

Hunter 531

Chapter 531 - Just Winging It

Jake was rubbing his hands as he looked forward to seeing Villy in a perilous situation that forced him to escape. Entering the vision, he was not sure what to expect. Maybe Villy getting beaten up? Him waltzing into the territory of some far more powerful monster, making him tug his tail between his legs?

As the vision appeared, it was neither of that. He saw Villy flying through an odd area with purple-ish mist everywhere. Comet-like balls of ice flew all around him, some of them several kilometers across while others were far smaller. Jake also saw that sometimes space itself seemed to crack, and small vacuums opened up, sucking in mist and some of the smaller comets.

He had a hard time figuring out what was going on. Villy was in his C-grade Wyvern form and looked incredibly distressed as he dodged comet after comet. It was like he flew aimlessly. A few minutes passed before a giant comet suddenly exploded, only to reassemble again but into a vaguely humanoid form. Villy did not hesitate and released a breath on the newly born... comet elemental? Ice elemental? Either or, he quickly dealt with it, but that didn't at all give him a reprieve.

Finally, Villy seemed to spot something. With high speed, he flew to the side and, to Jake's surprise, encountered a massive wall of purple ice. Flying alongside the wall, Villy soon found a small cave and stopped before it.

His body began morphing and shrinking, and within five seconds, the familiar humanoid form of Villy appeared. Familiar, yet foreign. He looked young in the vision, and Jake had a strong feeling this was the earliest vision of the would-be Primordial he had ever experienced.

Villy collapsed and leaned against the inside wall of the small ice cavern and breathed heavily. He closed his eyes for a moment before summoning a large metal plate of sorts to block off the hole, sealing himself within the cavern.

Sitting back down, the Viper surprisingly fell asleep as time accelerated. Once the Viper woke up again, he quickly took out some kind of magical device. It looked like a compass of sorts, and Villy frowned as he looked at it. After a bit, he took out another few weird devices as his frown only grew.

“Fuck,” he just said as he groaned and brought both his hands to his head. “The exits should have remained for at least another week... did that bastard lie to me? I swear...”

Just those few words made Jake put two and two together and realize what was happening. The Viper was in some kind of minor world or dimension, a bit like Yalsten but probably far smaller. Also, clearly far more unstable compared to Yalsten in its heyday.

Jake knew about these kinds of places. They were often small dimensions that resided in the infinite layers of space. One could not break into them, with the only way in certain natural entrances that sometimes opened, and one could also only exit through these small holes. These dimensions tended to be of incredible value exactly because of this. Any small world that had been isolated for a long time was bound to have given birth to several potent natural treasures, especially as many of these small worlds rarely tended to have beasts or monsters and had singular dominating affinities. There would still be enemies, but it was often only very specialized creatures like the elementals or creatures born to guard the treasures.

It appeared that Villy had entered one such place with bad information and found himself screwed over and trapped. Which maybe didn't sound that bad if the world would open up again, but there were a few minor issues. First of all, how long would it take? It could take longer than Villy's natural lifespan. One had to remember that Aeon Clok had killed people far more powerful than himself by sealing them in a world a bit like this and just having the passing of time kill them all.

Then there was also the issue that these places could get far more dangerous during their lockdown period, and based on the comets going wild and Villy seeming panicked, Jake assumed this was the case.

"I need to get out of here," Villy talked to himself as he stood up and took out some more magical devices, including the compass.

"It hasn't been that long... or is the layer meant to be this weak?" he muttered as he considered his options. Jake saw the Viper deep in thoughts before steeling himself. "It could work."

Wings appeared on his back, making him look a bit like Jake with his wings out.

"Those fuckers... they somehow accelerated and sealed the entrances," Villy said as he double-checked some weird magical circle on a map. "At least halfway sealed them."

Jake was beginning to question if a C-grade Villy could truly escape a naturally sealed-off world like this. One had to remember that after Yalsten was sealed off, no one could escape, not even the A-grades. But if this was not a natural sealing but one simply accelerated by mortal hands, then it should still be possible.

Villy sat down in meditation with his wings summoned as Jake felt the energy and toxic blood move within them. Time seemed to move in odd ways as days passed with the Viper focusing on his wings. Jake got the feeling this was not some sudden burst of inspiration but him picking up the work on an ongoing project. The Viper had either worked on an escape skill like this before or had already completed several elements of the skill.

However, what was important was that it was not done, allowing Jake to feel part of the process. The first thing he picked up on was that each wing was different. It was like the Viper poured different

energies and manipulated the blood with variance, with each wing having different mixes of concepts as a result. Jake felt them both and noticed what differed.

One wing held blood that would be able to corrode passive energy, and the other wing held blood that would corrode mana with intent. Jake was momentarily confused but instantly realized why this was actually brilliant. Poisons of similar natures tended to amplify one another, while those of opposite natures would attack each other. This did not fully apply due to the sheer variety of concepts in each wing, but it eliminated most of the potential conflicts that could arise. Also, the Viper's infused intent in each wing was now physically removed from one another, and focusing his intent to accomplish the two tasks in separate wings was far more efficient and easier.

Next up was the process of creating the cocoon. On this note, then Jake had thought that the fast movement Villy had displayed in the first vision was part of the skill's effect, but that was quickly proven wrong. Nothing done would actually make him faster, but due to the nature of the magic, it would rapidly increase speed momentarily. The mist would erode everything in his path, making it like he was effectively flying in a vacuum of concepts. Considering the limited time the cocoon would last, fast movement right off the bat was also a necessity, and then one just had to let the momentum carry forward.

The vision progressed more or less as expected as Jake saw the Viper adapt and make the Wing's skill effect on the fly – pun intended. Feeling it like this, Jake had to admit that the Viper had truly been a monster. The toxic concepts that had taken Jake days to identify were found within hours by the Viper, and his level of energy control when it came to the toxic energy was utterly insane. He was at least slower than Jake in some places, but they were few and far between.

After what Jake estimated to be roughly five total days in the cave, the Viper opened his eyes and got ready. Scales covered his body as he flew out of the cave and into the storm of comets. He dodged them more easily now due to his smaller humanoid form, but it was clear he was not as fast in this form.

He flew for a quarter of an hour, periodically checking the compass he had brought until he was at the right spot. It was a weird fractured point in space that looked almost like a broken phone screen with microcracks everywhere.

The Viper took a deep breath as he got close and slowed down. That is when time slowed down, and Jake felt the skill be used for the first time. Both wings were infused with a lot of energy as Jake's eyes opened wide at discovering how he infused so much energy... he summoned several wings pretty much on top of each other at the same time.

An explosion sounded as both wings blew up from energy overload, Jake feeling the pain as he experienced Villy's body like it was his own. The Viper rapidly gathered the energy and wrapped it around him like a barrier. When he did so, Jake saw his body turn green and knew it was not due to his body changing... it was simply Jake seeing the effect of everything being corroded all around him.

A second explosion sounded out as the Viper shot forward towards the broken space. A faint trace was left in his wake as he went into the fractured exit point. The poison around him revolved at nearly impossible speeds, each particle of mist able to break down the fundamental laws of reality itself.

Once the Viper entered the fractured point, he simply phased into it. Even if the Viper was strong, he was not strong enough to break a space tunnel like this... but he could burn a small hole into it and pass through. Space reformed behind him like he had never been there, and Jake only saw a faint glimpse of darkness before Villy appeared in the outside world, surrounded by large snowy mountains. Behind him, a crack in reality had been formed, but it healed within a fraction of a second, so fast a simple blink would miss it.

The cocoon of mist dispersed nearly instantly, and the Viper began to fall to the ground, clearly exhausted. Jake felt a profound sense of weakness all over, and moreover, like a part of his Soulshape had been sacrificed to make the escape possible... which is when Jake found the final piece of the puzzle.

What he had been stuck on was how to control the poison. He now realized he didn't control it at all; it would control itself. What the Viper had done was sacrifice the wings themselves to infuse parts of himself into it. His own will and desire.

The last thing Jake saw was Villy turn in a certain direction, murder in his eyes. Clearly out for revenge against those who had dared to try and trap and kill him.

Everything then rewound, and Jake saw the vision again. Even if it appeared long, the entire vision had only been about fifteen minutes total, considering all the fast-forwarding.

Jake slowly hammered out the errors. He was confident and smiled as the vision ended, and Jake returned to the real world.

He appeared sitting inside Sandy's stomach, and instantly the worm was on him.

"Wow, what did you do? I felt something super weird just now, like, you were gone and then back or something? That was sooo weird... you were still kind of there, but not really, you know?" Sandy launched into a tirade.

"I did special magic," Jake just answered jokingly.

"Boo, you should share," Sandy answered.

“How about I share with you the results? Can you stop for a moment, so I can test this out? Just be warned, I will try to get out of here, and I can’t promise this won’t be a little painful. I may just make a hole or something on my way out,” Jake answered.

“Oh, go ahead; I will try and stop you, right?”

“Go ahead,” Jake answered confidently.

Jake focused as his wings appeared. The skill had already upgraded the moment he returned, and the learned knowledge turned instinctual. Everything happened instantly with the system’s assistance, as dozens of wings superimposed upon each other and exploded, forming a cloud of mist around him. He then sent himself flying forward towards the wall of the stomach chamber.

He observed everything carefully. He felt and saw himself impact the stomach wall, and the moment he did, it seemed to simply disintegrate. Everything turned black for a moment as no concept reached Jake, not even light. He felt entirely isolated from everything, and even his Sphere went haywire for a second. He felt the mist fight against everything and slowly consume itself to burn him a path, and then...

And then he was in the outside world.

Jake stopped and saw he was still in rocky mountainous terrain as the mist had already dispersed upon escaping. He took a moment to collect himself and saw the giant worm flying just above, and as he looked up, he also felt Sandy’s attention on him.

“You escape- I mean, got out!” Sandy said with surprise.

"That I did," Jake answered. He had to admit that he had expected the fatigue to be more prominent. Then again, he had a monstrous mana pool.

There were no marks anywhere on Sandy either, and Jake wondered why that was.

"That was so weird!" Sandy said, explaining to him what had happened. "I was just waiting and wondering what you were doing until you disappeared again and then just popped right out of my skin! Like, it makes no sense; it was like you weren't really inside me at all..."

Jake considered it for a moment before he understood the explanation. He had not even interacted with the physical body of Sandy, only the Soulshape, and one couldn't even say he had done that... it was more like he had been spat out of the Soulshape. He had to admit, even now, he still didn't entirely understand how the skill worked, and he had a feeling the Viper hadn't one hundred percent either when he made it.

Not that Jake would complain. He finally opened his messages and saw the upgraded skill.

[Wings of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – Refusing to remain earthbound, the Malefic Viper sprung wings to devour the skies. You, too, refuse to be earthbound. Allows the Alchemist to summon two phantasmal wings and take flight. While active, you can burn the blood within the wings and release potent toxic fumes. The toxicity and effects of the poison are based on Blood of the Malefic Viper. Toughness and maneuverability of the wings and speed are based primarily on Agility but receive a bonus from all physical stats. The wings count as part of your body for all relevant skills. Passively provides 1 Agility per level in Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May the sight of your wings be the harbinger of death.

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[Wings of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – Refusing to remain earthbound, the Malefic Viper sprung wings to devour the skies. Refusing to be bound or trapped anywhere, the wings of the Malefic One shall always leave a path of escape. Allows the Alchemist to summon two phantasmal wings and take flight. While active, you can burn the blood within the wings and release potent toxic fumes. The toxicity and effects of the poison are based on Blood of the Malefic Viper. Toughness and maneuverability of the wings and speed are based primarily on Agility but receive a bonus from all physical stats. The wings count as part of your body for all relevant skills. Allows the Alchemist to further infuse and sacrifice both wings to create an opportunity to escape if in a perilous situation. Doing this makes resummoning the wings impossible for a variable duration, dependent on Agility and the amount of energy infused into the wings upon the sacrifice. Passively provides 3 Agility per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May the sight of your wings be the harbinger of death and instruments of escape to feed another day.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 184 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 185 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 182 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

Wings was a contender, if not a winner, for longest skill description by now. The added description did not say much he didn't already know but did explain one thing he was unaware of... he couldn't summon his wings again. It was like the Soulshape framework itself had taken damage from using the skill. The more Jake looked at it, the more insane it seemed. The Viper had found a way to summon a new appendage to the soul and then used that added appendage as a way to sacrifice a part of the soul. Jake knew it was possible before as a concept but had never seen it used like this. The most common variant was severe boosting skills that could leave long-lasting damage to the soul.

The problem with the soul was that one really had to just give it time to heal. While there were treasures to hasten it or very special things like the Soul Renewal he had used on the King, the best medicine was truly just time.

Oh, and then there was the added Agility which Jake would definitely not complain about. Two levels in his profession were also a welcome addition if a rather expected one.

"So..." Sandy said after a while.

"Sure, sure, go ahead and gobble me up again," Jake sighed as the worm happily ate him like a tasty snack. Once he was inside, Sandy began moving again, continuing their adventure across the world.

"Hey, human Jake, can you tell me more about that weird magic before?" Sandy asked.

Jake wanted a break anyway and obliged. "You see, my good friend Villy, the Malefic Viper we talked about before, has given me a Legacy that has a lot of skills and..."

They talked and relaxed as Jake only had one thing he felt a bit sad about. The vision of Villy had not really been the embarrassing moment Jake had hoped for, but more just the snake god showing off how skilled he was.

Oh well, better luck next time. There had to be a vision where Villy was caught in a really embarrassing moment, right?

Chapter 532 - Godly Interference & Advice

"This is complete bullshit," Carmen said as she stared at the golden projection.

"It wasn't my call, but it comes all the way from the top," the projection of Sven said, shaking his head.

"This may sound curt, but it is partly because of you. Your personal relationship with the Malefic's Chosen is both a merit and a demerit. On the one side, it ensures us a spot in this world, but on the other hand, then if someone else gets in charge, we may be ostracized."

"Still complete fucking bullshit," Carmen now raged. "Do you really think Jake will just be all fine with us supporting this orange Cheeto fuck? Do you think he will just go: 'oh well, what can you do?' and let us go about our day like nothing? Fuck no, there will be hell to pay."

"You are talking as if his victory is a given," Sven answered. "Even if he is stronger than this Ell'Hakan, it does not mean he will beat him in the political arena. Besides, it is not even Ell'hakan we are supporting, but Arthur, another human. We are not betraying anyone, for we were never on the side of Lord Thayne, to begin with. He will get even better terms than Arthur if he comes out on top, and with Miranda likely around, she will be a voice of reason."

"Funny," Carmen scoffed. "You think he gives a shit about some terms or benefits? Jake is an impulsive kind of guy, and if he thinks you slighted him, that is the only thing that matters."

"Carmen, we are not getting anywhere if we talk in circles," Sven sighed. "The decision has already been made, and none of us can do anything about it. All we can do is make the best out of the situation. The top brass thinks this will have the highest overall chance of success, so that is why we are going with it. You can agree or disagree, and it changes nothing. If you want to do anything, it should be to make sure Jake stays positive towards us if he wins."

Carmen just kept frowning as she abruptly turned off the projector with a huff, still thinking it was fucking bullshit.

"Ree?" Sylphie asked, still sitting beside her, not entirely getting everything that was going on.

Sylphie had chosen to stay with Carmen during the time since Jake left, and the two of them had used Paradise as a home base while exploring. Renato was the kind of two-faced asshole Carmen expected and did not choose any side at all, only fortifying the city itself in case anyone chose to target them. Not that she cared, he let her and Sylphie do as they wanted, and Carmen's mother was doing way better. She had settled down and now just worked as a tailor. The original plan of bringing her to an area Valhal controlled had been delayed due to the Salvento family having a lot of assets to claim and Renato being very good at convincing them to stay "just a little longer" all the time.

"I don't know, Sylphie," Carmen sighed. "This entire situation is fucked up, and they just expect me to sit tight and do nothing? You know what, how about we go fuck up some of their cities? Go punch some City Lords to give them a bit of their own medicine."

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched excited, probably just wanting to get in a few good fights.

"Let's do i-"

Carmen's eyes opened wide as she felt a headache come on. She knew what it was and gritted her teeth as she heard the voice of Gudrun.

"Carmen, I understand your feelings," she heard the voice of Gudrun say as the god launched into a lengthy explanation. "You remind me much of my husband, you know? Like Valdemar, you never see the

bigger picture because you personally don't have to. But this entire scenario is quite delicate. Earth is a melting pot right now and in an untenable situation if one has even the slightest foresight. The Holy Church and Risen would never get along, and not even the Viper's Chosen could create peace among two factions that have warred for trillions of years. In the same way, then some humans will never come to accept the Order of the Malefic Viper either. They will never be able to disconnect the Chosen from the Order, for historically, there has never been any such separation. You know him as a person; they know him as a symbol. Conflict is inevitable and healthy, and this entire conflict will only lead to Earth entering a more stable state. No matter who wins. All we want to make sure of is that no matter who wins, we keep an opening. If the Chosen chooses to close this opening, then so be it. Removing ourselves as an organizational presence from Earth is truly not that big of a loss, and as per the doctrine of Valhal, you would be able to stay if you wanted. Anyone would. And remember, we have not actually chosen a side; we have, in fact, done the opposite and said that we will support either side that wins. If the Malefic's Chosen is the kind of individual that will make a "me or them" ultimatum, then I will only feel strengthened in this decision. For that is not the kind of man we would want to work with in the long term. So, Carmen, all I am asking of you is to do nothing. For remember, what you do will be the actions of Valhal. I cannot tell you what you can or can't do, but I can implore you to think about it. If you are truly confident the Malefic's Chosen will win, then just sit tight and keep trusting in him to handle it."

It was a damn long message that came like a huge package. Carmen took a while to process it all and wasn't sure what to think... Gudrun had been incredibly hands-off for Carmen, and she was surprised any god from Valhal would suddenly contact her, much less the wife and de-facto leader of the day-to-day operations of Valhal.

This is why Carmen found it suspicious, and even if she had a damn headache from receiving a divine message, she still responded.

"You do care about Earth... if not, you wouldn't go this far as to contact me and try to explain things," Carmen answered.

Carmen got an amused chuckle in return as Gudrun answered. "No, we care about the people on it... which is also why I mentioned that you could stay on Earth even if Valhal was made to leave. People like Jake Thayne care about the people they choose to care about. He has chosen you as someone he cares about. So even if Valhal leaves Earth and you stay, we won't have lost anything worth mentioning. And if

the Malefic's Chosen loses, I think it wise for you to bring your loved ones and leave Earth altogether, even if we do enter a partnership. For the safety of both you and the potential new leader of your planet."

"The way you talk makes it sound like there is even a chance Jake loses," Carmen still argued.

"There is. Maybe not this time, but the Chosen of Yip of Yore is not one to be taken lightly. Yip of Yore isn't either. He is a very unknown character to many, and what many do not know is that he showed up to Valhal and challenged Valdemar to a duel not that long ago. The mere fact that he still lives today should be proof that he is not the jester many believe him to be but can represent a genuine problem even to gods who stand at the pinnacle," Gudrun explained.

Carmen wanted to argue more, but her head was pounding. Gudrun also knew this and retracted her presence, leaving Carmen alone. She gritted her teeth and clenched her fists as she turned to a worried Sylphie.

"Change of plans. Fuck those cities and let's just go slaughter something else," Carmen said with much annoyance. She was pissed off and really felt like getting her frustrations out on some unsuspecting beasts. Besides, she and Sylphie should be able to handle a few weaker C-grades by now.

Someone else was also finally contacting his Patron after quite a while of no talking. After having a lot of long conversations, Jake finally initiated contact with a certain god.

"So, got another vision," Jake said as he reached out to Villy.

"Related to Wings, I see," Villy just answered.

"Yep."

"Are you busy or something?" Jake asked, feeling like Villy was far less talkative than usual. He had not reached out, even after Jake got his Wings upgrade, which he usually did. Nor when Jake had helped "make" Sandy.

"I am just waiting for you to address... you know," Villy said.

"Oh. That. Yeah, alright. So, it is quite clear to me that this Ell'Hakan guy had prepared for a long-ass time and clearly did not hold back when it came to divine guidance. I am going to guess that this Yip of Yore had blessed people on Earth that helped to act as mouthpieces and relay messages for a while," Jake said, sharing his thoughts.

"That is precisely what they did," Villy answered with relief. "I will admit, I had expected you to be a bit angrier. You were taken by surprise, and someone died, with Earth being thrown into quite a situation. All something we both know I was aware of and could have warned you about."

"Well, yeah," Jake said with a shrug. "And you kind of did by telling me to stop slacking off, didn't you? Also, we had this talk before that this falls into mortal affairs. The one thing I am wondering is, why does this Yip not care and help his Chosen so much?"

"His goals for his Chosen are different from mine, and his Path is also very different. I cannot give you the exact reason as I don't know it, but he is up to something," Villy shared.

"I see," Jake answered.

"There is also the fact that you two are not equal. You are the Chosen of a Primordial. My Chosen. This was never a fair fight, to begin with, and he was just trying to even the playing field, expecting me not to do the same out of pride. I also trusted you to handle it yourself. Even if you suffer temporary setbacks, you should be able to overcome them. People may die, but as harsh as it may sound, that is something I am fully willing to see happen as long as you keep moving forward," Villy explained. "And about Yip himself, I will have him handled. I can feel he is cooking up something, but he is not the only one skilled in the kitchen."

Jake considered the Viper's words for a moment. "Is that also why no one else was warned? Aeon should have seen it coming. Or Stormild, if that damn elemental was paying attention. Shit, didn't you say Oras is the master of seeing stuff? Did none of those really warn their own people on Earth?"

"Nope, not a single warning was given to anyone. Mind you, the Witches of the Verdant Lagoon also noticed it would happen but said nothing. And I hadn't told them not to either. You just must understand that giving warnings like that isn't really a thing and is even frowned upon by the system. Not even for the Holy Church. It goes against convention, and if a settlement falls and a few billion members of a faction die, so what? It is a minor loss of no consequence, and in the eyes of many, just a healthy culling of the masses," Villy further added on.

"I get it, jeez," Jake said with a sigh. "Let's move on to a happier topic. Thoughts on my new ride?"

"I will admit, it is not actually a race I am familiar with," Villy confessed. "Mind you, Cosmic Worms are nothing new and only semi-rare across the multiverse, but a Cosmic Genesis Worm is a first for me."

"Any idea how I made it happen?" Jake asked.

"A few, but nothing concrete. Ultimately, we both know it is related to that monstrous Bloodline of yours as well as your arcane affinity. Rather than me trying to come up with theories, I find it better you just figure out the truth and then tell me," Villy answered.

"That I can do. Oh well, back to killing stuff and flying with my wormy friend until it is time to kick Ell'Hakan's ass and boot him off the planet," Jake said with a smile.

"Sounds like a plan. But I will give you one warning, as Yip clearly doesn't care about conventions. People like Yip and Ell'Hakan are annoying fucks. They are planners, through and through, and a head-on approach tends to never work out well. Their victory conditions also tend to vary widely. If his goal is just to institute a World Leader, then why would he ever fight you? There is no need to. So think about why he does what he does far more. Think about what his plan may be. I am not telling you to try and be a planner yourself, as quite frankly, you would suck at it, but I am telling you to broaden your field of view. You killing Ell'Hakan would be your best victory condition, and he knows that. Thus he will act and plan according to that. Additionally, then this kind of planner tends to have strategies with multiple win conditions, some better than others, but all acceptable, with more fail-safes than you can imagine. Chances are the final confrontation with him will not happen on your terms, and I am not sure you can do much to change that besides making sure that even if it is on his terms, it is also on yours and you are not taken by surprise. Anyway, that is all I am gonna say, and good luck," Villy said, sharing his final nugget of wisdom.

"Thanks, and good luck to you too," Jake said in return, having a feeling Villy was also up to something behind the scenes. He did say he would handle Yip of Yore, after all.

Their connection faded, and Jake reflected on how Villy had actually been relieved at Jake not blaming him. Jake did not see why he would. Villy had not been the one who told Ell'Hakan to come to Earth; he had not been the one who made the United Cities Alliance morons, and he had not sent Jake to the other side of the planet. True, Jake was targeted because he was the Viper's Chosen, but that too was something Jake had picked to be. He could have renounced the Blessing at any time before reaching D-grade, and now as a Heretic-Chosen, he had already embraced the Path and whatever issues it could

bring to be a Chosen. Sure, he still wanted to avoid the responsibilities, but that was only to be expected, as who likes responsibilities?

No, the only ones Jake blamed were the United Cities Alliance and Ell'Hakan. They were the ones who had started shit, and Jake would gladly throw that shit right back in their faces. He just had a bit of a distance to go, and some progress to make.

"Hey, Sandy, be a bit less picky for hunting spots," Jake said.

"Hm? Why?" Sandy asked curiously.

"I need one level for something good," Jake said with a smile. He had killed one weak C-grade without getting a level and knew the next one would give him that level-up. Which would mean it was finally time to get his last class skill from Avaricious Arcane Hunter.

Chapter 533 - Hunter Level 180 Skill Selection & Being Hunted

It had only taken Sandy about a day to find good prey for Jake, and it wasn't even guarding that good of a natural treasure according to the worm, heavily insinuating he should feel thankful.

His opponent had been this weird wooly thing that Jake had no idea what was about, but it bled and suffered from necrosis the same as everything else, and with it only being level 201, Jake quickly took it down. Quickly being a relative term as the damn ball of wool had still been damn tanky. Anyway, with it finally dead, the last level came.

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 180 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

And it was skill-selection time.

Avaricious Arcane Hunter class skills available

Jake was naturally excited. These last skill selections always felt special, and this profession skill had not disappointed with his freak soul mutation skill. Jake did not necessarily want a similar skill for his class but something more directly related to combat. Maybe an upgrade to Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter? Oh, how about a skill, any skill, that scaled with Perception? He would very much like that. He had some Free Points saved up, and if he happened to get a skill that scaled with Perception... well, he had an excuse.

So, without further ado, he dove in and saw five options. It was as expected, and true to tradition, he went through them.

[Minor Arcane Seal (Rare)] – Through the concept of stability, none shall find a path of escape. Allows the Hunter to create a seal by infusing stable arcane mana into a chosen target or area around the Hunter. Consumption of mana is dependent on the object or area the Hunter tries to seal. The durability of the seal is dependent on Wisdom and mana expenditure. Adds a minor bonus to the effects of Minor Arcane Seal based on Wisdom and Willpower.

And the first one was a solid dud that Jake quickly skipped over. He knew how to infuse stable mana into stuff already.

[Hunter's Blade-Fang Style (Epic)] – To you, your weapons are your fangs, and your fangs are your ultimate shield. A defensive combat skill that revolves around countering and dodging your foe to keep distance and minimize damage taken. Unlocks intermediate proficiency in the Hunter's Blade-Fang Style and adds a small bonus to the effects of Agility, Strength, and Perception when using a bladed weapon.

The first interesting option. It was an actual melee fighting technique skill. It had a slight overlap with Fang of Man, with the stat effect increasing while wearing a weapon. In cases like that, the strongest skill would take priority, and while you would gain a small bonus from the other one, it was minor. As for if he wanted to pick the skill? No. There was a chance Jake could upgrade it to the style he had made with sim-Jake, but there was also a risk the innate knowledge from this skill could lead him astray. One had to remember that Jake's fighting style was dependent on his Bloodline, so no normal skill would ever be offered that truly fit him. Unless it actually referred to Jake directly in the description, he wouldn't even consider it. Hence he moved on.

[Grand Arcane Explosion (Epic)] – Through sheer power and an abundance of resources, you can overwhelm your foes. Overload your surroundings with unstable arcane mana and detonate it all to create a massive explosion. This attack is especially effective against the environment but also causes significant damage to anything else caught in the blast. Adds a bonus to the effects of Intelligence and Wisdom when using Arcane Explosion.

Skill makes Jake go big boom; Jake no need; Jake already knows how to go big boom.

[Arcane-Shadow Vault of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Ancient)] – Your prey believes it can escape your avarice, foolish in its assumptions as your pursuit is endless. Through practice and sheer power, the Avaricious Arcane Hunter can turn into an Arcane-Shadow to either attack or defend. Allows you to vault forward a short distance between you and your destination. Phasing through physical or magical obstacles will result in either destroying the obstacle or impeding you entirely. Your methods are crude and destructive, allowing you to create an arcane explosion at your target destination based on the distance traveled. Adds a bonus to the effects of Agility, Endurance, and Intelligence when using Arcane-Shadow Vault of the Avaricious Hunter. WARNING: This skill is unlocked by and will serve as an upgrade to your existing Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra, resulting in the loss of the skill

And there it was. Jake had expected to see this kind of skill offered, and it came as expected. This was the reward for sim-Jake's work so far, but it was clearly not good enough. He knew that sim-Jake would not accept his Legacy merely being some ancient rarity skill. In fact, he was pretty sure his simulacrum

would want to beat him senseless if he picked it. Hence he moved on just as everyone would expect. Because, as always, the best was saved for last.

[Relentless Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Legendary)] – The Avaricious Arcane Hunter is relentless in his pursuit of a stronger foe, and it only ends when he so desires. Once a target is found, the hunt shall only end in death. When hunting prey, you only grow in deadliness. Allows the Avaricious Arcane Hunter to accumulate momentum during a hunt by slowly finding an opportunity to strike. This momentum can then be turned into a tangible weapon. Successfully landing blows while not taking damage yourself hastens the accumulation of hunting momentum. Can consume all hunting momentum to significantly empower a single attack to deal devastating damage. Momentum can carry over if a new hunt begins shortly after another one ends. All skill effects have an increased effect the higher the level your foe is. The base speed at which hunting momentum is accumulated as well as the maximum amount of momentum possible is determined by Perception.

Jake read the skill over carefully.

If one asked Jake what his biggest problem was, it would be huge finisher attacks. Arcane Powershot was damn strong, but not some massive finisher, and while Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter had filled that role for a good while, it wasn't at the level of what some other attacks he had seen. Carmen had her Fist of Ragnarok, his brother had that huge lighting attack, and many beasts also had supremely powerful attacks they could only release as a final gamble. Shit, that weird space-tunnel attack by the Panther had been insane, even for its level. Jake had kind of wanted something like that, and while he realized this skill would not give him some massively powerful blow, then it was good too. Dependent on how effective it actually was, of course.

There was only one huge plus. It was a skill that scaled purely with Perception and was a skill that allowed Jake to translate his Perception into actual damage. Some of his class skills and his archery skill already did this, but this added another layer. Moreover, nothing said it required one to use a ranged weapon, so Jake could also land a far more powerful melee blow using this Hunting Momentum. Yes, that was now the official name of the momentum Jake accumulated during the fight.

Needless to say, Jake picked the skill because why the hell wouldn't he? It was a no-brainer and clearly the best. The moment he did so, he felt the instinctual knowledge enter his head. Honestly, there wasn't much to it, and he knew that to truly get a feel for the skill and how good it was, he would need some actual combat. What he was sure of was that his overall damage output had just increased a lot.

After his talk with Villy, Jake had also changed his mind about just charging back. It seemed like Ell'Hakan and Arthur did have lines they refused to cross, and he had to trust other people in his life to be able to fend for themselves. Caleb should protect Jake's family, and Miranda could handle herself, especially if she managed to get to the Grand Mangrove River. In there, she should be absolutely safe. He also wondered why, even now, no one had tried to take the Pylon in Haven yet. As long as he wasn't put on that thirty-day timer, he truly wasn't in that much of a rush. And if it was taken, he could just get it right back.

Speaking of Miranda. Jake had already reached out for her to contact him once available. If Ell'Hakan was making some plans, so would Jake. Ell'Hakan had clearly done a lot of research into Jake and even had his Patron help, but his research was limited. There were things not even the gods knew or could find out.

So why not make use of that? Of course, for him to truly figure out a method of approach, he would need to speak and strategize with Miranda. He just hoped she had gotten to the Grand Mangrove River safely.

Miranda regretted not forcing Sultan along. Not to have his companionship or fighting power, but solely due to that flying ship of his. Neil had managed to teleport them far, and they were making good distance with him teleporting them a few more times, but outside of these teleports, they were slow.

The problem was with Mark and Louise, Hank's son and daughter. Neither of them had reached D-grade, making them far slower than everyone else and forcing Hank to carry one and Christen, one of Neil's party members, the other. Miranda was not at all a physically proficient fighter, but even she outclassed the two of them several times over.

Now, being slow would be fine if not for the fact they were being chased. It was clear that the United Cities Alliance wanted her dead, just as Ell'Hakan had warned, and a group was in hot pursuit. Clearly, then the United Cities Alliance had some teleporters still around somewhere, or at least some way to teleport around, as they quickly chased after, despite teleporting so far from Haven.

This meant that despite their headstart, they were slowly getting caught up with. It was unsure if they could fight this group, but Miranda doubted it. Neil and his party were good fighters, but not at all at the level of true elites, and information on them was also abundant, making her sure Arthur had factored them in. Miranda herself also wasn't a good fighter in a straight-on battle like this.

Luckily for them, they reached the Grand Mangrove River before they were fully reached by the other group.

"Shit," Neil cursed the moment they entered the mangrove. "I felt a teleport about... more than a kilometer, less than ten, right behind us."

"Can you teleport us further in?" Miranda asked with concern, looking at Hank and the others.

"No, this place is messing with my space magic quite badly, I can use it locally, but it is like the entire area is warped slightly," Neil shook his head.

During this time, they never stopped running as they dove further and further in. In far enough for monsters to appear and hassle them, but fortunately, Neil and his party were there to handle with. Eleanor, Levi, Silas, and Neil handled most everything, with Lillian also offering some support, but it was limited what she could do.

The water below them stirred as Miranda felt movement behind them through it. It was lucky the area was swamp-like, giving her some benefits as a Verdant Witch but far from enough to fight without proper preparation. Thinking quickly, Miranda took out some bottles she had gotten some Jake a long time ago for experiments. They all contained his blood infused with Blood of the Malefic Viper, and she had nearly forgotten she even had them after she discovered how useless they were if anyone else than Jake used the blood.

Crushing all the bottles, she spilled the liquid all over the water. She knew it could attract something they didn't want to attract, but it could also do just the opposite. Just after she did this, a large crocodile emerged from below, one nearly at the peak of D-grade.

"Hank! Take Mark and Louise and keep running!" Miranda yelled to the builder as Christen tossed Louise to him. Hank complied and started running further away. Not only because of the croc, but due to what came from behind.

Sadly, he did not get far. The water rose in front of him like a barrier as it crackled with lightning. Hank turned back in a panic, and so did everyone else who was not too busy with the crocodile.

A group of five appeared, all of them giving off strong auras.

Miranda recognized them as the group with Arthur during the Auction, and all of them had powerful equipment, and there was even a caster with the Fulgarian Deepcaller class Jake had sold the Akashic Tome to. He was also the one who had made the barrier of water. She identified a few of them and knew they were in trouble.

[Human – lvl 174]

[Human – lvl 178]

But she still believed they could at least put up a fight until more presences appeared behind the wall, having circled around with incredible speed. Miranda saw them as she squinted and gritted her teeth.

[Infernomaw Hound – lvl 199]

[Frostmaw Hound – lvl 199]

[Thundermaw Hound – lvl 199]

Three large dog-like creatures, each of them more than five meters tall, guarded their path of escape. Miranda prepared her magic to hold them off as she released a pulse of Verdant energy. It entered the water below, but the Fulgarian Deepcaller slammed his staff into it, sending a pulse of lightning through, nullifying her mana.

He smiled confidently as Miranda frowned.

“A pleasure to finally meet you, Ms. Wells. I am Mahowny, leader of the first advance party of the United Cities Alliance. Took us quite a while to finally catch up, but here we are,” the man spoke with confidence. Not that Miranda could fault him. He turned to the others in the group and smiled.

“We are not merciless. It is only the City Lord of Haven and her assistant we are after, and the rest of you are free to leave. But should you choose to stand in our way, we will show no mercy,” Mahowny said, almost tauntingly. He was full of himself, and Miranda wanted to do something.

Just then, he opened the barrier a bit, and all three Hounds jumped in and killed the crocodile. It was an obvious show of strength, and they all knew one side was superior.

“I still don’t understand why you find this all necessary. You are choosing to work with an unknown Chosen from another planet, and for what? Do you truly think this will end well, even if all your plans work out? He is using you, not the other way around,” Miranda said.

Mahowny just smirked. “One of the good things about being a soldier is that my job is not to think about those things. I just follow orders and get the job done, and in this instance, my job is to kill you. Truly, it is nothing personal. Now, you can either decide to give yourself up and have your followers here leave or fight. I am fine with either option.”

Miranda tried to look like she was deep in thought. She felt herself being closely monitored by the party in front of her. All five of them were above 170, but the biggest problem was the three hounds. If she tried to use any magic, she did not doubt they would react and pounce. The other side clearly knew that they risked taking a loss or two if Miranda or the others had any trump cards, making them prefer if she just surrendered.

All Miranda could do was to make use of this and drag out the time. All she remembered about the Grand Mangrove River was that Jake had made a friend there, and she had hoped to draw them closer using the blood.

“Time is up,” Mahowny said after Miranda did her darndest to look conflicted for around a minute. Miranda prepared herself along with the rest of her group as the other side was about to engage. “You have made your choice, and now it is time to-“

He didn’t get further as he clamped up. Everyone stopped in their tracks, with the three hounds suddenly lying down on their respective branches, whimpering. An aura had swept into the area, making Miranda’s eyes open wide. It was stronger than anything she had ever felt on Earth, and she had no doubt the source was well in the C-grade.

She slowly turned her head and saw the figure that was the source of the aura through the thick roots of the mangrove. Miranda did not know what to expect, but it was not that. A young woman with snow-white skin and scattered scales across her body walked on water like it was solid ground. Her hair was long and white like the rest of her body, and her eyes were red with reptilian pupils. She wore a dress that looked like it was made of snakeskin, swaying behind her as if weightless. She looked like something out of a fairytale.

[Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake – lvl ???]

The young woman - no, C-grade monster turned humanoid - watched them all as she seemed to be looking for something. Or someone. Finally, her eyes landed on Miranda.

“Who are you?”

Chapter 534 - Snake Girl = Danger Noodle

Miranda’s mind was a bit jumbled from the powerful aura, and it took her a moment to formulate a response. This resulted in her not being the first one to answer.

"I sincerely apologize for disturbing your area," Mahowny said as he bowed. His party members followed suit, their nervousness palpable. Sweat was pouring down their brows as they also realized that the monster that had appeared was more than any of them could handle.

It had to be mid-tier C-grade... which meant it was above level 250. The group from the United Cities Alliance could probably handle a weak C-grade using their hounds, but the snake was an entirely different issue. It was leagues above anything they could even touch.

"We are only here for this woman and will leave once done," Mahowny further said. "And we are more than willing to compensate you for allowing us this."

The snake did not even turn to him but kept staring at Miranda. Miranda felt the pressure and finally came up with an answer. "Miranda Wells... I work for the Malefic's Chosen."

As if a switch had been flipped, the humanoid snake's eyes opened wide. "Really? Is he here?"

"No, sadly not," Miranda said, the pressure on her instantly alleviated.

"Oh..." the snake deflated.

Miranda saw the Mahowny and the others had turned white as sheets, now matching the complexion of the snake girl. They looked like they were about to plan their escape already, having realized they were in a very perilous situation.

"I was being chased here by enemies of the Chosen," Miranda quickly pounced on the opportunity to remove the elites from the United Cities Alliance. "They aim to kill me and hurt the Chosen through that."

This got a response out of the snake as she turned her head to the party of five.

Mahowny instantly raised his hands in defense. "This is all a misunderstanding, I—"

He didn't get further. Miranda wasn't sure what happened, but one moment he was talking, and the next, there was no head on his shoulders. The movement had been too fast for her to see. It wasn't even certain if it was teleportation or just incredibly fast movement.

"Did you know that humans have these unwanted movements in their aura when they lie? I learned that from the ones I acquired to perfect this human form," the snake said in an insidious voice. It looked like she hadn't even moved as she now stood there with a severed head, parts of the spine hanging out.

Her rhetorical question did not have a chance to be answered as movements came from below. The aura of the Alabaster Snake had completely masked them as three C-grade snakes shot up from the water, and within less than five seconds, the hounds and human party were all dead.

Miranda could only stand there and stare as it happened. She had hoped for assistance, but the response had been prompt and unexpectedly harsh. There was no questioning or doubt in the snake; she had simply acted and wiped them out unceremoniously.

She saw that Hank looked incredibly worried, and Neil's party still had defensive positions. It was a sloppy one, as they all knew that if any of the snakes that had just appeared chose to attack, none of them would survive.

Are these the "friends" Jake talked about? Miranda asked herself, already knowing the answer. He had mentioned it so casually like it was no big deal... but the snake in front of them was far more powerful than anything she could have imagined.

The three C-grade snakes that had appeared were all far larger than the small and delicate-looking Alabaster Snake, but they all showed respect to her and bowed before ducking their heads underwater once more, dragging the corpses along with them.

"Humans are really questionable," the snake said with scorn before looking at Miranda. "Ah, but not you. Just the normal humans, if you know what I mean. Anyway! You said you are here because of the Forefather's Chosen? Why are you here if he is not?"

Miranda was not sure what to answer but quickly read the mood and emotional state of the powerful C-grade. "There is a conflict going on right now, and the Chosen is preoccupied with handling other matters, including an enemy Chosen that serves a god who is antagonistic towards your Forefather. Due to this, the city I managed for him could no longer properly protect itself, and he asked us to go here."

The snake listened attentively before tilting her head. "But why here?"

Smiling, Miranda was happy the C-grade asked. "Because he trusts that you can keep us safe while he is gone."

The snake reacted a bit more strongly than Miranda had expected. With starry eyes, the snake clenched her fists and put on a massive smile that looked more than a little odd. "Re... really? He trusts me?"

"If not, he would not send us here," Miranda promptly answered. "It is truly my pleasure to meet a confidant of the Chosen. As I said before, then my name is Miranda Wells. May I ask what your name is?"

Miranda had to admit that a cold shiver ran down her spine as she asked the question. If Jake had met this snake, there was a chance he had also given her a name, and no matter how dumb it was, she didn't doubt the female snake with her personality would be all giddy and proud of it. She swore that if he had named the snake Snakie or Scaley or anything like that, she would be unable to hold her poker face and would smack him over the head the moment they met again, Chosen or not.

"A name?" the snake asked, still all happy about what Miranda had said. "I sadly do not have one of those. Most simply call me by my race as I am the only one in these parts. You can refer to me as it too if you so desire."

It was almost funny to see how the female snake now tried to act all professional and like she was welcoming guests into her humble abode. Which was exactly what she did in her mind, Miranda reckoned.

"Please follow me back to the center of the mangrove. Ah, we even have a few humans there and lodging for your kind," the Alabaster Snake said.

"Really?" Miranda asked with genuine surprise. Humans living in a C-grade infested danger zone? She had a hard time seeing that.

“Yep, you will see when we get there,” the snake girl smiled. She looked towards the water for a moment before the three large snakes emerged again. Alongside them, a wooden barge had also appeared, seemingly out of nothing. “Get on for a quicker trip. Ah, did you know the Chosen rode it too? We helped him the last time he was here, and he was so nice.”

“I can imagine,” Miranda said, having to fake her smile a little. How in the hell did Jake end up making friends with nearly every monster he didn’t just kill? Heck, even the ones he killed, he somehow ended up making friends with posthumously in the case of the Fallen King.

She and the others got on the barge and got through the Grand Mangrove River far faster than expected. The snake girl ended up joining them on the barge and was incredibly talkative once she learned everyone there had met Jake before. Neil was the first to truly reciprocate and asked curiously about the area and the odd spatial fluctuations he felt.

It turned out that the mangrove truly was a mysterious place. The water was far, far deeper than it should have any right to be. It was likely spatially expanded somehow, and so were some areas of the Grand Mangrove River in general. Small clearings from a distance could turn into large open areas once one entered them and vice-versa.

The place they were being taken was one such clearing. It was close to the center of the Grand Mangrove River and the lair of the Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake. Miranda also learned along the way that the snakes had pretty much fully taken over the entire Grand Mangrove River and had hunted down all powerful C-grades that could prove threats. The rest they had left alive, effectively to fatten them up for future slaughter.

It didn’t take them long before they reached their destination, and Miranda was astonished when she saw it. After entering a clearing, the area opened up and revealed what looked like a massive clear lake with sunlight coming down from above. Floating barges and platforms with buildings filled the clearing, making it look like a small city had been constructed.

Miranda saw well over a hundred people walking on the barges, and there was clearly too much space for the number of people. She also noticed something else... the moment they appeared, all the humans rushed out of their homes and sat down on their knees at the edge of the barges, many of them shivering.

"How come these people are here?" Miranda couldn't help but ask.

"Oh, I had them brought here. It is humans who tried to pass the river but were captured. After the Chosen was here, I realized that I didn't truly understand the world or the humans, so I decided to get some. While humans are dumb, they can also know a lot. Oh, I even got this form after studying humans a whole bunch!" the snake shared with a big smile.

"So they are staying here against their wills?" Hank asked curtly. Miranda threw him a glance to shut up, but the snake had already heard him.

"Well, I brought them here against their wills, but I guess they can try and leave? Not that I see them make it out without getting eaten or recaptured," the Alabaster Snake laughed, clearly finding it funny.

"I see," Miranda said before anyone else could speak. "Could you please bring us to a place where we can relax? We have been on the move for a long time."

"Of course!" the snake girl said enthusiastically. "I prepared a special place in case the Chosen returned! Humans are really good at making things, I will admit that."

Miranda nodded along, glad to have everyone else stashed away. She had a feeling that the snake girl wasn't going to leave them alone, though, so she would bite the bullet and handle the C-grade. She feared what any of the others could say, and if the snake got mad for just a single second, it could tear any of them apart.

"If you are interested in learning more about the Chosen, I am more than willing to share. In fact, I will have to contact him soon using one of my skills, and you are more than free to come along. I can even relay a message," Miranda offered.

"Really?" the snake asked with glee. "I would love to!"

She was almost swaying as she sat there happy, and it bought Miranda enough time to get the others off the barge and into a mansion-like building that did not look like it should be able to float. Once they were all gone, Miranda and the Alabaster Snake headed towards another large unoccupied building for Miranda to finally get back to Jake.

And probably have an incredibly long conversation with an overly enthusiastic, highly erratic, and incredibly dangerous C-grade snake.

While waiting for Miranda to get back to him and hopefully having reached the mangrove safely and met up with the albino snake, Jake decided to have some fun.

One of the things Jake liked the most about new skills was the honeymoon period. He remembered when he had just gotten One Step Mile or when he had gotten Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, and the fun time he had experimenting and using the skills for the first time, truly pushing them to their limits.

Relentless Hunt, as Jake had chosen to shorten yet another overly long skill name to, was a skill he naturally also looked forward to having fun with. There was much to figure out, and Jake went in with glee as he stood before a large bear. A large bear breathing fire. Oh, and there was lava coming out of its mouth at all times, and even some running down its hide.

Finally, it was about the size of a warehouse.

[Emberdust Magmabear – lvl ???]

Jake estimated it to be around level 210 and was probably the strongest C-grade he would face so far in pure power – though he had a feeling he was facing a good matchup. Observing it from afar, he saw it bathe in a volcano and then soak in the sunlight for a few minutes before eating some metal out of a mountain. Not a single creature dared get near. Sandy had told him that something good was hidden within the lava of the volcano, and the worm acted all coy like it was doing him a favor, while Jake knew Sandy just wanted whatever was in that damn lava.

Now, while this was undoubtedly a fight, it was also a journey of exploration. A chance for Jake to see what he was truly capable of. An opportunity to fully explore his new skill and learn its limitations and when it was best used.

The massive beast looked like it could give him just that opportunity.

Jake engaged it from afar with a fully charged Arcane Powershot, blasting a hole in its body right off the bat. The blood that came out was thick and burned like lava, but the hemotoxin Jake had poisoned the arrow with infected it nevertheless. His Sense of the Malefic Viper also made him aware the poison worked as intended, proving it was truly a being of flesh and blood despite its appearance.

As his strike hit and the bear roared, Jake also felt it right away. Odd energy welled up inside of him, and it even seemed to now exist in the atmospheric mana - always being there, he was just unable to see it before. He knew right away it was this Hunting Momentum.

He did not hesitate to pour just a little bit of it into his second attack. The bear tanked the hit just like the first, and Jake did notice the effect. The Hunting Momentum was not a concept or an idea like Stealth Attack or even the Mark of the Avaricious Hunter that just added extra damage. It made all aspects of the attack stronger. The arrow flew faster, it penetrated deeper, dealt more damage, and even the poison on it appeared to have a slightly heightened potency. The momentum's effect on the poison was slight, and Jake noticed it was also brief.

Several more attacks were released as the bear charged, leaving a path of lava behind it. The ground itself erupted as the lava shot up towards Jake and forced him to retreat. The bear was incredibly durable, and even as he inflicted injury after injury, it was still barely affected. It also quickly became clear Jake was not the only one "building momentum," so to say.

The bear was heating up. Its very skin began to glow red as its lava-like blood boiled, and it soon began to give off an orange mist that burned the very air. This mist spread quickly and was carried by the wind. The bear roared as the mist was sent out like a shockwave, combusting any time it encountered a physical object, setting that unlucky object on fire.

Jake retreated further and further as he kept attacking from range. His arrows flew through the mist, and he did notice to his annoyance that it burned off the poison, but the arrows themselves – the stable versions at least – managed to survive.

His opponent was far larger than him but also far slower. As long as Jake kept his distance and bombarded it with ranged destruction, his Hunting Momentum would build, his Arcane Charge from the Mark would build, and the poison he did manage to land would accumulate. He had a feeling this kind of

beast was one that excelled in battles of attrition by simply outlasting and slowly burning down its foe. Too bad that it had met Jake.

No, too bad Sandy had decided the worm really wanted to eat its treasure.

Looks like we are in for a long one, Jake thought as he smirked to himself. He was definitely not complaining.

Chapter 535 - Taking Status & Making Plans

Jake breathed heavily as he stared out at the vast landscape before him. An area the size of a semi-large city was scorched and burned as the remnants of the battle remained. In the middle of it all lay a giant beast, its very blood only adding to this environmental destruction. Even in death, its blood retained the same destructive properties as it burned the ground.

The final attack of the bear had been quite something. It exploded and released an attack reminding him a bit of the Scorched Plains attack from the bow he lost when the Sword Saint cut it in two at the finale of their duel.

Seeing this destruction made him reflect a bit. During the vision with Palate Jake had seen, Villy and the C-grade fighter had ended up destroying a massive city and the surrounding environment, and Jake did have to confess he had wondered why he felt so far from being able to do that despite approaching C-grade himself.

This fight gave a bit of insight into how close he was actually getting. If he truly wanted, he could cause absolutely massive destruction with his arcane energies. The thing is, he didn't, as that was a waste of energy.

Villy had mentioned this before and said that massive, flashy attacks that caused widespread destructions were not proofs of strength but proof of horrible control. Now, some attacks did get big due to their naturally chaotic nature, and a part of the attack's power lay in pushing yourself beyond your limits of control, but this was only the case for rare attacks that often couldn't be used more than once a fight.

No, rather than make a large explosion that covers a large area, make a far more intense explosion in a small area. That way, as long as you hit, the attack would deal way more damage. Someone should really have taught the bear that, as it was certainly a victim of making huge flashy attacks... then again, what if it was used to only fighting massive foes like itself? In that case, large attacks were probably more effective.

Anyway. The fight had taken nearly an entire hour, and Jake was all the happier for it. Because, oh boy, did he have some data on Relentless Hunt.

Firstly, on the accumulation of Hunting Momentum. While Jake was fighting or just even observing his enemy preparing to fight it, the momentum would build. While in the tracking and observation phase, it was incredibly slow, dozens of times slower than when he was actually fighting. During the fight itself, the Hunting Momentum would accumulate passively, but the speed at which this happened varied.

If Jake landed blows and did the damage, it would speed up, while it would slow down or even halt entirely if Jake was hit, with the slow-down based on the severity of his injuries. If it halted or slowed down, it would slowly pick itself up again as time passed, and he kept avoiding blows, while it would speed up very quickly if he began to land attacks.

That was how the accumulation worked. Now for the actual effects of the Hunting Momentum.

The first thing here was the maximum amount he could have at any time. It was natural there was a cap because if not, couldn't Jake just silently observe a peak C-grade for a year or two, build up an utterly insane amount of Hunting Momentum, and then proceed to launch an arrow that could break the moon in half.

Yeah, so it made sense there was one. However, this is not to say the cap was low because one had to remember one detail: the maximum was determined by his Perception. All parts of the skill were determined by his Perception. And if there was one thing Jake had a lot of, it was Perception.

Now, Jake did not know what the expected cap of Hunting Momentum was, but he felt like his was quite a bit higher than that. A lot higher. He had managed to cap it out during the fight because he tried to not use it and had released one single attack expending all of it. This brings us to the actual effects of the skill.

The effect was varied based on the attack it was applied to. It wasn't just a percentage amplifier, but in some ways, it still kind of was. Jake could not turn a normal stable arrow into an arrow of certain doom, but the benefits of Hunting Momentum it received percentage-wise were more than Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. Overall, though, Jake would say Hunting Momentum was best used with his already powerful attacks because, holy hell, had that Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter been powerful.

When Jake had used the Hunting Momentum, he had felt the oversized wood-like arrow almost thrum with the concept. Like an invisible wind embracing it, he had felt the power within. Further using Arcane Powershot had only made it stronger, and when he let go of the string, it flew forward faster than anything Jake had ever shot before. It seemed unimpeded by anything, and even the remnant destructive arcane energy left by Arcane Powershot was empowered, allowing it to pass unbothered through the combusting mist.

It had hit the bear before it could even react, and the giant beast had been blasted back, lifting it off its feet and launching it several hundred meters backward. It had survived, but it was heavily injured, and Jake had finished it off shortly after that. As for how much it made the attack stronger percentage-wise, Jake couldn't tell for sure... but it was significant. It wasn't just the increased damage that mattered but

the increased speed, the increased energy around the attack, and the momentum making it more penetrative and more resilient to getting whittled down by barriers or domains.

He had also discovered one other major thing. The momentum worked on an “attack,” which came with both some good and some bad traits. Good traits? A melee strike counted as an attack. This did not just mean the attack did more damage but once more also that it was faster. His punching motion simply sped up, allowing him to truly take his opponent by surprise. It meshed very well with his counter-style.

Bad traits from it working only with attacks? Touch of the Malefic Viper did not work with it at all as it was not classified as an attack. Activating his Arcane Charge from Mark did not count because, again, not an attack. Activating or amplifying a poison using Touch also didn’t work. Moving to block, even if it is with the intent to counter, did not work, even if the counterattack follow-up was affected.

Anyway, there were more things to the skill, but Jake believed he would have ample time to use it moving forward. He and Sandy had made plans, and those plans included a lot of killing during their travel. But to fully carry out their plan, Jake would need to talk to Miranda first.

Speaking of Sandy, the worm had decided that eating all the lava in the volcano was also a necessity, so he was stuck waiting even more for the hungry worm to get done. Waiting anyway, Jake chose to take a look at his full status for the first time in a while.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (D) – lvl 183]

Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter – lvl 181]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 185]

Health Points (HP): 30251/55140

Mana Points (MP): 30279/104437

Stamina: 10938/50240

Stats

Strength: 4689

Agility: 7656

Endurance: 5024

Vitality: 5514

Toughness: 4129

Wisdom: 6684

Intelligence: 5814

Perception: 11867

Willpower: 5709

Free points: 0

Titles: [Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch], [Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer VIII], [Dungeon Pioneer VI], [Legendary Prodigy], [Prodigious Slayer of the Mighty], [Kingslayer], [Nobility: Earl], [Progenitor of the 93rd Universe], [Prodigious Arcanist], [Perfect Evolution (D-grade)], [Premier Treasure Hunter], [Myth Originator], [Progenitor of Myriad Paths]

Class Skills: [Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra (Uncommon)], [Traditional Hunter's Tracking (Rare)], [Arcane Stealth (Rare)], [Superior Stealth Attack (Rare)], [Enhanced Splitting Arrow (Rare)], [Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Epic)], [Arcane Powershot (Epic)], [Big Game Arcane Hunter (Epic)], [Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)], [Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)], [Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Epic)], [Fangs of

Man (Ancient)), [Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Ancient)], [Moment of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Steady Focus of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Arcane Awakening (Legendary)], [One Step, Thousand Miles (Legendary)], [Relentless Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Legendary)]

Profession Skills: [Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Herbology (Common)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Alchemist's Purification (Common)], [Alchemical Flame (Uncommon)], [Craft Elixir (Uncommon)], [Toxicology (Uncommon)], [Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)], [Concoct Poison (Rare)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Epic)], [Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Ancient)], [Advanced Core Manipulation (Ancient)], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Wings of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Legendary)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Pride of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Anomalous Soul of the Heretic-Chosen (Legendary)]

Blessing: [True Blessing of the Malefic Viper (Blessing - True)]

Race Skills: [Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races (Unique)], [Legacy of Man (Unique)], [Identify (Common)], [Serene Soul Meditation (Epic)], [Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)]

Bloodline: [Bloodline of the Primal Hunter (Bloodline Ability - Unique)]

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Looking through it, Jake mostly took notice of the ever-expanding length, but another thing was that many rarities stood out, especially in his class. While for many, an epic skill would be considered excellent, to Jake, it felt lackluster by now. The rare and below skills were even worse. Enhanced

Splitting Arrow was one he often used yet had not upgraded since shortly after reaching D-grade, and despite it being a common attack in his arsenal, it was still only rare. Arcane Powershot was his go-to archery skill, and that was also only epic rarity. He could excuse himself for not upgrading Shadow Vault as he had sim-Jake on that, and his tracking skill was also one he felt like he would upgrade when the time was right, but many of the others he felt like he really needed to work on before evolving. At least his core skills needed to be refined and upgraded.

All more tasks he would take this coming hunting period to address. He had a feeling that many of the skills wouldn't even necessarily be that difficult to upgrade as long as he consciously tried to do so. He had already refined many of the skills significantly just by how much he used them, so a bit more effort and some experimentation and it should be possible to at least get a few good upgrades in.

As Jake was considering all these things, he suddenly felt a small nudge. He instantly smiled and responded.

"Miranda? Good to finally hear from you. Did you arrive at the Grand Mangrove River safely?" Jake asked first thing.

"Don't worry, we got here safely," Miranda answered promptly. "We were saved by a certain snake that you seem to know. One with a humanoid form resembling a young girl or woman. Is that something you might know about?"

Jake thought for a moment before frowning. "Does not ring a bell... wait, is the race of the snake Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake?"

"Yes."

“Oh damn, and she already got a human form? That is actually impressive,” Jake said in admiration. “I knew she was talented just due to her high level, but it seems like I underestimated her. Maybe the Blessing also helped, but I reckon it is mostly her effort.”

It was the truth too. One thing Jake had learned about monsters while he researched the Pollendust Bee Queen was that their abilities to make use of natural treasures varied widely and were highly dependent on the talent and ability of the monster to actually refine and make use of these treasures. A bit like how one craftsman could turn a pile of ingots into a legendary sword, while a far less skilled smith would only be able to make it epic.

Other factors like compatibility with the treasure also factored in, but talent and skill were also considerable elements. The most important skill was naturally energy control to properly absorb a treasure, and as with many things, good energy control carried over and also mattered when it came to using the universal Polymorph skill all monsters got at C-grade. Villy had told him that it often took years for a beast to properly design and refine its humanoid forms to be useable. So for the Crimsoneye Snake to do it in only a few months? Very impressive.

Oh, on a side note, Jake had no idea how good Sandy was at energy control or absorbing treasures. Not that it seemed to matter as the glutton would just make up for it with quantity.

“I should mention the snake is currently listening in and very pleased by your assessment,” Miranda answered. “I was told to relay that she very much appreciates your praise and would gladly welcome you to visit if you ever get the time. Not those exact words, but that is the sentiment, at least. She very much wants you to visit.”

“Alright. Keep up the good work, both of you. I will definitely visit when I come to get you and the others after all this is over. Now, can you tell me a bit of what happened after I was thrown away? Give me the down-low.”

Miranda proceeded to give Jake a description of all that had happened recently. How the snake had killed the pursuers from the United Cities Alliance, how Ell'Hakan had not wanted to kill her but even warned her, and he even learned that Arnold had contacted Miranda using one of his communication devices to say that Ell'Hakan was still staking it out near Haven, likely waiting for Jake to return.

Jake considered all this and began asking some things of his own. He knew Miranda had ways to contact the Sword Saint and many others around the world. She had said that the old man was missing in action after presumably getting ambushed in his residence, but Jake didn't put much stock in it. There was no scenario where he saw that old monster die to a bunch of goons, even if they were the top elites of Ell'Hakan.

Which begged the question, why attack him without using their full force? The answer was simple: they didn't know how strong he actually was. One has to remember that the only time the Sword Saint had revealed his full power was during the duel at the end of the Treasure Hunt, and only a handful of people had been present then, none of which would share it publicly.

Miranda agreed with Jake's assessment and even added to it. People did know a duel had taken place, but only the "result."

The result being that the Sword Saint was apparently crippled for a long time afterward. In reality, he had simply been recovering from using his Transcendence, but in the eyes of the world, he had lost and taken grievous injuries. That is at least what Miranda believed the public interpretation was, and Ell'Hakan was right about one thing. If enough people believed something, it became accepted as the truth.

Jake knew that he himself was not some grand strategist, and neither was Miranda, but they didn't need some perfect plan either. They just needed a plan that was good enough and relied on things they knew Ell'Hakan could not predict. Relied on gaps in his knowledge.

“Say, the Fallen King and that other Unique Lifeform are still engaged in some kind of battle, right?” Jake asked Miranda.

“Yes, according to what I was able to gather, they were still locked in a standstill,” Miranda answered.

Jake nodded and considered for a bit. “I have an idea.”

If there was one thing Jake was certain of, it was that Ell’Hakan expected a rematch with Jake. The man likely believed Jake was the only human on Earth that stood a chance against him, with all C-grades locked away. The only other entity who could threaten him would then be the Fallen King or maybe Sylphie, but Sylphie was far removed from Haven.

So Jake’s plan relied on one simple concept.

Just don’t fight him.

He shared his idea, and Miranda seemed somewhat receptive, even if there were things to refine. They talked for a while longer until Miranda made him aware the Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake had left, finally prompting her to ask:

“Jake, just to make sure, you have not named this snake yet? Not even in your own head?” Miranda asked.

“No?” Jake asked with confusion. But he soon got it and smiled. “If you want me to think of a name, just ask, and I wi-“

“Definitely not. Actually, wait... no, do think of a name, but I have sole discretion when it comes to accepting it or not, alright? And promise me not to share your name ideas with anyone else but me until the choice is final, alright?” Miranda said.

“I guess?” Jake answered, thinking she was overdoing it. He had gotten better at naming things; one just had to look at Sandy. Sandy was a real name! That was definitely an improvement, right?

Unluckily, Jake did not have more time to talk as his ride arrived to eat him up once more. Jake said his temporary goodbyes to Miranda, forgetting to mention his “faster way back than expected” was within the stomach of a massive C-grade worm and going on his merry way.

For his plan to succeed – or for any plan to get more probable – he needed one thing. Levels and power.

It was power-hunting time.

Chapter 536 - Schemers

Across the planet, the chaos brought on by the United Cities Alliance and Ell'Hakan continued. Beasts attacked like never before, and millions died within only a week as many settlements fell, unprepared and too weak to resist. Those who held on still took losses, and the survivors all had a newfound hatred. The work that had been made to establish positive relations between monsters and humanity was thoroughly broken.

The problem was that people did not see the actions of beasts as those of individuals but that of a monolith - as a tribe. They put all monsters in a box and vilified them in their minds as aggressors. This was not much different from what humans did to other humans before the system. People loved to hate others, and it was just easier to hate an entire religion, country, or appearance than recognize that each person was an individual making their own choices.

And this feeling was reciprocated by the monsters.

They, too, viewed humanity as something they wanted to wipe out. Their reasons varied, but their goal was the same. Some saw humans as destroyers, having ruined their natural habitats before the systems and thus nothing but a scourge on the planet. Others had been mistreated and abused by humans all their lives. A small part just looked down on humans as weak and pathetic creatures not worth keeping alive. Others still did not truly care much; they just wanted to hunt without restrictions. As with any good hate group, they didn't need a unified ideology, just shared hatred.

With every beast that killed a human, humanity's hatred of beasts grew. With every human that killed a beast, the beasts' resentment of humanity grew. One would maybe think that monsters getting angry at humans killing beasts while defending themselves wasn't fair, but how was it different from what humans usually did?

Human hunting parties entered the territory of monsters often. They killed hundreds of beasts or elementals or whatever they came across that gave them experience before retreating to their cities. It was so normalized no one questioned it. The monsters didn't even question it, as fighting and the law of the jungle were just the rules of the multiverse.

What they did question was the Fallen King then coming and trying to tell them they had to leave all human settlements alone. Leaving some alone was fine, but all of them? Would the humans have accepted the same terms? A unilateral ban from entering and hunting monsters within their homes?

The answer was no.

This was not a question of right or wrong but simply reality. Humans and monsters both needed to kill to progress, and humans had a tendency to want to avoid killing other humans, making them target monsters instead. This was how the universe had worked for Eras, and there would never truly be peace between all the different races. Especially when the enlightened races kept their sense of superiority, thinking the life of a human or elf was more valuable than that of a beast. War and conflict were simply inevitable.

Unless, of course, a powerful enough influence could make humanity and all monsters back down and search for prey elsewhere than their own planet.

Miyamoto felt the token in his spatial storage vibrate once more and decided to take it out this time. He had chosen to wait out and assess the situation before making any further moves, but it appeared it was time to discuss their circumstances.

“Ms. Wells, to what do I owe the pleasure?” he answered, allowing her to take the initiative.

“It pleases me to know you are doing well, Sword Saint. To the world, you are still considering missing in action and potentially dead,” she said.

“I am aware,” he answered as he smiled to himself. “And it is intentional. So please, do me a favor and keep it as such.”

“Alright?” Ms. Wells said with some confusion. “May I know what happened after you were presumably attacked?”

"A fight followed by information," the Sword Saint answered as he remembered what had happened.

Two powerful individuals charged at him. The Sword Saint had his blade ready as they circled him. Both of them were melee combatants like him, and from their small initial clash, he became fully aware they would not be easily taken down.

One of them wielded two blades of ice while the other was a pure fighter without any obvious magical characteristics. Seeing the opponent using ice magic, he quickly realized these people were aware of his abilities. One of the greatest counters to water was not extreme heat but extreme cold. It would make his attacks rigid and impede the flow. This opponent was here to counter him directly; that much was evident.

Flanked on each side, he blocked one as he stepped back to avoid the blow of the other. His original assessment that they were about as strong as the Judge from the Court of Shadows was correct. The difference was that they were both already using their boosting skills, wanting to finish this battle quickly, and even if that made their strength explosive, it was far from the level of the Judge when he went all out. They were more at the level of his usual fighting strength.

Blades of ice began to revolve around him as the ice swordsman took a step back, and the other engaged with a curved sword in each hand. The man's speed was impressive, and the Sword Saint was forced to block until one of the ice blades attacked from behind. Angling himself a bit, he was hit in the lower part of his back. A non-vital area.

Using his boosting skill, he only activated it at a low level. His opponents still attacked with an upper hand as they pushed themselves to their extremes. The Sword Saint took injury after injury as trump cards were revealed from the other side, and soon enough, he was blasted back as his left arm was severed.

“We expected more,” one of them said as he approached with the tip of his ice blade pointed at the Sword Saint. Injured and a bit tired, but otherwise, fine. The man had continually frozen and interrupted Miyamoto’s magic and stopped his attacks for the other side to get the advantage.

“Why are you even doing this... the Noboru Clan is not part of any religious faction. We are an independent force. Would the United Cities Alliance not want us on their side?” the Sword Saint asked with heaved breath.

“No one cares about your pathetic little clan,” the other attacker spoke. “You are the only one worth killing here. With you gone, they will fall into shambles, and we are already aware of the internal struggles your family faces. It won’t be hard to convince them to back the alliance with their Patriarch dead and gone.”

The Sword Saint nodded before answering with gusto. “I will never let that happen!”

He released a massive wave of water that pushed back the two of them and temporarily allowed him to escape their sights and retreat. The old man ran through the plans, but he was simply too slow. A blade of ice flew from behind and hit him in the shin, making him fall over. He rolled to the side to avoid the non-magical warrior’s scimitar but still took a nasty cut. In a final gamble, he tried to take down one of them with him, but he was too slow. He managed to cut the shoulder of the ice warrior but was stabbed in the heart by a scimitar. The old man tried to do something, but before he could, the second scimitar swept up and severed his head.

“Got the notification?” the ice warrior asked.

“Yes,” the second warrior nodded.

Acknowledging, the ice warrior took out a token and seemed to communicate through it. A few seconds passed before he smiled. “It has been conveyed. Let’s get out of here before-”

The corpse of the old man suddenly moved as a spear appeared in his hand. The second warrior was stabbed in the back as his eyes opened wide. The corpse quickly stood up as he healed, a head regrowing and his body changing. Rather than an old man, a figure with red eyes and black hair stood there. He smiled as his fangs showed.

Swiftly, the ice warrior took out the token again, but before he could relay anything, his arm flew into the air, still holding the token. He screamed as he turned and saw the Sword Saint standing there, an arm still missing but otherwise looking unharmed.

The ice warrior tried to retaliate as the old man bent his knees.

“Thousand Waves Slash.”

A wall of ice appeared but was cut through like paper as the warrior was blasted back. The Sword Saint followed up and landed several blows before cutting off the head of the man he identified as a Nahoom. Turning to the other warrior who was struggling with the former Monarch of Blood, he quickly went over and teamed up, cutting off the man’s legs and arms.

After knocking him out but keeping him alive, the Sword Saint looked at the former Monarch, who sat down on the grass, breathing heavily.

“Who would have thought me acting as your doppelganger for so long would come into play like this,” Iskar, the former Monarch of Blood, said.

Miyamoto and Iskar had, for a long time, acted together. Both were old souls and had a lot in common, with Iskar having a wealth of knowledge stashed away in his head. He did not remember everything, but with time, the former A-grade recalled details. His existence was an interesting one due to its link with the Divine item left by Sanguine, but he was a fully-fledged lifeform when outside of it, and not a weak one either.

His skill set was incredibly vast and varied and included high-level illusion magic coupled with hypnosis. Enough to fool the two attackers into thinking they had actually killed Miyamoto.

“Let us leave,” the Sword Saint said as he saw movement from the direction of the Noboru Clan. He planned on staying dead in the eyes of the public, and leaving behind only one unrecognizable corpse should keep up the illusion, at least for a time.

Moreover, leaving just one corpse meant he had a prisoner - a prisoner likely holding a lot of valuable information.

Miyamoto explained this to Ms. Wells, not believing there was a need to keep it a secret from her. Jake trusted her, and so far, she had shown herself worthy of that trust.

“I don’t understand why you need to fake your own death even to your clan... do you fear it would leak if they knew?” the City Lord of Haven asked.

“Yes and no. The main reason is quite a bit more straightforward. The Noboru Clan is not truly a faction but just people rallying behind me; at least, it has begun to feel like that. They require me to be their Patriarch to continue their existence and rely on me far too much. Moreover, there have been more internal struggles as we have grown. There were even those pushing to join the United Cities Alliance. So I wish to see how the clan will act when I am believed dead. I want to see if the clan is worthy of keeping alive as it currently is or if I will have to reconsider my approach,” the Sword Saint answered.

Miyamoto had considered it for a long time. After his duel with Jake in the Treasure Hunt, he realized he needed to be more selfish and truly pursue what he cared about. His power would be the power of the clan, but it had become too much. They had begun to treat him as more than an elder. However, he still did not want to rule the clan with an iron fist. He could have, but he wanted autonomy and for himself to have some freedom. He wanted to know his clan would not crumble if he was to die.

After a bit, Ms. Wells asked: “There is bound to be an internal struggle... and with the recent beast attacks, many will die. The Noboru Clan may not survive without you.”

“Death and life are simple realities of the system. No faction is not built upon a mountain of corpses, and should the Noboru Clan fall simply due to my absence, then as much as it pains me, then I must recognize it is unworthy of existing. Even if it ceases to be, our heritage will not. However, should the clan come out whole, it will be stronger than ever,” Miyamoto explained.

“I see,” she simply answered, recognition in her voice. She seemed to understand.

“Now, Ms. Wells, I do not believe you contacted me only for an exchange of information. I have interrogated one of my ambushers and learned of their plans to make Arthur the World Leader, as well as Ell’Hakan’s desire to defeat Jake. From what you tell me, Jake also seems to have a plan, so please, do share. What do you intend to do to handle this Ell’Hakan? He seems like a tricky one to deal with,” the Sword Saint asked.

“So, Jake proposes to...”

She explained, and the Sword Saint could not help but smile after she was done. It was simple, and it gave the Sword Saint something he would very much like. Hence, he was more than on board. “It shall be my honor and privilege.”

Vilastromoz observed as Jake began his hunting spree, not wanting to interrupt. He was busy with his own matters anyway as he also had to make preparations for what was to come. This was part of the reason he had not contacted Jake for a while, though the primary one was that he was unsure how Jake would react. The god had to be honest... feeling genuine worry about how someone else would react was something he hadn't felt in a long time, and he had kind of missed it.

The Viper would lie if he said he didn't feel a slight level of responsibility for what was happening, but he would equally be lying if he said he didn't think this conflict was a good thing. Strife would push one forward, and a slight level of urgency could be healthy at times. Not that he feared Jake would become complacent as he seemed to still have the same internal drive for progressing he had the day they met, but it could help speed him up without any negative consequences.

Simply forcing Jake to think a bit differently was good. He would meet many who were like Ell'Hakan in that they didn't have any interest in fighting him in a fair fight but still wanted to make trouble for him. The Viper had many such foes during his rise to power and even had many such foes now. He also understood that this entire conflict with Yip of Yore's Chosen was entirely due to Jake being the Chosen of the Viper.

Yip and his Chosen relied on stories. Legends. It gave them power, made them progress, and the Viper saw the mirror image that was being made. Because he knew that Jake was not the only one being targeted in this conflict. While the Chosen wanted to fight and likely kill Jake to prove himself and his Path...

So did Yip of Yore aim to kill a Primordial to prove his. And Villy was his chosen target for that - a logical one too. He was the perfect target if he evaluated it a bit himself. Yip needed a villain, and the Viper was quite villainous when he wanted to be if he had to say so himself. The Viper also knew that Yip was not doing this haphazardly. Everything was part of a greater framework. A larger story.

A grand epic, if you will.

Honestly, it made Vilastromoz a bit sad he was targeted. Because while Yip and his Chosen were very similar, Jake and Vilastromoz were most certainly not. They were nearly exact opposites.

Jake preferred to face his opponents head-on. As for Vilastromoz? Well, so far, all he had done since returning from seclusion had been to handle his issues head-on. But this was not because he preferred to do it this way; it was just simpler and faster.

However, if he faced an opponent worth the effort?

That is why he found it sad that Yip had chosen him. Sad that people had forgotten who he truly was.

Because if Yip of Yore thought he was a meticulous planner, he had not met the schemer known as the Malefic Viper.

Chapter 537 - Rebuilding & Lots Of Killing

Countless factions dominated the multiverse, but few were as unique as the Risen. They were the living dead, and that came with both bonuses and demerits. Some bonuses included a natural lifespan equal to your True Soul's natural lifespan, meaning you would live as long as possible, and aging would only

come to pass due to the person wanting it. Combat-wise, they truly did not have many differences from other enlightened races, besides some changed natural affinities and stats. They were neither stronger nor weaker, and history had also shown that their natural average level of talent was roughly comparable to humans and elves.

As for demerits, the largest inherent one was probably their inability to procreate naturally. Two Risen could not simply make a child. Instead, it took a far more complicated process. It was possible, mind you, but not as easy, and it required a specially created item that both would-be parents poured a part of their essence into. Even then, it wasn't like an actual child would be born and grow up normally. They would be born in their full adult form, albeit with a nascent consciousness like that of a child.

Their other way to procreate was for others to willingly become Risen. However, this, too, was not as simple as some common misunderstandings and prejudices that existed in the multiverse had made it out to be. One of the most widespread beliefs was that the Risen could forcefully create more Risen by raising the dead.

It did not work like that. The only way for someone to become a Risen was to willingly accept to become one, and only while still alive. You had to participate in a ritual, during which the system would allow you to change. It always required the person to willingly choose, and the ritual would even fail if the individual taking part was being mentally manipulated in any form.

Sadly many still thought the Risen could forcefully make more of themselves by killing others. True, they were talented in raising undead, but while the Risen were classified as undead, no raised undead could ever be classified as Risen or an enlightened species. They were all monsters, unable to possess a class or profession.

Most undead in the multiverse naturally hated the living and wanted to consume them. They were scourges and natural disasters more than anything. A beast or elemental would not choose to hunt down those significantly weaker than themselves for no reason. Meanwhile, an A-grade undead monster would gladly consume several planets with nothing more powerful than a C-grade on it just to

kill everything there. This was also due to another trait of the undead – a lack of intelligence. They were, more often than not, still only pure instinct, even when reaching S-grade.

So publicly making an enemy of the Risen for also being undead was easy as pies. And the Risen knew.

Casper and Priscilla had known it too, which was why they had planned for the eventuality that they would be pushed out of Earth from the very beginning. This was why they had wanted to create the dungeon, as it was part of their plan, and when the Treasure Hunt happened, they got the chance to get a damaged World Core by combining all the fragments they had found there.

It was a golden opportunity they had leaped at, and it had gone far better than expected. It had truly given them a path of survival far more viable than any of their other plans, and while Casper did admit he would miss Earth, he had no regrets.

Casper was flying far in the air as he stared at the black skies with only a few clouds here and there. No stars were visible, but they would work on that with time. Down below were rolling hills of soil, and familiar grass was growing, identical to that of Yalsten.

Turning his head, he saw the edges of the realm and knew it was still slightly unstable. The usable area was only a few hundred square kilometers right now, but it would expand with time as everything stabilized - as the tree grew.

So, what had the Risen done?

They had made a new world using the World Core from the Treasure Hunt. One that now existed within the infinite void, like Yalsten, but this one was still linked to the ninety-third universe.

Each world had to be anchored somewhere in the real universe, or it would be forever lost in the infinite void, effectively killing everyone within as they had no way in or out. Unless someone managed to become a god, that is, but chances of that were non-existent. These anchors could be detected and destroyed by outside forces if they located them all and doom all who resided in the world. So the Risen had done something smart. Something classified as clever use of system mechanics.

The anchor had been placed within the cave they had then turned into a dungeon, effectively making it inaccessible as when the dungeon was created, a barrier would form that was impenetrable to nearly anyone. The way anchors worked meant that one could still get out as the anchor was more of a coordinate, and if they wanted to teleport out, they just had to place the person a bit to the side of this coordinate, thus having them outside. As for if they didn't, then the person would just appear within the cave, but oops, the cave is now the location of a dungeon, so the system would kindly relocate you just outside the dungeon entrance.

Oh, also, even if their world had been cut off, they still had one final failsafe: Casper himself. He carried the Blessing of the Blightfather, so even if they were lost within the infinite void, the Blightfather could use the Blessing as a beacon to locate them.

Casper could never claim this had been his own ingenious idea. It truly wasn't something revolutionary either, as many factions had done this, and truth be told, there were still ways to mess them up. Just not for anyone on Earth. Not yet.

There was still the risk of Earth being taken over and them just becoming sitting ducks, which was when the other part of the plan came into effect. The Risen had worked on raising ghosts since the day they returned from the Tutorial and made the city. Ghosts had a few properties, but one of them was that they were pure energy. Pure energy and very effective rocket thrusters in large enough numbers.

That's right, the dungeon that the Risen had made had already left Earth right after they evacuated everyone. The Holy Church had been busy still advancing to catch a large sphere rock being lifted into the air by hundreds of thousands of ghosts. By the time they reacted, the sphere was already too high. Every single ghost had died during the ascent, and there were many risks that they would be stopped by beasts or that the ghosts would die in the hazardous environment closer to the edge of the atmosphere during the journey, but they had made it.

Made it and were now nothing but a rock floating through space like another unsuspecting meteor. Right now, they had no direction or control, but with time they would. This world was one they would use long term and would be one of the new major home bases of the Risen in the new universe.

With the former Root of Eternal Resentment planted and hopefully able to create a new tree, Casper was hopeful. They had the backing of the Blightfather and were currently working hard on a teleporter directly from the hidden world and to the Ghostlands, entirely circumventing the ninety-third universe and still giving them a place to go and progress.

Casper smiled as he saw Priscilla busy far below. Lyra appeared at his side, joining him as they saw their new city slowly being constructed. They only had around a hundred thousand people with them, and space was a bit tight, but they would live. Live and prosper.

To commemorate where they had come from, they had also picked a very unoriginal but fitting name for their world:

New Yalsten.

Jake sat chilling on top of a massive tree as he stared out onto the ocean in front of him. Sandy was busy eating an entire field of fruit trees, and Jake didn't bother the worm as he smiled to himself. Life had been good.

By now, it had been about a month since he had his first talk with Miranda after she reached the Grand Mangrove River, and the thing that surprised him the most was that nothing had surprised him during this time. At least he did learn some stuff that explained things.

The Pylon of Civilization at Haven had been hidden even more than before. It had not been moved, but Miranda had created a decoy Pylon of sorts and placed it under her main office, sealed beneath her ritual chamber. She told him that she had felt people try to get to it, but nobody had succeeded yet. Jake had not even known about her doing this, but honestly, it made sense. Not even Ell'Hakan would think Jake had hidden the Pylon under his lodge in a nearly unprotected state.

They had also discussed Miranda talking with the Sword Saint and the old man being on board, having even faked his own death using the power of the former Monarch of Blood. However, she had failed to get in contact with Casper as the token he had was no longer reachable – he was still around, mind you, just out of range. Where he was, Miranda didn't know, but from what they had learned, the territory of the Risen was effectively gone, having been successfully invaded by the Holy Church and United Cities Alliance. At least, that was the official story. Jake wasn't entirely sure what to think after Miranda told him there was now a big hole in the ground where the Risen had once been.

Jake was sad to see Casper gone, but he should still be alive. Villy had at least told him that. Well, okay, not alive, technically, but still around.

Caleb had been suckered into working for the United Cities Alliance, and honestly, Jake didn't really see the problem. He was just doing his job, and it wasn't like what he did would hurt Jake or those he cared about. The Court of Shadows was a business, and Jake knew that Caleb refusing could only result in him having to leave the Court.

The Court of Shadows was what could be classified as a true neutral faction in that they only cared about money. Villy even mentioned that if Jake wanted to slap some fat stacks on the table, he could

just hire them to also target the United Cities Alliance, including Arthur himself. However, there would be one thing holding them back in the future.

A rule they had was that they would not accept the task of assassinating the leader or someone part of the leadership structure of a planet they operated on. This was simply a concession to allow them to stay on planets without conquering them themselves. Jake also reckoned this was why Arthur was fine with keeping them around. If the United Cities Alliance won and he became World Leader, they would not target him but only function as an asset operating out of Earth as there was an element of deterrence if people knew the Court had a branch stationed somewhere.

So even if Jake was not a fan of what was happening, he understood why it was like that and wouldn't blame Caleb for what he chose. He did what was best for his family – their family. Jake also knew that while his brother believed in him, it was best he made decisions for his nuclear family first and foremost. Maja and Jake's little nephew were his priority, and if Jake somehow ended up dead or forced to leave the planet, Caleb needed the Court to back him.

It was all complicated. Valhal had also taken a complicated stance on the matter. One of absolute inaction. He was informed that they had been hired or brought on by several cities to help defend them from the attacking beasts, but that was it. Villy had once more talked with Jake and offered that they did have an approach they could take if they wanted: offer them a deal too. But Jake had no interest in this either.

No, he had been thinking and was beginning to make some realizations. Some things he had to do if he wanted to stay on Earth or even be able to call it a home he could visit. Things to allow those he cared about to find safety there and not have it be what it currently was: a mixture of forces with era-old conflicts that would never get along, with some newborn factions tossed in that also vied for control. Jake would have to make some decisions.

Anyway, the Holy Church was also still acting all shady, and from what he had heard, they were planning something of their own. The Noboru Clan had fallen into shambles over the last month with lots of internal conflicts, and it was all messy as hell. Speaking of messy, even the Church apparently had

problems, and Jake had not heard a single peep about or from Jacob. It was like he was gone. Then again, something must have happened because he would definitely not have authorized an attack on the Risen.

Another person Jake had not seen or heard from was one other quite unique character on the planet. Eron. The now third person with a Bloodline residing on the planet after Ell'Hakan had arrived was notably absent from everything. Miranda had tried to figure out what was happening, but she had no idea... all she knew was that no one had seen him for quite a while.

Jake had been curious enough to ask Villy only to get an unexpected response. Not even the Primordial had any idea where he was and found himself unable to locate him. People with Bloodlines were harder to find by default, but Villy clarified that he should still be locatable. Unless, of course, he had been hidden by someone at or around the level of Villy himself. It was enough to interest Villy and make him do some independent research, and what the Viper found out was that he was definitely gone from Earth and likely from the ninety-third universe. As for where he had gone, along with all of his followers, Jake had no idea. Truth be told, Jake had never really talked with or about him that much outside of their brief interaction in the Treasure Hunt. Eron had just been doing his own thing until he was suddenly gone.

Oh, and as for the question if he was dead... Eron? Dead? Yeah, Jake definitely couldn't see that happening, and his guts also told him the insane healer was still kicking.

To summarize, a lot had happened over the last month, and Jake could probably have been back in Haven already if he had wanted to. He had purposefully waited and wanted to make sure everyone was ready. He had even managed to get word to the Fallen King about his plans, with the Unique Lifeform now on board. Though the Fallen King had apparently not at all been in a rush either but oddly happy with the stalemate that he faced with another Unique Lifeform. Then again, how often could someone like the Fallen King find someone of equal level that was his equal? Well, every day, if he stayed around Jake. Not that Jake would bother to fight him all the time. He was too busy killing to just do fighting.

During this month, Jake had not slacked off at all. He did discover the oddity that it felt like he progressed faster again for some reason. In between killing n C-grades or while waiting for Sandy to get a treasure, Jake would usually either talk with Miranda, recover from a fight, ponder on some issue, or do alchemy. Alchemy was what he did if none of the others were required, which is why he was surprised at getting three entire levels.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 186 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 187 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 184 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 188 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

A level every ten days from not even being that focused on alchemy was odd. Granted, Jake had primarily been crafting items and not really experimenting, but it was still a lot. Jake had even spent a bit of time checking in on sim-Jake and pondering how to get his last three “of the Malefic Viper” upgrades when he was meditating anyway. No real progress there, though. Some initial ideas began to form, but he was not really that focused on them.

His true focus had been hunting and improving his class skills. As for how that had gone? Well, in the hunting department, the levels spoke for themselves.

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 182 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

...

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 193 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

And with that naturally came the race levels.

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 185 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

...

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 190 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

12 levels gained in his class and 3 in his profession over a span of thirty or so days was incredibly good and nearly brought him back to his early D-grade days. Jake had been surprised several times at getting a level, even if he had killed a few dozen C-grades by now - C-grades more powerful than anything he had faced before.

Relentless Hunt was truly a powerful skill and gave Jake far more damage than he had initially expected. It allowed him to break stalemates, land unexpected blows, and far more easily control the flow of a battle. Moreover, the longer he kept the fight going, the larger his advantage became if he didn't need to use the Hunting Momentum.

He was also beginning to realize that the skill was quite a bit stronger than it was meant to be. For several reasons. Its innate balance came from assuming one would still get hit once in a while, hence slowing the generation of Hunting Momentum. Something Jake was very good at avoiding due to his Bloodline.

Additionally, then it was probably not intended for the person using it to have a Perception stat at the level of Jake's. He had, of course, tossed every free point gained in it without any regrets and was now close to having thirteen thousand Perception, making it nearly as high as his two second-highest stats combined. Stats that were already highly inflated due to Jake's many stat amplifiers.

Jake truly felt justified now in going so hard on Perception and proving all the nay-sayers wrong. Perception was, and would forever be, the best stat.

As for class skills... Jake had gone even further above and beyond expectations, and the results spoke for themselves.

Naturally, his success was partly due to his high Perception.

Because. Again.

Perception best stat.

Chapter 538 - Chronicles Of Skill Upgrades

Upgrading skills was always a difficult and time-consuming process. You had so much to evaluate and so much to do, and Jake's method of upgrading was considered even harder than the standard approach. He insisted on only doing it during combat and only reflected on how to upgrade the skills on a surface level in between fights.

This would usually be an incredibly ineffective, if not downright horrible, method as it carried so many more risks. Especially when you did this only while fighting enemies at a higher grade. However, to Jake, this added element of danger only made him focus more. It allowed him to truly feel and experience the movements of energy in a more profound way, and his senses felt sharpened. Probably because they partly were.

It was not a joke either when he said Perception was a big reason why he could upgrade the skills the way he did. Rather than do a long time of experimenting and theorizing, he could feel and perceive the skills and how they worked and potentially find snags and room for improvement, along with discovering potential areas to build upon for an upgrade. Perhaps more importantly, it allowed him to faster rule out dead ends and ideas that were too hard to pull off with Jake's current level of skill and grade.

As for how many skills Jake had managed to upgrade during this month? Three in total. Each upgrade used different methods and approaches but resulted in the same: Jake growing stronger. All were skills parts of Jake's usual toolbox and perhaps his most essential ones in a fight.

He had been a busy hunter, and the first skill was one he used all the time.

Splitting Arrow, or more accurately, Enhanced Splitting Arrow. Currently sitting at rare rarity since just after Jake evolved to D-grade, where he had upgraded it from uncommon rarity to allow the split to work with his Arcane Hunter's Arrows. That upgrade had allowed the arrow to split and retain innate magical properties.

It was a simple yet effective skill.

[Enhanced Splitting Arrow (Rare)] – A skill most often used by archers, now usurped and reformed by the Avaricious Arcane Hunter. Allows you to clone your arrows while in flight, allowing them to retain innate magical properties. Each arrow strikes with the power of the original. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Wisdom when using Enhanced Splitting Arrow.

Paths of improvement? Several. Jake had many ideas. Some of the first that sprung to mind was to allow it to clone even the poison on the arrows and other external magical properties. As an example, then Jake could not split an Arcane Powershot as the Powershot added properties to the arrow that were not innate. Okay, while he could probably still split it, all it would do was make the attack weaker, so it wasn't worth it.

However, this method of improvement quickly hit a snag in that one of the biggest strengths of Splitting Arrow was speed and how subtle it was to use. If Jake wanted to make it so much more powerful, the skill would require a lot more energy to use as Jake did pay mana and stamina when he split arrows, and dependent on the poison, the cost could get insane. Sleeping Night Toxin would be so darn expensive to clone. Jake was not even sure he had the mana pool for it. So he quickly moved away from doing that.

Which is when Jake remembered his most important motto. Keep things simple. Why would he need to really change the skill? He just needed to improve it. Make it better than what it was. So why not just do that? Focus on improving every aspect there already was – something that would become a theme with these three upgrades. For Splitting Arrow, he felt like he needed to truly understand the process that caused the arrows to split and improve upon that.

Jake did have utterly bonkers Perception, so it was only right to put it to use. He thoroughly analyzed the moment his arrows split and the entire process from start to end. Since gaining it, the skill had gotten a lot stronger already. The resource cost was lower per split than the day he got it, and he had an easier time splitting more arrows than before. This alone was perhaps enough for an upgrade if he pursued it more actively, but Jake went in another direction. One he also believed would shore up even more room

for future upgrades and improvement. A path where Jake had taken a lot of inspiration from the Sword Saint and the duel they had. The result had been better than expected.

[Splitting Arrow Rain (Epic)] – A skill most often used by archers, now usurped and reformed by the Avaricious Arcane Hunter. Allows you to clone your arrows while in flight, allowing them to retain innate magical properties. Each arrow has variable strength and can be further split into less potent versions. If the original arrow is shot upwards, it can be split to create a far more potent arrow rain. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Wisdom when using Splitting Arrow Rain. Increased damage based on Perception and the distance the arrows fall from when creating an arrow rain.

Jake did not have a good area of effect skill before besides just a lot of arcane magic. Now, Jake had what could thoroughly be classified as a disaster-level attack. Pre-upgrade, each Splitting Arrow had the power of the original, but with this version, Jake could vary it. He could make ten arrows with the power of the original or a hundred arrows with about twenty percent of the originals... because, yes, they actually retained more power than math would otherwise suggest.

The upgrade had come during a fight with a massive water elemental while crossing a small part of one of the oceans of Earth. It had been larger than any creature Jake had faced before and relied solely on its massive resource pools to survive. Jake had bombarded it with thousands of arrows every few seconds and shown it that he, too, had a lot of resources to spend. And mana potions.

Something had to be said about watching a rain of arrows that each exploded upon impact. With a bit of practice, Jake could truly make it look like it rained as he shot the arrows into the air and let them rain down on his foe. His archery skill was also an important aspect of this skill, allowing him to bend the original arrow and make it fall faster and at slightly different angles than just straight down.

The elemental had died simply due to being bombarded for long enough and from far enough up in the air – because, yes, Jake just flying really high up in the air and him then shooting down counted as creating an arrow rain. Granted, Jake would have been screwed against the elemental if it had just run away underwater, but Sandy had done Cosmic Generis Worm stuff and made it so the elemental could

not flee underwater by messing with space itself to effectively solidify the liquid. The more Jake spent time with the worm, the more he realized how messed up of a creature Sandy was.

Anyway. Splitting Arrow was the first skill Jake improved, and once that was done, he moved on to another staple.

Arcane Powershot.

If there was one skill Jake would say truly was the core of his fighting style, it had to be this. Jake had gotten Powershot all the way back at level 10, right after he got out of the Challenge Dungeon. Since then, it had been his best archery skill, if Jake said so himself, but more than anything, it was his skill. He had upgraded it twice himself already, and out of all his skills, he didn't have one he felt more familiar with. Without lying, he would probably want to keep Arcane Powershot over all other archery skills he currently had, even if that would be illogical.

Either way, it was probably his best combat skill. All others had conditions or only worked well when used with others, but where would he be without Powershot? Probably at a far lower level, if not dead. It was only right to give the skill some love, and this time around, Jake took a note out of a Primordial's book: Valdemar.

The thing about skill upgrades was that there were several ways to do it. The most usual way was to add more to the skill, like how Jake had just improved Splitting Arrow to be able to split more and added the arrow rain function. But there was another way.

Refine and improve. Do not change the core of the skill itself but simply make everything about it better. Concepts did not even need to be added; you just had to better understand those that were already there. Out of all the Primordials, Valdemar was the best at this. He was a simple man, and as a simple man, he had simple skills.

His go-to was a simple chop. Jake had seen this simple chop smash through the barriers of the Malefic Viper and tear his flesh and bones apart as space and reality itself bent and buckled under his power. This was not simply because he was strong but because of the skill the would-be Primordial used. It looked like a common rarity skill, but in reality, it had likely been mythical or beyond during their confrontation at S-grade.

Jake had gone in a similar direction as Valdemar and thoroughly analyzed Arcane Powershot. As mentioned before, Jake was already intimately familiar with the skill and only sought to improve every aspect. Arcane Powershot was inherently a bit chaotic due to the destructive arcane energies, but that was primarily due to Jake's lacking control. The more stable energy he could actively control and pour in, the more destructive energy he could stabilize and infuse into the attack. The end result would still look chaotic, and the purpose was still to push himself to his utmost limits – something Arcane Powershot had not really allowed him to do for a while.

He wanted to go back to those days when he felt his own muscles burn, his skin peel off from destructive energies, and his bow struggled to not break apart from the sheer level of energy infused. After days of slowly refining the skill and dozens of dead C-grades that became victims to his Path, the system rewarded his efforts.

[Arcane Powershot (Epic)] – Stamina the fuel – Mana the guide – Arcane the power. Evolved from Infused Powershot, it now uses a higher concept of mana to amplify itself. The higher the magnitude of the charge, the greater the stamina and mana expenditure. Arcane Powershot's power is dependent on the charging duration, but due to your Arcane Mana's inherent power, the base power without any charging is significantly higher than Infused Powershot. Adds a small bonus to the effectiveness of Agility and Strength as well as a medium bonus to the effectiveness of Intelligence when using Arcane Powershot.

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[Arcane Powershot (Ancient)] – Stamina the fuel – Mana the guide – Arcane the power. Using your arcane energy, charge a devastating attack using a bow that pushes your body, will, and control to their limits. The higher the magnitude of the charge, the greater the stamina and mana expenditure. Arcane Powershot's power is dependent on the charging duration but has a powerful baseline due to your arcane affinity. Adds a medium bonus to the effectiveness of Agility and Strength as well as a substantial bonus to the effectiveness of Intelligence when using Arcane Powershot.

There was no interesting fight that spawned this upgrade. Jake had not made it to battle a certain foe like the massive water elemental. The upgrade had come during one of his many times using it to first engage a foe, and everything had just clicked and fallen into place.

The change in the description was intriguing. Primarily how nothing had really changed functionality-wise, yet it was quite different word-wise. All references to Infused Powershot were gone and now replaced with their own text, indicating that the skill was now more divorced from Infused Powershot than before. The changes were so few that not even the skill name had changed; the rarity had just upgraded.

Did Jake complain about this? No. No, he did not. His only possible area of criticism was in that there was still no inherent Perception-scaling in the skill, but it was acceptable for now. The skill did still kind of scale with Perception simply because it empowered attacks that did scale with the stat.

In that fight where it had clicked, the energy had moved more smoothly than ever before. First, a stream of pure stability had entered his muscles, bones, skin, and bow. A fraction of a second later, the destructive energies had come, but Jake had protected himself already. The two energies interacted and rapidly reached equilibrium as Jake mixed stamina and mana far more efficiently than before he began practicing the upgrade. His efforts were rewarded as the skill upgraded and system assistance kicked in.

The Arcane Powershot Jake had released had been by far the strongest he had ever used outside of one using Hunting Momentum, and Jake was already beginning to see a path to a goal he had formed for himself. Something he had done in E-grade and wanted to repeat in D-grade if possible:

Kill prey a grade above himself with a single shot.

The final skill to be upgraded was a bit of a surprise. Arcane Hunter's Arrows.

This one honestly wasn't one Jake had been actively going for; it had just kind of happened as he worked on his other skills. This skill was one of those semi-passive ones that he didn't think actively about, but seeing as it was his source of projectiles ninety-nine percent of the time, he probably should consider it more.

The skill was honestly a bit... meh? Like there wasn't much to it, and it barely fit him as an Avaricious Arcane Hunter. It fit the Arcane Hunter part, but there was nothing avaricious about it. The avaricious tag usually just meant he dealt more damage to foes above his own level and sometimes less against those at a lower level. Most often than not, the tradeoff was just that the upgrade only worked on those at a higher level, making it a demerit by omission.

What Jake had gone for this time around was to better introduce his class into the skill along with his increased level of control. Once more, he dove into the vast treasure trove of Perception and better analyzed the arrows. Jake had already applied many concepts to them before and was rather used to them. He had found ways to infuse the Stealth Attack Concept better and now worked with Hunting Momentum. and began to practice a bit by first making a bunch of Arrows of the Ambitious Hunter since the skills were a bit similar. The difference was that the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter was a singular, far more powerful arrow and one that also contained the concept that allowed him to deal more damage to enemies of a higher level. Jake wanted to take that element and apply it to Arcane Hunter's Arrows.

Jake did have to be careful not to change the skill too much, though, as one of the best things about the Arcane Hunter's Arrows skill was the instantaneous summon. If the skill lost that functionality, he would probably have to switch back to just using a quiver that conjured arrows, which would suck.

As he was trying to work this concept into the arrows, he also began to ask himself why he only ever shot arrows that were either stable or destructive. Like, he knew it was best to go all-in with one element, but why have it be all static? Jake could make stable balls of arcane energy and then make those explode. His arcane bolts were stable at one moment and then destructive the next. That shouldn't be too hard to also do with arrows, right?

Nope, it wasn't. Considering Jake had spent an entire month focusing on upgrading skills, his mindset was already well-adjusted mentally to focus. And after he began to be able to change the equilibrium of the arrows, he tried to also apply the avaricious element. He thought it would be hard, but that very day, he had gotten the upgrade.

[Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)] - A mage and a hunter both, you combine your talents as you conjure your tools of destruction. Allows the Avaricious Arcane Hunter to conjure arrows made of highly-condensed arcane mana, focusing on either destruction or stability. A stable arrow will be sharp and durable, while a destructive arrow will explode upon impact. Conjuring arrows consume mana, and the conjuration is instant. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Intelligence and Wisdom when using destructive Arcane Hunter's Arrows. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Wisdom and Perception when using stable Arcane Hunter's Arrows.

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[Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Ancient)] - A hunter embracing control over all energy, you combine your talents as you conjure your tools of destruction. Allows the Avaricious Arcane Hunter to conjure arrows made of highly-condensed arcane mana, focusing on either destruction or stability during the creation process. A stable arrow will be sharp and durable, while a destructive arrow will explode upon impact. Conjuring arrows consume mana, and the conjuration is instant. The user can change the balance of the energy within the arrow remotely. Deals slightly increased damage against

foes at a higher level. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Intelligence, Wisdom, and Perception when using Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows.

Jake had to admit that this one was the cheapest upgrade out of all of them. The amount of system assistance that came in was insane. This was one of those instances where the upgrade path had been pre-determined already, almost just waiting for Jake to discover this way to improve it.

The result was slightly more powerful arrows that were better against foes at a higher level, which naturally meant more damage to everything. The ability to change the balance of destruction and stability on the fly was also a great addition for quite a few reasons. Where Jake applied this upgrade the most was, of course, by shooting a stable arrow, and once it was close to its target, he made it explode. No, Jake could not blow up an arrow already embedded in his foe. He tried, and it failed every time.

This one was still a new addition, and Jake had more science to do before he had figured out everything.

Every single skill upgrade also improved all existing properties, even if new ones were added. This month of hunting had been perhaps the most fruitful period Jake had ever had in D-grade when it came to improving his fighting power. Jake still wanted to improve some things, but time was limited. Soon enough, he would have to resolve everything going on with Earth.

"I am done eating!" Sandy said to Jake as the giant worm flew over, having consumed the entire field of fruit trees. Jake stared out over the ocean and smiled at the worm as he shook his head, telling himself to focus on what lay ahead. They were about to head across the ocean for the first time.

The geography of the Earth had truly changed a lot, and one of the changes was the placement of land and ocean. You could walk nearly anywhere without crossing an ocean as paths connected almost everywhere, but there were still parts without a reliable way across. These narrow points were all they had crossed so far, but to go further, they had to head straight through the open ocean. That, or

potentially take a long way around. Jake would lie if he said he wasn't looking forward to their sea trip, at least a little.

On a side note, the "ocean" Jake had crossed with Carmen was not truly an ocean. Jake realized that now. It was more just a massive lake still connected to the ocean, though, by old-world standards, that lake was indeed ocean-sized.

"Did you know that even before the system, we knew so little about what hid in the depths of the ocean? Had so much of it still unexplored? Some even said we knew more of space than the depths of our own seas," he asked his wormy companion.

"No?" Sandy asked as Jake felt the mental version of an eye roll. "How would I know? I am a Sand Worm. It would be very weird if I knew what you humans were up to before the system."

"My point is," Jake said, waving off the worm, "I am looking forward to seeing what monsters may roam over the vast oceans."

"I am more wondering what kind of tasty things these monsters are hiding away," Sandy said with glee. "But no going into the water. No way we are doing that."

"That we agree on," Jake said.

There was no fucking way he would willingly face a C-grade in underwater combat.

Chapter 539 - Sky Whale & Old Acquaintance

Sandy was definitely the most lopsided creature Jake had ever come across. Okay, maybe something like the Termite Hive Queen was equally lopsided, but Sandy was definitely so specialized and weird that it boggled his mind.

Most creatures Jake knew could fight. Like, fighting was a basic skill of the multiverse, right? Jake had yet to come across a single C-grade that couldn't at least fight back in some way. But Sandy? Sandy and fighting were not a thing at all.

And yet, out of every C-grade, Jake did not want to mess with Sandy and make the worm an enemy. Because he was damn sure that would only result in everything he held dear getting eaten and the worm flying away unbothered.

Sandy was good at three things. Like a Sand Worm, a Cosmic Genesis Worm was incredibly good at moving about. Jake thought his new Wings skill was good at escaping, but Sandy had several skills that allowed escape.

Secondly, Sandy was incredibly resilient. The rock-like hide was not for show, and Jake found that even with Arcane Powershot, he could not break through, even if Sandy did say "ouchie" when he hit the massive worm. That was the upgraded version of Arcane Powershot too.

Thirdly was finding and collecting resources. Jake could sense natural treasures due to his boots and Sense of the Malefic Viper, but damn, Sandy was on a whole other level. The worm picked up on things of value up to thousands of kilometers away, and Jake had a feeling it could be even further.

What Sandy was not good at was fighting, but the worm also sucked at detecting enemies. Luckily, or unluckily, it was nearly impossible to find a natural treasure not guarded by something powerful, and Sandy had a good sense of how valuable a natural treasure was and, thus, what kind of power-level one could expect the protector to be. Sometimes Sandy was still wrong, but that is where numbers one and

two came in, allowing the worm to just leave. Even the one time they accidentally bumped into a mid-tier C-grade, probably around level 250. Sandy just flew away as the beast chased for a while until it realized it was wasting its time.

All of this is to say that Sandy was only good at running – worming - and eating. But damn, the worm was good at it. He had pimped himself the best ride around, and he clearly felt he was getting closer to Sylphie with every passing day. Now that they found themselves crossing the ocean, Jake also saw an entirely new part of Earth.

Amazingly enough, Jake had avoided underwater combat for the entire first day since they began their journey. This part of the trip would be a lot faster than the one prior as Sandy quickly realized that unless you were willing to dive into the depths, there were few treasures in the open ocean.

Sandy had only found a single island that didn't even have a C-grade on it but only a whole bunch of D-grade birds, making them avoid it. No reason to mess with the local wildlife without any rewards.

This resulted in Jake spending a lot of time within Sandy's stomach just working. He considered working on upgrading some more skills, but without fighting, Jake had a tough time doing it. Jake's entire fighting style was also just so damn instinctual, so trying to take a logical approach and researching a skill seemed too foreign to him.

Thus he focused on alchemy once more. Everything was just peaceful as nothing tried to attack Sandy, and what did try did not have the slightest chance of catching the Cosmic Genesis Worm. At least everything was peaceful until the third day when suddenly Sandy called out to him.

"Out. Now," the worm said as Jake was thrown out. He didn't even have time to stabilize himself before his eyes opened wide, and he turned his head and saw it.

Still only half-emerged, an utterly massive creature exited the infinitely deep ocean below. Its skin was blue and rough, with fins and a massive tail still hidden in the water below. It looked like a blue whale, just oversized to the extreme, with its emergence reminiscent of a large island choosing to take to the skies.

[Sky Whale – lvl ???]

Jake estimated it to be a bit over ten kilometers long, and it was by far the largest creature Jake had ever encountered. As for if he would fight it? No fucking chance because the aura it gave off was also far above anything.

It was a late-tier C-grade, well-beyond level 300. No matter how many skills Jake upgraded, he had no confidence in facing such a foe. This was also why Jake froze and gritted his teeth as he felt the whale's attention on him. The beast was still over a hundred kilometers away and moving incredibly slowly, but he still saw its stadium-sized eye turn to look at him.

"Sandy, why are we stopping here?" Jake asked the worm.

"It asked for you," Sandy simply answered.

"What?" Jake asked with surprise.

"Said they had been tracking us for a while and wanted to talk... I did want to run, but it seems friendly enough, you know? Anyway, I was promised a treat if I got you out, so get talking," Sandy said, having just sold him out to the massive whale.

As Sandy as said, he felt the whale reach out to him mentally. Jake accepted, wondering what the beast could possibly want from him outside of eating him. Wait, blue whales were herbivores pre-system and pretty chill creatures overall, so maybe this one was too? Let's hope.

"I greet thee, Malefic's Chosen," a deep voice echoed in Jake's head. It sounded like the whale was talking to him from inside a large cave or something. The voice was also obviously male.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" Jake responded in kind. He felt no animosity but instead a lot of caution from the massive Sky Whale. Clearly not fearful of his power but his identity.

"If you would allow me to speak frankly?" the whale asked.

"Of course," Jake allowed it, now even more curious.

"We have felt the waves of change for a long time. We, being those who reside within the vast waters of our planet. From the beginning, we were aware a war would come, and it has already spread to our waters. Factions have been born, and lines formed. I do not mean to ask you for anything, but I do have a request," the massive Sky Whale said.

"What could I possibly do for you that you cannot do yourself? You are the most powerful creature I have seen on this planet so far," Jake also spoke frankly. If the whale asked him for help in a fight or something, then he had to admit he was way out of his depths. Pun intended.

"The ones who will ultimately take control of this planet will not be those like me. When that happens, I fear what our fates will be. Perhaps I myself could leave behind this world and explore the wider universe, but many trusts in me and hide under my fins for protection. What I am asking of you is not assistance in any task but simply to allow us to stay once the time comes. In return, we shall support you in taming the parts of the world you do not wander yourself, Malefic's Chosen," the whale said.

Jake frowned, even more confused. He felt like this all came out of nowhere, and he wasn't even sure how they had tracked him or known he had been inside of Sandy. No one had been observing them besides Villy, and he had a hard time seeing Villy informing a C-grade Sky Whale about him out of the blue. Yet clearly, it had known he was coming and intercepted him. The whale was also aware of the entire Ell'Hakan and United Cities Alliance situation from the sounds of it. He had to know how.

"This has nothing to do with your request, but I have to know... how did you track me and know we were coming? Who told you? How do you even know the situation on land when you reside within the oceans?" he asked the massive whale.

"I apologize sincerely, but I am unable to answer that question. Just know that neither my Patron nor those following me are against you. All we seek is a path of survival and, hopefully, a healthy relationship moving forward with both the Chosen and his Patron. What I can share is that my Patron is no threat to you nor the Malefic One, and he realizes his station," the Sky Whale answered, now fully emerged from the water.

Jake pondered and couldn't figure out who or what it could be. What he could do was guess, and his guess was that the whale had a Patron that wasn't a god Jake had heard of before. Potentially not even that powerful of a god, but simply one that hoped to foster a good relationship with Jake and Villy. Why he had chosen to back Jake and not this Ell'Hakan if he knew both, Jake had no idea. Maybe he just wasn't a moron?

He admired the massive body of the whale for a moment as he wondered how damn deep the oceans had to be to facilitate such an enormous creature to live within it. Much less the treasures it had to hold for such a monster to reach its level of strength.

"I understand," Jake simply answered, feeling the nervousness of the whale decrease.

"I thank you, Malefic's Chosen, and godspeed in your journey. Allow me to offer you and your companion tokens of goodwill," the Sky Whale said as it opened its ridiculously large mouth. Out flew two objects, one being a large pearl the size of a volleyball and the other a crystal container about the size of Jake himself. It looked naturally formed, but an odd dark blue liquid was contained within that instantly triggered Jake's Sense of the Malefic Viper. Needless to say, he could not hold himself back from identifying it.

[Lifeblood of the Emperor Urchin (Ancient)] – The Lifeblood of a slain Emperor Urchin, an incredibly poisonous creature only found in areas with extremely dense water affinity. Its very blood is toxic to consume and especially toxic if directly injected. The Lifeblood is of a neurotoxin nature. Has many alchemical uses and is especially when combined with other neurotoxins or poisons with the water affinity.

Jake was not one to say no to a good thing and gladly accepted his gift. Sandy had already zoomed forward and eaten the Pearl without a care in the world. Jake shook his head and put the crystal container in his inventory.

"Thank you, from both of us. I am sure we can figure something out if you are sincere. Me knowing who is backing you would also help, but I can accept it if you want to stay secretive," Jake said with a smile

"No, I am the one to thank you. I have been allowed to say that my god is indeed far more aware of you than others, and you have briefly brushed Paths before. You and your Patron have both helped him, perhaps unknowingly, and he wishes to pay back that favor," the Sky Whale said.

Still no idea who it could be, Jake thought. Considering the whale said unknowingly, he assumed it truly was a god he had never met or interacted with. He was also confused at Villy having helped this mystery god. Moreover, he didn't get the feeling the whale was lying. Why would it lie? What would it get out of it?

They exchanged some more pleasantries before the whale took to the air. Yes, rather than dive down underwater, it flew upwards into the vast skies above, doing whatever Sky Whales do.

"That was a nice whale," Sandy said.

"Yeah, very whalecoming," Jake agreed.

"That was bad... like, I can feel you snicker through the connection, and you should not feel proud about that one at all," Sandy scolded him with exasperation.

"Whale then, I guess I will fin-ish this conversation here," Jake said, unable to hold back a grin.

The worm did not respond but just cut the connection and gulped him down. Jake did not resist as he was tossed into Sandy's stomach, still smiling proudly to himself.

"I do wonder what god that whale was associated with," Jake wondered out loud. It was a mystery that would likely take a long time to sol-

"Hey Jake, remember that god Karroch that was in charge of your Tutorial? Yeah, that is the god that blessed the whale and apparently a shitload of other beasts on your planet," Villy came in, spoiling the mystery.

"Wait, that beastmaster kind of guy? Why would he say I helped him, and moreover, why would he say you helped him? Well, unless you did help him... is this him paying you back a favor or something?" Jake asked instantly in return.

"Not really. As the god in charge of your Tutorial – despite him being trumped and just working for Eversmile, the Holy Mother, and others – he was the one in charge on paper. Which means he got rewards based on the performance of the participants. You becoming a Progenitor was a major boon to him. Then afterward, I killed the Brimstone Hegemon, an enemy of this god. One can say that we both changed his life. You allowed him to break through and no longer stagnate in strength while I removed an enemy trying to hunt down and kill him," Villy explained. "He truly got lucky by crossing paths with you and me."

"Huh, guess you learn something new every day. So, what is he trying to do? Get on your good side through me? Or just repaying some perceived favor?"

"Bit of both from the looks of it. Just let him; Karroch is an unaffiliated god that does not belong to any Pantheon, and honestly, him helping you out can be very beneficial. As a beastmaster, his Blessing can help beasts tremendously, and the guidance he can offer is also better than what most other gods can. You must remember that one of the primary abilities of beastmasters is to make their beasts stronger and allow them to grow in strength. If that Augur is a guide for the enlightened to find their Paths, a good beastmaster is a guide for beasts," Villy further explained.

"I see," Jake said. "But are these beastmasters not effectively just tamers forcing beasts to fight for them? Is it a good idea for a beast to be influenced by someone like that?"

"Beastmasters tend to have two classifications of beasts. Tamed beasts and companion beasts. Companion beasts have a connection more like the one you have with the Sylphian Hawk, while the tamed beasts are indeed just expendable chess pieces. Companion beasts are naturally what these beastmasters care about the most and the kind of Records you can expect if blessed by one," Villy said.

"Good to know," Jake said.

"Anyway, I just thought I would let you know as it was something god-related. I shall let you get back to your travels. Keep up the good work," Villy said before cutting off the connection. It was just a brief talk but rather enlightening. He also failed to hold himself back.

"Hey Sandy, can you do me a favor and tell the Sky Whale to say that I am happy Karroch benefitted from my Path?" Jake asked the worm.

"Who is Karroch?" Sandy asked.

"A mutual acquaintance of the whale and me."

A few moments passed. Sandy always made the walls transparent and allowed Jake to look outside, and he saw the Sky Whale, now far up in the air, react as Sandy spoke to it. A few more seconds passed.

"The whale talked about you truly being a monster or something like that, which makes no sense as you said you are a human, right? Humans aren't monsters," Sandy relayed to him.

Jake just shook his head. "Who knows? Maybe I am also a giant whale in disguise."

"Doubtful, considering whales aren't scared of water," Sandy scoffed.

"I am not afraid of water," Jake argued. "I just recognize I am not adept in fighting in it."

"Sounds like something someone who is scared of water would say."

"It is not about fear, but--"

"Maybe you are... what was it... a chicken? Yeah, maybe you are a chicken in disguise? Because you sound like a chicken right now," Sandy cut him off.

"No, it is not that, I--"

"Chickens also don't like water, right? What a coincidence..."

Their “argument” continued... Jake not realizing he had fallen into a trap – or being too stubborn and prideful to back down - until it was too late.

Chapter 540 - Teaching How To Human & Angry Shark

She had to ask herself if maybe she was the one who had something wrong with her. Yeah, maybe it was her? Miranda just couldn't see any other way for everything to make sense. Because if it wasn't her, then what the hell was wrong with everyone Jake introduced to her or made friends with?

They had spent over a month in the Grand Mangrove River by now, and things had been mostly fine. Emphasis on mostly. Because the Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake was far more peculiar than Miranda had initially estimated. She had to admit that she was originally afraid of the snake girl and had to constantly be on guard and act confident. Facing a C-grade, especially a mid-tier C-grade, was no easy task for her, but she had to endure it for her comrades.

That was a month ago. After spending a month with the snake?

“No, you can't just eat one of their arms to teach them a lesson. That is not how humans learn at all,” she said with exasperation as the C-grade snake sat on her knees, attentively listening.

“But big sis, what if they are being really bad? Like, at least eat the hand, right? It grows back, so it isn't that bad, is it?” the snake girl argued.

“It is still a no,” Miranda said with a sigh. “If you want to be a good ruler, do not use fear as your only tool. That is what idiots do, and you aren't an idiot.”

“Okay...” the C-grade said as she seemed to reconsider what kind of teaching methods would be good for humans. Ah, but not human adults, mind you. The snake girl seemed to be under the impression that

the best way to teach human kids was corporal punishment. Some idiot had mentioned to her that kids sometimes had to touch a hot stove to learn it was hot, so the brilliant snake naturally interpreted that as the best way to teach a kid about heat is to smash their faces onto a stove repeatedly until they were deathly afraid of kitchen appliances.

As for why the snake cared so much about learning “how to human,” as she put it? Because she was clearly obsessed with Jake and proving herself useful to him. Miranda was not even sure how to interpret the snake’s emotions... love? Infatuation? Neither felt right. Obsession was truly the only word she thought fit.

One good thing about this obsession was that she wanted to do all she could to make Miranda happy and her level of respect for the City Lord was through the roof as she seemed to view Miranda as a “senior” in the Jake fan club.

Her respect for Miranda was good, though... because the snake girl had a lot to learn before Miranda would dare unleash her on the wider society. She had done a lot of questionable things, and Miranda would be far more frightened of the C-grade if she didn’t have the demeanor of an unknowing teenager. One area she had really messed up was in her recruitment methods.

At first, Miranda had assumed the snakes had maybe helped or rescued people who had been trying to cross the Grand Mangrove River and found themselves in trouble. Nope, it turned out that the snakes were the trouble. They swooped up any humans they came across and forced them back to the center of the mangrove, and had them construct the small settlement that could now be found there.

If this wasn’t bad enough, then the Alabaster Crimstoneye Snake’s method of studying the human body had been to literally study the body. She had initially consumed several women and girls to learn about human physiology, and once she felt more familiar with the form, she forced women to help her refine it. This was partly done by her investigating how the human women’s bodies looked and having them explain things... which included cutting them open with a healer on standby.

It was only after this she began to learn a bit about humans were supposed to act she stopped. No one had ever even mentioned to her what she did was wrong by human standards because who the hell would dare tell a C-grade when she was out of line? Who would dare claim her actions were wrong and that what she did would be morally reprehensible by any reasonable moral standard? Well, that person ended up being Miranda.

Things in the settlement had improved after their arrival, and the mood had relaxed after Miranda had effectively taken charge. She still vividly remembered when a dozen or so humans had seen her tell off the Alabaster snake in public and their looks of utter horror for what was about to happen – because, yes, the snake girl's usual response to dissent was just to kill whoever disagreed.

People were dumbfounded when they saw that the snake girl just nodded enthusiastically and asked what she was then supposed to do. From that point on, they were all incredibly friendly whenever Miranda was around, and the fact that the snakes no longer killed people who messed up was a huge improvement. The young snake still needed to learn that simply attacking people wasn't in any way constructive.

Miranda sighed as she saw that the snake girl was a bit down after being told what she was doing wrong for the umpteenth time that day. It was probably time to "reward" her.

"We can continue this tomorrow, okay?" Miranda said in a soothing tone to the snake. "Also... I have a surprise for you."

The snake girl just looked up and tilted her head to the side.

"A surprise from the Chosen," Miranda clarified.

The eyes of the girl instantly lit up as she jumped to her feet. “What! What is it!?”

Miranda smiled at the nervous and excited girl. “A name.”

Jake and Miranda had agreed that this time around, Miranda would help him decide, and she quickly realized that Jake was obsessed with using the physical appearance or attributes of creatures to name them. It made her question that if Jake ever had a kid, he would name him or her Humany or something else dumb like that... alas, at least Miranda was there this time around to shoot down any downright horrible name ideas. Because Jake had a lot of dumb ideas.

After a bit of time, they narrowed the names down to a few. All of them were still real names, and all of them were even acceptable names for a girl. However, all of them also partly included parts of the Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake’s race name or physical attributes. Miranda personally thought that using parts of the race name for the naming scheme was moronic, as when the beast evolved, the race name could entirely change. So calling the snake Alabastie – an actual suggestion by Jake – the name would just come off as incredibly dumb-looking if she ever evolved.

She really hoped he had been joking, though, as Jake could not seriously just take the first word of a creature’s race name and slap on an “ie” or “y,” right? Yeah, that was too much for even him... even if he had kind of done that with Sylphie. And Mystie... yeah, okay, he had been absolutely serious.

Good thing Miranda was there. Anyway, the final battle of names came down to Scarlett, after her red eyes, and Allie. Allie, because of Alabaster and because it still fit Jake’s obsession with names ending in “ie” or “y”. Both of these were at least real names, and both were short and sweet. Even if the snake ended up changing race, later on, the names would not be questionable.

"A name!?" the snake girl gaped. "Me, named by the Chosen? Really?"

She was almost dancing, and Miranda had to admit she looked rather cute. If she hadn't seen the girl rip the head off a man without flinching, she would even have gone as far as to call her innocent-looking.

"Yes, but he had two suggestions, so you need to choose yourself," Miranda made clear. Miranda had to admit she was not actually that comfortable just naming another person herself. She wanted them to at least have some choice over the matter. Not that any of the beasts Jake had named complained about their names no matter how bad they were... Miranda just wasn't comfortable doing it.

"What are they!?" the snake girl said, practically jumping up and down.

"One of them is Scarlett. It comes from the red color of your eyes, and the color red often symbolizes courage, passion, heat, and force. It is a powerful name. Some also think it a violent name, something that is fitting for your rather fiery personality," Miranda said, the snake girl listening attentively.

"The second name is Allie. Parts of the name stem from your race and that you are an Alabaster Crimstone Snake. The name is considered fair and symbolizes harmony and nobility, and was originally the name of a saint. Moreover, it is often a nickname, so if you wish to have a longer, more formal-sounding name, you can also do that and retain being called Allie by friends and family," Miranda explained. "If you are not satisfied with any of these naming ideas, do not hesitate to voice it, and we can go back to the drawing board."

"No! No, I love both of them!" the girl instantly said as she waved her hands back and forth.

“Alright,” Miranda said with a smile. “Just think carefully about it. A name is important and isn’t something one should just choose haphazardly.”

Future Scarlett/Allie fell into deep thought as she seemed to think very deeply about what name she wanted. Doing something that Jake should maybe do once in his damn life as he had a tendency to just jump straight into a dumb decision.

Heck, for all she knew, he was probably doing something reckless and stupid at that very moment.

Fooled. Bamboozled. Entrapped. Completely and utterly let behind the light and taken advantage of. That is the fate that befell Jake after he argued with the Cosmic Genesis Worm. He had fallen for the dumbest thing ever: the good old “then prove it” argument.

Prove that he was not afraid of water.

Jake was not afraid, and even if he knew he was being baited into it, he had gone along with Sandy’s taunts. It wouldn’t be that bad to just dive down under the water for a little bit and maybe fight a few D-grades or something, right? He just had to avoid any C-grades. Heck, he could even practice stealth a little and sneak his way down there and find whatever it was he was looking for!

He had so much belief in himself... so how the hell had he ended up in his current situation?

Jake constantly shot arcane blasts behind himself to catapult forward faster as the large shark chased him angrily. He had to continually break through barriers as the water itself tried to stop him and slow him down long enough to be devoured by the monstrous beast. A beast that was naturally a C-grade.

[Razorstream Shark – lvl ???]

As for where the hell Sandy was? Well, Sandy was busy eating an entire fucking coral reef that the shark protected and seemed to use to create some natural formation. Jake had gone there after being told by Sandy it looked like a great spot to find valuable things, and since he wasn't a chicken, he could totally go there and get some herbs, right? There were indeed good herbs there, no way around it, but there was also an angry shark. A shark Jake had made even angrier after he stole some kelp.

Spinning around in the water, Jake took out his bow and charged an Arcane Powershot. The water fought against him as always, but he managed to overpower the natural environment and launch an arrow nevertheless.

It flew forward and hit the side of the twenty-meter-long shark, ripping off a piece of flesh and making it even angrier. Jake rapidly shot again before stepping down with One Step, teleporting to the side just before the maws of the shark snapped shut.

The arrow he had shot had no velocity at all, as Jake had released it with no power. Yet just before the shark shut its mouth around the singular arrow, it suddenly split into ten, with those ten further splitting into ten each for a hundred total.

Its mouth snapped shut just as all the arrows exploded at once, ruffling the large beast a little as Jake even saw the arcane energy flash up through its gills. Once more, he had done more to annoy it than actually damage it.

Charging again, the shark seemed to be getting a bit serious. The water around it warped as several teeth-shaped projectiles were summoned and shot towards him. Jake avoided and shot another arrow, but the waters around the shark moved as a powerful current began revolving around the beast.

Jake's arrows were thrown off-course with the shark charging again. Having no time to release another ranged attack, Jake decided to face it in melee combat. From within his Soulspace, he felt Sim-Jake's attention as his simulacrum observed attentively.

One would think that a shark had few close-combat options besides simply trying to bite its target to death, and one would be correct if it was a normal shark. But this one was an early-tier C-grade with a healthy repertoire of magic.

The sphere of water around the shark began warping as teeth-like objects appeared within it, and Jake's eyes opened wide as he focused. The shark barreled forward, and Jake entered the sphere as he swayed. Several attacks flew by him, but as the current only flowed one way, they all came from the same direction, giving him a chance to dodge. He dodged and used his katars to slightly veer some teeth away from him as soon enough, the shark was upon him.

Rather than try to bite him, it tackled with its snout that now had even more damn teeth growing out of it. Jake met it head-on as he punched forward with his full power. A mix of dark and arcane energy revolved around the katar as Jake used Descending Dark Arcane Fang for the first time in quite a while. The shark had no doubt willingly decided to trade the blow as Jake's hand too was hit by several razor-sharp teeth, but rather than cut through his gloves and puncture his hand, the gloves remained undamaged as Jake had already poured mana into the legendary item to strengthen it.

Their clash sent a wave of pain through Jake's arm as he was shot backward due to the sheer level of size and momentum the charging shark had, with the bones in his arm hurting, a few cracks having formed here and there. Not that the beast came out of it unharmed. It now had a deep wound in its snout that penetrated nearly three meters into its head as he had extended the blade with Descending Dark Arcane Fang. Sadly, he had failed to hit the brain.

He felt the faint approval of sim-Jake, but also some criticism in his failure to hit the brain and how he hadn't properly transferred the impact through the rest of his body to lessen the strain on his arm. Jake took it in as he decided that if he was going to be forced into underwater combat, he should at least make something out of it.

None of them knew how long sim-Jake had left, but to Jake's surprise, he felt like his simulacrum had gotten back more personality recently after he had regressed to be nothing but a nearly mindless machine improving Shadow Vault.

I guess sim-Jake never got to do any underwater combat... better get his take on this afterward. No, not afterward. Right now.

Jake smirked as the annoyed shark charged once more, a pulse of dense water affinity washing over him. A few thin cuts appeared on his body as he felt a concept of sharpness within the water itself, only making him smile more.

What human hadn't dreamt of fighting a shark?

Probably most humans.

The thing is, Jake wasn't most humans. Never had been.

He dove forward as human met shark, the two clashing as the water filled with blood and a happy worm ate an entire coral reef in the background.