

Hunter 491

Chapter 491 - Meetings & Leaving The Seat

Jake wanted to punch someone in the throat as he was still internally raging. More than anything, his lack of understanding frustrated him the most. He hadn't felt anything was off until the very last moment when Ell'Hakan perhaps went a bit too far with his questioning.

He had been complacent... Jake knew others had to constantly watch out when it came to social skills and keep their minds steeled. Jake never did that, as he always felt when someone tried any mind magic shenanigans. Things would feel "off," and his Bloodline would warn him, allowing him to easily ignore or snap out of it. The Minotaur Mindchief was a prime example of this early on his journey and had set a precedent.

However... against another Bloodline, Jake had no defense, at least not his usual one. Whatever the Bloodline of Ell'Hakan did, it could affect his emotions and make him trust someone for no god damn reason. Actually, thinking more about it, the man had asked Jake several questions first that he would have asked without anything shady going on, such as sharing he was indeed a human and had done the same event and whatnot. Even asking about his planet seemed pretty damn normal. Why wouldn't you be curious about what other worlds were out there?

He had slowly eased into more personal questions and asked about subjects Jake would usually keep a secret, yet Jake had at the time felt like he was just answering mundane things to a trusted friend. No, perhaps more than a trusted friend as he would never share details of his Bloodline with anyone, even with Villy.

Wait... maybe that is why it crossed a line.

Bloodlines would never be all-powerful. There was no way the guy could just make Jake trust him fully, and even if Jake did trust him fully, he would never share details about his Bloodline. That was the one

thing that no level of trust would make him share. So maybe that was it... he could make people slowly trust him somehow?

It felt too simple, but it was all Jake truly had for now. Either way, if that was truly what it did, Jake would make sure that Ell'Hakan could trust that Jake would turn him into a pin-cushion with arrows the next time they met.

Jake was thrown out of his thoughts as the Sword Saint walked over. Everyone had seen Jake punching the ground, and a few had backed away, afraid, but the old man clearly wasn't the frightful type. "It appears you have made a new enemy?"

Sighing, Jake turned to look at the old man. "If you ever see him, watch out. He has a Bloodline with some kind of emotional control, or at the very least one that makes him somehow feel trustworthy. Also, he appears to be the Chosen of some god."

The Sword Saint frowned. "Disturbing to have an enemy with unknown powers. However, the most important thing is to prepare for what may happen. Do you believe he may target Earth?"

Jake shook his head. "No idea, but it seems improbable. He would need some way to get to our planet, and even if we are in the same galaxy, that seems challenging. It is more likely he personally views me as an enemy for some god damn reason. Probably related to the Viper."

The old man nodded. "I see. Now do tell, I heard you returned to Earth recently, leaving the Order, which makes me wonder. How is my great-granddaughter doing there?"

Contrary to what many would expect, Jake actually knew as he answered. "I checked with the Viper a week ago while hunting and was told she is making slow and steady progress. She isn't in any danger if that is what you are afraid of. The Order is rather stringent with its rule of not killing other members. As long as she doesn't accept tea from anyone, she should be good."

"As expected then," the Sword Saint smiled before turning more serious. "Do not baby or even attempt to help her unless absolutely necessary. Reika has always been good at everything, to the detriment of her own development. She always had the best of everything, and I believe she needs to face others who are superior to truly progress."

Jake raised an eyebrow. "A bit harsh. I already think she got a wake-up call as she didn't do that well in the entrance test, and it seemed to motivate her more than anything."

"Motivation can be a fleeting emotion after what one believes to be only a minor momentary setback. Reika needs to see others outdo her and for her to chase behind them, feeling like she will never be able to catch up no matter what she does," the old man explained in a stern tone.

"Again, sounds harsh. Isn't that more likely to just make her hopeless?" Jake asked.

"If such a situation is enough for her to despair and surrender, then so be it. With a lacking mindset dependent on comparing yourself to others for validation, she would never reach the top. Reika is one of the smartest people I know, but that does not instantly make her the fastest learner or the best at everything. I firmly believe she can reach far... but she will be slow. Her caution and perfectionism will lead to greatness only if she has the patience and will to realize her potential without believing she also has to beat others in the process," the Sword Saint answered.

"Tough love then," Jake reckoned. He didn't disagree necessarily, and even if he did, it wasn't his place to argue or decide what the old man wanted for his family..

“You can view it like that. Moving on to other topics, are you satisfied with your gains from this event?” the old man asked.

“Oh yeah, definitely,” Jake answered, finally smirking a bit. Sim-Jake was still being a sleepy Jake and would be for a bit, but Jake was really looking forward to him and his simulacrum’s future.

“Then do not dwell on a single negative encounter but look towards the future. Remember, you are the one who decides how a potential next meeting plays out. If you are stronger, that is,” the old swordsman smiled encouragingly.

“True,” Jake nodded and smiled. “How about you, good rewards?”

“Naturally. I must say, this entire event was very enlightening. Did you know that in every single scenario, we ended up fighting? The outcome did change some of the times. The time and place also changed, but we always ended up in a duel,” the Sword Saint chuckled. “I am not a believer in fate, but perhaps we were fated to fight.”

“Or, more likely, we are just two humans pushed together by system events and relatively close to each other geographically, while both being overly competitive and battle-hungry, making our desire to eventually duel natural,” Jake countered.

“But is that not fate? A foreseeable future based on who we are? I would think the Augur would argue that is exactly how fate works. Never a guarantee but a prediction with high likelihood.”

“Maybe, but I really don’t wanna talk about fate or any of that crap right now... reminds me of that orange fucker from before,” Jake shook his head. “I also need to get going. I wanna catch Casper before he leaves.”

“Very well. Greet the Risen from me, and godspeed. And remember... if any outsider does come to Earth, you are not the only one able to defend it,” the old man assured him.

Jake said his goodbyes and willed himself to leave the Terrace after also noticing Arnold had already left, clearly not interested in exploring some garden.

He appeared back where he and the other Earthlings had originally entered the Seat of the Exalted Prima. Jake hoped Casper was still around as he began tracking and searching for his old pal’s mana signature. Luckily, Risen were pretty darn easy to track down as all that death affinity made them stand out. It did not take him long to get a scent, and based on how fresh it was, Casper had to still be around.

When he began moving towards where he felt Casper, the scent got stronger. Maybe even too strong, and a bit of scanning picked up hundreds of similar mana signatures. So, the Risen are having a meeting, huh?

Jake didn’t hesitate to walk in, getting a few odd stares as he noticed many others kept their distance. Even in the Seat of the Exalted Prima, the Risen clearly weren’t popular. He didn’t particularly care and walked into an area belonging to another planet.

When he got closer, he noticed several guards outside. They threw him a look, and one of them raised his hand. “Please do not go any further and create problems. We are merely having a meeting, nothing insidious.”

He stopped and Identified the man.

[Risen Elf – lvl 126]

“I am just here to see a friend before he leaves this event,” Jake explained.

The two guards looked at each other with suspicion as Jake elaborated. “It is to give him something.”

“Alright,” one of the guards relented. “But please allow one of us to escort you.”

“Sure,” Jake shrugged. They couldn’t fight, so why even have guards? Couldn’t people just walk in anyway? Jake sure could have. He was just being polite to not piss off Casper’s new pals.

The elf joined him as an escort and led Jake into a room filled with Risen. Priscilla and Casper were both there, along with who Jake guessed were other leaders. Jake’s presence instantly drew attention as they all turned to him. Now, they had taken precautions and were within an isolation barrier, but Jake had his sphere, so he noticed their very suspicious looks.

Luckily, Casper acted quick and excused himself as he went outside the barrier. “Jake, I did not expect you to come.”

“Having a meeting about how to take over the universe and turn it into a land of death?” Jake asked jokingly.

A joke that did not land, as instantly, he felt everyone within the barrier be on guard. He saw Priscilla nervously begin to explain and calm the others, but Casper just laughed and went along with it. “Damn, you caught us; I guess I will have to start a zombie apocalypse on Earth now.”

“Over my dead body. Wait, no, that would only be playing into your plans!” Jake smirked. “Good to see you again. I don’t want to disturb your meeting for too long, but I just came to give you this.”

Jake took out the Root of Eternal Resentment and presented it. He had already had it within Palate for a long time and learned nearly everything he could. With the curse energy also absorbed, Jake had little use for it, even if it was a great treasure. He also knew Casper wanted and needed it, so he decided to finally hand it over.

Casper stared at it for a bit before asking: “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

Casper nodded and took it. Jake saw him scan it magically as he looked at Jake. “You madman, you actually used all of it!? I expected you to use a portion or do a slow infusion or something like that, but everything!?”

Jake scratched his head. “Well, yeah? It was good stuff, and everything worked out well, didn’t it?”

“Sure did. Let’s not talk about that little incident, right? Anyway... can I see it?”

Smiling proudly, Jake pulled out Eternal Hunger and presented it to a visibly excited Casper. The man moved forward and touched the blade as his eyes widened. “This is just insanity and very much the sort of thing I would expect from you.”

“I shall take that as a compliment.”

“It was a compliment; I love it. That weapon is a pure marvel,” Casper smiled. “Thanks for the root, man. I promise I will put it to good use. If you get the time, you should come by and visit. I have something new and interesting to show you.”

“What is it?” Jake asked expectedly.

“A secret. You can see it if you come,” Casper teased.

“Fine, keep your secrets,” Jake joked back as he gave his mate a bump on the shoulder. “Nice meeting up. Oh, and I should say hi from the old man. I’m gonna leave you be and allow you all to continue planning for world domination.”

“Do begone pathetic being of life,” Casper smirked as he waved Jake off. “ And good to see you again, Jake.”

Jake left the secret undead meeting and went to see a few other people, including Miranda and his brother. He checked in with Caleb to see how his family was doing and, contrary to expectations, was told he shouldn't hurry to visit but focus on himself. His parents understood and were patient, just making Jake want to visit more.

With all meetings done, Jake tried to look for Carmen but found she had already left, so he entered the simulation space once more, where it quickly became apparent the Seat of the Exalted Prima had nothing more to offer for now. Standing in the simulation room, Jake considered if it was time to leave.

Sim-Jake was still asleep, and he had done everything he needed. He sighed as he remembered the talk with Ell'Hakan again as he willed himself to leave the simulation room. He then returned to Earth's hall and teleported back to Earth once more.

Jake appeared back where he had entered the Seat of the Eternal Prima from, still standing in the broken jungle not far from where the Phantomshade Panther had been killed. It did not take long for a familiar presence to descend and the expected question to be asked:

"So, had fun at the Seat of the Exalted Prima?" Villy asked a bit teasingly.

"It was certainly something," Jake answered. "I will tell you about it later, but first... do you know of anyone named Ell'Hakan?"

"I cannot say I do. Why?"

Jake proceeded to explain what had happened. How he had nearly revealed his Bloodline due to the other's Bloodline and how the other party had acted as if everything had been planned out and made threats. It didn't take long before the Viper had an answer.

"Sounds like the Chosen of Yip of Yore," Villy answered.

"So?" Jake asked.

"Yeah?"

"So what the hell is up with him? Who is this god? Who the hell is his Chosen and why is he after me, and do you have something, anything, more to add?" Jake exclaimed, a bit frustrated.

"Jake, what you are dealing with is called a mortal issue, not a god issue. Figure shit out yourself. I will tell you that Yip sees this as a fight by proxy, and as my proxy, I choose to trust you to handle it. The only real piece of advice I will give you is to not let your guard down and that this kind of opponent fights in a less straightforward way than you are used to. Do not expect him to just pop up and fight you in a duel, but something far more elaborate. As the Chosen of Yip, this mortal will clearly be one tricky bastard, but this is where my input ends. Ah, I forgot to add the most important piece of advice. Don't die, alright?" Villy explained.

"I will try," Jake muttered as he shook his head. "Enough about that weird fuck. Allow me to instead introduce you to my new best friend and tell you the glorious story of how we met..."

Chapter 492 - Great Wonders & Wondering What To Level

Jake narrated his brief trip to the Seat of the Exalted Prima and talked about the event. Villy asked several questions along the way, even some technical ones, about how the simulation worked and what Jake had learned while experiencing it. He was especially interested when Jake got to the conversation he had with the system together with sim-Jake. Of course, what he was most interested in was sim-Jake himself.

"So, it appears you entered what we call a Parallel World Simulation rather than a Dreamscape Simulation. The difference between these is that one is "real" while the other one is "fake," if that makes sense. Parallel worlds are pretty damn rare but do offer more opportunities and are actually accurate, while a dreamscape is nothing more than a fantasy constructed primarily with pieces from your own mind and inaccurate details, all based on the Records of the one who experiences the simulation," Villy explained. "This also does mean the simulacrum you have eaten is truly his own person and even had his own Truesoul while in his own universe."

"I have figured out that last part," Jake nodded. "But, do you have any experience with what happened? What it may mean in the future, any risks, and what I might gain out of it? Also, can you interact with the simulacrum?"

"Yes, maybe, some, depends, and no. You really need to get better at asking singular questions. I have had experience with other simulacrums from Parallel World Simulations crossing over. Not myself, but people I have known in the past. What you will gain out of it and any risks is ultimately dependent on the simulacrum in question, but from the looks of it, there won't be any issues there. The worst thing I have seen happen is that someone gained a split personality and suffered extreme delusions and even parallel senses. That eventually led to him going utterly insane and destroying a few dozen solar systems, believing that nothing was real and that he was stuck inside an illusion before finally getting put out of his misery. And one of the reasons why no one could ever help him was because no, I cannot interact with your simulacrum. He does not exist in our world, only within your Truesoul. He is still anchored to the simulation as without the simulation, he would not exist, and without him existing, neither would the simulation. They are conceptually entangled in every possible sense," Villy answered, giving Jake quite a bit more insight into sim-Jake and echoing much of what the system had said.

"Are there risks of me also fucking myself up?" Jake asked as he had bit onto the part about someone going insane.

"Probably not. May this simulacrum slightly affect you? Sure, but not to an extreme level. The primary difference was that in the example, both believed themselves to be the real person and the other the simulacrum. Whenever one was in charge, the other one believed they were possessed and would fight for control resulting in a fucked up Soulspace. In your case, you are in agreement on who is real and who is a simulacrum and that one day you will rejoin," Villy answered.

Jake nodded along before asking further: "Are there ways to make my other self persist?"

"Before I answer that, I want to hear why you even consider that something that should be done?"

"Just to, you know, allow him to be him," Jake shrugged.

"Look at it like this. Right now, he is effectively a clone you separated from yourself at a certain point in life. While bringing a simulacrum to the real world is not normal, reuniting with clones is. Some even purposefully create a clone to send them into areas cut off from the outside to allow them to develop by themselves for a while. Then, later on, the real version and clone reunite and merge, gaining from what each has done in the meanwhile. Granted, this method is risky and leaves you weakened while your clone exists, but it is more common than you would think. In these cases, both are fully aware of who is real and who is the clone from the get-go, and remerging is a given. They both want to remerge. No matter what, this simulacrum will not die as long as you live, for he will be you in both body and mind, and he too will want to merge. Your souls want to be one. To gain all you can for now and benefit for both your sakes," Villy said, giving good insight as always, adding in the end.

"Just do know there is an innate power imbalance, and it isn't that you will gain all his memories or Records. So training with him is best. Out of everyone, no one understands you better than yourself, so take advantage while it lasts. Also, I gotta add, having yourself as your teacher is the epitome of "fuck it, I'll do it myself," and I applaud it."

"Alright," Jake nodded and smiled a bit at the last joke. Believing they had enough simulation talk, he moved on. "So, the Seat of the Exalted."

"Definitely one of the Great Wonders of the ninety-third universe. Well, not this Seat itself, but what links it all together. The true headquarters of this massive undertaking. Perhaps this Exalted Prima is even a Bound God," Villy answered rather confidently.

For some context. While in the Order, Jake had bumped into the mention of Great Wonders quite a few times and had wondered – pun intended – what they were all about. It turns out that with the birth of each universe came places created not just for the native universe but the multiverse as a whole. Chances are the Seat or wherever the Seat led to was one such place.

Jake knew of a few other famous Great Wonders. The most famous one was Nevermore, where the Primordial known as the Wyrmgod had ended up effectively taking it over and ruling the dungeon, but others included the White Sun, a massive star and one of the largest celestial bodies in the multiverse, or the Mothership of Null, a giant spaceship of sorts where no magic could exist. There were many others, but some disappeared with time, some only appeared at set times before fading away for a period again, and most importantly, most were not aimed at anyone on Jake's level but those who had reached far higher. A place like the White Sun would instantly kill even weak gods just by them getting near.

The second thing was Bound Gods. Bound Gods were not living beings with Truesouls but gods born out of objects or places. They would be real in every way but be limited severely and most often served a function of sorts rather than possessing truly free will. Many believed these Bound Gods were merely apparitions of the system like the Guide, but others believed they were creatures born by the system to run certain places or even as protectors of some zones.

Another reason for a Bound God to exist was also simple enough – deterrence. Most Great Wonders in the multiverse were claimed and controlled by factions, but those with Bound Gods were often different. A Bound God would often have total control over what they inhabited, so even if they were weaker than a god, they still had the ultimate defense of merely making the Great Wonder useless by stopping its functions. Destroying a Bound God was also impossible unless one destroyed the Great Wonder, and destroying one tended to be a good way to make a lot of enemies. Some had been destroyed throughout history, but it was incredibly rare as with every time one was lost, it was lost forever and considered a major setback for the multiverse.

Of course, this assumed anyone was strong enough to destroy a Bound God. Some Bound Gods in the multiverse were more powerful than even Primordials.

"I do find it probable it is a Bound God of some sort and that it is a Great Wonder," Jake answered. "Having been there, it was clear that it wasn't just made for this one event; it even existed in the universe itself and not some hidden dimension. Moreover, with its competitive element, I believe the plan is for someone to gain at least some partial control of these Seats, and with that in mind, there would have to be some protections in place, or this whole Administrator Candidate business would be useless."

"I second that. It is a massive opportunity to get system-sanctioned partial control of any Great Wonder if it truly is one," Villy agreed.

"So... this is one of the reasons why so many gods want to get involved in new universes, right?" Jake asked, understanding a bit more.

"Right on. This event is only open to you natives, and you have a first-mover advantage. Having just some influence will allow one a better position to negotiate and form alliances or even sell off eventual rights," Villy said.

"So, you want me to try and claim this Seat of the Exalted in the Milky Way?" Jake asked.

"I would recommend for you to at least try, not for the Order but for yourself. You said you got a title just for doing this event; imagine what you would get for taking control of something even factions like the Holy Church want? Of course, this doesn't mean you have to actually want the Great Wonder. You can always just use it as a bargaining chip. Also, for full disclosure, I would one-hundred percent benefit from you doing well as you are my Chosen, so definitely a good idea," the Viper said a bit shamelessly.

"Aight... finally, do you think the Chosen of Yip of Yore is a legitimate threat right now? Like, can he come to Earth?" Jake decided to ask. He genuinely didn't know. Considering how much they struggled with making a teleportation network on Earth, it seemed unlikely, but one could never know.

"Why would the answer to that question matter?"

Jake frowned. "To know if I need to get as many levels under my belt fast in case it comes to a fight."

"That is up to you. My only advice is that you are truly in no rush for anything. What is the worst that can happen? Either you win, or you should be strong enough to just not engage no matter what you do. Worst case, just leave the planet and go somewhere no one knows who you are. With Shroud of the Primordial, no one would find you," Villy answered. "All of this assuming he can go to Earth in the first place and can actually fight you."

Jake considered the Viper's words for a bit. He was currently level 169 in both his class and profession, meaning he could focus on either. Focusing on his profession was slower for sure, while he could get quite a few quick class levels if he went hunting for a couple of weeks.

However... the more he thought about it, the less wise it seemed to focus on his class levels at the current time. Recent happenings made Jake reconsider many things, and he knew he would need a lot of live combat to properly learn to fight in melee, which would include a lot of hunting. However, before that, he would need sim-Jake to be ready to teach him and for Jake to probably practice with his simulacrum for quite a while.

It has also been a while since he had been back at the Order and done some alchemy. He had many shelved projects like the Bee Queen ritual he needed to get going, and he could always use more time doing alchemy. If the orange asshole did come to Earth, it wasn't like the planet was defenseless either. Shit, who was he even to think he was the protector of their world? There were many C-grades stronger than him, and even the King had him beat. The Sword Saint also felt more powerful than ever when they met in the Seat of the Exalted Prima.

To summarize... Jake would just focus on himself and what he needed to do. He wanted power, and he was playing the long game to get it. He would need to get his profession leveled up anyway, so why not now? He could then save his class for when he and sim-Jake began their melee training session.

"I am planning on heading to the Order again then," Jake said. "Let's hope some good lessons are coming up."

"I will have beer ready," Villy just said as the connection faded.

Jake shook his head and began retreating a bit from the jungle. He was lucky to find a hill with a cave in it and promptly headed inside, where he got to work. He pulled out a small pamphlet given by Villy on how to set up the teleportation formation.

Reading it carefully, Jake quickly got the gist of it and began working. With the ancient skill Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist, Jake figured things out far faster than expected as it filled in

the gaps where needed, and in less than an hour, the formation was complete. He was surprised when it was done as it seemed to become one with the environment, and he could barely feel it was even there.

After a bit of testing, he stepped into the middle of it. "Oh well, here goes. Let's hope no Void Dwellers decide to poke me along the way," Jake said a bit jokingly.

As he activated the formation, he felt Villy assist with energy. Before long, he was teleported away, his final thought before disappearing being about a certain elf he hadn't seen in a while.

I wonder how Meira is doing and if she is keeping up with her lessons.

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Meira studied the tome carefully to make sure she understood everything properly before she had to go take care of the garden. The book was about the energy circulation systems and physiology of different creatures in the multiverse. It was complicated, but her teacher had emphasized that she memorize as many diagrams as she could before the next lesson.

It was a bit harder than usual as she had to copy down some parts. Nella and Utmal had asked for her to do it for them, and Meira had naturally agreed as they were friends. She had discovered that the books in her Master's library were a notch above what others had publicly available, and many of the tomes were considered of the highest tier. Naturally, she couldn't take out any books of real value but only the most common ones, so she had to copy down anything important to show the others. Nella and especially Utmal had pressured her a bit to just bring the books, but Meira was hesitant as she didn't have permission.

Contrary to what many would perhaps expect, Meira didn't question her Master's absence in the slightest. It was natural that his residence within the Order was but one of many, and she was sure he had plenty of servants and slaves elsewhere. Anything else would just be weird for someone as esteemed as the Chosen of a Primordial. She knew he wanted to keep his identity a secret in the Order, which was why he only had a single slave, but he no-doubt had more on his home planet.

She still, of course, hoped he was doing well and that he would return someday. Until then, Meira would just keep up with her studies, and hopefully... maybe... her Master would even be a bit proud of how well she had done and even that she had made some friends.

Meira smiled a bit at the thought as she finished copying down the final diagram and got up to head towards the garden. On the way, she checked the mansion was in good condition as usual and didn't think much as she opened the door to the living room.

The moment she did, she froze on the spot as her eyes opened wide.

"I am just saying Jake should have stayed longer the first time around, and he needs a good talking to about staying firm and the true importance of alchemy! He didn't even get to study any proper ritualism or formation magic. Just look at how slow he is setting down that magic circle!" the Grand Elder and leader of the entire Academy, Duskleaf, said disapprovingly.

"And I am arguing that going back finally got him laid, which is invaluable for his personal development," the Malefic Viper, the almighty Primordial and leader of the Order, argued.

Meira didn't even have time to properly register what they were talking about before she passed out from the sheer presence of the two gods.

Chapter 493 - Not Blackmail

Jake stood with his hand covering his face in a solid facepalm as he stared at the chaos that was his living room. Using his sphere, the very moment he teleported into the garden, he saw everything. The trip had been smooth, if a bit nauseating as usual, with no void stuff along the way, and he had entered with expectations of finally relaxing a bit, only to come home and see two honored gods acting like children.

In the doorway to the room lay an unconscious Meira, and on the sofa, Villy was busy arguing with Duskleaf about Duskleaf wanting a "temporary leave of absence" from the Academy to do a minor experiment that would "only be a few thousand years tops," with Villy telling him that he would take away his cauldron if he did. Jake really didn't want to get involved, and luckily they both stopped arguing when Jake entered the house and went towards the living room.

"Should I expect an explanation?" Jake asked the moment he entered the room.

"It is a welcome party," Villy said as he lifted up and showed a can of beer. Lifted from a pyramid of beers made on the sofa table.

"I wasn't gone for that long, only a few weeks," Jake commented.

"Which is basically forever for you mortals, isn't it?" Villy cheekily countered.

Jake shook his head and looked at the plump Duskleaf sitting on the couch just looking at him. "Hey Duskleaf, been a while. I didn't take you as the sort to join in for these kinds of things."

Duskleaf looked a bit embarrassed and combed his beard with his hand as he tried to look wise. "I am not here due to this welcome party but to discuss your recent commitment issues. I saw you headed back to your little planet not long ago after only being here for a short while, and I firmly believe that was a gross miss-prioritization of your time."

"Oh. Well, I was asked by a friend to help out, so I had to head back," Jake just shrugged.

"While that is an understandable sentiment, you must remember that alchemy always takes precedent!" Duskleaf argued with great fervor.

"I also needed to head back to gather the necessary items to participate in a system event that may eventually lead to taking partial control of a Great Wonder," Jake added, shrugging again. "But I guess you got a point. Titles giving percentage bonuses to stats and controlling Great Wonders probably isn't worth my time."

"I..." Duskleaf said as he just shook his head. "Naturally, it is healthy to sometimes take a brief break to reflect on recent experiments and obtained data. But that break is over now, right?"

"I am back, aren't I?" Jake just smirked. "Thanks for the concern. I do plan on staying for a while. Now, with all that handled, why is everyone ignoring Meira just lying there?"

He finally decided to address the fainted elf in the room as he went over to her.

Villy shook his head and sighed. "You know that is entirely your fault, right? Suppressing one's aura and presence takes conscious effort, and as I said, it doesn't really work if the individual knows who you are, and no way I will bother making myself invisible when visiting. We have gotten used to not needing to

hold back our auras in your presence, so it is one-hundred percent your responsibility to make sure she can handle it.”

Jake looked over to Villy as he levitated Meira over to a chair and sat her down on it as he argued: “And how do you expect for me to handle it?”

“Well, by either not caring that she faints or by training her not to,” Villy answered, giving a surprisingly reasonable response. Jake wasn’t really sure why he hadn’t considered using his special “talents” to help Meira train her resistance to presences. It would make life a lot easier if she didn’t constantly faint whenever Villy stopped by. Then again, maybe she would still faint, presence or not? Either way, it seemed like something he should do.

“Are you confident that would be wise?” Duskleaf asked Villy. “The elf is commonly known as Jake’s, and any development in resistance to presences such as the one he provides is outside the norm. Considering it is also known that his Bloodline offers resistance to presences, it wouldn’t be an overreach to conclude others would infer that he can also, at the very least, train this resistance to others if the elf gets it. Right now, only Umbra – due to Jake’s brother - and the two of us truly know. A few others may also, but it may spread and become public knowledge if he does teach her. Jake has chosen not to do so yet to hide this ability of his, right?”

Duskleaf asked Jake the last part, and he felt a little bad at seeing the level of belief the old alchemist had in him. Villy threw Jake a knowing smile as Jake just scratched his head a bit and chuckled. “Eh, I don’t think it is a big deal if people know? Isn’t it actually pretty easy to hide the real truth? I can just say it requires a slave contract or something to share the resistance due to a skill or something.”

“That will work until people become aware of your brother,” Duskleaf argued.

"Do you really think Umbra will openly share it? I am sure people can come on a hundred different explanations as to why he is resistant," Jake shrugged.

"Oh, I do think that would work, except you also helped train some of his people when you went to their city, who now also know," Villy snickered. "The dragon will be out of the egg soon no matter what you do, so I truly don't think it is that big a deal. You may even be able to turn it to your advantage."

"Ultimately, it is your decision," Duskleaf sighed.

Jake smiled at him. "Thanks for the concern either way."

He then went over and began picking up some papers that Meira had dropped. Jake did find it a bit funny she still wasn't used to the spatial ring he had gotten her, as he saw the papers all contained rather complex diagrams.

Duskleaf also noticed when Jake brought them over and looked interested. "Oh, are you teaching the girl alchemy?"

Jake nodded. "Well, not really me per-se. You see, I have this plan..."

He explained his plan of making Meira a real member of the Order by properly teaching her and how he had her attend lessons and do her own thing. Duskleaf nodded along and motioned for Jake to hand him the papers. Seeing no reason not to, Jake handed him the diagrams.

The god looked them over and nodded as he muttered mostly incoherent words under his breath.
"Shoddy... acceptable... no... hm..."

Jake and Villy both just stared at him as Villy asked teasingly: "So, is the girl some hidden genius you just have to take a student?"

"Hm?" Duskleaf grunted as he looked up. "No, not at all. Her dedication to detail is respectable, but she made several mistakes, and her notes are all over the place. She does have a healer class, though, doesn't she?"

"Yeah," Jake confirmed, not knowing why it mattered.

"Those are rare at least," the old alchemist nodded.

"Wait, why are they rare?" Jake asked, confused.

"Not rare in the context of the multiverse, even if they are the rarest type of class. We are talking about here in the context of the Order," Villy butted in. "If you haven't noticed by now, we here in the Order tend to be self-serving assholes, so who would waste their class on being a healer? That is for those who even have classes. A lot only have one or the other, and considering they are in the Academy, they likely have an alchemy profession."

"Oh," Jake realized. "Makes perfect sense. I assume that gives her some advantages?"

“Some,” Duskleaf answered. “Minor, but there is synergy and overlap. Her knowledge of physiology is at a high level, likely from her class and learning how to be a better healer. However, her general skills when it comes to learning, studying, and taking notes are atrocious. I guess you cannot expect anything better from someone who has lived in servitude their entire life. Does seem at least a bit worth training if you think she has the dedication and mindset to progress.”

“I see,” Jake sighed as he got an idea and tossed Duskleaf a sly look. “Guess I will add teaching her some general stuff to my to-do list then, along with the resistance training. Going to be a busy stay.”

“What?” Duskleaf asked in shock. “Absolutely not. You need to focus on alchemy when here, not messing around. The resistance training is fine as you can do that passively, but spending dedicated time on teaching her is out of the question.”

Jake looked at Duskleaf and tilted his head. “She will have to be taught.”

Villy smirked in the background and nearly failed to hold back a laugh as Duskleaf shook his head. “I am not foolish enough to fall for something that childish.”

“Man, and here I was hoping I could do some more shenanigans with my arcane affinity and Bloodline in a ritual with the Bee Queen to make another creature a bit like Sylphie,” Jake sighed. “I was even hoping to ask you for advice and have you help and naturally observe the entire process.”

Duskleaf gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. “Are you blackmailing me?”

“What?” Jake said, acting shocked. “I would never do such a thing. I merely realize that due to my workload, I will have to re-prioritize my tasks and abandon the ritual. Such a bummer. I was really

hoping to see what kind of being I could make now. Especially after I have evolved and even partly merged with a simulacrum from a Parallel World Simulation that realized it was in a simulation with whom we, together, reached an agreement by negotiation with a system entity.”

“After you did what?” Duskleaf jumped a bit.

“Eh, nothing. I already talked with Villy about it, and seeing how busy you are, I don’t want to waste any more of your time talking about such boring topics,” Jake waved him off as he made another exaggerated sigh.

“Jake,” Duskleaf suddenly said, turning far more serious than before. “Trying to blackmail a god will never end well.”

“Pretty sure I already clarified I am not blackmailing anyone?” Jake asked with a big smile. “And you keep forgetting that acting threatening has no effect when I feel more animosity and danger from the countertop than you.”

“Fine,” Duskleaf finally relented. He then stood up and took out a green fist-sized seed and pricked his finger to put a single drop of blood on it. The seed sprouted instantly and, within five seconds, formed a fully humanoid form that looked like an exact copy of Duskleaf himself.

“This is one of those high-level cloning techniques I told you about, Jake,” Villy said with a smile from the sofa as he asked Duskleaf. “How much of your power did you put into that?”

“Nothing. I improved the seeds,” the newly sprouted version of Duskleaf answered. “However, they have a limited duration as it runs on the seeds alone.”

“How long?” Villy asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Around two billion years,” Duskleaf answered, looking disappointed. “Takes about the same amount of time to grow one.”

Jake listened in, and while some might feel bad about how he roped in Duskleaf and even made him spend a seed he had grown for longer than humanity on Earth had existed, Jake was totally fine with it. “So, that clone will stay here?” he asked.

“What? No. While it will be available, I can’t waste it too much. It can still display around ten percent of my full capabilities, you know,” the clone once more answered.

“It is as I said,” the real Duskleaf said. “I will leave this clone here and teach both the girl and you. Just remember to include me in the ritual.”

Jake gave him an affirmative nod before the god teleported away without any detectable spatial disturbance.

Villy just grinned and looked at the cloned Duskleaf. “You can still drink beer even as a little beansprout, can’t you?”

“Naturally,” Duskleaf – or Sproutleaf if Jake wanted to be cheeky – answered as he took a seat on the sofa where the real version had been before. Once he was sitting down, he looked at Jake. “And now

you tell me everything about that system event and let us go over your plans for the ritual with the Queen Bee.”

Jake nodded and smiled as Villy tossed him a beer can. He popped it open, took a whisk, and began. “As I said, then Villy and I think the event may have taken place in something linked to a Great Wonder...”

Within a throne room on a planet far away from Earth, the servants waited expectantly. At times, some would appear, teleported there by the system itself, as they too joined the other servants in awaiting the return of their king. The grand palace in which they kneeled was a marvel of pre-system engineering and was created from a bronze-like metal native to their world. A material only allowed to be used by the royal family.

Soon, the room was filled with servants as finally, their leader appeared. Ell’Hakan was teleported right in front of the throne, and he had a big smile on his face. Minutes passed as he seemed to have an internal dialogue – or a talk with his Patron – before he turned and briefly regarded his subordinates.

“Has everything been delivered?” he asked one of the servants standing at the front – one of only fourteen people only kneeling on one knee.

She nodded. “Everything has been prepared, and they signed the agreed-upon contract as expected. They are fast proceeding on their end but will still require some time to fully prime the array. It will be ready in time.”

Ell’Hakan thanked her, adding. “We cannot expect too much from them. Even with the guidance of my Patron, there are limits to the competency of the lesser. However, I believe they shall play their role adequately.”

The woman nodded. "Even if they are less skilled, they still possess heritages allowing them to do it. Humans are an adaptable breed after all."

"That they are," Ell'Hakan smiled, remembering his brief encounter with his fellow Chosen. His smile deepened as he looked forward to their next encounter. After assuring everything was as it should, he headed towards his chambers in the highest tower and the tallest structure on their planet – the Celestial Spire.

The top of the spire was the place closest to the stars, and only the king and his most trusted servants had ever been allowed there.

Standing on the balcony, he waited only a few moments before his most competent and vital companion appeared.

Ash and transparent flames shifted form as the air shimmered from the heat. Rapidly, an elemental-like being was condensed out of ash and transparent flames, taking a vaguely humanoid form. Space shifted ever-so-slightly in its surroundings as it appeared fully formed next to Ell'Hakan.

"So?" the being asked in a deep, echoing voice.

"Your kind truly does come in all shapes and sizes," Ell'Hakan merely said as he added on. "Like you, this creature that wanders the human planet was no doubt more powerful than I or even the Malefic's Chosen. You shall have what you desire."

"That we are supreme is a given, for such are the laws of the universe. Remember your promise, and I shall do as sworn," the being said before it dispersed into nothingness, leaving only a faint shimmer in space behind along with a small pile of ash.

El'Hakan just smiled and shook his head. He gazed up at the burning red sun above and the two faintly visible moons only detectable due to his post-system improved senses. Some companions were harder to deal with than others, and the Ashen Phantom Devourer was certainly the hardest. Not that it was unexpected.

One couldn't expect Unique Lifeforms to be loyal subjects. They were too prideful, too assured of themselves. One could never truly make them trust another fully. But they were easy to figure out and thus make use of.

He smiled as he gazed upon the cosmos above, enjoying the sight. "I hope you look forward to our next meeting as much as I, oh Malefic's Chosen."

Chapter 494 - Learning Styles & Internal Struggle

Meira slept as her eyes rapidly darted around below her eyelids, having a nightmare. She felt like she had been thrown deep underwater and had constant suffocating pressure on her. At the same time, she felt like she heard the raised voices of others. She tried to escape and swim away in her dream, but she only kept getting pressed further and further down into the deep and overwhelming darkness.

Finally, the pressure lessened, and she began floating upwards towards the sunlight. Meira felt relaxed and comfortable as she slept comfortably for the first time in a while - the last time being when she was knocked out by the previous divine visit. She had many odd dreams during her rest, and everything kind of blended together... but they were generally good dreams.

After having been deep in slumber for several hours, her mind finally stirred as she woke up. She opened her eyes and saw she was lying on the bed in her bedroom. She looked to the side and saw

Grand Elder Duskleaf sitting at her small desk, looking in one of her notebooks. Meira turned her head back to the ceiling and sighed. Yeah, she was definitely still dreaming. With that thought, she closed her eyes again, but it didn't work. She felt the pressure. An unsettling emotion. Her eyes shot open again as she stared to the side again, meeting the eyes of the Grand Elder.

They stared at each other for a bit as Meira tried to comprehend what was happening. She was only thrown out of her stupor when the door to the room opened after a knock. She abruptly sat up in the bed as her Master entered with a smile.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," he said casually with a smile. "Sorry about the lack of notice I was returning, but in my defense, I also didn't know those two would invade my living room."

"I am sitting right here," the Grand Elder grunted before turning to Meira herself. She sat there frozen and tried to comprehend what was happening as he spoke. "Our first lesson will definitely be regarding proper categorization and organization of information and general note-taking."

The god held up some of her papers, and she spotted the diagrams she had made for her friends. Meira then remembered she had been on her way to meet them before passing out... not that it mattered with what else was currently happening. She wasn't even sure if she should answer him or if that would be disrespectful. She just nodded, unsure how to act.

"Liven up, girl," the Grand Elder said loudly. "I am not going to teach an unresponsive statue anything. Focus and get over here to make sense of this utter mess you call a notebook.""

Meira nodded and quickly got off the bed before the words properly registered. She was confused as she realized and asked out loud on accident: "Teach?"

Jake had attended many classes in university during his studying days and, of course, gone through well over a decade of mandatory school. He had thousands of lessons overall with kids and adults of all ages. Hundreds of teachers.

But this lesson had to be the most awkward and weirdest by far.

The teacher was overqualified, while the primary student was overly-receptive to the point of being non-receptive due to pure nervousness. Jake quickly just became an observer as he found the scene of the alchemy god teaching the poor elf novice far more entertaining than he should.

Duskleaf and Villy had made it clear early on that they would have no impact on Jake's learning method as neither would ever be able to fully understand how he best absorbed information. Jake was a very instinctive learner and had to learn by doing to fully digest anything, but when he did things, he also caught on quickly. That didn't mean he got nothing out of reading or being told what to do, just that it wouldn't "click" properly in his mind before he actually saw – and more importantly felt – theory working in practice.

Meira was far more typical in the learning department. She did best with a varied approach to learning and was totally fine just reading and being told something. Naturally, she also needed some practical experience, and luckily – or unluckily if you considered the emotional damage – she had gone through plenty of "learning" with her body. She had built up her resistance to poisons through a long period of exposure where she had to learn to control her own energies to survive, and through this had also gotten to know her own body very well. Knowing her own body's metaphysical shape had then served as a gateway to also comprehend those of other creatures.

However, Meira had something far more valuable than something experience or teachers could teach her. She had a powerful survival instinct. Jake had noticed it after interacting with her so much that her entire mentality was about survival and doing all she could to keep living a relatively "safe" life. It was

odd in some ways. Jake wanted power to be free and do what he wanted and was willing to die on his journey, while Meira wanted to desperately avoid death by gaining power.

Of course, it was natural to not want to die. It was the most basic of all instincts and a primary driver for many to try and get stronger. Each evolution offered a massive boost in lifespan and natural treasures, and created products that increased longevity were incredibly popular and expensive. Many even turned to becoming vampires or undead to live just a little longer... not to mention the entire concept behind the Holy Church and the Holyland.

Meira was not like those who just wanted to live as long as possible. Her instinct was all about immediate survival. To survive till the next day. The next week. Next month. She took it one step at a time, and her long-term plans now revolved around Jake being satisfied with what she was doing. While it was maybe a bit cruel, Jake wanted her to keep this mentality. It had an air of desperation, and for Meira, desperation led to dedication.

Though he would also be a bit encouraging... and maybe even give her some work to get some practical experience. Currently, she was just doing a bit of gardening here and there for him, but he knew she wanted to do more.

"Duskleaf, there is quite a big crossover between the metaphysical constructs of beasts and Beastcores, right?" Jake asked the god as he had just gotten done correcting a very nervous Meira.

"Beastcores are ultimately just remnant Records of a beast as well as a portion of their energy, so yes, one can say that," the god nodded. "I assume you are considering its link to core refinement. Core refinement is essentially trying to construct a metaphysical framework within the core to allow it to house and store more Records with the core itself as the base. That is why you had such a profound effect on the Sylphian hawk when you made her. You created a catalyst that housed many of your Records. Though that was only possible due to the Malefic Viper's Poison triggering and stabilizing it using the Records of the Viper. If not, you would have probably broken the ritual."

Jake nodded, having already realized these things far earlier. He then turned to Meira. “What would you say to assist in a project of mine? The goal is to create a Pollendust Bee Queen variant, and to do that, I have a lot of cores gathered. To use them properly, I will need to have them all refined. Trust me, I have a lot of them.”

That was something Duskleaf had told him during their talk while having beers. Jake had just gone off the ritual with Sylphie and thought that having as many cores as possible would be best, but the alchemy god had shut that down hard. While there was some value in quantity, the biggest challenge was to make all the cores properly work together.

As mentioned then each contained Records and energy. Simply trying to smash it all together in a massive ritual would only result in disaster, so you needed to do something else. You needed to make sure that each core would complement and not conflict with one another.

One had to remember that when Sylphie was born, only a single Beastcore had been used, and the rest were orbs from elementals. Elemental orbs were quite a bit different to Beastcores as the orbs were pretty much pure mana with no Records that could conflict, so as long as they were all of the same affinity, things tended to be fine.

So, for the ritual to go well, Jake needed to refine every single core to ensure they would resonate. He already had a good start as each core was from the same kind of insect, and he wanted to use the cores to empower an insect. This removed a lot of conflict in Records already, but each termite had still been slightly different from another, making refinement a necessity.

There was also the option of first filtering out all the Records from the cores and only using the energy – something that you often did when using cores while concocting – but that wasn’t what Jake wanted. After all, he wanted to improve the Records of the Bee Queen to get a variant.

Meira looked at Jake with a bit of confusion as she stuttered. "I... I am not sure I will be of much use..."

Duskleaf also threw him a questioning look and sent telepathically: "I fully understand if you don't want to spend time refining so many cores, but there are many far more qualified to assist you in the process than she."

Jake heard him but was already determined as he talked to Meira. "I want you to help. Don't misunderstand, I just think you will be the best because I don't plan on you doing it in any usual way. It will be coupled with presence resistance training."

Meira looked confused as he had yet to bring up the idea of resistance training yet, but Duskleaf opened his eyes in realization. "You plan on infusing the Records of presence resistance into the cores to give it to the Bee Queen and thus resonate better with the Records of your Bloodline while also hopefully granting the Queen an innate resistance? Smart to not only seek to implement the concept of resistance but the process in which it is granted."

"Bingo," Jake agreed. Okay, that wasn't precisely what he had in mind. He had only hoped to maybe give the Queen some increases to aura resistance like Sylphie had if he combined the two by having Meira refine cores during resistance training, but Duskleaf made it clear his idea was even better than he first thought.

Poor Meira still looked a bit confused as she mustered up her courage to talk. "I... I have no experience in core refinement..."

She spoke in a tiny voice as if scared she would get scolded. However, Jake just shook his head. "No problem, I didn't expect you to. Also, this request is outside of your usual lessons, all of which I still

expect you to keep up with. This is just if you have leftover time as we will have to do the resistance training anyway.”

Meira nodded, but Jake noticed something. He had believed he missaw earlier, but Meira seemed to slightly shudder every time one of them mentioned resistance training. Jake quickly understood as he reassured her.

“This resistance training we are talking about is resistance to presences such as the presence of gods. Duskleaf here is trying really hard to suppress himself, and yet it is still clearly affecting you. I can help you train to be far less influenced,” Jake explained to her with a relaxed smile.

He saw her nervousness reduce slightly, but she was still afraid. Oh well, it will be a bit unpleasant, so I can’t lie and say it will be a walk in the park either. Better she is relieved at it being not as bad as expected than lower her expectations so much she gets a rude surprise.

“I will do my best!” she finally answered with determination.

Jake smiled. “I know you will. And there is no rush; we won’t get started yet. You need to first learn and practice core refinement, and I have a few matters to handle before the cores can even be used.”

Meira confirmed she understood with yet another nod but quickly looked nervous again. Seemingly having gotten some more confidence, she spoke once more: “Uhm... before the esteemed Grand Elder and the Malefic One graced us with their presences, I was on the way to visit some of those I study with... my friends...”

Jake opened his eyes wide as he had to know more. He had no idea Meira had any friends. Okay, that came out very wrong, but he had no idea she had any people she would actively call friends. "Oh, friends? Well, that is nice to hear. So that is why you copied things down from the books to show your friends?"

She nodded and quietly spoke. "I know it is Master's boo--"

Jake stared her down for using the M-word.

"My Lord's books... I apologize for overstepping and not ask if I was allowed to copy anything," she said while bowing.

"I was going to say that if you want to look over some books together, you have my permission to ask them over and just look at the library," Jake shrugged. It was Meira's home too, and he wasn't going to tell her she couldn't even have friends over.

Duskleaf shook his head a bit as he spoke: "Master stocked the library with quite a few tomes not commonly available and--"

"Duskleaf," Jake interrupted him. "That word is banned in my house."

"I have been calling him that since I was a mortal," Duskleaf protested.

“Well, social norms develop, and things that were acceptable in the past become frowned upon. More importantly, this is my house and my rules, so no M-word,” Jake said, adding on with telepathy. “I also don’t want to make Meira think it is okay. You know, she may begin taking after you.”

“You don’t want the elf girl to take after a god? One of the best alchemists in existence?” Duskleaf countered.

“Oh, she can definitely take those parts, just not the one where she uses banned words,” Jake shut it down with a grin.

Duskleaf grumbled something about Jake being lucky he had seniority as Villy’s friend, as he seemed to agree. “What I was trying to say is that the Malefic One put books in your library not to be handed out mindlessly.”

“I understand that,” Jake answered, inwardly celebrating his minor victory. “Which is why they will have to come by and look at them in the library.”

“Acceptable,” Duskleaf sighed. He shook his head and turned to Meira again. “Now, where were we... also, Jake, are you joining in?”

Jake shook his head. “Nah, I got something else to deal with right now.”

“Oh?” Duskleaf raised an eyebrow.

Jake just shrugged. "Yeah, so apparently, a big fight is going on inside my Soulspace, and I should probably check it out."

Chapter 495 - Two Geniuses Making Plans: Me & Myself

The ground shattered as the two beings clashed. Mountains were torn asunder, and space shuddered with every impact as their bout seemed to go through a neverending cycle of change. The larger of the two figures repeatedly adapted and transformed in response to the attacks of its small attacker, while the small combatant seemed to always be able to counter whatever the monster did.

Jake stood back and observed this all as huge areas of the Soulspace were ripped apart. It was a fight clearly far beyond D-grade, and yet sim-Jake didn't even seem that pressed. The level of power Jake could display inside his Soulspace had always been a bit of a mystery to him. It wasn't a real world, but just one created from his Records and his own mind. Kind of. It was real and yet imaginary - a dreamscape.

What sim-Jake was fighting was naturally the chimera made up of the curse energy from Eternal Hunger. The hulking monstrosity of pure energy had an ever-shifting body that constantly tried to adapt and improve to better kill and consume sim-Jake, but even with everything it did, it was a losing battle. Not that it cared, considering it was just pure instincts with not a shred of thought within. It just saw sim-Jake and wanted to eat sim-Jake, because that is what it did. One could almost call it eternally hungry.

The fight finally reached the zenith as sim-Jake vaulted over its massive form and, before it could adapt, smashed his katar down into its head. The blade extended in an explosive way on impact and blasted the chimera into the ground below, where it took a bit to re-condense its body. Mind you, no energy was actually lost by either of them, and this battle could truly go on forever or until Jake himself died, thus making the Soulspace disappear.

Getting a feeling it was time to interfere, Jake stepped forward and once more wrapped up the chimera in mana strings and re-sealed it. Primarily so that it would stop trying to constantly eat Villy's blood only to hurt itself and actually risk getting destroyed.

Sim-Jake nodded at him in approval once the job was done. "I must say, that arcane affinity is nifty."

"Definitely better than the boring dark affinity," Jake said in return.

"Spoken like someone who never bothered to explore it properly," sim-Jake shook his head. "Also... an elf slave, really? How fucking stereotypical can you get?"

"Villy set me up," Jake shook his head in the exact same fashion as sim-Jake had. "But I am handling it. More importantly, you seem to be having fun playing with that little bundle of very hungry joy."

"Definitely worth it," sim-Jake nodded. "It is better at fighting than most beasts I have encountered and is pretty damn interesting in the way it constantly adapts. Forces me to stay on my toes, you know? How come you never trained against it?"

Jake scratched his hair. "I maybe should have... anyway. How was your nap? Feeling rested and good to go?"

"Adequately rested, sure. I have been awake for a few hours now and just sat back and watched," sim-Jake shrugged. "I really don't have much interest in all of that alchemy crap, and based on how clueless I still am when it comes to it, I haven't merged with any Records related to your profession."

"But do you get the attraction?" Jake asked.

"Kind of?" sim-Jake answered, pondering the question. "I get the attraction in the complexity and that it can offer a different sort of challenge, though the lack of life and death makes it a bit less interesting."

"Eh, a bit, but it makes up for it with pure complexity. The field of alchemy is so damn broad, and there is so much to learn and so much to craft. I feel like I would be able to keep doing alchemy forever while still progressing," Jake smiled. "But enough about me. This version of me. What is the lay of the land?"

Sim-Jake sighed. "A mixed bag. First of all, my skills are gone. All of them. This is partly to be expected, but I don't even bloody remember how the skills worked anymore. I tried recreating some, but anything even remotely complex is completely lost to me. I have a feeling the system purposefully did it like this, but I am not sure."

"That sounds plausible," Jake nodded. "It probably deemed it too much to borderline hand me a bunch of skills to learn. Sure, they wouldn't be skills, but that level of knowledge would make doing what the skills did a lot easier and make me learn them far faster."

"True," sim-Jake concurred. "However, there is one exception. After coming here, I naturally lost my Blessing and all connection to Umbra as well as anything related to Tenlucis... but I got a skill related to Umbra very early on. Before I was blessed."

"You mean?" Jake asked with realization.

"Shadow Vault," sim-Jake smirked as he jumped backward and used the skill as he turned into a shadowy form for a second before fully reappearing. "This one I can still use... but my version was at a higher rarity. As it is, this Shadow Vault doesn't really jell with us anymore."

Jake nodded. He hadn't really used Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra for a long time, and the reason for that was simple: it was prone to do more damage than good. If he encountered anything while using Shadow Vault, he would lose health, mana, or other resources, and at his current grade, it was hard to travel in a straight line without anything getting in the way. If he had a clear line to where he wanted to go, One Step was just better.

"Any thoughts?" Jake asked, but he kind of knew the answer already.

"We gotta use it with this," sim-Jake said as he condensed a small arcane bolt. "And yeah, I can, of course, use the affinity too. Though I must say, I don't quite understand it... I can just use it. Weird that one. Like, I get the destructive parts of it, but I have a hard time balancing it with the stability and making it useable."

As he said that, the arcane bolt looked a bit unstable and soon scattered by itself as sim-Jake shook his head. "Anyway, we need to make Shadow Vault work with our arcane affinity, but without losing what actually makes Shadow Vault so great. More importantly, we need to get rid of its connection to Umbra."

"Being a bit harsh towards your old Patron," Jake joked, but he got it. Having skills related to several gods at the same time wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but it could lead to some conflicts, especially when it came to upgrading the skills. One of the primary reasons Jake so easily upgraded his "of the Malefic Viper" skills was because of his deep connection with Villy, flooding him with Records related to the Primordial and hence his skills. One could say that as his Chosen, Jake was playing life on easy mode in regards to upgrading his Legacy skills. In the same vein, then the less connection Jake had with Umbra, the harder upgrading it would become.

"I am not being harsh, just realistic. Either way, I have some thoughts in regards to Shadow Vault and will focus on improving it. Or at least find a good direction," sim-Jake said.

Jake nodded once more. "Now for the main dish. Melee combat. I assume you lost the skill you had made with your fighting style?"

"I never really had one," sim-Jake just answered blankly. "I got that starting weapon skill to uncommon rarity, after which I didn't even try to upgrade it anymore. I thought it would be a bad idea to upgrade an existing skill if I wanted to make my own style..."

"That isn't how that works," Jake said with exasperation.

"And I know that now. Major trust issues, remember?" sim-Jake scoffed, a bit offended. "Not that you should complain. That just means I retained one hundred percent of that knowledge. Again, that was probably helped along and approved by the system."

"What more knowledge have you lost?" Jake asked, a bit concerned.

Sim-Jake fell silent a bit as he sighed. "A lot... but it is more like they are being replaced. I remember taking a university exam despite never going to university, but I do also recall the university itself as I once followed a target while there. The only things still clear in my mind are all the things after the system and mainly events related to fighting. If I stand here and try to remember details of mundane things, I instead just remember what you did. It is weird, man."

Jake felt a bit guilty as he knew part of this was caused by him fucking up a bit during the infusion process of the bone. Yet he also knew this was an inevitable conclusion to two people with the same Truesoul sharing a Soulspace. Well, that, or be like the guy who went insane that Villy mentioned.

Nevertheless.

“Sorry,” Jake apologized.

“For what? For replacing memories of digging through dumpsters alone while avoiding adults wanting to take advantage of me with new ones of begging mom and dad to get fast food at the drive-through? Sure, both resulted in us eating trash, but at least I had a family and a brother in one of those memories,” sim-Jake joked, but then turned more serious. “I am being genuine here. You clearly made the better choices and ended up better off than I did. All I had was being strong and good at fighting. Sure, you are still a broken-ass human with major issues, but you are less broken than I was. Did you know I was a damn virgin? Not due to lack of opportunity, but because I thought it too risky to get vulnerable with another person. How pathetic is that?”

“Dude, too much information,” Jake said, trying to lighten the mood.

“Considering I got flooded with very vivid memories of sleeping with a certain Runemaiden, I don’t think you have much to say,” sim-Jake smirked. “At least I now have memories that I actually find positive. Ah, the one with Carmen included. I am becoming you more and more by the day, and I fully accept that. The day you learn everything I can teach you is also the day I will finally become a real boy. By becoming you.”

“Already beginning to inherit some humor at least,” Jake also smiled. They looked at each other for a bit before sim-Jake spoke once more.

“Well then, enough sentimental bullshit. Come at me,” sim-Jake said as he spread his arms wide.

“Unarmed?” Jake asked.

“That you think it makes a difference already proves how much you suck,” sim-Jake confidently said before taking a more relaxed stance. “Alright, the first lesson i-”

Sim-Jake charged forward, barely giving Jake time to react as he managed to block. A follow-up came, but he was able to dodge it. However, as he tried to avoid the third blow, sim-Jake managed to grab hold of his clothes and swung him over his back, smashing Jake into the ground.

“First lesson is to always seize the momentum,” sim-Jake smiled as he backed away.

Jake stood up and didn’t hesitate to attack. He went for a punch that was dodged, and as he tried to land a kick, his leg was caught. Sim-Jake just smirked again as he tossed Jake away, making him land on the ground with a thud.

The entire “fight” had been without either of them really using any superhuman abilities, and even then, the difference was clear.

“As you see, you do way better defensively. It is also pretty stupid to make such wide moves against someone with your instincts. So, let us say the second lesson is to not just go in swinging without thinking,” sim-Jake said.

Jake stood up again and cracked his neck. “Let’s go again.”

Sim-Jake just laughed. “Man, you are going to make people believe we are into self-harm.”

The next half an hour or so was spent with Jake fighting sim-Jake, or more accurately, Jake getting his ass whooped by his own simulacrum. After half an hour, Jake decided he wanted a win, so they changed up the rules by removing all rules.

Arcane explosions, arrows, shadow magic, and all sorts of methods were deployed. The two of them were perfectly evenly matched in power as they shared the same Truesoul, making it a truly “fair” fight. There were still differences in skill-set, though.

Sim-Jake was very good at dodging arrows, but real-Jake was very good at landing them too, and his curving arrows coupled with magical attacks made it undodgeable even for him. Meanwhile, sim-Jake would come out on top whenever he got close enough to land blows with his katars before Jake could disengage. Overall, Jake won most of the time, which was only to be expected as he ultimately had more experience due to having lived with the system longer.

Eventually, they both stopped as sim-Jake sighed. “This was actually a little productive as I have a better sense of your fighting style now. And a newfound hatred for bows. Those fucky curvy arrows are just annoying.”

“Guess we still got some way to go before we are perfectly similar,” Jake laughed at his simulacrum’s dislike for bows. Bows rocked.

“Anyway, go back to the outside world,” sim-Jake said.

“Is my life that entertaining?” Jake asked jokingly.

"No, not really, but it is the best I got, and I at least find the company you keep interesting," sim-Jake answered. "Don't worry, I will also be busy practicing and maybe having a few bouts with the chimera."

"Suit yourself," Jake shrugged as he disappeared from his Soulspace and opened his eyes in the real world. He was sitting on his bed within the mansion and stretched as if he had just woken up.

"Hey, Villy," Jake spoke out loud. "Is the inside of the Soulspace considered a Dreamscape Simulation?"

A small hole in space was opened as a head poked out. "It is a version of one, yep. Took you long enough to figure that one out."

"Oh... I think I get it now," Jake nodded. It had been bothering him but he kind of understood now. "Sim-Jake can keep being a simulacrum because he just went from one simulation into another... with the difference being that I am running the new simulation. Or, well, my Truesoul is the one powering it."

"Close enough to be true," Villy, the floating head, said. "So was that everything?"

"Yep. See you around."

With that, the head popped back into the hole in space and disappeared. It was just a small realization Jake had reached and wanted to confirm.

Still sitting on the bed, Jake could see the entire mansion through his sphere and saw Meira and Duskleaf in the library, still working hard. During their earlier talk, Duskleaf made it clear that while he would teach Jake about formations – only because Jake was pretty much a total novice – he would not touch anything else.

So, Jake still needed regular lessons. With that in mind, he took out his Order Token and began looking through everything that was on offer. He hadn't been gone for that long, but long enough for him to not really be able to follow the old lessons he had been enrolled in. Fortunately, there was never a lack of willing teachers, especially not in the lower grades, making it easy to find replacements.

The next hour or so was spent picking out lessons about concocting poison and brewing potions with a few general lessons about miscellaneous topics mixed in as well as two related to elixirs. Coupled with the lessons Jake would have with Duskleaf, and his planned resistance training sessions with Meira, Jake's schedule was packed moving forward.

Looking at the many lessons planned and what they were about, Jake had a feeling he never thought he would ever have...

He was actually happy to be back in school.

Chapter 496 - A Counter\U002BIntuitive Fighting Style.

Multitasking. Everyone loved multitasking, and it was one of those great buzzwords people often used when they attempted to do fifteen things at once poorly rather than just do a few well. Multitasking also wasn't truly doing more things at once. It was just rapidly switching between several tasks or starting tasks that could automatically continue or finish on their own while then spending the meantime on something else. Like an author putting food in the oven that would take forty minutes to cook and then using that time to also focus on writing.

Jake's ways of multitasking were at a level far above this. He had found a way to not only train with sim-Jake but also train Meira at the same time. It was quite honestly genius and not at all an accidental discovery found when Meira walked by his room while Jake had a fun spar with his other self.

It appeared that when Jake was fighting himself or just straining himself within the Soulspace, his aura flared as he was effectively having an internal struggle. When Jake also began to purposefully amplify this effect, it became highly effective to the point of Meira barely being able to move. It was just too good not to use.

So currently, Jake was sitting in the library on a pillow in Serene Soul Meditation while Meira was anything but serene. Duskleaf was trying to teach her as sweat poured down her face, and she was out of breath from the presence. The old alchemist god was unaffected due to the sheer difference in power but did admit that it was a very impressive aura when they began this kind of training. He had even added that if Jake was a god, it would maybe have been a little intimidating.

However, as things were, they did conclude that Jake could only do this kind of resistance training with those significantly weaker than himself. There was also some passive resistance to auras gained from just being around him frequently, but it was meager in comparison to a full-on training session where he was just blasting.

Anyway, while Meira was struggling in the outside world, Jake struggled in his inside one. He and sim-Jake had been training for a few weeks now since their first bout, and it was no longer just "fights," but there was some actual teaching going on.

"Don't let it adapt, move faster," sim-Jake said as Jake was busy fighting the massive monstrosity of pure curse energy. "If you let it get used to your patterns, you will be screwed."

You said that ten fucking times, Jake grumbled as he dodged and punched forward with his kater – a weapon he was still very-much getting used to still. He hit the arm-like appendage of the chimera but was soon pushed back by several spikes claws flying towards him, followed by a whipping tail.

“Momentum is key. Seize it,” sim-Jake spoke once more as Jake moved to attack. He delayed his actions by a fraction of a second, making the tail miss before he truly attacked, managing to land several blows before the beast could adapt and strike back. Jake was pushed once more and had to find a new way to counter as their endless cycle of switching advantages continued.

Jake had made himself weaker than the chimera on purpose to make it into an actual fight that he could lose. All other times he had “fought” the chimera had been merely using overwhelming power. He had blasted it around and sealed it, never truly engaging in combat.

And now that he did... he concluded that the chimera was far stronger than he had ever thought it would be. It was so adaptable it was insane. Its body would evolve on the fly to counter its opponent and its instincts were absolutely top-notch to the level of Jake suspecting it tapped into his Records a bit.

While sim-Jake had made the brawl with the monster look simple, Jake was struggling as he simply couldn't keep up. Which, in some ways, was a good thing as it showed how much room he still had for improvements.

The key to the fighting style sim-Jake had developed was all about seizing momentum and using the opponent's own fighting style and instincts against them. Jake had not truly considered it before... but this style was incredibly Perception-centric. It was all about reading the flow of combat, reading your opponent, and understanding the tempo of your foe instantly. It was about reacting, and to react, you had to see and be aware of what was coming. Jake's Bloodline-empowered instincts leaned towards always just avoiding danger and not attacking, meaning that while his instincts could help him read his enemies, it wouldn't help with what kind of response he had to formulate.

Reading your opponent during a fight also wasn't a one-time thing but something you had to repeatedly do as the fight progressed. The entire concept of controlling momentum and understanding the one you were fighting wasn't anything new either. Everyone did it, and it was the basis of most martial arts. Someone like the Sword Saint was a prime example of someone who was already a master at this, and as Jake recalled their fight, he did notice how the Saint became able to counter and strike him more and more as the fight went on.

"On the surface, a fight can seem simple. It's just about hitting the right timing and then swinging your weapon or landing that punch, right? While technically true, it is a harmful oversimplification. One of your other major flaws is overextension. When you see an opening, you pounce on it without considering the next step. Sure, you may land your blow, but won't it just end with you getting smashed in return? I am not saying trading hits can't be a good strategy, but it has to be an intentional choice and not the result of you fucking up and still managing to get out on top," sim-Jake had also explained, continuing.

"Every single move in a fight revolves around making choices. How much power do I use? What angle do I strike at? What will the opponent do? Follow-ups? You always need to consider the fight as more than just that singular exchange. Our Bloodline is a bit limited in that sense. It will make it appear smart to take advantage of an opening, even if doing so can lead to getting screwed five moves later. The same is true for dodging. It is all about dodging every individual move, sometimes a few consecutive moves, but the pre-cognitive danger sense is simply not able to predict far enough ahead. Once an enemy picks up on this, they can begin to take advantage. That isn't really a problem in D-grade yet as even your flawed style has so many adaptations it would take a peak-level genius to figure it out... like that Sword Saint."

Jake and the chimera kept fighting as Jake stayed close to it, trying to keep up with its ability to adapt and change to better combat what he was doing. It could go better as Jake repeatedly lost out.

"We have better senses and instincts than anyone else... which also leads to my next point. It is something I am working on myself, but that you may as well also begin considering. Right now, we adapt and react instinctually and "stop" the instinctual reaction when we want to counter. This leads to a very small and minor delay compared to merely following along with what our body wants to do. I have been wondering... why does our body dodge the way it does? If you noticed, our ways of dodging are slightly different, and you borderline instinctually form mana barriers and use magic. Something I certainly do not. The cause of this lies in what is essentially the system version of muscle memory. Soul memory,

maybe? So imagine if we could train our muscle memory. Actively, that is. Currently, we are still training it just by fighting, which is why battling the chimera is a good way to spend your time,” sim-Jake had also added. “It would lead an entirely new world where can instinctually make perfect attacks... theoretically.”

Jake pushed back the chimera in their fight and got the advantage. He kept pressing and adapting faster than this foe could adapt to him. He stabbed it over a dozen times as he countered its blows before finally choosing to release his power and reseal it.

“That was better than before,” Jake commented with a proud smile, looking at the wriggling form the chimera within its prison of mana strings. It stopped struggling after only a few seconds and just went dormant.

“Yeah, if you weren’t us. You got a long way to go before you get on my level,” sim-Jake shook his head. “But you are improving for sure. Fighting our instinct is hard, isn’t it?”

Jake nodded. It bloody was. Countering wasn’t a natural reaction for him, so he had to always register a blow, want to instinctually react by dodging, stop that reaction, and then counter instead. He would then, of course, need to quickly decide how to counter based on how he had wanted to dodge and what he sensed from his opponent. Jake needed to take in a whole lot of information and decide on it near-instantly. Something made easier by being able to quickly gather that information.

This was as mentioned a fighting style intrinsically linked with Perception. It was about not only reading your opponent but reading your opponent better than they could read you, and if you saw them do the slightest adaption or shift, you had to pick up on it and counter-adapt. Always be one step ahead, never allowing the other side to get an advantage or get any momentum.

To summarize the fighting style... It was about always knowing what your opponent does and taking advantage of those moves. It was such a simple concept made complicated by the sheer level sim-Jake, and now real-Jake wanted to take it. Theoretically, this would be an unbeatable style as long as he wasn't beat handily in stats, but reality was not that simple. There were too many variables in any fight, and often one didn't know the variable before the very final moment.

A hidden skill, a saved trump card, a new item, a boosting skill, help arriving, the environment changing, everything could happen. Sim-Jake had naturally recognized this, which was why the goal was never to know everything – just more than your opponent. Coupled with senses good enough to react to any trump card, sim-Jake believed that the most important thing was to be able to quickly seize back the momentum after surviving the trump card. Needless to say, simply expecting to instinctually survive these trump cards was only possible due to Jake's Bloodline, and honestly, the entire style could only really be called a fighting style due to the Bloodline. It wasn't something Jake could teach someone else as there were no "moves."

Everything was reactionary. Well, okay, maybe there were kinda moves, but the moves were just all based on reactions and tended to be simple and vary from opponent to opponent.

"Any progress on the Shadow Vault front?" Jake asked sim-Jake after discussing melee combat a bit longer.

"Some," sim-Jake said. "But nothing worth sharing, just trying out some things. It isn't like I can upgrade the skill myself, and honestly, I have a feeling if you just copied the progress I have already made, you would get an upgrade. Don't do that, though. It is still not there, and I don't want it to be a skill with a dead-end or one near-impossible to upgrade further."

"Very forward-thinking for a simulacrum that will one day in the not-so-distant future cease to be," Jake morbidly joked.

"I will be immortalized through that skill and your melee style," sim-Jake waved it off. "I naturally assume you will become immortal. Anything else would just be a fucking embarrassment."

"Maybe I just die to some random critter?" Jake teased back. "Or maybe I find an opponent your super style is utterly useless against, and I get killed."

"Well, that would be all on you for not further developing it then," sim-Jake smiled. "Even after I am gone, it will not be done... remember, I made it with melee and katars in mind. We now have far more methods than that."

Jake shook his head. "One thing at a time."

He knew what sim-Jake meant. All Jake was learning was pure melee combat. There was no use of skills or any other means of combat besides just brawling. In actual combat, Jake would, of course, be different, and he also had some minor adaptations to make based on his use of poisons. While sim-Jake wanted to land a deep wound to do a lot of damage, it was more important for Jake to land a blow that was good at injecting some poison.

"I am just saying," sim-Jake said. "You know, you can even add archery in and make it an absolute god-tier style."

"Or, even better, I can take it one fucking step at a time and not bite off more than I can chew and fuck myself over," Jake shot it down. That was one thing Jake knew he was better at than sim-Jake. While Jake would overextend in combat, sim-Jake would overextend in adding to his own workload, making him stretch himself thin. "Anyway, just keep it up with the melee practice and Shadow Vault. I am going to see Meira now and got a class to attend in a bit too."

"I know," sim-Jake just said with a deadpan face. "Remember. Same body, shared senses, partially shared memory. Ah, but do give Meira a thumbs-up from me. She is doing well."

"Already planned on doing that," Jake nodded and smiled as he disappeared from the Soulspace and opened his eyes as he exited meditation.

Duskleaf noticed he had woken up, and Meira also breathed out in relief as he stopped openly releasing his presence into the library. "Had a good time? Any good progress?" Duskleaf asked.

"Plenty of progress as always. I have the best teacher in existence, you know?" Jake joked. "I guess that sometimes if you want a job done well, you have to do it yourself."

"Ma--"

"Hm!?" Jake interrupted promptly.

Duskleaf groaned and corrected himself. "The Viper has made jokes nearly identical to that one nearly every time he summoned avatars, and I was around..."

"Great minds think alike," Jake smiled cheekily.

Meira, for some reason, nodded along with a serious expression like he wasn't joking. Jake turned his attention to her, making her tense up a bit before Jake calmly spoke. "How are you handling the presence training these days?"

"Uhm.... Better?" Meira asked. "It is difficult, but I am doing my best!"

The sweat on her brow had quickly disappeared after Jake stopped releasing his aura, and she had calmed down a lot. Meira hadn't even noticed that she didn't have any adverse reactions to Duskleaf's presence despite him purposefully leaking out a little. Jake met the gaze of the old alchemist god, and he nodded approvingly.

Jake, fulfilling a promise, gave her a thumbs up. "You are doing great."

She smiled a bit shyly as Jake exchanged some quick words with Duskleaf before leaving the two be. He went towards the entrance hall and the wall to teleport to lessons. Meira still had some ways to go, and despite it being nearly four weeks since Jake said she could bring friends over, she had yet to bring any. Not from a lack of opportunity as she had still copied some notes from books for them. Maybe they didn't wanna go?

Jake did see how it could be intimidating entering the home of another member of the Order of the Malefic Viper due to the rules, so maybe it was them not wanting to go? That explanation would make sense.

Shaking his head, Jake didn't think about it anymore as he used the Order Token to open up the gateway to the lesson hall. This was one of those big lessons only held rarely for newer students, and Jake felt he would see many familiar faces there. It was the first time it had been held since he entered the Academy, and the teacher was also a familiar face.

It was Viridia, the S-grade Hall Master Jake had met briefly way back in the day when he astral projected to the Order by accident. The highest-ranked mortal within the Order of the Malefic Viper.

Well, besides himself, that is.

Chapter 497 - \U0022So, You Want To Join The Order Of The Malefic Viper?\U0022

Some lessons in the Order of the Malefic were limited to certain members. This was one such lesson, limited to individuals who had been in the Order for less than a year. The lessons were also held once a year, making it one you could only attend once. Jake heard that the Hall Master had missed some lessons in recent times due to being away training, but it didn't have that huge of an impact who taught it. Rather than teaching much, it was an orientation of sorts, and Jake honestly only attended because it would be suspicious if he didn't. Well, that, and one kind of ulterior motive.

As for the topic of the lesson? How to become a true member of the Order of the Malefic Viper. Currently, they were all members of the Academy, but they were not truly members of the Order. One had to remember that many who attended the Academy came from different factions from all across the multiverse. Risen, who were loyal to the Blightfather and the undead faction, people from the Altmar Empire, or even the Endless Empire of insect-like creatures. That wasn't counting all those from minor factions.

Reika was still a member of the Noboru Clan and was loyal to Earth with no real sense of loyalty to the Order as far as Jake knew. Jake didn't really know if he would consider himself a true member of the Order, even if everyone else would, for one simple reason: he had a Blessing. That was, to many, a clear indication he was a true member. Even if no such rule existed, those blessed just tended to be. Jake was sure it would be touched upon how easy those like him had it with Blessings from the Viper.

With plenty of knowledge of what he was about to experience, Jake walked through the portal to the lesson hall, and to call this one huge was an understatement. But it was more than that. It was not one of the regular lesson halls but was clearly one specialized for this kind of thing. Carvings of the Viper lined the walls, and at the podium in the center was a massive statue of the Malefic Viper. It was a huge

coiling snake wrapped around a dragon and sinking its teeth into the neck of the larger beast, with the aura given off by the snake far more profound than the dragon. It was almost a statement that the Viper as a snake was superior to dragons.

On the ceiling was an equally impressive mural depicting the founding of the Order. At least, that is what he assumed it was about. It showed the Viper in human form followed by a huge swathe of people in robes as he demolished an army of beasts and, with a wave of his hand, created a massive hole in the ground to begin building the mostly underground headquarter of the Order of the Malefic Viper.

The entire hall was pretty much an advertisement for how awesome the Malefic Viper and the Order were. As mentioned, then Jake didn't feel like he would get much out of this lesson, but he did also go for one other reason: to see familiar faces.

Being the hunter he was, he used his tracking skill to find the aura signatures of those he was seeking. He quickly spotted Reika with the other alchemists from the Noboru Clan, sitting with a bunch of other people and chatting away already. Jake had to admit that the other alchemists looked a bit haggard, but Reika looked full of positivity as she chatted with a female beastfolk Jake didn't recognize.

Seeing as Reika looked a-okay, he left them alone. Jake scanned the room a bit more and spotted Draskil by himself, as always. By choice, mind you, as there were many who wanted to get close and talk to him. His Divine Blessing was just too effective at making people want to suck up to him and make him an ally or even friend.

Jake looked around and spotted a few more people he had seen or met before, including quite a few with whom he shared lessons. Ultimately, he decided to just go over to Draskil and sit with him.

One had to remember that Draskil had a standing higher than pretty much anyone there. He was no-doubt known as a loner who was too haughty to bat an eye when anyone approached, and those he would bat an eye at wouldn't approach him.

So Jake got quite a few stares as he casually walked over and took a seat next to Draskil. It was naturally unoccupied as no one had dared sit and risk angering him. The Malefic Dragonkin regarded Jake as he sat down, with Jake taking the lead.

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"What?" Draskil asked, confused, before his eye widened in realization. "Was it a weak one? Barely evolved?"

Jake shook his head and grinned beneath his mask. "It was pretty newly evolved, yeah, but not on the weaker side at all. Wielded both dark and space magic, with the ability to clone itself and a bunch of other tools. Definitely not weak."

He was naturally talking about his successful C-grade hunt. The last time he and Draskil spoke, they had discussed Draskil killing a C-grade while still in D-grade, and Jake had now managed to kill one while a few levels lower. He had to brag about it, and the Dragonkin seemed more than interested in engaging him in conversation. Much to the dismay of many of the observers who probably wondered how the guy with a lesser Blessing managed to get so friendly with Draskil.

"Good!" Draskil grinned as she patted Jake on the back, clearly elated at his kill. With great interest, he leaned a bit closer. "How was the fight?"

“Damn good,” Jake also grinned. “Man, it had this one attack...”

The two of them kept discussing as the stares of dozens inspected Jake carefully. Not many of those in this lesson were aware of who Jake or even Draskil was before attending. All the get-togethers so far had consisted only of those from the ninety-third universe, and that was certainly not the case for the lesson hall they were in now.

Jake even felt several C-grades present within the hall. Considering the Order recruited and allowed entry of people of all grades, Jake assumed there were separate lessons for them. It usually wouldn't end well to mix B-grades with those significantly weaker as their auras alone would crush those present. E-grades – which there were a few of – already felt the pressure from the C-grades and stronger D-grades, making them all congregate at one end of the hall.

Soon enough, about fifteen minutes had passed, and it was time for the lesson to begin. Everyone had taken their seats and the gates on all the walls closed. Down on the podium, in front of the statue of the Viper, a green portal opened as a green-haired human-looking woman stepped out. Her aura instantly blanketed the entire lesson hall, making everyone know she was firmly in the S-grade. But there was more mixed in. It was like her aura carried a concept of authority, more than just something born of power.

Jake did not have a shadow of doubt in his mind. She had an incredibly potent social-type profession. Probably even one called Hall Master or something.

“Welcome all newcomers to the Order of the Malefic Viper,” Viridia smiled as she regarded everyone in the room. Her eyes stopped on Jake for a second, clearly aware beforehand he would be there. She also lingered on Draskil a little but quickly moved on.

"I hope you have all settled in during your time in the Order, or more specifically, the Academy. It is a pleasure to see so many attending, even more so in a time of celebration of our Patron's return. No more words need to be said to fully establish that the Order is not the weak shell it was merely a few years ago but is now truly a pinnacle faction within the multiverse once more. It is an Order that I must emphasize barely anyone here is actually truly a member of," the Hall Master of the Order said.

A few confused murmurs were heard around the room, primarily from those who hailed from the ninety-third universe but also some who had merely applied to the Order by doing an entrance test. Jake felt a bit good about others also being clueless about things they should seriously know. Even Jake knew this.

"While all here are members of the Academy, that does not make you members of the Order. As students, you are offered temporary membership while within the confines of the Order, but outside our territory, you are not considered one. This lesson today is about your status in the Order, how to improve that status, and how to potentially truly join the Order of the Malefic Viper," she continued as she waved her hand.

A projection of a hieratical structure appeared above her. It outlined the general power structure of the Order in a simple fashion. At the very top was naturally the Malefic Viper himself, and right next to him – but placed a bit lower – was his Chosen.

Beneath that were other gods of the Order, then the Hall Masters, followed by Branch Leaders, and then a bunch more ranks Jake didn't bother to remember before finally getting to the bottom. Temporary outer members. This rank was highlighted as Viridia spoke again.

"For now, you need not consider the top. The Malefic One stands supreme, his Chosen second, especially among us mortals," she spoke as Jake felt her attention briefly on him, but her eyes didn't even move, nor did she in any way indicate she was talking about him. "No, the ranks you can reach for are those at the bottom. Right now, the majority of you are the highlighted temporary outer members, which, as I mentioned, means you are not truly part of the Order.

“However, this sort of membership also offers benefits. As temporary members, you do not need to formally join or have any true responsibility towards the Order. You can remain part of any other faction as long as they are not enemies of the Order, and we will have no control of your actions or if you choose to leave. Not that we tend to exert much control over our actual members, but some responsibility is expected.”

Being a temporary outer member was the end-point for most students of the Academy. Jake already knew that. Not necessarily because someone couldn't join but by choice. As mentioned many times, factions often sent talented individuals to the Order to study for a time, and these would naturally only be temporary members. While in the Order, these people were formally recognized as members, and their status from their home faction decided how they were treated, making them even sometimes viewed as having a higher status than true members. If the Chosen of the Blightfather chose to attend the Academy, he would still only be a temporary outer member, but his actual status would be far above his rank.

“As a temporary outer member, also know that your membership will end the day you stop attending the Academy or are made to leave. If you wish to remain a member, you will have to become a non-temporary outer member of the Order of the Malefic Viper,” Virida continued.

“Now, many of you here will easily be able to do this. Simply being able to enter the Academy makes you individuals with some semblance of potential, already making you pass the first hurdle. In fact, I would reckon that becoming an outer member within the week would be possible for the vast majority of those present. If you wish to also take upon you the responsibility membership includes, that is.”

This led to more murmurs, and a few were clearly interested. Most knew these things, and Jake kind of knew, but her just stating it outright was something different. Many of those unaffiliated with any faction probably wanted membership in the Order and knowing that was a possibility was great news. Especially for those from the ninety-third universe... not.

“Naturally, this near-guaranteed acceptance into the Order does not extend to those who entered under extraordinary circumstances, such as those who recently arrived from the ninety-third universe,” Viridia said, making hundreds deflate a bit all across the lecture hall. “Again, to make it clear, nobody here is guaranteed membership even if they want it. Except for one group: the Blessed.”

Jake knew this part was coming as Viridia lit up the next stage of ranks above outer members. “Anyone who carries any Blessing from the Malefic One will automatically become an inner member if they so choose, and dependent on the Blessing, perhaps even higher. Those with Blessings from gods loyal to the Viper or members of the Order are also automatically offered to become inner members of the Order.”

More murmurs, more talking in hushed voices, and more speculation sounded out. Quite a few looked at Draskil, too, as he sat there with his Divine Blessing.

“Membership and your rank in the Order will naturally also bring many benefits. You will gain more resources, more Academy Credits, and some new lessons will become available to you. All that is asked of you in return is to help the Order as they help you. This may include missions, providing materials for the Order, completing commissions, or just assisting it in other ways. We are not a charity, but neither do we expect slave labor from you. We have actual slaves for that,” Viridia joked, getting a few chuckles from around the room.

“However, more than some resources, you become able to finally claim yourself a member not just within the Order, but in the multiverse as a whole. If you wish for it, you can leave behind a Soulseal in the Order that will detect if anyone slays you, marking your killer. People will fear your very presence, and no faction will dare make a move against you lest they invoke the wrath of the Order. Many foolish forces have fallen through the ages by daring to make us an enemy, and do trust in that – your enemies will become the enemies of the Order. Ah, not to say we will simply deal with any issues for you. That is ultimately still up to you. What it will mean is that someone a few grades above you will think twice before killing you. If you die to someone around your own level... tough luck,” Viridia further explained.

Jake smiled a bit under his mask. That did sound like how Villy would run stuff and pretty much what their personal agreement was. If Jake lost and died to someone around his own level, Villy would not interfere, but if some god decided to kill Jake, he would. The Order would probably not save someone in time, but at least it sounded like they would take revenge. The second best thing.

“Now, as for the ways to officially become a member. Quite frankly, you just apply with any official through the Humanoid Resources department – you should each have a contact person linked to you – and they can get your application started. Tests and such will be performed on an individual basis,” Viridia quickly also added.

Jake, at this point, began zoning out a little as Viridia continued explaining what one could do if they became true members. She took some questions too, but none of it really interested him. Instead, he focused on the statue near Viridia, and as he stared at it, he remembered something.

Wait... whatever happened to that insane sculptor from the Primordial Church back in Haven? I heard he was trying to make a statue of the Viper, but surely... surely he can't still be doing that?

Chapter 498 - Minor Misunderstandings & Dungeon

It wasn't good enough. It was never good enough. With disappointment in his own incompetence, the sculptor shattered his half-made creation. Only a bit of the material was lost as he could still use the marble-like rock by refusing it, but some material was gone forever. Fortunately, the City Lord understood the importance of his task and provided him the funds necessary to do what had to be done.

Felix had not left his workshop for... a long time. He wasn't actually sure how much time had passed. All he knew was that nothing was more important than making the perfect sculpture. The only breaks he took were those forced upon him. It was good that he had at least evolved to D-grade so he didn't have to really sleep anymore but could keep focusing on his work exclusively.

The image was still vivid in his mind. The sculpture displayed by the Chosen of the Malefic Viper depicting his Patron had been near-perfect. It held meanings Felix could not understand and profound concepts he would not even dare to try to comprehend. He did hold questions such as what the purpose of the bottle was and the link between it and the mushroom, but such were not his questions to ask or his task to understand. He was merely the sculptor – a tool to bring about magnificence.

If only he was more talented. Even if his skills upgraded and the system called him a “prodigy,” he did not view it as enough. How could it be? All that he created was trash. Poor imitations. Not a single one was even close to being able to house the presence of a Primordial infused by his Chosen adequately. He didn’t even aim for perfection... just adequacy.

This was a task given to him by the Chosen of the Malefic Viper himself. Felix knew he had the backing of the entire Primordial Church behind him, and his Patron had even upgraded his Blessing to Divine in recognition of the importance of this task. The Malefic One had not had a statue made by one of their own for a long time... much less had the chance to have the Primordial’s Chosen infuse it.

Felix collected himself and prepared to start again. This time... this time, he would surely do it. If not, he would just have to wait a bit and get his level 180 skill in his profession. If that wasn’t enough, he would just have to wait for C-grade. Felix was not in a rush. The Chosen had not given a deadline, and he would rather see himself die of age than present a subpar sculpture.

Because if he failed, he truly did believe he deserved death just to make up for a fraction of the sin that a failure would be.

Yeah, that sculptor guy probably moved on to other things by now or asked Chris about what kind of statue he should make, Jake thought as he stayed zoned out during the boring orientation marked as a lesson. It wasn’t as if Jake had actually ever shown that Felix guy what kind of statue to make.

Anyway, refocusing a bit on the lesson, Viridia kept explaining stuff and taking questions, and from the vibe, Jake got the feeling a huge portion wanted to officially join the Order. Those who weren't interested fell into two camps – those with existing backings or those who were just on the fence.

Jake understood from a logical standpoint why one would join the Order. In the simplest of terms, it offered safety. It was why many factions could function. Even if it didn't lead to someone not killing you, it would make them think twice before doing so.

It was also important to note that many in the Order were faction leaders or at least highly influential figures on their home planets. While returning was maybe not currently possible for them, if they did return in the future, they may want to make their planet part of the Order.

There were, in general, quite a few draws when it came to joining a major faction. Some had likely already applied to become a member. One of which was the guy sitting beside Jake.

"Hey... have you officially joined the Order?" Jake ended up asking Draskil.

The Malefic Dragonkin looked at him. "Of course. It got me free stuff."

Jake nodded at the reasoning of his dragonkin buddy. As Viridia had explained, then members would passively just get more things. They got more Academy Credits, had access to certain stores that no one else did, and even got a stipend of sorts to further their own power. All in all, if you had no other obligations, joining just made sense. As a member, you also had a lot of freedom.

Most other factions were largely restrictive of what their members could do. There were high levels of expectations when it came to loyalty, and going to wars for your faction and risking your life was simply

a given. The Holy Church was the most extreme example of this, as when you were part of the Holy Church, leaving it again would get incredibly difficult, especially as your entire planet was often part of the Church, and you were born into it.

However, with restrictions also came benefits. The Order of the Malefic Viper would not just shower their talented members with help. They would not assign them teachers or give them all the materials they needed. In the Holy Church, you would never want for anything as long as you stayed loyal and fulfilled all expectations. In the Order, you would get tossed out if it was decided you sucked too much and was a leech.

It all came down to the fundamental difference in ideology. The Order believed in freedom over everything else - to always offer the choice. If the Order wanted something from you, it would be far more transactional. Naturally, the Order would come out on top in these transactions to not fuck itself over in the long-term.

Now, it has to be mentioned that this kind of model could only really work with the Order due to how they operated on a multiversal scale. The Order did not engage in wars or chose sides in larger conflicts. Their members could join as mercenaries on either side, and there were several examples of Order members even killing each other on the battlefield. Something the Order of the Malefic Viper naturally didn't do anything about. If you joined a war and got killed, that was on you.

Jake knew all of this just by doing a bit of studying and listening to Viridia's lesson. But there was still the question...

"Did you join?" Draskil also asked.

"Did I?" Jake instead just asked the god observing them.

“At this point, no one would believe you if you said no. You have acted like a member, got way too many AC not to be a member, and I am pretty sure that when one of the Verdant Witches had you registered in the Humanoid Resources Department, she did as a member of the Order,” Villy answered. “Not to mention what happens when you eventually slip up and reveal yourself as my Chosen. Actually, you denying to be a member after that happens would be hilarious, so maybe just act like you aren’t?”

So, yeah. He was. Maybe. Jake looked at Draskil. “Yeah, I did. Kind of. It’s complicated.”

Draskil shrugged at his response. “This lesson is boring. You also think that?”

“Oh, that isn’t a complicated answer. Yeah, very much a waste of time with no real information for me or you. But it seems like it is good info for many,” Jake said.

“Hm,” Draskil just hummed as he fell silent again for a few moments before changing the subject entirely: “What is your real level?”

Jake was still hiding his level and showing it far higher than it actually was, but Draskil had quickly picked up on it being off, especially as Jake openly discussed a few things to make him suspicious. Ultimately, Jake prioritized a good conversation with Draskil over hiding his true level, and Draskil didn’t seem like the type to share it around either.

“169, all three balanced,” Jake honestly answered.

“Profession holding you back,” Draskil shook his head. Jake faintly felt approval from a certain simulacrum within but ignored that guy as he didn’t know better.

Jake just smirked in response. “I don’t know... I killed one before you.”

“I am stronger now,” Draskil shot back.

“Arguably. And even if that is true, I will be stronger than you in the future,” Jake kept arguing.

“Bah, I would beat you,” Draskil scoffed. “Power is supreme.”

“You never know how a real fight will end,” Jake smirked. He actually didn’t have much confidence against Draskil, but he was sure he could at least escape or put up a good fight, especially considering his recent advances. One also had to remember that Draskil had not done the system event due to being in the Order, meaning Jake had probably grown more in power simply due to his new title.

Draskil observed Jake a bit more before smirking himself. “Then prove it. You are a member of the Order, so join a mission.”

Jake raised an eyebrow. “What do you have in mind?”

The Dragonkin pulled out a piece of parchment – yes, old-looking parchment – from his spatial storage and presented it to Jake. Jake stared at it for a moment. “I’m in.”

He only had to read the first few parts of the mission. It was a dungeon run, but not just any dungeon run: an alchemy dungeon run. Kind of. It was a dungeon designed and created by the Order for their late to peak D-grade members, and considering Jake still needed his fair share of Dungeoneer titles, it would be silly not to use it.

Alright, that was another thing to add that factions could provide their members: access. Every faction had its own dungeons and general areas. That the Order would have a bunch of dungeons was just to be expected.

Draskil nodded at Jake agreeing to go. "We leave in three days."

"Who is we?" Jake asked further.

"The succubus, me, you, and two more alchemists if we bother," Draskil shrugged.

"What kind of dungeon is it?"

"Combat mixed with alchemy tasks. Unique plants need to be crafted into toxins to pass areas. Maybe potions too or other stuff. Not sure. I just needed alchemists," the dragonkin explained.

"Is Irin an alchemist?" Jake asked, a bit confused. He was pretty sure she, as a demon, only had a social profession and her race without any class to speak of. Sure, she could learn alchemy, but-

“No, but she is hot,” Draskil just answered blankly.

I guess that is kind of an argument to bring her, Jake laughed a bit internally. “Fair enough. Any other alchemists in mind?”

“Can’t do it alone?” Draskil asked with a frown.

“Maybe, maybe not. How would I know? But even if I could, wouldn’t it be faster to bring more?” Jake pointed out.

Draskil looked like he hadn’t considered it much before nodded. “Okay. You know any?”

“Eh, I can think of at least one,” Jake answered. Wasn’t it about time to see how far Reika had come in her alchemy? It would also give them a chance to catch up and do some alchemy together. Jake had glanced at the parchment a bit more, and it seemed very much like a dungeon all about learning and effectively housed puzzles.

Jake still recalled how he had met Reika doing a puzzle in the Treasure Hunt and how well they had jelled working together back then. So why not invite her? Maybe she even had another friend to bring, or they could find another fifth person.

Meira was not an option for hopefully obvious reasons. She was busy with her own stuff anyway, and Jake didn't want to drag her into a dungeon. Especially not with Draskil around. He was a bit of an intimidating guy until you got to know him. Reika should be fine, though.

"Then you find more alchemists," Draskil nodded. "You have my contact information."

Jake nodded. "Yeah, just send me the information."

"The succubus will," Draskil confirmed.

Their conversation just devolved into small-talk after that until, finally, the lesson ended. Throughout Jake and Draskil's conversation, the two of them had sealed themselves within an isolation barrier made by Jake that made it impossible for others to listen in but also for others to see them. Viridia or even some of the C-grades could easily go through it, but none had, so that was nice.

It could be argued the two of them chatting during a lesson could be considered rude, but they were far from the only ones. Many barriers had appeared as friends, small factions, and groups discussed potentially joining the Order.

Not long after, the lesson came to an end. Jake prepared to leave as one of the first ones as he felt a telepathic connection. "Chosen, may I have a word?" he heard Viridia ask him.

Jake considered for a moment before nodding. "Thank you. Please simply come to my office once it suits you."

With those words, Viridia also disappeared from the lesson hall, none of their conversation leaking out. Jake got up and went for one of the gates and, just like usual, activated his token and stepped through. The difference this time was his destination.

Viridia had sent to him what was essentially an address through the token. Seeing no reason not to go, Jake headed through the gate and appeared in a large luxurious office. He instantly spotted Viridia already standing in front of her desk, bowing as she saw him.

“Once more, thank you for offering your time,” she spoke while bowing, making Jake a little uncomfortable and reminding him why he wanted to keep his identity as the Viper’s Chosen secret. If he didn’t, everyone would treat him like Viridia, if not even worse.

“No need to be so overly courteous,” Jake said, trying to be both dismissive but also understanding.

“I apologize,” Viridia still said but also had enough awareness to move the conversation forward. “It has been a while since our last meeting, and it is an honor to finally have you within the Order of the Malefic Viper.”

“It’s been a while for sure,” Jake nodded. The Tutorial felt like it had been ages ago. “Now, why did you want this meeting?”

“Firstly, I wanted to formally introduce myself to the Chosen. As the Hall Master of the Order, I find it only fitting that I make my loyalties clear,” Viridia began. “Secondly, to ask if the Chosen requires any assistance with anything? I have heard of your current considerations from the Verdant Matriarchs and wish to help as much as possible.”

Jake was a bit confused and frowned. "What considerations?"

"I fully understand if you wish to keep it under wraps for now. Just know that I will do my utmost to find candidates from within the Order," Viridia just continued.

What the hell is she on about? Jake thought, now more confused than ever. What candidates? Had she somehow listened in when they talked about the dungeon earlier? No, that should be impossible. He would have sensed it.

"Please be clear what considerations you are talking about," Jake said.

"Ah, my apologies," Viridia said apologetically. "I am naturally talking of your plans for propagating your Bloodline. To my knowledge, the Malefic One relayed his wishes to the Verdant Matriarchs, and I have been tasked to assist you wi- excuse me, my Lord?"

Jake had already turned around and began walking towards the gate again.

"Dispel whatever plans you had," Jake just said as he used his token to make a gate. "You are misinformed, and I have no such plans."

Viridia seemed taken aback as she asked, confused. "I apologize if I am overreaching or if there are any misunderstandings... but where is the Chosen going?"

Jake tossed her a final look before stepping through the gateway. "Just gonna have a small talk with my Patron."

Chapter 499 - Oversharing & One More Beer

Jake stared at the god, who had a rare look of slight embarrassment.

"Would you believe me if I told you that this is all a misunderstanding?" Villy asked a very angry Jake the moment he stepped through the portal and stood face-to-face with the god who was currently leaning back in a chair with a book.

"Should I?" Jake asked sharply.

"You know, I mess with you in many ways, but this is actually not one of them, I swear!" the god said very earnestly. Jake at least interpreted it as such. "You know I already told you to avoid tossing out any baby batter until you are at a higher grade and when you are really sure it is something you wanna do, didn't I?"

"Explain," Jake, agreeing that it did seem off.

"So, I was having some fun with the Verdant Witches after you had fun with your little Runemaiden, and I may have said something that made them believe you wanted to, how can I say it, be more out there. Or at least that I believed you should be more liberal," Villy explained.

"What exactly did you do?" Jake asked, piercing daggers.

The Viper then smirked a bit. "You know what, wouldn't it be better if I just showed you?"

"I am not sure I want tha-"

"Too late!" Villy smiled as the entire room disappeared, and Jake knew he was thrown into an illusion. He still saw the room and everything with his sphere... but what his eyes perceived and his ears heard was out of his control. Even the smells.

And damn, did he wish he could turn off those senses only a few seconds later.

A scene appeared before Jake. A large bed with silk sheets lay messy on the floor as three fully naked women were leaning on and pleasuring the Viper lying on the bed. All of the green-haired women looked nearly identical, and all were more than eager. Jake had to admit he was momentarily taken aback at how they looked but quickly flashed back to reality. Or, well, illusion.

One of them, who was snuggling up to his chest, asked. "It is rare you take the initiative," she said in a sultry voice.

"What can I say? I felt in the mood?" Villy smirked as he clearly enjoyed himself.

"Oh? Did something good happen?" another of the sisters asked as she ran her fingers across the Viper's fine scales.

“You can say that. My Chosen finally managed to have a major breakthrough in the arts of not being as dense anymore and got laid,” the Viper laughed a bit. “Not that it is anything serious, but some casual fun is just healthy. He should definitely get himself out there more. It should be good for him.”

The three sisters looked at each other but didn’t say more as they proceeded to get more aggressive. It was at this point Jake would have preferred the illusion to end, but nope, it kept going as Jake sighed. “Villy, I do not need to see your willy in action.”

As if it had never been there, the illusion faded, and Jake was back in the room. The Viper looked at Jake with a shit-eating grin. “Oh, did I misread the situation again?”

Jake shook his head and took a jab in return. “I don’t know what is weirder. You needing me to get laid to get it up, or you enjoying making others watch.”

“Now that is just a blatant misrepresentation,” Villy shook his head. “I like to make you watch because I think it would be funny. I also want you to remember that I used to be a snake and that you humans are the ones who are weird when it comes to copulating. It isn’t that big of a deal, ya know? As long as everyone enjoys it and is willing, who cares what others think?”

“I guess I am just not as free-spirited as you,” Jake shrugged. “And also not as unperceptive if you didn’t even notice the glance they exchanged.”

“Oh, I did notice,” the Viper said. “But I honestly didn’t think they would do anything this fast or make plans with the Hall Master. At most, I thought they would try to push that City Lord on you or make plans behind the scenes to set you up with those they liked. Believe it or not, I am not watching everyone all the time, and even I respect the right to privacy everyone has. Well, unless I have a reason not to respect their rights, in which case I do whatever I want.”

“Very noble of you,” Jake said. “But can I trust you to shut down this entire thing?”

“Maybe,” Villy smirked.

Jake looked at the Viper a bit more seriously, making Villy fully capitulate. “Alright, alright, but just be aware that even if I tell them to stop, that is no guarantee. They know you have a Bloodline, they know you are my Chosen, and they know we have a rather unique relationship. They are socially minded and will want to take advantage of all that, maliciously or not. So they may or may not still do some things behind the scenes that neither of us is aware of before it is too late. Witches are nefariously good planners; you should know that.”

“If I am perfectly honest, then I don’t really know how the witch class even works or how their magic operates,” Jake chuckled.

“Totally fair. I barely get it myself,” the Viper said, surprising Jake. Villy clearly noticed and elaborated.

“Witchcraft is an entire branch of magic that is awfully separated from borderline anything else. Their rituals follow a logic that nothing else does, and their magic is wholly unique. Sure, they do things that are a bit like curses but are actually called hexes. Oh, but hexes can actually create curses, but only if certain criteria are met. What are these criteria? No one fucking knows. It can feel so random at times. Maybe the trees need to be placed in a certain way, the stars form a certain pattern, or a number of highly specific items need to be in the proximity of the ritual.”

“I have noticed they have a lot of... remote magic, I guess is the term?” Jake chipped in.

“Sure. Sometimes. The requirements can once more just be so odd, and even if it is true that they are not as affected by distance as they use mediums for most of their magic, I wouldn’t say it is an inherent trait of the school of magic. Witchcraft can tap into so many other concepts too. Anyway, enough about that, trying to understand witchcraft – or worse, voodoo – is just a great way to mindfuck yourself and lead you astray on your own Path of magic.”

“Got it,” Jake said. “But it is a pretty rare school of magic, isn’t it?”

“Yep,” Villy nodded. “And the best part is that you often won’t know you are fighting a witch before the trees around you suddenly turn into spiders, and the sky begins to rain exploding frogs that insult your hairstyle.”

“I want that to be real more than you can imagine,” Jake laughed.

Villy didn’t flinch as he looked Jake straight in the eyes. “It is. I shit you not, the Verdant Witches wiped out a planet solely by the use of exploding frogs that insulted people before going boom.”

Jake slowly nodded. Note to self, do not piss off witches for any reason and bring back a nice gift for Miranda when you return to Earth.

“Ah, but don’t worry too much. Witches tend to suck in direct combat and rely on hiding and avoiding confrontation. You are close to a direct counter,” Villy added on, giving Jake a bit of relief. “Anyway, was this all you came to talk about?”

“Yeah,” Jake said. “Oh, actually, I am going to a dungeon with Draskil soon. Any tips?”

“Eat things,” Villy just said. “No, seriously. Eat a lot of things. Dungeons are great ways to duplicate ingredients and materials for free, but some of the stronger ones are placed with limitations. I am sure you noticed how things like those Golden Mushrooms from the Undergrowth couldn’t be brought outside the dungeon... the same is true here. But what you can do is eat them, and the knowledge gained from Palate is permanent.”

“Makes a lot of sense,” Jake nodded. He already kind of knew this. He also knew that while it was an “exploit” of sorts to place valuable things in dungeons, it also came with many restrictions, and balancing what could and couldn’t be in dungeons was an entire art. Art for the dungeon architects and dungeon engineers to figure out. He did know that the dungeons tended to require some level of combat before one could access the valuables, which was probably why Draskil was still good to have around. That the Order had made a dungeon that mixed alchemy and combat made sense too.

All factions had their own dungeons designed, often specifically to fit their own needs. Shit, Casper and the Risen planned on making a dungeon on Earth that he would no-doubt design to be helpful when training Risen.

Villy proceeded to give Jake a few more general tips but not much substance.

“Thanks for the tips and for handling your witches with benefits.” Jake finally said, adding on. “You got anything on your mind?”

“Eh, just one thing,” Villy said. “Can I check out that bone weapon you got from the system event?”

Jake was a bit surprised and couldn't hold himself back from asking. "Why? More specifically, why now and not when I got it?"

"I want to check something," Villy just said. "No worries, it won't do anything to your other self. The reason I waited was to make sure it was truly stable before checking, and it clearly is."

"Eh, sure then," Jake said as he took out the bone katar and handed it to Villy. The god took it in his hand, and Jake felt that Villy was trying to scan it. He could resist the scan and make it impossible even for the Primordial to see anything – due to system-fuckery, of course – but Jake allowed him to scan away.

Villy checked it out for a dozen or so seconds before he nodded. "Thanks, mate. Coming across items like this is rare, and I wanted to make sure of something while also scanning it for future reference."

Jake got the bone katar back and took note of how sim-Jake didn't even seem to have noticed, probably busy fighting or training in his Soulspace. "No problem, any time."

The two of them had some more small talk and shot the shit a bit before they said their goodbyes as Jake did the next thing on his list. He pulled out his token and dialed Reika. It didn't take long before he got a response.

"Hey there, how are you doing?" Jake asked her once she picked up.

"I am doing well, thank you... but what made you decide to contact me?" Reika asked in a confused tone, clearly not expecting the call.

"It is easier to ask in person. Can you give me your address and I can drop by? Ah, I can also give an update on stuff that happened on Earth and with the system event while we're at it," Jake answered.

A few seconds passed before she answered again. "I can, but maybe we should meet somewhere public? As you know, then I live in dorms of sorts, and while we do have our own private chambers, I would not want to create misunderstandings by you visiting."

"Eh, it should be fine. I don't care as long as you don't care," Jake sent back.

"Alright, fine. When do you plan on coming by?"

"Right now?" Jake asked.

He heard a sigh in answer, followed by a small break. "Alright, but wait at least five minutes, okay? Maybe a bit longer is also okay."

"Sure," Jake confirmed.

Still standing in Villy's room, Jake put the token back into his inventory and looked at the god who looked back at him. They had already said their goodbyes, but Villy read the situation as two bottles of beer appeared.

Well, I do have five minutes...

Reika hurried to clean up her chamber as it was frankly a mess. She even called in her roommate, a beastfolk, to help her get it presentable. She regretted saying five minutes less than five seconds after she said it, but it was too late now. With a bit of panic, she stacked the textbooks in a corner before remembering she had a spatial ring and began tossing them in there.

"Will he even care?" Bastilla asked as she helped put away some glassware.

Reika shook her head at her friend. "Maybe, maybe not. Either way, it needs to look presentable if a guest comes over."

"Sure," the beastfolk just shrugged.

"Thanks for helping," Reika smiled.

"Eh, it wasn't like I had anything better to do, and this guy got gold in the test, right? Sounds like a good guy to get friendly with," Bastilla waved her off.

Reika shook her head as she kept cleaning up. Before coming to the Order of the Malefic Viper, she would never have imagined the situation she was in now. She was ashamed to say it, but she was very uncomfortable around anything and anyone that wasn't human or at least very close to a human when she first got there.

Elves, dwarves, and whatnot she was fine with. But Dragonkin? Beastfolk? Demons? Weird elemental creatures? She was very averse to their presence. Reika wouldn't say they scared her, but they were off-putting. It took her a while to begin to truly view them as people rather than just... monsters.

Bastilla had been the one to truly open her eyes. Her father was a winged lion-like beast, and her mother an elf. Reika had wrestled with how that was even possible until she learned Bastilla's dad could take human form and was in late C-grade when she was born.

Her heritage meant Bastilla had a very lithe form and cat-like features, as well as fine golden hair covering her entire body, even her face. She even had two moth or butterfly-like wings she could summon. She didn't look like the oft-fetishized cat girls of the old world that were pretty much just humans with cat ears, but a true fusion between man and beast. Reika had not liked her in the beginning as Bastilla was crude, always stared with her beastly eyes, and was generally overly curious. Yet with time, she came to learn that Bastilla was just inquisitive and highly skilled in alchemy. She had a talent for it, and she had a Perception-based build, making her great at analyzing and seeing the crafting process.

By now, they were genuinely good friends, and as they had the same shared living space connected to their personal chambers, they often interacted and even had many of the same lessons.

Reika and Bastilla continued to clean, and Reika saw five minutes had passed. Yet he was not there yet, nor had he pinged her to show he had arrived, so they kept making the space more presentable. Ten minutes passed as it was close to perfect.

A quarter of an hour.

Half an hour.

Only forty minutes later did Reika get a ping on her token that Jake had arrived at the gate... now standing in a completely spotless room.

Chapter 500 - Spontaneous Decisions Are The Best Decisions

Jake hadn't set foot in a dorm for years. Counting time-dilation, close to decades. This wasn't the dorms of the old world with underfunded shitty facilities and shared bathrooms and only one washing room for several people, and every time you had to wash clothes, all the laundry machines would be taken, and even if they were not taken and you got the rare chance to start washing your clothes, some absolute asshole would stop the machine and take your clothes out halfway through the cycle.

No, it wasn't that kind of dorm, but the dorm for those with bronze tokens. It was significantly nicer than what those with white ones got, as far as he knew, but even the white token ones had to be better than the shit Jake lived in for a few years back in university. All in all, the Order tended to be pretty generous with accommodations, even if he was a bit biased as a black token himself where he got his entire huge residence.

When Jake first stepped through the gate to enter the dorm, he found himself in a circular room with eight exits leading into long hallways. Each hallway had nearly ten meters to the ceiling and was made of marble-like rock with bronze engravings and setpieces placed here and there. It looked damn good for dorms, that was for sure.

Many individuals went and came from the different hallways, walking towards the wall with gates on it or into the different hallways. No one took note of Jake as he stood there and tried to figure out where Reika's room was.

Checking the address Reika had given him, he saw it said "4-121," and it didn't take long before he understood what it meant. Each hallway was numbered, and then each room also had a number. It was a simple system.

Going down the fourth hallway, Jake quickly found the right place. It also quickly became clear as he walked through the hallway that behind every door wasn't actually a room but more like a small pre-set gateway. He also felt severe distortion of space, likely meaning that each chamber was spatially expanded. Which they would have to be considering there were only three or so meters between each door on both sides of the hallway, and with thousands of rooms in each of them, each room would be mega small if not for space magic.

Jake raised his token to the door and pressed the doorbell, so to say. A few seconds passed before it opened, revealing a large living room with Reika walking over to invite him in with a beastfolk woman behind her peeking curiously.

"Hey, glad you could make it," Reika said with a smile as she invited Jake inside.

"I was beginning to think he wouldn't come considering he said five minutes more than half an hour ago," the beastfolk commented. Jake got a good look at her and saw that she had some kind of cat heritage. Very shiny golden fur too.

He was a bit surprised at the comment, though, as he looked at Reika. "Didn't you say at least five minutes? I got the feeling you kind of wanted it to be more than five, so I stayed a bit longer and had a drink with a friend."

"Ah, yeah, no worries," Reika said, a bit embarrassed.

The beastfolk was about to speak up again as Reika cut in. "So, what brought you here, by the way? A meeting of some sort? What about?"

"Maybe we should talk more privately?" Jake asked, nodding towards the cat lady, who seemed very interested in their conversation.

"Alright," Reika agreed without hesitation. The beastfolk didn't protest but just shrugged and waved them off.

"Have fun!" she said with a suggestive grin.

Reika groaned and led Jake into her own personal room and closed the door behind her, activating the seal on it. Feeling they were isolated, Jake finally spoke freely. "So, how have you been enjoying being in the Order of the Malefic Viper so far?"

Okay, not the most pressing question, but Jake was interested. Reika came from quite a different culture and, contrarily to Jake, didn't have a good buddy who also happened to be running the entire place. She had a far more raw experience without any real help, and Jake genuinely wanted to know how she was doing. The old swordsman had also asked him to check in with her, so it was only right.

"It has been... better than expected?" Reika answered. "Not to be insulting, but I had expected things to be far worse and even less professional if that makes sense? Everything feels above board. Well, ignoring the fact that there seem to be far fewer restrictions on everything compared to the old world. I also do not particularly enjoy the fact that I have had a dozen people so far try to sell me slaves or questionable organs and body parts clearly belonging to humanoids."

"Does indeed have its issues, true," Jake agreed.

“But overall, I find it incredibly generous that the Order gives so much and demands so little. I have been able to attend lessons with experts I could only ever dream of learning from. All I have given up in return is some labor by selling some things I crafted,” Reika continued. “I would think this entire setup was too good to be true if I didn’t experience it myself. I can only imagine how much better it is for you.”

“Well, glad to hear you are settling in nicely,” Jake smiled. “And the reason why I came today was actually to ask you if you wanted to participate in a mission with me and a few others, so that should earn you some more Academy Credits too. It is a dungeon run, and I have been asked to look for alchemists to join.”

Reika looked surprised when Jake pulled out the paper detailing the mission, but she instantly shook her head. “This one is designed for late D-grades... I am not quite there yet.”

“Eh, you are level 154; it should be fine. Your profession is late D-grade, right? That counts. The dungeon itself just requires the one entering to be D-tier, and all we will need of you is your alchemical knowledge,” Jake said. He was already pretty determined that if Reika didn’t wanna go, they would just do the dungeon as a three-person team as he didn’t want to spend time getting to learn and work with a stranger.

“Are you sure these other people would be fine with that?” she asked, concerned. “Who are they, by the way? Ones I know?”

“So far, it is me, Draskil, and Irin going,” Jake answered.

“Oh?” Reika exclaimed, surprised. “Irin? The succubus? How and why? I would assume she had already completed the dungeon or has she truly never done it before? And even if she hasn’t done it... why go

now? She is not an alchemist as far as I know, nor a good fighter. At least not someone who would be useful with you and the Malefic Dragonkin around.”

“I was surprised too,” Jake answered, not sharing Draskil’s reason why he wanted to bring her along. “And I actually think your how and why are related. Why would she have gone before? The only reason now is because Draskil decided to ask her, probably just to not go alone or make her recruit alchemists to join or something.”

“Hm,” Reika answered, clearly a bit unsure. “So it will be the four of us? Sure I will be of help?”

“Why not? You have been focused on alchemy and were already pretty good before you went to the Order. I would rather work with you than some random,” Jake shrugged. “Draskil also doesn’t know shit about alchemy, so I would have to handle everything without you around, and that sounds like a bad and very tedious idea.”

“I see,” Reika said and nodded in confirmation, a bit more assured. “It would be my honor to attend then as long as all of you are fine with it.”

“Great, we go in three days” Jake smiled, not giving Reika time to comment on the short notice. Jake had also gotten short notice, so it wasn’t his fault. “Moving on... I see you made a friend?”

“Bastilla,” Reika nodded. “Yeah, we get along well. She is also an alchemist and rather talented. A bronze token like me, and I think she will upgrade to silver within a few years at most. Where she came from, no one really taught her anything making her progress fast after entering the Academy. She is a bit like myself in that regard, even if our methodologies vary widely. Her methods are far closer to yours than mine.”

Jake nodded as he got a brilliant idea. “Do you think she wants to come too?”

“Come to what?” Reika asked, genuinely confused.

“The dungeon.”

“I... would that be wise?” Reika muttered. “To bring along two bronze tokens... the disparity in the group will be massive.”

“Eh, it should be fine,” Jake brushed it off. “Just try to convince her to come so we fill the group. Not to brag, but I would probably be able to do most of the alchemy myself anyway, so I just need you two to help speed up things by pointing out obvious things I am too dumb to notice.”

Reika shook her head and smiled. “Fine, I’ll try. Anyway, you talked about a system event back on Earth?”

“Well, not on Earth,” Jake began. “It was in this giant space station of sorts, and I think it may even be a World Wonder...”

Jake began recounting the system event and how it had worked, Reika being very interested in the details. He also shared his brief conversation with the Sword Saint and let her know things were fine back on Earth. Reika herself began talking more about her experience in the Order, how she had felt incredibly insecure initially but had begun to find confidence again in her skills and talent, and how she had managed to get along with her roommates. Jake even told her of his bout with a C-grade – not

because he wanted to brag or anything. He didn't talk much about his trip with Carmen as he didn't want to share the Runemaiden's personal details.

It was a nice chat, and he ended up leaving a few hours later and headed back to his own residence. He got quite a few stares from Bastilla when he exited the room, and he saw that other people who shared the living space had also shown up to glare. Jake didn't particularly mind as he headed home for some more alchemy and to prepare for the dungeon dive.

Jake got confirmation less than five minutes after returning to his residence that Bastilla was in the dungeon group. Didn't take much convincing, it seemed. With a team assembled, Jake pinged Irin and let her know.

In what should not be a surprise at all, Irin didn't even know Draskil had asked Jake and was more than pleased to hear he would come along. She also didn't mind the two tag-alongs and sent over some more information on the dungeon to Jake, which he then also sent to Reika.

With everything done, Jake got back to work with his usual schedule as he waited for the dungeon run to begin.

Draskil and patience apparently didn't go well together. Jake had barely gotten started on his alchemy when Irin pinged him again very apologetically. She explained that the second Draskil heard Jake had already found two other alchemists, he saw no reason to wait three more days as the wait was originally for Irin to find alchemists. So he wanted to go... now.

Others would perhaps get mad at this, but Jake's response was a shrug and a quick call to Reika. Now, Reika liked to plan, and when she was asked to spontaneously go to a dungeon only hours after learning about it, she was hesitant, but her roommate Bastilla convinced her.

This is how the group of five ended up meeting only half an hour later within a large meeting room of sorts made for exactly this kind of thing. Draskil had been the first to arrive, impatiently sitting there waiting. Jake was second as he didn't have better things to do – or, well, chose not to begin doing important things. Reika and Bastilla came a few minutes later, with Irin the last to arrive as she had to prepare some materials and ingredients they would need in the dungeon.

“Everyone is already here?” Irinix asked with surprise after she stepped through the gate. “Well, that does make things simpler. I know it is on short notice, but has anyone managed to read the supplied material?”

Jake quickly scanned it before nodding, Reika also agreeing along with Bastilla, who looked weirdly out of it. Draskil was just staying mute as his tail moved back and forth impatiently. Jake noticed that Bastilla kept staring at Draskil, who didn't even glance her way in return.

He also took note of how the one at the highest level present was Irin at level 193, followed closely by Draskil at 190. The dragonkin hadn't gotten many levels recently, probably on purpose to strengthen his foundation before C-grade.

“Okay then... brief explanation only. The dungeon we are about to enter is made for late-to-peak D-tiers and features monsters above level 170 as challenges, up to and including a weak C-tier final optional boss. The dungeon itself contains nine floors total, all of which need to be cleared to battle the optional boss. Each floor has unique herbs, natural treasures, and materials one needs to obtain to craft a required product to pass the floor and move on to the next. All of these aforementioned things are guarded by monsters of various kinds, and often some materials from the monsters themselves are also required in the alchemical process. That is about all. Any questions?” Irin finished up.

“How long is it expected to take?” Reika asked. “Also, a pleasure to meet you. I am Reika from the Noboru Clan of Earth.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Irin nodded. “The expected duration is around two to three weeks total, but for this group, trying to go on any averages seems pointless. So the real answer is... I don’t know. Ah, but the maximum duration we can spend in there is four weeks before the dungeon itself collapses.”

Reika nodded at the answer, and Jake followed up with one of his own. “What kinds of monsters will we encounter?”

“Assorted ones. The floors tend to vary in affinity and design, meaning I once more cannot say. Besides the general design, I do not know the specific details. No one does due to how these dungeons work. It is only once inside things become clear,” Irin shook her head.

Jake nodded, guessing there was maybe some element of random generation going on? Either way, with that information, there was just one more thing to say.

Draskil stood up and stretched his wings as he smirked. “Then let’s just go and find out ourselves!”

In agreement, the party of two humans, one demon, one dragonkin, and one beastfolk headed out for their dungeon run.

Jake had at least prepared himself in the most important way for this run:

He hadn’t eaten breakfast for weeks and was ready for a feast.