

Hunter 561

Chapter 561 - A Chill Trip

The journey to Skyggen was one Jake had made before, but this time was far faster in every way. Jake's One Step had upgraded, allowing him to go further than ever before, and he was fast approaching the city. It did help that he also ignored everything in the way... except one thing.

Curiosity had always been one of his strong traits, but the last time he had gone to Skyggen, he had listened to the logical part of his brain. A massive mountain appeared before Jake, one reaching far into the sky above the many layers of clouds. It was bonkers how big it was, and Jake faintly felt a powerful aura from the top. A C-grade aura. Jake had not wanted to go the last time he was there as he was not quite ready to face a C-grade, but this time it should be fine, right?

Right?

Jake rapidly approached the mountain, which only looked bigger the closer he got. It completely put any mountain on Earth to shame, and based on how massive the base was, Jake estimated its height should not be measured in tens but hundreds of kilometers.

Kind of makes sense, Jake thought. The C-grade – or C-grades if there were more than one – had to live far enough up on the mountain due to the system restrictions.

The climb wasn't fast, but it wasn't slow either. By climb, Jake meant running vertically with One Step as he teleported up in the air like he had just unlocked infinite teleporting double-jumps. Soon, he made it ten kilometers up. Then thirty. Fifty. A hundred.

For every step, the mountain narrowed a little. When he reached the hundred-kilometer mark, Jake guessed the mountain had to be around three hundred kilometers tall. He did spot many caves also while making his way up and many creatures living on the mountain. Thousands of birds made it their resting place before heading out into the merciless skies again, some of which found themselves hunted by predators lurking on the mountainsides.

None of them paid him any mind, and Jake didn't bother them either. It did not take him long before Jake finally reached the layer of cloud that allowed C-grades, and he instantly felt the shift. The air suddenly turned chilly and white snow covered the mountain. He saw now that the rest of the mountain was covered in white, but more than that, he felt something else there. A presence that seemed to seep into the mana itself.

Curiosity still had hold of him as Jake went to investigate. He flew closer to the mountain and landed as he saw several tracks. Areas where the snow had been disturbed by what looked like a giant claw print.

He kept going forward until he saw a massive cave that seemed to burrow straight into the middle of the mountain. Icicles covered the sides of it, and Jake felt an intense chill coming from within. Enough for him to use a barrier of arcane mana to defend himself from it.

As he stood there, he also felt something from his boots. As he was earthbound, he could detect natural treasures, and from within that cave, a powerful sensation came. Sense of the Malefic Viper did not react, meaning it was not a toxin, but that did not mean it would be useless to him.

Not that Jake thought he could claim it... for he also felt a powerful aura.

Mid-tier C-grade? No... not quite... but still strong, Jake thought. Whatever creature dwelled within also seemed to become aware of him as its presence swept out from within. Jake was ready to retreat as two blue wisps of light lit up within the unnaturally dark cave.

A rumble sounded as he heard the sound of claws scraping stone. Soon, the creature became visible as it slowly walked out of the cavern, the chilly air cooling down as it got closer. Jake knew upon feelings its presence that it was a creature of pure mana. One of the natural masters of magic in the multiverse.

The blue scales covered its body as vapor exited its slightly open mouth. Two claws dragged it forward, each attached to large leathery wings, with two legs being the primary method of moving when not in the air. For some reason, Jake did not feel any fear but only had a stupid smile on his lips from finally meeting one in the wild.

[Northpeak Wyvern – lvl ???]

Wyverns were not dragons, true. But they were the second best. Even a powerful hatchling of a True Dragon often could not match a similarly-leveled evolved wyvern. The reason was simple... the requirements for a reptile to evolve into a wyvern were incredibly strict, and they needed to have insane levels of innate magical talent.

“Your smell is familiar,” a voice echoed out from the wyvern. “But you are not kin.”

Jake smiled. “No, I am not. It is a pleasure to-“

“Then die.”

His danger sense exploded as the wyvern opened its mouth. Jake reacted as fast as he could and activated Arcane Awakening and crossed his arms in front of him as several layers of arcane magic appeared. Just in time too.

A chilly wind hit Jake, followed by blue light. To lessen the impact, Jake tried to redirect some of the force as he was shot backward. The arcane barriers froze and shattered one by one as he felt like he was in the middle of a blizzard. Within a second, the final barrier shattered, and the cold energy hit Jake directly. His skin froze, his armor cracked, and he had to close his eyes for them not to freeze solid, the already summoned Scales still managing to absorb most of the force.

Luckily he was also being pushed away at an alarming pace. He flew back rapidly as he summoned a healing potion into his mouth to fight the cold energy that invaded his body and sought to freeze his insides.

Soon, he at least stopped accelerating as the power of the wyvern's breath dissipated. That just left Jake flying through the air like a comet down toward the ground. The entire front of his body was frozen, and Jake gritted his teeth as he managed to move his frostbitten limbs and brace for impact before he smashed into the ground, creating a large crater.

The cold emanated from his body, even freezing his surroundings. Feeling pretty damn chilly, Jake sat up in the crater, the mountain still visible far in the distance.

"What a rude wyvern," Jake muttered.

At least he had been hurled in the direction of Skyggen, so could this count as a shortcut? Definitely not, but Jake wanted to justify his curiosity somehow.

Still more than a little miffed at the lack of courtesy from the frost wyvern, Jake got up as his entire body was stiff, and his skin and scales cracked from the frostbite. It was damn annoying, and even with his vital energy working at high speed, it would take some time to eliminate all the frost energy in his body. The breath of a wyvern was far less potent than that of a true dragon, but it still held incredible conceptual power nonetheless.

Moving forward at a slower pace, Jake continued his journey. He complained a bit under his breath and swore: the next time Jake went to that peak, Jake would show that damn wyvern what true rudeness looked like.

Caleb looked down at the sleeping toddler as he smiled. He and Maja had many discussions during the pregnancy on how to deal with a newborn, especially with Caleb working early hours and whatnot as a school teacher. At least that hadn't been an issue considering he no longer needed to sleep at all. Adam did sleep a lot, and according to his mom, relatively normal hours too. At least compared to Caleb.

As a baby and toddler, Jake had been a weird one. Mom talked about how he would always wake up when you entered the room, almost as if he could detect you in the room... something he, in retrospect, clearly had been able to.

"I still feel a bit jealous," Caleb heard his dad, Robert, say from behind. "Back in my day, we had to get up every two hours to a crying baby and soldier through the day on four hours of sleep."

"In all fairness, I am not even getting four hours a week," Caleb smirked.

His dad ignored him with a huff as he looked at Adam sleeping. "I had feared how everything would be for a newborn... but he seems normal. Part of me had thought that maybe kids would grow up to

adulthood within a few months or have superpowers, making toddlers even more menacing than before.”

Caleb definitely concurred on that one. All of it. He had feared what kind of life a child could have in a world where battle and killing were so common, and perhaps more, how the system would mess with someone growing up.

The system had definitely led to changes for children, but surprisingly enough, it was generally positive. How exactly the status menu of a toddler looked, he couldn't know for good reason, but one thing was clear: their stats did not match their level. At least not their effectiveness.

Adam was already level 3, which meant that by pre-system standards, he should have more stats than a regular adult man. Or at least close. At least he should be far stronger than he was. Okay, he was still stronger than a normal kid, but it was not extreme, so even if he could crawl faster and had quite the grip, it was not at a level where he could lift his own dad off the ground. He did not seem to display any particularly supernatural traits besides one aspect: durability.

It was weird analyzing his own son like that, but he also couldn't ignore reality. Like with any kid, Adam liked to sometimes do less than intelligent things. Things that would usually make a kid cry, such as bumping his head or hitting himself with a toy, he ignored. The few times he managed to scratch himself, the wound would also heal within the hour. He had also not been sick once, and he needed less food than pre-system children.

Caleb was, needless to say, thankful that the system seemed to have made life for both children and parents easier. No longer did you need to be so fearful of anything and everything going wrong. Parents no longer needed to have several children to ensure some made it to adulthood, and even without medical professionals, children would be fine.

“We are lucky,” Caleb just smiled as he looked at Adam sleeping.

He left the room shortly after with his dad, going to the living room. It was only the two of them in the house, and Caleb would have to leave soon, leaving his dad behind to babysit. Yes, even with the system and all that, there was no way he and Maja would leave Adam without a babysitter.

“How is Maja settling in?” Robert asked.

“She is doing well,” Caleb smiled. She was spending some time with her own parents these days and had gone a route like many others when it came to figuring out what she wanted to do. Her prior ongoing education in law did not prove the most useful post-system, but she still wanted to at least work somehow tangentially to it, so she had decided that since her husband was a Judge, she should at least do something to help him do his job. Hence why she went into the business of making contracts. System contracts and general administrative work. It was honestly a good thing, as Caleb felt a lot better having someone he could one-hundred percent trust at his back.

The two of them chatted a bit more before dad suddenly seemed to remember: “Didn’t you say something about Jake coming by?”

“Yep,” Caleb nodded. He had to say Jake was really lucky. Adam being born and everything being so hectic had distracted mom and dad enough for them not to get too annoyed at his lack of contact. Not that Caleb blamed him, Jake was busy and had a lot on his plate already.

“About time,” Robert still grumbled.

Caleb just shrugged, there not really being much to say. It was definitely not an argument he was going to try and have again.

“So, when will he come?” Robert followed up.

“Not sure of the exact timeline, but last I heard, he was on his way. I have no idea how fast he is these days or if he has any errands on the way, but it shouldn’t be too long,” Caleb answered.

Dad just nodded, not talking about it further. Caleb was halfway looking forward to and halfway dreading the talk they would have when Jake arrived. He wasn’t sure how it would go after all the stuff with Arthur. Would Jake get mad at the Court for having helped Arthur? Would he get mad at Caleb? Or would he do as he usually did and not really care?

At least Arthur was gone. Last Caleb had heard, he was headed toward Haven to try and do some damage control. An understandable move, as Arthur truly believed Jake was an unhinged maniac who was seconds away from genocide at any moment. The leader of the United Cities Alliance genuinely feared that Jake would go on a rampage and ravage cities in retaliation and hoped to give himself up and lay down his life to appease the monstrous Malefic’s Chosen.

It was a stupid thought, but... Jake was hard to understand for people who didn’t know him. Everyone seemed to have expectations as to how he was supposed to act and viewed everything he did as something pre-approved by the Malefic Viper, and every action he made only one to further the goals of the Order of the Malefic Viper.

Let’s hope things work out, Caleb just sighed as he walked towards his office to finish up some paperwork. He had no idea what Jake was planning but was sure he was about to find out soon.

It ended up taking nearly ten hours before Jake was back to full speed after his wyvern encounter, resolving himself not to annoy moody frost lizards anymore. The cold energy had lingered far longer than expected, and with Palate useless against it, it had been a struggle to eliminate it all. However, when he was at full speed, he made rapid progress, and it did not take long before Jake closed in on Skyggen.

Only after he entered the fake Skyggen did he realize that he could likely have made it a lot faster if he had just figured out what teleporters were functional again and found a city that could take him there.

Earth was rapidly restoring what had been lost, and it should not take long before a new teleportation network was up and running. One that would even be better than the one before as all those responsible for making it had gotten stronger and more skilled in the meantime. Chances are that even areas like the Grand Mangrove River could be passed through by the teleporters with just a bit of tweaking. If not, then it should be possible to make a teleportation checkpoint in the middle.

Shaking his head, Jake did not want to waste time thinking about it as he saw the streets of fake Skyggen and how it barely differed from before. It was evident the beast tides had not reached the city at all, and all that had happened was them expanding as more sought the safety of larger cities.

Remembering the route, Jake passed through the city and went towards the real Skyggen.

It would be good to finally spend some quality family time... and talk to his parents about his plans of quite literally taking over the world.

Chapter 562 - Family Time

Jake was rarely nervous, but on that day, he really was. Logic be damned; he was still a bit afraid his parents wouldn't be okay with him coming, even if Caleb had only ever said they wanted him to. He had to admit that this was one of the reasons he kept trying to avoid going... Jake was very different from

before, and with every day, he truly grew further from Jake, a boring salaryman in finance, and into Jake, the hunter. Despite how much he had been assured by Caleb, the nervousness still stayed, making him feel like this was a repeat of their first meeting all over again.

To add on, there was one more element. A person who had looked forward to meeting Jake's parents even more than Jake himself... or, well, equally as much. It was naturally his other self, sim-Jake.

Sim-Jake last saw his parents the day they died. To him, it had been decades, even if he had been able to experience the real Jake's memories. However, as he still maintained an ego, it just wasn't the same. That is why when Jake entered the real Skyggen, he instinctively knew Sim-Jake had stopped his training and was alert and watching.

Who could blame him for being nervous? Both of them? All of this resulted in Jake slowly making his way toward the large residence where Caleb and his parents lived, with his head full of doubt. The guards didn't stop him at all but took out tokens to let him in without even speaking a word, Jake knowing they had been informed of him coming. He hadn't tried to hide this time around, so they all knew he was in Skyggen, meaning there really was no way to back down.

Jake approached the house and saw them within through his sphere. Waiting. He took a deep breath and walked up to the door before knocking. Within the house, mom instantly shot to her feet and rushed towards the door. He was thinking about what to say or how to act as she hastily opened the door and saw him.

In the next moment, Jake realized how dumb he had been.

Without any hesitation, his mom pulled him into a hug. His anxiety washed away as he just returned the hug. Neither of them spoke as he smiled, a well of emotions also coming from within his Soulspace.

He really should visit more.

“How long did you think you could hide it from me?”

The Augur looked out at the vast golden city from atop the spire. A deep frown adorned his face as he felt the changes in the tapestry from the faraway planet. The mix of hope and fear from his home planet reached him even in another universe, proof of his increased power after his evolution.

“Until you discovered it yourself,” the B-grade Bishop answered with a sigh. “I am not foolish enough to think that I can obscure the truth from an Augur for long.”

Jacob’s frown only deepened at the answer. “Why was this necessary? What happened on Earth?”

“Movements and machinations above what we mortals are meant to comprehend. The game of the gods is not ours to interfere with; all we can do is try and make the outcome as acceptable as possible. Yip of Yore, a god recognized as at the pinnacle, challenged the Malefic One, and their battle was extended to also include their Chosen. The Chosen of Yip of Yore invaded your planet with the help of a faction of natives and battled the Malefic’s Chosen. This happened only shortly after you arrived here and recently concluded with the Chosen of Yip abandoning the planet and the Malefic’s Chosen coming out on top,” the Bishop explained, Jacob not sensing a single trace of falsehood in his words.

“Why would all of this require me to leave Earth and come here?” Jacob asked.

“It is not only you. The faithful will all be evacuated from the planet as the Holy Church has decided to abandon it unilaterally. A decision that should not come as a surprise to you, considering the state it was in and the turmoil it faced,” the Bishop answered.

Jacob wanted to protest but truly couldn't. Deep inside, he had known this would be the conclusion for quite a while. The Holy Church was a monolithic faction that either controlled a planet or didn't. They had rituals and effectively terraformed planets to be better for themselves and natively spawn holy energy that strengthened the power of faith for all who lived there. Sharing with other factions, especially enemy factions like the Risen, was not an option.

“After the second event, it was obvious that taking control of the entire planet would not be feasible,” the Bishop continued. “Considerations of placing an embassy of sorts there were brought up but ultimately decided against. As things are looking right now, it looks like the Malefic One's Chosen will end up victorious. Something that I also feel does not come as a surprise,” the Bishop said, a hint of accusation in that last part.

They both knew Jacob had been asked to distance himself from Jake and also that he hadn't followed that advice quite as the Church would have hoped. Jacob also knew that the hope, no, expectation, of Jake was that he would leave the planet altogether. There truly was little reason for him to stay from the perspective of the Church, so they assumed he would just teleport to the Order. Something he had done. Except he also kept coming back, and based on how he seemed to have made a home on Earth, it looked like he didn't plan on staying away for good.

“Could you tell me everything that happened in my absence?” Jacob finally asked. While the Bishop had explained the cliff notes, Jacob knew there was more to it. There always was.

The Bishop agreed and told everything without holding back. Jacob had suspected it, but when it was confirmed that his father had been the leader of this native faction, he could only sigh. His sense of helplessness deepened when he learned that the Church had known about this Ell'Hakan coming well ahead of time and had even been warned, hence sending Jacob away beforehand. They had indeed

planned on leaving Earth all along and just wanted the Risen gone, too, something Jacob would have been an obstacle to accomplishing. Which begged the question...

"How exactly do you expect me to respond to all this?" Jacob asked.

"I expect nothing; I am nothing more than an instrument of a greater will. What I will say is that I personally question why you believe you have been slighted. You stand here now at C-grade, a multiverse in front of you, the blessing of the Holy Mother upon your soul and the Church at your back, and you care about a small insignificant planet. The reach of the Holy Church is boundless, and there are numerous places that can benefit from an Augur of Hope. Numerous places for you to exert your Path. Could you truly guide Earth towards a feasible Path with so many elements on it to lead it astray? Your planet was corrupted beyond saving already the moment the Chosen of the Malefic One chose to stay there. All you can do now is look onward," the Bishop said.

"And how do you expect me to do that?" Jacob asked further.

"Explore. You have barely seen anything of the multiverse yet; it is a ripe time to see what it has to offer. Leave Earth behind you. Perhaps the system will still offer you to return for events, but if not, then simply close that chapter of your life. People need help and guidance everywhere. People need hope everywhere. With time, I believe you will come to understand that no one has tried to slight or betray you. They simply guided you as you now guide others. Towards a better future," the Bishop finished saying, leaving Jacob alone with his thoughts.

Days passed by as Jake did something he hadn't done in a long time – absolutely nothing. He just relaxed with his family, played with his little nephew, and went around Skyggen exploring. Okay, Jake did do a bit of light work, but it was only reading, meditating, and helping Caleb out with some minor stuff. During meditation, Jake began working more with sim-Jake, but both of them dedicated most of their attention to their holiday. He had even made it clear to Miranda that he was only to be contacted in the case of an emergency, and Villy seemed to get the idea and didn't pop into his head a single time throughout this time.

Jake naturally also discussed recent events with Caleb and his parents. Everything with Ell'Hakan and Arthur had made quite the ruckus, and especially Caleb had seemed nervous Jake would get mad at him for the whole assassination thing. Jake didn't know why... it wasn't like his little brother killed anyone Jake knew, and while it did indirectly help an "enemy," Jake couldn't exactly get mad every time his brother took a job. It would be like if he got mad that his brother went to buy potions from someone else, as that would hurt Jake's financials.

As for the big subject of Jake's future plans... it felt like his parents didn't really understand it. They understood the words when Jake said he would become World Leader, but it didn't really seem to sink in. It was a bit like how they didn't entirely get what it meant that he was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper or really understood the multiverse and the powerful factions in it.

For the most part, Jake got it. The scale of things had gotten ridiculous. Gods who could crush entire galaxies with ease were mentioned as if normal, and factions with trillions upon trillions of members with countless planets were just things thrown out there. It didn't really make any sense to most people as it was too far removed from their everyday lives, so Jake didn't push it either. They didn't need to really understand... and in a way, taking control of Earth was a way of ensuring they didn't have to.

Or, maybe they did know and just didn't want to make a big deal out of it. In either case, it was probably for the best, as it allowed Jake to just be himself. For better or worse. Both he and his brother knew that even if his parents and Maja had reached D-grade, the chances of them reaching C-grade were near nil.

It was another thing Jake didn't want to think too much about. What he did like to think about was the last member of the little family.

Adam, his nephew, had proved himself to be a big fan of his uncle. Who could blame him? He seemed especially interested in Jake's mana strings, and while Maja wasn't keen on it, she allowed Jake to make a swing of pure, stable, arcane mana. The moving parts were a bit tough, but he got it working pretty

damn quickly and rapidly expanded - from a swing to a slide to a makeshift rollercoaster to whatever else Jake could get on.

No, this was not practicing; this was playing. Did it also happen to be good practice? Yes, but that was a happy little coincidence.

A month seemed like a long time, but the weeks passed by faster than Jake had expected. Before long, it was the evening before Jake would have to head back to Haven, and they had all met up for a final dinner together. None of them really had to eat – besides Adam – but that didn't mean one couldn't enjoy a good family dinner.

With the table set and a homecooked meal steaming, it began. They had tried to avoid certain topics during most of this time – topics delegated as work topics – but as this was the last night, all topics were valid. So, naturally, the conversation fell on what Jake wanted to do after he left.

"I heard you are planning on leaving and going to that Order again soon," Robert, his dad, stated.

"Probably," Jake nodded as his mom began mounting food on his plate. "I have something I want to do there before the evolution."

"Oh?" his mom asked. "Is it related to that alchemy of yours?"

"Nah. It's this dungeon with a hydra in it. I can fight the strongest D-grade version as long as I go there before I evolve. I lost the first time around and want a rematch," Jake said with a smile.

“You lost?” Caleb said with a cheeky grin. “Damn, I didn’t know you could even do that. What did it do, eat all your arrows or something?”

“That is exactly what it did,” Jake answered with a deadpan expression.

His mom gave him a look to make him stop teasing Caleb, but Jake doubled down. “What? It did eat everything. Arrows, magic, even my poison.”

Caleb turned a bit more serious as he inquired: “Sounds like quite the beast. A strong variant?”

“Yep,” Jake said as he took a bite of the food that his mom had just handed him. “This hydra later became a god too.”

Frowning, Caleb thought for a moment. “Wait, the Lord Protector of the Order? The Boundless Hydra? It has an image saved in a dungeon?”

“Right on,” Jake confirmed.

“Boys, enough hydra talk,” Maja finally cut in. Jake looked a bit apologetic, with Caleb naturally obliging with the words of his wife. It was a bit rude to talk about something only the two of them really knew and cared about.

They stopped discussing anything serious for a while as they just talked about causal topics. Primarily a trip Jake and Caleb made where Jake “borrowed” some more special alchemical ingredients from the Court of Shadows and, in turn, was made to help teach some alchemists. When Jake said talked, what he actually meant was that Caleb joked about how much Jake sucked at teaching people. Which wasn’t really fair.

It wasn’t Jake’s fault all of the alchemists in the Court were morons who didn’t put enough points into Perception to actually understand what was going on. They went on and on about methodology while Jake just kept telling them to just look at what the hell they were doing rather than just assume everything went according to theory. Something it turns out they couldn’t do because apparently Wisdom and Willpower were more important stats when it came to alchemy.

He could only shake his head at their ignorance, which his family only found amusing.

At least he did manage to teach them at least a little about poisons. Mainly things he felt were rather basic knowledge, but it seemed like him explaining it made them understand it better than if they read it. Jake wrote that up to his legendary teaching skill. Caleb was happy either way, as they both knew Caleb just wanted to have Jake teach to truly show off that there were no hard feelings between the Order and the Court. And Records. Probably some stuff related to Records too.

The dinner ended far too soon, and it was time for Jake to go. Everyone insisted on escorting him to the city exit, and it didn’t take them long to get there. Jake said goodbye to Caleb, Maja, and Adam before turning to his parents.

His mom gave him a big hug that went on for a bit too long, followed by his dad even giving a brisk one. Mom had tears in her eyes, but she didn’t say anything so as to not make Jake feel bad about leaving. They both knew he had to go.

Jake walked out of the hidden city gate as his dad followed him, with Caleb leading everyone else inside again. The two of them stopped a bit outside the city with no one else around. Robert turned to Jake with a serious look on his face. One Jake had only rarely seen on his father's face.

"Jake... Debra and I won't begin to act like we understand everything that is going on with you. I get some of it, but I will admit I have given up trying to fully understand what both you and Caleb are doing and how the world has changed. What I do understand is that you have important things you want and need to do. If there is one thing your mother and I would never want, it is to feel like you are restraining yourself because of us. So please, just do what you have to do. Just know that no matter what happens, we are proud of you, and you can always come to visit... but you don't need to. You don't have to hold yourself back because of us; we will be fine."

They smiled at each other as his dad tapped his shoulder.

"Take care out there."

Jake smiled and pulled his dad into a hug that lasted quite a bit longer than the last one. Letting go of him, Jake took a step back. "Thanks, dad."

His dad just nodded. "Now be off."

Jake nodded again and turned to leave.

"Be safe," Jake muttered under his breath as he took off, his dad staring after him as he left – Jake also feeling the gazes of the rest of his family from afar.

Chapter 563 - More To The Story

Getting back to Haven was quite a bit easier than going to Skyggen. A month was not a long time, but it was enough for many changes to happen. Earth's space mages had been working tirelessly, and the teleportation network expanded by the day. All the factions that remained were busy claiming what they could, especially after the Holy Church decided to effectively abandon the planet, resulting in the second biggest faction suddenly being gone.

The United Cities Alliance had clearly known of this outcome and already had people in place to take control. They did proceed with the plan of the takeover, but their loyalties to the Alliance were now in question as they all were also made aware of their failed overall plan. Which begged the question: what would happen now?

Jake had talked with Caleb about current events, and he at least had to give these City Lords credit. Their response had simply been to do their jobs as best they could and act as neutral forces. They invited everyone to make teleportation circles, and they prioritized their citizens over petty politics and focused on rebuilding and ensuring public order after all the beast attacks. That was pretty damn respectable and made Jake feel a bit better about what was to come.

For the final stretch back to Haven from the Fort, Jake still had to run. He decided to be nice and not rush, as they were now aware of his arrival back in Haven and could prepare stuff. A bit to his surprise, something unexpected contacted him on the way.

"Had a nice vacation?" Villy asked after the deity descended with his presence.

"I know you peeked in at me pretty much all the time, so you tell me?" Jake asked in return.

"In my defense, I wasn't really paying attention. Think of it more as me having a security camera on you where I can pull up the footage if I actually want to see something. Anyway, you had a good vacation, and now it is back to work, which is why I pulled you into a fast meeting. What are your plans with Valhal?" Villy asked.

"Not thought much about it, but I am a bit pissed at them for making a deal that is pretty much contingent on my death. Arthur, I can excuse for being ignorant and getting fooled by Ell'Hakan or whatever, but Valhal? Nah, fuck that; they did it with full knowledge. So something has to give, that is for sure, be it telling them to get the fuck out or demanding some kind of hefty compensation for being assholes," Jake said, a bit miffed.

"Okay, allow me to offer an alternative. Don't. I won't share much, but I will say that things aren't quite as they seem. Valhal is a good ally to have and a beneficial force to keep on Earth. The entire thing with Yip's Chosen is also far more complicated than you know, and again, while I won't share much, then you hit it right on the money when you said they went in with full knowledge. Including the knowledge that the contract would never materialize and become relevant," Villy said, making Jake frown.

"Explain," Jake simply said.

"I can't; that would potentially ruin future plans. Some things are simply best left unsaid. But know that Valhal never actually saw you losing as an option. They are allies, and it would be best to keep them as allies," Villy answered, refusing to give an actual reason.

However, Jake frowned with suspicion. "You were involved in them even making the offer, weren't you? What are you up to?"

“Things. We are playing a long game here, and some things will only make sense in due time. For now, just keep positive. Shit, if you want to excuse your sudden sense of forgiveness, just blame it on the Runemaiden. Wait, maybe you can demand to make her your mistress to-“

“Okay, bye!” Jake cut Villy off as he severed the connecting, a faint echo of a laugh still left behind as Villy clearly enjoyed teasing him.

He knew it was just a method to make Jake not discuss the topic any longer. Jake honestly had no idea what the hell Villy was doing or what he planned, but his gut told him it wasn't anything that would impact Jake negatively. He was aware that things between gods were rarely simple and that something bigger was brewing than just Yip and the Viper deciding to duke it out in a straight-on fight, so he decided to play along for now and be a good Chosen. While potentially using it as something to hold over Villy's head. He was still a heretic, right?

With all that done, Jake finally made his way into Haven proper. He had already felt Miranda observing him on his trip, not that he didn't expect her and everyone else to know about his arrival. As he got closer to the city, he also felt more powerful presences, making it clear he was the last to arrive.

The Sword Saint and Fallen King were already there. He had kind of assumed at least one of them to be late due to all the things they had to deal with during this month. Both had territories to stabilize and take control of once more, and while Jake had gotten some updates, he wasn't entirely clear on how things were looking elsewhere on Earth. Primarily because he didn't really care much and didn't wanna ruin his vacation by hearing how the rest of the world was potentially in turmoil.

Jake headed straight for the office, where all the others had already gathered. The King, Miranda, Sword Saint, Lillian, and of course, Arthur. Jake saw them through his sphere before he entered the office, and it was quite the sight, especially with how overly stoic Arthur looked. However, it at least looked like the man wasn't too uncomfortable. Jake would hope not. He had been in Haven for weeks already, so he should have had plenty of time for Miranda to set him straight.

Entering the large meeting room, everyone turned to him.

“You are late in your arrival,” the King said with a bit of snark. The Unique Lifeform felt a lot better than a month ago, and the many cracks in both masks were close to healed. Jake’s own mask naturally reflected the healing of the Fallen King in front of him, but he hadn’t really followed the mask regenerating during his break. Most of the time, he hadn’t worn the mask, as that had been unnecessary.

“I didn’t know we agreed to meet at midnight,” Jake answered back. “I apologize for assuming we would meet at reasonable hours.”

“For the record,” Miranda intervened. “The Fallen King is the only one complaining. I am personally surprised you even showed up this early. I would have expected you to come a few minutes before midnight tonight to barely meet the meet-three-days-before-World-Congress deadline.”

“Okay, I am starting to feel attacked here,” Jake said with a smirk. He met Miranda’s eyes and knew what she was doing. Humanization. She was trying to show that Jake was a normal person in front of Arthur by treating him casually and friendly. Jake didn’t think the King was in on it; he was just being a dick with Miranda then proceeding to make use of his dickishness.

“Who would have thought that previous history would be used as a predictor of future behavior,” Miranda smiled. “Anyway, good to have you join us, Jake. You aren’t actually that late; Lord Noboru arrived only an hour or so ago.”

“The lateness of one does not excuse the tardiness of another,” the King once more interjected.

“Or maybe you were just early. This is my meeting, so it begins when I arrive. Not my fault you decided to misread when I would come,” Jake just answered, not caring how unreasonable that sounded. He then finally turned to the guy in the room he was truly there for.

“I must admit, when I saw you last time, I was surprised, but I guess I shouldn’t expect anything less of Jacob’s dad. What I did not expect was for you to effectively try and start a civil war leading to millions of deaths for no good reason,” Jake said, not holding back right from the get-go.

To his credit, Arthur didn’t deflect or back down.

“Much has become clearer to me in the last few weeks. Light has been shed on my numerous misunderstandings and misinterpretations, and I now realize my mistakes and can only take full responsibility for my actions. However, I will not apologize for my ultimate reason for doing what I did. What I will apologize for is not realizing that perhaps we want the same thing, making my actions unnecessary and harmful,” Arthur answered.

“I am pretty sure you already know that I am quite skeptical of all this. I assume Miranda has filled you in on her plans?” Jake asked.

“She has made me aware, yes. And I also know the decision is ultimately yours to make. What I will make clear is that I also remain skeptical about her proposed arrangement. In all truthfulness, then before I even try to sell myself to this council, I will have to know it will truly be a council and not just a farce to try and sell the mirage of fairness and representation. That it will be a council that can actually lead to positive change and not just work to advance your personal whims or the wishes of the Order of the Malefic Viper,” Arthur answered, his gaze firm.

He and Jacob are quite a bit alike, huh, Jake thought. Miranda looked a bit nervous at the standoffish demeanor Arthur had adopted, making it apparent that wasn't how she had expected things to go. Arthur also seemed to misunderstand something.

"It will be to further my personal whims," Jake answered truthfully. "Why else would I bother becoming World Leader except for purely selfish reasons?"

Arthur frowned, but he didn't look surprised. "Which begs the question: why even make a council? Why not just have the Order of the Malefic Viper come and take over? With them in charge, it would be--"

"Didn't you hear what I just said?" Jake interrupted. "I said it was for my personal whims; what does the Order of the Malefic Viper have to do with anything? This entire council idea can be boiled down to a personal whim. Tell me this, why do you think I decided to become World Leader?"

The other man looked at Jake, confused by the question. "To take control and rule the planet?"

"Wrong," Jake shook his head. "I don't give a shit about ruling the planet. What I do give a shit about is to make sure no one else is ruling the planet. I don't want to see the Holy Church or some other bullshit faction take charge and do whatever they want. So, I decided to selfishly just claim the planet and tell everyone else to play nice or fuck off. The system clearly wants someone to take control at some point, and if that is the case, it may as well be me. But that doesn't mean I want to actually rule anything. That is what you are here for."

After talking, Jake threw Miranda a questioning look. He was a bit confused why the hell Arthur was still so ignorant even after all this time. Shouldn't she have explained all this already? However, she just gave him a smile in return.

Arthur looked to be considering Jake's words for a moment before asking: "What is your ultimate goal after gaining control of Earth? What is the goal of the Order of the Malefic Viper, and what, if any, role do they play?"

"I don't have any goal besides keeping things as they are and keep things peaceful. As for the details, that isn't anything I want to deal with. Honestly, I just want a place to return to whenever I want, and for those I care about who remain behind and be safe. As for the role of the Order? Well, they don't have any, at least not from your point of view. Sure, they will function as a deterrent to other factions, and I probably can't avoid anyone going here in the future. But it will be clear that this is my home turf and for no one to fuck around. There are certain perks to being the Chosen of a Primordial, and with the Viper at my back, no other faction will try to lay claim to Earth either," Jake answered.

The man once more fell silent, his frown making his skepticism obvious.

"And the Order of the Malefic Viper will simply sit back and allow this? What if your Patron asks for you to do something with the planet?" Arthur asked pointedly, still with the same misunderstanding.

"Well, the Order doesn't really have a choice, and if the Viper asks me to do something with Earth I don't like, I will tell him to fuck off," Jake shrugged. "You seem to fundamentally misunderstand the relationship I have with the Order and with the Malefic Viper. I don't serve him for shit, and I am more just a member of the Order by association and shamelessly leeching off them for my own benefit. The Malefic Viper and I are, in the simplest of terms, just good friends. So if he asks me for something, I will listen, but I will listen to him the same as I would listen to Miranda or anyone else here in the room. Well, besides you and the Fallen King."

This time Arthur really didn't know what to say, prompting Miranda to insert herself.

"I have been trying to tell you that you severely misinterpreted who you were dealing with and the current situation. You moved based on biased and false information with little criticism and few attempts to truly verify anything yourself. Was your interpretation one that would be true in ninety-nine percent of cases? Probably, but you still ultimately messed up," Miranda said harshly.

The Sword Saint also decided to talk. "I do not wish to see Earth fall either and would defend it if necessary. My reason for supporting Jake is that I trust him as a person. I learned about him as a hunter before I learned about him as a Chosen. But let me clarify that I will also take a laidback approach to Earth, similar to him... but should the planet be threatened, I will be here. No matter who the threat is, even if it is the Chosen of the Malefic Viper."

"Well, there you have it," Jake shrugged. "And, again, If it was up to me, you would not be sitting here. However, I have also become aware that just chopping your head off would lead to even more annoying issues, and while you are wholly ignorant of a lot of things, you seem to at least understand how to manage cities and politics. Your role will be the same as before, just on a council with a few differing opinions."

Arthur seemed to listen and sighed as he looked at the floorboards.

"I do understand that my actions were inexcusable, and I trusted people I never should have. Before I met Ms. Wells, I wasn't even aware of the existence of these Bloodlines, much less that the Chosen of Yip had one. I do realize now it influenced me, but that is no excuse for what I did. Let me also make it clear, Lord Thayne, that I do not fully trust you either, but I also know that trying to oppose you at this point will result in nothing positive," Arthur said before looking up at Jake. "I shall try and do my utmost on this council to try and make up for the mistakes I have made, but I will not compromise who I am or my beliefs. My priority remains the well-being of humanity and preservation of Earth."

"Great," Jake said. "That is exactly what the job description entails. Well, this was easy. Why did we need to meet three days before the World Congress for this again?"

Miranda sighed. "Because there is still a lot of work to prepare and contracts to draw up. Also, Jake, you have some personal matters you should attend to in the meantime."

Jake raised an eyebrow. "Such as?"

"I have been informed that the snakes at the Grand Mangrove River require your presence for a teleportation circle that should allow you to travel to the Order of the Malefic Viper again. Also, Arnold would like to see you. Finally, would it be possible for you to ask Carmen to come to Haven? The teleportation network should allow it," Miranda said.

"Oh, no need to worry about Carmen," Jake said with a smile. "She and Sylphie are already well on their way, though they didn't take the teleportation network but chose to take the more cloudy and scenic route. They should be here in a day or two, according to Sylphie."

Miranda nodded, surprisingly unsurprised. "Very well. In that case, maybe head over to Arnold or to the Grand Mangrove River. Ah, a teleporter to the Mangrove is already finished, and you can teleport there directly from the Fort. We shall reconvene when Carmen gets here."

"Got it," Jake nodded as he headed out to leave all the political nerds alone.

It was time to see what the resident mad scientist had been up to in recent times.

Chapter 564 - A Visit To The Resident Mad Scientist

Jake really had to restrain himself every time he visited Arnold. Mainly by suppressing his desire to see if he could break through the big dome of metal that guarded his workshop. It looked and felt damn

sturdy, but he should have a good shot with enough destructive arcane mana. If not, then surely Touch of the Malefic could do it.

Alas, he was not there to break stuff.

He had already gone to see Arnold before he went on holiday, so he was a bit interested in why Arnold had asked for him to stop by. Interested in what kind of thing the madman had made that he wanted to show Jake and potentially hand him. Or maybe he wanted a favor this time around?

As expected, then he was let straight in, Arnold aware Jake was back. The workshop had expanded once more, this time primarily downwards, it seemed. From Jake's sphere, he also saw some weird robot-looking things digging even further, making it clear the scientist was still expanding.

It didn't take long to locate Arnold, who was working inside a laboratory with a familiar cube. The one Jake had brought from the Void God, Oras.

"Good, you are here," Arnold stated when Jake entered without even turning around.

Jake was a bit surprised, not by what he was doing, but by the response when he used Identify on the man.

[Human – lvl 199]

The bastard has surpassed Jake in level. As for if he was working on getting his Perfect Evolution or still had evolution quests to finish, Jake didn't know, but he had still surpassed Jake. Holidays were truly detrimental to growth.

"So, what did you want?" Jake asked bluntly.

"I have been made aware you will soon return to the Order of the Malefic Viper," Arnold stated. "I would ask of you to procure some materials when you are there. Compensation shall naturally follow. Further discussion as to the form of compensation beyond Credits is possible."

"Oh?" Jake asked, a bit surprised, but he quickly got it. Arnold was probably running low on high-level materials. The guy had stockpiled when the system store was around and made ample use of the Holy Church and all other merchant groups... but by now, he had outgrown them. That, or they were gone off the planet.

He maybe even needed them for his evolution quest.

"Sure, we can figure something out," Jake agreed.

Arnold nodded and took out a tablet from his spatial storage, and handed it to Jake. "All details are within. A list has been made and ordered based on priority. Will a deposit of funds for the purchase be necessary?"

"Nah, I should be able to front the cash," Jake shrugged as he took the tablet and opened it to see the... list.

He started scrolling. It kept going.

“Arnold... how many items are there?”

“Eight hundred and seventy-one unique entries, the quantity of each item specified individually,” Arnold answered with a deadpan face.

Poor Meira, Jake could only think as he put the tablet in his inventory.

“This is quite a lot,” Jake commented. “And even if I don’t want a deposit now... maybe we can talk about what you can potentially offer.”

Arnold looked at Jake for a moment. “I would advise delaying. Preparations are underway for projects designated for use by C-grades. Based on the assumption that you are close to evolution, I predict any items would be more useful for you then. Moreover, the items requested will, in high likelihood, include the materials required for these projects. Before knowing what is possible to acquire, I cannot give an offer.”

“Eh... sound logic,” Jake said. He would need a lot of new stuff after his evolution, wouldn’t he? “But, give me a sneak peek anyway, okay? Come on, you must have something fun in the works.”

The man took a moment before nodding. “Continued research has gone into improving many weapons. Follow me.”

Jake gladly did so as they entered another workshop. Walking to a wall, Arnold activated some magic as barriers were rapidly removed. Jake had already seen the hidden room behind the wall and also knew that he had no fucking way to enter it. The way it was hidden was actually damn smart.

The walls that enclosed the room were three or so meters thick and made of metal, very similar to what the dome consisted of. It would take quite a while to get through it, and Jake reckoned only Alchemical Flame could do the job. The opening mechanism to enter was also simple but effective. The door of sorts required one to open it correctly, or a massive wall of steel would fall and block the entrance, and from the looks of it, Arnold had placed bombs on the inside to blow it the hell up if anyone broke in. The dude was very dedicated to protecting his works in progress.

Entering the room, Jake saw a few interesting things.

Firstly was a golem that Jake very much recognized. In a tank filled with murky water, the Census Golem floated, nearly all the destruction on it restored, though by other types of metal. If it was functional, Jake didn't know, but clearly, Arnold was far from done with it.

Next up were a few gun-like things in cases. Or, well, calling them blasters was probably more accurate. Jake had no way to properly evaluate those, but they looked fancy. Besides that, there were many different kinds of drones and spherical robots of sorts that Jake also had no idea about.

Arnold clearly knew this, which is why he led Jake to the one item Jake would likely care about. It was just a thin long piece of metal, but Jake recognized it right away. It was a nanoblade.

“Further improvements of the nanoblade are in progress, the durability, sharpness, and mana conductivity improving continuously. Seeing your recent switch to the use of katars, time will be needed to optimize the internal structure to support thrusting over slashing attacks. Moreover, from your explanations of Fangs of the Malefic Viper, the nanoblade can be further optimized to better facilitate and make use of the skill. I assume you are still interested in the weapon?” Arnold asked.

Jake looked at it for a bit before nodding. While he had two weapons right now, he knew the bone weapon was only temporary. When sim-Jake fully merged with him, it would lose much of its Records and power, making it effectively useless. By then, he would need another katar anyway.

Arnold took out his usual tablet and noted down this answer. “Finally, I recall you are planning on visiting the Grand Mangrove River. If possible, please take this along with you as you are going anyway.”

The man summoned a weird-looking cylinder of metal about the size of a person. Jake saw that on the inside, it was filled with mechanisms, and Jake could only throw Arnold a questioning look.

“The spatial mana within the Grand Mangrove River has interesting properties. I would like to analyze it to assist in another project of mine. From my initial tests, while a satellite is easily doable, proper drones for space exploration face challenges in the open cosmos as creatures and energies now lurk there. From my assessment, the Grand Mangrove River’s spatial mana has natural properties related to the concept of stealth,” Arnold explained.

Jake simply nodded and took the cylinder. “Makes sense.”

He had noticed the energy there before, of course. He had not quite identified it as some stealth concept, but then again, maybe it was a mix of space and stealth. Either way, what it truly was and how to make use of it was for Arnold to figure out.

"Anywhere specific you want it placed?" He asked to follow up.

"Somewhere safe, as the measuring device is not made to sustain unnecessary and sudden forces acting upon it during readings," Arnold answered. "Simply place it somewhere and infuse mana into the center circle. That will allow me to know it is in position and remotely activate it."

"Got it," Jake confirmed. As he stood there, he couldn't help but notice the many robots flying everywhere within his sphere within the workshop, especially those that seemed to do some rather complicated work like analyzing what looked like circuit boards. So he couldn't help but ask:

"Say, how do you even manage to control all these drones of yours? Even back in the Treasure Hunt, you had so many flying around. Are they all programmed? Some kind of artificial intelligence?" he asked. It was a bit rude to ask about someone's secrets like that, but considering how much Jake had shared with the man, he thought it okay to ask.

Arnold seemed a bit surprised by the question but was in no way offended. No, it was the exact opposite... he seemed elated that Jake had asked, giving Jake a bad feeling. A feeling that only grew as Arnold lowered his tablet and seemed to dedicate his whole attention to Jake as he explained.

"A number of methods have been applied. Most mundane models still run on simple programming, while more advanced models make use of artificial soul constructs. The Altmar Census Golem was my basis for these constructs, and I can only admire their ingenuity and prowess. However, the methodology and magiscripts used by the Altmar Empire do not suit my own, requiring me to adapt it, which made me switch to a more unorthodox approach by applying scripts and runes of the eldritch variety. The skill I received from Oras allows me to more easily split my attention between different tasks, and by augmenting the concepts within, I managed to implement soul constructs faintly mimicking my own, which then also allows me to temporarily fully immerse a part of my conscious within a given model. Do note that I do not need to use this functionality as the artificial soul construct will already act based on pre-programmed instructions and can be updated remotely through the

eldritch scripts. Finally, all information from every drone is fed to me continuously, which required me to develop skills and methods to filter, archive, and in other ways, sort through all data gathered. Models of machine learning are being applied here, which do require further development and improvement of skills, but the prospects are promising. If you are interested in delving into some examples of this theory, I could show you-“

“No, I’m good,” Jake cut him off. Okay, he had gotten way more than he had bitten off, and it did sound interesting, but more the kind of interesting that Casper would be excited about. Sure, Jake understood what Arnold meant, but he also understood that what Arnold was doing some something others simply couldn’t. From how he understood it, Arnold effectively split his mind into segments and had each handle different things. At least partly. Of course, this wasn’t really anything special, and, in fact, it was considered kind of normal to do this. Jake could, as an example, focus on different things at once while doing alchemy or using magic, but Arnold had taken it to a whole new level for a D-grade. One could only imagine how much more extreme it would become when he reached C-grade.

“Have you faced any issues with different personas emerging or conflicting thoughts?” Jake did have to ask as he knew that was a risk. Especially as he was dealing with someone using the Legacy of a Void God. Eldritch things and human brains didn’t mesh well based on all the books Jake had read pre-system.

“No,” Arnold simply answered.

“Well, geez,” Jake joked, having expected him to at least admit he had some problems. “Did you make a legendary skill or something to not mess with your head?”

“The initial skill received by Oras was at legendary rarity,” Arnold confirmed, making Jake feel a bit better... at least until the next sentence.

“However, I only became able to properly create my artificial soul constructs who were able to act autonomously after the upgrade to mythical rarity.”

Jake was taken aback. “You created a mythical skill?”

Arnold, even more surprisingly, shook his head. “No, not truly. Due to its nature as a Legacy skill, I did not upgrade my title from the achievement due to the offered Records and assistance from Oras.”

That at least made Jake feel a bit better, and he even felt some relief from within his Soulspace as simultaneously Jake was also looking on.

“Well, either way, damn if it isn’t impressive. Say, you pretty much put a part of your soul into each of these machines, right?” Jake asked.

“No, that assessment is incorrect. My soul remains intact and singular. However, partitions are linked through void scripts to each model,” Arnold clarified.

Jake nodded. “I see. Well, this has been very enlightening, but if there isn’t more, I should be on my way.”

“Very well,” Arnold answered, looking a bit disappointed, before leading Jake out of the hidden room with all his interesting works in progress. Jake said his goodbyes and quickly headed out toward the teleporter. On his way, he had to admit... he felt a bit relieved.

The reason for that last question was actually pretty simple. He wanted to probe if Arnold had delved into soul magic or what people often called soul ritualism. Jake already did some soul magic himself, but he wanted to see if Arnold had begun to delve into actually altering his own soul. Mixing eldritch magic and soul magic couldn't be good in Jake's eyes, and also, there was one final reason.

He wanted to know if Arnold planned on staying human. From how Jake saw it, Arnold was a prime candidate for someone to evolve out of their usual human form, maybe even turning himself into a robot or sentient computer or some shit.

However, this was not necessarily a smart thing to do. Arnold was still human, no matter how weird he was, and still had many of the more positive traits of humanity, such as emotions. Arnold becoming a robot was a prime path to turning evil, especially with his Patron.

Jake could only imagine the horrors of a sentient eldritch supercomputer without any empathy or emotions. While it was entirely possible for Arnold to not go down this path even if he changed his form, it was a potential threat. At least it looked like Arnold was not planning anything like this but would remain a living human supercomputer instead.

Shaking his head, Jake moved on to the next task at hand: visiting the Grand Mangrove River. He hadn't been there since he traveled through with Carmen and Sylphie but had wanted to visit for a while, primarily to thank them for helping him out by protecting Miranda and the others when he couldn't. Miranda had praised them a lot, especially the Crimsoneye Alabaster Snake, who led the group. It was only right that Jake would go in person to show his gratitude and chat with them.

As he got close to the teleporter, he suddenly remembered something. Jake had a tendency to zone out during long boring talks, but he did remember Miranda mentioning the name of the Crimsoneye Snake at some point.... he just couldn't quite recall what she was called.

Oh well, I can just ask her.

Jake also remembered Miranda mentioning that the snake had learned to take human form, so that was also interesting and definitely something he wanted to check out and talk to her about.

Chapter 565 - Snake Friends Visit!

To call the settlement in the Grand Mangrove River a city wasn't quite right. It was more of a small village, though it had been expanding in recent times, especially after the teleporter was installed. The reason for this was also quite obvious.

It was a prime hunting ground.

A settlement like this was rare as one could teleport directly into a place with D-grades all around you while still being safe. One had to remember that only a handful of people on Earth could fight C-grades, and the vast majority thus still needed to hunt D-grades to progress. Even the people considered elite struggled with stronger D-grades.

Additionally, it was a great place for those with the wood of water affinity to fight. Finally, it had one other advantage that Jake hadn't really considered: it was a place where C-grades could go if Jake wanted to meet with them there. Thinking about it deeper, it was probably the place Jake would meet with whatever final council member the King found.

All of this being possible was naturally due to a certain snake. A snake Jake was now on his way to meet once he felt done scouting out the village. It did have an interesting setup due to the environment, and there were quite a lot of people around, all of them pretty high-level D-grades. However, what he cared most about were two buildings.

The first of which was the largest building and a main office of sorts. The second one was a small but well-guarded building that Jake saw led into a pit of sorts going deep inside the Grand Mangrove River water. Not sure which one to check out first; Jake went for the pit after sensing the aura from it.

By the way, when Jake said well-guarded, then it wasn't by any of the C-grades but just two humans. There were also barriers that would no doubt make everyone aware if someone tried to break in, but none of that was an issue for Jake as the guard recognized him and opened the entrance to the pit without a word.

As for why Jake wanted to explore the pit so badly? Because he felt a familiar aura from beneath. One that reminded him a lot of the monument that Chris had built that allowed him to teleport to the Order of the Malefic Viper...

Jake felt a flare-up of anger, but he quickly suppressed it before the guards even noticed and entered the pit.

I swear, that orange fuck is gonna get what he deserves, Jake said to himself as he began going down the pit. It looked more like a deep well than anything else, and Jake didn't hesitate to jump down and allowed himself to freefall.

He fell for a bit over twenty seconds, putting the depth of the hole at around a kilometer. Upon landing, Jake found himself in a dug-out cavern with several tunnels leading away from it. He noticed that all of these tunnels had engravings on the walls and hummed with magic. Feeling curious, Jake began making his way through a tunnel and saw it lead into another similar chamber, though without the entrance. Closing his eyes, Jake used his senses to get a feeling for the space.

It's a magic circle, he swiftly concluded.

The pattern was far too purposeful and distinct for it to be anything else. Jake wondered if the creator was anywhere nearby but soon got his answer. A presence made its way through one of the tunnels, and Jake turned to face it. A long brownish snake slithered in his direction, its size filling out nearly half of the tunnel, putting its diameter at nearly four meters. Jake guessed the beast had to be several hundred meters long, and its head was large enough to eat a human whole. Not that Jake felt any threat as he recognized the snake as one of those who followed the Crimsoneye one.

“Hey there,” Jake greeted the snake as it got close. It then did something utterly terrifying.

The face of the snake began warping. Bone cracked, flesh twisted, and a vaguely humanoid face straight out of a nightmare emerged, still on the body of the massive snake.

“Grrrreetingsss Maeeelefic’sssss Chooosssennnn,” the snake spoke, showing off the prowess of Jake’s translation skill by even allowing him to comprehend what the snake had said through the hissing.

“Good practice with the transformation, but how about we keep this conversation telepathic?” Jake offered. He really didn’t want to insult a snake that was clearly trying so hard.

Nearly instantly, the face warped back to the old snake visage as a voice echoed in Jake’s mind. “Thank you for your permission to speak in this fashion; I am not as adept as the others in the art of human speech and have neglected practice with the Polymorph skill.”

“All good,” Jake answered, happy to not look at the nightmare creature the snake had transformed into. He was also surprised at the telepathic voice of the snake. It sounded... old? Most beasts Jake spoke to telepathically sounded very young, but this snake sounded on the more mature side.

“Have you come looking for the mistress?” the snake asked.

“Partly. I also came to check out the work down here. Well, not specifically the work down here, as I didn’t know what it would look like, but it is quite impressive. Are you involved in making the magic circle?” Jake asked the large snake.

He had a feeling the snake was for a few reasons. First of all, he faintly felt the space affinity from the snake. Secondly, it was down in the tunnel where the formation was being made, and lastly, it had a Blessing of the Malefic Viper.

“Yes, this one has been given the honor of creating this grand work of art. I thank the Chosen for this opportunity. I hope to do the task to the utmost of my abilities,” the large brown snake said in an overly polite and submissive tone. He could try to convince the snake to treat him more normally, but it wasn’t worth it.

“From the looks of it, you are doing a splendid job,” Jake praised the snake. “But I heard a part of the process requires my assistance; am I correct?”

“Such is the will of the Malefic One. The circle will need to be attuned and rely on the True Blessing of his Chosen so only he can teleport and decide who goes or not,” the snake explained.

“Great, what do you need of me and where? Please lead the way, and let’s get it solved right away.”

“Please follow me, my Lord,” the snake said and did something Jake had not seen coming. It managed to turn around in a narrow tunnel as space around it seemed to warp and twist. A second later, the snake had done a one-eighty and began moving, Jake following the old snake through the winding tunnel system of runes and magic. As he moved through, he did notice spots where his ritualism skill made him aware things were missing or unfinished, making it clear it was still a work in progress. Yet it also gave him the sense it was “done.”

“Say, is the formation functional after this infusion part?” Jake asked.

“Yes,” the snake confirmed. “However, as the Chosen has no doubt noticed, the work is far from done. The Malefic One has plans beyond a simple teleporter requiring your presence but wishes to allow it to hold more functions that will be helpful to the Chosen later on.”

Jake nodded, not asking any further. One thing was clear, the current formation was already far more potent than what Chris had managed to make. Then again, this was created by a C-grade with innate talent, while the other one had been made by a low-level D-grade. Thinking about it further, the fact that Chris could even make the monument, to begin with, was impressive. Now, as much as it sucked, the monument site had been turned into a graveyard. A memorial and reminder.

They did not exchange any more words before they reached what Jake assumed to be the center of the formation. At that center was an intricate circle with vein-like green pulsing fissures leading away from it and into the tunnels. The very epicenter held a pillar of metal Jake did not recognize with even more advanced scripts on it. Jake could feel it was a natural treasure of some kind but had no clue as to its properties.

“My lord, if you would do me the honors of stepping into the center circle and blessing the pillar with the Touch of the Malefic Viper,” the snake asked Jake.

Jake did as asked and used One Step to enter the center circle and activated Touch of the Malefic Viper as he touched the pillar. The moment he did so, he felt a response from the pillar, and the energy Jake injected was guided through magical channels in the metal. Jake gladly complied and infused his energy into these channels as the metal began to glow dark green.

The fissures of green energy began to shine brighter all throughout the spacious cavern, and Jake felt part of his own presence be mimicked by the pillar. He felt a pull on the part of himself that made him a Chosen, the natural treasure taking everything in. A few minutes passed as Jake simply infused his energy as the treasure naturally guided him to do until it stopped wanting anything.

At that moment, Jake felt an odd connection form, and the pillar cracked as parts of it fell off. The shards that fell floated in mid-air as they reassembled into an about ten-centimeter-long shard of metal filled with runic lines and humming with energy.

Jake reached out and grabbed it, making him instantly know what it was. It was there to control this entire magic circle.

“It is done!” the snake said with much happiness. “Truly marvelous! I thank the Chosen for blessing us with his presence and displaying his prowess. From my understanding, the shard you just received shall function as the control catalyst for the formation and shall allow you to teleport to a corresponding circle outside of this universe.”

“I see. Excellent work,” Jake simply answered, already feeling it himself. As he stood there in the center circle, he knew he could activate and be teleported to the first universe if he so wished. He even felt like he didn’t necessarily need to be in the center circle but that he could quite easily draw up a smaller circle that allowed him to tap into the concepts of this main formation to teleport from elsewhere.

Jake marveled at the shard a bit longer and analyzed the formation as best he could, but he did not have long before something else caught his attention. An aura approached through the tunnel, one far faster than the old brown snake had been. Far stronger too. He smiled as the presence was a very familiar one, and soon enough, an albino figure appeared before him... though she did look quite a bit different.

He failed to hold back as he lightly smiled and bowed his head briefly in gratitude. "It's been a while. I am sorry for not stopping by earlier and thanking you for keeping Miranda and the others safe."

Miranda's description of the human form truly didn't do it justice. She looked human, yes, but also clearly not. The scales were strategically placed throughout her body, not a single one of them of a cosmetic nature. Her reptilian pupils honed and improved compared to even her snake form, and the skin-like dress she wore was far from just a useless garment, but no doubt had quite the defensive properties. Was the form made to be aesthetically pleasing to humans? Yes, but it was also made with function in mind. Some sacrifices had been made to make her look more human, but overall it was incredibly well done for her to refine her humanoid form that much. However, her human form did have one major drawback compared to her snake form.

Her demeanor as a shy teenage girl was even more obvious.

The Alabaster Crimstone Snake, the mid-tier C-grade, stood nervously as she twisted some of her hair around a finger, looking like she didn't quite know what to say.

"I... eh, I just did as the Chosen would expect of me, you know..." she mumbled.

"You did me a favor, whether you thought it was expected of you or not. For that, I am naturally grateful and owe you one. I heard you even spent quite some time with Miranda and the others. I hope they were pleasant guests?" Jake asked, still smiling in what he hoped was a welcoming and comforting way.

“Yes, of course!” the snake girl insisted. “Ms. Wells was very nice and taught me a lot. She even helped me with making this settlement and stuff, and I wanted to go visit Haven, but I can’t teleport due to the stupid system,” she grumbled, at least looking a bit more comfortable now.

“It is what it is,” Jake shrugged. “How about we get out of here and get up to the main office? I think we are done here, right?”

The last part was addressed to the large brown snake that nodded. “Yes, my lord, you have more than done your part. I shall no longer delay you from attending to your matters.”

“How come old grumpy isn’t using his human form? He has been working on it so hard,” the snake girl asked with a questioning look.

Jake scratched his chin. “We decided telepathy was more efficient.”

A bald-faced lie that the albino snake nodded to instantly... before suddenly looking faintly horrified. “Would... would the Chosen prefer for me to use telepathy too?”

“Hm?” Jake said, a bit surprised. “No, I prefer your human form and talking like this.”

Again, a bit of a lie. Jake didn’t really care much either way if the snake was in human or beast form or used telepathy or not when they spoke. But he had enough awareness to know that the snake girl had only become a snake girl to try and better cater to what Jake wanted, and he saw no reason not to make her happy by saying he preferred her human form. When being kind was free and not a hassle, why not?

She smiled and nodded. "Yes, my lord! Shall we head upwards then?"

"Let us," Jake said as he began walking through the tunnel, followed by the snake girl. That is when he remembered one of the most important things he had to ask: "By the way, did you ever settle on a name you wanted?"

She stopped for a millisecond when he asked, getting all shy again. "I... I had a really hard time deciding. Ah! Not because the suggestions of the Chosen were bad, but solely due to my own lack of naming sense! I loved both Scarlett and Allie, and I even suggested combining them as Scallie-"

That would have been a perfectly fine name, Jake approved internally.

"-but Ms. Wells shot that down. But... I still loved both, so I thought of maybe still combining them somehow? That is when Ms. Wells said that humans can actually have more than one name or even have a first and a last name. So... I thought maybe go with Scarlett Allie? Or Allie Scarlett? Or make it the last name, so maybe Scarlett Allieson?"

Jake considered it and nodded. "I think all of those are fine, but does Allieson fit? Normally the "son" part comes from a parent or ancestor or some other family member called that."

"... my mom or dad could have been called Allie?" the snake girl asked without a hint of joking in her voice.

"You know what? Who is to say," Jake smiled and shook his head. Should I begin to call Sylphie, Sylphie Hawkson now? Wait, how does it even work when she is a daughter... who the hell even made up this entire stupid naming convention? And people call my naming sense bad; that is no more original than adding "ie" at the end of someone's race name.

"Then... then can I be Scarlett Allieson from now on?" she asked in a shy tone.

"Sure, if that is what you want," Jake nodded.

"Then I want that name," she said with affirmation.

Jake stopped and turned around as he extended a hand. "Well then, nice to meet you, Scarlett Allieson. You can just call me Jake Thayne."

Scarlett looked even shyer as she extended her small hand and took his. "Ah... the pleasure is mine?"

Miranda has done some socialization work on this one, Jake joked internally as he turned around and continued walking towards the main building above.

The two of them only exchanged some casual chatter as they made their way toward the surface for a proper meeting... though he did fail in getting her to call him Jake or even Mr. Thayne or something just a little less formal than "Chosen."

But hey, baby steps. One had to be patient with teenagers, after all.

Chapter 566 - C-Grade Checklist

Scarlett had a hard time imagining it. The first time she met the Chosen had been so brief, and she had barely had any time to talk to him as he was busy just making his way through the Mangrove. She also didn't fully realize who he was back then. With time she did come to understand and began to think about how she could make herself useful to the Forefather and his Chosen.

She was naturally elated when the Chosen trusted her enough to defend his comrades from danger and even more happy when those comrades chose to stay. Ms. Wells even taught Scarlett so many things. The more senior servant of the Forefather's Chosen told her about how some enemy Chosen of an extremely powerful god had backstabbed the Forefather's Chosen and tried to kill him. Or, well, maybe the goal was not to kill him? Scarlett wasn't sure. All she knew was that several comrades of the bad Chosen were killed, and the coward fled, resulting in the Malefic's Chosen taking over the world just as one would expect. As things should be.

Now, after his victory, he had finally returned to the Mangrove, where they were doing everything to help him, Old Grumpy snake even making a formation for the Chosen to teleport to the Order as he pleased.

But what she had truly had a hard time imagining was not any of his feats but his demeanor and sheer presence. Scarlett had met many humans and beasts, but one thing was for sure:

The Chosen was the coolest of them all.

Like, he was so cool in everything. He was only D-grade, sure, but Scarlett felt like she walked beside a far more powerful beast than herself. Logically she knew she didn't, but his presence was still awe-inspiring. To add on, he had not a shred of fear. Scarlett had honed her skills in evaluating humans. She could quite literally smell fear and weakness, and any kind of nervousness would be clear before her

eyes. Yet she felt none of those things from the Chosen. In fact, she was the one who felt scared and nervous when she walked with him... how couldn't she? He was the Chosen of the Forefather.

"Scarlett," the Chosen asked, making her feel all bubbly inside from him using her name. "Have you considered what your future plans are?"

Scarlett was perplexed for a moment about what he meant. Thinking a bit about it, she didn't really have any plans besides helping the Chosen. The formation was not anything she could help with, and the Mangrove was firmly under their control. Even if she was not there alone, the other C-grades could easily handle anything that cropped up. Besides that, her only plan had been to maybe explore the ocean and hunt there – something she had already been doing for a while. It wasn't the best hunting ground, and it often took a long time to find worthy prey, but she had to take what she could get. Worst of all, she had to do the hunting in her true form.

Not that anything she currently did mattered if the Chosen had other thoughts in mind.

"Does the Chosen have anything he wants me to do?" she asked, feeling a bit of hope. Maybe he had more he wanted her to help with?

"No, not anything like that," he answered, making Scarlett a bit disappointed.

"I was just considering if you have considered going to the Order of the Malefic Viper? I have explored a bit of Earth, and while it is possible, I doubt the planet is that good of a place for someone like you to grow. I am positive there are no B-grades, and even peak C-grades would be astronomically rare, assuming they even exist. Meanwhile, going to the Order would open up a multiverse of possibilities," the Chosen said, Scarlett, listening intensely while barely holding herself back from screaming "YES!" after the very first sentence as she tried to remain respectful.

“Going to the Order of the Forefather would be both an honor and a privilege,” Scarlett answered with a big smile on her face as courteously as she could, even bowing a bit, the same way she had seen some young human women do it.

“Great,” the Chosen said with a smile. “Now, if possible, can you show me a safe place for a measuring device within the settlement?”

“Naturally,” Scarlett complied without asking further questions.

“And can you then do me one other small favor after?” the Chosen asked as he turned and looked at her.

“The Chosen does not even need to ask,” Scarlett answered with conviction.

“Nice, I just wanted you to bite me a few times.”

Scarlett froze and took a moment to process what he had asked before her face turned red, and she completely zoned out... only to still hear the very next sentence.

“Eh, to make it fair, I could bite you too?”

In retrospect, maybe Jake's words could be misinterpreted, but he really couldn't hold himself back forever when standing next to a snake girl like her. It was irresistible and impossible not to ask for at least a little bite to get some of that sweet snake venom.

From a distance, her venom was not detectable, but when walking right next to her, his Sense of the Malefic Viper kept making him aware that the small snake girl harbored venom capable of killing hundreds of D-grades with a single drop. It was so strong that not even Jake was sure how he could handle it with Palate at legendary rarity, but he just had to give it a go.

It took him a minute to calm the poor snake girl down after she looked to have short-circuited. Once he got her to relax and listen to his explanation, it suddenly made a lot more sense to the girl, though that still added the complexity of her now being super embarrassed she had misunderstood.

"Are you certain, Chosen? My venom is quite potent, and I have only honed it further since I received the Blessing from the Malefic One, my Toxicity stat growing significantly," she asked. Jake biting into the last part.

"You have a dedicated Toxicity stat?" Jake asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes?" Scarlett answered. "Oh! Yeah, humans have different stats. I got a stat called Toxicity that is related to how toxic anything I do is, making it stronger."

"Did it replace any of the nine we humans have?" Jake continued asking curiously.

"I do not have the Intelligence stat. This one allows my toxins to be far stronger, but it does limit my magical capabilities in many other areas," she explained openly.

“Makes sense,” Jake nodded. “But I still want some venom for my own Palate skill. It has been a while since I encountered a toxin it proved ineffective against. Don’t worry; if it goes wrong, I have plenty of anti-toxins.”

Not that he was sure those would work, but why worry her? Jake was confident in his survival.

“Okay... but...” Scarlett kind of agreed, clearly unsure.

“Aight, you win. No rush, we can always do it after going to the Order if you want where we got assistance nearby if we do mess it up,” Jake smiled to comfort her. It maybe was also smart to have Meira nearby as she was a healer. Oh, and Duskleaf.

“Let us wait...” Scarlett said with relief.

“Got it. Now let’s go get this weird machine placed for Arnold.”

It only took him a bit before Scarlett showed him a place where he could deposit it safely, and Scarlett even told a C-grade snake to keep an eye on it. Jake activated it right away and saw it spin to life as what looked like a satellite dish emerged from its top, and he faintly detected the device sucking in mana.

With that done, Jake didn’t really have any more plans before it was time to go to the World Congress. A Congress that should, for all intents and purposes, be nothing more than a formality.

Scarlett was clearly intent on shadowing him, and he saw no reason not to allow it. It was a bit awkward, though, like going to a birthday party as the oldest cousin and having teenagers ten years younger than yourself follow you around.

Luckily, what he planned next did not include a lot of moving around. With some time to spare, Jake found a nice place to relax and noted down his aptly-named pre-C-grade checklist:

1. Become World Leader at the World Congress.

2. Upgrade Sense of the Malefic Viper.

3. Upgrade Sagacity of the Malefic Viper.

4. Go to Order and defeat baby Snappy

5. Mythical skill creation with the help of sim-Jake

6. Actually evolve.

Jake nodded at the mental checklist and didn't immediately notice anything missing. The first item was easy and would come in a couple of days if all went to plan. As for two and three, then upgrading the two skills was something Jake had subtly been working on for a while and had thought a lot about, even during his holiday, and it honestly should not be too hard. Plus, he would use Path of the Heretic-Chosen for both as he had two uses left.

Four and five Jake would combine, though it is more accurate to say that Jake wanted to do four during five. Jake knew that he needed a good battle for an upgrade, and he had discussed the skill sim-Jake wanted a lot with his other self. He also knew that it was not as easy as both of them had hoped and that they would likely need more preparation than first expected. However, in any case, then they both knew that live battle was the best time to consolidate everything and make the skill. It was only when in a life-and-death situation that Jake's instincts were at their sharpest, and the best results could be reached.

Number six should also be kind of easy. As for the evolution quests, Jake wasn't worried. In fact, he had a strong feeling as to what they would be. Especially the one for his profession. But, rather than theorize, it was better to just see the quest, and the easiest way to do that was to get one more level in his profession.

So why not kill two birds with one stone and also get in a skill upgrade? As for the skill he would upgrade first, it really was a no-brainer. It was the skill Jake should have arguably upgraded as one of the first but had somehow ended up never really focusing on. It was naturally Sense of the Malefic Viper.

Checking the description, Jake focused on the part that mattered:

...Gives a passive ability to detect herbs and poisons in different forms and a strong feeling of their properties and affinities. Allows the alchemist to far more easily detect affinities in the environment and detect areas optimal for cultivating herbs. Massively improves your ability to sense the poison you have inflicted and its effects on any inflicted entities...

Rather than focusing on what the skill currently did, he focused on what it didn't do. The usual goal when upgrading was to find aspects the Viper's version had and add those or improve current functions. Feeling herbs and poisons, the skill already did damn well, and the ability to detect affinities was also something Jake found hard to improve upon. Same for detecting poison he had inflicted. Which made him fast conclude he had to focus on adding additional functionality.

An obvious one was the ability to also sense natural treasures, but Jake kind of already could. Most natural treasures gave off intense affinities, so he could find them when close, and if they were of herbal or toxic nature, the skill still worked on them. So, while that would likely be an easy addition, Jake wasn't sure if that alone would be enough to qualify for an upgrade or even be useful to him. No, he needed something else.

Jake considered what would be useful to him. What he could really need. He had thought about this a lot and even looked at some of the other Malefic Viper skills for inspiration. That did give him some ideas, but ultimately, the direction Jake went in fit him far more. He went as simple as he could.

Perception was by far Jake's highest stat, and he made use of it in everything he did.

When forming magic, Jake felt the flow of mana; he felt how it formed and assembled itself, including noticing any mistakes. Jake did many micro-corrections all the time when doing magic or really anything requiring control.

He also used Perception in combat, even in ways Jake did not quite understand but that sim-Jake had helped him at least be aware of. He sensed the flow of battle, the concepts of momentum, and many other things that fed his instincts during battle.

Even when using stamina, Jake used it. He felt it flow through his body, and he directed it. Because it all came down to one basic concept.

Seeing is understanding, and before something can be controlled, you need to understand or at least be aware of it first. Perception was the first step of everything and, needless to say, had also become a massive aspect of Jake's methodology in alchemy.

Jake could notice far more than other alchemists when crafting due to his insane Bloodline-boosted Perception. He could learn and understand more simply based on what he could perceive. His collected data from any experiment was immense compared to the average alchemist, something his trip to Skyggen and teaching their alchemists made extremely clear. But they could still detect a lot during crafting, not due to a Sphere of Perception and an insanely high stat, but due to their skills. Which is when Jake asked a very fundamental question.

Why did Sense of the Malefic Viper not help with anything during crafting? When he first got the skill, Jake had thought maybe that was just not what Sense of the Malefic Viper was about, but that the skill only revolved around one thing: finding materials. However, it now also helped him locate places good at growing materials and detect affinities in general. It even had the function of sensing the poison he had inflicted. So why not allow him to better sense what he was crafting?

The problem was just how to upgrade that. How to try to feel more when crafting using Sense? It didn't make much sense – pun intended – to Jake to try and do that. He already was trying to feel as much as he could during crafting, and Sense of the Malefic Viper naturally already helped during that, though indirectly.

No, what Jake wanted was not just to feel more but to feel different. Pick up things he didn't before, either because he wasn't aware of them existing or his Perception somehow not being high enough.

If Jake was being honest, he would be fine if all the upgrade did was just add a line about increasing the effectiveness of Perception during crafting, as that would be a huge boon in itself, but he knew he needed more.

As he was sitting in meditation with a snake girl who also chose to “meditate” nearby while throwing looks his way every five seconds, Jake kept tossing around ideas in his mind. While considering all the different options he could possibly see work, he tried to check the Path of the Heretic-Chosen skill, and wouldn’t you know it? He had passed the invisible threshold.

Do you wish to experience the Legacy of the Malefic Viper? Uses remaining: 2

Well, don’t mind if I do, Jake promptly agreed as his vision turned black.

If he couldn’t figure it out himself, why not see what the Viper had come up with?

Chapter 567 - Sensing The Missing Link In Monster Alchemy

The vision quickly materialized as Jake found himself in a large cave. Extremely dense mana dominated the area, with the source being a humanoid figure sitting in the center. It was naturally the Malefic Viper as he looked to be doing alchemy. The black cauldron in front of him was giving off a faint mist, and the would-be Primordial looked to be focusing deeply.

Yet after a dozen seconds, Jake noticed the mist change color, and he instantly knew: the creation was ruined.

“Pathetic!” the Viper cursed as he slapped the cauldron away, making the rancid failed brew spill all over the cavern. “Absolutely pathetic.”

His anger was palpable, though the only one he was angry at was himself. Thinking back, Jake had never seen the Viper actually do alchemy normally, making him more than interested in seeing his methodology. With it being part of a vision, the insight Jake got would also be far more substantial.

After a few moments, the Viper sighed and, with a wave of his hand, had the cauldron float over again. A bit of cleaning later, he tried once more, Jake feeling the entire process from the beginning this time around. As he did this, Jake also got a far better feel for the Viper's level.

Barely C-grade.

Jake did not know if it was a pattern, but he felt like the visions got closer and closer to Jake's own level with every passing one. While it could be argued that seeing a vision from Villy's later years would be more beneficial as he would experience higher-level concepts and more advanced skills, the opposite was also true. Seeing lower-leveled skills made it easier for Jake to pick up insights and comprehend what the Viper did.

In this case, Jake could actually understand what the Viper did quite easily. Primarily because of how pathetically simple his work was... because what the Viper was trying to make wasn't anything complicated but just a normal health potion. So, yeah, Villy talking about how his failure was pathetic was kind of on-point.

He also noticed how the cauldron wasn't anything special. Jake could not identify it but guessed that it was common or uncommon rarity at most. Seeing these things, Jake became more and more sure exactly when in the timeline this was.

This was just after the Viper learned to take human form and wanted to learn more regular alchemy. As a snake or even winged snake, the Viper did not do alchemy the conventional way as far as Jake had gathered. Rather than crafting using mana, it was more like using internal energy to hone and store toxins. In humanoid form, the Viper had to switch it up and learn to do alchemy the same way humans did, which was an entirely different approach. An approach he clearly struggled with.

The Viper kept cursing as he failed another crafting attempt, time now being sped up in Jake's vision. Having experienced these visions so many times before, Jake knew what he was waiting for: the moment of the Viper's epiphany. Jake didn't believe the skill would show him the Viper just failing over and over again... though that would be quite funny.

A few more failures happened, all with sped-up time. The level of frustration of the Viper grew with every second, and he even began to take out different booklets to skim through. Basic crafting books about potions.

Jake's sense of schadenfreude from the Viper sucking so much at potions eventually turned to confusion. Even if the Viper failed a few times, it didn't make sense he kept failing. He was C-grade, and Jake could see Villy's level of mana control was far beyond the required level to craft a simple healing potion.

Clearly, Villy also realized this problem as he scanned the books one by one. Sometimes he took out the cauldron and tried again, but the process just kept failing. Jake watched on as his frown deepened and noticed something. There were small flaws... small oversights in the Viper's base brew that Jake had never encountered before when he made potions. As time passed, the Viper also noticed this issue and was as stumped as Jake was.

However, another disparity became clear between Jake and the Viper... a disparity Jake had never imagined. He failed to hold back a smile at the realization.

He had more Perception than the Malefic Viper.

Not the real one, obviously, but he had more than this newly evolved C-grade version of Villy. Villy also didn't have Jake's Bloodline or his basic crafting skills, much less a proper cauldron, making it even harder for him to discover whatever stumped him. He truly was like those alchemists at the Court.

As for what Villy lacked, Jake also discovered it quite easily.

All alchemists – those with the profession, that is – possessed crafting skills. Brew Potion was the applicable skill in this instance. However, as a beast, Villy did not have such a crafting skill and was trying to one-hundred percent freeform magic the alchemy.

The reason why the method failed was that the books expected the Viper to have the required skills. Those skills helped one with so many different things, including automation of certain minor aspects that the Viper was now missing.

With the lacking Perception, it also looked like Villy wouldn't be able to figure it out. The fast-forwarding of the vision soon stopped having as many pauses as Jake felt time pass. Days turned to weeks as weeks turned to months. The Viper kept trying to craft basic potions, sometimes getting closer but always failing.

Occasionally he would make a poison, almost as if he was testing if he still had his touch. Whenever he made poison, he added a bit of his own blood or venom, and he even tried this with potions, naturally failing. Jake had tried that one, and it wasn't that easy.

After the eighth month of fast-forwarding, the Viper stopped. Villy simply sat there and stared at the cauldron for the longest time, sometimes glancing at the massive pit he had made of failed potions. He looked lost, but not like he had given up.

"What is wrong?" Villy asked himself. "It should work, but it doesn't. Are monsters just not meant to do alchemy? No... I can do it; I am just missing something."

The Viper stood up and went over to the pit of health potions he had failed to make. He knelt down and scooped up some of it to drink, sneering at the horrible taste. Jake himself also faintly tasted it in his mouth, though he wasn't sure if it was due to shared senses or if he just remembered the time he tried to taste that rancid crap himself.

"Nothing," the Viper mulled to himself after a few moments, Jake knowing he had used Palate.

Falling onto his back, the Viper stared at the cave's ceiling. After a few moments, he sat up and, to Jake's surprise, spat some liquid into the palm of his hand. Jake saw the liquid and felt its toxic properties. Yet he also felt the vitality-based properties and the similarity to the failed health potions. The Viper had consumed some of it and refined it into a potent toxin using his own body.

The Viper shook his head again as he tossed the liquid away. A few more moments passed as slowly a frown formed on his brows. The frown soon changed into a look of realization as his eyes shot open.

"Maybe..." the Viper muttered as he quickly ran over to the cauldron.

Jake was unsure what Villy had realized and observed intently. His intuition told him what he had been waiting for was about to happen.

Villy picked up the cauldron and sat with both of his hands on it as he usually did, but then did something unexpected. His hands began to faintly glow with energy as mana was infused into the cauldron, far more than usual. Sharp fingernails dug into the metal as Jake felt it slowly change - Touch of the Malefic Viper active. Yet he was not transmuting it or even corrupting it, simply... attuning it?

That is when Jake's point of view changed, and the best part of the vision began. He merged with Villy as the senses of the Viper fully became his own. On top of his usual ones, of course. The moment the merge happened, Jake felt a connection with the cauldron in front of him, and Jake soon realized what the Viper was doing.

He was forcefully soul-binding the cauldron.

It was something that was honestly a bad idea in nearly all cases, but Jake soon came to understand. Because as he Soulbound it, he also slowly emerged a small part of his soul into the cauldron, something he could only do if a proper connection was formed with his soul first.

With both hands still on the cauldron, he summoned the ingredients. Water, flowers, grass, it was all slowly deposited into the cauldron, and it did not take long for Jake to feel a difference. He could detect what was going on inside the cauldron so intimately that it just felt... odd. It was as if the cauldron was actually part of his body, like a second stomach.

A metaphor Jake came to learn in the very next moment was very apt.

Because another skill also responded at that moment. During all crafts, some vapor would be released while the desired energies got extracted, and some minor parts would always go to waste. This just

always happened, and there was no way around it. The loss was often negligible, and the lost parts were undesirable, but it was there. There to be consumed.

Palate of the Malefic Viper thrummed to life as the Viper absorbed these unwanted parts of the brew while it was still ongoing. He then did something else unexpected – he directly absorbed parts of the brew through the cauldron walls like it was the walls of his stomach.

Jake felt his own Soulshape – one that was now merged fully with the Viper – and saw that it looked different. The cauldron had become a part of his Soulspace in a similar fashion to a phantasmal limb, and Jake also knew that this technique was insanely risky. Risky... but effective.

For the Viper, it had one especially effective feature. Because Jake, sharing senses with the Viper, instantly felt an aspect of Sense of the Malefic Viper he did not possess. Not because it was a potent application, but because it simply wasn't one Jake needed: it allowed the Viper to far better sense anything alchemical inside of his body.

In fact, it was probably a pretty normal skill for most beasts to have. Sandy clearly had a skill similar to it so they could absorb natural treasures eaten, and Jake guessed many other monsters did too. How else would they analyze and break down natural treasures they ate if they could not properly sense them?

With the Viper, there was also the aspect of him honing his poison. Scarlett already mentioned how she effectively cultivated to improve her own venom internally, and Jake also knew the Viper could do something similar. In other words, the best kind of alchemy the Viper was capable of in this vision was essentially a form of internal alchemy. A skill he now found a way to transfer to the outer world through the insane idea of partly merging with a cauldron.

Jake felt how the Viper now finally noticed these small missing pieces and nearly instantly put two and two together. The first attempt at crafting failed, and a booklet appeared in front of his head. Villy looked at it as new words were burned into the paper as he added personal notes.

Four crafting attempts later, the Viper had created a new crafting method for healing potions. Jake had been merged with the Viper throughout and focused intensely on how the Viper had managed to fuse with the cauldron.

He felt parts akin to his upgraded Fang there, the part where a weapon effectively became an extension of his body. In fact, it was nearly identical. Aspects from Touch of the Malefic Viper were also present. All in all, Jake began to wonder if maybe a reason he had only gotten this vision now was that he needed to see the others first...

Not that it mattered now.

Jake understood the concept and was confident. The final part of the vision showed the Viper stopping the use of the skill as he unfused from the cauldron.

This resulted in the cauldron crumbling into ash the very next moment. As it did so, Villy felt a wave of exhaustion that Jake shared as the soul energy had effectively been discarded. The lost mental energy was also immense, and Jake felt how the Viper's natural regeneration had faintly slowed due to his strained soul.

This was what Jake meant when he said risky. It was kind of like using a boosting skill during combat, just for alchemy. There would be a backlash, and so would there for Jake if he used this new application. The thing is... did he really have to go as far as the Viper did? Just with it being Soulbound and some of the concepts Villy applied should yield some results...

Just as he thought that, time rewound, and he started over from when the Viper had his epiphany. Without having to focus on anything else, Jake felt everything. He tried to truly be one with the Viper and experienced what Villy experienced.

It only took one more rewind before he fully got it.

[Sense of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – The Malefic Viper's greed for natural treasures is neverending. You are following his path for your senses to see all that you desire. Your desire to know the suffering you bring upon your foes has brought you even further down this path. Gives a passive ability to detect herbs and poisons in different forms and a strong feeling of their properties and affinities. Allows the alchemist to far more easily detect affinities in the environment and detect areas optimal for cultivating herbs. Massively improves your ability to sense the poison you have inflicted and its effects on any inflicted entities. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Sense of the Malefic Viper based on Perception. Passively provides 1 Perception per level in Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your gaze scour the multiverse for all that is rightfully yours.

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[Sense of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – The Malefic Viper's greed for natural treasures is neverending; his desire to discover all the world has to offer ceaseless. Gives a passive ability to detect herbs and poisons in different forms and a strong feeling of their properties and affinities. Allows the alchemist to far more easily detect affinities in the environment and detect areas optimal for cultivating herbs. Massively improves your ability to sense the poison you have inflicted and its effects on any inflicted entities. Allows you to temporarily merge a part of your soul into a Soulbound cauldron or similar crafting device, making it effectively act as part of your body. Even without fully merging your soul, you will still receive all sensory benefits from using a Soulbound cauldron or similar crafting device. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Sense of the Malefic Viper based on Perception. All effects of Sense of the Malefic Viper are further improved within the body of the alchemist. Passively provides 3 Perception per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your gaze scour the multiverse for all that is rightfully yours; may all truths lay bare before you.

As always, a bit of flavor text had changed, but it mostly remained the same. The changes were as expected, with it now adding the part about merging a part of his soul with a Soulbound cauldron, but he was happy to see that it still retained all sensory benefits even without merging himself with it. Jake innately felt that the only reason to merge with the cauldron was for Palate absorption.

Finally, it also had an increased effect within his body now. Jake didn't really see this part be that useful to him, but hey, it was there and was kind of another argument for merging with a cauldron. Oh, and of course, the expected bonus to Perception from upgrading the skill, and with his level, it was a lot of Perception. 200 Perception, to be exact, and that was before all percentage bonuses, meaning it was, in reality, 350.

Of course, this was only the math because of one more detail...

Jake had finally reached level 199 in his profession – the peak of D-grade.

Chapter 568 - A Feathery Reunion

Jake was still within the vision of the Viper repeatedly doing alchemy but no longer focused much on it. As odd as it was to say, then Jake didn't really have much to learn from the current Viper within this Record Fragment. Jake was better than him already when it came to making potions, and he had already seen all he needed to see during the first few rewinds.

Checking his notifications, Jake saw the level-up.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 199 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 197 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

197, Jake thought. He could almost taste the evolution now. With this level and his reaching the peak of D-grade, he also got one more thing: his very first evolution quest. Jake checked it, and if he was being honest, it was pretty much exactly what he expected.

Profession Evolution Quest

To walk the Path of a Heretic-Chosen is to not simply be given but to claim the power of your Patron. With every step, you move closer to the Malefic One, yet you remain a heretic, unswayed by the Records of a Primordial as they fail to supersede your being. Go forth, claim the Legacy of the Malefic Viper and make his Records yours to wield.

Objective: Upgrade skills related to the Legacy of the Malefic Viper to legendary rarity (8/6)

Jake had already completed it. It could be called anti-climactic, but as mentioned, Jake had expected this outcome. Why wouldn't he have?

Evolution quests were not about pushing the person to their limit – it was to test that the person had reached the expected achievements of the class or profession. If it required Jake to do something insane for even him, all it would have been proof of was that Jake had not lived up to expectations during his journey to C-grade.

Not that this one was easy... it required Jake to upgrade at least six skills to legendary, and based on the "8/6," it seemed to still count more upgrades he got now. He read that as an indication that the system

still recognized him upgrading more as part of the quest. Especially because the quest was still there and had not just been completed automatically.

Jake knew he could evolve his profession there and then if he wanted. Needless to say, he had no interest in this as he was aiming for the Perfect Evolution and also wanted to upgrade the last skill anyway.

Smiling to himself, Jake closed the quest menu just as he felt the vision was also about to end. He had barely been paying attention and still found himself merged with the Viper, but as had happened before... the vision extended a bit beyond the usual during this final time.

Still merged with the Viper, Jake felt the would-be Primordial's happiness at his success, and he celebrated a bit by himself. Jake just smiled alongside Villy, happy for his buddy's success, even if it was just a peek into history. Yet, mere moments before the vision ended, he felt something observing him – observing Villy.

A powerful presence that Villy did not at all notice but that Jake naturally picked up on. A familiar gaze that Jake had felt during a previous vision.

The First Sage?

The vision ended just as Jake became sure of the source and returned to the real world.

Scarlett felt all giddy as she guided the Chosen around the Mangrove. The thought of getting invited to the sacred Order of the Malefic Viper had never even crossed her mind, but the more she considered it, the more excited she became.

The Chosen was also nice and allowed her to stay with him during his visit to the Mangrove. She knew she had much to learn from him and would observe his every action whenever she could. Scarlett also noticed how the other humans of the Mangrove looked at him, and she felt their emotions. Their odd mix of emotions.

Fear and nervousness were two of the strongest senses other humans got from watching the Chosen. It was only right to feel fear before a superior being, and she could only approve of their understanding to not approach and needlessly annoy or delay the Chosen in his matters.

After he was done with his business, they went to the largest building in the Mangrove, where she led the Chosen to a room for him to meditate in. He did also make some weird comments along the way... like asking for her to bite him...

She didn't get it. Was physical contact not rather shunned by humans? Also, did he really trust her that much to allow her to use her venom on him? It was all a bit too much for her, and she was happy that he decided to meditate for a while so she could observe him a bit longer.

But... not long into meditation, she felt something. An odd shift in the environment as whispers of a presence that did not belong on a small planet like Earth appeared. Her eyes opened wide as she recognized it and stared wide-eyed at the Chosen as her heart began pounding from the pressure. Then, at the very next moment, he disappeared, leaving only a lingering presence behind.

Scarlett tried to calm herself down, but she could not stop herself from shaking. That had been the presence of the Malefic One... the Forefather of her entire race. What had the Chosen done? It was like he, for a moment, became the Forefather himself, their Paths and Records uniting.

Not long passed before he reemerged, the aura still present for a moment before it dispersed like it had never been there, leaving only the Chosen deep in thought...

Jake kept frowning as he sat in the main office in the Mangrove. Why had the First Sage looked at Villy? How had he been aware of him? Villy's description said that the first time they met was when the Viper tried to sneak in and learn from the First Sage, but this vision said otherwise. Or maybe it didn't, at least not from the perspective of the Viper.

Villy was not omniscient, and Jake began to suspect that his choice of seeking out the First Sage had more to it than the Viper knew. Had he been led into seeking out the man? If so, for what purpose? Did he just want someone to kill him, like Villy said? Leave a student, perhaps? Something entirely different Jake had no damn clue about?

All were likely, with the final one being the most likely. Shaking his head, Jake decided not to mull it over too much. He wasn't even sure if he wanted to ask Villy about it... maybe it was just better to keep it to himself and hope that a future vision could give some insight. Villy clearly cared a lot about this First Sage, and Jake didn't want to pollute a memory for no reason. Yeah, best keep it to himself and return to more current matters.

Jake opened his eyes and addressed the snake girl in the room, who was staring at him with wide-open starry eyes.

"I... I felt the presence of the Forefather. What happened? Did you go see the Malefic One?" she asked with much interest.

"You can say that," Jake smiled. "I used one of my skills as a Chosen, that is all."

She just nodded enthusiastically. "Thank you for allowing me to witness it! I will never forget this honor."

Jake smirked and shook his head, not having the heart to tell her that he just didn't really see any reason to hide something like this. She knew he was the Chosen already, so him doing Chosen stuff was just to be expected.

Oh, and finally... Jake kept forgetting that part that blasted out the presence of himself and the Viper whenever he used the skill. In his defense, he had not actually planned on just using the skill right away, but when he focused on stuff, he kind of tended to forget everything and everyone around him, with it already having led to outing himself to everything from friends in the Order to projections within dungeons.

"Would you mind if I did some alchemy?" Jake then asked the snake girl. It was more a rhetorical question as she, of course, instantly nodded.

"Thank you, I plan on staying here for a bit before heading back to Haven before the World Congress," Jake informed her, Scarlett naturally not voicing even a sliver of negativity.

Jake smiled again at her and decided to get some practice in with his new skill, and he had just the thing to craft: Perception Elixirs. He did have some already in storage, but he wanted to craft some more before he evolved anyway. He had three hundred stats to get and saw no reason not to claim them right away. Could he increase other stats? Sure, but Jake wanted Perception.

He also still had some materials in store, so he could get started right away. The moment Jake summoned the cauldron and laid his hands on it, he instantly felt the difference from the newly

upgraded skill. It was like everything within the cauldron appeared clearer than before, even if it was currently empty.

With a mental command, Jake manipulated the very air within it. He felt the different affinities and, out of curiosity, focused on them. Water, wind, space, time, nature, wood.... so many affinities he recognized. Jake chose one as he strained himself, and in the middle of the cauldron, a small droplet of water began to condense as Jake extracted the humidity from the air.

Definitely noticeable, Jake concluded as he got to work.

Adding the ingredients, he tried to discern what the difference truly was. In all honesty, the upgrade did not help much during crafting like this, as there really weren't many details he couldn't already catch with his Perception. It was far more effective during experimenting, that was for sure. He also faintly considered trying out the soul-merging effect but decided against it as his intuition warned him of the outcome.

Villy had destroyed his cauldron, and while Jake was confident the Altmar Cauldron would survive, he was certain it would be damaged and be in need of repair afterward. It had the rune on the bottom to accomplish this, but it would take time, and as mentioned, he didn't need it.

Jake thus just dove into the alchemy as time passed. Scarlett stayed by his side silently for nearly two days, simply staring at everything he did with interest. She was damn lucky Jake had been conditioned by Villy's constant staring, allowing him to completely ignore it and make plenty of elixirs.

Once it was about time to head back to Haven, Jake went on a drinking binge.

You have assimilated a strong energy of Perception.

+5 Perception.

You have assimilated a strong energy of Perception.

+5 Perception.

You have...

Elixir after elixir went down and seeing as he had enough, he even offered some to Scarlett. She graciously accepted but only wanted a single one, which was a bit weird. Especially as she looked to have no interest in drinking the elixir but simply held onto it for a while before storing it away.

Another easy 300 Perception in the bag, Jake smiled after he was done drinking. Over just a few days, Jake had gotten around one thousand more Perception from the skill upgrade, elixirs, and Free Points, making him feel quite good about himself. Jake knew that stat distribution also greatly impacted evolutions, and he wanted to make it absolutely clear to the system that he was a Perception-based guy.

At least, that is what he told himself to excuse his decision.

"Thanks for accommodating me," Jake said to Scarlett as he prepared to head back. "After the World Congress, I will come back here, and we will travel for the Order of the Malefic Viper, so make your preparations, alright?"

"Yes!" Scarlett enthusiastically nodded. "Will you need me to do or bring anything in particular?"

"I won't need you to bring anything, but we do need to talk about a few details related to my identity at the Order, but that can wait," Jake answered.

"Very well," she acknowledged. "I once more thank the Chosen for blessing us with his presence."

Jake waved it off. "That is part of what you will need to work on fixing. Be more casual, alright? Anyway, I am off!"

With that, Jake headed for the teleporter, with Scarlett still following him and bidding him goodbye.

A swift teleportation later, Jake found himself back at the Fort. The convenience of these teleporters was truly, well, convenient, even for someone like Jake, who had quite the insane travel speed. Jake still chose to fly back towards Haven, not because it would be in any way faster, but because he had already felt the aura approach, and he decided to meet halfway. As for who this presence was?

It was a small green ball of feathery death.

They had been apart for a long time. Thinking about it, this was probably their longest separation since the little featherball had been born.

His grin only grew as he flew forward and felt her approach pretty fucking fast. She had gotten a lot swifter, that was for sure, and it did not take long before he saw the small green form enter his vision and barrel straight toward him.

[Sylphian Eyas – lvi 199]

She had reached the peak of D-grade, something entirely expected. Jake stopped in mid-air and opened his arm wide to hug the bird. However, Sylphie had other plans and expertly dodged his attempt, flying in between his hands and dodging beneath his legs before doing a quick circle, landing perfectly on top of his head.

Sylphie stood proudly as if she had reclaimed her rightful place, and Jake nearly failed to hold back a laugh as he raised a hand and nuzzled her. "It's been a while, eh?"

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched in complaint, making Jake indeed fail to hold back his laugh. "I missed you too."

She showed mercy and allowed Jake to lift her off his head and give her a hug. Sylphie had not changed in the slightest since they separated. Well, besides getting a lot stronger and making Jake's Sense of the Malefic Viper now pick up how the wind mana itself seemed to change in her vicinity.

"Did you have fun with your adventures?" he asked, still holding the small hawk in his arms like she was a newborn baby.

"Ree! Ree!" she semi-explained as Jake play-fought with her talons.

"Lots of strong beasts, huh?" Jake nodded. "Managed to take down some C-grades?"

Sylphie proudly screeched in affirmation as she went on a tirade of screeches explaining what had happened. Jake nodded along, still unsure how the hell he understood what she meant. She had gone to the cloud layer where C-grades lived and managed to defeat a few C-grades while hunting with Carmen.

Speaking of Carmen... "Where did you leave Carmen? Isn't she also here?"

"Ree!"

"She isn't that slow."

"Ree!"

"Okay, she is a little slow," Jake laughed in agreement as the hawk insisted.

Feeling victorious, Sylphie once more brought the topic back to her adventures, Jake listening intently as he continued to nod along while slowly flying back towards Haven, and he at least managed to extract the fact that Carmen was back there talking with the Sword Saint, Miranda, and Arthur.

Oh... and two others who had also come back to Haven for a visit. Two hawks Jake hadn't seen for even longer than Sylphie: her parents, Hawkie and Mystie.

Chapter 569 - The Eve Before The Third World Congress

Hawkie and Mystie had been busy birds as far as Jake knew. His visits to Haven had just never really intersected with when they visited, and after Sylphie left with him and Carmen, the two hawks bothered visiting even less as they didn't really have any reason to go.

Instead, they focused on leveling, hunting as a pair in the sky and in the vast forest Haven was on the outskirts of. Jake knew that neither of them were particularly strong for their levels, but they weren't weak either. He would place them firmly in the mid-to-high-tier level of beast variants, primarily due to Mystie's unique type of magic and Hawkie's high striking power. Together they were especially strong with their developed combo-attacks and skills, bringing them firmly in the high-tier category.

Yet, even knowing this, Jake was surprised when he saw them from afar as the two of them waited on a branch just at the entrance to the forest.

[Stormsong Hawk – lvl 178]

[Mystsong Hawk – lvl 176]

You go, mate! Jake thought when he saw Hawkie had surpassed Mystie in level. It did make sense; Mystie was more of a supportive fighter, with Hawkie being the one going in and dealing most of the damage. But, damn, them both having reached such a high level so fast was impressive to him.

Neither of them were living cheats like Jake, Sylphie, or most of the other people around him. They were just kind-of-strong beasts. Well, okay, that wasn't entirely accurate. They were the parents of Sylphie, and in the same way that Jake's parents benefitted with Records by being his parents, so did Hawkie and Mystie benefit from Sylphie. Them being friends with Jake also helped them quite a bit, though Jake reckoned their relationship with Sylphie meant more. Then again, Sylphie benefitted a lot by being close to Jake, so he did help quite a bit by proxy?

Anyway, Records were complicated, and even if he helped, it was still their own effort that brought them to high-tier D-grade.

Jake smiled as he saw them and raised a hand to wave. Sylphie remained cradled in his arms, clearly content with not having to move as Jake flew over to her parents.

Mystie looked a bit judging down at her daughter while Hawkie flew down towards him. What looked like a fork of lightning appeared and floated in mid-air in front of Jake as Hawkie landed on it at eye height with Jake.

"Good to see you again, mate," Jake greeted the hawk. His first monster friend, if you didn't count the King.

Hawkie simply nodded his head and looked at Jake holding Sylphie.

"Does feel a bit bad to be surpassed by your own daughter, huh?" Jake asked.

To his surprise, Hawkie didn't agree. Quite the opposite. Jake felt only happiness at how strong Sylphie was, with not a shred of jealousy. This only made Jake smile more. Here's to healthy family dynamics.

What was the saying... Jake couldn't remember, but he remembered the gist of it. Celebrate the success of others and mourn their losses. Feeling jealous or angry because someone you proclaimed to care about experienced success was just a sign of you being an egotistical asshole. It was fine to feel a bit miffed, sure, but that should be trumped by the happiness of seeing someone you care about succeed.

"Or maybe not," Jake corrected himself as he looked down at Sylphie and nuzzled the feathers on her stomach. Like an angry cat, she fought back with her talons, but Jake just grinned as he adeptly dodged them to tickle her. "She sure has grown, eh?"

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched in agreement as Hawkie just gave a slight nod. Hawkie was as reserved as ever, and Mystie still seemed a bit cautious around Jake even after all this time. At least she seemed happy to stay at a distance and just observe what happened.

"Should we head back?" Jake asked. "You can tell me what you two have been up to in the meantime. How about you join us too, Mystie?"

He looked up at the hawk with a smile. She quickly relented, not due to Jake, but the wide eyes of Sylphie staring up at her, making her fly down and join them as they slowly made their way through the forest. He already kind of knew what Hawkie and the others had been doing and what they hunted, but it was always good to hear it from the primary source.

The two of them had mainly focused on safe hunts and not biting off more than they could chew. Mystie was damn good at stealth by now, from what he gathered, and allowed them to ambush foes or escape areas with dangerous monsters they could not beat. Jake also came to learn that, apparently, the massive lightning tree in the sky had died several months ago after Hawkie had gone for a round of absorption. That made Jake a bit sad until he heard Sylphie chip in about how there were many more of those trees up in the higher cloud layers where C-grades lived. Bigger ones, too, making Jake wonder where the hell they came from.

With more than one, he could only assume it was some breed of a tree. He had assumed that the massive lightning tree had been the "main tree" and the smaller crystal trees spread around were its seedlings, but now Jake began to wonder... what if the big one had also just been another seedling itself? Did this mean there was some massive awesome lightning tree somewhere?

Anywho, the two proud hawk parents had explored far more of the forest than anyone else. Jake had already known that C-grades existed deep in the forest, but they had indeed confirmed their presence and how there were a lot of them. Needless to say, Hawkie and Mystie were not equipped to fight C-grades quite yet, even if they had gotten a lot stronger.

They had an enjoyable talk as they made their way back to Haven, Mystie even joining in and adding some information with images made of Myst here and there.

Soon enough, they reached Haven, Jake feeling the many presences within. Everyone had gathered, it seemed, the group now also including Carmen. He did not detect another monster with the King but kind of assumed he had thought of one. Not that it mattered, they could always find this last council member after Jake was World Leader.

Jake waltzed into the main office, still holding Sylphie. However, she seemed to want to keep her dignity as she wrestled herself free and flew up to land on top of his head to prove her dominance. Jake cracked a smile as he entered the room, and everyone looked at him.

"I apologize for my late arrival, but I have to announce a change in plans. Going by hierarchy, it has become clear to me that the true leader of Earth should not be me but the mighty Sylphie," Jake joked with a wide grin.

"Sold," Carmen answered with a smirk.

"Wouldn't it be the same? Not like you plan on actually doing any work," Miranda shrugged.

"I have no complaints either," even the Sword Saint chimed in.

The King did not even dignify his joke with a response, while Arthur looked genuinely confused for a few moments before realizing it was just a bad joke.

"Thanks for the support and confidence, everyone," Jake chuckled as he went to take a seat. Hawkie and Mystie had both chosen to stay outside and had flown towards the good old lodge. Probably to steal his bananas.

"Let us get to work," Miranda cut in to actually get something done.

"Arthur was just telling us how he has spread the word of our arrangement, and despite quite a bit of pushback, things seem to be on track, with most understanding the nuance of the situation and choosing to support us. During the Congress itself, we should be able to convince the rest by actually displaying a united front," Miranda explained.

“As for the Noboru Clan, things have mostly calmed down,” the Sword Saint sighed. “There shall at least be no opposition to voting you World Leader.”

“We have claimed more Pylons and expanded, and naturally, all shall vote according to my will,” the King said. “When it comes to this final member of the council, I have attempted to seek out this whale you spoke of, but I ran into an obstacle.”

“Oh?” Jake asked, surprised. “What’s wrong?”

“You asked me to find a sea creature in a vague direction, one living far away in an area filled with C-grades that you expect me to hopelessly search through with a damaged soul,” the King explained very aptly.

“So what you are saying is that you suck at tracking and stealth. Got it. I guess I will just have to call the divine hotline to try and get this whale guy on board. After the Congress, of course,” Jake smiled.

“I congratulate myself for not wasting my time on such a pointless task, then,” the King scoffed before falling silent.

“I guess it’s my turn?” Carmen spoke up after a brief pause. “Eh, those from Valhal will vote for you; at least Sven, that bastard, told me so. He also told me to apologize to you, so I am sorry that Sven and the moronic moron higher-ups fucked up like the morons they are.”

“Apology accepted,” Jake said with a nod. “Partly. Valhal is not getting out of this scot-free, but we can talk about what form of compensation I find agreeable. Quite frankly, it wouldn’t matter if they refused to vote for me anymore, does it?”

“No, it does not,” Miranda confirmed. “Based on my estimates, you sit on well over eighty percent of the total votes. Remember that many of the nobles who are on the fence are only Lords with their one vote while we have all higher-level nobles on our side.”

“See? Even if Valhal decides to be assholes again, we’re good,” Jake said to Carmen.

Carmen looked offended for a moment but then took a deep breath. “I had nothing to do with what they did. I didn’t even hear anything about that orange fuck or that bullshit Alliance before everything had already happened.”

“I know that,” Jake said comfortingly. “But Valhal still needs to pay some kind of recompense. I am sure Sven already predicted this?”

“Probably did,” Carmen answered. “I didn’t really listen to much of what he said after he told me to go apologise. Ask him at the Congress. It is his damn fault for asking me to act as a diplomat like this.”

“Fair enough,” Jake nodded as he turned to Miranda again. “Anything from the Risen at all?”

“No,” Miranda shook her head. “But I did confer with my Patrons, and it appears like they have left Earth for good. Which was, according to them, probably better for everyone involved.”

Jake frowned. "Why?"

"Well... while the Risen do usually go the diplomatic route, the end result is often still the total domination of any planet they operate on, including eventual terraforming. Chances are they would have left by themselves at some point anyway or only left a small outpost at most," Miranda explained. "At least they would have gone for another planet nearby to make their own and not actually remained on Earth."

Her explanation reminded him of the final force he wanted to ask about: "What about the Church? They still have some cities, as far as I recall."

"Kind of?" Miranda said. "It is more just City Lords refusing to accept what happened and still waiting for the Church to call for them. They have fallen one by one in the last month, and only a scarce few remain, all of them in minor settlements of little importance. No, the biggest problem is the refugees from all the major cities, especially Sanctdomo."

Jake once more nodded, knowing there was quite a refugee crisis going on. If the King had not managed to rein in the monsters and their attacks dying down, things would have gotten far worse. The cities the Church used to own were primarily taken by the United Cities Alliance, with the Noboru Clan and even Valhal managing to snatch up a few.

The meeting continued for a bit longer, but there really wasn't much to discuss ahead of this World Congress. They didn't even know what kind of votes would happen besides the one for World Leader, so it was impossible to discuss that. All in all, everything was set, and Jake decided to head back to his lodge to chill with the hawks.

Carmen decided to follow him, something he definitely didn't complain about. It was good to hear about the adventures of her and Sylphie with actual human words. The fact that neither Mystie, Hawkie, or Sylphie spoke actual words using telepathy or something like that surprised him a bit, but then again, did they have to? The only one Hawkie and Mystie seemed to care about talking to was Jake, and he understood them. And if they didn't bother learning telepathy, he also doubted they would rush to get human forms.

In fact, it wasn't that unusual for beasts to never bother getting a human form. A human form had no value for a monster living in the wild and was, in many ways, only a weakness. It also took quite a bit of skill and time to create a usable one, making many lower-tier creatures simply give up and never bother. Then, finally, there was the fact that many beasts saw the human form as inferior and it as a slight to their honor to adopt one for even a second. Villy once told a funny story about why all dragons always chose to retain draconic features in their human form without having to: because they were braggarts who wanted anyone even catching a glimpse of them to still know they were indeed dragons. He didn't think Mystie and Hawkie were like that, but it was still a toss-up if they bothered to make one when they reached C-grade.

They also had the advantage of their small forms, allowing them to still travel around places built for human-sized individuals. Big beasts not fitting into human-sized houses was by far one of the primary reasons for human forms being such a widely-adopted concept.

As they entered the valley, Jake was thrown out of his thoughts as he saw the two hawks again, having indeed stolen some of his bananas. They were lucky he was in a good mood and couldn't scold parents in front of their own kid.

"Hey... are you ready to evolve soon?" Carmen asked him after they had gotten into the lodge and settled down at the table.

Jake finally Identified her and saw that at least she was.

[Human – lvl 193]

“Yeah, pretty damn close; I just need some class levels. And I got some stuff I want to finish beforehand,” Jake answered.

“Your class?” Carmen asked with surprise. “I only need levels in my profession... been kind of slow recently. Didn’t really feel like dedicating kills to Valhal or doing any of their bullshit rituals after they lied and tried to screw over my home planet.”

“Fair,” Jake nodded. “But in their defense, I don’t think Valhal actually tried to screw Earth over, and from my understanding, some complicated shit is just going on between a bunch of gods.”

“Why would you bother defending them after just talking about wanting compensation?” Carmen asked with a frown.

Jake just smiled. “I am the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. I know stuff. Secret stuff.”

“Ass,” she shot back.

“I do have one of those, yes,” Jake confirmed with a stupid grin.

“Assho... ah, never mind. So, what the hell have you been up to? I don’t know shit compared to everyone else, it feels like,” Carmen complained.

“Oh man...”

Jake once more narrated what had happened, including everything with Sandy and his journey across the planet. Sylphie and the other hawks stayed for a part of it until all three of them left to have some quality family time terrorizing the local wildlife, leaving just Carmen and Jake back at the lodge.

“Fucking Ell’Hakan. Dude is definitely coming back to make trouble, isn’t he?” Carmen said after Jake was done talking.

“No doubt,” Jake nodded. “Though I don’t know if he will mess with Earth again or just aim for me directly. Maybe a mix of both. Either way, I will handle him later. For now, I got too much other stuff to take care of.”

“I guess,” Carmen said before groaning. “Why does shit have to be complicated? Can’t we just have proper villains who show up and challenge you directly or something like that?”

“That would definitely be preferable,” Jake smiled. “I much prefer when people can just be direct and cut all the bullshit.”

“Agree,” Carmen nodded.

They were both silent for a few seconds before Jake scratched the back of his head. "You know, we got at least a few hours before the World Congress and nothing to do."

Carmen smiled. "I thought you just said you preferred when people were direct?"

"Other people," Jake clarified.

"God damn hypocrite," Carmen laughed before dragging him outside the lodge for a sparring session.

Followed by dragging him back inside for another kind of sparring session.

Chapter 570 - The Third World Congress

Jake and Carmen both lay on the grass in the valley outside of the lodge as they stared up at the sky, relaxing after their strenuous wrestling session.

"Why was it we couldn't use the bed again?" Carmen turned to him and asked.

"That is a meditation bed," Jake said stoically. "Also, it is super old and comes from a dungeon, and I didn't wanna risk breaking it. Sentimental value and all that."

"As long as you don't feel the same about the table," Carmen joked about the broken pieces of wood in the lodge as she sat up. "Should we get going? Also... aren't the others going to start asking questions?"

Jake looked to the side and saw a part of the valley pretty damn banged up from their earlier spar, including quite a few craters. “Nah, I think they will just assume we only sparred. Does it matter either way?”

Carmen thought for a moment. “I guess not, but I would prefer for no stupid rumors to spread.”

“Oh, I already got those rumors related to Miranda and me,” Jake shrugged.

“Really?” Carmen asked, a bit surprised. “So have you-”

“Nah. Professional boundaries and all. Don’t wanna make things awkward with someone who effectively works for me,” Jake shrugged.

“Don’t wanna shit where you eat, huh?” Carmen nodded. “Though, as a Chosen, isn’t everyone below you in the hierarchy? And does your Patron give a fuck about professional boundaries?”

A vivid image of Villy with three witches flashed in his mind as he shook his head. “Oh, the Viper sure doesn’t, but that doesn’t mean I don’t. As for everyone being above me as Chosen, well, if I don’t think someone is below me and they don’t think I am above them, then who the fuck is to decide?”

“Truly masterfully argued,” Carmen smirked. “Now, let’s go to that office and get this entire World Congress bullshit done with.”

"Fine," Jake agreed and stretched as he walked towards the main office. The others were already waiting there, and not long after, it was time. The invitations were sent out, and Jake agreed as his vision went black and he entered the Third World Congress.

The World Congress chamber hit Jake like a bag of bricks filled with nostalgia when he entered. His sphere spread out, and he could only sigh internally. Figures appeared all around him, but some people who had been at every other Congress were notably missing.

Sanctdomo and the Risen city that Jake didn't remember the name of were both gone from the top ten. Jacob and Casper were nowhere to be seen as it really got hammered home; they were both gone from Earth for good.

Another notable figure that was nowhere to be seen was Eron. Jake had kind of hoped to see him there, but his absence also confirmed for good that he had left Earth with likely no desire to return. His reason for leaving was still a mystery, and Jake wondered if he knew about El'Hakan coming or if it was totally unrelated. Either way, he was gone.

He did at least see some familiar figures he hadn't heard much about in the last month. Two people in particular. The first one was Maria, the fire archer who had been with Bertram and his party as a mercenary and had helped in the fight with the Monarch of Blood. She looked to be with an entirely different crew, and from what Jake could guess, she had split entirely from the Church.

The second person was someone Jake himself had told to be there but was still surprised to actually see. William stood on a platform way at the back of the room and looked unassuming as hell. His presence was oddly muted, and even if he had just appeared, Jake saw his eyes wide open as he looked deep in thought. He didn't get the feeling William would make any trouble, as he had far too many internal issues to deal with. At least he hadn't found his Path yet, judging by his level still being 199. In fact, scanning the room, no one at C-grade was present. A few were at level 199 here and there, but no one

had evolved. What stumped them, he didn't know, but he guessed it was either natural barriers caused by Records or an issue with quests.

Standing there and scanning everything, it felt oddly hollow. So little mystery remained of who those unknown City Leaders were. All intrigue about hidden experts on the planet was killed. Besides a few odd rumors about standout individuals who didn't bother with politics, there really was nothing. His only hope was in the unexplored parts of the planet and what monsters may hide there.

Jake had appeared on the platform together with the usual suspects. He, Miranda, Lillian, and Neil attended from Haven just like all the other times, but all the others who had been in Haven appeared on their respective platforms. From what Jake gathered, the Sword Saint had given up control of his Pylon when he pretended to die to better sell the ruse but had now gone and reclaimed it without any opposition. Carmen and Arthur had also appeared at their original Pylon locations despite being in Haven.

He was still looking around as the welcome message appeared.

Welcome to the Third World Congress of Earth. Two World Congresses have passed, and it is time for the final scheduled one.

The World Congress is an opportunity for the newly integrated denizens of Earth to establish political connections and an arena for discussion, voting, and international politics that can impact the planet as a whole. Note that no fighting will be allowed during the World Congress. Each booth has an aura that will offer privacy to each city.

During the Third World Congress, two votes will be held with a maximum length of five (5) hours per vote. After one vote finishes, the other will immediately begin. During this World Congress, a World

Leader must be elected, and if none has managed to accumulate 60% of the total votes, the candidates shall be cut down and options limited until the World Leader is elected.

The first vote will pertain to the election of a World Leader. The World Leader will automatically have their noble rank advance one stage and must be elected during this World Congress. The Second Vote pertains to the final trial of the enlightened races on Earth.

The first vote will automatically begin in thirty (30) minutes.

Jake read it over and saw only minor changes from the last time. More freedom with voting periods, an inclusion that the World Leader must be elected, and finally, information about the vote for a final trial of some kind?

Everyone read it, and Jake also double-checked that the voting rules had not changed since last year.

Voting rules of the World Congress:

The number of available votes is based on the nobility rank of the attending members. The number of votes per nobility rank is as follows:

King: 1000

Prince: 250

Duke: 100

Marquiss: 25

Earl: 10

Viscount: 5

Baron: 3

Lord: 1

The noble in question may distribute their votes as they choose if there are multiple options. The noble may abstain from voting. Votes are final and cannot be appealed. Any agreements will come into effect until the next World Congress or if all included parties choose to revoke it. All tie-breakers will be decided by the highest-ranking noble present at the World Congress.

It was the exact same as last year, indeed. Jake still questioned how and why prince was a thing considering the prince was usually the son of the King, but hey, who was he to question the omnipotent system?

Jake also knew that he would advance to marquiss after this vote. It was still a bit odd that he, as the World Leader, would still be three entire nobility ranks below the Fallen King, but there wasn't really anything he could do about it. Unique Lifeforms were pretty bullshit like that.

Also, no, the King could not give others nobility ranks. The nobility title of the King was a bit of a weird case in more than one way. Monsters could not have nobility ranks, but despite that, the King had one, which also did make it kind of funny when the system talked to everyone within the Congress like they were among the enlightened races.

After Jake had read through everything, including the usual prompt to vote for World Leader, he turned his attention back to all those in the chamber. He felt many gazes upon him and knew what he had to do. Miranda had told him many times, and sometimes he still had to do a bit of politics. With a mental command, Jake made his mask invisible and clapped his hands together to get everyone's attention.

"So here we are again at the third World Congress, but we all know this one is quite a bit different than the first two. With how things have gone in recent times, how couldn't it be?" Jake spoke, the speech only semi-practiced. He was mostly just winging it. Seemed more genuine that way.

"Enemies were invited onto our planet due to naivety, ignorance, stupidity, and deceit. Millions died due to the decisions of a few, and countless more now find themselves struggling from the aftermath. As I am sure you can all see, the Risen are gone. I knew many of you didn't like them, but out of everyone, they were one of the most peaceful factions. At the same time, the Holy Church has also chosen to leave. Why, you might ask? Because they realized their goal of world domination was not feasible, and they were the kinds of people who either want everything or nothing," Jake continued, seeing a few frowns here and there. Probably the idiots who still believed in the Church.

"Another question you might have is who this invader was. I am aware most of you have no idea, so let me clarify. His name is Eli'Hakan, an alien who has already dominated his home planet and is the Chosen of Yip of Yore, an incredibly powerful god that even the Pantheon of the Holy Church is wary of. His

reason for coming here quite honestly had nothing to do with any of you. He never cared about Earth. He came for me.”

A bit of chatter was heard here and there, but Jake raised a hand.

”I know, I know. Rumor has no doubt gone around that I am the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, an even more feared god than Yip of Yore and one with quite the, let’s just say, reputation. I do realize it is somewhat my own fault for not really bothering with letting more be known about myself that you all think I am some evil bastard, but I hope that you have come to realize I have no desire to lead Earth down a bad Path. I just want the planet to survive and be defended, nothing more. That is also what most of you want: for Earth to remain independent, but you must also realize that simply isn’t possible. Without backing, we are like a poor country with pointy sticks trying to defend ourselves from global superpowers. And not just any small, impoverished country, but one with a shitload of oil that everyone wants.”

Even more chatter, only a handful of people with some muted chuckling. All of them were people Jake knew, sadly. The joke did not land.

”What I am saying is that Earth would be fucked without someone big and scary to intimidate multiversal forces. Arthur, the former leader of the newly dissolved United Cities Alliance, tried to have Valhal be this big scary force, but needless to say, his plans fell apart and were built on a foundation of lies and naivety. However, through talks with Arthur, I came to realize that we do want the same thing, so I am proposing that we use my backing as the deterrent. That we use my identity as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper as a shield. Again, I know a lot of you are probably skeptical of this idea, but the Order will have no influence on the planet,” Jake explained.

There were still a lot of skeptics in the hall, but Jake continued nevertheless.

"Instead, Earth will be led by a council of five, me not included. I have no interest in actually leading anything. Thus, everything will be up to their discretion, with me only getting involved in matters I care about or find important. The same way as I have led Haven thus far. And before anyone asks, let me just address the question of why I then don't just make someone else the World Leader and sit on the council. The easy answer to that one: because I don't want to. Because if there is one thing I want less than to become World Leader, it is for someone else to become World Leader," Jake grinned. "Anyway, that was my big speech. I will now take questions."

"How will you-"

"What are-"

"If you-"

People instantly began yelling, and Jake raised a hand to silence them again. "That was a damn joke; I am not actually answering any questions. If you want to know more, ask the people on the council. After the vote."

"Are we not even gonna dignify a discussion of alternatives? Not even going to act like this is the democratic election it is?" someone with a particularly loud voice yelled. Jake did not recognize them at all and just shrugged.

"Not really, no. Not gonna lie; you people are way out of your depths by even being here. Didn't you hear what I said? Gods decided to fight over our planet. Beings who can blow it up with a wave of their hand. Does anyone here really think they can do shit to defend Earth? The answer is no. This is not a democratic election either, and I bet you that after this vote, we will come to learn that there are more violent ways of attaining the title of World Leader. I hope that anyone open to being voted for is also fine with having a constant mark on them. People who are not just from Earth will come after you. That

is another reason I think I am the best candidate. I welcome my would-be-assassins,” Jake answered confidently.

His response seemed to shut down the guy as Arthur spoke up. Just as planned.

“What Lord Thayne is saying is that he will act as a shield for Earth from the multiverse. Outside forces will hesitate even having machinations on Earth due to fear of the Chosen of the Malefic Viper being the World Leader there. Assassins who would be interested in Earth would not dare risk offending the Order by attempting to assassinate him. In addition, they will fear killing anyone they perceive to be working for him out of fear. His role will be nearly entirely passive, and from my understanding, he will not even be on Earth for the majority of the time,” Arthur said, looking over at Jake.

“True, I will not. I have a multiverse to explore,” Jake confirmed.

Jake didn’t really think there needed to be more talk, but damn, was he wrong. He had been warned beforehand, but it was still annoying that it happened. Even if they had the vast majority of votes and they could just vote instantly and make him World Leader once that first half an hour ended, they still freaking talked. However, the four council members had made it clear that simply brute-forcing the vote was a bad idea.

Instead, they wanted to bring everyone there on board with their decision. Jake could only sigh and sit back as he allowed the council members to show their prowess and convince everyone. Especially the Fallen King had some heavy lifting to do before he would get a proper approval rating.

The only ones with good approval ratings were Arthur and, surprisingly, the Sword Saint. Arthur because of his former status and existing connections, and the Sword Saint because... well, Jake would describe it as old-man energy. Who would dare disagree with an old man’s wisdom? Plus, he just seemed

authoritative whenever he spoke, making everyone subconsciously agree and take all his advice as sagely. Again, old-man powers.

Miranda was also working hard, primarily in the department of convincing everyone that while the Order was pretty damn evil by human standards, then it was not the Order but Jake taking charge and how those things were different. Everyone on the council was working damn hard.

As for Jake?

Jake was fighting the temptation to just zone it all out and just do some damn alchemy like all the other political events...

Luckily, it was soon time for the vote and for Jake to finally get to see what one got out of becoming World Leader. As long as he could stay awake long enough, that is.