

Hunter 511

Chapter 511 - Friendships & The Question Of Why They Are So Damn Hard.

It ended up taking Reika another few hours to reach a point where she felt confident letting the three of them roam free. Draskil hadn't really taken that much convincing when it came down to it, something Reika partially explained away by him also coming from the newly integrated universe.

Bastilla and Irin were much harder to reach as they had grown up with the system and the status quo, making ignoring someone being a Chosen an entirely foreign concept to them. Reika ended up giving a lot of examples of Earth and anecdotes relating to Jake to ensure them that he really wasn't the type of Chosen they assumed him to be.

Irin seemed to have the takeaway that she had just found the opportunity of a lifetime. Draskil seemed competitive, and Bastilla was... yeah, Bastilla was still rather shell-shocked and seemed to not really get the situation outside of "keep it a secret, that is what the Malefic One and his Chosen wants."

Reika just hoped that with time she could have a proper conversation with Bastilla about it... and hopefully not have a really shitty roommate experience in the future.

Jake was woken up from his Serene Soul Meditation when he felt Reika approach. He opened his eyes and saw that she looked slightly worn out, having fought a valiant battle for him.

When she got close enough, Jake asked: "So... how screwed am I?"

"I believe it is manageable," Reika answered. "At least I believe they all understand that keeping it confidential is best and that treating you too differently due to you being the Chosen isn't what you or

your Patron wants. If they are actually able to overcome a lifetime of conditioning and cultural teachings and not act too differently is an entirely different thing.”

”Thank you either way,” Jake smiled a bit sadly. ”This entire thing does suck.”

”I understand them,” Reika added. ”At least partly. Me telling them to treat you like you don’t have status is a far more extreme version of someone telling me not to treat my great-grandfather with a high level of respect. I am not certain I could stop doing that, at least not on a whim. So the best thing to do now is to give it time. Don’t treat them differently than before, but also don’t try to put a lid on who or what you are. Instead, normalize it and make it clear that to you, it is simply part of who you are, and while you are naturally proud of it – as any Chosen would be – you also don’t want it to be your primary defining trait. That them respecting you as a Chosen and as a person means not making you only the Chosen of the Malefic Viper.”

” Alright... so just give it time, huh,” Jake sighed. ”Let’s get over there. Any tips for things I should or shouldn’t say?”

”Don’t downplay your identity too much, but as I said, make it clear you do not want it to impact their treatment of you. Not too much at least,” Reika once more emphasized. ”Also, do not talk about your odd relationship with the Malefic Viper. That is between you and your Patron, and definitely don’t think that you talking about how casual you are with the Viper will make them understand they can treat you casually. Also, when we go greet them, you should say...”

Jake nodded slowly as he took her words to heart. He had enough social awareness to know that he sucked at having social awareness, and even if Reika was not some expert, she was far more adept than Jake.

The two of them walked back to Draskil, Irin, and Bastilla. They did all look at him weirdly and for sure differently than before, but at least they were all standing up and not kneeling. Jake sighed again as he got close and said what Reika had told him.

"I do hope this incident won't cause an unnecessary rift between us. I am still the same person as before. The way I have treated you till now is the same as I would have even if you knew, and I will continue to treat you as friends and not merely subordinates, even if I do recognize a difference in status. I can only hope that you will do the same. Also, I hope you all understand that keeping my identity a secret is something I would very much appreciate," Jake spoke, nearly saying verbatim what Reika had told him to.

The mood was still a bit tense and awkward for a few seconds before Draskil finally spoke up with a grin. "Makes sense now how you killed C-grade before I did."

Jake felt relief as he answered. "Now you are just looking for excuses for losing."

"Bah, only to be expected you win; you are Chosen," Draskil dismissed him before smiling. "But I am still stronger."

"For now, for now," Jake acknowledged with a smirk.

"Excuse me," Irin said, a bit too polite compared to her usual demeanor. "We do have a problem. I am required to report what happened during this dungeon run to my superiors... what should I say to them?"

"What exactly are you required to report?" Jake asked. "How in-depth?"

"I will have to submit a report and then do an interview," Irin said. "If I lie during it or obfuscate the truth, it may have repercussions... and I doubt I will even be able to hide it due to my contract."

Jake nodded and thought for a moment before finding a solution. "Alright, then just do as usual and report the truth. I will handle it on my end."

Taking out his token, Jake dialed the highest of the higher-ups when it came to the mortals – the Hall Master. She picked up instantly.

"How may I be of assistance?" Viridia asked.

She sounded a little bit too excited he had called, but nothing he could do about that. "My identity as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper has been discovered by three new individuals, and I will need you to help cover it up."

"Very well, are they already slain, or do you wish for me to do it while cleaning them of karmic bonds?" she promptly answered.

"No killing," Jake shut down the murder-hoboing. "One of the people is Irinix from the Humanoid Resources department and another the Malefic Dragonkin Draskil. Irinix will need to file a report of what happened during a dungeon run we just had, and I want you to intercept that report and make up an excuse that you wanted to keep track of Draskil's progress or something like that. Maybe use his Divine Blessing as an excuse."

"As you command, I will handle it, so have no further worries. Is there anything else I can help with?" Viridia said, not missing a beat.

"No, that is all for this time. Thanks for the assistance."

"The honor is all mine, Lord Thayne," Viridia said as Jake cut off the magical phone call.

"Alright, I got that angle covered," Jake said as he put his token away again. He had only taken a few seconds talking to Viridia through the power of telepathic efficiency. If not, it would be rude to make them all wait around.

"How?" Reika asked curiously.

"I am the Chosen, am I not? I had the Hall Master deal with it. She naturally already knows who I am," Jake said a bit jokingly, seeing no reason to mention that her finding out had also been a complete accident.

Irin nodded with some relief, not at all surprised. "Thank you, my lord," she bowed before stopping herself. "Oh, I mean, I am sorry, I-"

"Irin, just take it slow, alright?" Jake smiled. "No need to fret over minor things like that. Take your time and just treat me normally, okay? And a better thing to do than talking about this situation would be to address the loot we got from clearing the dungeon. But I must warn all of you... while I have not seen the properties of these items, only their appearance, I can already tell you they fucking suck."

With a very necessary warning, Jake summoned the two items. One of them was a scepter just like the one the Mushroom Man King had used, while the other one was just a mushroom cap formed like a crown. With disgust, Jake identified them.

[Scepter of the Indigo Caverns (Epic)] – A scepter crafted from unknown wood that has fused with the Lifecore of a once mighty fungus. Through time it has further been improved by the Mushroom Man King and empowered by the Indigo Caverns. Allows the user to directly manipulate and take control of fungi, using them as their weapon. This scepter can be attuned to specific fungi to further improve this effect. Significantly more powerful when used by one also wearing the Mushroom Cap Crown of the Fungal Lord. Requirements: lvl 180+ in any humanoid race.

[Mushroom Cap Crown of the Fungal King (Epic)] - The crown of the Mushroom Man King. Contains elements of his authority, making you inherently intimidating and hold authority over other Mushroom Men of a lower level than yourself. Allows the wearer to far more easily manipulate fungi using any form of magic. Significantly more powerful when used by one also wielding the Scepter of the Indigo Caverns. Requirements: lvl 180+ in any humanoid race.

His sheer level of disgust only increased after reading what they did. Without hesitation, he voiced his own stance as he disowned them both.

"Not me!"

"No," Draskil muttered decisively.

"I have no need for them," Reika quickly made clear.

"It would feel inappropriate to take anything," Irin said.

All of them turned to look at Bastilla, who had not spoken a single word since Jake had come out as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. She looked bewildered for a moment as she stared at the items and the party. "Really?" she finally spoke.

"I believe you can at the very least sell them for dismantling," Irin pointed out.

"If you don't want them, I would be fine with just destroying them here and now," Jake added on.

"I'll just take them..." Bastilla muttered as she swept them up. Jake threw Reika a glance, and she gave him a look making it clear that the beast woman was still not entirely on board and handling the situation properly. But, as her roommate, Jake believed Reika would have plenty of time to figure things out.

He was at least happy that even after everything was said and done, they could still bond over their shared hatred for mushrooms. A true unifier.

"Alright, thanks, everyone," Jake said with a genuine smile. "Let us head on back to the Order?"

All of them agreed, and Jake tried to make some casual small talk with the succubus on the way back, but all the responses were a bit strained from Irin's side. Draskil was a pleasant surprise as he seemed to have come to terms with things rather quickly and acted almost the same as before.

Reika walked with Bastilla as they made it back as one group, no one bothering to race this time around. They made it back to the teleportation station before splitting up. Jake didn't know how everything would be whenever they met again, but he could only do as he always did and just take things as they came.

--

Jake stepped through the gateway and walked to the living room before sitting down, exhausted. He had already seen that Meira and Duskleaf were busy inside the library, and he had no interest in interrupting them as he just took a breather.

He got half an hour of rest by himself before he saw Duskleaf whisk out of existence within the library. A few minutes later - after cleaning up - Meira also left and went straight for Jake in the living room, likely having been informed by Duskleaf.

"Lord Thayne," she bowed upon entering the living room.

"Hey there," Jake said with a smile. "How have things been while I was gone? Duskleaf treating you well?"

"The Grand Elder has treated me very well, and I have made much progress," Meira said enthusiastically. "I also did as you said and invited over some of my fellow students."

That made Jake perk up. He looked at Meira with surprise and motioned for her to elaborate.

"We only went to study in the library due to the many tomes Lord Thayne has available, and I swear that not a single book has left the residence. I thank you once again for allowing me to invite them and also offer thanks from them," Meira explained.

Jake felt genuinely happy that at least Meira seemed to have some real friends. It was good to know that she could at least have some healthy relationships considering Jake's recent issues in that department.

"I would love to meet them the next time they come over," Jake added. Meira seemed quite a bit happier recently compared to how she was when Jake first met her, and there was a good chance that had something to do with her friends, right? Her just having friends was a major improvement.

He did notice that she seemed a bit hesitant when Jake asked to meet them, but he didn't really dwell on it. It was normal to be a little nervous when introducing your friends to who was essentially your boss.

Now, Jake was not entirely ignorant and knew that Meira likely didn't have the same understanding of what friendship was as he did. This was part of the reason why he wanted to meet her friends, also to see if they were good or bad influences.

"I shall relay your wish," Meira said, as she added on a bit nervously. "Uhm, one of them, named Izil, also said that she wanted to meet you if possible..."

"Oh?" Jake asked, surprised. Why would she want to meet Jake? Okay, there were many reasons. She knew he had a black token, so that was likely it. But he didn't want to judge right away and think that she was just after his status or trying to take advantage of him. Heck, she maybe had a status of her own.

"Who is this Izil?" he asked.

"She is an elf from the Altmar Empire," Meira explained, adding on with a smile. "She has helped and taught me a lot of things."

Okay, so she does have some status of her own and doesn't seem like a shit person, Jake noted.

"Well, I already said I would love to meet your friends, so of course, I will also talk to her," Jake said, still smiling comfortably.

"Thank you," Meira bowed again. "I shall let you know when next they request to come over."

Her phrasing did make Jake frown a bit, but he didn't dwell on it. The two of them talked a bit more before Meira had to leave for a lesson, and Jake also quickly got busy himself. He had a few Malefic Viper Legacy skills he wanted to work on improving and he also kind of wanted to take his mind off things and be by himself a bit.

At least until Meira would have friends over.

A day that came sooner than expected as Meira told him they would come the very next day, not even two days after Jake returned from the dungeon.

Chapter 512 - An Offer Difficult To Refuse

Jake had seen a more nervous than usual Meira off as she went to one of her classes. He knew it was because she wouldn't be returning alone but had agreed to bring her friends along. It would be a lie if he said he didn't find it endearing and waited expectantly as he also worked on his own progress in the meantime.

He had appropriately begun scouring the library for books related to the Legacy of the Malefic Viper and had also searched for lessons related to the skills but quickly found a rather glaring issue on both these fronts. There were no books directly about the Legacy skills, only legacies in general, and on the lesson front, there were only really some related to Palate of the Malefic Viper. Jake did stumble across a scarce few related to Sense and Blood too, but both of these were incredibly low-level ones and seemed to be more about how one could obtain the skills. Quite a bit away from finding a way to upgrade it to legendary rarity.

So rather than looking for direct sources on how to upgrade his skills, he began researching the more general methods of upgrading Legacy skills and ways of upgrading skills close to what Jake had. Perception-based sensing skills to find herbs or toxic materials and whatnot were extremely common and well-researched, so Jake happily dove in and began reading. He decided to first focus on ways to improve the far less impressive Poison Sense Jake had merged into Sense of the Malefic Viper, hoping to find some inspiration.

His enthusiasm quickly dwindled as Jake went into the section on practice methods. As with most things, the best advice given was just to get practical experience. However, the books heavily advised against the alchemist trying to test and improve sensing skills during combat for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it was overly risky to try and focus on it during a fight. Secondly, you wouldn't know your opponent properly and what skills they had to avoid your senses and their poison resistance, making progress far less reliable. Third, it was just hard to properly focus and think logically and analytically while in a battle. Using the poison on someone far weaker than yourself wasn't as helpful when researching as using it against someone of equal or superior power, which is why the alchemists who had written the book recommended the same thing: living test subjects.

They suggested "investing" preferably in a slave or a bound creature to do this with. As you needed someone or something stronger than yourself, it even mentioned that renting one was possible, but emphasized that another great benefit of living subjects was the ability to use the same one and track the progress that way. It reduced the number of factors that came into place with using new test subjects every time, and if one got a sapient slave that was professionally trained, they could even have skills to convey the effects of the toxins – something especially useful when experimenting with mind affinity poisons.

As Jake read all this, he was a bit taken aback. Not by what it said, but by how it was written. It was clearly considered normal and not at all something anyone would question. It mentioned using these subjects with the same phrasing as one would use about any other type of tool like a cauldron.

Needless to say, Jake was not going to get any test subjects, and the more he read about it, the more he understood why Meira had kind of assumed that would be part of her job when she first met Jake. It was, in the eyes of the Order, considered a task akin to tending the gardens or any other service the slave could offer.

Jake still wanted practical experience with his Sense of the Malefic Viper and ended up finding some good things. There was a training dungeon set up by the Order that one could spend AC to enter that housed a lot of different toxins with innate properties to hide as well as some beasts and monsters to practice on. Making a mental note, he decided to visit one of these places.

On the subject of Blood of the Malefic Viper, it was a bit of a dead-end as the lessons were either about how one could possibly gain the skill or how to use the skill in alchemy. There was one lesson that seemed worth checking, and Jake also mentally noted that.

As Jake was still researching and doing some light alchemy, whenever he got bursts of inspiration, he felt movement within his sphere. In the entrance hall of the mansion, four figures stepped out. One of them

was naturally Meira, with the three others an elf, a scalekin, and a very tall dwarf or small ogre. Half-ogre, Jake guessed.

He didn't move to greet them as they all headed to the library as expected. Jake saw them all walk and talk, and everything seemed nice. A cursory look made it clear the half-ogre was primarily a close friend of the scalekin while the other elf stuck closely with Meira. Meira did seem a bit out of place, but Jake saw her smile whenever she answered, making him a bit happy.

They entered the library, and Meira began finding some books as the other elf helped. The scalekin and half-ogre just sat down at a table as they waited. It almost looked as if they hurried Meira, but he wasn't sure, considering he could only see and not hear anything happening.

After locating the books, they took their seats and began discussing things. Jake simply looked on as nothing noteworthy happened for the next fifteen or so minutes. Finally, Meira said something to the other elf, her customary nervous face on full display. The other elf nodded as the two of them left the library, the scalekin seemingly yelling something after them.

At that moment, Jake cursed the ever-present enchantments on all the doors and walls that isolated sound, effectively making every room the inside of an isolation barrier. Meira and the other elf headed straight for Jake's laboratory, where he had spent the last few days. They talked a bit more, and just before Meira could knock on the door, Jake made it open telekinetically.

What? He wanted to show off a bit in front of Meira's friend.

"My Lord," Meira bowed the moment she saw him. Jake was sitting in a rather comfortable chair behind a table, feeling a bit like a boss about to interview a new employee.

"Hello there," Jake greeted them with a smile. One they couldn't really see as Jake had chosen to keep his mask on. Turning to the other elf, Jake nodded. "You must be Izil?"

The other elf confirmed as he bowed slightly. "Indeed. It is a pleasure to meet you, Hunter, was it?"

Oh yeah, I used that pseudonym. Kinda forgot about that, huh? Jake thought. "Just call me Jake, and please, come in and take a seat," he simply answered. He honestly couldn't be arsed trying to conceal his real name. Irin knew it, which meant the entire Humanoid Resources department knew it, which meant anyone with just the slightest level of clout could find out.

"Thank you," Izil answered as she entered the laboratory. She looked back towards Meira and then back at Jake. "If possible, can we speak just the two of us?"

Jake wasn't that surprised, considering she had asked to meet him. He did wonder what she wanted and really hoped it wasn't something weird. Chances are she wanted to take advantage of his status even if she only believed he was a black token alchemist.

"Of course," he still answered. "Meira, if you will."

She nodded and bowed but did look a bit nervously at both Jake and Izil. Meira was naive but not stupid and likely had some of the same thoughts as Jake... or maybe she was just afraid Izil would offend Jake, making Jake kill her. She knew who he really was, after all.

After she left, the isolation barrier activated, making no one able to spy on the two of them anymore. With great interest, Jake allowed Izil to speak first after sneaking in an Identify.

[Elf – lvl 141]

"Firstly, I must thank you for meeting me. I am aware you are a busy individual," Izil said courteously, but Jake already knew there was a "but" coming down the line. "I am Izil, a royal associate of the Altmar Alchemy Association and currently a gold token outer member of the Order of the Malefic Viper."

Jake nodded, having already introduced himself before. He didn't see any need to explain he had a black token, as she clearly knew, though he was a bit surprised at her being a gold token.

"I believe you already have an inkling as to why I am here?" she then asked.

In a hurry, Jake tried to figure out if he should know why she was there. Nope, I have no bloody idea why or how I should know, but...

"It is related to Meira, right?"

It had to be. She was the only commonality between them.

"Correct. Just to clarify, then Meira is a slave which you own or at least have the ability to decide ownership of?" Izil asked very matter-of-factly.

Jake nodded.

"Firstly, and this may be overreaching, may I ask why you are having her attend lessons as she currently is? From the research I had done, then you have a backer making you able to afford some splurging when it comes to Academy Credits, but even so. What is your intent?" she asked, making Jake feel like he was being interrogated.

"You are overreaching," Jake dismissively said. "You do not need to know what I intend, but if you are worried, then I can at the very least assure you I mean no harm to Meira. All I want right now is for her to learn and grow."

"How about the future?" Izil asked. "I am aware you are from the new universe, so it is understandable if you do not know this, but the Altmar Empire has a standing order in place to free and help return elves found in involuntary servitude to the Empire."

Okay, Jake did not know that. He was a bit skeptical, but when he thought on it further, it made sense. The Altmar Empire was an empire of elves, and according to what he knew, a bit, eh... "judgemental" towards those who were not elves. For a race believing themselves superior to not want their brethren to be slaves or maybe even viewing it as an insult if some were wasn't surprising. It did raise some questions as to why there clearly were many elven slaves around, but that wasn't a discussion he wanted to start. However, even if such a standing order was in place from the Altmar Empire...

"I do not see what that has to do with me," Jake answered.

"I mean no offense," Izil quickly made clear. "I am merely saying that the reason I approach you is backed and supported by the Empire, and so will any eventual compensation. In essence, I am asking for the possibility of buying out Meira's slave contract."

"Oh?" Jake asked, a bit interested. His plan had always been to find a way of freeing Meira. Currently, he wanted her to become a fully-fledged member of the Order by herself, but if there were alternatives, he was open to it.

Izil understood that Jake was not entirely against the idea and smiled.

"This proposition is not only to benefit the Empire or you but Meira as well. She has shown quite the talent from the moment I met her and seems to only be growing in potential. Especially very recently, she has had tremendous improvements. For her to remain a slave is simply wasteful in my eyes. If she was free, she could also return to the Altmar Empire, where even more possibilities exist. Additionally, and this is merely my own personal feelings, then I am fond of her and wish to see her grow and forge her own Path. One where she is free."

Jake listened on, and while he didn't say anything, he was debating it quite a lot internally. If Izil told the truth, it was a truly good offer. It would allow Meira to get her freedom and stop being a slave, and it would even allow her to go to the Altmar Empire. All around good stuff and a difficult offer to refuse. Oh, and of course Meira had made a lot of progress in recent times. She was being privately tutored by a god.

"it is worth discussing," Jake concluded. "But it is not something I believe the two of us should ultimately decide. It is Meira's choice."

Izil looked surprised at Jake's response but still nodded a bit tentatively.

Jake then stood up and motioned for Izil to follow. "I will admit, I have kind of been hoping to meet her friends, so I shall come along when we go fetch her."

Izil now looked even more confused and surprised. "Those two people in the library with her right now aren't her friends. Nor mine, for that matter. We were asked to group up for a collaborative project for sparring purposes, and the two of them made her an easy target. I stuck around at first to try and recruit her, but I was hesitant due to her meek personality. And as I said... I have grown fond of her. But those two are definitely not friends, I can guarantee that."

Jake frowned. "Explain."

"The scalekin is called Nella and is the daughter of a true dragon who got together with an influential B-grade member of the Order of the Malefic Viper, while the half-ogre Utmal is nothing more than an attendant of her family who managed to enter the Order due to sheer nepotism. Her status is not to be underestimated, and she knows it. I hear that she has even more powerful relatives, some even reaching above B-grade. In other words, they are not to be offended, even if you are blessed by the Malefic One and have a black token," Izil explained. "While I am not sure if I can call their treatment of her outright abusive, they..."

Sighing, Jake listened as Izil explained their group's dynamic. Nevertheless, Jake was still insistent on going. He couldn't say he was surprised that Meira's interpretation of friendship wasn't normal, but he was still a bit disappointed. But more than disappointed, he was just sad. From what Izil said, they were just taking advantage of her.

Taking advantage of him.

"I implore you to not make any rash decisions," Izil said as they exited the library, and she sensed his negative emotions.

"I won't," Jake said.

The two of them walked toward the library as Jake observed it in his sphere, and now with some context, Jake saw that the scalekin's yelling likely wasn't just friendly banter. The snickering of the half-ogre also clearly wasn't innocent.

Still, Jake wanted to keep a cool head and not pass judgment only based on the words of another. He would judge the situation himself and ask Meira to figure out what was going on. As they got close enough to the library, Jake noticed the door had been left slightly ajar, allowing some sound to escape.

"How fucking incompetent can you be? I can't comprehend why the hell that owner of yours bothers to keep you around," he heard the scalekin say as Jake froze.

Froze - and considered if Viridia's offer of corpse disposal was still available.

Chapter 513 - A Teaching Moment

Jake was no expert in friendships. He would never claim to be. But what he did know was that the scalekin called Nella was definitely not a friend of Meira. Now, while Jake did want to just barge in and raise hell, he chose to listen to Izil and acted with thought. At the very least, he should give them a chance to explain themselves.

The door was already ajar, and they soon detected Jake as he got closer. It was almost comical how the facial expression of the scalekin changed when she detected Jake and Izil coming. Rather than a sneer, she turned to a neutral smile, trying to look like less of a bitch.

“My Lord,” Meira greeted her once he entered. He had seen her running back and forth collecting books, and yet she didn’t carry even a hint of discontentment.

“Ah, good to meet you-“

“Shut the fuck up,” Jake said to Nella the moment she started speaking. His aura flared for a moment with killing intent as Izil took a step back along with Nella. The only one of the newcomers who stayed unaffected was the half-ogre, and the reason for that was simple enough.

[Scalekin – lvl 152]

[Half-ogre – lvl 190]

Utmal, as she was called, was far stronger than any of the others, and Izil’s assertion she was more of a bodyguard than anything else was very likely accurate.

Nella still stood frozen as Jake spoke and Meira looked extremely surprised, if not downright horrified.

“Meira, have you ever had any friends before?” Jake asked her.

The poor elf now looked even more confused as she stuttered. "I... I don't think so?"

"Then let's have a brief lesson on what friendship is," Jake said as he turned to the scalekin. "Tell me, do you consider Meira here a friend?"

Nella, surprisingly enough, didn't raise a ruckus but merely responded honestly. "What a nonsensical question. Of course I don't. Now, if you weren't so rude despite it being our first meeting, I would maybe consider offering you the honor of my frie-"

"You can shut up again," Jake cut her off once more, getting a very angry glare from the half-ogre, which he completely ignored.

Meira looked entirely taken by surprise after Nella answered. Jake nearly felt like she was about to cry, but instead, she just nodded with realization and bowed. "I apologize if I misunderstood, and-"

"You have nothing to apologize for," Jake also cut Meira off.

Izil finally decided to also get involved after the initial shock of the situation. "Nella, at least admit you did purposefully make her believe you were friends, even explicitly stating it to make her give you things."

"You just have to get involved?" Nella scoffed. "And yeah, I did. What of it? This is the Order of the Malefic Viper, if you haven't noticed. Are you seriously trying to act like lying for personal benefits is some kind of heretical sin or something? You people are beyond me; it is her fault for being a gullible idiot, not mine."

She then turned to Jake and smiled. "Don't blame me for taking advantage of your little pet project. Is it not your fault for being too wasteful?"

"I guess you could argue it is my fault for not being more observant of the trash I allow her to drag home," Jake said in a cold voice.

"My Lord, I—" Meira began, and Jake was honestly a bit frustrated as he knew what she was about to say.

"Meira. Stop. Stop putting yourself down and stop thinking everyone can treat you however you want. Stop thinking you are lesser than them. I am not having you learn and take lessons for fun but for your own sake. It is about time you have some damn self-confidence and take some charge of your own Path," Jake said in a rather scolding tone as he pointed at Nella and Utmal.

"Those two are nothing. Trash by the wayside. If you allow trash to treat you as lesser than them, what does that make you? What does that make me who choose to believe in you? What does it make your teacher?"

Jake felt like he had been very patient with Meira so far, but her mindset was simply too different from what it had to be to survive. Not just in the Order but in the multiverse. If his gentle approach didn't work, he would go a bit harder. Even after everything, Meira still viewed herself as lesser than practically everyone else. He hadn't really picked up on this as the only ones he really ever saw her interact with were himself and Duskleaf, and expecting her to be casual with them was a hard ask. But she had gotten better with Jake, making him hopeful.

It was just disappointing to see that hope squashed.

And speaking of getting squashed, the two unwelcome visitors clearly weren't fans of Jake's words.

"Big words from some new initiate who just entered the Order. Do you think you are suddenly a genius unlike any other just because you managed to get a black token? People like you tend to just squander and have their feeble egos broken as they begin to fail. So what if you have a backer? You are still nothing," Nella said with a smile as she motioned toward Meira.

"You are already showing your weakness when you bother with a little whore like her. You waste time and resources on useless things. I don't even get what you are trying here? Sure, yeah, sorry for hurting your fragile ego by messing with what's yours. I had my fun with your whore while it lasted, and I will of course respect it if you don't want me to mess with your property."

"Nella, you-" Izil began but was cut off.

"Oh, shut up already; you are even more tiring than the human," Nella said with scorn. "I wanted to approach you to do some networking with the Altmar empire, but you are just too damn infuriating to deal with. Always having to be the hero and protecting the little elf but never even daring to really speak up. At least you were smart enough not to make unnecessary enemies, unlike the human."

Now, one might ask why Jake allowed her to keep talking. The reason was simple enough: he needed Meira to hear. While she had initially seemed like she wanted to explain things away and even excuse Nella, he now saw a far different expression. It was hard to read but definitely a mix of anger and crying. What he was certain of was that she was hurting.

He did also see Izil look ashamed when Nella pointed out her own lack of truly standing up for Meira. Jake chose not to judge this particularly harshly as at least it seemed like she had her heart in the right place. He also wanted to keep making it a teaching moment.

“I can at least respect the confidence,” Jake said with a smile. “The confidence to walk into my home acting like this and expecting nothing to happen.”

“Heh,” Nella laughed. “Last time I checked, we were allowed to come here. Are you so daft to not even know the rules of the Order?”

Izil, off to the side, also sent Jake a warning using telepathy. “Be careful. Any violence, especially killing, goes against the rules, and even if you have some influence, so does she. Keep calm.”

“Oh, I do know the rules,” Jake said as he walked over to Meira. He saw her still looking utterly lost with tears in her eyes as he spoke. “Meira. These two aren’t your friends. They never were. Don’t consider this a tragedy but merely a teaching moment. Believe it or not, in spite of our unconventional relationship due to the contract, I consider you a friend, which is also why I want to give you a choice before we go any further.”

She looked up at him, and once Jake was certain she was listening, he explained what he and Izil had talked about. “Izil and I spoke just before coming here. She offered to buy your freedom and make you a part of the Altmar Empire. Even take you back there. With the status of a citizen of the Empire, it will allow you to finally take charge of your own life.”

Izil seemed relieved at the subject change, and surprisingly, Nella and Utmal also seemed interested.

“That is correct,” Izil said with a smile. “The Altmar Empire has an official decree to free any elven slaves, and the second I found out you were one, I knew I had to talk to your owner. While we have not discussed any details yet, I-“

“One Credit,” Jake quickly added. “That is the price for her freedom - for the complete annulment of the contract. We can discuss the details, sure, but I do not want anything for it.”

Izil and Nella both looked surprised, but not as much as Meira. She stared between Jake and Izil before asking Jake. “You want me to leave?”

Jake sighed. “It is not my choice. But I can share with you that my initial plan was for you to become a member of the Order and then annul the contract. I want you to be free and make your own choices, and this will be the first time where I will truly ask you to choose after I made you choose your own lessons. You don’t need to pick right now, but can take however long you need to-“

“I want to stay with Lord Thayne,” Meira said decisively, shocking Jake a bit. She had not only interrupted Jake but said: “Lord Thayne” and not any of her usual go-to’s. Her decision was also not what he had expected, especially not for her to make it so fast.

“Think it over,” Jake said. “This is a chance for freedom. Here and now. If you need funds, I will help you and make sure you can go to the Altmar Empire safely. You will be able to finally be your own person. Meira, you are far more skilled than you think and can make it on your own. You don’t need to rely on others.”

“I want to stay,” she said decisively again before finally turning a bit meek. “Please?”

“Oh, this is all so damn touching,” Nella finally burst out as she turned to Jake. “Damn, you must be a good shag to have her wrapped around your finger like that, or is she really just that pathetic?”

“Lord Thayne and I have never slept together, and I have never been with a man,” Meira said, standing up for herself for the first time. In a weird way, but hey, it was something.

“So you can talk back?” Nella said, faking amazement. “And that declaration just makes this all the more pathetic. Seriously, is your dear master some limp-dicked loser who can’t even get it up? Or does he swing the other way and bought the wrong product when he went slave shopping? This must be one of the funniest days in my life.”

“I... you suck!” Meira practically yelled, red in her face.

Nella just found it amusing and shook her head. Jake was still looking on a bit proud before nodding. “If that is your choice, fine. But the part about being freed and becoming a member of the Order is non-negotiable unless you can find another way to safely be freed. We can talk about all that another day, though, as we have some trash to take out first. Tell me, Meira, what kind of punishment do you think these two deserve?”

She was still new to the whole making choices thing, but Jake believed in her. Also, while he wasn’t exactly keen on the two of them, the one they had wronged the most was Meira, not him. So even if Jake had a way he wanted to handle the situation, he would respect whatever Meira wanted.

“This is a fucking joke at this point,” Nella laughed out loud. “Actually too funny. Seriously, what the fuck are you gonna do? Do you think you can even do anything? Want to call your backer or what? While I don’t want to talk badly about my seniors, I am beginning to question what error in judgment one must have made to pick you. I also find it laughable how you think you are some big-shot who is in charge

here. If you truly try to start shit, it won't just be your ass, but your backer's on the line, as I am certain my ancestors will happily raise hell. So go ahead, make my day even better."

Meira still stared at Nella and Utmal as the scalekin spoke. Utmal just smiled at Nella's side, making it clear she also found this entire situation funny. Jake had the clear read on them that they were truly just taking this as some kind of entertainment. Perhaps messing with Meira had just been some way for them to pass the time while getting some benefits. They had never considered it a big deal to begin with.

After a few seconds of no one talking, Nella finally shrugged and looked at Jake. "I am bored of this. Oh well, fun while it lasted, and I shall consider sending someone to ask for compensation for wasting my time. The level of delusion you people have is astonishing. I hope your backer comes to their senses and gets rid of you because anything else would truly make them a moron."

"Punishment..." Meira muttered as she looked at the ground, still standing with Jake. Her speaking made Nella and Utmal wait with anticipation as something finally happened. Meira then turned to Izil with searching eyes, but the elf just looked down at the ground, making it obvious she would not involve herself further. A bit cowardly, but again, Jake would not judge her as she was essentially a representative of her faction.

Meira instead looked at Jake, who just waited for her answer. "I don't like them. They did wrong... but more importantly, they insulted Lord Thayne, and... the one behind him... that is not just wrong, but unforgivable. I..." she continued, looking towards Izil.

Nella smiled, and Utmal beside her also chuckled. They still had the same confidence. Jake had not asked them to leave, and they both felt safe. The rules of the Order protected them, they had backing, and Utmal was at a higher level, even compared to what Jake was falsely displaying. They had every reason to feel confident. They had just made one major fuckup— one with such a minuscule chance no one could really fault them for missing it.

Jake understood what Meira meant by looking at Izil as he smiled. Before anyone could react, he was in front of Izil and used Gaze of the Apex Hunter. He placed his hand on her forehead as Touch of the Malefic Viper activated, sending in a pulse of soul-soothing poison, instantly knocking her out.

“Now that I did not see coming,” Nella said with some surprise. “You also didn’t like that bi-“

“You know,” Jake cut her off as he saw Meira look worried at Izil and with genuine hatred at Nella and Utmal. “I am nearly grateful to you. It is good for her to learn that shit people exist and to be careful of them, and you two are prime examples of shitstains.”

Nella wanted to speak, but Jake didn’t let her as he released his aura along with Pride of the Malefic Viper.

“Now, you talked about rules earlier,” Jake said as he walked slightly closer. Utmal placed herself in front of Nella defensively as she prepared herself. He could only laugh at her horrible stance, showing that while she was probably strong, her actual level of fighting experience was limited.

“While this isn’t a rule I remember being stated explicitly, what are the punishments for blasphemy of the Malefic One?”

“Death,” Meira answered instantly.

“Come the fuck on, just because you have a lesser Blessing, you think insulting you is-“

“Nah, not at all. But calling the Viper a moron for choosing to back me? Now that I would say is very much in the camp of being questionable,” Jake smiled. “But I don’t know. I am not the one making the rules or even the one enforcing them, so let’s ask someone more qualified.”

Jake took out his token and sent a simple message before putting it away again. “She should be on her way, but in the meantime, I believe I shall make the executive decision of doling out some punishment of my own.”

Seeing as they were in his library, Jake thought it preferable to first get them out of there. His aura flared as he used Pride and Gaze to launch a mental attack, stunning both of them momentarily as Jake teleported forward and punched both of their faces as he tossed them into the hallway, smashing into the wall. The construction of the mansion was at a level where he had no way to even damage it, resulting in both of them coughing up blood from the impact.

Utmal got up to respond in a hurry, but Jake was already there. His katar flew forward and stabbed her in the chest just as a large hammer appeared in her hand. His other katar punctured her dominant arm holding it as he tore the one in her chest upward, slicing her chest badly. The half-ogre tried to counter but, despite her level, made a pathetic attempt.

She was stabbed multiple times in the chest before Jake finally finished her off with an uppercut through her chin and out the top of her skull. Utmal never got a chance to fight back.

Jake didn’t even bother with the notification as he turned to the stunned Nella, who held her token in her hand.

“You are fucking insane!” she screamed. Just then, there was movement as two auras descended. A man and a woman, both wearing robes with the motif of the Malefic Viper, appeared inside the hallway as they observed what had happened. Jake knew what they were. Enforcers.

“This madman went insane and killed my companion!” Nella screamed the moment she saw them but still had the energy to throw Jake a glance with glee at the misfortune she expected to overcome him.

Yet no such thing happened. Both of them merely bowed as a third person teleported in.

Nella stared at the Hall Master as Viridia didn't even acknowledge her presence before bowing towards Jake, joining the two other enforcers as she spoke. “I greet the Chosen.”

It was at that moment Nella knew - she fucked up.

Chapter 514 - Two Very Different Fates

The entire hallway was silent. Jake couldn't help himself as he enjoyed the look on Nella's face. She looked so utterly horrified and confused. It was a wonderful contrast to her formerly smug and overly confident demeanor that made it clear she believed no one could touch her and nothing she ever did was wrong.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice,” Jake greeted Viridia with a smile. “I take it your two colleagues are also in the know?”

“They are both bound by a contract with the Order and have absolute confidentiality,” she answered assuredly as she finally addressed what was happening. “Can you explain the situation?”

“You know what?” Jake said with a rather sinister smile as he motioned toward Nella. “I think we will have her explain it. Nella, would you be so kind as to explain what is happening here?”

Nella simply sat frozen as she stared for a few more seconds, not even recognizing Jake had spoken to her. She finally seemed to collect her senses somewhat as she stared at Jake. “You are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper?”

“Now who is the daft one?” Jake asked jokingly as he quickly turned to Viridia. “Oh yeah, that is one of the reasons why this entire situation is as it is. She called me dumb, and I am pretty sure she also called the Malefic Viper a moron at some point?”

“I... you misunderstood, I-“ Nella tried to explain but quickly shut up after getting a stare from Viridia.

“To summarize, she offended the Chosen and potentially the Malefic One?” Viridia asked.

“When you say it like that, it sounds bad, but yes, that is exactly what she did. The one I killed didn’t really say anything but was just her silent cheerleader,” Jake answered casually. He had to admit, he was probably enjoying this way more than he should, and it was only helped by Meira looking completely fine with everything that was going down. Happy, even.

Viridia simply nodded and asked. “What are your plans with the two remaining visitors?”

“Leave the elf alone; I knocked her out to avoid her seeing any of this. As for our dear scalekin, I shall figure that out promptly, as you quite honestly arrived far faster than I had anticipated. So if you would

do me the favor of waiting outside until we are done, it would be great. Afterward, I may need a bit of a clean-up crew,” Jake explained to them.

“As you wish,” Viridia bowed as she and the two enforcers simply teleported into the garden in front of the mansion. This left Nella, Jake, Meira and an unconscious Izil left alive in the hallway. One could ask if it was necessary to call Viridia there, but he decided to do so to make it absolutely clear how much Nella had fucked up. It was pure vanity and, honestly, just the fastest way to convince her he was actually the Chosen.

Nella looked up at Jake and did exactly what he expected her to: beg.

“I... I didn’t know,” Nella said as she fell to the ground and pressed her forehead against the floor. “I beg for your forgiveness and will do anything! Please, my family can compensate you handsomely and... I... I can even become your slave!”

Jake just sighed. “You still don’t get it, do you? I don’t give a shit about you. Never did. The one you need forgiveness from is not me but Meira. She is the one in control here.”

Nella’s eyes darted to Meira instantly, and groveled at her feet. “Meira, I am sorry; I would have never done those things if I knew! I beg you, please, I will do anything you want.”

Meira looked at Jake with misty eyes as he asked her: “So, Meira, what do you want to do? These are your enemies, not mine. True, I did take the initiative with the half-ogre and got my own personal frustrations out, but this one is all yours.”

“Won’t... won’t it expose you as the Chosen if she goes free?” Meira asked with concern.

“Maybe. But I already told you that no matter what, I will respect your choice... though, no, I will not have her become a slave,” Jake answered.

“She doesn’t deserve to be either,” Meira muttered as she looked deep in thought before finally asking him. “Lord Thayne, why are you being nice to me?”

Jake was taken aback by the question. His usual response would just be not to bother with her. If he had just wanted her to be a member of the Order and get out of his hair, he wouldn’t do what he was doing with Nella either. While he certainly had felt a considerable amount of responsibility for her as she had been dumped on him by the Viper, he didn’t act solely out of duty. He considered Meira a friend, even if he did know that was entirely one-sided as she viewed him as her superior in every way. So... the real reason was probably as simple as they came: he didn’t really have one. He just wanted to.

“Because I decided to be,” Jake answered with a smile. “You don’t need some profound reason for every decision. Sometimes you just go with your gut and see where that leads you.”

Meira nodded as she looked down at Nella before looking back at Jake. She finally gritted her teeth as she stammered out. “I... I suffered a lot before I came to serve Lord Thayne. But after coming here, I have been treated so well, and I even did things for myself. I then met Izil, Nella, and Utmal, and I thought I had finally even gotten friends... but they were just using me. That hurt more than even the poison resistance training... and when I was being tortured back then, I hoped every day that my torturer would just drop dead.”

Nella opened her eyes wide as she continued begging. “I never did anything that bad to you! I just did what everyone would do, and it was never personal or done to hurt you! Please believe me, if I had known, I would have never-“

“You would have never even spoken to me if you knew I was a slave...” Meira said sadly. “I didn’t think I had to hide it, but after you and Utmal found out, you treated me worse than before... why did you need to be cruel? If you had actually been a friend, I would have helped anyway.”

“We can start over! I will never disrespect you again, no matter what!” Nella said, grasping for straws. “Please!”

Meira just sighed sadly as she looked at Jake. “I have never killed anyone,” she said in her usual meek tone.

Jake didn’t answer but just acknowledged with a nod. It made sense she had only ever killed mindless beasts, if even that, considering her healer class.

“I am not sure I want to either...” she muttered as she seemed to finally have made up her mind. “I think we should hand her over to the enforcers and the Hall Master and have them decide on a punishment.”

Jake failed to hold back a small smirk. They all knew what that meant.

“Please! Meira, don’t do this. Didn’t you say you considered me a friend? Can you really do this to your friends, I-“

She didn’t get to say more as a robed figure appeared within the hallway and instantly knocked her out, with Viridia and the other enforcer appearing a moment later. Jake had naturally let them know that Meira had decided and conveyed her choice.

“Are you sure you want to leave the last elf be? We will be able to cover this incident up rather easily if all loose ends are removed,” Viridia said as she motioned toward Izil.

Jake looked at Meira even if he knew the answer, and she vehemently shook her head as expected.

“Nope, leave her be. It may lead to complications down the line, but it is what it is,” Jake answered her.

“Very well. How do you want these two to have died? With honor or disgraced? We can even make it a scenario leading to severe punishment of their ancestors and families if you so desire,” Viridia asked.

Meira looked incredibly uncomfortable at the mention of going after their families, and Jake also thought that was overdoing it.

“Meira, you are still in the arena of decision-making here,” Jake informed her.

“I don’t want their families to suffer because of what they did... they already lost someone, and that is enough...” Meira said in a rather weak voice.

Jake nodded. “Have them die with a modicum of honor. I will leave it up to you how to handle it.”

“Very well. I intercepted the scalekin trying to send a message out of this residence with her token earlier, and I will use that to make up a story by sending messages to relevant parties. How about them bringing back a valuable item to the Order but dying in the process? That way, we will offer slight compensation to their families on account of their deeds. I doubt they will ever raise a ruckus with this approach, and if they do, well, I shall also handle that,” Viridia offered.

Meira nodded after Jake threw a questioning glance at her. Also, he really wanted to ask about her intercepting messages sent from the token and apparently being able to doctor messages too. Jake had not heard anything about that being a thing, as all official information indicated it was an absolutely safe form of communication within the Order. Turned out that was a fucking lie.

“That will be fine, and once more, thanks for your help. Just to let you know, I don’t plan on making this a habit,” Jake said a bit jokingly.

“I would not complain if you did,” Viridia smiled as she bowed.

After a few more pleasantries and thanks from Meira to Viridia, the Hall Master and two enforcers left, bringing along the unconscious Nella and the corpse of Utmal. They even made all traces of them having ever been there disappear - corpse and all.

That just left the minor problem called Izil. Now, Jake had absolutely no plan on how to hide his identity from her. Not because he didn’t want to hide it, but because he had made a spontaneous decision to knock her out to at least give himself a chance. He considered what kind of story they could spin but came up short.

If he said he killed them and had his backer cover it up, she would instantly know that was either a lie or his backer had to be really far up in the hierarchy within the Order. It would almost have to be a god and considering his Blessing, he could see her figure it out. Gods did not back someone blessed by other

gods, which is why the basic assumption had always been that Jake had a mortal backer, as any god would have to be the Viper, and that surely couldn't be a thing.

"How long will she be unconscious?" Meira asked with a hint of worry.

"Eh... not long? Hopefully. The poison isn't harmful by itself but is good at knocking people out and making them calm as can be. It shouldn't take more than an hour or two, I reckon," Jake said with a smile and a relatively high level of confidence.

Something that would later turn out to be a mistake.

Irinixis sat and stared into thin air while waiting to be called into the chamber. Her time since returning from the dungeon and figuring out Lord Thayne was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper had been anything but calm, and she had been flung into a whirlwind of bureaucracy and intrigue.

For the top brass to involve themselves in the dealings of a D-grade or even C-grade was incredibly rare, if not downright unheard of. So when an order came down from the Hall Master's office to report anything related to Draskil and his group directly to them, it raised quite the fuss. When it became clear that Irin had been part of the dungeon group with him, the fuss turned to her as she was swarmed by colleagues and superiors, eventually leading to her being called by the leader of the Humanoid Resources Department. The mortal leader, that is, as one of the Witches of the Verdant Lagoon now sat at the very top.

Irin understood why a god would not get involved as that would make it clear that someone in the group was well and truly out of the ordinary. As it was, then one could at least find explanations for why the Hall Master wanted the report directly. With the Order undergoing a renaissance after the Malefic One returned, a lot of things were done differently than before.

Nevertheless, she was nervous about what her superior would ask her. Would she try to probe and figure out details about Draskil? The Malefic Dragonkin was at least an excellent red herring, and with the Hall Master actively helping by specifying interest was on him and not Lord Thayne, she hoped the Mistress wouldn't ask too much about him. While Irin had plenty of confidence in herself, she didn't at all believe she could resist the probings of the Velvet Mistress. She was an S-grade succubus, and Irin had heard she was approaching the demi-god tier. For someone like her, Irin was like an open book.

"Irinixis, please enter," she suddenly heard a voice as she was thrown out of her thoughts. She hadn't even noticed the attendant approaching her.

"Thank you," Irin bowed to the attendant as she got up and walked through the gate in front of her. She appeared within a mostly red room with silk-like cloth hanging from the ceiling so far above she couldn't even see it. The room was filled with a thin red mist as Irin saw a woman lying across a bed on a slightly raised platform.

"Irinixis, my child, I am so glad you had time to come visit me," the Velvet Mistress spoke as she sat up on her bed and tapped the spot right next to her. "Come over here and join me."

Irin was incredibly nervous but didn't dare argue as she went over. When she got closer, she finally properly saw the Velvet Mistress. She was a succubus like her, but Irin did not dare compare herself to the woman in front of her. One could only describe her as a personification of beauty, and even Irin found her face reddening as she approached.

The Velvet Mistress was a famous figure and was known to have many lovers from all sorts of places. There were even gods on her list of usuals, and her personal network of information could rival that of some factions. Yet she had chosen to be the leader of the Humanoid Resources department of the Order of the Malefic Viper because apparently "the one who got away" was part of the Order. It had long been a topic of discussion among the demons who this mysterious man could be, but none had figured it out quite yet, and the Velvet Mistress certainly wasn't sharing.

Irin, who had found herself lost in thought again, finally found herself in front of the Velvet Mistress. The Mistress took her hand and made her sit on the bed beside her as she smiled. "I am sure you have many questions as to why I asked you to come. Contrary to what you may believe, I am not going to question or interrogate you. Things are changing within the Order, and everything is telling me you are finding yourself rather close to the epicenter of this change. While I cannot be sure, I feel confident enough to bet on it."

"What does the Mistress need of me?" Irin asked, unsure and a little bit uncomfortable being too close to the woman. She felt her face heat up as the Velvet Mistress smiled again and leaned closer.

"I want you," she said in a teasing tone before giving Irin some space as she stood up, leaving the young demon beet-red in the face.

"I am serious. If you are truly close to the epicenter of this, you will need to be up to the task. We cannot lose out simply because we miss our chance, now can we? So I have an offer for you, my dear. I haven't had a disciple in a few thousand years, but what do you say?" the Velvet Mistress asked in a tempting tone.

Irin didn't even need to consider it before nodding, as she was in a state halfway between shock and elation. Within only a few days, she had gone from just being just another random employee of the Humanoid Resources Department to sitting in the room of the Velvet Mistress being offered to become a disciple.

All because she had been randomly assigned to a certain group from the ninety-third universe. One that happened to include a certain extraordinary human that had become the impetus of change for the Order of the Malefic Viper by making their Patron return to the world.

Chapter 515 - \U201CYou Are Never Going To Let Me Live This Down, Are You?\U201D - Jake Thayne

So, some good and some bad news. On the good side, Jake had now figured out how to put other people in a coma that they didn't seem to wake up from by themselves even after three days. On the bad side, Jake had now put someone into a coma and didn't really know a way to wake them up.

Izil had been "sleeping it off" on the couch for a full three days, and Jake's initial assessment of it only taking a few hours tops for her to wake up had been a little off. In his defense, he had kind of gone in with the assumption that Izil had some kind of innate poison resistance like everyone else seemed to, but Meira made it clear Izil never worked with poisons at all. She had come to the Order to learn about poisons exactly because she lacked knowledge in that area. So yeah, pretty big oopsie there.

The type of poison he had infused was inspired by the ethtoxin he had killed the big blue mushroom under Haven with – the kind that was incredibly hard to detect and eliminate. So hard to eliminate that Izil's body didn't seem to register it as harmful and had just absorbed it all into her very soul within a short period.

At least it appeared to be slowly losing effectiveness by itself, but with how slow it was, Jake reckoned it would be measured in months and not days when she would wake up by herself. Maybe, in hindsight, it wasn't a good idea to infuse so much damn poison that fast just because he wanted to knock her out instantly?

Meira was beside herself with worry, and all Jake could do was assure her that Izil was technically fine. It wasn't like she was in any danger from the toxin, and as a D-grade, she didn't have to drink or eat. Jake had, on the third day, turned to Villy despite really not wanting to because he knew what was coming. He had chosen to do so during a time when Meira was out and attending a lesson in case the Viper decided to do exactly what he did next.

The very second Jake tried to contact the god, Villy popped into his living room like he had been waiting. "Finally, you come crawling! Fucked up a bit, now have we?"

“Yeah yeah...” Jake muttered, having already accepted the incoming mockery. “I messed up and now must ask my honored Patron for any advice on how to fix it. I considering infusing her with more poison to counteract it, but that just seems like a bad idea.”

“Definitely something you should only do if you have confidence in your abilities and full knowledge of both poisons. So yeah, that is totally out of the question, considering your recent track record,” Villy smirked.

Jake sighed again as he tried to briefly change the topic. “How did it go with those two?”

Villy knew what he was talking about and shrugged. “Viridia handled it. She made some smoke and mirrors, sent some fake messages, and reported to the family that the scalekin was from that she died during a mission. She then gave them some compensation and what is essentially an entrance ticket to the academy for any youngster they want to send here.”

“Are you sure there won’t still be trouble down the line? I can’t see them not investigate and raise a ruckus if they find something amiss,” Jake said, a little worried. Mainly for Meira as she had interacted with them for a long time, and he feared that they would approach her to investigate.

“I think you severely overestimate how much these factions actually care about some D-grade dying. Even if they suspect something is amiss, they won’t do anything about it. The only reason large families like that would make it an issue was if they felt slighted or to save face. What you did is quite the opposite, and one of their members dying for the Order only reflects well on them. In fact, I have a feeling they will gladly play into the story and make use of it,” Villy explained. “While the bond between parent and child may seem strong to you as a human from a newly initiated universe, it matters little to most who reach high levels of strength. I guess you cannot fault them, as when you outlive your child number one hundred, it gets hard to care for each one individually, and you begin to view them more as assets than people. It is only if they prove themselves and become strong that the parents will begin to actually care. Well, that, or have talent making them worthy of recognition.”

Jake frowned as he heard this. It was hard to grasp parents not caring for their kids at all. Okay, maybe they did care a little, but still. Maybe it was just his pre-system mindset and his relatively young age that made him think that. For someone that had lived for tens of thousands of years and had hundreds of children, perhaps it was just a natural reaction to seeing your children die to begin caring less. A defense mechanism, perhaps.

“Ah, but I do want to note how funny it is that you go so far to hide your identity as my Chosen and yet freely and happily make use of the benefits it offers,” Villy teased.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to hide it if it didn’t come with my life turning into a damn circus of clowns wanting to suck me off. I never hid on Earth that I am your Chosen and happily answered anyone who asked because people there didn’t have the insane reaction to it everyone has here. Believe it or not, I am not embarrassed to have that True Blessing,” Jake smirked in response.

Villy smiled for a moment before he shook his head and looked at Izil, who was sleeping on the sofa. “Alright, let’s get on with the topic on hand. If you want to wake up that elf, you have a few obvious choices. Here, let me play teacher a bit: what are your options from your limited point of view?”

Jake had already been ruminating on the topic for the last three days and, of course, had a few ideas. “With my newly upgraded Touch of the Malefic Viper, I can try to control the poison and extract it from her by isolating it somehow. I could also try to make an antidote that directly targets the energy of the ethtoxin to make it go away faster. Lastly, I considered making a toxin and then controlling that poison to wake her up by attacking her soul to get a response.”

The snake god listened on as he nodded. “All very good solutions, except for the fact that the poison has entered and been integrated with her soul, making it far harder for you to do anything with it.”

“Exactly,” Jake agreed, having already figured that out. Usually, a poison would operate within the Soulshape and physical body of a target, but this poison had entered a deeper layer of Izil’s soul, and Jake couldn’t truly detect or feel it anymore. He only vaguely got a sense of how much there was remaining from Sense of the Malefic Viper. And even that was only because he had made it and thus had a far easier time sensing it.

“So, you are all out of ideas that you fear won’t end up causing more harm than good?” Villy asked.

“More or less,” Jake said with resignation.

“Alright... Jake, I must admit, for a simpleton that usually does the simplest shit to solve a problem, you have really gone above and beyond yourself this time,” the Viper said as he failed to hold back a laugh. “Tell me, what does the poison you injected do?”

“It soothes the mind and makes one relax,” Jake answered.

“Okay. So what would be the best kind of antidote to that?” the snake god asked leadingly.

“Something that un-soothes the mind and makes you unable to relax?” Jake asked, a bit confused before it finally clicked.

“Oh... fuck me,” Jake muttered as he face-palmed. “You are never going to let me live this down, are you?”

“No. No, I am not, oh my dear Chosen. So, what is the complex solution to this absolute mind-bender of a conundrum?” Villy asked with a massive grin.

“A slap or a solid shake...” Jake said, embarrassed.

“What is that? Oh, I think if you yelled loud enough or splashed some cold water on her, it could work too,” the Viper laughed as Jake wanted to crawl into a hole.

He had not put her into a coma... she was just fucking asleep. A long sleep, sure, but any external stimuli should wake her up in a jiffy the moment her soul had finished absorbing all the poison. He had essentially only “knocked her out” for ten minutes, with the rest just being her sleeping.

“Okay, change of topic. When do you think Meira is ready to apply and become an official member of the Order?” Jake asked, desperately not wanting to talk about his fuck-up anymore than necessary.

Villy, in his infinite mercy, agreed and answered with a shrug. “I am not really following her progress as I quite frankly don’t care, but I am sure Duskleaf knows. However, chances are, she could join on her own merits by now. The only real thing standing in her way is her mindset and absolute co-dependency on others.”

“I thought you didn’t care to know about her?” Jake asked.

“I don’t, and yet I know that. But enough about her, you should get back to work and actually get some levels under your belt and upgrade some of those skills. Chop, chop, I didn’t give you infinite Academy

Credits and an entire Academy to play around with for you to waste time on sleeping elves and petty drama between D-grades,” Villy said, his voice quite a bit more serious than usual.

Jake frowned a bit at the sudden sense of urgency. “Is there something coming up?”

Villy just smiled. “You are in a newly integrated universe... there is always something coming up. Now get moving, and good luck. I still got that ale ready for next time when you aren’t so preoccupied.”

“So, a sense of urgency, but I still have time to drink with you?” Jake asked jokingly just before Villy left.

“Naturally. Being my drinking buddy is an absolutely essential task as my Chosen,” the Viper said before waving. “Bye!”

With that, he was gone, and Jake was left alone with Izil in the room.

“Gotta make up a bullshit story for Meira,” Jake muttered. He was not going to tell her that Izil had been sleeping for three days just because no one had bothered to wake her up.

Jake waited for Meira to come home before he woke up Izil, feeding her some bullshit story that he had found a solution and eliminated all the toxins. Once she was awake, Izil looked confused around before going into a flurry of questions.

A lot of lying, deceit, and convincing later, and Izil left. She definitely knew the story they had fed her was false, but at some point, she had just stopped questioning them and accepted their horrible tale. He had tried to go with the official version that the Order had made and said that he had knocked her out as he revealed who his backer was and wanted to keep it under wraps, and after a heated discussion, Utmal and Nella left.

They had then promptly accepted a mission, done it super quickly, but died in the process within just a few days. Yeah, the more Jake thought about it, the more clear it became that the story was absolute crap, and everyone knew it. Jake didn't think Izil knew he was the Chosen, but she definitely knew something was way, way off. Enough wrong for her to stop probing.

"Do you think Izil and I can still be friends?" Meira had asked after the other elf had left.

"I don't see why not," Jake answered truthfully. "Just always be a little less trustful of others, okay? Even Izil. Be on the lookout for her probing for information and maybe even call her out on it if she asks. At some point, me being the Chosen will be revealed to everyone, and I am sure she will understand why you chose to hide it then."

Meira didn't seem entirely sure about it but still nodded and thanked Jake for his help. Over the last three days, Jake had noticed some subtle but very welcome changes in Meira. Firstly, she used "you" way more when addressing Jake than before. She also came and asked for stuff at times and didn't seem to try and hide away most of the time when Jake was around. While he wouldn't say she appeared confident, she was at least a little less timid. Still super timid overall, but baby steps and all that.

The following days were thankfully without any distractions or blowback for anything that had happened recently. He didn't hear anything from Irin, and all he heard from Reika was an update that Bastilla was still freaked out but way calmer. Draskil had chosen to leave on a solo mission not long after they returned from the dungeon and would likely be gone for the foreseeable future.

This allowed Jake to once more focus on what he had come to the Order to do: alchemy. Alchemy and improving his profession skills. Jake quickly fell into a schedule that consisted of research, crafting, practicing skills, going to lessons, and having the occasional resistance training session with Meira, often if not always coupled with Duskleaf teaching him about formations. On top of that, he had a certain simulacrum to deal with whenever he meditated.

It was understandable if one viewed this as overwhelming, but one had to remember that Jake had all twenty-four hours every day. He never slept or rested and just kept working. If he ever got tired out from a certain task, he would simply switch to something else. Slight headache from reading hard-to-understand tomes or just returned from a lesson about improving sensory skills aimed at a level far above D-grade? Do some mindless crafting. Low on resources from mindless crafting? Work on improving skills. Lack of violence? Go train with sim-Jake and fight a chimera.

Like this, days turned to weeks as weeks soon turned into months. There was little change in what he did, but the sheer scope of tasks made things never seem samey, and he always had something interesting to pursue. Halfway between the second and the third month of this particular session, there was one shake-up of the usual schedule. One Jake had been waiting for and looking forward to.

The final skill selection for his profession in D-grade.

Chapter 516 - A Real Anomaly

The levels had come faster than Jake expected during this particular training session. Maybe it was because he was actually crafting a lot this time around, but it could also be due to him simply progressing in so many areas at the same time. Not that he had any way to truly find out, as the system wasn't very liberal with sharing information on exactly how experience worked. Shit, for all he knew, the recent "D-grade drama," as Villy called it, could have helped him progress. Anyway, it got him to 180 in his profession, which gave him another skill selection that he had very much been looking forward to.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 180 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 176 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

Jake liked skill selections, even if he had to admit a lot of the initial excitement and enjoyment had begun to wane the more he got. It was rare that he was offered more than one or two skills he would even consider, and the only truly interesting skill choice he had recently was the last one for Avaricious Arcane Hunter which made him go back and pick up the common rarity Stealth Attack skill. That one had actually taken some thought and not just to pick the highest rarity one every time. After skipping the fucked up ones, like the curse or slavery-related skills, of course.

But the level 180 skill selection was a bit different for one simple reason: it was the last one before C-grade. Each profession or class came with some built-in skills that would be offered no matter what, and often the best was saved for last. For his class in E-grade, it had been Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, a skill that was still extremely potent now.

He hadn't really had one for his profession in E-grade, but that was due to him hunting down the nine "of the Malefic Viper" skills, making him not really care about anything else. But this time around, he had no such thing. In fact, the last two skills he had picked for his profession had been about rituals and core refinement, both things that weren't part of this core skill set. Truth be told, Jake didn't really need that many more alchemy skills due to how all-encompassing the Malefic Viper Legacy skills were. This did also mean he had no idea what to expect when he saw the prompt and opened it.

Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper profession skills available

Jake would usually go through the options one by one at this point. He would write some off for being weird and more just view his offered skills as representations of the progress he had made. But this time was also different in that aspect.

The offerings were the usual ones. There was an upgrade to Graft Plant that seemed a bit interesting, a skill about creating special acids that he maybe would consider, another one about curse magic that he didn't want, and finally, a fourth one related to Jake leading group prayers for the Viper that he noped the fuck away from.

He barely registered these as he went to the bottom skill. As said, then Jake had no idea what to expect from this final skill offering, and he had to admit, it was a surprise. A good one... maybe?

[Anomalous Soul of the Heretic-Chosen (Legendary)] – Heresy and orthodoxy united in one body, power claimed from both. To be both a Chosen and a Heretic requires not only mental deviancy but a truly anomalous soul to reconcile opposing concepts. A soul that only grows more unique as you walk further on your Path as a Heretic-Chosen. Due to your connection to your Patron, your mana will begin to carry faint hints and morcels of the Records of the Malefic Viper when crafting poisons, making each creation more potent. Due to your identity as a heretic, this is not granted but taken, resulting in significantly increased mana expenditure during this process. As your soul mutates, so does it get empowered, allowing it to break convention. Going forward, every stat point in Wisdom increases your Mana Points by 12.5 rather than 10. May your very existence become an anomaly that shuns normalcy for power as you continue paving your own Path as a Heretic-Chosen. Note that this skill results in a permanent change. Losing your status as a Heretic-Chosen or your profession will make the skill further mutate and transition into a race skill.

It was weird. Just weird in so many ways. This was a skill of a type he had not been offered before, that was for sure. It was entirely passive from what he could see and did something Jake always looked for in skills – it had an ability he could not in any way replicate himself.

But this one felt a bit out of the left field, even if he should ask himself if it truly was. Jake walked a very weird Path, and he intermingled many concepts and Records with himself at all times. The mere fact that his Soulspace was as powerful as it was proved that Jake was an anomaly, as Villy had made it very clear that sealing something like the Eternal Hunger chimera in there was not something a D-grade should ever be able to. He knew this was likely just a side effect of this Bloodline, but his choices also had to have contributed. Integrating sim-Jake had only strengthened him further, too.

The actual effects of the skill were in the simple department, at least from the looks of it. It was essentially an all-around buff to all poisons Jake crafted, with the downside being an increased mana cost during the crafting process. On top of that, it granted an overall increase to his mana pool. The biggest part of the skill was clearly the mana pool from Wisdom, and this was also what he was the most worried about.

This skill would permanently alter his soul. It would give him 25% more mana, which was even more together with the existing 25% bonus from the Mask of the Fallen King. However, he knew that these kinds of alterations did not just come for free.

His soul as it was could already be considered fully utilized, so to somehow expand it had to come with losing something in return. There had to be some consequences. The system had some innate sense of “balance,” and even if gods like Villy found ways to slightly skirt around these balancing mechanics, Jake was not at all at a level where he could do that. At least, that is what Jake believed. He wasn’t sure at all, though. Gritting his teeth, Jake delayed his choice for a moment as he asked his Patron god:

“Villy... is skills that permanently alter your soul generally considered good or bad?” he asked his dear Patron god after reaching out.

“I will need some more information than that,” Villy asked in return near-instantly and seemed very interested right from the get-go.

“I am offered a skill that allows every point of Wisdom to give more mana than it already does, but it permanently alters my soul in return,” Jake answered.

“Do you, in turn, lose some of your stamina or health?”

“No,” Jake answered. “It also allows some of your Records to get mixed in when I craft to make poison better at a higher mana cost, but it doesn’t seem directly connected to the Wisdom part. And it is the Wisdom part I am worried about.”

“So, you are wondering what else you will lose to allow you to get this increased mana pool?” Villy asked.

“Yeah,” Jake nodded.

“Firstly, did you know that while the 10 points per stat are pretty standard, it isn’t universal? In fact, it is only really a thing for the so-called enlightened races. Many beasts have innate racial skills, especially those of massive size, that make each point of Vitality give them far more health points per stat. How else do you think a massive mushroom that is around your own level can have a mana pool ten times your own? Or how a massive whale the size of a planet doesn’t waste all its vital energy to heal a minor wound? But you are right in your case as an enlightened race; it usually comes with a trade-off. The trade-off is built into the races who gain these racial skills, but for you, as a human, you have no such thing. But I think I see a way and an explanation for you to be offered it anyway without the usual trade-offs,” Villy said after explaining something Jake honestly had kind of figured out a long time ago. If not, then it made no sense how he could fight and damage beasts for so long without them dying.

“What way?” Jake asked curiously.

“You are walking your own Path that is already incredibly hard as it is. Your soul is already ridiculously powerful as it is, and you can handle this mutation without losing yourself at all. That is why you get it offered, I reckon, as, without a powerful soul like yours, the system would never even give you the choice of risking such a mutation. As for the price of the skill... I think it lies in proving your Path. To put it in simpler terms, you increase the Records you need to progress, and you have to prove yourself more than before to gain each level or evolution. Along with that, then faltering in your Path may lead to

downright disastrous results. I am talking a full-on soul implosion or you evolving into something very unpleasant,” Villy explained.

Jake listened as he tilted his head. “Doesn’t seem like an actual drawback? Or more just something I already deal with as a high-tier profession? Wait, will it make each level slower to get experience-wise?”

“It is an extreme drawback for most, and no, it will not make each level easier or harder. At least, I don’t think so. Jake, I need you to understand that you are really walking your own kind of Path here. You are forcefully channeling the Records of a Primordial through your soul without dying, you experience true Records of a time long passed, and you have a Soulspace far more powerful than any D-grade I have ever encountered. You are a heretic and a Chosen at the same time while getting away with it. Your sheer level of ego is forcing two opposing concepts to unite within you. So I do agree... the actual drawback a soul mutation brings likely won’t negatively affect you as you are already a damn anomaly and a freak,” Villy said. Jake was not entirely sure if the god was praising him or not, but he chose to take it all as a compliment. Also, Jake had not shared the name of the skill, but Villy still called him an anomaly, so clearly, he agreed the skill fit Jake.

“Anyway... good skill? Also, how come you didn’t pop in this time but chose to keep the conversation telepathic?” Jake asked two questions at once.

“Of course it is a good skill. Very upgradeable, too, I reckon. Don’t worry about evolving it, by the way. Improving it should not increase the drawback at all. Why do you think all my Legacy skills can only be obtained at Ancient rarity and below, where they only give one stat point per level in your profession? As for why I didn’t pop in, well, I got my own stuff to deal with sometimes. This is one such time where I don’t want to dedicate an avatar to visit,” Villy explained.

“Fair enough, mate. Thanks for the help as always, and good luck with your endeavors,” Jake said his goodbyes. He had a feeling Villy didn’t wanna share what he was up to and naturally respected that.

“See you around, and keep up the leveling,” Villy said in return as the connection was cut off.

Without delaying further, Jake selected the skill.

Are you sure you want to select [Anomalous Soul of the Heretic-Chosen (Legendary)]? This skill will lead to permanent alterations to your soul.

Another prompt asked him if he was really sure, once more putting emphasis on the skill not being a casual choice. With resolution Jake confirmed. The moment he did, he felt an odd sense of vertigo. His Sphere of Perception momentarily retracted entirely into his own body, and all of his senses were completely cut off. It was only for less than a second before his sphere spread out again like before, and all his senses returned.

He expected more to happen, but it didn't. The only thing that felt different was Jake now feeling a slightly larger pool of energy he could pull from and control. Jake wanted to make sure nothing had somehow gone wrong as he checked his status.

Status:

Health Points (HP): 50198/50210

Mana Points (MP): 60123/100296

Stamina: 31851/37060

Yep, his mana had increased from around 80.000 total to over 100.000. It was so odd that having his soul change and mutate didn't do more than it had. So very odd. Jake stared at his status for a good while longer before reaching a conclusion.

"My stamina is way too fucking low compared to my mana points now."

Okay, not a conclusion as to why he didn't notice a soul mutation more, but as to what a big future issue would be. Currently, Jake never really ran out of mana during a fight as he already had a large pool and further increased regeneration from the mask. Then there was the occasional poison he was infected with or the mana from the Scales of the Malefic Viper legendary upgrade, which allowed him to absorb a bit of energy from magic attacks.

This meant his current bottleneck when it came to Endurance was his stamina. Rather fitting considering the name of the resource pool. Still an issue, though. But he had just the solution - he just needed for Meira to return first.

He spent the next few hours testing out stuff and drinking mana potions to fill up his pool to see if that felt different. Jake had wondered if maybe he would feel it when it went above the 80.000 he had before the skill, but nope, not a problem.

After four hours, Meira came home, and Jake quickly approached her in the hallway. "Hey Meira, wanna come shopping with me?"

Meira was taken aback at the sudden question. "Are you sure you don't just want me to go out and acquire the desired products as usual?"

"Yeah, I'm sure I want to go myself this time and wondered if you didn't wanna come," Jake answered with a smile. "I also wanted to take you shopping to finally get you some proper equipment. You are above level 140, so there have to be some good things available for your level by now that you can hopefully use for the rest of D-grade."

While Jake had leveled a lot, Meira's speed was far faster. When Jake had first met Meira, she was level 109. So even if her skill was not meteoric, it was still pretty damn fast, and one had to remember that she was not grinding levels through fighting and nearly only with her profession. She had mentioned getting quite a few class levels, too, due to her healer class benefitting from some things, but it was only three or four levels.

"Equipment?" Meira asked with genuine confusion. "Why?"

It was a pretty good question. Meira could borrow everything she needed for alchemy, and Jake had gifted her a spatial item quite a while ago for convenience's sake. So why the equipment?

"The world sucks, and you will need to learn how to fend for yourself a bit better, so I think getting some practical experience under your belt would be healthy," Jake said.

"I... is Lord Thayne sure?" Meira said nervously.

“Yeah. Don’t worry, won’t have you join a war or something, just do a few dungeons or go hunting a bit with a party. You will be fine,” Jake said to try and calm her down. Didn’t work very well, but what can you do?

“Okay...” Meira muttered. “What does Lord Thayne need to buy?”

Jake smiled. “A whole lot of elixirs.”

What better way to get more Endurance than that?

Chapter 517 - A Small Shopping Trip

The last times Jake went shopping, he had either gone to the vampire place because he also wanted to sell stuff or went with Villy to get new clothes. All other shopping was done by Meira after that for a few reasons. First of all, it saved Jake time. Secondly, Meira was incredibly insistent on doing it as she was almost desperate to prove herself useful – something that had gotten better recently – and lastly... Jake had no idea where the hell to go shopping in the first place. Like, he had some ideas, and he could just go where he went last time with Villy, but he didn’t feel confident. The problem was that the place he and the Viper went was fucking huge, and Jake really didn’t want to wander around for hours on end to try and find what he was looking for. Could he ask someone for directions? Probably, but that was also something Jake really didn’t wanna do. Asking strangers for directions sucked.

So dragging Meira along and buying some equipment for her was just killing two birds with one stone. The two of them left only about an hour later, with Meira taking the lead and first bringing him to a place primarily dealing with alchemical products.

The Order of the Malefic Viper didn’t have any official stores, and as far as Jake knew, there was no massive trade emporium run by them either. All the stores one could encounter were run by individuals or other merchant organizations that simply operated within the Order. All the Order really got out of it was a small tax added on each product sold and payment for the spaces they occupied. This system

allowed individual merchants to use the Order to progress and for alchemists from the Order to easily earn money by selling their products to one of many merchants eager to work as their broker. A bit like how Sultan had helped Jake.

He would probably love it if I brought him to the Order and had him get a store here, Jake thought as he entered a large street from one of the many large gateway-obelisk-things spread throughout this part of the Order.

Jake had gone to the same general area as he had gone with Villy. This was pretty much the epicenter of trade for the Order and filled with shops catering to every kind of customer. To call it an entire city was no understatement as Jake reckoned it was larger than any metropolis on Earth had ever been. This city was split into several districts that were then split into grades, and each district was further split into smaller portions based on product type. Jake had gone to the D-grade part of the trade city.

“I have gone to this store many times when Teacher or Lord Thayne asked for me to get alchemy ingredients,” Meira explained as they walked on the street. Jake chose not to comment on her using what many would interpret as a less formal name for Duskleaf by just calling him Teacher compared to calling Jake Lord.

“I will be in your care then,” Jake answered with a smile. It was honestly nice having someone just lead you around when shopping, so he didn’t have to go scouring himself and probably end up getting scammed as Jake had no idea what the hell anything was worth. Not that he doubted he would still come out fine. With the exchange rate of Credits from the ninety-third universe and his already massive amount of funds, calling Jake loaded was an understatement.

While alchemists did tend to be on the wealthier side, they rarely got truly rich as they also spent a lot. Buying materials for experiments that led to no useable products was just a pure money-sink but a necessity to progress in your craft. Jake felt very fortunate he had yet to run into any issues in that department as he just gave Meira however many Credits she needed and didn’t think about it much.

It was a bit weird that Jake had worked in finance before the initiation, but after the system really didn't care much about money. Perhaps that was a testament to how little he actually cared about his job and life before the system. Sim-Jake hadn't cared about money either but rather preferred jobs that challenged him, indicating that perhaps this sort of apathy towards money was just natural.

To Jake, money was just a means to an end to allow him to do what he wanted. Maybe he would care more if he actually needed money, but as things were, it was an absolute non-issue, and something was also telling him that he could make a lot of money if he truly needed it. If he became absolutely desperate for funds, he could probably just sell the autograph of the Chosen to some fanatical A-grades or something.

Jake was thrown out of his wayward thoughts on the importance of money as they finally reached the store Meira had wanted them to go to. It was a large building that was beautifully decorated with a very gaudy-looking sign in front depicting a cauldron surrounded by mushrooms and plants with dark green mist coming out of the cauldron. It was even magically animated.

Besides the sign that made Jake question the artistic sense of the creator as the idiot had included mushrooms, the building looked nice. He followed Meira inside, where a female scalekin attendant wearing a suit-like uniform greeted them

"Welcome to the Cauldron's Dream; how may I be of assistance?" the scalekin asked courteously.

Meira looked at Jake as he answered. "I am on the lookout for Endurance-increasing elixirs and, if possible, some ingredients containing ethtoxins or at least ones useful when creating soul poisons. I also just need some natural treasures related to soul magic in general."

The ingredients were self-explanatory as Jake really wanted to get better at soul poisons due to their potency, but his desire to buy Endurance elixirs could be questioned. Primarily to ask why he didn't just craft them himself, and the reason for that was pretty simple: he didn't want to. He could; it would just take a lot of time, and making elixirs truthfully wasn't that stimulating for him.

"How many elixirs are you in need of, and will they be for D-grades like yourself or ones of lower grades?" the attendant asked.

"Just for me, and I need enough to add approximately six hundred stat points total," Jake answered.

"Certainly, I shall have an offer ready in a few minutes. If you would please follow me so we can look at our stock for the soul items. Please do not hesitate to make me know if anything catches your eye and you have further questions," she said with a smile as she led Jake and Meira into another room. Meira had explained that it was pretty normal that no price was offered right away on products but that there would be a brief waiting period. Jake guessed this was due to variable pricing or maybe just to do some paperwork.

"Is there a specific type of material you are looking for or products of a certain grade?" the attendant asked once they entered a far larger room than before.

"For rarity, I will need uncommon rarity and above, but some rare and above would also be welcome," Jake answered. "As for if I am looking for anything specific... not really."

"Very well, let me see what I can do. If desired, I could also ask one of our resident alchemists to assist you in selecting ingredients?"

“No need,” Jake said. Not to be an ass, but he trusted his own senses more when assessing if he wanted ingredients than some resident alchemist.

The attendant simply nodded before motioning for Jake to follow her over to a large tome on a stand. She directed Jake to simply look through their inventory as the pages changed. One page of the open tome depicted an alchemical ingredient with a three-dimensional picture that even gave off a faint aura and scent, while the other page contained written information on the ingredient displayed. As he changed the page, he saw that natural treasure also appeared, and if he wished to, he could open an index. No matter how many pages he turned, the book didn't change either, making it look like the tome had infinite pages.

Jake was very engrossed in this as he began looking through the different offerings and ended up spending nearly two hours looking before he was done and had decided on what he wanted. The attendant seemed perfectly patient and ended up just chatting with Meira.

The elixirs also came rather quickly, and it was only after Jake was done browsing he got to see them.

[Patientia Elixir (Common)] - An elixir created from a mix of common ingredients, along with a few uncommon ones along with a Beastcore of unknown origin. Allows any who drinks this elixir to receive some of the innate power of the materials, enhancing one's Endurance. +5 Endurance upon consumption. Requirements: D-rank or higher.

It was just as Jake had expected when he was shown the one hundred and twenty bottles. All of them were exactly the same and clearly mass-produced to sell. All Jake saw when he looked at them was saved time and proceeded to make it clear he would buy all one hundred and twenty.

For soul items, he ended up buying way, way more. Way more than he had expected to. The reason why he even wanted these items was that he had a few goals in mind. Firstly he needed some of it for the

rituals with Duskleaf, and secondly, he wanted to work on making a certain kind of poison, and for that, he felt like he needed as many different kinds of ingredients as possible. So, yeah, he had chosen to get a lot of ingredients – around a hundred different kinds – with plenty of stock for each of them. Seventy-one were of uncommon rarity, eighteen rare, six epic, and one ancient rarity natural treasure. The ancient rarity one and most of the epic rarity ones were the only items he only got one of each. He had all of this written down on a magical sheet of paper that the big book of browsing “printed” out.

The attendant stared at the final list when Jake showed it to her for quite a bit. She looked up at Jake with puzzlement. “Sir, did you make a mistake? I count over four thousand individual items here...”

“Sounds about right,” Jake nodded.

She looked at him with judging eyes and stared him up and down as if to assess him. “I mean no insult, but before we proceed, I have to be certain you possess the funds for a transaction of this size. The final tally for all these items is... over one-point-two billion Credits.”

Despite saying the number, the attendant seemed shocked, and Jake was also somewhat surprised. Cheaper than he had thought.

One had to remember that Jake left Earth with about four billion Credits after the Treasure Hunt auction. But that was Credits from his universe. After exchanging them for Credits used in other universes – all of which had the exact same going rate – he had, in actuality, about four hundred billion with the 1-100 exchange rate. So to spend a billion or two on alchemical stuff wasn't that big of a deal to him. What else would he spend money on anyway?

“Yep, that seems fine,” Jake just said. “Does that include the elixirs?”

“Yes...” the attendant said, taken aback. “Is sir certain?”

“Yeah,” Jake once more confirmed as he proceeded to use the system-feature-thing to show that he indeed had the Credits available.

The attendant did a one-eighty in attitude as all her doubt disappeared, and she displayed a massive grin. “In that case, allow me to process you, sir.”

With the attendant smiling giddily, Jake completed the purchase and got all of the stuff he had wanted. It was delivered in a special spatial storage bag which Jake quickly emptied to put it all in his own inventory as the herbs would do better in there.

Jake and Meira left after that, and Jake failed to hold back a grin as she saw the attendant dancing with joy inside the building behind them. Never had it been more obvious that the store had a commission policy.

“That is all I really came shopping for,” Jake said to Meira on the street outside. “Now it is all you. We need to get you a full set, excluding the spatial necklace, right?”

“Lord Thayne, is it really necessary?” Meira asked nervously.

“Meira, I just spent over a billion Credits while you waited patiently for me to finish. You have worked for me for quite a while now, and I have yet to really give you anything, haven’t I? So don’t hold back. Even if it is not for fighting, then good equipment can help you with everyday tasks,” Jake said.

“Okay...” Meira relented, having learned that there was no real arguing with Jake once he had made up his mind. Also... while it was faint, Jake did feel a bit of happiness in her voice.

The two of them headed back towards the gateway obelisk they had teleported into the trade city and walked through a gateway leading to another part of the district. After waiting for a few minutes for the queue to clear, that is. Despite having many obelisks and each obelisk having four gateways operating at once, there were still people waiting simply due to the number of people that came through. To say that the city was buzzing with activity was an understatement and Jake understood why shops absolutely loved being placed there. Even while inside the alchemy shop, he had seen several people come and leave.

After passing through the gateway, they found themselves in a new area and headed towards some shops Jake and Meira had picked out before coming. Meira had asked Izil for advice, and Jake had asked Reika to ask Irin. He had considered contacting Irin personally but had stopped himself as he felt like that would lead to an entire conversation, and he really had just wanted to go shopping.

Anyway, they headed to the shops Irin had suggested first as Jake reckoned she had to know the good spots. Out of everyone Jake knew who was around his own level of power, Irin was the one who had been in the Order for the longest, after all.

Reika had given Jake a list of three from Irin, and it did not take long to find the first one. It was a large red building and was actively having many customers going in and out. Most of them were women, but some had men accompany them.

A women’s clothes shop, Jake quickly concluded as he headed inside with Meira. Once inside, Jake saw that it truly was a high-tier establishment and an incubus quickly walked up to greet them when they entered.

“Welcome! You two look like new faces. First time coming here?” the incubus asked in a friendly tone.

“It is,” Jake confirmed.

“Were you referred by someone?” he asked, still friendly.

“A succubus friend named Irinixis mentioned the place,” Jake said truthfully. Not a referral, but he had learned about it from her, and Jake didn’t think she would recommend a place for Reika to visit if there was no way to get in. Oh yeah, that is what Reika had done – asked Irin where she could go if she went with Jake to get some equipment.

“Ah, I see!” the incubus laughed. “Come on in then! What are you two looking for? Something for the gentleman or the lady?”

“Equipment for her,” Jake said as he motioned towards Meira. Meira looked pretty nervous and looked around at the high-class entrance hall. Jake himself also scouted the rest of the building with his sphere but found that everything on the second floor was just a distorted mess while everything on the first floor was just a bar of some kind, a few meeting rooms, and overall nothing interesting. The reason why it was distorted was due to the liberal use of space magic to expand all the rooms and save on real estate. It had been the same thing at the alchemy shop.

“I understand,” the incubus said as he looked Meira over before glancing at Jake again. “Just follow me, and I am sure we can find just the right things.”

Chapter 518 - Equipment For Him & Her

Jake had a confession. He had never actually been shopping with a girl before in his life. Well, besides with his mom, but that wasn't really shopping together but more going shopping at the same place separately. Even when he had a girlfriend, it had never happened. Perhaps another indicator of how poor that relationship had actually been.

This meant he really didn't know how this sort of thing usually went down. Like, what was he supposed to do? Just follow along? Should he wait outside? As he was utterly clueless, he chose to simply follow the incubus as that guy seemed confident in what customs were. Meira looked as clueless as he as she had likely never actually gone clothes shopping due to her life before coming to the Order, making them both absolute newbies.

The incubus led the two of them into a private room. It was as lavish as every other place Jake had seen in the establishment, but the entire room was a bit off compared to what Jake had expected. It was large and had a few couches, with a mannequin as a centerpiece. That part was semi-normal, but Jake had no idea why the hell there was a king-sized bed in the room. It gave him a bad feeling, but he tried to explain it away. Probably just doubles as a hotel or something.

He knew he was just grasping for straws, and his final attempt to deny he had gone somewhere very unplanned was shot down the very next moment.

"Considering it is your first visit, let us start out light," the incubus said as "clothes" were summoned on the mannequin. He used the words clothes very loosely as there wasn't a lot of it. What was displayed was a mini-dress with a few crucial parts missing, especially in the chest region.

Jake just stared as Meira turned red like a tomato.

“Basic, yet irresistible in its simplicity. This one is a very popular item amongst humans and elves alike, so what say you? If you want to, you are even allowed to test out some of the items we offer in the room provided, but you must buy them if anything gets damaged,” the incubus said with a polite smile.

“...If Lord Thayne wants me to...” Meira said in an almost whispering voice before Jake spoke up.

“Big misunderstanding!” Jake exclaimed. “Huge one. We are not like that at all and came for actual equipment, not... this. You know, things that give stats and stuff and help when something attacks you.”

The incubus seemed taken aback at what Jake said and asked clarifyingly: “You were referred by Irinixis, though? I apologize if there is any confusion, but we deal not in armor but equipment with quite a different use— one I dare claim just as important as combat.”

“Not questioning that, just saying it isn’t what we came looking for,” Jake quickly said. “I apologize for wasting your time.”

“No worries, young man,” the incubus said unbothered. “If you change your mind, you are free to visit once more. Both of you. Now, if you are looking for equipment for the young lady, may I ask what type? What does she specialize in?”

“Healer and alchemist,” Jake answered, happy that the incubus didn’t make a bigger deal out of the awkward situation than he needed to.

“In that case, I can recommend a quaint little store just down the street run by a friend of mine,” the incubus offered as he waved his hand and displayed a magical 3D map.

Jake recognized it instantly as one of the stores Irin had also recommended, making him clarify: "Just to make sure, they just sell normal equipment, right? Gear for the battlefield, you know."

"They do indeed, though I would once more argue that the battlefield of the bedroom is one often too neglected," the incubus said semi-jokingly.

Jake didn't comment on it but just excused himself once more as they left, getting a few light jabs on the way out and stares from other patrons who no doubt made assumptions about the human and elf exiting a private room. Once they were outside on the street, Jake couldn't help but joke with Meira a bit to relieve the tension. "Well, that was a screw-up. Sorry for that; we're never going back there, that is for sure."

"Yeah..." Meira nodded. He felt like she almost seemed disappointed, proof that he still wasn't that good at reading social cues sometimes. Not paying it any mind, Jake and Meira headed to the second shop. It was a lot smaller than the establishment they had just been in and also had a lot less traffic.

It was small and quaint, with only a single story, and Jake and Meira headed inside right away. It was just as small and homey inside as it was from the outside, and it had fabric stacked on shelves all around. Jake had been in a few tailor shops in his life, and this one sure fit the bill.

He had already seen the one person in the store through his sphere, and she also noticed him and Meira when they entered. A small dwarf came out of the backroom with a smile a few seconds later and greeted them. "Ah, welcome! What can I do for the lad and lassie?"

Jake briefly scanned her and took note that she was C-grade. Contrary to other dwarves he had met, she was wearing a light dress and was far from as bulky. Still bulky by human standards, but probably considered a stick by dwarf standards.

“I need some equipment,” Meira said. It was something they had talked about while going there – that Meira needed to ask for herself. Jake thought it was awkward to act like he was out shopping with a kid who couldn’t speak for herself on what she wanted. He knew it was because Meira didn’t want to actually decide what to get as Jake was paying, but he hoped he had put those doubts to rest.

“What for?” the tailor asked as she looked Meira up and down. Mostly up, considering the height difference.

“Uhm, everyday stuff and probably some fighting, I think...” Meira said, looking at Jake.

The dwarf nodded as she asked Meira some more basic questions, like what stats she was looking for and what special effects she wanted. Jake just listened in as Meira answered everything and, as subtly as he could, began making his way towards the door. Meira noticed him, and Jake just smiled and gave her a thumbs up before leaving her to do her own shopping. He already had enough awkwardness for one day and wasn’t going to be forced into a changing room or anything like that.

Considering he had some time to kill and was in a shopping area anyway, Jake decided to do some shopping of his own for a bit of gear. He had a few pieces of equipment he had been walking around with for a while and quickly settled on one of his older pieces – gloves.

[Gloves of Quintessential Arcane Manifestation (Epic)] – Gloves made from a powerful synthetic cloth. These gloves are incredibly thin, nearly unnoticeable, and are incredibly resilient against all attacks. Will become immensely more durable if infused with arcane energy. The Crystalized Essence has been fully integrated. All constructs using your arcane affinity and your hands will last longer and be more potent.

The gloves can store a large amount of arcane energy that can be released immediately. Channeling unattuned energy into these gloves will grant it your arcane affinity. Enchantments: +125 Intelligence, +75 Wisdom, +50 Willpower. Quintessential Arcane Manifestation. Requirements: lvl 115+ in any humanoid race. Quasi-Soulbound

They were good. Arnold had gone above and beyond when he made them, but frankly, their effect just didn't cut it anymore for the most part. The blast he could shoot out of them was pretty much the same as what he could do by himself, and the only true value was how durable they were when he infused them with arcane energy. There was also the part about arcane constructs made with his hand becoming stronger, but as with most things in the system, that was all relative. When he got them, it was noticeable, but now that he was several times stronger, it was utterly irrelevant. In ten or more levels, borderline none of the effects would do anything besides the stats.

So, Jake decided to check out a shop he himself had been looking at before they went. He had said that the Order did not run any stores themselves, but that did not mean members of the Order didn't run their own stores and that members didn't tend to have the biggest ones.

Jake headed for one of these shops that he knew were run directly by talented members of the Order. It was new and had a pretty special requirement for those who were allowed to shop there – you had to be blessed either by the Malefic Viper or a god subordinate to him. He feared that he was walking into a madhouse of fanatics, but he also knew they had good stuff in there. Draskil had even mentioned it once during their dungeon run and said he got a legendary item from there.

Before he left Meira alone, he had placed a Mark of the Avaricious Hunter on her. He had zero confidence in finding her without it.

After going through another gate and walking down a large street even more filled than those before, he saw the building he was looking for. It wasn't hard, considering it was a massive castle-like building with the motif of the Order of the Malefic Viper proudly displayed right above the entrance. A massive tower shot up from the center of the castle, too, making it a landmark. Quite impressive considering the building had only been around for about a year.

Not many people went there, but all who did were stared at when allowed entrance. With a sigh, Jake headed for the castle, and once he got close to the entrance, he felt a faint pulse scanning him. He was not blocked and simply walked through the entrance to enter a large hall. The moment he stepped inside, he felt many presences all around him, not from people but from the statues lining the hall on each side depicting different gods. At the end of the hall stood the statue of the Malefic Viper. It depicted a massive simple-looking black snake coiled up and faced towards whoever dared enter the castle.

Well, if this isn't a way to try and humble anyone who enters, I don't know what it is, Jake thought, getting flashbacks to the lesson with Viridia and the statue of Villy there. As usual, Jake didn't care about the presences but quickly still understood what was happening. He chose to walk slowly through the hall before reaching a new gate and entering, trying to at least look a little worn out from the endeavor.

Only after going through the gate could he see the new area due to how spatially expanded it had been. And oh boy, was it expanded. Jake entered an utterly massive curving tunnel of sorts, extending what seemed like infinitely upwards. He also felt that his Mark on Meira felt far further away than before, way, way, further.

"Greetings, Blessed by the Malefic One," a voice said as a figure teleported in. Jake instantly felt the pressure and knew this individual was a fully-fledged B-grade. The person wore a hooded robe with the insignia of the Order on it, but nothing else was visible, not even their race.

"Hello there," Jake said in return with a nod.

"What has the young master come looking for?" the hooded attendant asked. Jake had studied a little and knew this place was quite unique, and Draskil had also said that the ones running it were high rollers of the Order.

“Equipment, preferably gloves. Also, if there are any items capable of awakening Records within an item to further enhance them, that would also be supremely useful,” Jake said. While Jake had come looking for new gloves, he wouldn’t say no to also finding a way to upgrade his boots.

“The second request may be hard to fulfill as such items are rarely found in D-grade,” the B-grade said. “But for the gloves, we have plenty on offer. Please, do tell, what kind do you need? And do you walk the Path of the Malefic One, having embraced the Legacy?”

Jake wasn’t sure why the second question mattered but answered both. “I do possess the Legacy skills, and I need gloves primarily to help boost my physical stats, and if they are highly durable, it would be the best.”

The attendant nodded and spoke: “Please follow me.”

Using a few hand motions, a portal appeared right beside the B-grade, and the person motioned for Jake to step through. Jake felt no danger or like anything was amiss and did so as he found himself inside a far smaller area reminiscent of a trophy room. There were pedestals all over with items on display, all of them behind barriers a bit like what the vampires had used to preserve their items. It was the kind of barrier that helped items not lose their enchantments and power.

Jake could not even Identify any of the items due to these barriers. It wasn’t that he couldn’t properly see or sense them, but that the barriers themselves messed with whatever Identify did. Rather than getting full information, it only gave a brief snippet.

After using Identify on a few of the pedestals, all of them holding pairs of gloves, Jake got the gist of it.

[Gloves – Ancient - Medium Armor – Magical – Pride of the Malefic Viper – Requirements Not Met]

[Gloves – Legendary - Medium Armor – Magical – Touch of the Malefic Viper]

“Do note that the young master may only purchase a single item,” the attendant said. Jake was about to ask why but quickly understood. Resale value. But he was a bit confused about the descriptions provided still.

“Can you explain what the information given means?” Jake asked.

“The first three, I believe self-explanatory, while the fourth says if the gloves give physical or magical stats, with the final one displaying which Legacy skill the item is tied to. Do note that in order to use the gloves, you need the Legacy skill at the same rarity as the gloves. If none here are useable, we can visit a lower floor. Do note that if you do not possess the required level to wear any item, your Identify should reflect that,” the attendant explained.

Jake nodded once more in recognition. Made sense. He looked at a few more items before one truly caught his eyes.

[Gloves – Legendary - Medium Armor – Physical – Scales of the Malefic Viper]

They were all black gloves and looked incredibly light despite being classified as medium armor. Thin black scales covered the item, looking almost just like a pattern on the leather. Jake liked how they

looked, and the description made him very hopeful it would do just what he wanted. It gave him good vibes.

“That one,” Jake said as he pointed to the gloves.

“First, I must make sure the young master has the funds. Each legendary item here is priced at a billion Credits. Also, be aware that once the item is revealed, you must either purchase it or leave with nothing,” the attendant said.

Jake quickly displayed that he had the funds and didn't see any scenario where he wouldn't buy the gloves for a measly billion Credits. With a nod, the attendant took out a token. The barrier shimmered away, allowing Jake to finally properly identify the item.

[Gloves of the Malefic One's Grace (Legendary)] – By the grace of the Malefic One, your scales shall be your instrument of invincibility. Created by an incredibly skilled crafter possessing the Blessing of the Malefic Viper, these gloves contain but a fragment of the Primordial's Records. Made from the hide and scales of an apex wyvern, infused with its toxic blood, and enhanced by a powerful, refined core, these gloves are incredibly resilient. Allows Scales of the Malefic Viper to be cast directly upon the gloves at a significantly increased effect. While using Scales of the Malefic Viper, the effect of all stat points granted by these gloves are increased by a significant amount. Only one who has shown sufficient proficiency in Scales of the Malefic Viper may wear these gloves. Enchantments: +300 Toughness, +300 Vitality, +300 Strength, +300 Agility, +300 Endurance. Scaled Hands of the Malefic One Requirements: lvl 175+ in any humanoid race. Skill: Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary+).

While Jake did have a limited understanding of how much things were worth, he did know that legendary items were always priced in the billions within the multiverse. The Auction had allowed everyone on Earth to get banger deals on stuff, but this offering was at the same level in pure value. One billion was a steal.

“Satisfied?” the attendant asked.

“Very,” Jake smiled. “But is it truly only priced at a billion? This may be presumptuous of me, but the materials alone must have cost more than that severalfold.”

A part of him even wondered if maybe the item was cursed or something, but the attendant explained:

“These items have a limited userbase, and it is not in our interest to keep them vaulted up. They are for those who have been recognized by the Malefic One or those loyal to his excellency, and it is only in our interest to help them on their way. For you to already have achieved legendary rarity in Scales of the Malefic Viper despite being in D-grade is incredibly commendable already and proves you are worthy. So yes, they are underpriced by the standards of many but priced exactly right by our standards. This place was never made to make money to begin with.”

Jake nodded in understanding, not one to say no to a good thing. “Well, I am for sure buying them.”

The attendant nodded and bowed. “May they serve you well, he who is blessed by the Malefic One.”

Chapter 519 - Something Wrong

Meira was nervous after Lord Thayne left her alone. She had been shopping many times before, but never for herself. Wasn't it just a waste of money to get her equipment? Currently, she only got a bit of Wisdom from her spatial necklace, with the rest of her items not even counting as equipment. Receiving that necklace had already been far more than Meira would expect, but at least she saw the usefulness in that. It allowed her to more effectively transport materials for Lord Thayne as it even had a storage specifically enchanted to store alchemical ingredients.

“Follow me, lassie; let’s get you sorted,” the shop owner said as she hurried Meira into the back room. Meira just followed along with the far smaller woman, still not sure if all of this was a good idea.

“Relax there,” the dwarf said with a calming smile. “Young masters like that like to treat their girlfriends nicely, so you better take advantage while you can.”

“I... he doesn’t think of me like that,” Meira denied, embarrassed. He had made that clear when they had gone to that other shop. She was mad at herself for thinking that Lord Thayne had taken her there with those kinds of intentions. Nearly as mad as she was for feeling dejected that he hadn’t.

“Really?” the dwarf asked. “Well, color me surprised. Either way, he gave me the heebie-jeebies, so there is no way he is average, and people who aren’t average got money to treat those they care about. And he does care about you. Any damn idiot can see that. So stop dilly-dallying, and let’s get you a proper set, alright?”

Meira looked at the dwarf for a moment, considering her words. It was true that Lord Thayne didn’t think of her “that way,” but it was also true he had always been very nice to her, so maybe he did care? Just in another way? And if he did that, it should be fine to get some equipment if he asked her, right?

“Okay,” Meira said with a smile as the dwarf got to work, and the two discussed what kind of equipment would suit Meira best. They spent a good while going over everything, and the dwarf even showed her different pieces of jewelry she had in stock that would go well with what Meira needed. It was all a bit overwhelming as many of the items were probably more expensive than Meira would have been if the Order had just decided to just sell her to someone over giving her to Lord Thayne.

Yet it also felt oddly liberating – a feeling she thought she would never feel – to be there alone. Buying things for herself. She hoped to make Lord Thayne proud and to want to keep her around, which was the primary reason she worked so hard. But after the entire incident with Nella and Utmal, she had been

thinking if maybe it was okay if she did some more things for herself? Izil also tried to convince her she should be more selfish, or at least not as selfless.

Maybe she could begin to get stronger for herself? If Lord Thayne wanted her to no longer be his slave but instead be a full member of the Order by her own merits, she would need to be more independent. She would need to make her own choices and be a member because she wanted to. But she was afraid that becoming a member would mean that Lord Thayne would have her leave. Have her get her own residence or enter the dorms or something. Meira desperately didn't want that to happen, so she would have to selfishly find a way to make Lord Thayne want to keep her around even after she was no longer bound by a slave contract.

She wanted to stay no matter what she had to do to make that happen. It was selfish of her to want more from him than what he had already given and promised to give her... but he did want her to make her own choices and do what she wanted. And what Meira wanted more than anything was to stay, so this selfish wish of hers was okay... right?

--

Jake walked out of the castle-like building wearing his new cool gloves. On the way out, he had already done a bit of experimenting and found that they were actually very similar to his old gloves. He could instinctively use Scales of the Malefic Viper only on the gloves, and he instantly felt the scales already sewn into the gloves be filled with energy and strengthened to an insane level. The gloves stayed flexible like before, but he felt like his hands had become near-impenetrable. Of course, any blunt force would still hurt like hell, and if he tried to block a sword, he would find his fingers broken, but for anything magical, it would be insane. He could also use it to grab sharp edges and whatnot, as he had already done with his old gloves.

The stat effect was also interesting. Whenever Jake used Scales of the Malefic Viper, he felt a slight increase in power based on how big a part of his body he covered. It was super small when he used it only in local areas, but Jake reckoned that if his entire body was covered, he would get what would amount to roughly 100 more in each of the five stats the armor gave. It was small, but there, and

frankly, the biggest thing about the gloves was the insane amount of stats they offered to begin with, along with their sheer level of durability when Scales were used.

He considered if making an entire set of armor like the gloves would be a good idea but discovered that maybe it wasn't the best as the mana drain when he infused the gloves was rather intense. A full set of armor would be able to drain dry even Jake and his anomalously large mana pool at an alarming speed.

Feeling good about himself, Jake saw no need to delay as he headed back towards the shop Meira was in. His Mark worked as a guide after he went through the teleportation gate to the same area she was in, allowing him to quickly make it there. She was still inside the shop, and Jake decided to wait outside until she was done.

He leaned against the wall of the building and closed his eyes as his mind sank into his soul. Once inside, he was met with the sight of an almost exact copy of himself who was, for some reason, repeatedly hitting the ground as dark pulses of energy were released from him, blasting him into the air.

Sim-Jake had changed to look even more like Jake than before. Looking at him felt a bit weird to the real Jake as he knew his other version was slowly disappearing. His personality had become more and more like Jake's own over the last few months. It had already been similar, but now they barely talked anymore as there was no need to. They now only discussed two things: melee combat and Shadow Vault. And melee combat had become less and less as of late as Jake quickly picked up on sim-Jake's teachings the more assimilated he became.

Jake looked at his simulacrum, who was naturally aware he was there. His other version stopped his practice and turned to Jake. "Don't look glum like I am dying or something; we both knew this was the ideal outcome."

"Still," Jake sighed.

“It is what it is,” sim-Jake shrugged. The next moment a katar appeared in both of his hands, and Jake mimicked his motion as they charged each other. Their weapons clashed as if mirrored with two katar tips perfectly impacting each other, sending both of them stumbling back.

Sim-Jake moved faster for the follow-up, but Jake was ready as he countered, getting the upper hand. He managed to land a minor wound but was pushed in return when he tried to capitalize on the one hit he got in.

Their fight continued for about twenty minutes, with both of them slowly taking damage. It looked very even until Jake made a minor slip-up and was cornered. He had slowly been losing ground, and after a combo more than a hundred hits long had found himself unable to respond before a katar penetrated his skull.

“Fuck,” Jake muttered, thinking he was gonna win this one. Both their wounds had also already healed. They weren’t real wounds anyway.

“Still improving,” sim-Jake smiled.

True, Jake thought as the simulacrum turned around and continued whatever he was doing before. Jake had no idea what it was doing but knew that the simulacrum focused nearly one hundred percent of its time on Vault now. He had to, as his memories of the simulated world were slowly fading, and continuing to improve the fighting style was now meaningless. Now all he had to do was pass down the final pieces before fully handing the mantle to Jake.

He stayed a bit longer to look at his simulacrum, genuinely having no idea what he was doing. It was like all the Records pertaining to Shadow Vault had been integrated into sim-Jake for him to perfect. It was to the level of the real version of Jake feeling unsure about even using the skill. He got the sense that he was lacking some of the instinctual knowledge the skill gave about how to use it but naturally couldn't know what he didn't know. However, what he was sure of was that the day sim-Jake ceased to be would be the day his Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra upgraded, and in the same way, then the day Shadow Vault upgraded, sim-Jake would lose his remaining basis of existence that kept him separate from Jake.

"Keep up the good work," Jake muttered with a sigh before he left his Soulspace, having felt Meira and the dwarf exit the back room within the store.

Jake opened his eyes and went inside the store just in time. He saw Meira carrying a whole bunch of things, all placed in separate boxes. They also saw him enter the store as Meira looked somewhat nervous. "Lord Thayne! Please inspect the items and let me know if these are acceptable."

"You are the one shopping here, not me. Whatever you picked is fine as long as you didn't get a full set of legendary gear in an attempt to bankrupt me," Jake joked.

"I would never do that!" Meira semi-yelled with indignation before finally realizing it was a joke, making her blush in embarrassment. She clenched one of the boxes and asked in a nearly whispering voice: "Please look at them a little, please?"

Jake resigned himself and nodded. Meira took out a white dress from one of the boxes and proudly showed it off. It didn't look that much different from the usual dress she wore, at least not in design, but the item was clearly far superior. Identifying it, he actually felt a little proud of her.

[Sorcerer's Dress of Merciful Intent (Epic)] – A dress crafted from the silk of a juvenile Ethspawn Spider, further enhanced by a talented crafter. Grants impressive resistance to most magical attacks and

dissipates a portion of the physical force of all blows made against the wearer. Passively absorbs a portion of all attacks, be they magical or physical in nature. This energy can then be infused into a healing spell to empower it. Enchantments: +250 Wisdom, +100 Intelligence, +100 Willpower. Merciful Intent. Requirements: lvl 140+ in any humanoid race.

He had to admit that when he had left Meira alone to shop, he had feared he would have returned to her having selected a full set of common rarity equipment with a few inferior rarity items mixed in. Jake was happy to see she had selected equipment of proper value. It wasn't overly extravagant either. One had to remember that Meira was not a monster like Jake and needed far fewer stats than he did from his equipment. In many ways, then a full epic set of gear would be just as good for her as a full legendary set. Sure, the legendary gear would be better overall and have better special effects, but the difference wasn't massive, and there was also the fear of making Meira a target if she had too good stuff.

"Looking good," Jake approved with a thumbs up.

"Should get the little lassie all settled for a good while," the dwarf said with a smile. "Gives above her total stat limit, leaving some room for her to grow into. The rings are both purely defensive, too, so don't worry about her getting targeted as a healer. They will all find themselves dead before getting to kill her. And if all else goes wrong, the earrings have an enchantment to automatically teleport a distance away if she is in mortal danger. Limited uses with recharge time, but a real lifesaver."

Jake nodded and thanked the shopkeeper. He did not doubt she had done her job to try and convince Meira to get better stuff. Okay, sure, it was her actual job to make Meira spend as much as possible, and it was a bit weird for Jake to be grateful to her for making him spend more, but such was life.

"How much for everything?" Jake asked.

“Full set of epic armor, an ancient ring, epic ring, and a set of ancient rarity linked earrings with emergency-teleportation ability... comes down to roughly one-point-nine billion Credits for the entire thing. If we cut the most expensive item in the earrings, it will only be-“

“Nah, it’s good; we’ll take it,” Jake smiled as he paid the shopkeeper. The dwarf looked a bit surprised at how fast he had just paid’ without any comments. Not that Jake thought much about it. He had spent nearly that much on alchemy items earlier that day, and this was a full set for Meira that she could use for a long time. Totally worth it.

He saw the shopkeeper lean in and whisper something to Meira Jake couldn’t hear as the C-grade dwarf hid it. Meira turned entirely red in her face before quickly backing away, making Jake wonder what the dwarf had said, but looking at Meira, she didn’t look like she had any intentions of sharing. She didn’t even dare look at him for some reason.

“Thanks for your patronage,” the dwarf said with a big smile. “And do come again. I love big spenders.”

Jake chuckled a bit at the shamelessness as he said his goodbyes and headed out of the shop. Meira put all of the boxes in her spatial storage, intending to take them on once they got home. Something they did right away as neither of them had any more business in the city for now.

The two of them headed back to one of the gateway pillars and teleported straight home to the mansion. Jake went to the living room as Meira went off to her personal residence to change into her new clothes. That was also when Jake learned that Meira had never learned how to rapidly use a spatial storage to switch equipment or even equip a weapon. He should definitely teach her that.

With some time to spare, Jake took inventory and began making some plans for his next period of crafting with all of these new materials. He also now had ingredients for some ritual stuff with Duskleaf, and he was ready to begin the initial parts of the ritual for the Pollendust Bee Queen. There would be

several stages to the ritual, and this first part was pretty much just about filling the creature with energy and Records to further build upon.

After thinking about his plans for a while, Meira returned to the main house. Jake saw her in his sphere long before she reached the living room, but he was still taken aback when he saw her with his eyes. She wore the white dress she had shown him along with the jewelry he had been told about. Before, she had only been wearing her simple clothes, but now she truly looked like a young elven mistress from an influential clan.

“Does it look okay?” Meira asked shyly.

“Yeah, you look great,” Jake smiled as he gave her not one but two thumbs-ups, only making her blush more. It was clear she wasn’t used to compliments from her reaction, and Jake had to admit it was kind of cute.

Nonetheless, Meira seemed happy. Jake was just happy she was happy, and the two of them once more dove into their routine of alchemy and practice. Everything was going smoothly, and Jake felt relaxed during this time until one day... something felt wrong.

Very wrong.

Chapter 520 - In An Instant

Jake had spent another month rapidly progressing since his shopping trip. The most monumental event was when Jake finally laid down the ritual circle framework for the Pollendust Bee Queen. He had prepared enough cores, and with some of the materials he had bought, could begin the initial stages.

It was a bit like how Mystie had used her ritual for a long time before Jake came along. Jake would do something similar but at an even higher level. The ritual circle itself was about ten meters in radius and was placed on his lawn, surrounded by a barrier he cheated to get made by just having Duskleaf erect it. This initial stage would last quite a while and was likely going to be the longest.

Besides the ritual, Jake had just been slamming out potions and had been working on a special kind of soul poison he really wanted to make. It was harder than he had thought it would be, but he still felt he was getting closer to his goal.

With this also came some levels. It felt like they had been coming even faster than before recently, and Jake theorized it was due to how expensive the materials he experimented with were. Again, he didn't know; all he knew was that three levels in a month was pretty damn good.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 181 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 182 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 177 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 183 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

One other thing Jake had also done during this time was a lot of heavy drinking. Only a bit of it had been alcohol, with the majority being Endurance-increasing elixirs. And damn, had it paid off.

Status

Health Points (HP): 54011/54050

Mana Points (MP): 95231/100484

Stamina: 47021/48320

--

His stamina had increased by more than ten thousand points since he went shopping, the main contributor being 555 stats gained from elixirs, maxing out his current limit for his levels when it came to consuming them. This was before percentage bonuses, so he had to add another 45% to that. All in all, good stuff. As for his free points... Jake had been weak and, in a moment of indulgence, tossed all the 175 stat points he had saved up into Perception.

He had no regrets.

Yet even after all of these things had gone so well and Jake felt like everything was going great, he felt uneasy that day. It was a terrible feeling he could not pinpoint; he just knew something was wrong. Off. Jake felt restless and couldn't focus as he asked Villy, who didn't provide any useful answer. He then turned to Miranda to ask her how things were on Earth and was told nothing was amiss.

Next up was Sylphie, and while they couldn't exactly speak, she also wasn't worried. Sylphie was still hanging around with Carmen too, so it shouldn't have anything to do with her either. Jake then checked everyone in the Order he knew but just got confused responses. Nothing was wrong anywhere... yet Jake felt as he felt. Something was horribly wrong, and it frustrated him to not know what the issue was.

And for every moment, that feeling of wrongness was building.

Miranda felt flustered after Jake had contacted her for the second time that day to tell her that something was wrong. He gave no details or even an idea of what the issue was; he just said something was wrong. Miranda had gotten to work and checked in on everyone, having even contacted Caleb, Jake's brother, to make sure things were calm. He said nothing was wrong. Same for Casper and the Risen.

The Noboru Clan also didn't have any issues. She was well and truly lost and considered if perhaps she had to go to the Holy Church and the Augur to try and figure out if there truly were any problems. She even went as far as to check where the two hawks, Mystie and Hawkie, were, but they were still in the forest. If they were in danger, then Miranda had no idea what to do anyway.

In all honesty, then Miranda was worried about Jake. What if something had happened to him that caused some kind of mental disturbance? That didn't seem to be an issue, though, as he was perfectly lucid. Lucid... but troubled and worried.

She kept trying to find the problem and did recall Lillian, Hank, Hank's children, and most people she and Jake both knew. He had said that his feeling of wrongness was likely connected to someone he knew being in danger, but that was it. All she could do was take precautionary actions.

Miranda was still researching and trying to find out what was wrong as suddenly the ground shook. Are we under attack?

Without any hesitation, Miranda activated one of her skills to get the status of the city and saw only one place with a disturbance. The teleportation building connecting Haven and the fort had been utterly destroyed. Even the usually well-protected one at the Fort was now nothing more than rubble.

She instantly teleported down to her ritual chamber to prepare for an attack as several tokens in her inventory vibrated. With bated breath, she checked them and saw the same message from everywhere.

“Under attack-“

“Teleportation circles-“

“Cut off-“

The Noboru Clan, Court of Shadows, Valhal, Risen, and even the Holy Church.

Miranda scrambled to understand the situation and quickly realized one thing: in an instant, the entire teleportation network of the planet had been destroyed.

An hour earlier.

Sometimes, one must choose a lesser evil.

Arthur checked his watch and saw it was time. The researchers and space mages had been hard at work for the better part of a year, and finally, their hard work would be realized.

“Activate the circle,” Arthur said.

The more than a dozen space mages complied as they got into position. Soon, the circle began pulsing with power, a cube in the center functioning as the anchor to connect two very far-off places. The cube had been given to him during the Myriad Choices event for this exact purpose. The magic circle would only be active for a few seconds... but it was enough.

Eighteen figures appeared, and a second after, the entire underground chamber shook as cracks formed all over. The mages who had helped perform the ritual all fell unconscious to the ground as healers rushed in to take them out. The formation was well and truly broken too, but it had done what it was supposed to.

“We meet again, Arthur,” the man – if he even was that – leading the entourage of new arrivals said. His orange skin made it clear he was not human, and neither were any of his comrades. Arthur knew every single figure that had just appeared could singlehandedly battle the strongest party that the United Cities Alliance possessed. But such a force was necessary, especially their leader and the odd shifting elemental-like being of ash. Both of them were figures he knew few could rival.

“Welcome to Earth, Celestial Child,” Arthur bowed, using the title he had been informed the alien named El’Hakan went by.

“A single sun and a singular, powerful moon,” Ell’Hakan smiled as he looked up, his gaze seeming to pierce the several hundred meters of soil above them to gaze at the sky. “I thank you for your welcome, and I believe all preparations are in place?”

“We have held up our part of the bargain,” Arthur nodded. “By the end of the hour, everyone will need to be in position, so we must not delay.”

“Naturally,” the alien man nodded with a smile as Arthur led him to the chambers above.

A hard decision had to be made, and Arthur had simply seen no other path than the one chosen. A cancer had invaded their planet in the form of divine fanaticism. And like cancer, these organizations would fight each other to eventually leave the body they inhabited dead, broken, or mutated beyond recognition. So he had chosen to battle this cancer by introducing a metaphorical chemo-therapy – a harmful method that he at least had a semblance of control over. One he hoped would give their planet a new life.

Once they reached the chamber above, Ell’Hakan turned to three of his followers. “Go.”

The three of them nodded as they all teleported away. Space mages, all three of them.

“What do you intend for them to do?” Arthur asked.

“Something for the future. Only a fool doesn’t plan for tomorrow,” Ell’Hakan said with a comforting smile. “Do not worry. I will keep my promise, and their task is of no consequence to our plan. Once our business concludes, and if we are successful, you shall have this world, just as the contract dictates.”

Arthur nodded, feeling assured. “Very Well. The Disciple should arrive soon.”

As if he had predicted the future, a young man walked into the room. Arthur once more felt pressured as he knew this person was at the very peak of D-grade already. Just a single step away from his evolution and a vital piece in their strategy.

“Greetings, Disciple of Eversmile,” Ell’Hakan greeted the young man with a bow. “Have you made the preparations? Assembled them all?”

“They are ready,” the young man named William simply said as he looked at the being of ash. “I take it you will be the one to lead them?”

“Such is the arrangement. Lead me to them, human,” the rumbling voice of the Unique Liform said.

The more time passed, the more assured Arthur felt. Despite not a single one of them being in C-grade, they had a chance. But the Chosen was powerful, and so was this Fallen King. There were also many other factions...

Ell’Hakan noticed Arthur’s doubt and comforted him. “As long as you do your part, so will we do ours. Remember who stands before you. Now... let us begin our story of conquest and liberation.”

Miyamoto sat in meditation within his chambers. The wind was blowing hard as the flowers swayed, the world itself in contrast to his inner calm. He had been contacted earlier by Ms. Wells of Haven and informed that Jake believed something was wrong.

The Sword Saint would not disregard the hunter's judgment and was prepared.

He opened his eyes as the ground rumbled. Yells went through the entire compound, and the city of Saya was in chaos as the security forces moved to find those responsible or identify their city's attacker. All he heard in the distance was that the teleporters were all destroyed. Miyamoto slowly stood up and sighed.

"Who are you people?" he spoke as two figures appeared. Both with orange skin. He frowned as he felt their power. These people... stronger than the Judge of the Court.

"We come at the behest of the United Cities Alliance as well as our lord, the Celestial Child, Ell'Hakan. By his grace, we offer you the opportunity to surrender and to join us in our quest to purge this world of divine influence," one of them said.

Miyamoto frowned. "What does this purging consist of?"

"The death or escape of all those who serve their gods as puppets," the other one of his two visitors answered. "We do not care for those blessed by gods with no alliances or factions, such as the Primordial you call your Patron."

“You are starting a war,” Miyamoto said, his frown deepening. “One that neither Noboru Clan nor I will take any part in.”

“Very well,” the first person spoke again. “It shall be told you died with honor.”

Miyamoto drew his blade as the two were upon him, and in an instant, he was blasted out of his personal compound, flying through the air and out of the city. He landed in the plains outside the city as the two figures appeared to his sides

The Sword Saint got into a defensive position as the two charged again, the old man ready this time.

Caleb had instantly put the true Skyggen in full lockdown after Miranda contacted him. A choice that would prove incredibly wise as not long after the attack arrived. The fake Skyggen had its teleportation arrays all blown up in an instant, and even the secret circles set up by the Court were destroyed.

He moved quickly as he evacuated his parents, wife, and child to a shelter, and just in time, too, as he got reports of incoming attackers. Yet they did not move to actually attack but had simply stationed themselves outside.

As the Judge of the Court of Shadows, Caleb was usually informed about something like this happening... but he had been taken by surprise, and from the sheer level of coordination, this was not some minor attack. They had simultaneously struck nearly every settlement and every single faction at once. He had no idea what these people were planning, but he soon got an idea as more and more intel arrived.

It was a full-on attempt at a planetary takeover.

All over the part of the planet inhabited by humans, similar scenes took place. Armies appeared in cities out of nowhere as residents showed their true colors. The United Cities Alliance had long been considered the largest singular faction and was now showing it. In many places, they simply caused civil unrest. Others went and directly attacked the local City Lord to take control, effectively expanding the scope of the alliance

In the cities that were too powerful or with a populace that could not be infiltrated, far more common forms of warfare were deployed as each city was cut off. Many City Lords that had simply allied with a religious group surrendered immediately once under pressure as they had no way to get swift reinforcements and feared for their lives.

Within less than half an hour, the once well-connected planet with a sprawling teleportation network was turned into a planet of isolated islands with vast distances between each of them.

“Earth under attack, teleportation network down planet-wide, Sword Saint MIA, Caleb isolated, and yet to establish any contact with other cities,” Jake heard from Miranda as his feeling of wrongness was at an apex. The message almost gave him relief as finally, he knew what had caused it.

There was not a hint of hesitation as Jake went to the teleporter in his residence. The moment he reached it, he tried to activate it but felt like the connection was slightly unstable.

“Villy, something is wrong with the teleporter. Can I still use it?” Jake asked with slight panic.

“It will take you to Earth if that is what you ask. It will even take you to your city,” the god answered promptly. As if he had been waiting.

“What is happening on Earth?” Jake asked, knowing the god knew.

“Jake, there are things mortals and gods have to deal with. This is not something that involves me. But... good luck, I believe in you, do your best,” Villy said as he cut off the connection, leaving Jake frowning even more than before. Villy seemed almost worried? But he did understand the part about this not being an issue for the god to deal with.

Without hesitation, he activated the teleporter and was sent through the void. The journey was thankfully uneventful as Jake touched down right in front of the monument erected to allow his teleportation and-

BOOM!

Right behind him, the monument exploded. Debris and rock flew around his ears as he took in everything his sphere saw. Flying pieces of the broken monument, soil and dust spewed up from everywhere, and red flames soared up into the sky from the attack that had broken the installation.

Jake turned his head almost robotically as he saw three figures land amongst the rubble of his now cut-off way off Earth. He stared at what the man in the front was holding as that something was thrown toward him. It landed a few meters in front of Jake and rolled on the ground as he stared down at the lifeless eyes of the monument’s creator’s severed head. Chris’ head.

“Welcome home, Chosen of the Malefic Viper,” a familiar voice said as Jake looked up and saw the Chosen of Yip of Yore – Ell’Hakan.

“I did tell you we would meet sooner than you expected,” he spoke in a calm tone. “My condolences for the builder; he was useful while it-“

Jake didn't give the man a chance to speak as he charged. A few hours ago, he had been doing alchemy in peace. Everything had happened so fast, and Jake barely had time to properly register what was going on. But... he didn't need to.

His eyes burned with pure anger as a katar appeared in each hand. Arcane Awakening activated at full power immediately as there was no hesitation or doubt.

He was going to kill every single one of them.