

Hunter 53

Chapter 53: Goals

Jake didn't know how much time had passed before he opened his eyes once more. Or, to be more accurate, he saw out of his already open eyes. He found himself in a rather lovely-looking room. Scratch that understatement; it looked like the presidential suite of some over-the-top fantasy world.

Gaudy, clearly magical, chandeliers hung from the ceiling, with every piece of furniture overly ornated with extremely detailed carvings - all of them depicting a snake.

"So, how long ya gonna stand in the middle of my bedroom before saying hi?" a voice said, startling Jake out of his stupor.

Turning around, he saw a scaled man, now wearing quite a nice-looking outfit. It was a combination of a modern suit and a more old-school style. If he had to put his hand on it, it looked like something Dracula might wear.

"How did I get here?" Jake asked frowning. He couldn't remember what he was doing before this and got a headache whenever he tried to.

"Now, this is where it gets interesting. Our connection from the blessing is two-way, you know? Though this is a first for me for someone to appear like this. Just know that you did this," the Malefic Viper said, chuckling as he added. "Though I did help a little bit."

Bringing a hand to his head, Jake still had no idea what the hell had happened. Turning to the Viper, he asked. "Where exactly are we?"

“My bedroom,” The Malefic Viper said, still smiling. “More accurately, we are in the headquarter of my little Order. The great, the magnificent Order of the Malefic Viper!”

Spreading out his arms with a goofy smile, Jake could only chuckle a bit. “Very humble of you.”

“Well, a certain amount of ego is certainly required for one to ascend to godhood,” the Malefic Viper said, as he took a seat at the table. “Come on, take a seat, and calm down a bit.”

Following the advice, Jake sat down on the chair as he rested his head in his hands. What exactly was he doing before he got here? He remembered wanting to meet his colleagues. But after that, everything seemed all murky to him.

He had made contact... met them... ambush... Jake suddenly opened his eyes wide as he remembered. He had been betrayed. He had run. He got through a barrier, and the final thing he remembered was charging into a group of three raptors before he blacked out.

“I died,” Jake muttered as he looked towards the ground. “I fucking died.”

The Malefic Viper looked at him a bit as he laughed out loud. “So, is this the afterlife you expected?”

Jake, still somber, looked up at him. “So... this is what happens when you die? You appear in a gaudy room with a god cracking jokes?”

“Well, that entirely depends on a lot of things, but yes, a blessing can affect where your soul ends up after death,” he answered. “Though no, unless extraordinary circumstances represent themselves, death means death. End of story.”

“Does dying during the tutorial count as such extraordinary circumstances?” Jake asked bitterly.

“Sadly not. At least I have never encountered it,” the Viper said. “Death, no matter how it happens, will result in you leaving the tutorial for good and all rewards lost. Besides anything directly related to circumventing death, dying in combat results in just that: Death.”

He made a big silly smile at Jake as he finished, the archer looking back confused at him. Until it finally hit him.

“Wait, what the fuck, I’m not dead?” Jake asked as he perked up, staring daggers at the Viper. “What the hell, man?”

The Malefic Viper answered by laughing hysterically at Jake's outburst. “You should have seen yourself! Pure gold! Pure gold!”

His amusement was shortlived, however, as he turned severe. “This doesn’t make your situation good, though. Your body is in a shitty state, and your lifeforce is unbelievably weak. Your physical body is likely in a very vulnerable state right now.”

Jake, hearing that, also turned serious. "What can I do? And how the hell am I here if I am not dead?"

"You can't really do anything except trying to calm down. Your body is healing by itself; you just have to not stress and inhibit said regeneration. As to why you are here... because you chose to. Or at least part of you did. Not something I have experienced before with someone of such low rank," the Malefic Viper said, as he continued the lengthy explanation.

"Karmic projections aren't that uncommon, but the way you did it is exceedingly risky. One could say that a part of your soul has traveled through the karmic bond created by the blessing I gave you last time we met. I would recommend not doing it this way again, as if the other party has even the faintest of nefarious intent towards you, crushing your projection, and thus the fragment of your soul would be extremely easy. The damage to your soul wouldn't be easily healed from that and can result in many negative side-effects."

Jake couldn't help but get a bit scared upon hearing that. "How the hell did I manage to sever a part of my soul and send it here?"

"On that matter, I can't help you. Well, I could, but I am not going to. Methods to do things like that are not exactly common knowledge," the Malefic Viper said as he shook his head. "Perhaps you simply sought to seek refuge somewhere and accidentally made your way here with a part of your soul? Just a guess."

That certainly was a possibility when Jake thought about it. Perhaps his instincts had taken over and, in desperation, somehow managed to do it. Which also kind of was an example of how his instincts were just that: Instincts. It was fast kneejerk reactions and a powerful sense of intuition. This meant that he far from always made the best decisions when he relied purely on his instincts. Especially not in complicated matters.

Perhaps coming here was a mistake. At least Jake didn't think the Malefic Viper had any evil intentions towards him, so he shouldn't be in any danger. But making his way back to his body and the tutorial was, without a doubt, his top priority.

"Can I return to my body somehow? Or is my consciousness split or something? How exactly does this work?" Jake asked.

"Nah, things aren't like that. Whenever your body is ready, you will naturally return. I made sure of that. It's also just a small part; it ain't like you made a clone," the scaled god answered. "Just wait and hope someone doesn't finish off your body in the meantime."

Jake didn't get why the guy was still in such a merry mood despite his possible demise at any moment. "I barely dare ask, but... what would happen if someone did that?"

"Poof!" The Viper said as he made a small cloud of smoke appear from his hands, "and you're gone."

"So... death?" Jake asked, sour at the showoff in front of him.

"Yep. Permanent," he answered. "Though don't worry, I have a feeling you'll be just fine."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Jake decided to trust him for now. "So... what am I supposed to do in the meantime?" Jake asked.

“Well, since you dared to intrude into my personal chambers, the least you can do is to entertain me a bit,” the Malefic Viper said jokingly. “What have you been up to since passing the challenge dungeon? And did ya get any nice rewards?”

“I guess It was decent...” Jake began as he explained what he had been doing since their last meeting. To his surprise and embarrassment, the Malefic Viper had heard his small prayer before ingesting the unholy amalgamation of poison he used to pass the challenge dungeon.

He told of returning to the tutorial forest but quickly found that there really wasn't much to talk about, so they did like their last sit-down and started discussing broader subjects and themes instead.

Elsewhere in the Order, a green-haired woman sat meditating. Opening her eyes, she sighed as she thought of how to handle the Malefic Viper's return. The banquet had gone well, and the proper ceremony would begin in only a few days.

She couldn't help but chuckle a little at the thought of the ignorant ones that the Malefic Viper had talked to the day prior and their surprise upon discovering that they had conversed directly with their Patron.

Getting up, she decided to walk the halls. She was the Hall Master after all. The Lord Protector had returned to his realm and had begun making his own preparations together with his direct followers. The ceremony would be grand for sure.

As she walked the hall, she eventually ended up close to her Patron's chambers. Not wanting to disturb him, she prepared to leave but heard voices coming from the room.

“That sounds utterly idiotic of you,” an unknown voice said.

Surprised, the Hall Master stayed to listen. She knew of everyone with access to this area of the Order, and yet she didn't recognize this one. She considered scanning the room with her mana but feared that it would offend the Viper.

More Importantly,... who was this person speaking to? Could it be their god? No, impossible, no one would dare-

“Hey, give me a break. I thought it sounded like a great plan at the time,” she heard the Malefic Viper answer as he laughed.

“If the goal was to get slapped across the face, then sure,” she heard the other person answer, also laughing.

Frozen she stood there... was this person... mocking her god? Had another god entered without her knowledge? But what god would dare come here and talk so casually with the Viper himself?

No, she had to investigate, even if her life depended on it. Perhaps it was a test to see her devotion by not allowing slights to his honor? Yes, that had to be it.

With great resolve, she made her way to the room. She already decided to enter, but teleporting in would still be a bit too disrespectful.

As she was about to knock on the door, it opened, revealing the happenings within. Two people were sitting at a small table. No, one god and a... projection? She felt the faint aura of the Viper himself coming from the conjured image, but the aura it gave off was of a different person.

“Ah, Jake, this is Viridia, the big boss of my Order. Well, Snappy and I not included. Boss of the mortals, I guess, would be most accurate,” he said, as the projection also turned to look at her.

Jake and the woman looked at each other as both froze.

To Jake, she looked... impossible. Green hair, glowing yellow eyes, and a face that would put any model from Earth to shame. Quite frankly, she looked far too perfect for it to be natural. Perhaps she had a hidden skill or something, but Jake felt like the only reasonable response would be to show loyalty towards her.

Luckily his bloodline didn't really care for that, so he managed to stay seated.

Viridia, on the other hand, was equally surprised. This person was Jake, her Patron's supposed 'friend'. Obviously, the man was weak, but she got a weird feeling as she looked into his eyes. She couldn't quite describe it, but if she had to compare it to something, it would be a lesser feeling of reverence, not unlike what she felt when she was in the presence of her Patron.

It was the result of the True Blessing without a doubt. The blessing on top of the massive benefits it already granted was also a message. That he was chosen. Most holders were known as popes, prophets, saints, and champions. It was a way to mark the most critical mortal by a god. Which thoroughly made Jake an outlier.

"Eh, nice to meet you," Jake said.

"This servant greets the chosen one," Viridia said as she knelt, surprising Jake.

"Aaaand she made it awkward," the Malefic Viper laughed with faux annoyance. "Come on, take a seat. We were discussing how to handle rejection when your former crush decides to try and kill you in cold blood."

"And the people I thought were my friends," Jake added, as he seemed a bit downtrodden. "Though I still think it is all based on some stupid misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding or not. It wouldn't matter if you died now, would it?" the Viper said, shaking his head. "What's done is done; the goal now is to move forward. And get your sweet revenge, of course. You fucked up this time, stupidly walking into an obvious ambush like a moron, and got smashed. Learn from it, and don't do it again."

"I don't know... I just thought that I cou-"

"Well, you thought wrong. Stop being so naive and trusting. You're far too weak to act like that."

Turning to Viridia once more, who was still standing there unsure what to do, the Malefic Viper ordered.

"Take a seat, and give us your thoughts. A female perspective is always valuable."

Rushing as if a scared rabbit, she hurried to sit down as she tried to calm herself down and formulate a response. This situation was far too informal for her taste, and she couldn't help but get nervous. Steeling herself, she managed to squeeze out: "I believe the advice of the Patron to be the best thing to do."

Shaking his head, the Malefic Viper sighed to himself inwardly. Devout followers were nice to have, but they made for terrible conversation partners. Turning back to Jake, he continued.

"Jake, what do you want?"

"I want to return to my body and hopefully not die, I guess?" he answered.

"No, what is your goal? What do you want in the long run?" the Viper asked once more.

What do I want? He hadn't really thought much of it. He wanted to survive, of course, and that had been the main thing everything revolved around. He had always been a rather one-track person, focusing on the matter at hand first and foremost. The looming threat of death had, of course, been a good motivator not to get too lost in thought in the dungeon.

But thinking on it more in-depth, why did he want to survive? What for? Besides the basic instinct to survive that every living being had. What did he want to achieve? Right now, he wanted to somehow clear up the misunderstanding with Jacob and the others... or did he really?

He did want to get revenge on that red-robed bastard with the spear along with Richard and that metal caster.

If thinking long term goals, however... he wanted to find more challenges and fights. Not just fight weak or scheming prey, but powerful enemies. He craved the near-euphoric feeling he got from fighting the ambushers on that first night.

He wanted to overcome challenges and climb higher in the system. See exactly how powerful he and his enemies could become. He wanted to improve.

"I want to do whatever I want," Jake answered after thinking deeply on the matter.

"True freedom is indeed a worthy goal," the Malefic Viper said as he nodded. "But what do you want to do with this freedom?"

"I want to be able to see what this multiverse has to offer. Challenge myself and see exactly how far I can go. Or at least go out in a cool way," Jake answered with a cheeky smile.

The Viper returned the smile: "Then don't allow yourself to be chained down by your past. Stand above all of them. Schemes and planning, in the end, fall before absolute power. Reach a level where your word becomes truth; misunderstanding dispelled with a wave of your hand. Your enemies either cowering in fear or dead. To strive for progress is to keep moving forward ruthlessly."

"Sounds like a plan," Jake laughed as he looked towards the ceiling as it started getting blurrier by the moment.

"I think my body wants its soul back," he said, as he stood up from the chair, the Viper doing the same.

"Take care, my friend. May we meet again soon," the god said, adding. "Let's hope it's not due to you being near death, though. Stay true to yourself, but stop being stupid."

With a final fist bump with the god, he nodded. "Thanks for the talk."

"Just remember, Jake," The Viper said, as he turned unusually severe, letting his aura wash over the room. "Freedom doesn't come without power, and power doesn't come cheap. Strive for it. Hunger for it. Make it, so you are never betrayed again. So no one dares to. And if they do... crush them like the pathetic ants they are. You will find yourself on a mountain of corpses. Be sure you're the only one standing on the top."

These were the last words Jake heard as his projected body disappeared as the soul fragment returned from whence it came. Turning to the even more astonished Hall Master who had just silently been observing everything, he smiled.

"So, what ya think?"

However, she didn't hear the words as she was shaking from the pure killing intent in his aura that still lingered. For all of his antics and unusual personality, she had nearly forgotten.

The Malefic Viper had never been a benevolent god.

