bit more relaxed as Carmen left with the former King of the Forest disappearing soon after. Eron left hastily, too, as he still seemed uncomfortable after spending time around the King. Caleb and the Sword Saint also bailed as they had some stuff to attend to, leaving only Jake, Bertram, Jacob, and Casper.

That is when Jacob did something Jake had not seen coming.

“Casper, the Holy Church is going to advocate for the expulsion of the Risen from Earth and not allow them into any kind of unions. It may result in an outright attack with the goal of pushing you off the planet or annihilating you outright,” Jacob said when it was only the four of them.

“Huh?” Casper said, a bit surprised.

“The Holy Pantheon is determined. They place a lot of importance on Earth due to the presence of so many powerful factions here. The Court of Shadows, Valhal, the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, someone with a Divine Blessing given by Stormild, another by Aeon, and of course a Transcendent... now also a Unique Lifeform. To give up the planet would be moronic. The Church can accept the presence of all these, but the Risen are the mortal enemies of the Church, and co-existence is not acceptable to the leadership at all,” Jacob explained.

Jake also stood surprised as Jacob just said a lot of things he had not expected to come out of the Augur and leader of the Holy Church on Earth.

“Why are you...?” Casper asked, equally confused.

“Within a system event such as this, we are entirely cut off from the rest of the multiverse. There are no observers, and they have no control over us, so I need to say it here where we can speak truly freely. You need to be prepared, Casper. And while I am the leader of the Holy Church on Earth, I am not the leader of the faction. My protests will do nothing but make me lose influence, and it may even result in losing my position,” Jacob answered.

“Still doesn’t answer why you are telling me all this to begin with,” Casper frowned.

“Because I’m not a complete asshole, and even with my position in the Church, I don’t need to agree with everything that is happening. Publicly I will need to be against the Risen and even lead a campaign against them, but privately I honestly don’t care. In fact, if I actively helped to destroy a friend, that would go directly against my Path,” Jacob sighed. “Casper, you may now be Risen, but you are still a friend and the same lazy employee who spent more time complaining about being unable to get a good date than actually working.”

“Now that is just harsh...”

“You once told me you liked hanging out with Jake because he couldn’t get a girl either,” Jacob continued.

“Wait, what?” Jake blurted out.

“It wasn’t like that! You know I just liked hanging out with someone who didn’t always go on and on about their perfect relationships,” Casper said, a bit embarrassed.

“Anyway, Casper, I just wanted to warn you. Be ready, for something will come. The Church will likely order assassins soon to go after you and other influential people, spread more propaganda against you, and try to insert people into your cities to cause civil unrest. In fact, many are already in your cities. Once the universe opens up more and people can be brought here, forces will likely descend. Even if it isn’t possible to bring outside help, the forces of the Holy Church grow every day,” Jacob explained further.

“Will the Church really go to war?” Jake asked. “Don’t they fear the consequences?”

“There will be a justification. Perhaps claims they are killing and forcing people to become undead. That they murder the living to fuel themselves. Essentially slander to make the living side against them. At the same time, they assume you and others will stay out of it as the Malefic One never tended to get involved in other conflicts. He isn’t involved in the one that is currently going on. As for Valhal and the Court of Shadows, it is entirely possible they will be hired. For Valhal, we just need to hire individuals as mercenaries, and the upper echelon of the Church may negotiate with the Court of Shadows and force your brother to side with us.”

Casper looked grave for a moment as he sighed. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

Jacob nodded. “Just take care of yourself. Please don’t spread anything about our talk. Needless to say, this is not approved by the Church in any way and may even be considered treacherous.”

The last part was also partly directed at Jake, and he, of course, nodded. Casper also nodded as he muttered: “Well... I guess I need to speed up that project a bit.”

William sat in meditation atop the block of metal as he slowly absorbed the energy within. He was thrown out of meditation and lost his focus when the system message suddenly appeared and informed him that he had just received a quest.

“Master?” he asked as he felt the presence of Eversmile descend upon his mind. It felt like his head was on fire from the pressure, but he resisted and gritted his teeth as his Master spoke.

“Such an event is not right for you. Seeing a second potential Path will only confuse you and risk making you stray from your current one. The right one. I have said it before, but all these system events are nothing more than distractions that will ruin you down the line. Just keep walking the Path paved before you, and you will find what you seek, my dear disciple.”

William felt the presence disappear again as he breathed out in relief. He tasted a bit of blood in his mouth, and his eyes were red from the stress. Talking with his Master was no easy feat but a necessary one. His Master always gave him advice on what was best for him and had led him towards several opportunities already. Nevermore was just one of many, and when he had stood before the Judge from the Court of Shadows and been superior, it had proven his Path was the correct one.

He still didn't know exactly what his Path was or where it would lead him. However, he had not been led astray so far, and Kimmie and little Seo had also been able to live peaceful lives in a small city he had claimed.

Not that there weren't setbacks. Recently the of the Unique Lifeform from their Tutorial had appeared and was close to the area William usually worked in, creating some issues. The monster had dominated a huge region, far larger than he believed humanity knew, and the monsters William had gotten close to were now doubtful if they should also join this Fallen King. While this may be a wrench in the works, William also believed it an opportunity. He and this Unique Lifeform had a shared enemy, after all.

Stretching a bit, he decided to get up from the slab of metal. He needed a few more skill upgrades and to make some more preparations before he was ready to make the final push to C-grade. He had already made so many preparations, and he would have nothing get in his way. Because while William knew little of what Master wanted, he did know that he and Master had one shared goal:

To overcome the karmic curse laid upon William by the one who had slain him.

Chapter 442 - Golden Opportunities Only A Moron Would Waste

Jake spent the rest of the World Congress checking in with the Sword Saint to tell him that Reika was doing fine at the Order and just chatted with a few people. He had expected Arthur to talk to him at some point, but it never happened. Jacob's dad had approached nearly every other faction but had stayed clear of Haven for some reason.

The last five minutes were spent chatting with Miranda as they set up a time for the next meeting. They had to plan it around Jake's lessons and also Miranda's meetings and work. Scheduling was hard work.

As Jake just waited to be transported out, he mentally went over his near-future plans. Participating in the Path of Myriad Choices event was going to happen, so he needed another fragment before that. He also had a current list of classes in the Order he wanted to finish before heading back to Earth.

On that subject, he had to figure out how easy it was to travel back and forth from Earth and the Order, so he would have to chat with Villy about that. As things were currently, he couldn't leave far from Haven if he wanted to be able to return to the Order on short notice, and he naturally couldn't attend classes if back on Earth or make use of other benefits by Order offered. Those teleportation gates in the Order were fancy but not that fancy to work cross-universe.

Hopefully, the Viper would have some convenient method to allow Jake easy travel. His ideal situation would be to be able to both attend lessons he wanted and go to Earth whenever while also being able to leave Haven to head out and hunt. He even had another plan.

Carmen had asked him to help her track down some family members, and while he did want to help, he had little confidence. So... wasn't Prima hunting a good opportunity? He could use the hunting trip to improve his tracking skill and get another Prima under his belt to complete the key. Win-win right there.

With those thoughts, Jake said his temporary goodbyes to Miranda and Lillian. Neil had just been gone and holed up with other space mages with no one daring to interrupt their work.

Thus the World Congress ended, and Jake's vision flashed for a moment as he found himself back on the couch in the living room of the mansion.

"Eik!" he heard a weird yelp as he saw Meira sitting right beside him, having jumped away the moment he teleported back in.

She looked at him in fright before she finally calmed a bit down and got off the couch. "Sir, I did not know you were returning so soon!"

"Pretty sure nobody knew how long it would be," Jake shrugged. To be fair, he had told Meira he would probably be gone for around ten hours as that was how long the First World Congress had taken, so he was back four hours early.

As for why she was sitting on the couch? He wasn't sure. She usually resided in her own residence when preparing for lessons or meditating, and it wasn't like she had any work in the main mansions. Things like cleaning weren't a thing in magical mansions.

"But it is good you are here. Things are ramping up a bit back on Earth, and I will need to return pretty soon, so I will be around less than before," Jake said. "I still plan on attending some of the lessons, but it will be less. I just need to find a good way to travel back and forth first."

Meira seemed a bit disappointed but didn't voice her thoughts. "I shall make sure the mansion and the gardens remain in perfect condition so Sir can return at any time without discomfort."

It was a nice roundabout way for her to say that he should keep coming to the mansion. She also seemed to have one more thought. "Shall I also end my currently planned lessons?"

"No, of course not," Jake said, shaking his head. "Keep going as before; you have full access. Keep learning and improving as much as you can, okay? Don't worry; I will be sure to check up on you once in a while, and you are also to select new lessons yourself if you run out."

That is one thing Jake had learned... Meira borderline needed him to check up on her. It wasn't that she wouldn't do any work if he didn't, but that she seemed to have some odd mindset where if Jake didn't see and recognize her results, she didn't make any progress.

Meira nodded enthusiastically at his words as Jake dismissed her with a look they both knew: he was about to talk to Villy, and she didn't want to be anywhere near when that happened due to the god's tendency to descend with mildly alcoholic beverages.

Once she was gone, Jake opened his mouth. "Hey Vil-"

"Sup," a god popped into existence right in front of him, sitting on another couch - two glasses filled with some weird blue liquid already on the coffee table between them.

"Done the World Congress," Jake said casually as he gave Villy a quick breakdown of what had happened. How the King had appeared, the vote for no World Leader, and then the second vote and the quest he received right after.

Villy silently listened and nodded along here and there. When Jake finished, the Viper made his thoughts known after getting a quick sip of the drink, Jake mimicking his actions. It tasted a bit of strawberry despite the blue color.

“That no World Leader was elected makes sense, as it would be hard for your planet to select a single uniting leader without a huge war first,” Villy said.

“Just to make sure, you aren’t advocating I should take up the position?” Jake asked.

“No, quite the opposite. Doing so would be a waste of time and likely set you down a path where nobility holds a great impact. You will be required to participate in certain things, and while that isn’t an issue currently, it would just be an annoyance down the line. You would waste a lot of time on things I know you have no interest in, and for what? To lead a small planet? Even if the influence expands and you take over the galaxy, so what? Become a god, and you can waltz into most empires, kill a god or two, and bam, you own a country larger than the budding kingdom on Earth instantly,” Villy shared his thoughts.

“Well, I still kind of care about the planet and have friends and family there,” Jake said. “Abandoning them outright is not an option.”

“So, just make that known and ensure whoever is in power knows you have that viewpoint and that all hell will break loose if they go after anyone close to you. If push comes to shove, evacuate those you care about. Bring them here or somewhere else of your choosing if the hotly contested territory of Earth isn’t worth the real estate. You could then even choose to make Earth an example of what happens when someone makes you an enemy. Quite a common tactic that one,” the god explained. “Or, you know, just put someone loyal or at least not antagonistic in charge.”

“Sounds like you are suggesting I put in Miranda or the Fallen King,” Jake said.

“Or most others, honestly,” Villy said. “Not many on Earth view you as an enemy, and the only problem is that many of your friends and family belong to factions that are not exactly on friendly terms. But it is up to you; I have no skin in the game.”

“Yeah. I guess I will figure it out,” Jake nodded. “So, the system event?”

Villy turned a bit more serious. “This is not a normal event; just know that. The ability to change one’s path is not at all simple, and especially the opportunity to experience a secondary one is once-in-a-lifetime. Needless to say, I would heavily advise you to do it; only a moron wouldn’t. However, I am also very interested in this Seat of the Exalted Prima.”

“How so?” Jake asked. He had just assumed it was some place on Earth that would appear as part of the system event. Maybe some kind of hidden world like Yalsten?

“The Primas existed on Earth from the start. A Watcher of Earth... this feels like part of something bigger. Moreover, I have heard some rumors that other factions have investigated it already and come up short. What little they have found points to this Exalted Prima not being something simple at all, and these Seats of the Exalted Prima are appearing on every planet with sufficient life across your entire universe,” Villy explained.

“Is that abnormal? I would reckon system events appear for everyone.”

“It is just the entire way it is designed,” the Viper shook his head. “A Seat of something is often only the first stage. An introduction of what is to come.”

"You sound like you have an idea what it may be all about?" Jake asked.

"I do, but I won't share more than I already have. Just focus on the events as represented and participate in all those you can. All of these system events are golden opportunities to a new universe, and missing even a single one is a huge waste," Villy said.

"I have been thinking," Jake began, "how hard are titles to obtain? I got one from the Tutorial and one from the Treasure Hunt, all giving percentage stat-increases, so won't someone who has done dozens of these events just be downright overpowered for their level?"

"They would be," the Viper agreed as he grinned. "Such as the Chosen sitting right in front of me. You underestimate how hard titles are to obtain. Every single chance to get one is an unmissable event. This even ignores the massive amount of Records associated with every title gained from these events."

"How rare are system events outside of system integrations?"

"Rare, but it, of course, varies. Some are small, some are large, some can be attended at all times, some are time-limited, but most are once-in-forever. Many titles do exist that just give minor benefits with no percentage increases, but perhaps a few stats or other small bonuses. Some titles are gained by everyone, such as the evolution titles and the dungeon-related ones," the snake god said. "Not that it matters much. As you are right now, you are well ahead of the curve, and if you just keep doing as you are right now, you will stay ahead."

"I do feel like my level has stagnated a little, though," Jake admitted. "Many people at the World Congress were catching up."

It was the truth. Especially someone like the King. Jake and the King had been at the same level only a few months ago, but now the Unique Lifeform had him beaten badly. Jake knew the reasons why, as he was shoring up weaknesses and “solidifying his fundamentals,” as people kept saying, but it still felt bad.

“You haven’t stagnated. Trust me, stagnation is when you stop gaining levels at all, or it becomes difficult and takes a long-ass time for every one of them. Level-up rates also vary. You will come to experience that as you shore up your weaknesses and shortcomings, the levels will come to you faster and easier, and you won’t hit a wall. Many of those who rush their levels will hit a wall or end up taking a worse evolution.”

“So, you are saying the Fallen King will be in trouble?” Jake asked a bit teasingly.

“Maybe,” Villy said, fully serious. “Even a Unique Lifeforms will reach walls and have to overcome challenges. Every evolution is difficult for them, and if they fail to live up to expectations, they will be stuck in their current grades forever. No one has an easy path to godhood; all need to struggle.”

Jake sighed. “Guess I do feel a bit better now.”

“Ah, but I would advise you to begin to get some levels under your belt. You are so far off stagnation as you are right now that it isn’t a worry. While it is true that rushing might bite you in the ass, that will only happen to you if you overdo it. So I think it is time for you to make a push in levels. Meanwhile, I will work on a better solution for when you go to Earth and back here,” the Viper said. Jake didn’t even have to ask. He had planned on asking for a better teleportation solution, but the Viper clearly inferred this from the talk before.

“One that can work outside of Haven?” Jake asked.

“Well, that is the plan. Your little friend I blessed will need to help, though. I still need that monument as a beacon, so I guess it is time to put him to work again,” Villy said with a smirk.

“Wait, what has Chris even been doing all this time?”

“Eh, a bit of maintenance work, I guess? I don’t really bother with him,” the Viper shrugged. “Jake, after my return, I gave out blessings in the millions. I don’t keep track of every minor insignificant character.”

“No, I am just saying, the guy was lost, and you put him on a Path. Only feels right to take some responsibility,” Jake argued.

“Then bring him to the Order once he is done with his tasks on Earth,” Villy just shrugged again. “Here, he can find plenty of things to do. He still needs to remain in your little city for now, but in the future, just bring him along.”

“Alright,” Jake agreed. Originally he didn’t want to bring Chris as he went to do alchemy, but by now, he realized it wouldn’t matter. Even as a Builder, Chris could easily find his place in the Order. “Now, with all of that settled, I guess it is time to get some alchemy done.”

Jake only had lessons for the next week. After that, he hadn’t booked more as he had predicted the World Congress would lead to some changes. Even the ones the rest of this week, he didn’t really need to attend. There were so many lessons that it really didn’t matter when Jake took them or even if he delayed. He also had infinite Academy Credits, so he didn’t care about missing stuff.

“Just one piece of advice,” Villy said. “Pay a visit to the Nalkar House.”

“The vampires?” Jake asked as he remembered. “The High-tier Token.”

He instantly took it out as the Viper nodded.

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

“If you are going to do a leveling push, you need materials. You obtained that token yourself, so go use that to exchange it with the Nalkar House. Trust me, they will be more than happy to,” Villy explained as he made a slightly mischievous smile.

Jake suddenly remembered the original plan to use this token when he originally entered the academy as a cover of sorts. It turned out that was utterly unnecessary due to the plans the Viper made and how the Order worked. Jake had just been swept up by everything and completely forgotten it. Reika had obviously forgotten too, making him feel a bit better about it.

“Well, then I guess it is time to visit a vampire house.”

Chapter 443 - Vampire Visit

Ah, vampires. If any race had been truly marginalized and suppressed throughout the history of the multiverse, it was them. The Risen and Holy Church both hated them, and most humans, elves, and other humanoids also weren't fans due to the racial skills they possessed.

For a good reason too. Vampires had the ability to drain the life force of others. In fact, they had to do this due to a massive drawback associated with their race: the lack of natural regeneration.

Pretty much all other races could live without any kind of sustenance until they died of age after reaching a certain grade. You could put Jake in a box, and he would keep living until he ran out of lifespan. If you took the same box and put a vampire in it, the vampire would eventually die due to starvation simply due to passive energy expenditure. They did have some racial skills to alleviate this drawback, such as the Eternal Slumber skill, but it wasn't perfect, and there were many times Eternal Slumber truly did turn out to be an eternal rest.

Now, the usual way to drain life force for a vampire was through drinking blood. It was easy and straightforward, but it had the issue of harming the victim that was used as food quite a lot and could easily result in a casualty. Even if the target didn't die, they would lose resources, and continued exposure to vampires would result in a temporary reduction in stats and prolonged periods of weakness. It was like Jake overdrawing his own body with Arcane Awakening except far worse, and often times or extremely skilled and specialized healers were required to fix the ailment.

Jake had already learned all of this during his time in Yalsten, and he had now learned even more by reading a few basic tomes on vampires that were already present in his library. He had even called Meira, who had given him quite the negative input if he said so himself.

"Vampires are always part of powerful families and really ward their legacies and power. They also buy a lot of slaves to use as food and simply for pleasure. The most positive outcome for a slave sent to a vampire house is the vampires liking the taste of their blood and deciding to use them for crafting blood potions. Well, they would also get really lucky and one day become a vampire themselves... if that is even considered a better fate."

So, yeah, Meira wasn't a fan. Yet she didn't seem alarmed or surprised when Jake said he would go and visit the Nalkar House. Jake learned the reason for this was quite simple: there was no way they would ever dare drink a single drop of his blood. No, not because he was blessed by the Viper or had a backer or something like that, but because drinking his blood would be what in the vampire world was known as a very bad time.

You see, it turned out that drinking from someone with highly toxic blood courtesy of Blood of the Malefic Viper wasn't the most pleasant experience. It involved a lot of corroded flesh and overall just made the entire action futile as the vampire would lose more blood energy than they would gain.

The exact polar opposite of someone like Jake were slaves or servants bred to be used as food. Viewed as livestock or pets, these people were trained and nurtured all their lives to be valuable blood banks. It was somehow a recognized Path of the system, and they even had skills and professions focused on providing better and more tasty blood while not being susceptible to the weakness after a vampire used them.

For classes, they tended to still have one focused on combat, but nearly always of the physical variety for better stats-distributions. These were also specialized and worked in synergy with vampires, making them potential soldiers.

The classification for these people was Blood Thrall for the weaker and less recognized ones. Blood Servant was then used for the more qualified and influential non-vampires, and finally, the Blood Disciples. Blood Disciples were those who had the potential of joining the main family and becoming vampires themselves.

Jake had decided to read a bit more up on modern vampirism as he didn't wanna go in with knowledge many Eras old from Yalsten. In fact, it was a bit funny to read the books from Yalsten and compare them with more modern ones. One difference was that in Yalsten, merely consuming health potions and

potions made with herbs was considered adequate to regenerate blood energy, but in modern times, consuming such potions was only done in combat.

The Path of vampirism was inherently tied to the consumption of blood and life, so to try and substitute it was to stray from that Path. Short-term, it didn't matter, but long term, the effects on Records became significant. Maybe some vampires in Yalsten knew this, as they still kept live humanoids to drink from, but Jake knew only the elite were able to indulge in this. Keeping the fact that using health potions was harmful in the long run secret made sense if the supply was limited and to quell dissent.

Now, needless to say, Jake wasn't a big fan of how vampires did things. He could totally understand why many races and factions distrusted or were outright antagonistic towards a race that literally required the subjugation and consumption of other humanoid races. The worst part was that it had to be humanoid. Beast blood and such only worked for vampiric beasts, and often the best blood was the blood of the race you had transformed from. Human-turned-vampire would do best drinking from a human, and so on and so forth.

At the same time, Jake also saw the vampires take some level of responsibility. One big thing was how few there were, even with their ability to transform others. The Risen more or less had an open-door policy for any living who wanted to become a Risen, but for vampires, it was far different. You had to be part of a family or be hunted down and slain, as they did not want rogue vampires out there. They cared a lot for lineage, and the only way for an outsider to become a vampire was to join the family as a powerful expert deemed worthy or to be a Blood Thrall that managed to climb to Blood Disciple and then be gifted vampirism.

This did result in the average vampire being far more powerful than most other humanoid races, but it also meant they were more restrained and few in number. They were careful and wanted to avoid vampires causing trouble. The vampire families associated with the Order of the Malefic Viper were also incredibly loyal, not a single family having left. Ever.

So, yeah, to conclude, the vampires were truly a mixed bag of evil nature, loyalty, and odd social dynamics where family was everything. That entire thing where only the talented could become

vampires also led to every natural-born vampire being the child of talented individuals. The weakest vampires were born at D-grade, the majority in C-grade, and the Nalkar House, as an example, had four S-grades and dozens of A-grades currently alive. This did not sound like a lot for a “faction,” but one had to remember this was merely a faction connected to the Order and did not contain all Nalkar vampires that existed. They were also just one of six houses.

Anyway, their strength meant they had resources, and Jake needed resources. As he researched them, he also concluded that him going there and receiving benefits would help obscure who his backer was, maybe even making some factions assume the Nalkar House or a member from there backed him.

The way of getting there also wasn't as simple as merely taking a teleportation gate. Jake had to put in a request to be able to enter their area as it was always sealed off, which had given him even more time to consider his approach once he got there.

It had only taken him half a day to hear back and get a positive affirmation that he could come, which also unlocked his token and allowed him to teleport to them. He got no other information besides an approval, and the second he got it, Jake headed off.

He didn't wear his fancy party clothes but stayed in his good old combat outfit. Jake didn't think he would get into a fight, but he wanted to be in what he felt most comfortable with.

Jake used the token on the teleportation wall in his mansion, and after a brief goodbye to Meira, he stepped through, finding himself in an entirely new area. Jake stepped out of a large rectangular monument in the middle of what looked like a city square as he instantly felt hundreds of eyes land upon him.

Through his sphere, he spotted dozens of individuals staring at the newcomer. All of them were either elves, humans, a few beastkin, and some mixed races. Compared to everywhere else in the Order, there was a distinct lack of any scalekin. No vampires either.

All of the people around him looked relatively normal, and the entire area seemed like the outer area of a large medieval city. The only thing really distinguishing this place from anywhere else was the oddly familiar sky. It was red, and something that looked like the Blood Moon the Monarch of Blood had summoned using the divine artifact hung in the sky above.

Before Jake had any time to figure out where to go now, a dark red swirl appeared in front of Jake as a humanoid form condensed from mist. It was a young man that looked about Jake's own age with black hair and one of those slightly androgynous yet also often considered handsome faces. However, the most striking feature was the two red eyes that met Jake.

[Vampire – lvl ???]

It was undoubtedly a C-grade, and Jake had a feeling that he was not a weak one either. The vampire looked at Jake briefly before smiling, revealing his fangs. "Welcome to our humble abode, Hunter. I am Alcor, and I am to act as guide without you becoming too uncomfortable."

The moment the vampire had appeared, Jake felt all the people observing back away while bowing deeply. The vampire Alcor didn't even recognize their existence but just looked at Jake. The vampire also let his aura really go off, as if trying to assess Jake.

"I would sure hope for a pleasant stay," Jake smiled in response, not getting intimidated.

“Then it seems my job will be easier. Now follow me; the Patriarch is ready to see you,” Alcor said as he opened his hand to reveal a rune of blood that then conjured a frame of red mist, where the center of the frame took on a mirror-like surface before it condensed into a gate.

Jake looked at the spooky-looking mirror portal for a moment before stepping through. He felt no sense of danger from it, and quite frankly, the C-grade wouldn’t need to use weird tricks if he wanted to kill Jake.

The other side of the portal revealed a giant, fully furnished hall, and Jake instantly felt dozens of auras far more powerful than himself. At least twenty C-grades, and one that was far above anyone else present. Below a god... but not by far.

Jake turned and looked at the figure, who gave off an aura that seemed to almost tinge the very atmosphere around him red.

He looked a lot like Alcor but was middle-aged and wore an old-timey suit. He had a well-kept beard and the same deep red eyes. The vampire was currently sitting on a large lounge chair with two barely-dressed women standing at his side – an elf and a human, both C-grade.

“Hunter... what a peculiar name, but not one chosen out of pure hubris, I believe,” the vampire said in a deep tone as he got up and began walking towards Jake. “All wish to be the hunter in any situation, but never the prey. And as you stand here, I come to believe that you do indeed adopt this trait, at least in concept. Immune to presences of those stronger... unwilling to recognize himself potentially a prey before a predator. You are a hunter indeed, with all the bravado that comes with it, young Bloodline Patriarch.”

Jake looked at the vampire, who stopped right in front of him. He was a good head taller than Jake and looked down at him, as he too was feeling Jake out, just as his junior had done mere minutes ago.

"You seem to have done your research," Jake said, as he clearly didn't need to explain who he was. When he had sent his message to the Nalkar House, he had only informed them that he had obtained an old item related to their lineage and the Order. He had not gone into any specific details, but it was evident that they had looked into him before inviting him over.

"I do appreciate the luck involved in me living through the phase of a new integration. Always such an exciting time bringing about change like never before. The Order itself has changed more than thought possible with the return of the Malefic One. A truly momentous and equally surprising event, do you not agree?" the vampire said with a searching tone while also taking a few steps back and walking towards his seat.

Jake felt the subtle waves of mental energy in the air, ever so slightly affecting Jake, but more than that, reading him. He only felt them due to how on alert he was and his sphere, making it clear the vampire had no intention of revealing his actions.

Alcor, the young vampire, also just stood silently back with his head lowered, same as everyone else.

"I don't believe many would call the return of a Primordial anything less than momentous," Jake just answered.

"But not surprising?" the vampire said with an inquisitive look.

"Of course it was, but why would it be more surprising than other events? We natives of new universes know nothing of the rest of the multiverse upon integration. The mere existence of gods was a massive

surprise,” Jake again answered, speaking only the truth. Something the vampire recognized as he nodded.

“Perhaps as difficult as it is for me to recognize the possibility of a creature not living with the system,” the vampire sighed. “I am Fairleigh, current Patriarch of the Nalkar House. I do believe we skipped the formal introduction, did we not? Now tell me, Hunter the hunter, what is it you bring from your nascent universe you claim is related to my lineage?”

Without any further ado, Jake pulled out the High-Tier Alchemy Token of the Malefic Viper. Fairleigh looked at it deeply for a few moments before he sighed.

“Such items truly belong in the annals of history. They come from a time when we vampires were on our way to becoming a truly multiversal force. Able to stand toe-to-toe with the Holy Church and the Risen. Yet it is also a reminder that the Malefic One and his Order were our allies even in those times,” the vampire said with a melancholic tone. “Where did you acquire it?”

“During a system event, I went to a world once known as Yalsten. An old hidden world once inhabited and ruled by vampires. It had been destroyed due to its isolation, but the system does as the system does and brought back Yalsten of many, many eras ago,” Jake answered truthfully. “I found this specific token in a vault set up by the Nalkar of Yalsten, one created with the hope of passing down some of their treasures. When I got the treasure, I was asked by a projection left behind to have positive inclinations towards the Nalkar, so here I am.”

“A hunter that also keeps his word, it seems. Very well, if you treat me with honesty, I shall return the favor. Now tell me, what is it you desire of us in exchange for an old relic of the past?”

Chapter 444 - The Sentiment Of Vampires

Jake had many questions and doubts as he stood before the vampire. First of all, why was the Patriarch of the Nalkar Family there, and not just some lower-level leader? Heck, why was there a leader to begin

with? Even if Jake assumed the vampires just placed a lot of importance on history and lineage, this still seemed like overkill.

Based on the line of questioning, it was possible they suspected him of being more than he represented himself as. The poking into his views on the Viper's return seemed very deliberate, as if they wanted him to reveal something, but even that made little sense. If Jake was the Chosen, would using lie-detection and trying to make him reveal his identity be a smart choice and not just one that would piss him off?

No matter the case, the Patriarch was willing to negotiate, and he did seem interested in the Alchemy Token.

"An old relic perhaps, but still one that would be honored," Jake answered. "The Order of the Malefic Viper would undoubtedly adhere to its promise, making it more than just an interesting trinket."

"While true, we do not need such a token to enter the Order anymore. It was of a time when we Nalkar were spread all over the multiverse, and to enter the Order was a sign of success. Now, all the Nalkar able to join are all members already, making the primary function of the token null," Fairleigh said.

Jake couldn't really argue with the fact that they could enter without the token, but he still knew the vampire wanted it. The current act of downplaying the value of the Alchemy Token was only proof to Jake that the Nalkar were interested. If they weren't, why bother and not just buy it cheaply and be done with it, and if Jake refused, then just tell him to bugger off? At least, that is what Jake was banking on.

"In that case, perhaps it would be better to save it and find Nalkar unassociated with the Order," Jake sighed as he faked disappointment.

Fairleigh looked at Jake and smiled. "Please, let us stay in the realm of honesty. While that was no outright lie, we are both aware of the value such an item holds to my family. Even if it is not purely based on the benefits it offers, but the sentimental value. In fact... come, let me show you something."

Jake couldn't even resist as he was forcefully teleported and appeared within a massive chamber of sorts. On a second look, it reminded him more of a museum, with glass containers and complicated magic arrays guarding many mundane items spread throughout.

"Remembering history has always been important to our kin. Perhaps we merely enjoy living in the glory of the past, or maybe it is a way to not repeat our mistakes. Either way, we preserve, and we collect. That token you hold may not be a treasure to most, but to us, it is invaluable," Fairleigh explained.

Looking around, Jake saw a lot of rather, well, boring items. One area had a dining set sealed away, another section was filled with old paintings and pictures, and a third was bookshelves stacked upon bookshelves with old books in them.

"We have items from all eras, even some from before our fall. In fact, we value anything from before then, as it speaks of what once was, and the Records it contains matter. Perhaps not to you or anyone else not of our lineage, but to us, there is power in history," he continued his explanation as he went over and pointed out what looked like a fountain pen.

"This pen was used by a scholar of the sixth Era to write letters back to his family. It managed to reach epic rarity back in the day but has returned to a mundane item after this long. Items such as that Alchemy Token have yet to return to mundanity but still contain such powerful Records, making it even more valuable."

Jake nodded along as he couldn't help but think about the ludicrous amount of resources expelled by that one chamber he was in. It was humongous, larger than any museum Jake had ever seen or heard of on Earth. At the same time, it was incredibly densely packed, with every single item sealed away with incredibly powerful and intricate formations. These formations were able to freeze time itself for the item and allow them not to turn to dust through the passage of time.

"Tell me, do you find our obsession with the past foolish?" the vampire finally asked him.

"No, not really," Jake shrugged. He had never been the type himself to collect old antiques or care much for cultural inheritances, but he knew it was a perfectly normal hobby. "Even on my planet before the system arrived, we collected pieces of history, families had heirlooms they warded with their lives, and I know of at least one old man who picked up an old heirloom his clan possessed and turned it into a monstrous weapon."

"But you seem to not personally share the sentiment?" Fairleigh asked once more.

"No," Jake shook his head. "While I do understand placing sentimental value on objects, I rarely do it. Not that I entirely avoid it... I still have the first potions I ever crafted stowed away, and all the equipment I wear I earned myself one way or another. I do value these items more than they are necessarily worth and value some more than others, but that is due to the story of how I got them."

The vampire nodded. "An understandable view for a hunter. Now tell me, what kind of compensation are you seeking in return for the token? It cannot merely be the extra alchemical ingredient associated with enrollment. If it was, you would have no need to come here."

"I am in need of alchemical ingredients of higher value, most specifically ones of the hemotoxin nature," Jake said. Vampires were damn good at hemotoxins. A massive surprise that vampires, wielding blood magic and using blood energy, were good at blood poisons.

“And?” Fairleigh asked.

Jake took out his second item as he revealed his necklace by un-fusing it from his body and holding it up. “I need this improved. I know the Nalkar Family have long been part of the Order, so I assume I am correct when I believe you can do this?”

[Prodigious Alchemist’s Necklace of Holding (Epic)] - An amulet awarded to a prodigious young alchemist upon completion of a trial. An ornate creation of high craftsmanship made of metal attuned to the space-affinity, holding a spacegem in place. Allows the user to store items in a small pocket dimension found within the gem. Due to the nature of the gemstone used, living, non-sentient entities can be stored without harmful side-effects in temporal suspension. Enchantments: Alchemist’s Spatial Storage. +25 Wisdom. Requirements: Soulbound

It was Jake’s first piece of epic equipment and probably still one of his best items to date. By sheer usefulness and convenience, it was at the top as nothing beat spatial storages. However, Jake was also acutely aware that the item had fallen off big time. The stats it gave were great when Jake was level 26, but now? Now they were irrelevant.

He could probably have gotten a better spatial storage, probably even one with the same Alchemist’s Spatial Storage enchantment. Maybe not as good, but at least close. It had to be noted that each person could only hold one spatial storage item under normal circumstances, so Jake couldn’t have swapped for another without choosing to “unbind” his Prodigious Alchemist’s Necklace of Holding. Now, even if it was Soulbound, this wouldn’t destroy the item but just make it completely inert. Of course, it would still be Soulbound, as one cannot get rid of that connection without breaking the item altogether.

So yeah, maybe him holding onto it was for purely sentimental reasons. Jake had to admit he had briefly considered if upgrading the item was even worth it, but...

“How exquisite,” Fairleigh said as he looked at the necklace. “Truly ancient craftsmanship, incredible attention to detail, and that stone used... I am amazed someone would choose to give that to someone of such a low grade.”

Even if the vampire could not see the description, he was still an ancient vampire in S-grade. He looks at it a bit more before nodding. “Finding a suitable crafter should be possible; we have some very talented jewelers among our ranks. Do note that unlocking the full potential of the gem will not be possible with your current strength and the necklace being Soulbound.”

Jake nodded. “Just seeing it improved is all I hope for. Also, just to check, I want to make sure there are no risks of breaking it if I choose to improve it?”

Fairleigh smiled as he chuckled. “If I can find a D or C-grade capable of breaking that item, we would have our new Patriarch or Matriarch in the making. You seem to not fully comprehend. That item was made by someone far above C-grade and was then directly modified by the system to be in its current form, sealing away the Records and power within. An incredibly rare thing that is not worth doing. These items can also only be obtained from system events. Well, in your case, I assume it was a Tutorial Challenge Dungeon?”

Jake nodded once more. “Yeah, I was lucky to find one associated with alchemy and got this at the end.”

“Just alchemy?” the vampire asked inquisitively.

“More or less,” Jake said, shutting down the topic.

Fairleigh smiled again as he took out a token. A moment later, he dispelled it again. "The young lad who brought you here has been tasked with fetching a suitable jeweler I have in mind. Now tell me, you went to a realm known as Yalsten? I must confess it is not a name I am familiar with, but we had many such worlds back then, and if it was hidden as you claim, it was customary to keep it secret to limit leaks. Did you happen to obtain any valuables from there besides this token? One's related to our race?"

That is when Jake remembered. During all of his fights with the Counts of Blood, Jake entered their chambers. All of them had been preserved and filled to the brim with valuable-looking and expensive objects. Furniture, paintings, candle holders, chandeliers, pretty much all of the fancy stuff the Yalsten vampires loved. For some reason, Jake had decided to just gather all of the fanciness because why the hell not? He needed furniture for back home, and it looked good. Now, that seemingly random choice appeared to have been an unexpectedly wise one.

Jake waved his hand as a dining table appeared in front of him together with eight chairs to go with it.

Fairleigh looked at it as his eyes opened wide. "This... did you obtain this in Yalsten too?"

"Yeah," Jake answered. "It was in a chamber of sorts that looked to have been preserved."

"This dining set dates back dozens of Eras... as old as the token?"

"It is at least from before the eighth Era," Jake said. Based on the Monarch of Blood, the Viper had not gone into isolation yet when Yalsten fell, and Jake knew Villy had done that during the seventh Era. So, naturally, this item had to stem from before then.

“Truly?” Fairleigh asked. “I will have to have a chronomancer confirm the exact age, but we would be more than willing to buy this set if you are correct. We would naturally pay handsomely.”

“I got more,” Jake said, not wanting to miss the opportunity.

“Oh?” Fairleigh exclaimed, letting a bit of excitement leak out. “Can you show me?”

Jake looked a bit around and noticed how most of the floor space was already filled.

“We’re gonna need a bigger room.”

Vilastromoz was busy as always, multitasking doing all sorts of important things. Having your mind split and being in many places at once was helpful, but he nearly always kept one part of himself reserved on observation duty, also known as Jake-watching.

However, today he wasn’t alone. And no, it was not Duskleaf visiting either.

“Katherine, I do wonder why you don’t simply choose to reveal your presence to your kin,” the Viper said to the woman sitting with him, sipping on a wine glass filled with a red liquid a bit too red to be wine.

“I will in due time, but not now. I am more intrigued by your choice of Chosen. I have been observing, but so far, I truly cannot see why you have picked him. His Bloodline does seem peculiar and powerful,

but even if it was utterly monstrous, I see little reason to bless a lowly F-grade as you did and not wait for him to at least reach B or A-grade. The chance of him dying without giving a return on investment would be far lower if that was the case,” the vampire goddess said.

“Are you questioning my decision-making skills?” Vilastromoz turned and asked her with a raised eyebrow.

“No, of course not; I am merely perplexed and unable to comprehend the reasoning behind the choice,” she quickly backtracked. Failing to realize the reaction she just had was a big part of the reason why Vilastromoz liked Jake. He would have remarked that the Viper did have a shitty track record and probably even included a self-deprecating joke about how the Viper had fucked up by blessing him.

“Keep trying to comprehend. I personally fail to comprehend your sense of secrecy, but then again, I guess you would prefer not to get tracked,” the Viper shrugged.

Katherine, also known as the True Ancestor of the Nalkar lineage, was the most powerful vampire of the Nalkar-line. Sanguine had experimented much to make different kinds of vampires, and Katherine was the first vampire of the Nalkar line that ascended to godhood, giving her the title of True Ancestor. She wasn't actually the first Nalkar vampire, but many believed she was - it was that kind of rumor that appeared and that no one bothered to correct.

She had left during the seventh Era to protect her kin elsewhere as those that remained in the Order were safe due to the presence of Snappy. Back then, they had not been official parts of the Order but were more like the local branches of Dragonflights. Closely tied to the Order, but not members. Something that, in retrospect, probably turned out to be a mistake. Once Sanguine fell, the vampires were unassociated with any factions and couldn't decide on joining one but tried to stay independent. By the time they realized they had needed to be part of something bigger, Vilastromoz had already entered isolation.

Today, Katherine and many other vampires, including the closest thing the vampires had to a pantheon, now resided in a hidden realm that not even Vilastromoz knew the location of.

The Holy Church and Risen didn't know either, as if they did, the Viper reckoned they would have already attacked. These vampires had nothing to do with the Order and were not at all under its protection.

This leads to the question of why Katherine had visited and the old snake god had his suspicions. A suspicion that would prove correct as the vampire spoke.

"What are the future plans of the Malefic One? I am aware that the True Ancestor of the Balnar lineage has already made contact, but so far, he is tight-lipped. We are aware of the movements that have recently been happening, and the council has had discussions but has yet to--"

"Ask the real question," Vilastromoz interrupted as he looked at her sharply.

"Is the stance of the Malefic One the same as it was back then?" she asked.

"Have I ever said otherwise? When did my word stop mattering?"

He smiled as Katherine finally asked. "Will the Malefic One allow the six clans to fully join the Order of the Malefic Viper?"

“Five clans,” Vilastromoz corrected. “The Balnar have already sworn fealty.”

Katherine looked surprised before she stood up and bowed. “Then may the Nalkar be the second clan to do so. I shall return to the council and relay the information.”

“Just a second,” Vilastromoz said as he raised a hand. “How many of you are there now?”

“A hundred and eleven, including us six True Ancestors,” she answered.

“Not bad, more than one an Era,” Vilastromoz nodded. “Bring them all before me, and we can continue this conversation.”

“As you command,” Katherine nodded enthusiastically.

Vilastromoz watched as she disappeared and smiled a bit to himself. Yet another batch of gods was ready to join him. He knew the vampires had struggled for many Eras and had latched onto him as a lifeline. In fact, he felt like the entire multiverse was much more consolidated into enormous factions than back in the day. So, perhaps it wasn't too stupid for the Order to also become more than it had always been. To truly expand it and make it into a multiversal force to be reckoned with. A faction that controlled territory and dominated more than just a few small pieces of land spread throughout the multiverse for their small branches.

Adding nearly every vampire left in the universe to his faction would be a good start. Of course, the Holy Church, Risen, and probably a few dozen if not hundreds of factions wouldn't approve. This was why no faction had ever allowed them to join them despite their relative strength.

Sadly for them, Vilastromoz didn't really give a shit.

Chapter 445 - Vampire Hoarders

"This one too?" a large vampire asked as he lifted a coat hanger very carefully.

"Definitely that one," Fairleigh said as he nodded.

"Where to stash the tablecloths?" another vampire inquired.

"Set the tables like they used to be on the seventeenth picture."

"Understood," the attendant said as she began carefully using telekinesis to move the tables and chairs into their exact positions, as shown in some old picture. A second vampire joined in only to double-check all the dimensions and distances were absolutely correct. A third came to put down the forks, knives, smaller forks, tiny spoons, large spoons, medium spoons, and all kinds of the different and utterly superfluous fancy-ass tableware.

Jake just stood back as he watched all of this happen. At first, he had just thought the vampires were eccentric collectors of old items, but by now, he realized... they were just straight-up hoarders. Organized hoarders with relatively fastidious taste, but hoarders nonetheless.

Fairleigh, the S-grade Patriarch, even personally chose to oversee as the many vampires worked to recreate a dining hall exactly as it was shown in one of the pictures Jake had found. It wasn't even something from a painting, but a picture in a book on proper table manners.

Not that Jake chose to complain. In fact, currently, he was just waiting for the jeweler to arrive along with his agreed-upon goods being collected and prepared for him. The Alchemy Token had somehow ended up not even being that big of a deal. The paintings of old vampires from Yalsten, the books from the library telling their history, and the many random items Jake had swiped turned out to be far more valuable in the eyes of the vampires.

The reason for this was ultimately simple. The Alchemy Token was not truly an item of the Nalkar vampires but merely a gift they received from the Order. It was an item nearly identical to many tokens still created today and had little to do with the culture and history of the vampiric race.

Jake couldn't help but consider what would have happened if he had shown up with the divine artifact the Sword Saint had gotten. In some ways, he was actually happy he hadn't gotten that necklace as he feared the level of insanity these vampires would show upon seeing it.

The negotiation process had already been a lot as-is, and Jake had no idea if he got scammed. Though, to be fair, he felt like he was the scammer, selling off old furniture and mundane items he had no use for and would probably just have given away or used for a fun-time bonfire or something.

After looking on a bit longer, Fairleigh finally turned to him. "I just got word the crafter is ready to help with the necklace. Are you prepared to leave, or do you wish to stay and observe the recreation some more?"

"Upgrading the necklace takes priority," Jake said, not having the heart to tell the ancient vampire that he really didn't want to see a group of powerful vampires set a table as if their lives depended on it.

“Very well,” the Patriarch said, looking only slightly disappointed as he teleported the both of them.

They appeared in what looked like an area of the city Jake had first arrived in. Except this place was clearly part of the commercial district as Jake stood before a massive shop.

That C-grade vampire that initially brought him to the Patriarch was already there waiting. The Patriarch gave the young lad a nod before he teleported away, leaving Jake with the vampire called Alcor.

The vampire seemed a lot more respectful now than the last time they met as he motioned for Jake to follow. “Please follow me; the mistress has already prepared all the suitable materials for the crafting session.”

Jake nodded as he was led into the shop. He noticed how the street was devoid of people, and Alcor clearly noticed his confusion. The only people he saw were himself, Alcor, and a single other person currently within the shop.

“We cleared out the area in preparation for your visit to not have any of the livestock gawking during the crafting session and to avoid disturbances,” Alcor explained nonchalantly.

“Livestock, huh,” Jake just commented.

“I am aware they can be annoying, but sadly, they are necessary,” Alcor sighed, clearly not understanding Jake’s comment.

“You know,” Jake said just as they entered the shop, “I once fought what happens when livestock reaches a breaking point and gets the power to resist and fight back. It doesn’t turn out pretty for the oppressors.”

He was clearly talking about the Minotaur Mindchief. The circumstances back then had been very different, and Jake would argue the vampires were running a far greater risk. Then again, what the hell did he know? The vampires had managed to persist for Eras.

“I think it can turn out quite well,” he heard a female voice say as the woman within the shop regarded them. “I didn’t kill anyone when I received the gift. I did have a few who needed to be put in their place, but now we are all family.”

Jake looked over and saw a female vampire standing there to welcome them. She had long black hair, the usual red eyes, and the equally commonplace beauty he had come to expect from all vampires. In fact, all vampires he had ever seen took the whole “look better with every evolution” concept to an entirely new level.

Not that she wasn’t more than just pretty to look at. While she didn’t feel that powerful, Jake still felt a strong aura, making him relatively certain right off the bat that she was a pure crafter. One at the cusp of C-grade.

[Vampire – lvl 199]

As for the words she spoke?

“I take it you were a Blood Disciple?” Jake asked her.

“Correct,” she said, clearly showing pride at that fact. It was probably for a good reason, too, if she had managed to get recognized and become able to become a vampire through her own efforts. Considering she was the jeweler Fairleigh had brought her to see, he didn’t doubt that she had been recognized and been given “the gift” through merit.

“This is Mistress Rubylake, one of the most talented jewelers of this generation,” Alcor introduced her. “And yes, she was formerly a human but has since ascended.”

“Ascended is a strong word,” Jake just commented again as he shook his head. Insulting the jeweler he wanted to help him probably wasn’t a good idea, so he cut it out there. Instead, he just took out his necklace and presented it to the woman called Rubylake. Jake assumed it was some kind of title or maybe just the naming convention of where she came from.

“This is the necklace in question,” Jake said as her eyes were already trained on it.

“May I look at it closer? I only got descriptions, so I will need to inspect it myself to see if I believe I can do the job,” she asked.

Jake nodded and handed it over. He felt his connection to it slightly fade as it left contact with his body, making him unable to use the spatial storage. He still had the stats, but he innately knew he needed to touch the necklace to use the storage.

Rubylake looked at the necklace as she took out some weird box. She placed it inside as she began infusing blood energy into it. She looked almost in a trance as she sometimes nodded, other times frowned, and finally looked elated.

"This item... it qualifies!" she said with extreme delight. Alcor, standing with Jake, also smiled from ear to ear.

"Congratulations, mistress," the male vampire said.

"Qualifies for what?" Jake asked, being more than a little confused. He assumed it was good, but he was more wondering that she didn't mean that she qualified, but that his necklace qualified for some mystical objective.

"Apologies," Rubylake said. "This item qualifies for my Evolutionary Quest, and I just failed to hold back my excitement. I have been looking for an opportunity for a few years while making preparations for this day."

"Villy... what the hell is an Evolutionary Quest, and please don't tell it is something incredibly basic and common knowledge I have somehow entirely missed?" Jake quickly asked the Viper mentally as he had a strong feeling asking the vampires would make him look like a moron.

"Gotta do some questing to advance to C-grade along with usual requirements. This is indeed pretty basic knowledge, so basic that no one actually bothers writing about it, and the quests are individualized, so it isn't like telling people about it matters. You will learn more about it later, so stop worrying your pretty little head about it and instead get that bling upgraded. Maybe she can turn it into a giant gold chai-"

Jake began ignoring Villy as he followed suit in congratulating her, not wanting to look like an ignorant idiot. Or a rude one. "Congratulations are in order, then."

“Thank you. It is still a bit premature as I have yet to succeed, but I have a high level of confidence. Now, Do you have any questions? Don’t worry, there are no requirements of you besides allowing me to modify the Soulbound item,” Rubylake asked.

Jake nodded in acknowledgment. He was aware that as it was a Soulbound item, Jake had to give consent before any modification could take place. He was ultimately still the master of the item, and he merely allowed another outside force to modify and hopefully improve it.

“How long will it take?” Jake finally asked.

“I should be able to do it within a day, maybe one and a half days. I have made too many preparations, and the magic circle is already fully charged... if I take any longer, it will likely result in failure,” she honestly answered.

“What are you planning on doing, if I might ask? If you won’t answer, it is fine. Trade secrets and all that,” Jake asked further.

“No, I will gladly explain. My primary objective is to awaken the Space Heart – the name of this type of Spacegem used. Currently, only a small part of the full space is utilized, and its powers are generally sealed. Once I awaken it, I can pull on the Records and energy to forge and awaken latent energy in the rest of the necklace, and while there will probably be no cosmetic changes, the item will improve significantly if I succeed. Just so you are aware, I aim for a legendary rarity for my own quest. It is not a true craft, but to perform an upgrade at this level of complexity should qualify,” Rubylake explained.

Jake nodded in understanding. “I assume you will want peace and quiet during the crafting process?”

He knew he tended to want to be left alone while crafting.

“That would be preferable. However, I will need you to still stay close. There is a waiting room next door you can choose to stay in, but as long as you stay within a kilometer or so, it should be fine.”

Nodding once more, Jake decided to just go next door as he would also wait for something else: his alchemy ingredients.

He said his goodbyes and was led by Alcor into the building next door. It was a large lounge room with not a single other person in sight. There was still no one within his sphere either. As he was next door, he could still see into the store of the jeweler. She had gone down to the cellar and activated a lot of wards and formations to hide, but of course, none of that mattered to Jake’s Bloodline-powered Sphere of Perception.

Jake saw her carefully place the necklace on an alter as she prepared several ingredients in a magic circle around it. He looked on a bit more before he stopped, choosing to respect her privacy. He also had no idea what she was doing.

Ten minutes or so passed, with Jake just entering meditation. Alcor was not talkative either but just quietly stood in a corner with his eyes closed, waiting. After those ten minutes, Jake spotted movement outside the building as he saw Fairleigh appear, holding two crystals in his hands.

Fairleigh entered as Jake looked up, identifying the two crystals before the old vampire walked over and had a chance to speak.

[Alchemist's Bloodgem Spatial Storage (Rare)] – A gem containing a spatial storage that is especially suited to any blood-affinity herbs and natural treasures. The energy of the gem is slowly leaking, giving it a severely limited lifespan.

[Memory Crystal (Common)] – A crystal containing infused information.

One was a gem no-doubt containing all the herbs and such they had agreed upon. The other was something a bit more unexpected, and Fairleigh quickly explained.

"I took the courtesy of creating a Memory Crystal from the input of a talented alchemist from the family who is specialized in hemotoxins. It contains his insights into the agreed-upon materials as well as some tips and tricks. I hope this addition is a welcome one," the vampire said with a smile.

"And, of course, the ingredients you requested. It took quite a dive into the gardens to find them all, especially in such quantities and all suitable for D-grades, but we managed to do so. I once more took a bit of liberty and placed them within this Bloodgem for you to transport the ingredients while making sure they lose none of their potency. It is far worse than a true Alchemical Spatial Storage, but it will make do. Just know it will only last a few more decades."

Jake nodded in acknowledgment.

"I have no plans of taking that long before using the ingredients. The crystal is also more than welcome," Jake said. The vampires had treated him pretty nicely so far, even if they did have some inherent cultural issues.

"Now, I would offer you one more thing, but I guess I already know your answer?" Fairleigh asked in a not very hopeful tone.

"No, I have no interest in becoming a vampire," Jake shut it down.

"A shame. Truly a shame. You would fit right in," Fairleigh sighed but was not truly disappointed. Clearly had had low or no expectations to begin with.

"Why would you reject such an offer?" Alcor suddenly butted in, genuine confusion in his voice. "Would it not be purely better? It would allow you to only focus on either a class or a profession without sacrificing strength, solidifying your Path."

"Child," Fairleigh said as he turned to Alcor. The young vampire froze in fear as Jake felt a bit of bloodlust leak out of the old vampire. "When a gift is rejected, you graciously accept the other party's decision. Anything else is unacceptable. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes... Patriarch," Alcor said, barely getting the words out as he looked like he could barely breathe.

"Temper your arrogance," Fairleigh sighed. "We vampires are not necessarily superior. No enlightened race is. For all, vampirism is a choice, and if the hunter does not deem vampirism part of his Path, we should never claim to know better or falsely believe ours more powerful."

"I understand," Alcor repeated as he stared down at the ground. Jake, however, felt that the guy didn't entirely agree.

“Enough of that,” Fairleigh said as he smiled again and sent the crystal and Bloodgem floating towards Jake.

Jake caught them both and didn’t hold back as he inspected the spatial storage gem, a large smile forming on his lips.

He was about to have a bloody good crafting session.

Chapter 446 - Heart Of The Alchemist

Jake had asked for alchemical ingredients with hemotoxin properties as well as those with blood affinity. Most blood affinity ingredients were easily translated into products with hemotoxin properties, making it an ideal material to use. The other function of the blood affinity was in Blood Potions which vampires very much enjoyed. As well as quite a lot of beasts that could actually use them as natural treasures to gain experience and levels.

This led to the vampire clans cultivating these herbs in spades. Hemotoxin was also a preferred poison of the vampires as it synergized with many of their skills. An ability that thinned the blood of a foe and made it more difficult to control one’s vital energies just worked incredibly well with blood magic for rather obvious reasons.

So Jake had high expectations. He had asked for the good stuff but had not been overly specific besides mentioning a few herbs he knew he wanted. Jake was not foolish enough to believe Fairleigh wouldn’t know better than himself, and Jake was also confident in the vampire not wanting to scam him too much. Even if he scammed Jake a little, it would be fine as Jake already felt like a scammer after pawning off so much useless shit from his spatial storage.

However, when he peeked into the gem, he realized he had indeed miscalculated: those damn vampires valued their old antiques more than he had believed. There were fifteen different kinds of herbs and

natural treasures, with six of them at rare rarity or above. All of them were exactly the kinds he had hoped, and more surprisingly, Jake actually knew about all of them from prior research and the classes he had taken on hemotoxins. Well, it probably shouldn't be that surprising, considering the vampires were a major supplier of hemotoxin materials for the Order.

Looking at these six high-value items, Jake was very pleased as he quickly scanned through them.

[Crimsonwood Ash (Rare) – Ash of a burned Crimsonwood. Even if much of the potency has been lost, the ash still contains some qualities of the Crimsonwood. If the ash is inhaled, it will enter the bloodstream and cause internal damage as it binds with the blood of its victim, making it incredibly difficult to dispel. If too much is inhaled, the individual will combust, spreading even more ash.

Jake had read a lot about Crimsonwood Trees. They were an entire categorization of trees, but this one came from one of the more valuable types. The Blood-Combusting Crimsonwood was a tree that quite literally set itself on fire to spread its deadly ash and kill everything within huge areas around it. The weaker ones could level entire ecosystems, while the more powerful Blood-Combusting Crimsonwoods were known to wipe out all vitality-based life in whole solar systems. Of course, the materials of such a tree would be used by A or maybe even S-grades.

The ash that was left over and found close to the trunk of the tree was rare by itself, and as far as Jake knew, any part of the actual tree would be ancient or maybe even legendary rarity. However, it made no sense to kill these trees, as the ash itself was valuable. Jake assumed the vampires had a few of these stashed away and fed them beasts or something like that to make them self-combust and leave behind ash. It was good stuff.

The next three were all also good stuff but considered relatively commonplace. Yet they did still stand out due to the high quality and rarity of the specimen Jake had been provided.

[Spikestalk Root (Rare)] – The root of a Spikestalk. Spikestalks are plants that hide under the earth and strike any that get too close with blood-draining spikes. This blood energy is then deposited into the roots, where it is further refined into a liquid containing large amounts of life affinity. Has many alchemical uses.

[Bloodshade Flower (Rare)] – A flower growing in the soil of the freshly slain. This flower has absorbed large amounts of blood from vitality-based lifeforms and has evolved to what it is today. To better feed, it exude pollen that will make any vitality-based lifeform it comes into contact with bleed from any orifice. Has many alchemical uses and has a potent hemotoxin nature.

[Red Moss (Rare)] – Mutated moss that has become red due to being in an environment with potent blood affinity mana. The energy within has potent hemotoxin qualities but can also be used in restorative potions. Consuming the Red Moss in small quantities will temporarily grant resistance to hemotoxins, while large amounts will lead to an overload causing hemorrhage.

They all more or less did as their descriptions said but had no interesting qualities over that. The only reason these were even rare rarity was due to how old they were and the amount of energy each of them contained. Red Moss, as an example, was just mutated Green Moss and was relatively simple to make if one had a cave with arrays to constantly pump in blood mist or placed it among many Bloodshade Flowers. The stalk was just one of many carnivorous plants that liked to eat people. This one just did it by draining all their blood, a bit like the Indigo Fungus Jake had fought so long ago.

These were all the rare herbs Jake had gained. Next up was an item that wasn't a herb but was nevertheless extremely valuable.

[Crystalized Blood Essence (Epic)] – The crystalized Blood Essence of a powerful C-grade vampire. Contains an incredibly potent blood affinity energy. Consuming the Crystalized Blood Essence as a vampire will restore Blood Energy, while if any other race consumes it, it will act as a hemotoxin. Has many alchemical uses.

One thing that was common for all living creatures was that natural treasures would often be condensed when they died. For vampires, it was often their heart and their blood, and for someone like Jake, it would probably be his eyes that would be infused with his Records. The Crystalized Blood Essence was one such treasure as it had come from a dead C-grade vampire.

There were some discussions to be had about using the blood of a brethren to do alchemy, but the vampires had no qualms. In fact, they viewed it as respectful to make use of the corpse of someone who died. Across the multiverse, many who closed in on their deaths made wills concerning what they wanted to be done with their bodies. Thinking about it, it was a bit like organ donation before the system.

Anyway, this Crystalized Blood Essence was a great material and could be mixed into most hemotoxins to make them better. Each Crystalized Blood Essence could also be used dozens of times in crafts before it would run out of energy, making it suitable for alchemy.

The final item was the most interesting one and the one Jake knew the least about.

[Crimson Dawn Lotus (Epic)] – The Lotus spawned after a Crimson Dawn. Contains incredibly potent blood affinity energy mixed with time affinity mana. Has many alchemical uses but is incredibly volatile.

Blood and time. An incredibly potent combo, and Jake was a bit surprised this had even been included considering he hadn't asked for it. He had briefly come across the mention of Crimson Dawn Lotuses during one of the lessons, but it was only related to how they only spawned during a Crimson Dawn. Jake had no idea what a Crimson Dawn was.

Luckily, he had a vampire right there with him.

“What is the Crimson Dawn?” Jake asked Fairleigh.

The old vampire smiled a bit as he pointed upwards to the huge red celestial object hanging above.

“What you see above is an ancient artifact crafted by the True Ancestor of the Nalkar Clan many Eras ago. It allows vampires to not feed as much and empowers us in every way while under its crimson light. However, as with most objects, it does not hold infinite energy. Every millennium there is a single month where the Blood Moon is down, and we have to perform a ritual to reawaken it. Once the ritual has been performed, it will rise again, bringing about a Crimson Dawn as its light washes over our lands. These lotuses only bloom during a Crimson Dawn, so they are quite valuable. The ones you have are from three hundred years ago but have been fully preserved,” Fairleigh explained, giving Jake some more interesting vampire lore.

Jake nodded in understanding. “Thank you for the trade.”

“No, thank you. I am not blind to us taking advantage of you by having a young talent use your necklace as an opportunity to complete her Evolution Quest even after you have given us so much. I hope the alchemical ingredients are at least acceptable, and please, do not hesitate to visit again. I have permanently unlocked your token to allow you access,” Fairleigh said with a smile. “Now, if there isn’t anything more, I sadly have other responsibilities to attend to.”

“Alright. I may stop by again at some point,” Jake nodded as the vampire disappeared in a puff of red mist.

Only a few seconds passed before the other vampire in the room asked in a rather odd tone. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?" Jake asked, confused.

"Speak to the Patriarch so casually. You show such little care and – no offense – lack decorum and grace. Is it truly to do with your Bloodline? Something about being a hunter?" Alcor asked. He seemed genuinely interested.

"Something like that. It allows me to ignore the suppression caused by their presence," Jake answered, telling the truth while not wanting to explain further.

"Even so," Alcor protested. "Do you not realize your way of acting could be viewed as disrespectful? That if you cause someone of such a higher status even the mildest level of annoyance, they could end your life with a touch... no, a single thought?"

"Sure I do," Jake just shrugged.

"Then why act with such... arrogance?"

"Why not?" Jake just smiled. "What's the worst they can do, kill me? Man, you really think too little of those more powerful. Just don't be an outright dick, and things should be fine, and if they kill you due to being some butthurt cry-babies, well, it is what it is, and I will at least go out like a champ."

Alcor just stared at Jake in disbelief as Jake just grinned without elaborating. What he said was once more the truth with some tiny modifications. Jake didn't solely rely on being lucky to not meet a powerhouse that would kill others just for looking them in the eyes. He relied nearly solely on his intuition and sense of danger.

If he did meet someone who would go apeshit if Jake treated them as an equal, Jake would probably get a sense for it and just keep his damn mouth shut. Of course, if the person began acting like a pompous asshole, then Jake could potentially risk failing to hold himself back and get swatted into the river of reincarnation – or, more accurately, the Truesoul Recycling Center, if Jake's understanding of life after death was correct.

Anyway, considering Alcor just sat back, Jake decided to inspect the Memory Crystal for some advice and tips on how to use his newly-obtained ingredients. Once he infused energy into it, he felt a wave of information enter his head, and Jake quickly became aware that Fairleigh had heavily downplayed it. The one who had infused knowledge into the crystal was an A-grade alchemist who specialized in hemotoxins and had not held back at all with including tips relevant for a D-grade.

Jake dove right in and began devouring the information. At some point, he felt a small poke on his soul, and knowing it was Rubylake needing his approval to improve the necklace, he just accepted and kept studying. Before going to the vampires, Jake had planned on taking a few more lessons on hemotoxins and some other minor subjects, but as he sat there going through it, he realized that wasn't necessary. At least not for now.

The knowledge within focused on utilizing only the fifteen alchemical ingredients Jake had received. It was a hyper-specialized course on making basic hemotoxic potions with a whiff of an improved version Jake was very interested in attempting.

He even considered if he shou-

“Hunter, I believe the mistress is done,” the voice of Alcor suddenly said. However, even before Jake heard him, he was thrown out of his state of concentration. Something had changed.

He felt a connection to something just on the other side of a few walls and down in a cellar. At the same time, he felt like he had just leveled up many times as he experienced an influx of stats through that same connection. Rubylake had succeeded.

Without even thinking, Jake held out his hand, and on his palm, the necklace appeared, looking just like before. It was still made of platinum-like metal with the green gem faceted on a beautiful chain. The design was relatively simple, but Jake felt it practically humming with power. He had even somehow managed to summon it to himself through its innate space magic and his Soulbound connection.

Jake saw Rubylake rush out of the cellar through his sphere, and before she had even made it to the waiting room, Jake had inspected his new necklace.

[Heart of the Alchemist (Legendary)] – Once merely proof you were a prodigy, now even more as you have shown you have the heart of an alchemist. An ornate creation of high craftsmanship made of metal attuned to the space-affinity, holding a Space Heart Gem in place. Innate power still dwells within the Records of the necklace yet to be uncovered. Allows the user to store items in a medium-sized pocket dimension found within the gem. Due to the nature of the gemstone used, living, non-sentient entities can be stored without harmful side effects in temporal suspension. Allows the user to directly deposit beneficial products into their own bodies with a slightly improved effect (can only be used once an hour). Enchantments: Alchemist’s Spatial Storage. Innate Consumption. +500 Wisdom, +450 Willpower, +400 Intelligence. Requirements: Soulbound

Jake carefully studied every word of the improved description. There were a few changes, but the overall item was the same. The storage no longer said it was small but was now medium-sized, it had thrown in some more cryptic stuff about more Records within, and it had even added a new ability of sorts to directly consume things like potions through it for improved effects. Moreover, it gave an absolutely massive 1350 total stats from one item. It felt utterly insane, especially considering it also had

all the other effects. He had thought the Altmar Signet was amazing for giving 1000 total, but that was also all it did.

Then again, this was an item he had gained at a far higher level. And as Rubylake stormed into the waiting room and saw Jake hold the necklace, she also shed some more light on the upgrade.

"I did not expect you to be able to summon it! Such a strong connection despite your still young age. I am impressed," Rubylake nodded in approval, a huge smile on her face. "I was actually afraid it would become too potent, but I felt no resistance or like it burdened your soul at any point. Hard to imagine anyone not already peak D-tier being able to use it."

Jake just returned her smile. His level was still hidden, so she thought he was level 183, making it even better than she imagined. "I can see the craft succeeded. Did your quest too?"

Rubylake's grin grew even more. "I am evolving just after this."

Alcor, who had been silent after Jake had summoned the necklace, also seemed happy. "Congratulations, mistress! What are your expectations?"

"High, but time shall tell if they are met," she said, returning her attention to Jake.

"Some things do still confuse me... the time it took was not as I expected," she said, and Jake also checked how long had passed as he frowned.

Only a bit over five hours had passed while she had said it would take at least a day.

“How come?”

“I... everything just felt right? The materials resonated with the necklace nearly right away, the energy was effortlessly absorbed, and the Records and energy within the necklace seemed almost primed to be awakened. Have you had it attempted before?” Rubylake asked.

“No,” Jake shook his head. “You are the second person ever to lay a hand on it besides me.”

“Any idea who originally made it? Or if it was used by someone before it was transformed into what it is today?” she inquired further.

Jake just kept shaking his head. “I got it as a reward from the system.”

Rubylake frowned a bit but eventually just sighed in resignation. “Oh well, it doesn’t matter. Just... take care of it, okay? That necklace is no simple item.”

“Of course,” Jake said. “And thanks for your help.”

“I should be the one thanking you for giving me the opportunity. There is no way I would have succeeded this easily without you bringing such a wondrous item,” Rubylake bowed as she took out

her token, and Jake felt his own within the necklace in his hand resonate. She had put her contact information into it.

“Simply call me if you ever need a jeweler,” she said.

“Sure thing,” Jake said as he returned the favor and also gave her his contact information. Mainly because if he wanted to contact her, it would be a bit awkward if she couldn’t answer. Wait, maybe she could answer? He wasn’t entirely sure how the call feature of the token actually worked now that he thought about it

“Anyway, good luck with the evolution,” Jake finally said as he felt like he had gotten all he had come for.

After a few more pleasantries, Jake put on his necklace and fused it with his body once more. He then promptly headed back to the mansion, and after a brief exchange with Meira, he dove into the laboratory.

He had no plans of exiting anytime soon. Because if there was any question if Jake had been scammed, the answer was a resounding no. Because the true value of the ingredients didn’t lie in their rarity alone but in the sheer quantity of what he had received.

That’s right, Jake was about to waste an absolute shitload of expensive materials.

Chapter 447 - Momentum \U002B Wealth = Progress

Meira went over some material from her latest lesson as she gazed towards the mansion. Sir had said he would be around less, but she had believed he insinuated he would leave the Order to return to his own universe, not this.

He had entered the laboratory and then just stayed there after giving Meira the task of handling anyone who came looking for him. He had even done so everyone who tried to contact him through the token would instead reach her, making Meira more than a little uncomfortable.

She had to tell off a newly advanced C-grade vampire, the succubus in charge of his group from the ninety-third universe, and dozens more who wanted to speak with him and had somehow gotten his contact information. Meira the fact that he had a Bloodline that had leaked, and it seemed they all wanted to discuss it with her Master, but the only one they would reach was her.

Meira had to steel herself every time the token activated, and she had to answer only to inform them that her Master was in seclusion doing alchemy. The only lucky thing was that everyone accepted this answer, and coupled with no sightings of him anywhere, they had no reason to doubt her.

She herself was still busy going to lessons every day and learning. Meira was honestly still unsure of the reason why she had been tasked to do it, but she naturally would try her best. She did realize that with every day, her value increased, and she began to have the pet theory that he was actually nurturing her into a long-term slave. That he wouldn't discard her but keep her around.

This was also confusing in its own right, though. It was normal to get new slaves once you advanced a grade to have more useful subordinates. Of course, you couldn't have slaves beyond your own grade, so real talents like the Chosen naturally had to switch out often as there was no way for a slave to keep up in levels, much less be able to have the same level of Records to keep advancing.

Maybe he was planning on having her serve his descendants? It could also just be that he was eccentric and wanted to see how far she could go. If that was the case, Meira would certainly do her best, and hopefully, that would be good enough.

However, for every day that passed, she actually began doubting if he had just stopped bothering with her. She had originally hoped for this scenario before meeting her new Master, but now it gave her conflicting emotions. It wasn't that she truly believed he had forgotten, but that small tinge of doubt never left, no matter how logical she tried to be. It was true that he was in seclusion, after all. The problem was that his way of doing it was a bit abnormal.

It would be fine if it was only in there for reasonable periods when he entered seclusion. When it came to alchemy, a highly intense type of crafting that required a high level of focus, it was normal to at most be in seclusion a week or so at a time while in D-grade, take a few days to rest, and then go back into the laboratory. This was to renew focus and get rest, as many couldn't properly relax within the laboratory.

This was the normal way... and him doing alchemy in seclusion was normal... the problem was that he hadn't taken a single step out of the laboratory for over two months.

The entire area was tinged red as the scent of blood dominated the air. Most vitality-based creatures in early D-grade would find themselves bleeding from every orifice if they entered this dense cloud of crimson mist, truly turning it into a domain of death.

Luckily it was contained within a shielded room. A room where only a single alchemist sat in the center, unbothered by the mist. No, the opposite of bothered. He reveled in this environment as it fueled his regeneration.

This was naturally Jake, who was sitting within his alchemy lab. He had been busy crafting hemotoxin after hemotoxin, going through the net worth of some D-grades every single day as he spent the valuable materials he had received from the vampires.

To Jake, gaining levels was very easy when compared to others due to his overwhelming amount of already accumulated Records. He could spend a few weeks within a forest and probably get a dozen class levels just killing more powerful foes and taking advantage of all his class bonuses.

This was relatively normal as most everyone could quickly gain class or even race levels by slaying those of significantly higher levels. Jake did not doubt this was how the King had gained so many levels so quickly. Of course, one should do this with moderation to not hurt one's Records, and it also came with the inherent risk of death, but sometimes a burst of potential was truly what one needed.

Crafting like Jake did, splurging on materials with no care for cost in the face of progress, was in many ways similar to hunting far more powerful enemies in quick succession for levels. Rather than necessarily needing to be perfect when he made a poison, the value of the ingredients alone could help uplift the rarity.

Within the first week of Jake's isolation, he had already gone through hundreds of rare materials and even more common and uncommon ones. Yet he kept pushing on without the slightest care as he felt the progress like never before.

Concepts that would have taken him far longer to grasp before he understood instantly. When he encountered a minor problem, he would often have a eureka moment, remembering something mentioned in lessons, skimmed in a book, or recalled due to Sagacity and Palate. He was truly harvesting the fruits of his labor.

He had not truly crafted anything since coming to the Order. He had barely gotten any levels but had just fortified his fundamental abilities, and now it was time to build that damn tower higher. Jake had chosen hemotoxins as his method of doing this because he wanted something that would be effective when hunting beasts. Necrotic Poison also helped, but Jake knew Hemotoxic Poison was better in prolonged combat. Besides, he already had uncommon rarity Necrotic Poison, which was pretty good.

Jake also used his blood in every creation, which was more potent than ever before, not to mention all the stats that just helped with everything. Things had just gone so smoothly, and after the first week, his experience and talent in crafting hemotoxins rivalled his best kind of poison prior, Necrotic Poison, as he crafted an uncommon rarity version.

You have successfully crafted [Potent Hemotoxic Poison (Uncommon)] - A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned

[Potent Hemotoxic Poison (Uncommon)] - Greatly increases bleeding on infected entities and makes any injuries significantly harder to heal. The poison must be introduced directly into the bloodstream to have any effect. Spreads throughout the body of the inflicted foe near-instantly, making it even harder to dispel.

To most alchemists, using several rare ingredients and even using the epic Crystalized Blood Essence to further improve the process and then only end up with an uncommon rarity product would be viewed as an utter failure. But what had Jake done? He made another batch. And then another.

He just kept pumping out concoction after concoctions with no regard for wastage as he rapidly improved. When he got tired, he slumped over and slept. When he was in doubt, he entered Serene Soul Meditation to calm his mind and refocus on his task. No outside interference got in his way, and even Villy seemed to understand as Jake had not heard the god ever since he had entered the laboratory.

Weeks passed by fast, and he had barely noticed when it had been more than a month since he entered seclusion. Yet he didn't feel tired at all as he kept pushing, still finding new inspiration and improvements every day, no, every hour. He even recalled the times he had fought the vampires in Yalsten and some of their blood magic. Especially the magic of the Monarch of Blood, and he remembered when he had bitten and consumed the blood of the ancient revived vampire. Blood that had now mixed into him with Palate, as it qualified as toxic simply due to the level of sheer life energy it had contained.

Every day was just great, and he produced piles of Potent Hemotoxic Poison. One good thing about the Order was the limitless supply of glass bottles. He had thrown a buttload into his new and improved spatial storage already, with it barely taking up any space.

On the sixty-third day after Jake entered seclusion, he had been crafting his most difficult creation yet. It contained the Crimson Dawn Lotus and pulled on all of Jake's insights he had gained so far and his understanding of the concept of time. This was far from the first try, but he had a good feeling as Jake became more and more familiar with the concept due to his class skills and further improved his level of comprehension as he researched the lotuses.

By researching, he meant he ate them for Palate, something he had done with all of his obtained herbs.

If others saw this, they would be spitting up blood, but Jake didn't care. He knew he was wealthy, and he knew he could earn back his wealth again. Hoarding materials without progressing made no sense. And progress Jake did, as he on that day finally managed to succeed – just before he hit the two-month mark since entering the laboratory.

You have successfully crafted [Accelerated Hemotoxic Poison (Rare)] - A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned

[Accelerated Hemotoxic Poison (Rare)] – Time heals all wounds, or so the saying goes, but to some alchemists, time can become yet another weapon. Greatly increases bleeding on infected entities and makes any injuries significantly harder to heal. The poison must be introduced directly into the bloodstream to have any effect. Spreads throughout the body of the inflicted foe near-instantly, making it even harder to dispel. Forcefully speeds up the flow of blood within the foe, forcefully accelerating the effect of the poison, making it deal damage faster over a far shorter period.

Seeing the notification had put a massive smile on his face. The poison was exactly what he had hoped and avoided one of the biggest weaknesses of the Hemotoxic Poison, which was the slow-acting effect. By mixing in some time affinity from the Crimson Dawn Lotus, the process would be sped up and make the poison even better. The ash from the Crimsonwood tree would then make the poison bind with the blood more thoroughly, making it even harder to get rid of too. It was one nasty poison, and one Jake was very happy about making. Especially as it was followed by another system message.

[Concoct Poison (Uncommon)] - While most focus on the aspect of giving life through their craft, others prefer to take it away. Allows for the concoction of uncommon-rarity poisons and below. Must have suitable materials and equipment in order to create poisons. Adds a small increase to the effectiveness of created poisons based on Wisdom.

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[Concoct Poison (Rare)] - While most focus on the aspect of giving life through their craft, others prefer to take it away. Allows for the concoction of rare rarity poisons and below. Must have suitable materials and equipment in order to create poisons. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of created poisons based on Wisdom.

When he had gained the upgrade, Jake was more than elated. He had wanted Concoct Poison to reach rare before he evolved to C-grade. He had evolved it to uncommon rarity in E-grade and now rare in D-grade, so he had to keep the streak going, right? He knew this was already far better than the average, making him smile as he read the changed description.

As expected, it was much of the same, just pointing out he could now make rare rarity poison. The only other benefit was that it increased Wisdom scaling, now making every poison he created slightly better. More than anything, upgrading a skill like this was a feel-good moment and not a purely practical one... okay, it apparently did have a great impact on Records and potential profession evolutions, but Jake had a feeling he would be fine in that department either way.

Speaking of Records, there finally was the big one. The one other goal Jake had when he entered seclusion: to get some god damn levels. And levels he got.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 153 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

...

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 168 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 153 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

...

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 160 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

Sixteen levels in his profession in only a bit over two months. It was roughly one level every four days, which quite frankly was insane and proof of how many materials he had burned through as well as the level of progress he had made. He knew this had been him building off the momentum he had amassed for the last few months before the crafting sessions, but during it all, he also realized how much he had to pull on for knowledge even before he went to the Order.

One had to remember Jake had undergone the Trial of Myriad Poisons. He had been injected with – as the name suggested – myriad poisons, and even if this didn't help much in his daily life, it allowed him to more easily understand things when he came across them. He got a sense of déjà-vu whenever a poison he had consumed prior popped up. As with most knowledge, he didn't just remember everything, but the knowledge only appeared when in the right context.

With the levels also came two other benefits. One was Path of the Heretic-Chosen getting another charge, and the second was skill selection. To cut a short story even shorter, Jake picked the best skill of the bunch.

[Advanced Core Manipulation (Ancient)] – To touch upon a core of pure energy and Records is to touch upon the broken shell of a soul. Allows the alchemist to far more easily manipulate cores and the Records within the broken soul shells with the goal of refining them. Refined cores will, in most cases, be more effective, and you can also choose to amplify certain effects. Having taken it further, you have learned that the layers of souls can be malleable in some circumstances, and applying this knowledge, you have learned to fuse cores containing similar Records and even change their nature in some circumstances as your own soul influences the core. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Advanced Core Manipulation based on Wisdom and Willpower.

The reason why he had chosen this skill was two-fold. First of all, it was something he felt like he needed, especially as he had decided that it would soon be time to awaken the Pollendust Bee Queen. Okay, Jake-soon, as he still didn't feel even close to ready. Additionally, he also knew that core refinement did not work very well with Touch of the Malefic Viper, as that was more core corruption. After all, touch did not really "improve" something; it just changed it. He needed a dedicated skill, so when he saw the option, he was instantly intrigued.

This was clearly an upgrade to the rare Refine Core skill he had been offered at level 120. Back then, he had skipped it due to its low rarity but also because he didn't have any immediate use. Both of those things had now changed.

As for the skill itself, well, as far as he could tell, it pulled a lot on his experience with Shroud of the Primordial. It had something to do with soul shells or something, and to be fair, Jake was not entirely sure what it was talking about. Either way, he had a strong feeling the skill would be very useful, and it would also offer him more diversity when it came to alchemy. Oh, and being able to fuse the thousands of insect cores he had would make the ritual to awaken the Pollendust Bee Queen way simpler and likely also more effective. The skill also came with a lot of innate knowledge, giving him confidence in using it.

Anyway, that was the first reason he had picked it: because it was good. The second reason was that everything else offered was shit. Like, so shit, he didn't even want to think about it. Every single one of the four other options related to Jake being either a Chosen or a Heretic. All of it was about Jake being back at the Order of the Malefic Viper and offered him a leadership skill, a skill granting knowledge of the Order, a skill to grow dissent and make more heretics, and some fourth bullshit skill Jake would never pick in a thousand years. Rather pick the god damn geology skill at inferior rarity than that.

And this more or less was Jake's progress over the last two months and a bit. He had kept crafting a few more rare poisons until the evening of the same day he had made the first one. That is when he was finally contacted by the one person he had allowed to.

"Carmen contacted me a while ago and asked me to inform you she was on her way to Haven and would arrive within a day or two. She found clues on where her family might be and a trail to start following. More details to follow when you get back."

The moment Jake heard the message, he also felt like now was a good time to stop. He hadn't entirely burned through all his momentum, but it was best to stop now anyway. He had reached his goal, and he was tired anyway.

So Jake sent back an affirmation as he prepared to leave seclusion for the first time in over two months. On a side note, Miranda had known he was in seclusion, and, for that reason, they had skipped their

agreed-upon meetings. They did have a small talk before he entered seclusion and agreed on her giving him a debrief once he returned to Earth.

At the same time as he exited the laboratory, he also reached out to the Viper and got confirmation: the snake god had made a better method for Jake to return to Earth.

That settled everything as finally, it was time to return to Earth. He would not return to the Order until after the next system event either, but he would have to hunt down a Prima before that. Something he had also made prior preparations for with the help of Miranda and a little-known mad scientist called Arnold. He also had to help Carmen, so he had plenty of things to do. Things he wanted to do.

Jake smiled to himself as he smelled the fresh air outside the laboratory, happy with everything he had achieved and even happier as he thought about visiting Earth again and finally getting in some good stretches by killing something.

Chapter 448 - Unexpected New Paths

Before returning to Earth, Jake needed a proper method to travel back and forth that didn't rely on being in Haven. Luckily, he had already talked about this with Villy quite a few times and knew the snake god was on it. They both wanted to give Jake the possibility as there were still many things to be done back on his home planet and in his home universe as a whole.

So a quick telepathic phone call later, the snake god popped into his living room – Meira being away at a lesson. Jake not even having talked with her yet since exiting his little isolation session.

“Had a nice time doing alchemy?” Villy asked when he appeared, smiling.

“Pretty good if I say so myself, lots of levels, skill upgrade, a new skill, hemotoxins for days. You know, all the good things in life,” Jake joked in response.

“Nice to know my dear Chosen at least enjoys what I am known for. Well, known for in an at least a semi-positive light,” Villy answered with his own cheeky smile before continuing. “I remember you mentioning you took a skill for rituals, right?”

“I did,” Jake confirmed as he had a suspicion about why the Viper asked.

“Well, that entire travel-between-universes issue will require a bit of ritual-making from your side to function,” the Viper explained as he fished out a crystal he promptly tossed to Jake. It was similar to the one the vampires had given him and contained knowledge.

Jake quickly scanned it and saw it was a guide for some kind of ritual or array. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what the Viper was asking of him. “I need to set up my own teleportation circles?”

He did not like the sound of that. Jake had no experience with magic circles at all, and even if he now had a skill that helped a bit, he had no confidence in setting anything complex up without a long period of practice first.

“Yes and no. You do technically need to make a magic circle, but not a teleportation circle per-se. What you will need to do is make a subordinate circle to the primary teleporter placed in the city. Think about it as a receiver with the monument in your city as the sender. You just need to tap into the signal and remote-activate the monument, and off you go through the void between universes,” Villy explained.

Jake nodded a bit as he kept scanning the Memory Crystal. It really didn't seem that complicated, but Jake could still see setting up the circle would take a bit of time, not making the teleportation anything instant.

"Thanks, man, this should come in handy," Jake said as the snake god also threw him a bunch of stones, as well as an odd green orb.

"Use those stones to activate the circle and feed it power together with your own mana. As for the orb, give it to that little verdant witch of yours. It is a gift from her Patrons," Villy said.

Jake inspected the two items he had been given right away and frowned a bit.

[Energy Stone (Common)] – A stone containing energy.

[Verdant Orb (Unique)] – An orb made to be used only by those compatible.

It was one of those cases where Identify did nothing. He was a bit surprised at getting common rarity stones from Villy to power the circle, but then again, what the hell did he know?

"Anything else I should bring back?" Jake asked.

"Now that you mention it, I do have this nascent plague I would like to ask for you to spread and then report back on the general deadliness," Villy grinned.

"I could take it and just eat it with Palate," Jake commented.

"Funny that you mention it... that is actually quite a normal tactic. A specific poison or disease designed to kill anyone and anything, while being especially weak against Palate, making all those with the skill survive," Villy said nonchalantly.

"Is that actually something people do?" Jake asked, not sure if he wanted the answer.

"Plague theory is not really a big branch of the Order. If I am perfectly honest, it is due to its generally low level of power. It is only good at killing those significantly weaker, and even then, it is often easily thwarted by talented healers and others finding ways to combat it. But yes, it has been used. More by the Risen than the Order, though, as it is a good way to clear life-affinity energy from an area to kill off all the weak critters, turning it into a land of death," the god explained. "Now, if you really wanna kill a planet without having to kill everything by yourself... ah, never mind, we'll save that one for another time. Just know you already possess the necessary tools, even if you lack the power to pull it off."

"I will not mind, no, as I have no plans of destroying any planets," Jake shook his head.

"Yet," Villy foreshadowed with a cheeky smile.

"Anyway!" Jake cut the conversation all. "How the hell do I get back to Earth?"

"Oh. Yeah. That. Well, I already installed the teleporter in your secret sealed-off basement room."

“I have a secret sealed-off basement room?”

“As of ten minutes ago, Yes,” the god said as he motioned for Jake to follow him.

They went over to the library, where the god went over and pulled on a book that made a bookshelf swing open, revealing a stairway. One that had definitely not been there before.

“A little basic,” Jake commented.

“What can I say? I am a fan of the classics,” Villy answered with a shrug.

“You just infused mana into the entire shelf, didn’t you?” Jake asked, having felt the flow of energy.

“Oh yeah, totally. The book is just for show. The activation mechanism is bound to your mana, well, and mine, but mainly yours. An array covers the entire place, making even most gods unable to locate this area,” the snake god further explained as they both walked down into a small chamber with an intricate teleportation circle in the middle.

Jake looked at it for a moment and the scripts that covered the wall. “I take it you facilitate the teleportation from this universe and back to the ninety-third entirely?”

“Precisely. You just need to step on the platform, put a bit of mana in, and off you go. It even works with others, but only up to a dozen or so at a time. More than that, and, well, some might get stuck in the void mid-teleport.”

“AKA a bad time,” Jake nodded.

“Well, not really an anything-time, as it would just mean ceasing to exist, but that is another conversation my poor little D-grade Chosen is too young to have. By the time you are ready to enter the void yourself, you won’t even be my Chosen anymore,” Villy said with a smile. “Now, better get going.”

“Aight. Thanks for this time, and see you soon,” Jake said as he got on the teleporter. He infused mana into it as he, at that very last moment, remembered: he had forgotten about Meira.

Sadly, he was already swept away before he could stop it as he disappeared from the first universe and went back towards Earth.

Back on Earth, the planet had experienced what many would classify as a second renaissance after the system had arrived. The system event that allowed individuals to revitalize themselves and find a new path had passed, with it bringing about incredible change.

For many, the event didn’t affect them personally. Individuals like Miranda, Jacob, Carmen, Neil, and his party, or any elite really, weren’t affected in the slightest. This event was not for them. No, the true change was found in the level 30 construction worker who had not received a level in months. The warrior who discovered he wasn’t suited for fighting beasts in close range, the mage who learned he was not talented in magic, or just those who had never truly found a Path.

To these people, the event was a second chance. Classes and professions were changed, people found new hope, and a sense of life enveloped every city as progress returned to many. Simply finding a new path and doing the event had also resulted in Records, allowing those who had changed to get an initial period where they almost sprinted, fast getting stronger and more assured in their choices.

For some who were stuck, this event led to no changes, not because they had failed, but because they were already set on their Path – even if that Path was a mediocre one. The small restaurant owner who was satisfied with his life, the smith that enjoyed just working a few hours a day and then relaxing the rest with his family. These people had chosen a Path, even if it wasn't one to power.

Nevertheless, this led to growth across the planet. The average level of humanity grew, and more and more D-grades appeared as the native humans got a second wind. To make it even better, these people who had just gained another chance could potentially also participate in the next event less than a month away. If not the Path of Myriad Choices, then at least participate in whatever Seat of the Exalted Prima was.

The cities that benefitted the most were naturally the large ones. Sanctdomo had a massive spike in power, but the fringe groups like the Court of Shadows and Risen also got a boost few had expected: re-alignment of their citizens. Many had picked professions and classes during their tutorials with no knowledge they would end up working with shadow assassins or the living dead, but now that they got a chance to change? They adapted.

Among the Risen, Necromancers, death mages, crafters specialized in death-attuned materials, and even people who decided during the event they wanted to become Risen. For the Court, the same was true as many became more specialized in what the Court needed, with a similar thing playing out all around the planet.

Haven didn't actually experience that much growth overall. Most who went there were already settled in their own Paths, so while some did make use of the event, the vast majority of them didn't. However, there was one large exception.

Miranda sat in the office and drank some coffee with the man in front of her. The last time they had spoken had only been a week ago, but he had grown significantly yet again. Back then, he had just reached D-grade, and now he was already level 110. However, more surprising than anything was that the man had been stalled for so long beforehand.

"You are looking better than ever, Phillip," Miranda smiled at the former military man and leader of the Fort.

"It sure is a strange time," the man said as he also took a sip. His face no longer looked sunken, and he was no longer a tired man at the end of his rope. Miranda had come to understand him quite well with time and come to realize that while he was strong for his level when they first met, it wasn't because he really wanted to be strong.

He had been part of the military. He had been the leader and sent into a tutorial with people from his camp, and they had all turned to him for guidance. When he got out of the Tutorial, he had appeared in the old base camp, and yet again, all had turned to him for guidance as he was the highest-rank commanding officer present.

Out of a sense of responsibility, he had accepted. Then they found a sanctuary, saved citizens, made the Fort a fortified settlement, and he just kept going because he had to. But then Jake had turned up. A magical bird had rebuffed a force he and his men would get slaughtered by. Miranda came and helped take over the management of the Fort. Suddenly he no longer had any responsibilities and was lost.

Phillip had, by all accounts, retired. He was already a middle-aged man before the system arrived and was tired of the constant pressure and expectations. His sense of responsibility was so ingrained in him that he kept working even after he “retired” as a representative of the former soldiers and those who stayed at the Fort. Not that they needed a representative, he was just the kind of man that couldn’t sit still.

And then... then this system event came. Miranda had expected a lot of people to find their Path through this event, but Phillip was not one of them. He didn’t seem to have the drive anymore, but it appeared she had miscalculated.

The man before her could barely be compared to the old Phillip. No longer was he a man constantly wandering around with his rifle to look “official” or with a profession to lead the troops and defend the Fort. Instead, he sat there with well-defined muscles, skin that had an odd semi-metallic tinge to it, while only wearing a thin shirt and normal pants. He wore no equipment at all, yet Miranda felt his body brimming with power.

Alteration Mage. No, to call him a mage was perhaps incorrect. He was more a fighter than a mage, even if he did use magic as his primary tool of combat. The difference was that the only target of his magic was himself and his own body. His profession had also changed to be some kind of enchanter. Miranda was not privy to the details, but she knew he was no easy opponent, especially not after reaching D-grade.

“Are you sure you want to fully step down from all of your positions?” Miranda asked to confirm. Phillip had still been a part of many endeavors but had slowly phased them out. Now he came to get entirely uninvolved with everything Haven and Fort-related.

“I am,” Phillip nodded. “I have done enough for this place. For others. From now on, I will focus on myself and myself only. I plan on leaving soon to travel around a bit after the event, but before that, I want to get enough levels to properly do the dungeon beneath the city.”

She also liked how he looked when he talked about exploring the planet. He looked happy, perhaps for the first time since she met the man over a year ago.

"It is your choice," Miranda said approvingly.

"For the first time in a long time... it truly does feel like it is," he smiled in response.

Back with Jake, he was still making his way to Earth.

Jake felt himself flow through the void once more. He closed his eyes and tried to seal off his Sphere of Perception to not be overwhelmed by the odd sensation the place gave him as he hoped for it to pass quickly.

However... it didn't.

It took longer than before. Jake suddenly felt like a gaze landed upon him, and he sensed himself stop. At the same time, he felt an overwhelming sense of danger for a fraction of a second before it disappeared just as it came. At the same time, Jake's sphere no longer felt overloaded... in fact, it felt like whatever space he was in had suddenly turned stable and un-void-like.

Jake opened his eyes and saw the pitch-black darkness of the void as cold sweat appeared, and an innate fear swelled up from deep in his soul. He saw only the darkness that high enough Perception could perhaps one day pierce, as he had no idea what or who was watching. He was unsure what was happening as he felt something besides Villy just staring, with Villy's attention on him being far weaker.

He felt a bit nervous as suddenly a single eye appeared within his vision. A human eye with an odd multi-colored iris. Then another. Then ten eyes, a hundred, thousand, million. The entire void was replaced by a rainbow of colored eyes before they all merged together and formed what could be described as a malformed head that appeared small yet filled his entire field of vision.

“Deliver. Gift.”

A voice echoed in his head made up of a mix of distorted voices as blood began pouring out of his ears and eyes. Jake had to grit his teeth as he slowly felt his consciousness slip away as if his mind was shutting down to protect his psyche. Something impacted his chest as he began blacking out while floating through the void again.

The final thing he saw before slipping out of consciousness was the entire void suddenly gaining a dark green tinge as a familiar presence descended.

Chapter 449 - Oras

Vilastromoz made sure Jake had safely passed through the void and back to his planet before he regarded the being before him. Today had been a stark reminder that even with all of his preparations, there existed beings in the multiverse that could circumvent them.

The Viper had used several methods to hide Jake traveling through the void. The biggest one was, of course, Shroud of the Primordial, but the teleportation itself should also help hide him. These preparations should have been unnecessary anyway, as locating anything traveling through the void in such a brief period was beyond even the Viper himself. Finally, why would some ancient and powerful being even bother with interfering with someone teleporting through? Trillions went through the void every moment, so what was one in so many?

Yet none of that mattered before the being in front of him. It was the same being that had originally spotted Jake when he traveled to the Order. The fact he had been spotted the first time around was no surprise, as the being saw most everything that ever passed the void, with the only surprise being Jake noticing the gaze. Well, not a surprise to Vilastromoz, but probably the creature.

“Snake Who Holds Forgotten Knowledge, you seek compensation?” the voice of the being echoed as the ever-shifting reptilian eyes moved before him.

“I first seek answers,” Vilastromoz said, not minding the title the being had assigned him.

“Traveler of the void, passing the veil of the new world. A gift given to be delivered to that which I gaze upon,” the Void Dweller answered as cryptically as ever.

The Viper frowned at the answer. For the Void Dweller before him to gaze upon someone was just a fancy way of saying it had blessed them. Normally that would be whatever, but the situation was different when dealing with beings like this. A god’s Blessing would affect the target, yes, but the Blessing of a Void Dweller, much less one like the one before him? The effects would be significant. Merely seeing a Void Dweller could make mortals lose their minds and have their mental faculties irreversibly corrupted, so it was no surprise a Blessing did even more.

“What did you ask to be delivered?” the Viper asked.

“Gift. Knowledge. Power.”

“And who is it supposed to be delivered to?” Vilastromoz kept pressing.

“He Who Commands The Many Eyes That Dwell Within the Soulless Vessels of Metal and Lightning. Seeker of knowledge like I,” the Void Dweller explained without much care for the overly long title.

Vilastromoz finally turned his gaze towards Earth and quickly did a scan. He had never bothered to scan the ones around Jake much, just a cursory one. He had assumed none could hide from his probing, but upon a deeper inspection, he noticed there was indeed one person with a Blessing he hadn't noticed before, making him frown even more.

“You could have asked before making my Chosen a mule,” the Viper protested as he stared into the many eyes.

“Yes... decision made in haste. Apologies, Keeper of Lost Knowledge. Compensation will be made,” the Void Dweller answered, as the eyes shifted a bit in apology. Vilastromoz could read this particular Void Dweller as it wasn't one of the mindless beasts that usually roamed the endless void, but one most gods of any repute had found themselves in contact with several times in the past.

“What do you offer me?” he asked.

“To the Primordial? None shall be given. Compensation for He Who Hunts. An equal, is he not? Nascent seeds will be planted, more futures planned. Outcomes predicted falsely before, corrections required,” the Void Dweller answered.

Vilastromoz just sighed as the eyes kept shifting. He felt movement from afar as he stood in the middle of the void as the attention of more beings began gathering as the Viper had let his aura flare. “Fine. Just don't have this repeat itself. Even if you want a favor from him, ask through me. Finally, why are you

playing with the minds of mortals? I never figured you to be the kind of being to break a weak mortal like that.”

“Interpretations infinite, minds of unlimited variations. Comprehension of He With Eyes of Steel, mortal yet mind untouched. Corruption minimal, patterns recognized; seeks only knowledge. Compatible.”

He understood the answer as most of the communication did not come in words but in shapes and expressions made by its body. The Viper didn’t ask further but just looked at the Void Dweller and the ever-flowing ocean of eyes it consisted of. It was a physique not like any other creatures in the multiverse, and these Void Dwellers could only reside within the void. Well, most of them anyway.

“I shall trust your discretion then,” the Viper nodded. “May your gaze land upon all of existence, Oras the All-Seeing.”

“May your will shape reality, Malefic Viper of the Primordials.”

With that, the eyes all disappeared as Vilastromoz sighed again. Oras was a difficult one to deal with. A creature as ancient as could be, a true god of the void, unlike the majority of its void brethren.

Speaking of Void Dwellers. The Viper chose not to leave right away as he felt the many creatures close in on him, their auras dominating the vast nothingness, every single one of them able to slay gods like were they children before men. The weakest Void Dwellers in the void were a match for a newly ascended god, with the ones closing in on the Viper being far above that level, able to slay Godkings and Godqueens easily.

Predators of a domain that should not be threaded by those belonging to the universes. The mere aura of a god attracted them as they sought to feast and grow from the slaughter of energies not of the void.

Vilastromoz had to admit he felt angry. So far, he had predicted most things, and those he had failed to predict, he had at least had a sense would happen, or they had led to positive outcomes above expectations. However, someone like Oras was not predictable. Vilastromoz did not understand the Void God like he understood his fellow Primordials. Something that annoyed him severely.

Hopefully, the deaths of the approaching Void Dwellers would quell that anger just a little bit, also giving him a chance to get a good stretch in.

Jake woke up with a start as he quickly oriented himself. The entire area around him was filled with his own mana as he found himself in a defensive position. Instinctually he knew that he and everyone else had gotten lucky that nobody had entered his laboratory, where Jake had returned to upon arriving on Earth.

As he observed his sphere, he noticed something out of place. On the floor in front of him lay a small black cube with magical patterns on it and what looked like eyes marking its surface. He instantly recognized the faint energy it gave off as the same as the creature he had encountered in the void.

Just thinking about that thing made his head hurt as he groaned in pain. He tried to find out how long he had been out of commission instead and found out he had been knocked out for well over an hour. He checked his status and saw he had lost health, mana, and stamina from the encounter, indicating soul damage. Soul damage from just looking at the damn thing.

The box on the floor suddenly caught his eye. Where had that come from? It had the same energy as the being he saw in the void and-

A headache assaulted him again. Without thinking, Jake pulled off his cloak and threw it over the cube on the floor, making his headache instantly subside. At the same time, he remembered everything far more clearly. That damn box was able to make him forget it even existed? What the actual fuck was it?

“Villy... what the fuck is going on?” Jake finally asked. A few seconds passed as he got an answer.

“You met a Void God... again. Oras, as it is known. An ancient creature born of the void.” Villy answered, sounding annoyed.

“How did he spot me with Shroud? Also, are you okay? I remember seeing you appear just as I blacked out...”

“I am fine. And Oras spotted you because the Shroud and everything else I do isn’t good enough to hide you when in the void. Not from Oras,” the Viper explained.

“What the hell does that thing want? Something about a gift? Who for?” Jake asked, even more confused.

“Traveling through the void isn’t easy. Going out of the ninety-third universe is especially hard, and going back in? I reckon only a few can even facilitate this return trip. Oras spotted you and decided to have you bring something into the ninety-third universe. The gift you received is not for you, but the one Oras has “blessed.” I use that word very carefully as the usual result from someone getting blessed by a Void God is a cult that makes the Order of the Malefic Viper look like the good guys in comparison. Luckily, Oras cares little for anything besides knowledge and seeing new things... at least as far as I can tell. I don’t fully understand the creature.”

Jake nodded in understanding. "So, who is this god-forsaken box a gift for?"

"Arnold."

Hearing the name, Jake's eyes flashed for a moment. For some reason, the answer didn't surprise him, even if he did find it confusing why some being from the void would bless Arnold, a guy who liked making machines. Confusion the Viper clearly detected.

"I don't know why Oras blessed that man. That is for you to discover, but in my experience, the logic of a Void Dweller is not worth trying to comprehend. However, it does seem like Arnold is mostly unaffected... I would look into why that is. His mind seems to accept the Void Dweller, which is quite peculiar," the Viper said.

"So, should I deliver the box?" Jake finally asked.

"Go ahead. Oras said you would get some kind of compensation, and while I do not understand the creature, it somewhat understands mortals. So his compensation should be worth it."

Jake nodded again, and after a few more words, they ended their conversation. He felt that the Viper seemed somewhat distracted during their talk, but that wasn't anything new. What was new was the Viper actively using the name of another mortal. This indicated that Villy actually viewed Arnold as someone with some level of importance now, showing that this Oras was a big deal.

Wanting his cloak back, Jake closed his eyes and pulled it off the box. Luckily he could look at the box using his Sphere of Perception without feeling like his head was about to split open. He took out a black piece of cloth from his inventory and wrapped the box in it before putting it inside a wooden barrel he normally used for water. The entire thing was only about the size of a shoebox, and when he tried to lift it, he noticed how it didn't weigh anything. That wasn't an exaggeration either; the metal-looking box with eyes on it literally didn't weigh anything. It was honestly just creepy.

At least he could put it in his spatial storage while still in the barrel. Jake proceeded to walk up to the lodge above and over to the pond, where he quickly washed the blood off his face from bleeding out of his own orifices. He wasn't in a hurry to deliver the box and decided to get a few things done first.

Firstly he checked in on the troll down in the cavern. Rick, as he had been named, was still just chilling with what was now a sprawling garden down in the biodome. His kids were also there, having grown a little since the last time he saw them.

Next up, he headed for the city center of Haven and met up with Miranda. They had a good talk with Jake getting updated on recent happenings in the city. He even remembered to give her that Verdant Orb Villy had handed him - primarily because she reminded him to.

He wasn't entirely sure how to feel when he got told that his absence hadn't really had any impact and that most assumed he was just in the valley doing alchemy or out hunting or something.

The city itself had grown even more since the last time he was there. He was informed that the Fort had expanded yet again as more and more sought the larger settlements. He learned about the outcome of the first system event and how many had begun progressing again, including Phillip. Jake honestly didn't care overly much, even if he was happy that others were finding their own roads to power.

Their meeting was interrupted about an hour in as suddenly Jake felt a gust of wind enter through an open window, and the next moment, a bird was standing atop his head. Jake had felt her coming but didn't react, allowing the hawk to get her small moment of triumph as she screeched and flapped her wings happily.

Jake raised his hands and lifted her off his head as he gave the bird a hug. "Hey Sylphie, long time no see."

The hawk looked up as she snuggled up to him, Jake just stroking her small head. He smiled, yet he had a somewhat mixed feeling when he used Identify and saw her level.

[Sylphian Eyas – lvl 163]

For the first time since her birth, she had surpassed him in levels. Jake would lie if he said it wasn't somewhat expected. Sylphie was still growing rapidly and was still just identified as an Eyas, meaning that even if she just slept and did nothing, she would keep leveling. Combined with her Blessing from Stormild, her connection to Jake, and her own efforts, it was no a surprise she had kept progressing so fast.

As he held her, she made some cute chirping sounds as Jake nodded along, getting the gist of what she was saying. She even summoned a medal of sorts with the same symbol on it as Jake's Altmar Signet, meaning his little hawk had also gotten the highest evaluation too – or at least been evaluated to be impossible to evaluate.

One thing also quickly became clear. Sylphie was not back in Haven just to say hi to Jake but because Carmen was coming. Jake was totally fine with the two-person journey to track down Carmen's family turning into a three-person trip.

"I will always be amazed at the growth of Sylphie," Miranda said as she looked at the hawk. Jake nodded but didn't really think she was one to talk, seeing how her level had also grown significantly.

[Human – lvl 158]

She was nearly at his own level. Jake knew a large reason for this was her profession leveling damn quickly, but she also clearly farmed some class levels here and there. If Jake had not just gotten a lot of fast levels, he would be way behind. He was also certain Carmen had to have surpassed him in level by now.

Not that Jake was worried. In fact, he found the sentiment exciting. He had never feared not being the strongest, and if everyone else got more powerful, didn't that just mean he had more people to fight?

Sylphie felt his thoughts and squirmed herself free as she screeched in approval. He felt her intentions, and he was more than happy to oblige when the time was right.

"She is a real talent, isn't she," Jake said to Miranda as he smiled, Sylphie once more letting out a ree of agreement. "I am going to head over to Arnold now to check what information he has gained on the locations of any Primas and the route to this port city."

"Have a nice journey. I will remain here in case Carmen shows up. Not that I doubt we won't both notice her arrival, she isn't exactly the stealthy type," Miranda answered with a chuckle.

With that, Jake got up and headed off to the Fort. He teleported together with Sylphie, who had decided to stay with him, and reached the now buzzing city within a few minutes of leaving Miranda's office. The teleportation circles had been moved yet another time as Jake looked towards the central citadel and saw that the metal sphere had expanded not just in width but in height as the mad scientist had obviously noticed he was running out of horizontal real estate.

As he looked towards the metal sphere, he faintly felt the odd box that had been forced upon him vibrate within his necklace, dispelling all doubt that Arnold was truly related to it. Jake just had a hard time figuring out how the many-eyed freak of a Void Dweller was related to a mad scientist. Well, besides the entire theme of madness.

Oh well, I guess I can just ask him.

Chapter 450 - Comprehending The Incomprehensible

"So, Arnold, what made you decide to get blessed and enter a pact with some sort of otherworldly being of the void that usually turns people insane merely by laying their eyes upon it?"

Jake had barely entered the sphere of metal and made his way to the mad scientist before he popped the question burning in his mind. He hadn't even taken out the creepy cube yet. Jake had just been invited in by Arnold's assistant and walked into his workshop asking about his Void God pal first-thing.

Arnold, to his credit, didn't get fazed and didn't even look up from his workbench as he answered: "By all estimates, being blessed by a god is superior to not being blessed by one, and the offered benefits outstripped all other offers at the time."

It was the kind of answer Jake had expected, but he still pressed further. "But... have you seen this god?"

“Naturally,” Arnold nodded, still unbothered as his hands kept working.

“And? No comments on the appearance of a floating thing of infinite eyeballs?”

“The appearance of Oras shifts according to the observer,” Arnold shook his head. “I saw not an eye but a string of numbers. All perceptions one can have are related to the act of observing. You saw a representation of a visual organ while I saw a language able to relay what is observed.”

“Are you trying to tell me you see the world as being made up of numbers or what?” Jake asked further, wondering if Arnold thought he lived in a simulation or something.

“No. Just that all can be reduced to numbers. Even the system itself,” Arnold nonchalantly answered. He soon stopped his work and looked up at Jake. “I do not believe you have come here to discuss divine alignments?”

“No, I came to ask about something else... okay, just one more question, do you talk to Oras?” Jake couldn’t hold himself back from asking.

“Talk? No. Communicate? Yes. Conversation through spoken words such as the one we are having right now is a severely limited and highly inefficient way to relay information from one source to another. The communication thus happens through images, arrays, patterns, and formulas, which is far more efficient and helpful,” the scientist explained.

Jake couldn’t help but imagine the two biggest nerds in the multiverse talking with each other by using god damn formulas to spell out stuff. But... Jake began to understand how Arnold could deal with Oras. “Okay, final question. What is Oras to you?”

He had a hunch and wanted to confirm it.

“Unknown as of yet,” Arnold shrugged.

“What is your best guess?”

“Knowing when you don’t know something is knowledge in itself. I don’t need to guess when I know I can’t comprehend something yet. I still have many steps to understand before I can comprehend a being such as Oras, making my lack of comprehending the creature a natural conclusion,” Arnold answered. “The human mind is limited in scope, and we must accept there are some things we are not meant to understand. However, that doesn’t mean we can’t try to comprehend them and observe the impact they have on phenomena we can see. Through those observations and evolution brought upon us by the system, perhaps one day we can transcend our current limits. But that day has yet to come.”

Jake nodded along as he kind of got it. He remembered talking to an old acquaintance from school during a reunion who was studying physics at the time. The guy talked about quantum mechanics and how there were so many things we simply didn’t understand and concepts that just seemed beyond the human mind to comprehend.

Yet he also talked of tools to measure what these incomprehensible things did. He talked about how humans tried to make theories and formulas to explain what happened, even in situations where imagination had long conceded.

Jake didn’t really get it... but he did get the simplified explanation Arnold gave.

“Humans couldn’t see ultraviolet light before the system, yet we could make devices that could. We couldn’t see gravity, but we could measure what it did. That has changed now, as the body has evolved to, in many ways, become the best measuring device in existence and the mind the best computer to simulate hypotheses and confirm theory. I have already become able to understand flows of energy, comprehend patterns not understandable to the human mind before, and I am certain you are the same. Your senses now also encompass mana. You can feel the flow of energies within your own body, and even metaphysical concepts are now understandable – something we couldn’t even observe before the system. In due time, even a being like Oras will be understandable as our scopes expand.”

It was the most Jake had ever heard Arnold talk, and he actually heard some passion in his voice. Jake felt like he had gotten a far better understanding of Arnold during this brief talk and, in concert, also understood Oras a bit better.

Arnold was just a damn nerd, and Oras was a nerd-loving knowledge-seeker, AKA also a mega-nerd. Simple as that. At least, that is how Jake chose to summarize it.

“Anyway, I brought this for you,” Jake finally said as he pulled out the weird box the eldritch abomination of eyes had given him.

Arnold stared for a while as he asked. “I am uncertain why you brought me a barrel.”

Jake quickly reacted as he opened the barrel and pulled out the bundle of cloth containing the box. “I would advise you to close your eyes or something. Looking at this thing is highly unpleasant.”

He followed his own advice as he began unwrapping the bundle. Arnold reacted by taking out a pair of spectacles and putting those on. Jake was anticipating the man to fall over or grasp his head in pain when the box was revealed, but he just stood there and looked at it.

“Ah. A puzzle box. Thank you,” Arnold just said as he went over and took it off Jake’s hands. Jake himself just stood there with closed eyes as Arnold carried it over to a glass container and put it inside.

“I have contained it now,” Arnold said, making Jake open his eyes, and instinctively he looked towards the box.

He saw it clear as day as it was within a display case of sorts. It looked like only a thin layer of glass separated the cube and himself, yet he felt no headache but could inspect it freely. The box was just black without any patterns on it, and there were no shifting eyes or weird energy surrounding it. It was just a black box, with its only extraordinary feature being how black it was.

Jake kept staring at it a bit as he just put it out of his mind, seriously not wanting to bother with it anymore. “So, Primas.”

Arnold nodded as he moved his hand and a large screen appeared on one of the walls displaying a map. Jake instantly saw a few familiar markings on it. Haven, Skyggen, Sanctdomo, and several other cities he recognized were marked on it, as well as some noticeable landmarks such as the Insect Plains and the large mountain Jake had passed on the way to Skyggen, now dubbed the Frostpeak Mountain.

Waving his hand again, the scientist made a few areas light up. At the same time, the map drew attention to a small mark at the far side of it, right at the edge of a large mass of nothingness – the ocean, Jake assumed.

The lit-up areas were all on the way to this marking, and based on the distance, Jake saw it was about four times as far as his journey to Skyggen had been. Luckily there appeared to be other settlements along the way, but the final stretch looked like it had to be passed by foot.

“The highlighted areas are ones where the energy signatures corresponding to Primas have been detected. This indicates they either live there or have lived there previously. Based on the signals and times of death of the eagle Prima and the monkey you have slain previously, we have a rough estimate of this Prima energy half-life. Primas all give off unique energy, same as races such as humans or elementals of specific affinities,” Arnold explained.

Jake nodded along, knowing this already. Every single living thing had an energy signature entirely unique to themselves, but the same races also shared some common traits. This was all tied to Records, and needless to say, then all humans had the Records of being humans. In the same vein, all Primas had the Records of being Primas, making that the thing Jake would use to track them down.

“I have also marked zones with creatures of interest and the fastest routes to follow,” Arnold further explained.

Looking at the map and the level of detail, Jake couldn’t help but ask: “How did you map this? Satellites?”

“No. I have attempted launches, but the upper layers of the sky have proven impossible to break through with my current methods. Even that is secondary to making anything able to survive in space for a prolonged period without getting destroyed. This map was done with drones flying approximately ten kilometers in the air, just below the dense cover of clouds.”

“Must have been quite the operation,” Jake commented.

“An ongoing one,” Arnold just said as he motioned for Jake to follow. “I have also worked further on the requested weapon. However, as of yet, it isn’t ready.”

Arnold opened a container as a slick Nanoblade was revealed. It was just the blade, but Jake could practically feel the energy infused into it. It was as thin as ever too, and Jake wondered what it needed to be ready.

“The blade is mostly done, and the box you brought should help me finalize the product. We both share the fact that Perception is our primary stat, and I aim to infuse the Nanoblade with abilities taking advantage of that,” he explained.

Jake nodded along but suddenly got a very bad feeling when he heard Arnold mention the box. Wouldn’t that mean Jake would eventually run around with a cursed blade seeking to consume all of existence in one hand and a blade forged using methods passed down by some eldritch monstrosity in the other?

Actually, on second thought, that sounded pretty cool. “It looks damn impressive already. Keep up the good work, man.”

Arnold nodded as he handed Jake a tablet of sorts, not unlike one of the ones Arnold normally ran around with. “Within this tablet is general information of the areas you will encounter on your way, such as settlements and noteworthy territories of certain creatures. The map is naturally also included, and if you hold onto the tablet, it will track your location on said map. Any further questions?”

“Any advice on the journey?”

“Avoid the red zones or explore them carefully. Those are areas where I have detected C-grades,” Arnold answered, adding. “However, you will have to pass such an area to reach the port city. This place is known as the Grand Mangrove River, and it does contain Primas. Plural. However, I would suggest quickly passing as it also contains C-grades. Once more, plural. Flying over is not an option either. The reason for this should become rather obvious when you get near there.”

Jake checked the map and did notice a river-like area that seemed to cut through the terrain between the city closest to the port and the port itself.

“Got it. Do you need me to bring you fragments from Primas too?” Jake also asked. He hoped Carmen had all hers, as it could get a bit tight on time if he had to-

“No. I shall acquire all I need in cooperation with the City Lord,” he answered, shaking his head.

“Wait, Miranda got three already?” Jake asked, surprised. She hadn’t mentioned that even after they had spoken for so long. He knew Sylphie had two fragments, but that Miranda had three?

“No, we have four between us. The last two are already in progress of being acquired during this very moment,” Arnold just said, not explaining further on that topic. “Also, head towards the east for the Ambermill settlement. A powerful individual is currently passing through with an energy signature matching that of a member of Valhal. You intend to go with that woman, correct?”

To preserve his pride, Jake didn’t ask about the Prima fragments further. From the last sentence, he could also see Arnold really wanted him to leave by now, so Jake didn’t want to overstay his welcome more than necessary.

Once outside of the big metal dome, he met up with Sylphie again, who hadn't wanted to go into the dome. Apparently, she had tried to sneak in and cause havoc in the past, and Arnold had somehow managed to throw her out using some built-in defenses, impressing Jake. He still got the feeling Sylphie could have broken out and caused destruction, but neither party wanted that. This had inadvertently led to Sylphie really disliking Arnold but also kind of respecting him.

Another reason she respected him was explained as he got outside and saw her. Jake found Sylphie eating out of the hand of Arnold's assistant, who had kept an eye on her in a small building outside. Arnold was smart, after all, and knew bribery with food was a true and tested tactic when it came to placating powerful beasts.

"Sylphie, are you ready to head out?" he asked the hawk that was happily snacking away.

"Ree!" she answered with enthusiasm, flapping her wings. After a quick screech at Arnold's assistant thanking her for the food, Sylphie flew up and landed on his head again.

"Arnold found Carmen, so how about we go meet her on the way?"

That got another happy flap from Sylphie as the man and bird headed towards this little place called Ambermill.

Once his visitor was gone, and he was alone, Arnold activated all of the interior barriers to seal off the dome. At the same time, the entire laboratory shifted as the sensitive devices were retracted into the walls, leaving only himself, a single worktable, and a display case with the gift from Oras within.

Bringing the case to the center of the room, Arnold activated a small laser and cut off the top of the light-refracting glass. Just a hole large enough to put a finger through would be enough. He moved back as he took out a chair and sat down in it as he risked losing his balance with what happened next.

On the ceiling, a single laser appeared and fired down onto the cube, and the very next moment, it was as if Arnold had been transported into an entirely different world. The light reflected off the cube distorted all senses and made him perceive reality as different from what it was. Yet even if it changed, a pattern remained.

As he sat there, finding himself surrounded by lights with millions of colors and shapes he did not even know the name of, he began to decipher whatever mystery his Patron god had left within the cube. It was the type of mystery that perhaps didn't even have a solution, but merely attempting it would lead to newfound discoveries. Or, perhaps the conclusions would be based solely on the eye of the beholder.

Either way, there were patterns, and a theory adequately explaining this pattern could be made. There was meaning somewhere in the madness, and if there wasn't, then Arnold would just have to refine his theory until it was correct anyway.

Such was his Path. There was always a pattern, always a formula to describe reality, always an answer. With the system, everything was possible, even understanding the system itself.