

## Hunter 461

### Chapter 461 - City-Hopping

Jake and Carmen stood outside of the small brick house. It looked cheaply built, which made sense as this was squarely in the slums of Puddlerock. Apparently, many of those who lived there had been exiled from Saint-something island due to breaking some of their stupid Holy Church rules. Or maybe they just had a bit too much independence to fit in.

"This is the place?" Carmen asked as Jake checked the paper in his hand.

"Definitely looks like it," he nodded. "How did you find out about this Clinton guy anyway?"

"The Holy Church isn't the only faction with people able to divine stuff. Valhal has Rune Seers and stuff like that. I just got in touch with one of the better ones, and she used my Records to track my family by linking me to them. This is how she found this guy, too, as his karma is deeply tied to theirs," Carmen explained.

"I see," Jake nodded. He still wasn't clear on how Carmen wanted him to track her family, considering he had yet to see anything to go from that wasn't just good old detective work. For the Primas, he could use their energy signatures, and he would need something similar if he was to track humans.

"Why are we stalling, by the way?" Jake then asked.

"I wasn't," Carmen said defensively as she raised her hand to knock on the door. She hesitated a bit before she finally built up the courage.

She knocked two times as the two of them waited. Jake wasn't worried about no one being home, considering he could already see the man inside sitting in a chair reading a book. He was on the older side, probably in his late fifties to early sixties. Also, inside the house, Jake had already spotted a lot of fishing gear, and overall the guy called Clinton just gave Jake the impression of an average retired man who liked to fish.

When Carmen knocked, the man looked up, frowned, and placed the book on a table as he went to open the door. It didn't take long before he was there, but he didn't open it right away.

"Who's there?" he asked carefully.

"My name is Carmen... I am looking for some people you used to travel with, and I heard you could provide some information," the warrior of Valhal said a bit nervously.

The man instantly responded as he opened the door slowly at first, but was surprised and swung it open rapidly when he saw her. "Who are you?"

Carmen looked a bit surprised herself. "I already told you my name."

"Your voice just reminded me of someone else... sorry. Ah, where are my manners? Come on in. I hear you are looking for someone?" the man called Clinton said, finally calming down.

That is until he saw Jake wearing his mask and the hawk sitting on his shoulder. He stared at them a bit as Jake just raised his hand to give a friendly wave, Sylphie mimicking him as she raised her wing to also wave.

Cuteness won out as the man couldn't help but smile at the sight and was further calmed by Carmen's explanation. "He is a tracker I work with to help me find the people I am looking for."

Clinton nodded once more as he invited them in, and after the usual pleasantries of being offered a drink and politely declining, they finally got to the main topic.

"I can already guess who you are looking for... you look just like her. Your mother is called Marcia, right? Your father, Antonios?" Clinton asked with a light smile.

Carmen frowned a bit as she nodded, but Jake also felt a faint sense of relief. If it was because of the use of present tense implying they were still alive or the confirmation the man named Clinton knew about them, Jake wasn't sure.

"They were also traveling with several others from my family, right?" Carmen asked.

"Oh yes, quite a few. I think it is lucky that an entire family could enter a Tutorial together. I remember your father mentioning you and saying how you were away at college at the time and therefore weren't present at the annual dinner. It must have been tough," Clinton said apologetically.

"Unlucky... yeah," Carmen muttered as her gaze turned a bit cold. "I am currently looking for them and heard you know more. But before that, how come you left their group?"

Clinton sighed. "While it was a very cohesive group, there was also a lot of... drama. Being an outsider, I had no influence, so when I finally came across a safe settlement, I chose to make it my home. I also must apologize, but I am not sure exactly where they went, just that they went towards the western city of Longchester."

Jake finally decided to also enter the conversation as he asked: "Do you have something related to any of them? An item they crafted or used that hasn't been bound to someone yet, or maybe something similar?"

"Hm," Clinton frowned, not questioning why Jake asked for it. "I may have something. Let me look."

The man got up and went to check in another room. Jake had decided to butt in for two reasons. First of all, because it needed to be asked, and secondly, because he saw how hard Carmen was clenching her fists below the table. He found it a bit weird but still decided that changing the topic a bit would be for the best.

Jake had no idea why Carmen was even looking for her family. He had never asked but had assumed it was similar to his own reasons. Having no plans to pry into her personal business, he would just let her handle it, and even if there was some bad blood between her and her family, it was for her to deal with. All would come to light if they found them anyway.

"Ah, here it is!" the man said as he brought out a wand. Jake looked at it and instantly felt a mana signature from it. "This wand belonged to Antonios. He got a better one when we entered this city, and I didn't have a high enough level to bind it to myself at the time... when I finally did, I realized I had no plans of fighting anymore."

With a string of mana, Jake floated the wand over and scanned it. The mana within was faint, but Jake was sure of it. It belonged to a person that wasn't Clinton. Carmen was looking at him, and Jake nodded as she sighed in relief, muttering something about the Rune Seer not scamming her.

"How much for it?" Carmen asked Clinton.

"You can have it," the man just smiled. "Your father and mother helped me out a lot in the Tutorial, and I owe them at least that. It was your father's anyway, so returning it to his family only seems right."

"Alright," Carmen nodded with mixed emotions.

"If you do find them, please give them my greetings. I hope they are doing well," Clinton said as he leaned back and took a sip of coffee.

"Just one final question... was there a woman called Beatrice with them?" Carmen asked in a serious tone.

"Of course!" Clinton said with a cheerful smile. "She was such a nice young woman. Beatrice is your cousin, right? You are about the same age, but I hear that you drifted apart due to some differences. I hope you two can reconcile. After all, family is more important than ever in this new world. Do say hi to her for me, alright?"

Carmen just frowned but nodded. "I will be sure to greet her when we meet, that I can promise you."

“You guy’s ready to go?” the silver-armored warrior said as he escorted Jake, Carmen, and Sylphie to the teleportation chamber once more. He had actually been way more helpful than Jake had first thought he would, having more or less stalked them ever since they entered the city.

The man had even handed him a map of quite a large area that had been created by the United Cities Alliance. It was a lot like Arnold’s map, just about a hundred times worse and less detailed. A lot of it was rough estimates with no proper identification of where dangerous beasts resided. This did partly make sense, as to the United Cities Alliance, an area filled with level 160 monsters was viewed as pretty much the same as one filled with C-grades, marking them all as danger zones.

It did give some insight into areas worth investigating, though. But before they would have time to head out and check the danger zones – hopefully finding two Primas on the way - they would head off to this Longchester place and continue their tracking mission.

There was just one minor problem... the young man in silver armor really wanted to come with them and had even made a decent case for why they should bring him along. He was well-known and had knowledge of all the areas they were heading to. With his reputation alone, he would remove all potential barriers to their travels just by being present.

“You sure you really wanna come?” Carmen asked skeptically, with Jake getting why. The guy looked young, probably barely in his twenties. He also just struck Jake as a bit green, even if his level was high. He was too... cheerful. But then again, Jake wasn’t the best at reading people if they were good at hiding their emotions.

“I can carry my own weight,” he smiled. “Trust me, I will be of use, even in a fight!”

Jake just shrugged. “Just know we aren’t your babysitters.”

“Naturally not,” the warrior kept smiling. After a bit more convincing and the man even pulling out a small satchel with snacks for Sylphie, their group was convinced. If nothing else, then he was a damn good planner. They continued their journey that had rapidly turned from a three-man journey into a four-man one.

This did change the dynamic quite a bit, as Jake and Carmen were the kinds of people who could run through the plains for twenty hours straight without exchanging a single word. But this guy? It was like he had a condition that would make him explode if he shut up for more than ten minutes straight.

Anyway, this guy was called Peter, the kid of the city leader of Puddlerock. At first, he seemed a bit... well, dull, but the more the guy talked, the more Jake’s opinion changed. Even Carmen seemed to shift her perception quite a bit.

Peter was originally a member of the Holy Church. The plan had been for him to get good relations with the massive faction on the planet to help out his father and because he genuinely wanted to make Earth a better place. The Church was present on both continents from the start, with its influence spreading from the beginning.

At first, the young man had fit in well. His affinity for light magic was high, and he was quickly recruited as a potential paladin. He had risen through the ranks, gained power, had his own elite party, and generally just been a real asset. He actually enjoyed his time there and thought the Church a force of good... until something happened.

Peter had been part of the Treasure Hunt. He had left pretty early on due to getting into a scuffle with vampires a bit above his own league, but some members of his party had stayed behind. One of them was a mage that the young guy clearly had a crush on despite not admitting it even with all his blabbering.

She never returned.

This in itself was not that suspicious. Many died during the hunt. Peter had kept going as normal for months after that until one day, he had coincidentally met up with her parents and heard them talk about how much of a hero their daughter had been. Peter had agreed, but when they talked a bit more about her, he found out that she hadn't died in a fight or anything like that. She had sacrificed herself in a ritual to create a sword.

Jake remembered the Sword Bertram had used on the Monarch of Blood but only now knew how they made it. He remembered the power Bertram had displayed, and only now did it make sense how they had managed to create it.

Peter had been distraught, and he only felt more messed up when no one around him thought it that weird. They praised her sacrifice and said she was just in the Holy Land now. He had even been brought and spoken to her spirit... but even so. She had even explained how she had reached the end of her Path and had trouble gaining levels, and she had gone out doing what was best for everyone.

Even if Peter could see the logic, he just didn't like it. He had heard about it happening but, like an idiot, never believed it would happen to someone he cared about. His faith was broken, and it was almost as if his progress stopped from one day to the next.

When the system event of Unusual Unions arrived, he participated and became what he was today. He had even renounced the god from the Holy Church that had blessed him. This had all led to some fallout between Puddlerock and the Holy Church, and honestly, Jake put two and two together pretty quickly that Peter's old man hoped to create good relations with Valhal and the Order of the Malefic Viper through Jake and Carmen as the bridge to the Holy Church was more or less burned.



Since the event, Peter had progressed more than ever and began leveling again. He was not associated with any faction besides the United Cities Alliance and was more or less a lone wolf. Now, for the final question, how was he in a fight? Well, that was yet to be determined as none of the guards or officers they met as they teleported around wanted one. And boy did they meet a lot of guards.

The next days were spent teleporting to a city, going to the public office of the city, and then tracking down Carmen's family in the records. Luckily they were a group of nearly thirty people, making them stand out quite a bit, but it was still damn annoying.

Peter helped immensely by cutting away all the red tape and giving them instant access. It still took a while to get around and put together everything, but finally, they got confirmation after visiting city number eleven.

The family was found.

They were in a city without a teleportation circle in it and had lived there for about two months. Now, while this city didn't have a teleportation circle currently, that didn't mean it never had one. It had been deactivated about three weeks back due to what an official described as "political differences that were currently being resolved."

Talking to a merchant who had been there recently, things became a bit more clear.

"Eh, they had some issues with the guy running it not wanting to contribute taxes or something last I heard... or maybe it had something to do with all the workers. I honestly don't know, but the place is a damn mess and keeps raking in money. I would generally stay away," the merchant had said.

“Why?” Jake asked.

The merchant looked at Jake and shook his head. “the place is just a bit messed up and serves a certain clientele... but hey, if you are into whores, gambling, and doing some messed up stuff, you may enjoy it. I sure know I ain’t going back. If I did, my wife would kill me.”

For some reason, Carmen smiled upon hearing this description. As for Peter, he just frowned, clearly not aware of the place. As for the name of the city... well, it had the most on-the-nose name Jake had ever encountered:

Paradise.

Chapter 462 - Tracking & Danger Bird

Paradise. A city with a quite apt description for certain kinds of people. It was the kind of place that the United Cities Alliance didn’t truly recognize as a member but still wanted in their circle. A necessary evil, so to say, where all the weird and controversial shit could be done. A center of debauchery, wealth, and whatever the heart desired – and that came from its own marketing.

Peter had gone and gathered all the intel he could on the place. Considering what he got was clearly a watered-down version of the actual place, Jake was impressed the “civilized” United Cities Alliance hadn’t denounced it yet. They didn’t exactly promote or endorse it but just acted like Paradise didn’t really exist, and their stance had led to some recent trouble resulting in the teleportation circle being cut off.

This meant they would have to travel there on foot, which the clerk heavily advised against. Apparently, one would have to pass quite the dangerous zone where these gazelle-like creatures roamed, and they were known to be rather aggressive towards anyone invading their territory. Hearing this, Jake naturally knew they had to check it out.

There was still one thing bothering him, though.

"Any idea why your family would choose to settle down in that kind of place?" Jake asked Carmen the second they were outside the city.

She looked in thought for a moment before answering. "I don't really want to know, but if I had to guess, then it is because they thrive in that kind of environment. My aunt and uncle made their fortune by running a casino, and I know my grandparents were heavily involved in the medicinal industry, so producing drugs or shit like that is right up their alley. As for my parents, they probably just followed whatever my grandparents, uncle, and aunt wanted."

"Sounds like a pretty messed up family dynamic," Jake commented.

"Yeah," Carmen just said as she fell silent.

"Whatever the case, I hope they are safe," Peter tried to comfort her. It didn't seem to work very well as Carmen just ignored the guy.

While Jake did believe Carmen wanted them to be "safe," he had an odd feeling about why she wanted that. She seemed to carry a lot of animosity, yet she also clearly wanted to meet them again. Jake knew he wasn't even halfway qualified to try and figure out what was going on, but he did know that Carmen certainly didn't come from a typical family.

"Let's just get moving," Carmen said, making them drop the topic as the four of them headed off. Jake took out the Prima fragment as he also thought to ask Peter.

"You killed any Primas or gained any fragments?" Jake asked.

The young man sighed and shook his head. "Yes to the first one, no to the second. While I was still with the Church, we killed a Prima, but the fragment was given back to the leaders. I haven't killed or even come across any since then."

Jake nodded in understanding. "Alright. Just gonna say right now that we still need two for Carmen, so even if we come across any, she has them reserved."

"Naturally," the young man agreed. Jake didn't detect any hint of disappointment from him either, so he nodded as they headed forward with great speed, only slowed down by Peter a little bit. Being a warrior with light magic, he was actually relatively fast, but his movement skills were more focused on instantaneous movement than long-range travel.

Sylphie helped as always with her wind magic, and only now did Peter seem to truly take notice of this small hawk. Jake hadn't really thought much about it, but he now realized that most people probably just viewed Sylphie as an extension of Jake. An animal companion or something akin to that.

"I don't think I ever properly introduced you to Sylphie, did I?" Jake asked, way overdue.

Peter just smiled and said. "I do not believe you did."

"Well, Sylphie is Sylphie, a pretty young little hawk, and probably one of the strongest creatures on the planet at her level, with less than ten humans alive able to fight her," Jake quickly introduced her.

The young man froze a bit as he chuckled and looked at the hawk. "Nice to meet you."

"Ree!" Sylphie answered a bit offended. Even she was able to detect his lack of belief in what Jake had said.

"I am not joking," Jake said in a serious tone. "She is higher level than both Carmen and I, and she is a high-tier variant."

"Yeah, I'm gonna be honest; I would probably lose in a fight," Carmen shrugged. "She is faster than any of us, incredibly elusive, hard to pin down, and has incredibly potent attacks."

Sylphie began circling them as Jake could feel how much she enjoyed being praised and spoken highly of. Peter looked at the cute little hawk with newfound respect and a bit of fear as he seemed to finally understand they weren't joking. It did help that Sylphie was circling them faster and faster and created a small hurricane that they were in the eye of, even while running at high speed.

The guy also finally didn't speak for more than ten minutes as more than an hour passed in silence. He and Jake ended up opening their mouths at nearly the same time as they reached the outskirts of a grassy plain:

"I feel a Prima."

"We reached the territory of the gazelles."

Jake and Peter exchanged gazes as Jake smirked. "Well then, seems like this won't be a waste of time. I am a bit confused, though. How come no one has bothered hunting down this gazelle?"

"It and its pack moved in--"

"A group of gazelles is called a herd," Jake corrected him.

"It and its herd moved in only a month or so ago, and they are fast and difficult to track down while also being rather powerful," Peter explained correctly.

Jake nodded as he felt for the Prima. He knelt down and sensed the faint energy left in the air by the gazelle Prima as he and the others began making their way into the plains. While usually referred to as a mana signature, it was more accurate to call it an energy signature, as even someone like Carmen without mana had this identifiable trait. It was tied to the soul, and even with evolutions, it remained more or less the same. In many ways, it could be viewed as the DNA of the Truesoul.

There were ways to obscure it, and for the first time, Jake felt something like that. The trails of energy left by the Prima were muddled. It was like the beast had gone in both directions at the same time while also giving Jake a hunch it had actually gone in neither.

This was one way to hide trails better: making false ones. Jake's stealth would hide his energy signature, and most stealth-related skills worked like that. Due to the way energy was related to the body, it was effectively entangled with the soul, meaning that when Jake used a stealth skill, it hid all the mana in his surroundings, even the traces he had passively left before going stealth.

What the gazelle did was far more complicated than merely hiding. A false trail combined with stealth skills would mean the gazelle could easily create ambushes and whatnot while never itself falling into a trap. Moreover, when Jake felt the presence of other gazelles than the Prima, he felt their trail be identical to the Primas.

"This thing is good," Jake muttered.

"What is it?" Carmen asked.

"The Gazelle Prima is able to mask its tracks and lay down false ones... Peter, have other people tried to hunt it?" Jake turned to the young man.

"Yeah, quite a few, but they never find it or never return. That is also why we didn't even know it was even a Prima," he said worriedly.

Jake nodded. He inspected the energy signatures but simply had no way to properly distinguish them and track down the gazelles using them. Usually, this would be where Jake was fucked, but there was one more thing he could do.

He waved his hand as strings of arcane mana were woven and cut away some of the tall grass in front of him. He went forward as he scanned the area with Sphere of Perception until he finally found what he had been looking for.

"Please stay back," Jake said to the others as he carefully condensed mana under his feet and went forward, avoiding stepping on the grass. With the strings of mana, he cut away more grass as he finally found what he had been looking for: physical tracks.

Tracking in the new world was quite a bit different from old-world tracking. Tracking in the old world relied on actual tracks, analyzing feces, and just looking for any physical evidence left behind by the traveling animal. A lot of these methods were made harder with the system. One such example was the fact that trampled grass was far more resilient and would simply make itself stand again and regenerate with a bit of mana mere minutes after being trampled.

However, the ground below did not even itself out. It became covered by the grass, but Jake could still see the earth below had been dented. Hoof marks had been left and using them, it became clear the gazelles had gone through there. Unsurprisingly enough, there was no trail of energy despite them clearly running there, but one leading off in another false direction.

Now, it would be a difficult thing to determine where the tracks were pointing. Physical tracking was rarely done, and Jake could only really do it due to his incredibly high Perception allowing him to see minute changes coupled with his Sphere of Perception, but even that did not grant him the knowledge to read and analyze the tracks. This is where Jake had one final card up his sleeve: he used to really like binging those TV shows about guys drinking their own piss and walking around in the wild while explaining stuff.

"One has larger hooves than the others... but is lighter," Jake muttered. He followed the trail a bit and became more and more sure this one was relatively recent. The soil would still smoothen itself out with time due to the grass and when it rained and whatnot, and he could see the absolutely minuscule smoothening of the hoof marks by only traveling half a kilometer or so.



"That way for sure... and recent. Hm..."

Jake closed his eyes as he took a deep breath. No matter how good the gazelle was, it was only D-grade like him. Even if it had a powerful skill and was talented, Jake had something even better: a high as fuck Perception stat.

Releasing some of his own arcane mana, he introduced stability into his surroundings. Everything seemed to almost freeze as Jake scanned the mana in the air and around the tracks. He discovered what he was looking for down inside the hoof-print he had been looking at, or more accurately, embedded in the soil. It was just a faint wisp of energy that did not belong there. But it was enough. Once thoroughly scrutinized by Jake, it revealed itself as the kind of energy he had been looking for.

That of the Prima.

It was like the entire technique made to hide the Prima unraveled as he found this. The false tracks now correctly appeared false in his mind, and a true track emerged, leading into the distance.

"Got you."

[Hunter's Tracking (Uncommon)] - The hunter does not sit silently in his lodge but actively hunts for his prey. Unlocks proficiency in tracking down prey based on limited clues left behind. Also allows the hunter to more easily identify characteristics of the game, including mana signatures and aura. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Perception while tracking.

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[Traditional Hunter's Tracking (Rare)] - The hunter does not sit silently in his lodge but actively hunts for his prey. Unlocks proficiency in tracking down prey based on limited clues left behind, including both magical and physical ones. Also allows the hunter to more easily identify characteristics of the game, including mana signatures and aura. Allows the hunter to more easily distinguish and analyze physical tracks. Adds a bonus to the effect of Perception while tracking.

Jake smiled as he got the upgrade. This one came as no surprise as Jake finally advanced the skill. He knew the tracking skill was a lot like the weapon skills or even the stealth skill. Abilities with identical names could have different effects, and Jake knew he had gone in a rather mundane – or traditional - direction with his tracking by using conventional methods, but it clearly had been good enough. Others would mix in odd stuff like analyzing space or the two perhaps most popular paths: karmic analysis and time magic.

Those were a bit too fancy for Jake to dabble in quite yet.

"You got it?" Carmen asked.

"I got it," Jake smiled as the party of four took off to kill themselves another Prima.

The silent wind swept through the plains as a group of three people stood on the plains and gazed upon their handiwork.

"Well. That was a disappointment," Jake muttered.

"Are you sure this was a real Prima?" Carmen asked.

"It dropped a fragment, so... yeah?" Jake said, equally perplexed.

Peter stood and stared all around him at the scattered body parts. Sylphie was busy plucking out all the Beastcores and even ate a few of them as snacks.

"You gotta do that ritual thing?" Jake asked.

"I only do that for good fights," Carmen just scoffed. "This barely – if at all - qualified as a fight."

"Fair," Jake nodded as he managed to swipe up the core of the Prima before Sylphie got to it.

Anyway, it turned out the Gazelle Prima was weak as fuck. It was a bit fast and good at hiding itself, but considering Jake could track it and they had a hawk that was even faster than it had been, the fight had been over in less than a minute. The Prima had also only been level 139, making it so weak that any one of them could have taken it in a one-on-one, even Peter.

"This does explain why it hid away when strong parties came looking," Peter mumbled.

"Yep," Jake nodded.

"Ree!" Sylphie said as Jake had to walk over and pat her on the head. "Yeah, you did well!"

She really had. She had managed to cut off one of the legs of the Prima and then proceeded to slice and dice it about fifteen times before finally decapitating it with a fly-by to cut through roughly ninety percent of its neck. Then it just took a pair of talons penetrating the skull of the Prima, and a good yank later, the head was off.

The poor guy Peter hadn't really had a chance to show off but had just killed a few of the normal gazelles part of the herd. He also looked at the small hawk with new eyes as he clearly thoroughly believed Jake had not been joking about her being a little ball of cuteness and death.

"Ree..." Sylphie screeched faintly as she acted all worn out as she looked up at Jake with begging eyes. Jake knew the spoiled bird just wanted to be cuddled and praised as he picked her up and held her like a cat, much to her pleasure.

He kept stroking her as she nuzzled up to him as he looked at the two others.

"Anyhow, with all that done, let's get to Paradise."

Chapter 463 - Paradise

"It looks pretty normal," Jake said as he looked down at the city known as Paradise. "Very well-defended too."

"The question is if those walls and barriers are to keep monsters out or the people in," Peter said with a frown.

"Perhaps a bit of both," Carmen added.

They were all currently standing on top of a cliff, looking at the city below. It was defended by many natural barriers and had tall cliffs on nearly all sides. Finding it had actually been a bit difficult due to how well-hidden the city was, and one of their defensive barriers also had a stealth component. It was pretty crap compared to what Skyggen had, but it was likely good enough to fool most people and beasts.

"Just saying, we've been spotted," Jake said as he noticed a presence lock in on them. Well, to call it a presence was not entirely accurate as when Jake looked around, he noticed a crystal embedded in a large boulder not too far away. It was from that the gaze originated, and Jake assumed it came from some magical surveillance system.

Jake turned towards the crystal and looked at it to make it clear he knew. He wasn't if the crystal could also communicate audio, so he waved at it once as he waited.

"What if they attack us?" Peter asked, a bit concerned.

"Then we show them why that would be stupid," Jake answered with a shrug.

He did not feel any presences within the city that he felt especially concerned about. Though he had to admit, he felt far more powerful auras within than he had expected.

The city of Paradise was a well-built city with large houses and mansions of stone and wood. It had one of those mixed styles between medieval and modern, but it was clear this place was far more wealthy than most other cities. The houses were incredibly high quality, and the builders had even added many cosmetic touches to make the mansions look more expensive.

There were still a few less-than-fancy buildings scattered about. They looked a bit like apartment complexes, and Jake guessed this was where the workers lived.

In the center of Paradise was the largest of all the buildings. It was a tall stone building, probably about fifty stories high, and with far more fancy construction than any other place. It was massive and dwarfed every other building in its surroundings. It was surrounded by several other high-rises, all about twenty stories and in similar styles.

"This looks like one of the places my dad used to own a vacation home," Peter mumbled.

"Yeah..." Carmen said as she stared, lost in thought. "Jake, when we go in, can we try to be a bit... subtle? I want to take this slow and not raise a ruckus right away unless we need to, okay? I want to find out what is going on before my family knows I am here."

Jake threw her a glance and nodded. "Alright. I want to investigate this place, too, so we probably shouldn't just start blasting. Also, incoming."

Over a dozen cloaked figures were rapidly approaching them, and Jake at first thought they were perhaps related to the Court of Shadows due to the dark magic used by one of them, but on closer inspection, it was just regular dark magic and not the special branch of shadow magic used by followers of Umbra.

While their stealth skills were far from good enough to hide from Jake even before they entered his sphere, it was clearly good enough to fool Carmen and Peter. Sylphie seemed to have also noticed them only a bit after Jake, but he knew she had her own weird Sylphian methods.

The figures appeared around Jake and the others a moment later, with only five of them revealing themselves. Nine others spread out in the area surrounding them. They kept a safe distance and stayed in stealth, ready for if Jake or the others turned out to be antagonistic.

“Quite the welcome party,” Jake said the moment the five figures appeared. All of them wore dark cloaks and entirely black masks with only holes for the eyes. They were not that much different from Jake’s own mask aesthetically beside the color and wooden texture. Jake obviously used Identify on the man at the front right away and got a not-that-unexpected response.

[Human – lvl ???]

The man looked at Jake and the others for a moment as his eyes lingered on Jake. Finally, he smiled and removed his mask, revealing the face of a man in his thirties. “I apologize. We were not informed or aware of the Malefic’s Chosen visiting Paradise.”

Jake wasn’t surprised they knew who he was and had honestly been more busy looking at the guy as he finally got around it. There we go.

[Human – lvl 141]

It was a bit like Phillip way back in the day. Jake just needed an extra moment to circumvent whatever the person used to hide their level. Considering the guy was at a lower level than himself, it wasn't that hard.

"I didn't exactly announce my travel plans anywhere," Jake quipped back.

"Understandable. May I ask your purpose in visiting Paradise?" the formerly masked man asked.

Jake tossed Carmen a glance, and she nodded as she spoke up. "He is here with me. I am looking for some people that I heard reside within the city."

"Hm, I am not able to share any personal details of any residents per the law of Paradise, not even if the ones you are looking for do indeed reside there. Do not misunderstand; it is not that I am unwilling to share but unable. We simply do not collect any information as subtlety and anonymity is a cornerstone of the city and a necessity due to the clients we serve," the man explained.

"They are in the city," Jake just said. He could feel the mana signature similar to Carmen's father's wand somewhere down in the city below. Jake was unable to pinpoint where in the city due to the barriers defending the place, but he was certain he got a response from there. In other words, Carmen's father was there.

"There you have it," Carmen said.



"I see," the cloaked figure sighed. " May I know what your business is with these people? Needless to say, we would prefer to avoid any issues or disruption of daily operations."

"No," Carmen just shut down the line of questions.

The man looked a bit troubled as Jake just waved it off. "Are you going to show us the city or what?"

"Very well," he finally relented as he took out two masks from his inventory. "Here, have these free of charge for your two companions. Using masks within Paradise is customary, and they assist in hiding your energy and identity. They even have an enchantment capable of blocking out most mundane Identify attempts."

Jake swept them up with a few strings of mana. He inspected them briefly and found them working as advertised before tossing them to Carmen and Peter. Both of them put on the masks after also briefly examining them.

"May I know what kind of role the hawk serves?" the man also asked.

"What do you mean?" Jake asked, already ready to get angry at the man calling Sylphie a pet.

"Just merely if it is a companion capable of combat or a pet of some sort. I assume it is the prior due to the hawk's power," the cloaked man explained further. "In either case, the hawk will be bound by the

same rules as everyone else, but be advised there are certain... activitiesbeasts are unable to partake in.”

Jake had no fucking idea how to respond to that as Carmen looked mortified after putting two and two together, with Peter looking a bit confused.

“Ree?” Sylphie asked, equally if not more confused.

“Nothing,” Jake just said before throwing the cloaked man a glare. He seemed to get it as he backed down and continued.

“Please follow me if you will,” the man said as they followed him down the cliffside. “Paradise offers all kinds of amenities for those willing and capable to pay. Please let me know if there is anything in particular you are interested in.”

“First, show us a good place to stay. We plan on being in Paradise for a bit,” Jake explained. This seemed to put the man at ease. Jake could see why as he was probably wondering what the hell the Chosen of the Malefic Viper was doing visiting this city so far away from Haven. Unannounced even.

“Naturally,” the man nodded gladly. “Just a few things for when inside Paradise. Murder, thievery, extortion, and violence of most forms are not allowed unless consented to. Besides that, expect liberal rules and the ability to do whatever you wish. I do not doubt the Chosen is well-off, so you will find most of the city more than willing to welcome you with open arms.”

Jake just nodded, pretty sure there weren’t that many things Paradise offered that Jake was interested in. Well... there was one thing, but that was only if they had time. He would have to discuss more with

Carmen once inside as he wasn't entirely clear on her plans. Though, to be fair, he had a feeling Carmen wasn't either but was just making things up as they went.

Making it into the city was easy with the five cloaked figures escorting them. The other ones who had been hidden had just slipped away without revealing themselves- Their entrance did get a few glances as clearly new people usually didn't enter through the front gate.

"I heard you had some teleportation issues?" Jake asked once inside. From what he knew, Paradise was a city sustained by visitors, so he would assume the lack of teleportation to the city would cause issues, but from the looks of it, he was a bit off.

The streets were some of the cleanest he had ever seen. People walking on the road were well-dressed, and the storefronts and large buildings were immaculate. He was sure that things were not as rosy in the poorer residential areas, but clearly, the buzz was still on.

"Heh, sure, they like to say that, and the hypocritical United Cities Alliance did cut off the teleporters... the public ones, that is," the man said with a smile as he pointed towards a large building in the center of town squished between the high-rises. "That is the teleportation station. While many cities cut off the public teleporters, there were often back-ups placed elsewhere or simply ones hidden and reserved for the elite. Those they sure didn't bother to cut off. It is all just empty posturing."

Jake would lie if he said this information surprised him. People in power acted like absolute assholes, and politics was a shitshow before the system, so why would giving people superpowers change that? Shit, wouldn't adding personal power on top just make it worse? And speaking of worse, Jake had one thing he wanted to check.

"What kind of wares does Paradise offer? Of the more... controversial kind," Jake asked.

The cloaked figure looked back at him and shook his head. "If you are asking if we sell slaves, then no. I cannot speak to if any slaves exist or if such deals occur under the table, but there is no public trade, and selling and purchasing slaves is officially banned. Now, If you are looking for drugs of any kind or even people willing to sell their services for special experiences, we have those aplenty."

Jake narrows his eyes a bit at the response. Is Sultan somehow involved in Paradise? Or the people who run it?

The response clearly communicated the guy knew Jake's stance, which he had only openly really talked with Miranda, Sultan, and a few others about. It was also possible he was just aware of the rules of Haven, but Jake had a feeling it was more than that.

Following the man, they got a quick tour of the city and were introduced to several establishments. As expected, the three primary industries in Paradise were drugs, prostitution, and gambling. Below that were the high-tier hotels and other forms of entertainment such as a circus, something akin to a theater, and even a cinema. Jake had thought the cinema a bit silly until he discovered something interesting... they had actual movies from before the system. Primarily older films.

When the system had arrived, it had wiped out most technology, but film rolls had apparently survived. Jake also learned that day that the film industry had used film rolls a lot longer than he had expected, and it was only barely a decade before the system the industry fully phased them out.

It was interesting hearing and seeing the city, and Jake didn't know if he should be surprised or not by the lack of any so-called "fucked-up shit" so far. Sure, they had passed a few strip bars, stores openly selling recreational drugs, and plenty of casinos, but that was it. There was no one openly propositioning people in the streets or people being tortured on the streets or anything like that.

Finally, they made it to one of the biggest buildings in the entire city. A grand tower of expensive marble stone and glass. Jake could see it was expensive and extravagant just by looking at it and staring into the lobby. There were even two security guards outside, and Jake was sure this was the equivalent of a five-star hotel in the old world.

It was a hotel... and a casino. Of course it was also a casino.

“We shall take our leave here,” the masked figure said. “For transparency reasons, I must inform you that the leadership of Paradise has already been made aware of your arrival and where you are staying. The Chosen will likely be contacted during your stay.”

Jake nodded, having already expected something like that.

The cloaked men disappeared after that, and the four of them made their way into the casino-hotel hybrid. Jake actually found it a bit refreshing that his accommodations were not just given for free or covered by the leadership of the city, making him pay for it himself. He paid for them all as he booked three adjacent rooms on one of the highest floors, and they made their way up the elevator.

“This feels so... normal,” Peter frowned as they made their way up the elevator. It was far slower than just jumping or flying themselves, but hey, it was a fun novelty and reminder of the old world. Thinking about it deeper, the last time Jake was in an elevator had been the day the system arrived.

Quite a lot has happened since then, huh, Jake thought as he kept quiet.

When they made it to their floor, they walked through the well-lit and decorated hallway before making it to their rooms. Each room had a keycard, but rather than chips inside, they each had a small array and

used the mana signature of the person with the card. Once more, it was kind of well-made and smart, proving the people behind Paradise had some real talents among them.

The four of them decided to enter the room Jake and Sylphie would share as they closed the door and took their seats at a table. Jake decided to swipe some bottles of alcohol from the bar in the room, knowing full well he would get scammed by how expensive it was. He ignored the pills and powder also on offer.

Carmen took out a small token of sorts and was about to activate it when Jake shook his head. "No one is listening in or observing us, and the room is enchanted quite competently."

"Are you sure?" Carmen asked skeptically.

"Yeah. I am also a bit surprised, but it seems like Paradise at least sticks by its own rules of respecting anonymity," Jake answered, adding. "So, what are your plans now?"

They were there for Carmen and her business, after all.

"I think I just want to look around a bit alone for now... as long as you can show me where they stay," Carmen answered as she looked at the mask she had placed on the table. "I doubt they will recognize me, and I want to meet them without them knowing it is me."

Jake nodded and looked at Peter, who answered after thinking a bit. "I guess I will go scout out the place a bit. I know nothing of Paradise, and I am sure my father would be more than interested in knowing how it operates."

“What about you?” Carmen asked Jake.

Jake just smiled. “It’s gambling time.”

Chapter 464 - Gambling Time

Ah, gambling.

Who doesn’t love gambling? Well, okay, many people don’t like gambling due to the innate predatory nature of the practice and its proneness to exploiting and preying on those with addictive personalities. So, in fairness, gambling was actually more an epidemic that ruined lives and split up families. But, there was one crucial aspect required to make gambling a negative experience: losing.

Gambling was designed to always favor the house. There were ways to cheat the system, so to say, like card counting or even just straight-up cheating. Jake never really thought card counting should be viewed as cheating as that was just someone not purposefully sabotaging themselves by not thinking while playing. Then again... casinos would prefer if people didn’t think, which explained why they happily handed out drinks left and right.

To summarize, gambling was a loser’s game. Because it was designed to make you lose. Anyone going into it should do so with the expectation of losing all or most of what they put into it. You went gambling for the experience and the fun of it, not to make money. Making money was a lucky coincidence but never an expectation.

The way casinos always made themselves the winners was just simple statistics. They tipped the odds in their favor. Roulette was a great example of this. Let’s say you choose to bet on either black or red, so that should mean a fifty-fifty percent chance to win, right? Except no, because there was the added 0

option. Some casinos even added 00 as an option to lower the chances even more. This made it close to fifty percent... but not quite. And by the law of large numbers, the casino would win big in the end. So what if someone won once in a while when there were far more losers? The casino needed these winners to make everyone think they could be the next one to hit the big jackpot.

Gambling in the system worked pretty much the same as pre-system. In fact, some could say it was fairer in some ways than before. Jake had gone to check out the casino after guiding Carmen and seeing Sylphie and Peter off for their own exploration, and he was honestly impressed. He saw people play roulette, and one would think that with magic, stats, and all sorts of skills, it would be easy for either party to cheat... but it wasn't. The explanation for why that was lay in one of the fundamentals of the new world:

System-fuckery.

The system recognized gambling and gave skills to facilitate it. It was like a system-bound contract bound every single interaction done during gambling. Cheating simply wasn't possible in most cases. One such example was playing cards. Each person would get their cards just like usual, but each person would only be able to view their own cards and those laid out by the dealer. The face would just be blank to anyone but the owner of the cards, making it look a bit weird when Jake saw people sit there with face-up cards while playing blackjack, only for their cards to be revealed once it was time.

Jake had to admit that it was an elegant and easy solution by the system. It still allowed some forms of tipping the odds in your favor. In the end, it was still people playing the games. If you played poker and wanted to bluff or read your opponents, nothing stopped you. Jake was sure some mental skills and social skills could help here, but it was also a double-edged sword as people learned how to fake responses.

People clearly realized this, and the place was flooded. Hundreds were there, people at every table and dealers working overtime. They even had god damn slot machines and nearly everything Jake would expect from an old-world casino. The entire atmosphere was also spot-on. Jake had only been in a casino once before in his life during a company outing, and back then, he had only played the slots.



Now, to bring the topic back to why gambling is bad... all the system-imposed rules and regulations only made this more obvious. Someone could set up a lottery that was one in a thousand, and sure enough, it would truly be one in a thousand that would win. The same was true if a slot machine was designed with an eighty-percent payout rate for over a hundred thousand games... it would truly have that payout rate. It limited risk, making it a sure win.

There was no way around this. The rules of the system in this regard were absolute. You just couldn't use any skills to cheat besides perhaps the aforementioned social skills. Skills were all blocked...

Skills.

Jake didn't use any skills.

"He does it again!" the dealer yelled as Jake tapped his cards, revealing a straight. The seven other masked players at the poker table groaned as the dealer pushed their chips over to Jake. Jake was grinning from ear to ear as he just stocked up on Credits.

Another hand was dealt, and Jake checked the cards. Average at best, but better than his last hand. The flop came, and his cards were still good. One pair, highest card. No straight possibilities, but two spades.

Jake thought a bit as he raised. Most had already folded, but big blind stayed in together with one other guy. He still felt like he had it and was keeping a poker face as the two called. Then the turn then came. Hearts. Low card. Not a threat; still no straight possibilities either quite yet.

He looked at the two others. Both looked stoic, and Jake did not have the slightest chance to read them. Luckily he didn't need to read them to know what he would do. A slight feeling welled up in his stomach, but Jake stayed in even after one of the others raised with only big blind.

Then came the river. Two pairs for Jake, but also another spade. The only thing that beat him was a flush, but...

Jake instantly knew. No one at the table told him, but he knew. As Jake had been small blind, he decided to check. The big blind checked. The last guy raised the pot by double. Jake looked at him for a moment... he knew he would lose this hand. Now he could either choose to fold, call or raise. Jake looked at the relatively small pot and decided to do what any good cheater would do: he made himself not look like one. Jake called as big blind folded.

Both revealed their cards as the other guy had a flush, just as expected. The man cheered as the others padded him on the back for taking down the big evil Jake. Jake, in turn, just mulled to himself, acting all dissatisfied.

Another hand was dealt as they kept playing, Jake thoroughly enjoying himself while making some money. He liked poker as even with his abilities, he didn't instantly know if he would win or lose. Roulette was too easy as Jake knew the moment the ball began spinning, but for poker, he would only know in the moment.

It allowed nearly all the excitement to remain. Now, how did he do it?

His sphere did nothing as the cards were blank even to that. Likely because the display on them was entirely magical. He could not really use it to read the other players either. Danger sense only went off a few times when another player really looked like he or she wanted to smack Jake.

No, it was all intuition. All gut feeling. To fully get the gut feeling, he would have to be right at the moment things were decided. Jake had a theory the deck of cards only “decided” what card to deal the moment it was dealt. This did mean burning cards was just for show, but hey, it made the experience authentic.

Jake kept playing a bit more before he saw a very well-dressed man approach. He also felt an aura from the man that actually gave him pause as Jake turned his head. The newcomer was wearing a white suit and tie. He looked like a clean-cut man in his mid-forties and was flanked by a man and a woman, clearly acting as bodyguards. Not that Jake believed the guy needed it.

[Human – lvl ???]

He could not see his level, and even when he tried to get around the obfuscation, he failed. The presence the man gave off was the most powerful Jake had felt from another human he didn’t already know about. He was stronger than Peter or anyone else Jake had met on his travels, but he still fell behind Carmen... at least it appeared like that.

Jake felt like he should not fight the man. Not within Paradise. This made him quickly reach a conclusion. A domain-type fighter.

It was the same as Miranda. Someone not necessarily supremely powerful in regular combat, but fighting them within their own domains was an uphill battle. Jake scanned the man a bit more, and it was clear he was the City Lord of Paradise just by feeling how in-tune he was with the atmospheric energy.

"I see the Chosen is enjoying my establishment," the suited man said as he went over to Jake, who stayed seated. Jake felt the dealer tense up as the game paused. The other players at the table also looked on with wide eyes as their gazes darted between the City Lord and Jake.

"Please, keep playing," the man said to the dealer and players.

"Yes sir," the dealer said as she began dealing a new set of cards. Jake looked at his and just folded right away before turning to the man.

"It has been a while since I had a good game of poker," Jake said as he looked at the man.

"And yet you do indeed seem to be an experienced player," the man said with a smile. One thing to note was that he was one of the only people not wearing any mask when even his bodyguards were. He was clearly not interested in hiding his identity.

"I have dabbled," Jake explained as he waved his hand. He wasn't lying either. He had utterly annihilated his family in poker several times in the past during family game nights to the point of them never wanting to play with him anymore.

"Under usual circumstances, I would accuse you of cheating after your display at the roulette earlier, but as I am unsure how you did it, I shall refrain," the man in the suit said with a big smile. "I just hope you are satisfied with your winnings for now and perhaps have time for a more private discussion? I would love to get to know the Malefic's Chosen a bit better."

"I guess I got some time," Jake smiled as he got up from the table while swiping up all his chips. "Been a pleasure playing with you, ladies and gentlemen."

Pleasure ripping you off, Jake thought as he smiled a bit to himself. All the people in the casino were clearly loaded. Not a single E-grade was in sight, not even the dealers. Jake had no shame ripping them off, even if they knew who he was. What would they do, go complain that the Chosen of the Malefic Viper had dared rip them off in a poker game? Shit, it would probably just be a cool story for them to tell.

Jake followed the suited man as he spoke. "I must say, I do appreciate you chose to play against other visitors and not the house directly. Limited our losses."

"Do not misunderstand. I didn't do it to spare your wallet. I just wanted to play some poker," Jake answered curtly. He felt the bodyguards didn't appreciate his disrespect, but he wasn't too worried about it.

They walked through a few hallways as all the employees bowed toward the suited man. A swift elevator ride later and Jake found himself within a spacious office. "You may excuse us," the man said to his bodyguards, who both bowed and went to stand guard outside.

The man went over to a small bar and looked at it. "Any preferences?"

Jake shrugged as he said a bit cheekily. "Whatever is on the house."

"Bourbon it is then," the man nodded as he poured two glasses. "Ah, I also believe it is due time I introduce myself. I am Renato, owner and City Leader of Paradise. Follower of Dyonsy, god of debauchery and a proud member of the Golden Road Emporium."

The man called Renato brought over Jake's glass and sat down on a couch across from Jake. Jake took a swig and quickly concluded it was good stuff. "So, Renato. A bit on the nose for a god to classify themselves as being of debauchery, isn't it?"

"Ah, but what is debauchery if not merely indulging in one's desires and embracing one's Path? The world is cruel and relentless. Is it not far crueler to then also deny others the freedom to truly express themselves?" Renato asked, giving Jake the feeling this was another guy who believed he had Jake all figured out. Why did everyone assume he was some guy who didn't really care much about what others did?

Well, probably because he was that kind of guy. For the most part.

"I do not believe you invited me here to discuss your ideology," Jake just stated.

"Indeed, I did not. I am sure you are familiar with the Golden Road Emporium, correct?"

"Remind me," Jake said. Why the hell would he know that?

"Surprising... Sultan has not spoken of his Patron? The leader of the Golden Road Emporium?" Renato asked, surprised.

Jake looked at the guy as suddenly things made a lot more sense.

Carmen spied on the mansion intently as she sat in a small cafe not too far away. Jake had shown her to the mansion in which her father lived, and it had only taken a minute or two before Carmen saw someone she recognized. It was a cousin she hadn't seen in more than half a decade... before Carmen had a "falling out" with her family.

Soon after, she saw more familiar faces. It also quickly became clear that they owned the place. It was a large mansion, four stories tall, brick-construction, with a massive garden. All of it was surrounded by a fence and a gate, both enchanted.

The fence was the type where everyone could look in. Carmen expected nothing less from the narcissists. They wanted to show off their home and their wealth. They wanted everyone to know they were of high status. Usually, Carmen hated that, but today, it was welcome. It allowed her to just sit there and observe who went and who came. She had yet to see any of the people she was truly looking for, but she was confident they were there.

But more than that, she saw a lot of women come and go. Dozens every hour entered the mansion and left again. Most of them were not the most dressed, and none of them wore masks, indicating they were workers or residents of Paradise. Probably workers.

Carmen had figured out black masks were for the ones in charge. The important people. Her family members she had seen so far all wore black masks or no masks at all, while it seemed like employees did not use them normally, and when they did, they had white masks on.

As she was putting things together in her head, Carmen saw her. Carmen was sitting in the café as suddenly she tensed up and the glass in her hand was squished so hard she managed to compress it. Yet she didn't notice as her eyes were trained on the person that had just exited the mansion.

She was wearing an expensive one-piece red dress, hair styled perfectly, with not a single speck of dust on her body. She walked in high heels down the pathway leading out of the mansion as all the employees bowed to her. Her posture was immaculate. Four men wearing black masks flanked her, too, signifying her importance.

But more importantly, was her face.

A perfect unblemished face with not a single scar or deformity left. No signs of what Carmen had done to her and what had landed her in prison. Not a single fucking mark. Her cousin was back to her perfect self... no, she was even more perfect now.

Beatrice... Carmen thought as she held herself back. No... be calm... be rational for once in your fucking life... figure this shit out first.

#### Chapter 465 - The Importance Of Keeping Up Appearances

Jake had not talked that much with Sultan recently. He knew the merchant was still busy and operating out of Haven while making liberal use of the teleportation network. In fact, he had been a pushing force to integrate more cities into the network and establish more connections with factions like the Holy Church and independent cities.

Miranda had been the one keeping Jake up-to-date on this, but clearly, she had no idea about everything the shady merchant was up to. Jake was already aware the guy had a Blessing due to earlier conversations, but Sultan had divulged no details when it wasn't necessary. It also didn't seem like something worth bothering Villy over.

"I do not tend to pry in the personal business and work of the citizens of Haven," Jake just answered Renato. It was the truth and also a way to not just make himself look more ignorant than he actually was.



“An understandable and respectable position. I have already shared more than I perhaps should then,” Renato sighed. “Oh well, in for a penny in for a pound. Sultan and I both belong to the same organization, and both have ties to the Golden Road Emporium. I guess you can call the Emporium a Pantheon of sorts, even if it is merely merchant gods banding together in a mutually beneficial alliance.”

“And Sultan is blessed by the leader of this Emporium?” Jake asked with raised eyebrows.

“Midas, the Golden God,” Renato answered with clear respect in his voice.

“Midas, huh,” Jake mumbled as he shook his head.

“One of the cases where the Records of the multiverse bled into our unintegrated universe, a bit like Valhal and many other such cases. Our world’s connection to a mercantile system and focus on wealth and capitalism no-doubt only strengthened this bond and resonated with the Path that Midas and other merchant gods followed,” Renato said. “Of course, this is merely my interpretation, even if it is one I am confident about. Please do enlighten me if the Chosen has other insights.”

“No, it seems reasonable,” Jake agreed. He did know that the multiverse as a whole had affected their world. Shit, just looking at all the mythical creatures should be proof enough. Dragons, phoenixes, and just the existence of entire races of monsters were already legends before the system. That was too much to be a coincidence.

Renato nodded as he smiled. “I do hope that today and this visit can lay the groundwork for a long and mutually beneficial relationship. While you may not be a fan of some of the things we do here in Paradise, do know we are no slave traders. We merely have a more liberal and open market than anywhere else, allowing those who offer more questionable services to find clients.”

“Through my initial exploration, I did not find much... so do share. What kind of controversial services? And please hold nothing back. I came back from the Order of the Malefic Viper recently, don't think anything we Earthlings get on will surprise me,” Jake asked. He wanted to make himself appear more like the Chosen than he probably had to, and sharing his ability to travel to the Order and back was also very deliberate.

“It is no secret that we have no set rules besides the obvious ones you have already been informed of. As long as the cornerstone of consent has been reached, we do not interfere. Even if one party consents to get killed by the other. As for some anecdotal examples, we have some individuals with certain interests. Fantasies they like to carry out. Before the system, carrying out these fantasies would involve some rather unfortunate consequences, but now with healing magic and the human body being far more resilient, they can indulge.

“One frequent client enjoys the fantasy of assaulting and killing women, something he, to my knowledge, carried out even before the system to great cost and inconvenience. Another is a woman who has specific fantasies related to a concept called vore, I think, or perhaps we should just call it cannibalism. She likes to eat the member of her partner after intercourse.

“These are just some of the sexual ones. Others simply want to experience beating someone beyond recognition or torture others. For some, Paradise is merely about being themselves and partaking in whatever drugs they so desire. With overdose being no risk with a good healer and an alchemist with an antidote on hand, you can imagine how many substances they can experience at once.”

Renato held nothing back as he continued talking about Paradise. He also added on his justifications for the city needing to exist. The powerful tended to also be the unique, and unique people would have very varied tastes. Any Path could legitimately lead to power, and staying true to yourself was fundamental to avoid stagnating. Renato viewed himself as nothing more than a businessman who facilitated a required service under the best conditions possible.

Jake knew he couldn't argue about some points. There were many fucked up people within the Order of the Malefic Viper, and Jake had no interest in being an arbiter of justice. He was not interested in making the world a better place... at least not all of it. As long as his small world – himself and those he cared about – could live a good and comfortable life without the negative influence of others, he was fine.

His and Renato's conversation was somewhat enlightening, and he knew the man did have limits for what he allowed. Jake was not particularly happy learning that slaves did exist in the city, as the law only prohibited selling and buying them. The rule did also extend to slaves being unable to offer services and be pimped out to others, meaning they could only act as personal servants. Jake was repeatedly assured every individual who worked there did so with consent... even if he did admit some did so out of desperation and to get some semblance of safety. Others were just as fucked in the head as the clients they served.

This was the kind of place Jake didn't like but also wouldn't actively move to get rid of. It did not interfere with him at all, and Jake had a feeling this was exactly what Renato wanted to make clear. Paradise was no threat to him or his interests, and he would prefer if Jake just left them alone.

This brought them to the principal topic of this conversation:

"I am aware you are here together with Ms. Carmen from Valhal. I do not know the details, but I want to know if Paradise can expect any... trouble coming from this visit?" Renato asked.

Jake shook his head. "I don't know. All I know is that she was looking for people; I am uncertain what her intent is once she finds them."

It was a half-truth. Jake did know who she was looking for, but he truly didn't know her intentions. That was for her to decide... it was her family, after all.

Renato sighed at Jake's response. "I will not get in the way of you or the Runemaiden, but I will ask a favor. Please inform me before anything violent happens. Just a bit before or right when it begins, and it should be fine."

Jake raised an eyebrow as the man explained:

"Paradise exists in its current form because my employees and I have created a balance. We are the ultimate authority that none dare stand against. If my base is shaken and a seed of doubt is sown, it can mean the end of my city. So, if the unfortunate happens and killings take place, it will need to look like these are approved and accepted by Paradise. In other words, I will justify whatever actions you choose to take. Retroactively if I have to."

That was... not what Jake had expected him to say. He had expected him to maybe ask them to take it outside of the city, try to be subtle about it, or even outright tell them to leave if they planned on killing anyone. There was even the possibility the man would choose to oppose them. It turned out he would just sweep things under the rug while acting like Jake and Carmen were just cleaning house and doing Paradise a favor.

"Even if it is high-status allies and friends of yours?" Jake asked.

Renato shook his head. "You misunderstand. Sultan and I have many disagreements, but one thing we share is that we do not have friends. If it was people other than you and the Runemaiden who had come, I would have already mobilized everything to kill the both of you. However, as it stands, there is none within the city I value enough to face the consequences such a confrontation could bring."

Jake nodded in understanding. He was also not dumb enough to not recognize the jab against Sultan, more or less telling Jake they were not really allies but just temporarily partners of convenience. But oh well, such was the world of merchants, and Jake already knew. Everything was a calculation of risk and benefits, viewing people and personal relationships the same as a business would view deals and partnerships. In many ways, life was just cheaper now.

"Fine," Jake agreed.

"Thank you," Renatos said as he tossed over a small device. It looked like a pager of sorts, the kind they used before cellphones were a thing. "Merely activate the device when something happens. It will briefly scan your surroundings and send it to my chief of security. After that, we will analyze it and come within a few minutes."

"Got it," Jake said. They had more or less been granted free-pass in the city to do whatever they wanted. Which also meant...

"I will head back to the casino then," Jake smiled deviously. "I think I have some time before Carmen is done for the day."

Renatos surprisingly smiled. "Naturally. Do note we have recently changed the rules to have maximum betting amounts and limited games allowed per hour on all house-run games."

"I feel like this is targeted," Jake protested.

"I apologize if you feel that way," Renatos joked in kind. "Perhaps sticking to poker would be preferable? I am certain many rich folks are more than willing to play a few hands against the Chosen of the Malefic Viper..."

Jake looked at the man before he just shook his head and decided that ripping off rich folk who probably also had some messed-up hobbies was acceptable.

Peter scouted through the streets as he made sure to fulfill the task he had been granted. He held a small crystal in his hand as it took in his surroundings and recorded everything. He went towards the seedier areas as a few members of security spotted him, but they left him alone once they recognized who he was. He could only smile, knowing they did not actually know him and had purposefully refrained from investigating him further to not incite the Chosen.

All they knew was that he had come with the Chosen and the warrior from Valhal, Carmen. Peter did feel a bit bad about deceiving the two of them by just acting like a follower, but he had a job to do. Paradise had long been growing beyond what was healthy. As he scouted around, he confirmed it had indeed grown not only in size but also in power. Below the cobblestones on every street were runic circles and formations. The walls were immaculate too.

He had a feeling that even if an early C-grade attacked, the city of Paradise would be fine. The defenses were just that powerful. It was lucky he had been let inside with open arms, and from the looks of it, everyone assumed he was working for the Chosen as he did his job. The ignorance and apathy of the Chosen were truly beyond what the United Cities Alliance had expected based on the intel.

Peter snuck inside a larger mansion as he used his magic to hide. Light refracted around him as he became invisible, and his epic-rarity stealth skill activated to make his footsteps, aura, and everything else disappear.

Nobody noticed him as he recorded everything. People got careless when they thought they were safe and removed their masks without any worry. Within ten minutes, he already had recordings of over a dozen individuals that surely would prefer to not have anything made public about them.

He swiftly left and made it to more places spread around the settlement. This was an opportunity the United Cities Alliance could just not miss. Peter praised their luck and the guy who had given them a tip that the Chosen and the woman from Valhal were coming towards Paradise to track down those people. It had given them the perfect opportunity to integrate Peter into the group as a guide no one would suspect.

With the woman busy dealing with her own matters, the Chosen occupied in the casino, and the hawk out of the city flying around to scout the surrounding wildlife, Peter could do as he wanted without suspicion. Even if he was caught, he could just claim he was working for the Chosen.

The next hours were spent as Peter collected information on hundreds of individuals. He saw sights he would much prefer to do without, but his task had to be done. Even if taking down Paradise entirely was not an option, they could use this against the ones who had been there.

More importantly, what would happen if recordings from all over Paradise spread? The trust in the anonymity and integrity of the city would be broken. It would hurt Renatos significantly and weaken his position when negotiating with the United Cities Alliance. Removing Paradise was not preferable. No, they just wanted it to be controlled.

As for the Chosen... well, making him their ally was never the purpose... no, it was not even a possible goal. At most, they could hope that he simply left Earth to never return. That would be the optimal outcome. Luckily for them, it appeared he had already gone to another universe before and would leave again soon based on what he had talked about with Peter and Carmen.

Wanting him to leave was the official stance of the United Cities Alliance. Peter actually began to see the Chosen as more than just his reputation. He was surprisingly normal and easygoing and didn't at all seem as their intel implied. This did make Peter feel a bit bad about the deceit.

While he had spoken many lies, his history was not one. He had been part of the Holy Church but not in any regular party. Like any organization, the Church needed those acting covertly. Assassins, scouts, and rogues handling the dirty business. Peter had been good at this, which is also why he felt genuinely betrayed when one of his party members decided to selfishly sacrifice herself.

It threw off many of his plans and did derail him emotionally. She had joined the Church together with him. They were not meant to truly fall for the promises of the Church. At the time, he had been genuinely unsure what to do. Split between two camps. One was ruled by his father... and the other was ruled by someone Peter had always looked up to. Yet now, he found it hard to truly recognize him. He looked the same, and his demeanor was similar, but he had changed.

Peter didn't blame his brother, though.

His brother had always been one to easily convince himself something was the right thing to do. He was steadfast once his opinion was made and loyal to a fault at times. He wasn't a bad person... but he would do bad things for the greater good. Something Peter understood from a logical standpoint but didn't agree with.

Something like the Holy Church was like a cancer on Earth along with every other major religious faction. Everyone knew each and every one of them wanted to conquer the planet. Assimilate everyone forcefully if they had to. Earth's culture and history would be wiped out, and Earth would become nothing more than a single planet in the endless line of planets ruled by the Holy Church. An unacceptable fate.



The purpose of the United Cities Alliance was to preserve the identity of Earth. Peter's goal had been to join the Church and figure out if it was possible with them. It was not... that much was obvious. Even if Peter's father had hoped it was. For his family.

Ah... one other thing Peter had not been entirely truthful about. Peter's father was indeed quite high in the hierarchy of the United Cities Alliance. In fact, his family seemed to have a tendency to always reach the top.

Especially considering his father, Arthur, leader of the United Cities Alliance.

#### Chapter 466 - The Salvento Family

Jake and Carmen sat on the balcony and looked out over the city. Jake saw the mansion in question as Carmen also stared intently. Due to the enchantments placed on the construction, everything was vague, and he could only barely see some people moving within. When he didn't focus, that is. A bit of squinting, and he saw around the formation and could see the large lawn and even in the windows clear as day.

Peter and Sylphie were still out, with Sylphie being on a super-secret special assignment as she wasn't interested in gambling, drugs, or sex. She was too young for all those too, and Jake was glad to keep her away from the degeneracy. If he didn't, he was sure Hawkie and Mystie would somehow find a way to kill him.

"I saw most of them," Carmen muttered as she also looked down at the mansion, even if it was still blurry to her. "They looked so... carefree. Like everything was fine."

Jake just kept silent as she talked.

“My grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, parents... everyone was there. Just one big happy family,” she said again. “And... my cousin... the one I told you about... she was just so fucking perfect. Again. Not a single mark, like nothing I did ever mattered. To any of them.”

When she returned that day, Carmen had been a mess. Jake had done nothing more than just allow her to vent as Jake learned everything that had happened. How Carmen grew up in a toxic family that cared more about reputation than not being shit people, how her cousin had always been perfect and pretty much bullied Carmen, and how no one had ever done anything to address this.

How Carmen had finally found a calling only to get that dream shattered when her cousin decided to just straight-up assault her. How the legal system had failed. Jake had to admit he was unable to hold back a small smile when Carmen told him about the day she had smashed in her cousin’s face so hard the other woman had nearly died – and on her wedding day, no less.

Then came the fucked up prison where Carmen had managed to make it by fighting even more. Even guards. They all left her alone as her hand only got worse from her using it to hand out beatdowns. She even confessed she had just considered ending it all at times. Her future was one where parole was something that would likely never happen with her family’s influence, and if she did make it out, she was effectively disowned.

She had been saved by the system like so many others. Finally, she could confront her family. She talked about how she had been looking forward to seeing them all struggling. None of them were fighters, but all were just socialite assholes. They had to have suffered, right?

But no, they were thriving.

“The one thing that kept me going every day was that at least that bitch Beatrice was also suffering. But now... now she is just healed. No, better than healed. You saw her, right?” Carmen turned to Jake

"I did," he admitted. In fact... Carmen didn't even have to point her out.

"And?" Carmen asked with a fiery glare.

"She looks like the kind of person an army of rich middle-aged men would pay top dollar to make their sugar baby," Jake answered. He wouldn't lie... she was one of the most attractive humans Jake had seen. However...

"But... meh, I doubt looks will get her that far in a few years," Jake added on. While she was hot, Jake had seen more than what Earth had to offer. Irin and Meira both had her beat handily if Jake went by pure looks. Personality, too, if even a fraction of the things Carmen said were true. This was, of course, disregarding people of higher grades.

Carmen nodded but still looked down with an empty gaze.

"What is the plan?" Jake finally asked. It was the part she had never addressed. He could not figure out what she actually wanted. Revenge? Justice? Just to mess them up a bit or the full nuclear option? Maybe even some kind of reconciliation. No matter what, Jake could see she was conflicted.

"I don't fucking know," Carmen sneered. "Why does everything just work out for them every fucking time?"

“You know, we could just leave. Within a few minutes, we could be through a teleporter and in another city, never to return. You could forget all about them forever,” Jake proposed. It was only a half-honest proposition as Jake, more than anything, just wanted Carmen to think about what she wanted. He had no real advice to give because what the hell did he know? This sounded like something a therapist was needed for – something Carmen had never attended as her family “didn’t believe in therapy,” whatever the hell that means.

“And just let them get away with everything?” Carmen asked, staring daggers at Jake.

“Get away with what?” he asked.

“Fucking... everything. Being the scum of the Earth who can just go about their day unbothered. How the hell do they still do so well even now? How the fuck is my aunt D-grade when her only talent is to be a stuck-up bitch and a terrible person?”

“She must be supremely talented at being a stuck-up bitch I guess,” Jake shrugged. Okay, he was legitimately unsure if the system recognized that as a Path. Being a manipulative person who used others for her own gain... now that was probably something you could gain plenty of progress with.

Carmen just fell silent again as she kept looking down at the mansion. One moment she looked like she wanted to go pummel the place into dust, and the next, like she just wanted to leave. She clearly didn’t know what she wanted. Carmen’s planning and strategy had ended upon seeing them... and Jake had a theory.

She had wanted to see them be utterly fucked. She had wanted to see them living a terrible life while she had managed to rise up again and gain power and status. To experience their situations being reversed. But what she had instead gotten was them still being wealthy, privileged, and everything just being fine and dandy. However...

“Must be pretty miserable being them, huh,” Jake mumbled.

“What?” Carmen asked, confused.

“They have nothing worth anything,” Jake just shrugged. “All they have is their social clout. Take that away, and what are they?”

“A bunch of rich bastards who are nearly all still D-grade?” Carmen shot back.

“To be more accurate, they would be a bunch of weak D-grades with just wealth, which will do them no good when faced with a superior force. Have you seen a single fighter among them worth anything? I haven’t during all this time sitting here looking at them come and go. So how do they survive? By them being viewed as valuable enough to be kept around by the City Lord or other backers,” Jake answered.

“Right, but why the fuck does that matter? Do you think the City Lord will just throw them to the wolves for no reason? They may be fucking assholes, but they also know what they’re doing when making connections,” Carmen rebuffed him.

“Funny,” Jake said. Due to how this entire flow of conversation had gone, Jake had no time to tell what he had been doing. Including his meetings with Renato. “The City Lord seems to not care about them at all.”

“Explain,” Carmen just said.

Jake smiled as he told her about his talks with Renato. Carmen seemed to have a hard time believing it, as she looked at him skeptically.

“So you are saying I can just do whatever I want?” she asked skeptically.

“Essentially, yeah. Renato clearly doesn’t want to go against the Runemaiden of Valhal,” Jake said, a bit teasingly.

“Or the Chosen of the Malefic Viper,” she shot back.

“Well, of course not. I got a big angry snake with really nasty poison backing me, but you also got an angry guy with a really big axe as well as all his drunken god friends behind you, so I think we are both pretty damn scary,” Jake joked.

“None of which are in this universe at all and won’t be for a long-ass time,” Carmen argued.

“True, true. But they will be one day, and people like Renato are in this for the long game and have godly backers themselves. If he pisses us off, it reflects badly on his backer,” Jake said. “So do not question the fact that when it comes to status, you have them thoroughly beat.”

She still looked skeptical as Jake kept piling on.

“Also, in personal power, you are far beyond them. They can’t touch you in any way. They are forced to comply with what you want or face the consequences. They have no one to complain to or seek justice from. Not now or ever, as you will keep getting stronger.

“Think about it like this. Positive thoughts. You will reach C-grade and beyond, and in the meanwhile, they will all grow old and rot away while you live on and gain more and more power. By then, they will be nothing but an annoying memory of your younger days,” Jake finished.

A few moments of silence followed as the warrior from Valhal just took in the words. She had a personal struggle to overcome. Minutes more went by before she finally seemed to have made up her mind.

Carmen took a deep breath as she looked down. “I will meet them and confront them. If I just leave and act like nothing, I will beat myself up over it forever. I... I want to hear them out... or at least hear something from them. Closure, maybe... before they die of old age, you know.”

Jake smiled as he asked: “Want me to come with you?”

She looked at him and slowly nodded. “Yeah... just promise me one thing.”

“What?” he asked.

“Let me do the talking, and if things get weird, give me a reality check, okay?”

Jake nodded once more. "Sure thing. Want Sylphie around too?"

"No," Carmen shook her head. "Let her continue doing whatever she is doing... wait, what is she doing anyway?"

"Oh, I asked – or well, bribed - her to keep an eye on Peter as the guy was acting shady, and so far, it seems like he is indeed up to some shady stuff. Went all stealth mode and began running around with a crystal. Probably recording or scouting for the United Cities Alliance or something. I will probably talk with the guy later and figure out what he is up to," Jake shrugged.

"Wait, he was shady?" Carmen exclaimed, surprised.

"Oh yeah, for sure. Not sure exactly what the deal is with Peter, but he did seem genuine in most things, and honestly, what he is doing doesn't seem like my problem. Renato can figure that one out, and even if he arrived in the city with us, it isn't our fault if everyone decides he is somehow the fourth guy among the three musketeers," he joked.

"We are the three musketeers now?"

"Look, it was the fastest analogy I could get on with three people," Jake laughed. The mood was instantly lightened as they sat there just a bit.

"We should go now before I chicken out," Carmen finally said.



“Let’s get a move on then. I’ll send a quick message to Renato and update him on the way, so no worries if you see some shady cloaked figures around,” Jake said with a smile as he practically dragged Carmen out of the hotel before she had time to change her mind.

Jake knew whatever Carmen was dealing with could be bad in the long run. The Viper had told him that being hung up on things could lead to stagnation and issues. His fellow Primordial, known as the Daofather, dubbed this kind of thing a heart demon or something like that, which just sounded like a metaphor for having doubt or insecurities by someone trying to sound more profound than they actually were.

Either way, Carmen would do best by confronting it. No matter how things turned out. All he could hope for was that things didn’t end too badly.

Who knows, maybe they had turned into at least marginally less shitty people than Carmen described them to be? He knew she was a biased source, and they couldn’t be that bad, right?

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“The Salvento family... why?” Renato asked himself in a confused tone once he got word from the Chosen who they were going to visit. His chief of security was also there with a slightly worried look.

“I am uncertain, but it was clear that was their target. No other place fits the description,” the man answered. He wore a worn-out police uniform and looked a bit sloppy, but he was nevertheless one of the strongest people in the city.

“But out of everyone, why them?” Renato asked, a bit worried. The reason was simple... out of every faction, they were one of the ones Renato preferred not to make an enemy. Not because of the family itself, but who they had managed to bring into their fold through the age-old strategy of deploying a honeytrap.

That woman Beatrice had him wrapped around her finger, making him little more than a loyal dog even if he was incredibly powerful and used a tricky kind of magic Renato would prefer not to get involved in.

“Maybe it is some moral mission? It seems like this is for the Runemaiden, not the Chosen,” the chief of security chimed in.

“Perhaps, but it is still odd they chose them out of everyone. It also feels personal. The Runemaiden sat outside the mansion for nearly an entire day just scouting it out with a frown on her face, and now they decide to go. Who are these people to her?” Renato wondered out loud.

“People who wronged her? Wouldn’t be a first; the Salvento’s aren’t the most popular,” the other man shrugged.

“No... no, if it was that simple, she would have just attacked.”

Renato kept pondering the issue a bit more. He did have some theories, but none that could be confirmed, and it was possible they had simply wronged her. The Salvento family had done everything under the sun, including slavery, before they entered Paradise. They currently ran several brothels and high-level escort services, not just in Paradise, as well as produced nearly a third of the entire drug supply of the city, and that was the part that wasn’t exported. They had a major influence but also a horrible reputation for one simple reason...

They treated everyone they viewed as below them like absolute shit and had a triple-digit body count of people who “offended them.”

Carmen stood around the corner and stared at the imposing gates of the mansion. They felt so much larger than the last time she had come there and looked utterly indestructible. She felt nervous and had second thoughts, but when she looked around, she saw Jake who was judgmentally staring at her behind his creepy mask. Well, she also wore a mask while in Paradise, so it was fair.

She felt a bit more assured seeing him there, so unbothered and relaxed. She quickly composed herself, and with Jake in tow, they silently walked towards the gates.

Carmen didn't truly know what she wanted. She had fantasized and dreamed for years about what she would do. While in prison, she dreamed about getting out and somehow making it big to then return home in an expensive car to make her parents and family look at her with recognition and pride. To view her as good enough.

It was stupid. No matter how many times they put her down and ridiculed her, she still wanted to get their approval. She only had a handful of memories where she thought her family actually felt proud of her. All of them in her youngest years. After she entered her early teenage years, it was all downhill from there.

They had wronged her so many times. They made her life hell. Made her want to kill herself several times, took away any little joy she found, and never acted like she was worth anything more than dirt. Dirt to be pushed into a corner when guests came over. When she went to prison, it was like she was dead to them. No visits or calls, with the only thing she ever got being a card from her father saying he was disappointed while also outlining how she had been taken out of all wills and barred from any inheritances.

And now, even with the system, it seemed like they had just written her off. If they let it slip that she existed, they could just lie. Clinton seemed to believe she had been off to college, and it was implied she had probably just died due to that. That part was likely true... they did just assume she was dead. How could they possibly think the useless Carmen could survive?

So... what did she want? Did she want them to see how far she had come? To be impressed that she was now a Runemaiden of Valhal, a high-ranked warrior? Did she want them to praise her and welcome her back with open arms and apologize for their past actions? Say she truly was family after all? For her father to say that he was proud of her?

Did she just want to brag? Show them how wrong they had been and then make them know she was so above them that they weren't worth her time? To look Beatrice in the eyes and say she would enjoy watching her die of old age as she would forever stay young? Call them all out for the shitty people they were before walking off, now their superior?

Or... did she just want to kill every single last fucking one of them?

Chapter 467 - Peak Family Drama

Jake walked with Carmen towards the large gate with two guards out front. The two guards had clearly already seen them and noticed the black mask on Carmen and Jake wearing his own rather unique mask. Both were identifiers that they were guests of Paradise and likely wealthy individuals, which also meant the guards took a polite demeanor by default.

"Good afternoon, sir and madam. May I know your purpose for visiting the Salvento residence?" one of the guards asked courteously.

Carmen looked at the man for a moment before just saying: "Tell them that Carmen is here."

The guard looked confused and exchanged a look with his partner. They didn't argue back but just decided to do as asked. He felt the other guard keep an extra eye on Jake, making him guess the guy probably had some way to gauge people and how strong they were beyond merely using Identify - an ability like beasts had, making them know who not to mess with.

A few minutes passed before a few more guards made it out of the house before finally, Jake spotted someone that was clearly a member of the family. It was a man wearing a tailored tan suit who walked beside a woman in a relatively modest dress. Both looked to be in their forties to early fifties, and looking at Carmen's conflicted reaction to seeing them, he had a good guess who they were.

Her parents.

Jake didn't know what he expected, and neither did Carmen. He just stood back as they observed. Carmen looked at the two of them as they came closer, with the man clearly not in a good mood.

"Who are you?" he asked the moment they were within earshot. "What the hell do you want? Money? How dare you use the name of my dead daughter to-"

Carmen didn't hesitate as she ripped off her mask and stared daggers at the man. "Who the fuck is dead?"

The man stopped with his mouth still half-open. His expression was odd, but the woman - Carmen's mother - had the kind of reaction Jake would have expected from someone finding out their daughter was still alive.

She brought her hands to her mouth as she ran over and past the security guards, tears in her eyes.  
“Carmen? Is it really you?”

Carmen had no idea what to think. She saw her mother run over without any hesitation while crying like she was actually happy to see her. Meanwhile, her father still just stood there dumbstruck. She hadn't seen or heard from her mother since her last court date. Sure, her mother had also been crying then, but she hadn't visited her a single time in prison. She hadn't even once made a call or sent a letter or done anything. How did she dare to suddenly act like she was happy to see Carmen after willfully not going to see her for nearly two years?

“What, surprised I am not dead?” she sneered at the both of them.

Her mother stopped a few steps away as the tears just kept streaming down. “I... I'm so sorry... about everything. I...”

“You what?” Carmen shot back.

“Carmen, do not speak to your mother like that,” her father said as he had now composed himself. “Stop making a scene and come inside if you want to talk.”

Glaring, she shot him a look as she felt her anger build. “What the fuck are you going to-“

She then felt a slight tap on her shoulder. She whipped her head around and saw Jake who was just shaking his head. Carmen looked into his eyes for a moment before taking a deep breath. Don't get too emotional... you are in control here.

"Fine. Lead us inside," Carmen finally said. Her mother seemed relieved while her father nodded, still looking deep in thought.

The two security guards just stared as she saw her father raise a hand. "Hold it. Who is this man, and why are you bringing him along?"

"I am a companion, and I am coming along, no discussion," Jake just answered. "I have been hired to and have no intentions of shirking on my promises."

His answer was short, but it seemed good enough as her father only looked at him briefly before ignoring him. The moment he had said the words that he was hired, Carmen already knew that her father had passed judgment and now didn't see him as anyone worth anything... he had always been an ass to service workers, but it had clearly only gotten worse.

Yet her mother seemed so happy. She wouldn't stop crying and looked like she wanted to just give Carmen a hug. What the hell is up with... everything?

Man, if this wasn't peak-level family drama. Jake could see Carmen about to lose it right away, but he noticed quite the discrepancy. Her father did indeed look like an utter asshole, but her mother's relief and emotions felt incredibly genuine. Moreover, the glances the man tossed his wife were proof he wasn't happy with how she acted.

Carmen had asked Jake to help ground her and give her reality checks, so he would do that. Jake had the lucky advantage that he quite frankly didn't give a fuck about what happened to any of these people. All he cared about was Carmen not making a kneejerk reaction that she would come to regret. She was effectively holding a loaded gun at all times, and a single moment where she lost control could kill either one of them, something they clearly weren't aware of.

Wordlessly they were escorted inside as Carmen walked beside Jake, her mother a bit off to the side, and her father at the front. The woman looked like she wanted to say something or at least get closer, while Jake saw the man with a deep frown on his face that he probably believed none of them could see as he had his back turned.

Jake exchanged a look with Carmen, who just had a stony face. He tried to give her an assuring look, and she nodded a bit stiffly. For now, they would let her family take the lead and see what they planned on doing and what they would do. Jake took his time to scan the mansion with his senses and quickly noticed a vast underground complex. He also felt someone powerful in the house... but it was odd. Like, the aura was powerful, but it also felt almost fake? Now Jake was also curious.

Once inside the mansion, her father exchanged some words with a servant of sorts before leaving, practically dragging his wife along. Jake and Carmen were then led into a lounge room of sorts, where they sat down.

Jake took the initiative as he summoned a barrier of stable arcane mana, isolating them from the outside world entirely.

"What the fuck is wrong with them?" Carmen instantly shouted as she looked at Jake the moment he was done with the barrier. "And why did you stop me? Do you understand any of this shit?"



“No, not really... but your mother seemed genuine. There is definitely more going on than you know,” Jake shook his head. “I think hearing out their side can be beneficial. Not for them, but for you. If you don’t figure things out, you may discover something in the future that will make you look back at today with regret. If they prove to still be absolute assholes, you will always be able to turn the situation around to your advantage. Remember, you are in the right here. You decide what happens today, not them.”

Carmen finally sat down and stared at the expensive-looking coffee table. “What will you do if things turn bad?”

“Depends on what you want me to do,” Jake shrugged. “Ah, but I did place a Hunter’s Mark on each of your parents to keep an eye on them. To be safe, ya know.”

She just shook her head and smiled a bit. Jake knew she still had no idea what she wanted to happen and that it all depended on what her family chose to do. It was all a complicated reason, and Jake was just happy nothing was really up to him. He would just do his simple task of making sure Carmen made choices with an at least partly clear mind.

Minutes passed as they sat there, just chatting a bit. Carmen decided now was a good idea to discuss how many people undervalued good form while in the gym and how important it truly was when building muscle, especially when focusing on building specific muscles. Jake had rarely seen someone so obviously just talking about a random topic to take their thoughts off things, but he nevertheless listened and engaged.

It took more than twenty minutes before anyone even addressed them aside from the first servant. Jake had noticed many attempts to probe them and observe or listen in, but Jake’s barrier was too good for their bad scouting attempts to work. This wasn’t only because Jake was good, but because the attempts were half-arsed at best.

The door to the room opened, and in came another servant. "The family will receive you now," the woman said courteously.

This choice of words was not lost on Jake, but Carmen didn't seem to care much as she just got up. Jake had dispelled the barrier when he saw the servant approach and followed her out. Their welcome so far had been less than welcoming... they weren't even offered tea and cookies.

They were led through the grand mansion and into what Jake guessed was a banquet hall. Jake already saw the gathering of people in the hall before the double door was opened. "Prepare yourself. It looks like they are pretty much all there," Jake said, infusing his voice with a bit of Willpower to only let Carmen hear.

More than fifty people were gathered. Around thirty of them were suits or dresses and other such fancy clothes, while twenty were guards or servants. It was quite something. Jake saw Carmen steel herself as the doors were opened, revealing the entire hall and the many people gathered. It reminded Jake of the most intimidating job interview imaginable, with all of them just staring at the maskless Carmen.

Now, Jake had expected many opening questions... but not even he could predict this one.

"Child, what on god's earth are you wearing?" a woman who looked to be well in her seventies with frilly hair and a baggy dress asked.

Carmen was wearing her combat outfit. Cured leather, metal bracers, heavy combat boots, and generally, she looked ready for a fight at any moment. The only skin she revealed was her face and bare hands. Meanwhile, every other woman in the room wore dresses or other "elegant" clothes.

“Mother, cut her some slack. She must have had a hard time traveling all this way,” another woman cut in.

“Doesn’t excuse her lack of proper etiquette,” a third woman cut in.

“Also, who is this man? And look at those... things on his feet. Do the servants not vet any random homeless person who wanders in?” a man chimed in.

“Now, now, let’s all calm down,” a fourth woman finally said as she raised her hand. Jake recognized her instantly as the woman Carmen had mentioned was her hated aunt, the mother of her most-hated cousin, Beatrice. To note, then Beatrice was not present in the room currently, but Jake saw her in another room off to the side, clearly observing them through some monitoring device. With her was a relatively thin and nerdy-looking man with glasses. He was currently giving her a shoulder massage as she looked at the confrontation between Carmen and the rest of the Salvento family.

“Carmen, it truly is you,” the aunt said as she was all smiles. “I cannot tell you how much of a surprise this is. We had feared the worst when we failed to get in contact with you after so long, and I cannot tell you how happy we are to see you return to us. I am sure that if you work hard, then our family can find it in our hearts to forgive you and move on. With the world in such turmoil, isn’t it a great opportunity to give new chances?”

To her credit, Carmen didn’t lose her shit but just stood with a steely face.

“That’s it?” she finally asked after a good five seconds of silence.

“Carmen! Be respectful, and do not make this more difficult than it has to be!” her father yelled from across the room. He was red-faced, and Jake noticed how Carmen’s mother was just standing all the way in the back, looking down with tears in her eyes.

“Nothing is difficult here,” Carmen shot back.

“She is right,” the aunt agreed. “Now, Carmen. I must know, why did you come now? Why come at all?”

The mixed messaging could not be more clear. On the one hand, the aunt welcomed her back with open arms while simultaneously questioning why she would come back as if it was obvious she wasn’t welcome.

“I felt like I had to,” Carmen answered truthfully.

“Daft as ever,” the old woman – Carmen’s grandmother - said. “After all the trouble you caused, you dare show your face like this again? You dare show up covered in dirt, ignoring all etiquette and social norms by just barging in the door? Without a single apology? You should be on your knees begging for forgiveness from your aunt and your cous-“

“Enough!”

Jake had expected Carmen to be the one yelling, but while the voice was similar, it wasn’t her. Her mother broke out of the crowd and ran towards Carmen as she stood in front of her. “This is... enough!”

Carmen stared confused at the woman's back. While it made a bit more sense to Jake, he chose to stay silent as he curiously observed.

"Maura, what in god's name are you doing!" Carmen's father yelled. He looked both worried and infuriated at what was happening.

"This isn't right or at all what we agreed! You promised-"

"Maura," the aunt cut her off as she stared down at Carmen's mother. "Think very carefully about what you want to do or say next."

The woman hesitated as Jake decided to get a little involved. He infused his voice with a bit of Willpower and whispered into the woman's ear.

"Just speak. Do not underestimate your daughter, and share the truth. Have no doubt that the side you now stand on is the superior one."

No one but her heard his voice, and she looked bewildered for a moment, but it seemed to have given her the confidence. She gritted her teeth as she yelled:

"Why should I trust anything any of you say! I already lost my daughter once, and I will not do so again! You promised me she would be out of prison within a year and be back with us! You swore you were doing everything and that as long as we kept our distance, we would be fine! You never did anything!" the woman practically screamed.

“Maura, shut your mouth right now and apologize! Get back here and-“

“No! I am not leaving my daughter again!”

The situation had turned tense a lot quicker than expected. The woman called Maura had only managed to share a few details, but Jake could see Carmen was shaken. She looked unsure of what to do, and Jake placed a hand on her shoulder to calm her down.

Carmen looked up as she collected her thoughts. She seemed to make a decision as she stepped forward. “I think there are some things I need to know. Mother, please follow me so we can-“

“Dear, I will need you to stay so we can talk this out,” the aunt interrupted her, and Jake saw the guards move to cover the door. “Having you and your mother simply leave like this will just cause issues no one wants, wouldn’t it?”

Jake just sighed internally. What a fucking moron.

And, of course, they just had to make it even worse as the side door swung open.

“Now, what is all this ruckus? Is my retarded little cousin causing a ruckus again and in need of another lesson?”

The cousin entered, and with her was the nerdy-looking man that gave off quite an odd aura. Finally, all the related parties were gathered in one room for the highest stake game of family feud imaginable.

#### Chapter 468 - A One-Sided Family Feud

Jake's attention was firmly on the two newcomers, especially the scrawny-looking man. He was thin, pale, wore glasses, and even in D-grade, he still looked like someone who hadn't left his basement for half a year. Yet he did have an aura of confidence, and Jake could see why.

[Human – lvl 165]

He was actually higher leveled than Jake himself, and it wasn't spoofed or anything either. However, even so, Jake got weird vibes from him. His aura was oddly inconsistent, and his mana signature had an odd, well, signature. It was a bit familiar to Jake, but he wasn't entirely clear where he had felt it before.

The other newcomer was the woman called Beatrice. She wore the kind of dress Jake would expect out of a high-society gala, and she clearly cared a lot about her looks. Jake also felt an aura from her as well as a domain of sorts. His senses heightened, and he quickly noticed how the subtle domain only affected Jake and the other man that stood next to her as well as all the male guards. Somehow it excluded family members and women. Jake did recognize this kind of aura as he had seen a familiar one before, though that one had been far less potent and controlled. It was a seduction aura of sorts, and Irin, the succubus, had a similar one.

Her level was also quite a bit lower, to say the least.

[Human – lvl 131]

Carmen looked at the two of them, and Jake saw her one hand slightly shake. Jake did not do anything to interfere but would let things play out how they should. Whatever happened, he would just follow Carmen's lead, and from the looks of it, there was also her mother around now with far more insight into who was a bastard and who wasn't.

With impressive calmness, Carmen looked at her cousin as she scoffed. "You're still as big of a bitch as back then, huh? Nice guy you got yourself there by the way, I see you are still at least good at whoring yourself out."

The nerdy-looking guy instantly turned aggressive, but Beatrice held his arm and shook her head. "No need to get mad, babe. She is just jealous. Look at that pathetic guy she managed to drag along."

Okay, why am I getting attacked? Jake questioned but still chose to hold his mouth.

"I understand that the concept of having a man around and not fucking him is foreign to you. Oh wait, is that why you're so popular in the family? It wouldn't surprise me to learn you fucked half your cousins and uncles you--"

"Do not utter another word! How dare someone like you come in here and act like this!" a man Jake recognized as Carmen's uncle screamed as he turned to her father. "Didn't I tell you you shouldn't have married that bitch and had a devil spawn like her!"

Jake saw Carmen begin to shake more and more before she finally just stopped. She took a deep audible sigh as she looked at her mother.

"Mom, who here would you prefer not to see dead?"



The woman called Maura looked bewildered before she turned afraid. "Please, let's just leave; I am sure that if we send a message to the authorities, they will--"

"They already locked down the room," Carmen sighed. "They don't plan on letting any of us leave. So tell me... who do you prefer to leave alive?"

Maura didn't answer but just looked dumbstruck as she stared up at the rest of her family. Jake saw the cold gazes they sent in return, and Jake honestly found it impressive. The sheer level of cohesion in this family was insane. Even her own husband, Carmen's father, looked back with disappointment and anger.

"At least you realize the situation you are in," the aunt said with a smile. "Now, we aren't heartless enough to kill our own family. But house arrest is certainly the least of the consequences you will face. Beatrice dear, do you have any ideas on how we can involve little Carmen more in the family business?"

The cousin just smirked. "We always need more little whores. We can even take the mother."

"No," Carmen's father finally spoke up. "I shall handle my own wife."

Jake saw Maura shake a bit as she backed away. Honestly, looking at this entire situation... yeah, these people had a seriously lacking ability when it came to probing others. Jake took out the beeper he had gotten from Renato and sent a message, more or less making it clear that murder was going to happen.

“You are all fucking insane,” Carmen sneered. “And equally fucking delusional to think you can in any way tell me or anyone around me what to do when I am here.”

“Heh,” Beatrice laughed when she saw Carmen clench her fists. “Are you still doing that silly boxing thing? Think a little girl like you can fight? I thought you had learned your lesson the first time around, but it seems like you need another one? Ah, I just got a nice little idea for where you can work; we just need to chop off those useless arms. I am sure we have plenty of clients looking for a little para-play.”

Jake saw Maura look horrified, with Carmen’s father also frowning deeply, but the others barely reacted. He decided to finally get a little involved as he felt Carmen was about to make her move.

“Excuse me, what am I to do?” Jake asked. Carmen threw him a look, but he just tossed her a glance, and she seemed to get it.

A few people finally looked at him as they barely seemed to register him.

“You are trespassing and are not family. Guards, apprehend him already and put him in the dungeon for dear Alberto to play with,” the aunt spoke, and Jake instantly guessed the guy with Beatrice was Alberto based on his creepy smile.

The guards reacted, and Jake threw Carmen a look. She just nodded, so Jake smiled as two men flanked him on each side.

Two heads fell to the ground before anyone else in the room reacted as Jake now stood with a black blade in his hand. He could have just blown their heads off, but Eternal Hunger hadn’t been fed in a while, so why not use this opportunity?

His display instantly stopped them in their tracks. Carmen's mother stared at Jake in disbelief as Carmen just laughed out loud, getting the attention of everyone. "Fine. You attacked first."

Carmen stepped down and flew forward with incredible speed. She appeared right in front of her aunt a moment later and mercilessly chopped down on her shoulders. Blood erupted as two arms were severed, and she screamed bloody murder.

Not a single other family member moved to help but just ran away as some of them took out expensive-looking items to defend themselves. Carmen showed no mercy as she moved again and kicked her uncle so hard in his stomach that her foot went through. With a whip, she tossed him away as he smashed into a wall, blood flowing down the pristine marble.

"Alberto!" Beatrice screamed, and the man reacted. That is when Jake learned why the aura of man felt familiar yet also fake. He instantly lit up with red energy as power flooded the room and five summoning circles appeared. He saw that deep below, similar circles appeared as five creatures were teleported from below.

They all looked humanoid and wore armor and wielded weapons, but Jake felt nothing human about them. The reason why he found the energy so familiar was because he had felt it before – demonic energy. He identified one and found them all around the same level.

[Demon-Possessed Human – lvl 164]

Now he knew his fate if he was to be captured. He had a fully-fledged warlock on his hands, it seemed. It was a class Jake had become faintly familiar with. The demons that were summoned moved for Carmen

right away as Jake still didn't move. Alberto kept an eye on Jake as he also didn't move from Beatrice's side. Jake, in turn, stayed to protect Carmen's mother.

Carmen was surrounded by demons in a moment as Beatrice yelled.

"Tear that bitch apart!"

"Fucking idiots," Carmen scoffed. Golden runes lit up on her body, and Jake knew she had finally activated just a few of her boosting skills. "Do you have any fucking idea who I am?"

Golden light erupted as she moved. A possessed human chopped down with an axe as Carmen just caught it and proceeded to punch the man so hard in his chest it exploded, sending him flying back. Dodging under another blow, she landed a low kick and put another off-balance as she punched him so hard that his head was embedded in the stone below.

It was an absolute slaughter. They were simply not on the same level, and Alberto knew this. Jake was aware the man would make a move as he went over to Maura. "Apologies."

He tapped her head and sent in a bit of Willpower, instantly knocking her out with a mental attack. He had a feeling it was better he got involved now. Of course, he still had to ensure Carmen's mother was safe. And well... that was a task for the third musketeer.

From above, what looked like a green bullet fell. A section of the roof collapsed as the hawk smashed down and cut one of the possessed humans in two from head to groin before swiftly flying over and joining Jake. Jake had communicated with her the task she had been given as he left Carmen's mother in the hawk's care.

Beatrice, to her credit, seemed to notice things had gone south. She looked at Jake as she backed a bit away, with Alberto taking a defensive position in front of her. Jake felt that the man had already gathered some energy within his body and could release the prepared skill at any point. Moving to attack would be smart, but... this was not Jake's fight. It was Carmen's privilege to kill them.

"Hey... hey, how much is she paying you? I am sure we can figure something out," the woman said as she released her seduction skill at full power, all of it directed towards Jake. He felt the level of mental influence, and it was at quite a high level if he had to say so himself. Still useless, of course.

"I don't believe you can offer anything I want," Jake just shot her down. "And if I wanted a prostitute, I would go to a brothel."

The woman looked shocked as Alberto was furious. He should probably have expected it, but his comment triggered the man enough to also make his own move. It was a bit premature as Carmen had only barely gotten done killing the second-to-last possessed human as they were actually respectably tanky with potent regeneration skills.

Jake felt the man's aura flare as he knelt down and pressed his hands to the floor. The magic responded as Jake felt a gateway open. Jake briefly felt a connection be established with something far more powerful than anyone in the room as the man fully activated the trump card of most warlocks.

"Demonic Transformation!"

His body bulged as muscles erupted on his body. His skin turned red, and Jake saw a faint mirage behind him of a similar-looking demon. A true demon.

Demons were a rather unique race in the multiverse due to one of the racial skills possessed by all demons in C-grade and above. The Demonic Contract. It was the ability to make a contract with those significantly weaker than themselves and allowed the contractee to pull on their power and, in extreme cases, even allow the demon to possess them or someone else for a limited time, making them far more powerful. This was a very common path to power for demons, and these contracts could take many forms.

That was a simplified version, but Jake had no time to go through all the information in his head right now as the transformation was complete. From a small and scrawny nerd, he had become a three-meter tall demonic mass of muscles with an axe of bone.

Feeling the bellowing aura, Jake understood why even Renato was careful around the guy. Warlocks were notorious for being powerful at their levels due to the nature of their Path. It was a Path that had plenty of drawbacks too, but none that mattered at the current time.

Jake dodged as the axe swung down, and he retaliated with Eternal Hunger, getting a good stab in. The bulky demon barely cared but kept swinging wildly with every single axe hit tearing up the hall. A few shockwaves even reached the family members of Carmen and Beatrice, ripping them apart.

Carmen swiftly finished off the last possessed demon and charged over. Jake graciously bowed out and allowed Carmen to have her fun with the demon guy. At the same time, he made sure no one else left the room, including Beatrice, who had managed to flee into the room she and Alberto had entered from.

He followed her and appeared in front of her with One Step Mile in an instant. "And you folk talk about etiquette. Isn't it rude to leave in the middle of a party without notice?" Jake taunted her.

“What the hell do you want!” she screamed. “What has that witch given you? Who even are you?”

“Lord Thayne, Chosen of the Malefic Viper and perhaps the most powerful man on Earth,” a familiar voice said as Jake saw the man in his white suit as he teleported into the room. Renato quickly glanced about and saw the carnage, while he frowned at seeing the fight between Carmen and the demon. While the demon probably had Carmen beaten in pure Strength, Alberto clearly had no idea how to fight, and it didn’t look like he knew the Demonic Avatar skill either to have the demon actually possess him. Carmen quickly wore him down as her fists fell like rain and sent blood flying.

Beatrice stared at Renato and actually looked relieved. “Mr. Renato! I am so glad you are here; these lunatics came in here and-“

“Shut it,” Renato cut her off with a death glare before turning to Jake. “Lord Thayne, thank you for informing me of the decision you and the Runemaiden reached. I have already made the necessary preparations, and the Salvento family will be punished according. If you and the Runemaiden choose to leave any survivors, that is.”

“That will be up to her,” Jake shook his head. He waved his hand and sent out strings of mana and tied up Beatrice, who was once more trying to sneak away. She fell to the ground and struggled, her stats pathetic for a D-grade. Jake had also tied shut her mouth for good measure.

The situation was firmly under control. The family members who had survived were huddled up in a corner, Carmen was beating down the only fighter worth a damn, and Jake had Sylphie bring over the unconscious Maura, who Jake entrusted to Renato.

And then he just observed the fight between the large demon and Carmen. He saw how she didn't really use any skills but was just pummeling the transformed man. Jake felt how she let out all her frustrations and anger by using him as a living boxing bag, and honestly, good riddance.

Jake only knew a bit about what went into creating demon-possessed humans, and it wasn't nice. It required you to completely break down someone enough to have them willingly take in a demon, effectively killing themselves to come hosts. Currently, he could see a lot of what was beneath the mansion, and it appeared like it had primarily belonged to Alberto and housed his workshop.

"Should send some men to the cellar," Jake said to Renato. "And bring some healers."

The man nodded gravely as Jake just stood there and kept watching Carmen let out all the pent-up emotions. Sylphie also joined him as they just let her do her thing before the demon finally died a slow and probably very painful death.

Chapter 469 - Catharsis

Carmen stood over the body of the demon. Blood dripped onto the floor from fists that didn't even have a single scratch on them. She breathed heavily as she kicked the corpse in frustration at the fucker dying so fast. She knew it wasn't all fair that she had let out everything on a man she had only met less than an hour ago, but from the looks of it, he was a fucking asshole. Fit right into the family.

At least he had been worth more than her pathetic uncle and aunt. They could barely handle anything, and she was relieved to see at least one of them still alive despite her injuries. They were still D-grade after all, and anything short of blowing up their entire torso or ripping off their heads wouldn't lead to instant death, which is why it was maybe overkill to tear her uncle in two, though that shouldn't have killed him instantly.



Anyway, it was good the demon guy had at least been a bit durable to let her vent, considering the rest of her family were too pathetic. And they were pathetic. She wanted to kick herself for being so scared before coming that day. These people were nothing more than bottom feeders.

She looked into the room and saw Jake stand together with the shady City Lord Renato, but she also saw her mother lay there unconscious. Jake gave her a nod to make her know she was okay, and even Sylphie mimicked him, making her smile a bit internally. Finally, she saw the tied-up Beatrice.

I'll save her for last.

Carmen turned her attention to the other family members in the room. As she looked at them, her anger flared again. No... they deserve worse than death.

"Get the fuck over here!" she yelled at them.

"Little Carmen, please, this is all a big misunderstanding!" she heard her grandmother, who had managed to survive, cry out. She even had the gall to use the name she used to call Carmen when she was like five.

"I told you all to get the fuck over here," she said again. It seemed to get the message across the second time around as she also pointed at her aunt. "And drag that bitch along. If any of you are healers, fix her up too. At least enough so she doesn't die too quickly."

They did as ordered without another complaint or word spoken. Only now did Carmen truly recognize how fucked up their sense of authority was. The moment she had the upper hand, pretty much everyone just rolled over and did as told. It was pathetic.

Jake and Renato then walked over, with Jake dragging the bundle of mana strings containing Beatrice. The woman was wriggling, trying to get loose as she looked up at Carmen with fright. Carmen had to hold herself back from just stomping on her head then and there as she turned to Renato.

“Is this all of them?”

“Everyone from the Salvento family present in Paradise, yes,” the man confirmed.

“And you really have no issues with everything that happened today?” she also asked.

“I have major issues with it. I lost a major source of income and an important part of our infrastructure. Your family – or former family – were at least decent at their jobs, and it will take a long time to find suitable replacements,” the man answered honestly but added. “However, this is a preferable outcome to dealing with the fallout of making you an enemy. Moreover, it was only a question of time before they tried to reach beyond their station and would no doubt go for the position of City Lord eventually. So, truly, good riddance.”

Carmen just sighed as she wondered what to do next. She considered if she should just kill them all, but then she saw her mother. Still unconscious. She gritted her teeth as she sighed and looked at Renato and Jake. “Can you help me contain them or something? I think I need to have a talk with my mom.”

Jake nodded and smiled as he tossed her a few potions. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” she smiled as she went into the other room with her mother and shut the door, trusting Jake to make sure no one escaped. Even if they did, she had confidence he could track them down again.

Jake stood in the large central banquet chamber and saw it all torn up and destroyed. Renato stood silently at his side as the man just seemed happy with everything being contained within the mansion and that nothing spilled outside to impact the rest of the city.

“You allowed them to get away with a lot,” Jake finally said, both men knowing what he was referring to.

“A balance is required,” Renato just said in defense of himself.

“They have a fucking dungeon full of prisoners. Human experiments. I am pretty sure this goes against the so-called rules of Paradise,” Jake shot back.

Renato sighed. “I was aware of some of it. Slaves were brought in from the outside. While slave trading is illegal, owning them is not... and even if it is frowned upon, we simply didn’t have the means to investigate and-

“Bullshit,” Jake said. “You just didn’t think it was worth it.”

“As I said... a balance is required,” Renato just said as the two of them stood in silence. “But do know that I shall strive to improve things.”

"I hope so," Jake said.

And hopefully, whatever Peter does will light a fire under your ass and make you get your shit together.

Hours passed.

Carmen had woken up her mother and heard the whole story. Between sobs and apologies, Carmen became a bit more clear on what had been going on back then. When Carmen gave her dear cousin a good pummeling and was charged criminally, her mother had fought for her with her father also kind of supporting her.

However, due to the pressure from other family members, they were told to back off. Her mother was finally promised that Carmen would stay incarcerated for a year or so before they would agree for her to get out. With the family's power, she hadn't doubted it was possible, but the promise did come with some limitations.

First of all, they could have no contact with her during this time, and her mother had agreed. Carmen did learn that some things did not line up. The letter disowning her was news to her mother, making her cry even more at learning that it had indeed never been their plan to let her out.

Her mother also said that things got worse after she went to prison. Her father got more aggressive and short with his wife, and her freedom was limited. Her father and mother had apparently been threatened to be cut off from the family entirely, and at that moment, her father had chosen the family over Carmen and his wife. It was a fucked up situation, which just led to the ultimate question:

"Who of them is worth keeping alive?" Carmen asked her mother.

"I..." her mother said with hesitation. "Carmen, we shouldn't stoop to their level. Please, enough people have died today, don't make it worse."

Carmen just sighed at her mother's naivety, yet it also made her a bit glad. She also decided that she wanted another perspective on this as she dispelled the barrier in the room and spoke a bit loudly. "Can you come in here? I need some common sense."

Jake was not a good person to ask for common sense, but nevertheless, he entered the room where Carmen and Maura were sitting. The woman looked like a mess, and Jake greeted her with a wave. He took the initiative and made his own mask invisible when it was just the three of them.

"Not sure you want me for common sense," Jake commented.

"You are the best I got," Carmen just scoffed with a smile. "You have been keeping an eye on my family," any thoughts so far?"

"They are trying to figure out who to throw under the bus, but it seems like they all agreed on the uncle, aunt, and Beatrice as well as that grandmother of yours. A few more, too, probably. They are all kept in the room so you can figure out what you want to do with them," Jake answered.

"What do you think I should do? No... what would you do?" Carmen asked.

Jake took a moment to think. Would he kill them all? Maybe. It seemed like a waste of time to do so. Would he let them go? Fuck no. But if he wasn't going to let them go...

"I don't think I am the best to ask. I don't know them well enough... but think about it like this. What are the consequences of leaving them alive, and what do you want out of their deaths? Remember, this is not about them but you. If you genuinely believe killing every single one of them will make you feel better, do that. That would also remove all karmic ties and potential future issues one of them could bring. If you believe that leaving them alive - and that they are no future threats - will make you feel best, do that," Jake answered honestly. He did not know what he would do if he was in the same position. He would just go by his gut in that situation.

Carmen looked like she considered her words before asking her mother.

"Do you want your husband alive or not?" she asked a bit coldly.

"Your father-"

"He is not my father," Carmen cut her off. "And I am not a part of that shitty Salvento family. They lost the privilege for me to recognize them long ago."

"He... I don't know," her mother shook her head.

Jake sighed as he saw the woman so... lost. Her entire life had been upturned in just a few minutes, and all the conditioning would take far longer to fade away. It was a difficult situation, and Jake could only watch from the sidelines as, luckily, Renato entered the conversation.

“Ms. Carmen, would it perhaps be best we find a peaceful place for your mother to rest for now? We have plenty of healers and individuals with experience dealing with injuries not necessarily of the physical nature,” the man asked.

Carmen hesitated before finally nodding. Maura didn’t even try to argue but did say one last thing. “Please don’t kill your father... even with all he did...”

With that, she was led away, and Carmen looked at Jake and Renato for a moment. Jake understood at that moment what she had decided. “Have everyone leave the hall,” she said, with Renato complying as he ordered his men out.

“Meet you back at the hotel?” Jake asked.

“Yeah,” Carmen nodded as she closed the gate and entered the central hall.

Carmen wiped her hand with a cloth. It was still red even after she cleaned it, but with a bit of water and soap, it should come off. Around her lay more than twenty corpses of people she had once called family. Once. She realized that forgiveness was just not in her heart. Carmen was not going to justify anything to anyone. She killed them purely out of selfish revenge, and fuck her, did it feel good.

Now there were only four left, as her chair moved a bit as her dear cousin struggled. She really was a sucky chair.

“Pipe down,” Carmen said as she grabbed her thigh of Beatrice and let her fingers sink into the flesh as the woman made muffled screams.

The other two people were her aunt, grandmother, and father. Sadly her uncle had died during the fight with the demon, leaving only four of her primary targets. None of them spoke for good reason as they all lay on the ground, every single limb broken.

Her grandmother had not even reached D-grade, and it was a miracle she still lived. Carmen stood up and made sure to do a back-kick into her cousin’s stomach as she walked over to the vile old woman. Carmen squatted down in front of her.

“Never imagined this day would come, huh?” Carmen asked as she held up the woman by her frilly white hair. The woman only glared back as she muttered.

“Devil... spawn...”

“A bit hypocritical considering your favorite granddaughter’s boyfriend literally summoned demons,” Carmen sneered. “Not that I would argue. Devils are demons who have reached the realm of godhood; did you know that? No, probably not based on how fucking ignorant you have shown yourself to be. Either way, I shall take it as a compliment, so good riddance.”

With that, Carmen simply extended a finger and poked the woman on her head. Her finger penetrated the skull and sank into the old hag’s brain as her eyes opened wide before going blank and lifeless.

“And now for my favorite aunt,” Carmen said as she sprung up and walked over. “For you, I really have no grand speech. I always fucking hated you. You are a coward and an utter failure as a parent and a



person. The mere fact you managed to pop out that cousin of mine is a sin worthy of death alone, so I am giving you just that.”

“...” the woman struggled, but Carmen had already ripped out her tongue and broken her jaw as she wouldn’t stop yapping on begging for mercy earlier.

Carmen turned and looked at her cousin as she dragged her own mother over to her by her hair. “I wondered for a while If I should kill your own daughter in front of you... but honestly, I prefer it the other way around.”

She stomped down with her foot as she kept hold of the long hair on her aunt’s head. All the hair was ripped out as the woman was smashed down. Carmen had actually planned on ripping the head off, but oh well.

Another good stomp later, and all that remained of her head was a mass of blood, skull fragments, and brain matter.

“Now the finale. Beatrice, oh Beatrice. Do you have any idea how long I have looked forward to this day? I am actually a bit sad I wasn’t better back on that fateful day. If I was as skilled then as I am now, I would have killed you in time. I did try to kill you, you know?” Carmen said as she stared down at the crying woman – who naturally also had her tongue ripped out.

“Ah, wait, here, let me help you answer,” Carmen said as she pulled out a potion and fed Beatrice. She instantly healed with the head going first, and within less than a minute, a new tongue had regrown.

“You psychotic bitch,” Beatrice screamed. “You absolutely fucking psycho! You are never going to get away with this!”

“Get away with what? Fixing a minor family issue?” Carmen scoffed.

“I hope you get raped to death you-“

“And tongue privilege is revoked,” Carmen interrupted her as she ripped it out again. “You really don’t know when to shut the fuck up.”

Beatrice kept trying to scream as Carmen just took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She put a hand on each side of her cousin’s face and lifted her up. Opening her eyes, she stared straight into the eyes of Beatrice and saw only defiance meet her.

Carmen began squeezing as soon the eyes changed from defiance to pain and then finally despair. Gradually she increased her power as she didn’t lose eye contact for even a second. She wanted to make sure Beatrice suffered until the very last moment.

“Goodbye, and may you rot in whatever hell a bitch like you ends up in,” Carmen said as she increased the pressure and, like a melon, Beatrice’s head exploded, splashing blood all over Carmen.

Carmen couldn’t help but smile as she, for some reason, felt relieved. Yet she also felt tired, like she had just won a fight against her most powerful opponent ever. She looked at her bloody hands before she was brought out of her thoughts by the muffled cries of the final person left alone.

She turned to him and scoffed. "Be lucky my mother asked to keep you alive. That is the only reason you leave alive today. Don't fucking ever contact me again, and if you do, I will not be as nice, even if it goes against my mother's wish."

The man didn't even answer as he looked to be in a state of shock. He just kept screaming.

Carmen ignored him as she threw the corpses a final look before leaving the hall. Outside she saw the same guard that had first escorted them into Paradise.

"Ms. Carmen," he bowed.

"I am done," she just said.

"What are we to do with the survivor?" the guard asked unbothered.

"I honestly don't care, as long as he doesn't die," Carmen said dismissively.

"Very well. What will the Runemaiden do now?"

Carmen thought for a second. "Well, first of all, I need a damn shower."

“Honestly, that saying is just bullshit,” Carmen said as she took another shot. “Revenge is never the answer, my ass.”

“But an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind, didn’t you know that?” Jake teased her as he also took a drink.

“Well, I can live with that; I got confidence in my self-healing,” Carmen joked in return.

It had been a few hours since everything had ended. Renato was doing clean-up, Peter was nowhere to be found, and Sylphie didn’t like sitting around in a hotel room, so she had decided to scout out the surrounding area of Paradise.

Jake and Carmen had met up in the hotel room as they were currently liberally emptying out the minibar while chatting about everything that had gone down. Carmen was now just sitting in a bathrobe with damp hair as she drank, her clothes still full of blood after the happenings earlier today, with Jake having also switched into something a bit more casual.

“It’s weird. Based on all the movies and tv-shows and whatnot, one would think only some hollow feelings would remain. You know, how it is often shown where some guy gets their revenge and then they just become empty husks without purpose,” Carmen said as she stared up at the ceiling.

“I feel just the opposite. It was cathartic. Like finally, I am free... am I a bad person for that?”

Jake shrugged as he took another drink. "Good or bad... I don't know. Is it really worth thinking about? Freedom is what allows you to be and do whatever you want to. So what if others think you are a bad person if you and those you care about don't?"

She was silent for a while. "Do you think it makes me a bad person? Killing them all, I mean."

"No, not really. It was merely a consequence of their own actions. They lived their lives killing and taking advantage of others while never even being willing to risk their own hides. It was just a matter of time before reality caught up to them, and they pissed someone off they shouldn't," Jake shook his head. "Not sure about others, but I may have done the same. I truly don't know."

Carmen smiled and nodded as she fell silent for a bit as she stared around the room. She adjusted her hair a bit and took another drink as she took a deep breath.

"You know, for nearly four years, I have either been stuck in a fucked up women's prison or been busy running around killing things by myself for the most part," she said. "I know I have major trust issues... I don't like others having my back. Sylphie was the first living thing I think I ever really trusted, and that was just because she was so cute and innocent I couldn't see her backstabbing me."

Jake kept silent as he let her talk.

"I don't like all the pressure Sven put on me, or the importance people place on some stupid title like Runemaiden. Shit, I ended up going through several gods before I found one I stuck with due to my own damn insecurities more than anything else," she continued.

"I get it," Jake said. "Trusting people sucks. In my tutorial, I was naive and trusted people, and that nearly got me killed. But at the same time, you need to trust some people, or life just gets too miserable. I guess I did get lucky with who I met."

Carmen smiled and looked at Jake. "I guess I could have been more unlucky with who I met."

The two of them fell silent as they just drank. Carmen finally sighed and leaned forward as she grasped Jake by the collar as she muttered something about Jake being dense under her breath.

She looked him straight in the eyes. "Wanna hook up?"

Jake's brain short-circuited for a moment before he nodded and was promptly thrown towards the bed.

#### Chapter 470 - The Morning After

When fighting, Jake liked to be in control and dictate the momentum. He liked when he decided what would happen next, and the flow went as he predicted.

That night did not feel particularly in control, and if he was candid, he was totally fine with it.

Not that he didn't also seize the momentum here and there as the battle continued, making it a big back and forth.

After their battle, Jake found himself lying on the bed as he relaxed, with Carmen leaning against the headboard next to him, still stark naked. He looked over and saw her relaxing. Her short blonde hair was

a bit more unkempt than usual, and her defined muscles, especially on her stomach, were still visible even as she relaxed them. She noticed his gaze and didn't bother to hide anything as she spoke.

"I guess I should make it clear this doesn't mean we are getting married or anything," Carmen said.

"And here I was just thinking about picking out a good ring and wondering if Sylphie should be a bridesmaid," Jake joked back in return as he also sat up in the bed.

Okay, Jake had to admit, he could be a bit dense at times. He had not at all expected what happened to happen, but he wasn't averse to it. He just went with the flow and would be a damn liar if he said he wasn't a huge fan. If this was pre-system, he would definitely classify Carmen as someone way out of his league, especially factoring in the aesthetic improvements from evolutions.

"Don't get me wrong, I do like you, but there is no way I am looking for any kind of relationship right now, okay? So let's just keep it casual," Carmen further clarified.

"I didn't expect anything else," Jake nodded. Life was too complicated for both of them, and they each had their own stuff to deal with to get into any kind of meaningful relationship. A relationship would mean either or both parties had to sacrifice something to make it work, and Carmen and Jake were too selfish to want that.

"That doesn't mean this has to be a one-time thing," Carmen said suggestively.

"Technically, it already isn't," Jake smirked in return.

Carmen threw him an even more suggestive look, but Jake sadly shook his head. “While I would love to, I have already had to make five excuses to Sylphie about why we were busy, and by now, she seems to think we are performing some grand ritual.”

“Too bad,” she shrugged as she jumped off the bed and had armor appear on her body. “What are your plans now? I will stay in Paradise a bit to sort things out. I still need to figure out what to do with my mother. Taking her back to a settlement belonging to Valhal would be best, but getting there isn’t that easy right now.”

“You could always wait for the teleportation gates to be fully established. I am not sure how long it will take, but it shouldn’t be that long with how fast the space mages are progressing,” Jake said. “It may also be possible for me to help by doing a bit of roundabout teleportation by first going to the Order and then back to Haven, but I’m not sure if I can even do that.”

“No need, I will figure this out myself, but thanks for the offer,” Carmen rejected as she went over and gave him a kiss, adding. “Still only friends.”

“With benefits,” Jake smiled as he promptly got a chop on top of his head.

He also decided to finally get up and was dressed in moments through the power of his spatial storage. As he took on his clothes, he also took out an item. It was a Key of the Exalted Prima.

[Key of the Exalted Prima (Unique)] – A key to the Seat of the Exalted Prima. Allows entry to the Seat of the Exalted Prima.



"Here, take this," Jake said as he tossed Carmen the key.

She caught it and looked at the key with a frown. "Don't you still need another fragment? The only reason I didn't have a key is that I gave mine to Sven, so it really isn't your problem."

"I just gave you loot priority for the three Primas we killed," Jake shrugged. He knew Carmen wasn't a fan of charity. "And I plan on spending the rest of my time before the system event just exploring this continent. I am sure Renato has some good information on nearby spots with dangerous foes, which will likely include a Prima or two. Even if he doesn't have a map, I still got Peter's."

"Sure you trust that guy? Didn't he disappear after doing some shady shit?"

"Eh, trust or not doesn't matter; the map is at least legit based on what I can see," Jake said, shaking his head.

"You aren't angry at him lying to our faces this whole time?" Carmen asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Thinking about it, did he actually lie? We never asked, did we? Sure, one could argue he lied by omission but by that logic, we also lied to him about the nature of why we were going to Paradise. As far as I know, he didn't do anything against either of us and will only cause trouble for Renato, which I quite frankly don't give a damn about," Jake explained his point of view.

Carmen thought for a while. "I guess you have a point, and it isn't like Valhal or Haven is allied with that city alliance either."

Jake nodded as he went over to the balcony. "Okay if I let Sylphie in now?"

"Go ahead," she shrugged. The bedroom was still a bit of a mess after their nightly battle, but it didn't matter much.

Jake opened the balcony door, and the moment he did, a green form flew in and quickly circled the room. She zoomed a dozen rounds before finally landing on a table, knocking over a bottle.

"Ree!" she shrieked.

"Yeah, we discussed the situation," Jake nodded with a serious expression.

Sylphie looked at Carmen a bit suspiciously.

"Eh, yeah, we finished the discussion. Adults only you know?" Carmen played along.

"Yep," Jake reiterated. "Carmen will stay here for a while to handle the rest of her matters while the two of us can head out for a bit of hunting. We will meet up at the system event anyway, so--"

"Ree, ree, ree?" Sylphie asked.

"I guess?" Jake said, a bit surprised as he turned to Carmen. "Can Sylphie stay here with you until you got everything handled?"

"Why?" Carmen asked, confused.

"Well, according to her, she found some sky-anomaly around twenty kilometers in the sky hidden above the other clouds, and she wants to eat it," Jake shrugged.

"Eat it?" Carmen asked, confused.

"Yep. Sylphie's words, not mine. Well, her insinuation, not mine."

"What is this anomaly?" Carmen asked, a bit curious.

Jake turned to Sylphie, who made a few more screeching noises.

"A very windy one," Jake explained very accurately.

Carmen seemed to understand she would not get a proper answer, and Jake had also given up. From the sounds of it, it was perhaps some kind of natural formation or jet stream or something. Sylphie seemed

to want it, so the rest didn't really matter as he trusted her instincts for what she could and couldn't absorb.

Anyway, it seemed like Jake would have to head out alone. Sylphie and Carmen both had their own Prima keys, and Jake only needed one more fragment to form his own. He had over two weeks to get that done and also get some great hunting in.

Before he left, he went by Renato and talked to the man to clear some things up. First of all, he washed his and Carmen's hands of Peter by making it clear they didn't know the guy, and he even managed to come out looking like the good guy by "warning" Renato about Peter once Jake claimed he couldn't find him.

The visit also gave him some good information about the surrounding area. Renato had mapped out some areas where his elite was hunting and – more importantly – areas his elite avoided as it was too dangerous for them to hunt in. Jake also learned that the man didn't even have a single fragment himself and was fully aware he would not get a key. He was running a full-on turtle strategy which meant hunting wasn't something the man was skilled in.

With everything in Paradise done and dusted, Jake headed out for a danger zone about a day's travel away. For Renato's men. Jake could probably get there within a few hours.

Once he was outside, it finally came. Something he had waited for since last night. A presence descended as Jake heard the voice.

"I am so proud of my Chosen," Villy's voice echoed in his mind. "To lay with a Runemaiden from Valhal? Truly my man. Tell me, who's next now that you have finally abandoned your days of celibacy? You know it is entirely possible to-"

Jake tried to ignore the god as he ran but finally felt compelled to answer after Villy began talking about setting up blind dates with other influential women from other factions.

"You are way more invested in this than I thought you would be," Jake mumbled.

"Oh, I am not; I just like to make fun of you. Good for you to finally get some tail, even if your partner in question didn't have a tail," the god kept joking. "Ah, but just to make sure, you didn't, you know, went for making more mini-Jakes?"

"No, and if you keep asking, I will from here on out live a life as a eunuch," Jake said. Okay, he wouldn't. That was too big of a sacrifice to make, even to spite Villy.

"That would include you cutting it off, you know? But okay, okay, I'll leave you be. Just one piece of advice, don't get too attached to anyone, alright? You are both only D-grade, and if I am being frank, then chances are not a single person you have met from your own universe will live as long as you. The amount of talents who have fallen due to sentimental reasons isn't few and being able to live with seeing everyone around you wither and die is a requirement if you want to go all the way," the Viper explained in a serious tone.

"I know," Jake just answered, the god bringing down the mood. "But that sounds like something I will consider when it becomes relevant, not now."

"Just remember to prepare yourself mentally," Villy reiterated.

Jake nodded as he kept running. Not wanting to end the conversation on such a somber note, he smirked and took a jab of his own: "I am impressed you actually stopped being a peeping tom."

"Alright, I am many things, but a voyeur is not one of them, especially not when it is my mate. That would just be weird, man. Well, unless I am part of the deed, in which case, seeing things is unavoidable, you know? It is a possibility, depending on how free-spirited and open-minded you are," Villy answered in jest. At least Jake hoped it was in jest.

The two of them chatted a bit more about random, somewhat unrelated things before Villy had to get back to "work," as he called it. It appeared that Jake having a nightly escapade made Villy decide that now was a good time to have a status meeting with the three Witches of the Verdant Lagoon – for entirely unrelated reasons, Jake was sure.

Checking out his map, Jake went towards the closest danger zone worth looking into. He also pulled out a fragment to scan for any Primas. He had spent the last while with others, and honestly, Jake was a bit glad Sylphie had found something that made her stick around Paradise, allowing Jake to go off solo.

With only a couple of weeks till the system event, Jake smiled as he looked forward to some solo hunting and hopefully some more class levels under his belt. He had noticed the lack of experience gained when with others and was relatively sure by now that he got a lot less experience when fighting with others than by himself. Even less than the usual penalty of shared experience and the battles being made easier as a result of partying.

Who knows... if the hunt was good, maybe he could even find a "weak" C-grade worth killing.

It was shortly after the Second World Congress.

Casper checked the Magiscript one final time. A vast tapestry of runes and symbols revolved all around him as he scanned it for any flaws or missing parts. He had already messed it up a few dozen times by now and had to debug what was effectively ultra-complex computer code. His many years working before the system in research and development with software came in very handy as he was more or less just coding in a magical language infinitely more complex than any computer code humans could ever invent. Something only made possible by his now superhuman abilities.

Taking a deep breath, he activated the testing core and ran the simulation. It started up as expected, and soon enough, the entire structure stabilized. The energy flow was up to the hoped standards, with the density even surpassing what he had calculated prior by about half a percent. Casper grinned as time passed, and half an hour later, a perfect equilibrium had been reached.

Having confirmed the result, he took out the real thing. The unique item hummed with power as Casper knew he was in possession of something even peak-level factions would go far to acquire. A real dungeon core.

[Intermediate Dungeon Core (Unique)] – A Dungeon Core offered directly by the system due to Earth's performance during the Treasure Hunt event. This Dungeon Core is of the intermediate level and can support monster spawning up to low-tier C-grade. Must have a suitable environment to activate and spawn the dungeon. Requirements: Soulbound

After looking at it for a while longer, he went to the prepared cavern. Several guards were in place, and when they saw him, they knew. Priscilla was notified and sent a communication to Casper asking if he was ready. He confirmed as he entered the cavern and made everyone else leave the area.

He would need silence and focus to implement the core and create a true Dungeon. Casper sat in the middle of the cavern and took out the core, and the moment he got the go-ahead to initiate, he began infusing his Magiscript. The entire cavern responded as the process started. Beneath him, another ritual

was also going on as hundreds of D-grades fed a ritual that supported him and the cavern with energy, all led by Priscilla herself.

Casper had begun preparing this cavern the very day the city was founded. He had worked on the scripts, directed thousands of workers to assist him, and out of everyone in the city, if not the world, he had been the one to use the most resources on such a singular goal. Casper had even been trained by an S-grade Archlich specializing in Magiscript and dungeon-making. Heck... he even had pointers and was blessed by a Primordial to do this job.

There was no room for failure.

Days passed as Casper was in a constant state of focus. The walls were slowly filled with scripts as the cavern expanded. Space was distorted, and a week in, only Casper and the area a few meters around him remained stable. On the outside, the cavern was about two hundred meters in diameter, but in there, it had expanded to tens of times that. Anyone trying to go inside would also swiftly find themselves rebuffed as a barrier had been made by the dungeon core itself.

Casper had lost count of the number of potions he had consumed and even time itself. Lyra's encouraging words helped keep him awake and keep track of everything as she fed him energy through their connection. His body had difficulty enduring the process, but Lyra began defending him and healing his wounds.

Two weeks passed. Three weeks. A month.

Casper was haggard, but he knew he was nearly done. The script was perfect. He had only found a few minor flaws to perfect. He had worked with this kind of thing before... he was a damn talented computer scientist before the system, and now he did not doubt he was a damn proficient user of Magiscript.



Day thirty-three, it happened. The core was fully stabilized, and suddenly Casper's vision shifted as he felt himself overseeing an entire space. He felt like he was a god in control of his own world but quickly pulled himself back to reality to not lose himself as he disconnected from the core.

When he opened his eyes again, he found himself with his legs crossed in front of the entrance to the cavern, a white mist-like barrier blocking the way inside. He broke out in smiles as Priscilla arrived behind him.

"Did you...?"

Casper just grinned. "Damn straight, I did."

He went to stand up but found himself stumbling. His mind was still in a daze as he focused on all the notifications he had gotten, them being the last thing he saw before he passed out from pure exhaustion.

\*'DING!' Profession: [Blight-Touched Dungeon Architect] has reached level 172 - Stat points allocated, +8 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Profession: [Blight-Touched Dungeon Architect] has reached level 173 - Stat points allocated, +8 Free Points\*

...

\*'DING!' Profession: [Blight-Touched Dungeon Architect] has reached level 189 - Stat points allocated, +8 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Race: [Risen Human (D)] has reached level 154 - Stat points allocated, +21 Free Points\*

...

\*'DING!' Race: [Risen Human (D)] has reached level 162 - Stat points allocated, +21 Free Points\*

Title acquired: [Progenitor Dungeon Master]

Title earned: [Progenitor Dungeon Master] – A master of reality itself, you have created your own little world. For doing so while still in D-grade and within three years of the integration of your universe, you have shown yourself to be a true Progenitor Dungeon Master. Increases your ability to create dungeons and manipulate self-created world spaces. +25 all stats, +10% all stats.