

Hunter 571

Chapter 571 - Earth's Final Trial

After half an hour, the prompt appeared to vote for World Leader. Jake opened it and saw that it, too, was the same as every other time.

Please place your vote for World Leader of Earth. You have 10 votes and can distribute them as you desire or choose to abstain with any or all of your votes.

Votes remaining: 10/10

Time remaining: 4:29:59

Jake naturally dumped all votes on himself instantly while the others continued talking. And damn, did they continue to talk. A lot of people just voted right away from the looks of it, but as far as Jake could tell, the voting period would only end once all votes had been made. Jake would naturally prefer for them to just get things over with, but all he could do was wait as the negotiations happened.

In the meantime, he stood there valiantly as he, in reality, zoned out and entered his Soulspace using Serene Soul Meditation while still keeping an eye on the outside world using his sphere. In there, he discussed future matters and plans with sim-Jake for a good while until finally they got done, and in the least suspenseful vote for World Leader Jake could imagine, he got the title... which wasn't even a damn title.

The election of World Leader has now concluded!

Results: Jake Thayne has been elected World Leader with 93% of the total votes.

Congratulations! You have been elected World Leader.

As a World Leader, you gain access to certain special privileges and abilities.

Due to the previous vote for Paths of Unusual Unions, the World Leader can formally invite native monsters of any grade into protected lands.

Allows the World Leader to announce future World Congresses.

Allows you to appoint a maximum of five (5) Ministers and delegate responsibility.

Allows the World Leader to lay claim to any area controlled by Pylons.

Allows the World Leader to...

...

More privileges and abilities will be revealed after the conclusion of Earth's final trial if the World Leader manages to fully take control of the planet.

Jake read the many messages that popped up in front of him but ended up skimming most of them as he quite frankly didn't care about most of what they said. He adopted the same attitude as he had towards Haven. All of these things were for the council to figure out after he appointed the five Ministers and got everything delegated out.

There was also a pleasant surprise he had not expected. Jake had not thought much of the Unusual Unions vote and knew it had just resulted in some more interesting classes and professions popping up, but the positive working relationship between humans and monsters had kind of been ruined by the actions of William and Ell'Hakan. It was recovering now, but it would take time.

So to see that it had resulted in Jake gaining a very useful ability was awesome. If he read it correctly, it meant that he could now remove the restrictions C-grades had so they could go everywhere, allowing him to finally invite people like Sandy or Scarlett to Haven without any problems. That was definitely a great bonus.

Finally, there was the section about a final trial also mentioned in the welcome message to the Congress. Jake did not ponder on this much as he could just wait for the vote that was shortly upcoming that would no doubt include far more information on this trial.

He also checked and saw that his nobility title had been upgraded.

Titled Upgraded: [Nobility: Earl] --> [Nobility: Marquess]

[Nobility: Marquess] – A noble who has been voted World Leader and begun his true Path of planetary domination. Allows you to control several Pylons of Civilization as well as claim control of Planetary Pylons. Grants access to certain events and opportunities exclusive to nobles. Opens many new paths to power

Jake read it through and saw some interesting things, especially the note about Planetary Pylons. If a Pylon of Civilization was made to claim and form a city, then the Planetary Pylon was made to claim a planet. It more or less functioned as the mainframe and primary controller of all other Pylons on a planet. It was kind of a natural upgrade to see, considering the message about this final trial.

All in all not much had really changed from him becoming World Leader. Anyone with any kind of political aspirations or skills would probably vehemently disagree with him, but overall, Jake saw no real gains. He had to admit a part of him had selfishly hoped that by becoming World Leader, he would get some kind of new title or at least some passive bonus to stats or something while on the planet he supposedly led. Alas, stuff like that was probably reserved for people with social professions. If Jake had to guess, all he would really gain was another option to skip over during his evolution.

Even if it wasn't a big deal to Jake, others seemed to disagree as all eyes were on him. Oh... I probably have to speak again. Damn.

"Well, thanks for the vote of confidence," Jake said casually. "I will do my job, which is to stay alive and make sure no one else can claim Earth. For actual leadership, you will have to look to my Ministers. Speaking of which..."

Seeing no reason to delay, Jake turned around and instantly offered for Miranda to become Minister. She accepted instantly, and Jake repeated this with the King, Sword Saint, and Arthur. Arthur was the only one who hesitated for a moment but still agreed.

"There we go, four out of five Ministers appointed," Jake said with a nod.

He knew that everyone already knew that the last member of this council would be a beast, as much of the discussion before the vote revolved around people arguing about who to add. Most of those opposed to a beast joining the council naturally want someone from their own clique or at least another human.

Valhal also had the decency to shut the fuck up during all this time, and naturally, Caleb and the Court had no interest in any kind of official position. All he did was give Jake a cheeky smile after he became World Leader as he mimed being so proud he had to wipe away a tear. Asshole.

They still had a few more topics to talk about, one of those related to Valhal and for Jake to publicly call them out. Miranda had mentioned that he had to outwardly take a hard stance and make it clear he disapproved of what they did. All of it had something to do with the plans of the Viper, so Jake just rolled with it.

However, before he had a chance to... the second vote began unprompted.

The second vote of the World Congress relates to Earth's final trial.

The enlightened species have had time to establish themselves on the planet and form alliances and connections, but will it be enough to truly lay claim to the planet as a whole? There live more than the enlightened in the multiverse, and soon Earth will have to prove it can hold up.

Chains hold back that which seeks to claim the planet as its own, but with the links broken one by one, it soon shall be released.

The Prima Guardian awaits its freedom.

To truly lay claim to planet Earth, the Planetary Pylon must be claimed, a core that is currently protected by a barrier that requires two keys to open. One key shall be given to the elected World Leader, while the second key is held by the Prima Guardian.

However, before the Prima Guardian comes, a choice must be made.

Face your trial alone, or seek out allies.

In five years, the Guardian will arrive on Earth with its army and must be defeated within five years of arrival, or the Guardian will move to claim the world for itself as the barrier naturally falls. All planets can choose to either engage the Prima Guardian alone or ally with others to create an army capable of defeating each planet's Prima Guardian.

Note that the strength of each Prima Guardian is based on the number of fragments collected from slain Primas as their Records and power have been absorbed by the Prima Guardian, as well as the overall performance of the planet in all prior system events. Rewards for slaying the Prima Guardian will be split amongst all contributing planets. Bonus reward for any planet defeating the Prima Guardian on their own. But be warned, for should the respective World Leader of any planet die, the Prima will claim the key and thus the planet.

The Prima Guardian Alliance Interface will open up for all World Leaders whose planet voted to ally with others. Should a planet choose to face its Prima Guardian alone, this interface will only appear after the World Leader's own Prima Guardian has been defeated.

What Path will Earth walk? One where they face the Guardian by themselves or with the help of the rest of the Milkyway?

Votes remaining: 25/25

Time remaining: 7:36:55

It was quite a chunky description that could get summed up rather easily: big boss coming to Earth in five years, choose now, face big boss alone or ask for help like a bunch of losers. Sure, it also said that all of this was to finally claim the planet properly, but Jake cared more about the prospect of facing this Prima Guardian. He was also quite surprised by the mention of this Prima thing again.

Seems like all of that stuff about the Exalted Prima is indeed a major theme of this universe, huh? Jake thought. He had heard from the Viper it had happened before with other universes where major events during these initiation events centered around some topic, location, or entity. However, with all initiations and all the system events that followed differing so significantly, no one could truly predict what would happen, making it all a bit more exciting. At least to Jake.

Chatter appeared around the room, bringing Jake out of his wayward thoughts and back to the World Congress chamber. Though he was unsure why people were even discussing it. He quickly placed his votes before speaking up.

"What is there to talk about?" Jake spoke loudly. "More accurately, why are all of you talking about it like it matters to you? We all know the answer already, right?"

Jake turned to the booths around him.

"If Earth truly requires aid to defeat this Prima Guardian, then no other planet in the Milkyway will be able to do anything," Caleb spoke up first. Omitting that there was one who did have people who could help, but no one considered that orange fuck a possibility.

"Help seems wholly unnecessary," the Sword Saint also spoke up.

"It is indeed a waste of time to even consider it," the King agreed.

"There you have it," Jake said. "So finish this damn vote already. No fucking way we are going to share our prey and bounty with other planets."

In all fairness, Jake would prefer not to share it with the others on Earth either, but sometimes one had to be nice. Also... he saw an opportunity and leaped on it.

"Besides, the last time we invited aliens from another planet, it didn't end well. Oh yeah, which begs the question, will we be able to rely on Valhal in this matter, or do we need to sign some shitty contract first before you are willing to defend Earth?" Jake said in a venomous tone as he looked toward Sven.

Sven, to his credit, looked like he had expected this and did not try to make any excuses. "We of Valhal can only lay ourselves down flat in surrender and realize we misjudged the entire situation and made many mistakes. I thank the Chosen for showing mercy during this time so that we, with time, can make

it up to you to hopefully establish a healthy and mutually beneficial working relationship, allowing us to prove ourselves to both the Chosen and Earth,” Sven said as he bowed deeply.

Jake had kind of expected this, but his response did make Jake suspect that Sven did not know that some shady stuff was going on that the Viper was in on. He acted more as a CEO of a company where the board of directors did something moronic, and he now had to take responsibility. Jake would feel sorry for him if not for the fact that he was still the damn CEO, and like any CEO asked to do some dumb shit, he had the option of refusing and potentially quitting. Being a heretic wasn't that bad anyway.

“We at Valhal realize that the new World Leader and his Council will need many resources to stabilize their rule, and to help this cause, Valhal is more than happy to offer gifts to expedite everything,” Sven continued after a brief pause.

Did they need a lot of resources and stuff? Well, probably not, but fuck if Jake knew. What he did know was that he liked free stuff.

Staring at Sven, Jake still continued acting harshly. “You are lucky I consider the Runemaiden a close friend, or Valhal would have either gone the way of the Holy Church or the way of the alien invader's comrades. You are on a tight leash, so don't fuck it up. No third chances.”

Sven bowed once more. “That is all we could ever ask for. Thank you, Chosen of the Malefic One.”

Jake exchanged a glance with the man, feeling a sense of gratitude from him. Confronting Valhal publicly not only proved that Jake was still mad at them to everyone – including any potential spies or individuals who had a relationship with Ell'Hakan – but also allowed Valhal to apologize and get a way into the good graces of all the other factions. Many of them would have hesitated to interact with Valhal if they thought the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and his council remained pissed at them.

"Approach the council after this and discuss terms. For now, let's just get this vote over with. What are you people waiting for? We are facing it alone, so place those damn votes already," Jake said, sweeping his gaze across the room.

Also, he really had to hold himself back from admonishing a lot of them some more, especially those from the United Cities Alliance. This second vote made it clear Earth had more dangers to face, and he could already imagine the result if they had gotten their will. Jake, the King, the Sword Saint, Sylphie... so many powerful and promising individuals would have been tossed off the planet. Shit, they did manage to make Casper leave, someone Jake would very much have liked to have around.

At least those morons seemed to listen to him now as they finally got their shit together, and all the votes were placed.

The election concerning the final trial of Earth has now concluded!

Earth has chosen the face the final trial alone. Your Path is set, and the Prima Guardian will descend upon the planet in five (5 years). With it shall come an army and all of the formerly undefeated Primas that have gained more power through the Seat of the Exalted Prima.

Warning: Based on collected fragments and Earth's performance in all prior system events, the difficulty rating of the Prima Guardian is considered extremely high.

Prepare yourselves, or the Prima Guardian shall find no equal and lay claim to your world.

Jake read the message and the part about the difficulty rating. Others around him began chattering loudly again, some mentioning how they made a mistake, others trying to calm them down, with a third group even asking if perhaps there was a way off Earth if things went south. Jake cared for none of it as he could only smile to himself.

To him, it wasn't a warning.

It was the promise of a good time.

Chapter 572 - A World That Makes Sense

He had hoped it would end... but no. The World Congress was a cruel mistress and allowed them to stay within the system event for the remainder of the allotted time. Jake wanted to leave, but a sharp look from Miranda made him know that he better stay. Alas, it was probably for the best, as seeing the newly-elected World Leader run away prematurely probably didn't inspire confidence.

However, even if he was forced to stay physically, no one had told him to not go on a mental journey to somewhere better. Even if he did try to stay engaged and at least feign interest. Hey, he had tried, okay?

Jake would firmly classify the rest of the World Congress as a waste of time. Miranda would probably disagree and call it a "valuable opportunity to calm the doubters and display unity to the many City Lords of Earth, thus inspiring confidence in the council."

In fact, those had been the exact words she had used.

Anyway, Jake had nearly eight hours to listen to mundane chatter, and by the time the subject of tax codes was brought up, Jake completely zoned out and went into his Soulspace to talk to a way better conversation partner: himself.

Within his Soulspace, sim-Jake and the cursed chimera both sat calmly as sim-Jake had a hand on the huge monster. It did not react but let him stay there, and Jake knew what he was doing. Some kind of attunement. The details were still a bit fuzzy, but Jake knew that the curse energy and Eternal Hunger were instrumental to the mythical rarity skill he and sim-Jake hoped to make.

After waiting a while, sim-Jake was done, and the moment he released his hand, the huge beast of pure curse energy attacked, forcing sim-Jake to seal it again. Once that was done, his other self turned around and regarded the real Jake.

"This entire deal with World Leader is a waste of time. Why bother? Just evacuate everyone to the Order of the Malefic Viper and leave this stupid rock behind," sim-Jake said, commenting on recent events. "All you are doing is creating distractions for us."

"Maybe, maybe not," Jake shrugged. "In either case, I don't plan on making it into a distraction but an opportunity. We don't know what benefits being World Leader may offer in the future, but I am willing to risk it leading to nothing for the chance to gain something unique."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then I will have wasted a bit of time. How much lifespan do we have by now? Do you even know? I reckon at least a thousand years or something, and probably ten times that at C-grade. So what is a few years chasing a bad lead?" Jake argued.

"Ultimately, the choice is yours," sim-Jake shrugged. "You are the one who will have to deal with all of the annoyances. I just don't want you to dilly-dally and end up stuck at S-grade because you decided to fuck around and not focus on what truly matters."

"If I get stuck at S-grade, I will just have to hunt a few gods or something," Jake grinned, unafraid. "Or die trying. Both are acceptable."

Sim-Jake just shook his head. "Anyway, we will need a lot of time to prepare, and especially with this Prima Guardian arriving... do we have time? Can you figure something out with the Viper?"

Jake nodded. "Should definitely be able to. Once we go to the Order, we can look into it. But you are certain that this Path you have chosen to walk down will work?"

His other self just smiled. "I am betting my entire existence on it."

Everything was wrong... at least it had been. Suddenly everything looked so clear; the muddiness of reality washed away as the many strings that held him down were forcefully severed by the system itself.

William felt so weird he had a hard time describing it. He had joined the World Congress as he had practically been ordered to, not sure what he could even get out of it. He had spent the last month just wandering around, unsure of where to go and what to do. Ms. Kim had told him that maybe being lost and working on finding himself for a while wasn't the worst, but William hated feeling so... wrong.

Quite a few times, he regretted wanting more emotions that much, but in the end, he knew it was for the best. It just sucked to feel like he was walking through a swamp and like the endless threads of karma around him were a net made to slow him down and incapacitate him.

That is until he joined the World Congress. In an instant, the threads disappeared. The net was gone, clarity washed through his mind, and he even felt like his body underwent a cleansing. That is when he realized why the Chosen of the Malefic Viper wanted him to enter the World Congress.

In the Congress, nothing could influence him... and all ongoing influence was dispelled. While William could not be sure, he had a fear that Eversmile had placed several karmic magics on him that denouncing the Blessing did nothing to address.

Yet, even with his mind clear, it only became more evident how truly lost he was. William was still afraid of the Chosen, yes, but it wasn't the same kind of fear... in fact, standing there in the World Congress, he had no particularly negative feelings. It made William wonder if the intense fear had ever been his own or just the result of Eversmile doing something.

William had slept once during this month as a test, and for the first time since the Tutorial, he didn't have a nightmare. That at least somewhat confirmed that the cause of his nightmares – all of which just amplified his fear of the Chosen – were not natural in any way.

Hearing the speech of the Chosen also made William realize one thing. The Chosen truly didn't care about a lot of things, and he probably didn't care about William at all either, unless he made direct trouble for him. It was comforting but also disturbing as William realized that the strongest emotion he could detect towards himself using his karmic magic wasn't anger or killing intent. It was apathy. An emotion he realized the Chosen also had before their last encounter...

William simply wasn't a noteworthy character in the eyes of the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. At most, he was a curiosity to the man. Their disparity in power was large, and seeing the other people around him, like the Sword Saint and the King, only made it all the more evident how insignificant William truly was.

It made it clear that William, indeed, wasn't a protagonist of the world as he had gone around thinking for so long. The Chosen was one. The Sword Saint. The Fallen King. But William? William was just a karmic mage who could hopefully one day be helpful to all the people he screwed over. He realized this and could only smile to himself.

William felt a huge weight lift from his shoulders as he was finally free of the endless net of toxic karma and pressure. He wasn't really anyone special... and he didn't need to be. He just had to be who he wanted to be and do what he himself wanted to do. Find out what he actually wanted out of life.

Race Evolution Quest

As you reach the end of D-grade, you have walked a Path seeking perfection. A Path of discovery of yourself and what you want to be. Yet you have not found it. Without determination and vision, there is no Path. Without desire, there is no progress. Without willingness, there is no life.

Objective: Find your Path (1/1)

Race Evolution Requirements Met

WARNING: Evolution unavailable during ongoing system event.

William saw the system message as the quest completed, and he could only sigh at how stupidly simple some things could be.

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His escape was glorious as Jake was teleported back to Earth after seven damn hours of super engaging political discussions that sometimes disturbed Jake and Sim-Jake's far more interesting conversation. Sadly, he went straight from the pan and into the fire as he had another damn meeting at the main office of Haven just after the World Congress. The Sword Saint, King, and Miranda had been teleported back to where they had entered from, so at least they were all gathered again right away.

More politics. More talking. Luckily, Jake quickly managed to find an excuse to sneak off, but just before he did so, the old man at the table asked for a bit of his time.

The Sword Saint led Jake into another room and erected an isolation barrier around them. Jake wondered what it was about but soon learned as the old man spoke.

"I have considered matters more related to this entire situation with Ell'Hakan. From what I gathered, I believe others here have a misunderstanding. Jake, when you fought him, how powerful did you think he was? How would you evaluate him?" the Sword Saint asked Jake.

Jake considered for a moment. "Elusive, fast, resilient, but overall not a major threat in direct combat. He mainly used his goons against me and took more of a supportive role as a caster. Don't get me wrong, he is strong for his level, but he is a pompous dick using tricks over power."

The old man nodded. "Did you think he faced you seriously at the time?"

After thinking for a few seconds, Jake shook his head. "No, definitely not. His plan was always to throw me to the other side of the planet, and he was just buying time."

"Interestingly enough, I got the same feeling when he fought me," the Sword Saint said. "At least in the beginning. However, as time passed, he did have a genuine desire to kill me. We fought for longer and more seriously than you did. Is that assertion correct?"

Jake nodded. "True. What are you trying to say?"

"While it is a cliché, I do believe one can learn a lot about someone from fighting them. My understanding of this El'Hakan from all the explanations before I encountered him was that we were dealing with a politician born with a golden spoon. Yet when I fought him, I met something entirely different. I met a seasoned fighter who has wielded his weapon for decades. A warrior born through slaughter. He also enjoyed our fight far too much, even refraining from using his Bloodline for nearly the entire fight."

"So he is stronger than I initially thought? Does it ultimately matter?" Jake asked.

"No, perhaps it does not. But I do feel like I need to warn you. Do not underestimate El'Hakan in battle, even if you manage to isolate and fight him alone. While our battle did appear to end with my victory, I had far from won. He still had far more to show me, and he was far too calm. I truly believe now that without inviting springtime fully, I would have died if we had kept fighting. So do not mistake his schemes as a sign of weakness, as I fear that when he is backed into a corner without any schemes, is when he gets the most dangerous," the Sword Saint finished saying his peace. "Less annoying, perhaps, but more deadly."

If it was anyone else saying all this, Jake could have probably brushed them off or maybe even considered that Ell'Hakan had messed with their heads. However, this was the Sword Saint, probably the human Jake respected the most as an equal. If he thought Ell'Hakan was more than met the eye, he could only take it to heart.

"Got it," Jake said with a serious nod. He still firmly believed he was stronger than Ell'Hakan bar any tricks or schemes, and he would keep thinking that until the orange fucker proved him wrong or was dead. But... there was a chance the gap was not as large as Jake believed.

"That is all I wanted to add. Now continue your journey. I shall remain here a bit before I, too, head out and finish the final steps before my evolution," the Sword Saint said.

"Good luck with it all," Jake smiled as he headed off back toward the lodge. Carmen joined him shortly as she walked beside him on the way back, looking deep in thought. When they made it back, she finally spoke.

"Do you think I made a mistake by joining Valhal?" she asked, a bit unsure. "Fuck, even asking that is being a heretic, isn't it?"

Jake looked at her and shrugged. "If they consider that heretical, then fuck 'em. Besides, I doubt they do. And I would not say you made a mistake; quite the opposite. They fit you. Just ignore all of the political shit like I do. I don't blame you for what Valhal chooses to do as long as you don't blame me for whatever nefarious shit the Order of the Malefic Viper is up to."

Carmen smirked. "A bit unfair considering you are the Chosen, but sure. Does feel weird to dedicate kills to them and do stuff in their honor, though."

"Just think about doing it for Valdemar. Valdemar is a cool dude, as far as I can tell. Or just dedicate kills to the concept of Valhal. There are plenty of ways to make the Path you walk make sense to you. Worst case, just become a heretic who doesn't actually believe in anything Valhal does but still want their skills and Records," Jake shrugged. "I am really not the one to ask advice from for things like this; you do know that, right?"

"Or maybe you are," Carmen sighed. "Either way, I want to do some soul-searching, I guess. By soul-searching, I mean wander into the forest and kill shit alone until the world makes more sense to me, or I have at least punched all my frustrations out."

"Totally fair," Jake said. "Killing things is a great way to clear your mind. Very zen."

Carmen shook her head and punched him on the shoulder. "Say goodbye to Sylphie for me. I don't really wanna delay but just head out right away. Before that cute little ball of feathers makes me want to stay."

"Have fun," Jake waved to her as she had already begun heading off. Within a few seconds, she was out of the valley and headed toward the forest. Wait, what if she kills all the good prey? Well... I guess I can share a bit.

Jake used his bond to search for Sylphie and realized she was somewhere far up in the sky. Really far up. Not quite at the layer of C-grades, but close. If he had to guess, he would say the small hawk was showing off to her parents.

Referring to his checklist of things to do before C-grade, Jake now only had four things left to do before evolving. Besides getting those last few class levels, of course. Though he could do that pretty quickly after he was done with all the other things he wanted to do.

1. Upgrade Sagacity of the Malefic Viper
2. Go to Order and defeat baby Snappy
3. Mythical skill creation with the help of sim-Jake
4. Actually evolve.

Jake had checked off two things, and he planned to do all his remaining goals – besides the evolution itself – at the Order. But before going, he had to do one more thing he did not add to his list. Becoming World Leader had not really given him much value, but there had been one useful benefit.

The ability to allow C-grades to visit human areas.

Seeing Sylphie was gone, Jake headed straight for the Mangrove River, this time not to visit them but to allow Scarlett to visit him. Then afterward, he could head up and say hi to Sandy and also allow his worm friend to go wherever they wanted. Finally, he would see if he could have a certain whale visit.

Because what could possibly go wrong by bringing a group of powerful C-grades into an occupied human city?

Chapter 573 - Snake In The City

To call Scarlett absolutely ecstatic that Jake visited so fast again was an understatement. It only got more extreme when Jake asked her to help out with his experiment of allowing her to follow him to otherwise restricted areas.

"So, I will admit, I am not entirely certain how this works," Jake said. He did not have a skill or anything to "mark" people. Well, he did have one to mark people, but that was something else entirely. The World Leader ability was weird, and Jake tried to do the most basic stuff.

He concentrated and willed for Scarlett to be allowed to go anywhere. Nothing seemed to happen, and Jake feared that he couldn't actually use this ability without a profession allowing it or a lot of practice. Yet after a few seconds, Scarlett spoke up.

"I... I think it worked?" she said, a bit unsure and nervous.

"And you are not just saying that because I want it to work and for me to feel better?" Jake asked skeptically.

"I would never do... I... no... I do feel a bit different. It is weird, and I can't quite explain it, but I feel more... free? Unburdened?" Scarlett said, still as nervous as before.

"Have you tried using a teleporter before?" Jake then asked her.

"I have," she nodded. "But only ones within the Mangrove when Old Grumpy was experimenting. I cannot use the teleporters the humans set up to travel outside of my domain."

"Out of curiosity, what stops you? You being C-grade or the system restrictions?"

"I do not know; it just simply doesn't allow me to travel through," Scarlett shook her head. A moment passed before her eyes lit up. "Oh! You mean to say that maybe it would work now?"

"That is the hope," Jake smirked. "Willing to give it a shot? If not, and you are hit with some kind of backlash, you should be able to instantly teleport back again. Though it is a bit risky, and we could maybe just go to the outskirts of the Mangrove."

"I trust the Chosen," Scarlett smiled. "And I am certain the system would not allow me to teleport if it would simply result in my demise."

Jake was still a bit apprehensive, but Scarlett had clearly made up her mind. Seeing her determination, he could only agree, and they walked to the teleporter together. With several C-grade snakes watching curiously, the two of them went into the teleportation chamber.

He saw how nervous she was, making him reach out and hold her hand – with gloves on, of course - as he smiled comfortingly at her. "Are you ready?"

Her otherwise ghostly white face flushed red as she did a small nod. They activated the teleporter, and Jake still held onto the hand as they appeared at the Fort. An entire snake girl was attached to the hand too, and she looked perplexed for a moment before looking around her.

Jake, still holding her hand, led her outside as they appeared not far from the giant metal dome, with a great outlook over the city that had sprung up at the Fort. And, honestly, it really was a city at this point. Jake had no idea how many people lived there – despite owning the land – but he knew it had to be a lot. It was turning into a real metropolis.

Scarlett seemed to barely register that he still held her hand as her head whipped from side to side and her reptilian eyes darted around to take in everything. Jake smiled and felt happy for her.

Turning his head, he also looked towards a certain spot in mid-air and gave a nod. An invisible drone that had been floating there stopped observing them and moved on, and Jake also felt the attention of dozens of other similar attentions leaving him. Arnold sure had some protection set up in the Fort from the looks of it.

"What do you say?" Jake asked.

"It is... large. So many humans in one place, yet all of them are so weak. The weak are protected by the strong. Hunting others is disallowed, too, right? Doesn't that mean most who live here are creators and not fighters?" she asked curiously.

"It is mostly creators, but remember they are not to be underestimated. Within that metal dome is one of the most dangerous humans on Earth, and he is a pure creator," Jake explained as he pointed out Arnold's mad scientist lair.

"A strong construction, the metal looks nearly as resilient as my scales," she said, impressed. Not realizing that it said more about her damn scales than a giant dome of metal. The worst part was that Jake also estimated it to be the truth, if not an understatement to praise Arnold.

"Just don't begin to go around destroying stuff to test that out," Jake joked.

"I would never!" Scarlett said with much indignation as she shook her head and tried to raise her hands, but her movement made her aware she was still holding onto Jake's hand, making her quiet down and look at the ground.

Jake just shook his head and softly let go of her hand. "Let's head back to Haven, okay?"

She stared at this hand with disappointment for a moment before nodding. "If that is what the Chosen wants."

Will really have to work on that attitude before we get to the Order, Jake thought but didn't say much as he headed out of the Fort with Scarlett. The two of them flew, and Jake had to admit that even with him using wings and Scarlett just flying with regular energy manipulation, she was still far faster than him. He didn't doubt that she could destroy pretty much any human settlement on Earth if she so desired.

Once they made their way back to Haven, Jake led Scarlett toward the lodge. Miranda and the others were still stuck in the office discussing stuff, so he would have to leave her alone for a bit with his banana tree-that-wasn't-a-tree.

"Can you wait here for a while?" Jake asked her once they made it to the lodge.

Scarlett looked disappointed again but still looked curiously around, prompting Jake to explain a bit about where they were.

"This is my lodge and pretty much my home on Earth. It's where I first started to live after I returned from the Tutorial, and it has a lot of sentimental value," Jake explained.

Scarlett's eyes opened wide as she seemed to look at the lodge with far different eyes. She closely studied everything but soon noted something. "Someone dared break the Chosen's table!?"

Jake cringed a bit and scratched his head. "An... accident happened. Anyway, see you in a bit!"

With a jump, Jake headed toward the sky to gather even more beast friends. Sylphie and family were all up there, and while Sandy was probably nowhere close, he had a strong feeling they could get to him pretty damn fast. To make sure his sandworm friend wasn't too slow, he took out the weird egg-that-wasn't-an-egg and infused some energy into it during his ascent. Once he felt like Sandy had noticed, he stopped and stored the egg away again.

Finally, he contacted a certain someone to set up a meeting. Jake reached out mentally as the divine connection descended.

"Well, well, well, I guess a congratulation is in order, revered World Leader of Earth," Villy joked first thing. "I can't even begin to tell you how proud I am from seeing you move up in the world and become a proper politician."

"Fuck off," Jake joked back. "I guess I should also say I am proud of you for holding back your curiosity and not contacting me right after my most recent vision into your controversial past."

"No need to give me credit; I just had more important things to do. I was actually doing alchemy, you know? Duskleaf is over the moon," Villy said, clearly grinning on the other side.

"Funny, because in this vision, you were also doing alchemy and being rather shit at it. Couldn't even make a health potion," Jake mocked the poor Primordial.

"Hey, my failures pathed the way to greatness," Villy took it in strides as they finally got down to business. "So, another one of these World Congresses is over with. Anything worth sharing?"

"Well, we got this upcoming final trial thing..."

Jake began to explain the second vote in detail, pretty much just reading what the system messages said. The Prima Guardian would appear in five years, but as they both interpreted it, then they only really had to fight the Prima within ten. Five or ten years wasn't a lot of time, but it also wasn't a little. He did wonder about one thing, though...

"Do you think this Prima Guardian will be B-grade?" Jake asked curiously.

"If it is, your entire planet is doomed, and you may as well bail on it now," Villy mocked him back. "Even with Nevermore, reaching B-grade or a level where you can hunt B-grades within five or even ten years

is utterly unfeasible. The time you can spend in Nevermore is still limited, and even if you did choose to just rush levels, you would be hit hard by diminishing returns. If you did somehow manage to make it to a level of power where you could fight B-grades in time, it would be with a shitty foundation and sorely lacking Records for a C-grade. So, no, at most, this Prima Guardian will be in the later stages of C-grade. I have never heard of any B-grade in any of these initiation events appearing within a decade.”

Jake took it all in and nodded in understanding, but he did bite onto one thing: “Are the diminishing returns really that bad? Isn’t it only really a thing if you hunt a lot of the same kind of enemy or if the fights get too easy? I haven’t noticed it otherwise, I don’t think.”

“It is bad, yes. So far, you have not really had many issues with it, sure, but that doesn’t mean it won’t be in the future. For the Tutorial, it is by design not a problem, and after returning to Earth, you have had a natural and balanced approach. If you had decided to go dungeon hunting in rapid succession after you cleared that one below your city, or maybe went in to explore the forest right away, you would have gained some more levels, yes, but soon you would find the levels just stopped coming all-together or it would get to the point where you could kill a thousand beasts higher level than you and still not level up. It happens to many who try to rush their levels and not focus on other things. In fact, it happens to everyone to some degree as it kicks in after a singular kill granting experience. You can alleviate this issue with qualitative upgrades along the way, like skill upgrades, but it can only do so much. The best thing to do is simply wait and focus on other pursuits. Even beasts have to do this, hence why they rarely hunt but instead consume natural treasures to slowly progress or work on improving other qualitative aspects of themselves. Ah, but I would note that there are windows of sorts. At the start of any grade is one such window where you can do a shitload of hunting without running into any noteworthy issues,” Villy explained as the great god of exposition he was.

“Huh. I assume that last part is why a lot of the Nevermore stuff is at early C-grade only?” Jake asked.

“Exactly,” Villy confirmed. “It is a great chance to get some solid levels under your belt for all of you Earthlings. Shit, it may even be expected by the system that you will go to Nevermore and gain levels to face this Prima Guardian thing.”

"Aight. Two more things," Jake added. "First, do you think this event is part of Ell'Hakan and Yip's plan?"

"When?" Villy asked a bit teasingly.

"When what?"

"When do you ask if it became a part of their plan? If you mean before the World Congress, then no. No one knew what event would take place. If you ask about right now, then yes, it will certainly be factored into their schemings. That is the hallmark of any good plan: adaptability. You do not expect everything to go flawlessly, but adapt and reconfigure the plan to still reach an acceptable outcome," Villy explained. "Now, what was your second question?"

"Eh, could you help contact that Karroch god for me so I can find the whale he blessed? I want to talk to it about potentially being in the council," Jake asked.

"You want me to reach out to some weak unaffiliated god and ask him for a favor? To be the one who approaches him first, laying down my pride?" Villy asked in disdain.

"Or send someone else?" Jake scratched his head. "Or a letter?"

"A possibility," Villy said teasingly. "But I must actually hand it to this Karroch. Out of all the gods not close to me, he is probably the one who knows most about our relationship just from the fact that he was in charge of your Tutorial. His plan of trying to help you to get in my good graces is quite well thought out."

"Is it working?" Jake teased back.

"A little. I tend to not be a fan of beastmasters, if I am perfectly honest. He was very unpopular before due to having made quite a few enemies, especially the Brimstone Hegemon, who I happened to kill. He should be able to find other Pantheons who want him, but I guess I can reach out with an olive branch for my dear Chosen and offer him a job. From what I saw, he at least seemed like one of the less shitty beastmasters around," he graciously said.

"Thank you, oh my ever-benevolent Patron," Jake answered with much reverence.

"Yeah, fuck you, and see you at the Order soon!" Villy finished as the connection was cut promptly.

Jake just smirked as he kept flying until he finally reached far enough up for C-grades to live.

He could get Sylphie and family on the way down once he had gathered Sandy, as he had a strong feeling making them wait for him wasn't gonna work out well. Sylphie was not known to be the most patient of birds.

However, it appeared the choice was not his to make as he felt the green bird approach from afar, likely dragging her parents along based on her slower speed. Jake had stopped just at the C-grade cloud layer and sat himself down on a platform of mana in mid-air as he stared out into the clouds. He saw movement in the distance but didn't bother with beasts unless they decided to mess with him first.

Minutes passed as Sylphie grew closer. She had been quite a bit away and wasn't in a rush, seemingly even taking breaks – or having fights – along the way. He also got the feeling that Sandy was fast on their way, quite a lot faster than the hawks could possibly travel.

Smiling a bit to himself, Jake decided to meditate a bit as he waited for the beasts to arrive. Hopefully, they would get along.

Chapter 574 - A Friend Of A Friend Is A Rival

They did not get along.

Well, more accurately, Sylphie seemed to not get along with Sandy in the slightest. She zoomed around the giant worm, making angry noises as her blades of wind tried to harm the giant worm while Sandy, in turn, just laughed.

“He he, the little bird tickles!”

Jake just shook his head and smiled. Sylphie probably could do some real damage if she wanted, but she at least had enough awareness to hold back. Then again, Sandy could also just leave in a heartbeat if Sylphie got a bit too much.

Hawkie and Mystie just stared at the giant worm that wriggled in the air from the constant assault of the peak D-grade hawk. An assault that would tear most D-grades to shreds in seconds, even if it was just Sylphie playing.

“Hi hi,” Sandy still laughed as they asked. “So... so you said I can now go anywhere? I did feel something when you focused real hard before.”

“That is how things should be,” Jake answered. “Give it a go?”

“Sure!”

In the next moment, Sandy disappeared, leaving an even angrier Sylphie behind to miss her blows. Jake frowned as he felt the ripples of space from where the giant worm had just been. A moment later, Sandy popped their head out of the clouds below. “It works!”

Jake opened his mouth to speak but ended up just shaking his head again. “Let’s visit Haven then. There is someone else I want you both to meet.”

He spoke telepathically out loud so both the hawks and Sandy could hear it, even if he knew Sandy could also hear him if he spoke normally. Sylphie, hearing this, looked at Sandy with a challenging gaze before flying towards Jake with great speed, right into his arms. Jake reacted on instinct and caught her as she nuzzled up to his chest and got herself comfortable, still throwing looks at Sandy.

“I think your bird is jealous,” Sandy joked with him. “Ah, but I get it! Wind magic is kind of just worse space magic, isn’t it? Must feel inferior. Poor thing.”

Sylphie took great offense to this as she screeched. “Ree! Ree!”

“Oh, you got super wind? Well, I got super cosmic space! No! Genesis cosmic space!”

Sylphie momentarily looked taken aback but soon retaliated. "Ree!"

This time Sandy seemed to have taken a hit as Sylphie brilliantly argued that space was just boring wind, and as her wind was kind of green, it was superior to space magic in all ways as space didn't have a color. An argument Jake had no idea even made sense. Especially as Sandy then began to argue that colors actually made things worse...

Which just made even less sense as Sandy had no eyes and couldn't see colors.

I may have made a mistake, Jake realized as he led the two arguing beasts down toward his lodge. He did notice one issue there, though. Sandy was a bit... big. Could probably find a place to lay in the valley, but it would be problematic to bring them around anywhere.

Jake voiced his concern, which Sylphie just took as ammunition to argue she was superior. However, this time around, she had to admit defeat.

"Oh yeah! Well, space magic is so cool it can do stuff like this!"

In an instant, Sandy's body began to shrink. Jake felt the intense movements of space mana doing the work, and Jake knew that Sandy technically wasn't getting smaller; they just compressed the space around themselves and created a pocket of sorts. Jake knew that a good wave of destructive mana would destroy this technique, and it probably also took quite the upkeep, but he nevertheless gave Sandy a thumbs up.

Sylphie tried to show off as she tried to puff herself up by breathing in as much as she could, trying to make herself look bigger to prove she could also grow in size, ultimately just making her look silly. Sandy laughed in triumph as a worm, now about the size of a large horse, flew down next to him. Quite a bit slower than before, mind you. This only hammered home that the impromptu shrinking technique had little to no practical application outside of fitting into spaces Sandy couldn't before.

Soon the valley entered their sight, and Jake frowned as he didn't see Scarlett anywhere. Upon landing, he also didn't see her anywhere within the house. Jake wondered if she had gone to explore the laboratory below the lodge. Rather than wondering, Jake closed his eyes and activated tracking as well as just his usual sensing abilities.

She went down to the biodome?

He wondered what had attracted her there as Jake motioned for the group of birds and worm to follow. On the way, Sylphie managed to zoom over and swipe a newly-formed banana, making Jake shake his head at the audacity of these fruit thieves.

They quickly went down and into the cave, which Sandy commented felt very nice and familiar. Once a sandworm, always a sandworm, it seemed. Jake felt Scarlett ahead, and upon entering the biodome, he saw her walking behind a large troll that motioned to different plants with three smaller trolls following behind.

"What you doing?" Jake asked once he got closer.

Scarlett turned around and bowed, with Rick also turning and doing a big wave.

"I was simply receiving teachings from Sir Rick," Scarlett said. "He attends the garden of the Chosen, does he not?"

"That he does, and he is doing a damn good job, too," Jake said with a smile and gave Rick a big thumbs-up. Rick mimicked Jake and did a thumbs-up back with an even bigger smile.

Jake wasn't lying, either. He really liked the biodome. Did he actually use the garden down there? No, not really. In fact, he had kind of forgotten about it and all of his plans for it, including the artificial sun he wanted to install and all that jazz.

At least Jake now realized that maybe that sun would have been a bad idea, as Rick seemed to do best with underground plants anyway. However, even if Jake didn't use the underground garden much, it didn't make it useless. He could always use what grew there to sell or maybe to help train new alchemists or something. Or, well, to just have Rick have a nice play to live and enjoy life.

"Ree!" Sylphie finally made herself known. Not that Scarlett hadn't noticed the entourage, which consisted of three hawks and a large floating worm. Sylphie seemed to have found yet another rival as she stared up at Scarlett, who stared back.

For a moment, Jake got the feeling that Scarlett was jealous of Sylphie? He looked down at the hawk cradled in his arms, not sure why she would.

"Greetings, hawk of wind," Scarlett said, also looking at Hawkie, Mystie, and Sandy. "Hawk of lighting, of mysticism, and worm of... space?"

“Eh, acceptable assessment,” Sandy answered. “Nice to meet you too, white snake!”

Hawkie and Mystie both regarded Scarlett with apprehension as they felt her power. As a mid-tier C-grade, she was by far the strongest among them, and they all knew it. If she was an enemy, they would all be in deep shit, with even Sandy having difficulties. If anyone could get away, it would be the worm, though.

“Anyway, I guess I should introduce you all...”

Jake did the polite thing and had all his beast friends get to know each other. Rick also joined in, very interested in having guests. He even brought over some interesting-looking fruits Jake did not recognize but that tasted extremely good.

On a side note, then no one mentioned that Sandy also happened to be the Chosen of Snappy, or the Boundless Hydra, as fancy people called him. Not doing so was probably a good idea as Jake was entirely uncertain how Scarlett would react, and it would also ruin one of the best things Jake had seen in a while...

A worm, a snake, and a hawk arguing which race was best. Scarlett argued snakes were just better worms, Sandy vehemently disagreed and came up with weird arguments for worms being the best, and Sylphie kept screeching how hawks were the “bestest.”

Hawkie and Mystie even backed up their daughter with information on how birds, hawks included, actually hunted both worms and snakes before the system. Scarlett, however, also had memories of before the system and talked about how snakes ate the eggs of stupid birds who just left them lying around... With Sandy then saying that worms didn’t care as worms just ate anything, thus proving they were the best beasts in existence.

Now, it was only after Jake gathered all these beasts together he finally got around to asking a quite pertinent question: Why?

Why had he gathered them all in Haven? Scarlett was to bring her to the Order, but did he need to call for Sandy and allow the worm to travel into human territory? Well, no, he didn't have to. Sandy probably wouldn't even like being in human territory due to the lack of tasty things to eat.

So, why? The simple answer was just that Jake had wanted to. He wanted to, at the very least, give the beasts the freedom to go wherever they wanted. It was funny how his mind had instantly made granting them more freedom of movement a priority despite the lack of practical merit.

Also... he had to admit seeing them all like this was amusing. Sylphie had long left his arms to fly around and argue louder while chasing Sandy. Scarlett, in turn, tried really hard to look dignified while three kid trolls poked her and wanted to touch her snakeskin dress.

Eventually, they did get tired of their squabbles, and Jake could finally get to the important part after they at least chimed down a little.

"Scarlett and I will be headed to the Order of the Malefic Viper, and while we are going, I would at least like to offer you all the opportunity to go with," Jake said to the group.

"Meh, I'm good here, still stuff to eat," Sandy instantly shut it down. "And the many-headed guy says that staying on Earth is also all good, so I stay."

Rick shook his head, understanding the sentiment but seemingly happy where he was. Hawkie and Mystie also declined, something Jake had expected.

“Ree!” Sylphie also explained, expertly outlining why she wouldn’t go.

“Guess it will just be us going then, Scarlett,” Jake smiled at the snake girl.

“Yes!” She nodded happily. “I once more thank the Chosen for giving me this-”

“But before that, we must work on that,” Jake interrupted her.

“Work on what?” Scarlett asked, confused and nervous.

“You see... I am hiding that I am the Chosen at the Order for several reasons, so you need to not publicly recognize me as such. To not slip up by accident, it would be best if you got used to calling me something else. Something less... formal,” Jake said.

“I... I could use My Excellence?” Scarlett tried, though it looked to hurt her to use such an “informal” term.

“Yeah... again, some problems there. It wouldn’t make any sense. We both got a Blessing, and the one I am hiding my True Blessing to look like is not that high, so you speaking to me like an authority makes little sense,” Jake said, scratching the back of his head.

Scarlett looked lost for words, just staring at him.

“It would be best if you could just call me by my name-“

He saw the poor snake girl’s head turn red, and her eyes went wide as she looked just about to melt down.

“-or maybe just call me Lord Thayne still?” Jake tried to save it.”

After a while, Scarlett collected herself. “I...”

“Heh! Silly snake! Hey, Jake, she sure is bad at using names, right Jake? You see, Jake and I are friends, so I can call him Jake, and he can call me Sandy!” the cosmic worm clearly bragged to Scarlett while wriggling proudly.

Scarlett clenched her fists. “I- I can also call him...Ja... Lord Thayne!”

It looked like merely uttering the sentence had taken more energy than slaying a hundred C-grades for the poor snake girl. She looked nervously at Jake, who just smiled at her while mentally giving Sandy a high-five for the assist. Not that he was sure Sandy had intended to help and not just make fun of Scarlett.

“Should we get going then?” Jake asked.

Scarlett nodded with delight as Sandy also decided to follow them. Sylphie quickly headed off again with her parents, only telling Jake that she wanted to evolve soon but wanted to “make better friends with the wind first.”

Rick, of course, stayed in his cave. He was a cave troll, after all. A cave troll gardener close to C-grade.

Jake did not need to say goodbye to anyone else. Primarily because he could just head home within five or ten minutes if need be.

The trip back to the Mangrove was fast and easy, and they quickly headed down to the formation below the Mangrove where the snake Scarlett called Old Grumpy was still hard to work. Sandy commented on the way how funny teleportation circles were while at the same time talking about how easy it would be to mess with them.

Once they made it down to the large underground tunnel, however, Sandy shut up. The Genesis Cosmic Worm looked lost as they stared at the runes on the walls and began to move around.

“This is... awesome,” Sandy said, wriggling closer to a specific wall with a bunch of runes. “So cool! Oh! This one does that? Wha... wait... ah! Yeah, that makes sense... but why does the dust move like...”

The worm was utterly engrossed as Old Grumpy made his way over. “I greet the Chosen and the Mistress. Have you come to make use of the teleporter?”

Jake nodded. "That we have. You said I was ready, right?"

"Indeed! Please follow me... but what is that creature you brought along?" Old Grumpy asked.

Said worm whipped around as fast as a super-shrunk space worm could. "Hi! I am Sandy! Did you make this place?"

The old snake considered the worm for a moment before bowing. "I cannot take credit for such a feat; it is all through the guidance of the Malefic One. It gladdens me to encounter one who surpasses myself. May I know if thee have any criticisms?"

"I wanted to ask you for stuff!" Sandy responded in a very happy tone.

"Let's get us teleported, and then you two can chat, eh?" Jake asked with a smile, happy to see Sandy able to get along with another beast.

"As the Chosen wills," Old Grumpy answered and led them to the central chamber.

Once they stood on it, the old snake did some stuff, and Jake felt the formation hum to life. Sandy looked on interested during it all and even made some small comments here and there.

The connection to the first universe through the void formed and strengthened as Jake felt his True Blessing and his potent karmic connection to the Malefic Viper function as the catalyst to allow the teleportation.

He reached out and held Scarlett's hand to make sure she was brought along. Just as they were about to be swept away, Jake heard Sandy make one last comment:

"Oh! It uses the True Blessing! Does that mean I could use it with my True Blessing from the Boundless Hydra after some modifications?"

And Jake nearly broke his hand from Scarlett tensing up as they teleported back to the Order.

Chapter 575 - Back To School Season

Man, who would have ever thought that one could miss school? He even leaned into tropes by bringing a transfer student along...

A transfer student that was frozen in panic even as she and Jake appeared in the grassy area outside of his way too large mansion in the Order of the Malefic Viper. Jake's hand was squeezed so hard he had no way of releasing it as poor Scarlett tried to process everything.

"I... is... is the worm the...?" Scarlett stammered out nervously.

"Chosen of Snappy? Yep," Jake confirmed casually. "Ah, but keep that a secret too. I haven't really discussed it with Sandy, but we may as well keep it hidden."

“Wi... will-“

“No, Sandy does not give a flying fuck about any kind of perceived disrespect or whatever,” Jake answered, already knowing what the poor snake girl wanted to ask. Spending so much time with Miranda really hadn’t done her much good on that front as she now knew far more about the Order and the structure, as well as how important of a character the Lord Protector was.

Scarlett looked like she was about to ask more as movement came from within the mansion. Jake looked over and smiled as a familiar face peeked her head out. The elf’s eyes opened wide as she saw him.

“Lord Thayne!” she yelled and quickly ran out and over to him. Jake noticed her level had grown yet again and quite fast too.

[Elf – lvl 163]

“It’s been too long,” Jake waved at her.

Scarlett also finally let go of his hand as she stared at the elven woman running over with a frown. Meira barely seemed to notice the snake girl as she stopped a few steps from Jake.

“Welcome back to the Order, Lord Thayne!” she said with a deep bow and a smile.

Jake smiled as she just stood there. She didn't ask why he had left so suddenly back when Ell'Hakan had invaded but would wait for him to tell her himself. If he wanted to tell her. Coupled with her progress, Jake also saw she had tended to things properly as she looked over to a certain spot on the lawn. Quite a large spot as the grass had been cleared, and a large formation was made instead with an object placed in the middle – a large boulder of sorts with holes in.

It was the Pollendust Bee Queen ritual circle. Jake had not forgotten it, and he was glad to see that neither had Meira.

"Are things progressing well with the circle?" Jake asked Meira as he looked at it.

"Yes, my lord! In your absence, I had taken the initiative and acquired some extra cores when I ran out to keep supplying it with energy, and I apologize if that was overstepping," Meira said apologetically.

"You prioritized the ritual; why would that be overstepping?" Jake smiled. The ritual had indeed progressed as he wanted, and with every passing day, the energy within the egg that the boulder housed in its spatially expanded interior grew stronger and stronger. Still dormant, mind you, but Jake was building up to something. He had delayed finishing the ritual and actually awakening the Bee Queen for quite a simple reason: he didn't want a D-grade Queen.

Jake wanted to hatch a C-grade. Insect monsters – or ectognamorphs – were quite a bit different than other monster types, and queens were even more different. They were very much a caste-based race, and Jake wanted a powerful Queen from the get-go. The chances of birthing what the books described as a true "Hive Queen" were low if done through evolution, but Jake believed it was possible to do using this ritual and some special Jake sauce.

He was not ignorant of the effect he apparently had on beasts and monsters. Sylphie and Sandy were proof of what happened when Jake interfered in the evolutionary process, even just by a little. How or why he was like that, he didn't know, but he knew it had to have something to do with his Bloodline.

Anyway, to hatch a C-grade, there were some requirements. The most important of which was the source of energy in the ritual having to be at least of that level, meaning Jake had to at least be C-grade to get the result he wanted. However, it wasn't like he was delaying spawning a C-grade only because he had to wait for his own evolution, as the egg also needed ample time to grow.

Before the egg could even absorb C-grade energy, it needed to grow enough through the absorption of D-grade energy and Records. That is what Jake was currently doing – or had Meira do – and it helped create a powerful foundation. Once it was saturated, Jake could introduce C-grade energy, hopefully leading to a qualitative change and making it into a C-grade egg that Jake could further mutate using Jake Records.

"Thank you, Lord Thayne," Meira still bowed, even if Jake said it was fine. Finally, she turned and looked at Scarlett. "May I know who the guest My Lord has brought along is?"

He felt like she had an odd emphasis on the word "my" but didn't really think about it. He probably misunderstood.

"Scarlett, Meira, Meira, Scarlett," Jake quickly introduced them. "Meira works here and is a friend, and Scarlett is a friend from my home planet that helped me out quite a few times."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," Meira bowed to Scarlett.

Scarlett looked between Jake and Meira before slightly bowing to Meira. "Nice to meet you too."

Jake was happy to see them be polite to each other. Way better than the last time he introduced friends to each other. "Have you been doing well while I was gone?" Jake asked the elf.

"Yes, Lord Thayne. I have attended lessons regularly, and the honored Grand Elder still taught me nearly daily until recently," she answered with a big smile. "The Grand Elder will surely also be happy to welcome you back. However, I have not seen the Grand Elder for the last week as he has been busy assisting the Malefic One, making him leave me with self-study material."

Scarlett perked up at the mention of the Malefic One and looked at Meira again a bit weirdly. Jake butted in to explain. "Meira is getting taught by Duskleaf, the disciple of the Viper."

He had thought that explanation would help, but no. The poor snake girl once again became nervous and bowed. "I apologize for not recognizing the Grand Disciple of the Malefic One."

"Okay, none of that. Use names, you two. Besides, if you join the Order too, I am sure Duskleaf would also give you a few tips here and there," Jake said with a shake of his head. "But first, we have to get you into the Order, of course."

"How would one undertake such an honor?" Scarlett asked with much interest.

"That..." Jake was about to answer when he stopped. He... kind of didn't know? He had joined the Academy of the Order, but, thinking about it, had Jake ever properly joined the Order? What did it even mean to properly join the Order? He knew from Viridia's propaganda lesson that for anyone with a

Blessing, becoming a member was just a formality, so it shouldn't be a challenge. He just wasn't sure how it could be done.

In retrospect, maybe he should have paid more attention during the lesson...

"Do you have any talent in alchemy?" Jake asked her.

"Sadly, this one is only skilled in the cultivation of personal venoms," Scarlett admitted. There was no hint of shame or embarrassment in the statement, though. Which was good, as Jake didn't see it as a demerit either. Being specialized was good.

Jake knew that as a member of the Order, Scarlett would also semi-join the Academy in that she could attend lessons if she wanted. The few combat lessons there were would maybe interest her. It would be a bit like Draskil, who Jake knew wasn't really into any kind of traditional alchemy either.

As he considered how to make her join, Meira spoke up. "My Lord, any official from the Order of the Malefic Viper is capable of initiating new members into the Order, and those with sufficient rank can grant membership without further approval as long as the proper steps are undertaken."

"Oh?" Jake asked, surprised. "Have you been looking into joining the Order?"

"I... had lessons about it," she answered. Jake frowned as he knew from her tone she didn't talk about Academy lessons but those she got before she came to work for Jake. It did make sense, though. Jake remembered the vampire crafter who had helped him upgrade his necklace and her explanation of how she had been a slave once. It made sense that slaves were taught how to potentially stop being slaves and join, at the very least, to give them false hope.

“What do these steps entail?” Jake inquired further.

“Personal approval of a member, signage of a contract with agreed-upon terms, and an evaluation of talent. Usually, a background search will also be done, along with a karmic reading,” Meira dutifully explained. “However, for those with Blessings, none of this is needed besides the contract of terms, and all the contract will entail is that membership remains active as long as the Blessing is not withdrawn or denounced. At least for lower-tier Blessings... I am not sure about the procedures for those with Greater or Divine Blessings, much less a True Blessing.”

Jake nodded. Getting her to join should be easy enough, then. He was also pleasantly surprised by Meira, as getting her to talk so much tended to be damn hard, especially with her not getting nervous. She had spoken with great confidence, and Jake felt oddly proud of her.

“Thanks for the explanation, Meira,” Jake smiled at her and gave her a thumbs-up.

“It... I only did as expected...” she muttered nervously.

And we’re back.

Shaking his head, Jake turned to Scarlett. “Seems like getting you in should be easy enough. Wanna get it fixed right away?”

Jake was not one to delay things, even if he had just returned.

“Yes, please!” Scarlett nodded as if she had just been asked if she wanted a high-tier natural treasure with toxic properties.

Taking out his token, Jake felt how it was now active again after returning. The token did not work on Earth for obvious reasons as it functioned off some grand formation somewhere in the Order, Jake reckoned. He infused energy into it and made a call to someone he hadn’t contracted in a while.

It connected, and he instantly heard her voice.

“Lord Thayne! It has been quite a while since anyone heard anything from you. Is everything all right? Did you enter secluded training? Ah, sorry for blabbering; I assume you contacted me for a reason. What can I do for you?” Irin the succubus asked. She was an official of the Order and the first one Jake thought to contact. He did also have the contact information of the Hall Master, Viridia, but it seemed a bit much to call the CEO of a company with billions of workers to help register a new employee.

“Hey Irin, been a while, yeah. And everything is fine; I just had to deal with some issues back on Earth. An enemy Chosen thought it was a good idea to invade the planet and raise a ruckus, so I had a civil war and an asshole Chosen to deal with before I could return. It is fixed for now, but still annoying. Anyway, the reason I contacted you was that I brought along a friend from my home planet who would like to join the Order of the Malefic Viper. She got a Blessing, so it should be possible, right?” Jake asked her while also explaining what he had been up to. It just seemed nice to tell her after he had gone AWOL.

After a brief period of silence, she responded.

"That sounds... way above my pay grade. The Chosen stuff. When it comes to joining the Order, it is nothing more than a meager formality only simplified further by her already having a Blessing. Would it be possible for me to come by?" Irin asked.

"Sure thing," Jake approved.

"I will be around in a few minutes. Good to hear from you again, Lord Thayne," Irin finished. He disconnected the call and turned back to Scarlett.

"I will have a friend come by in a bit to help you join," Jake said with a smile.

"Thank you!" Scarlett bowed once more.

Jake went over to do a quick check-up of the Bee Queen formation while he waited and made sure nothing had gone awry. As he analyzed the formation, he noticed a few spots where it felt... lacking. Jake was not sure that was wrong, but he knew there were faint flaws or at least places with room for improvement. He made mental notes to address this later and once more thanked his high Perception for allowing him to notice the problem. Without the stat growth he had experienced since he upgraded the formation last, he would not have noticed these minor elements at all.

As he was still looking things through, a new figure appeared. Jake instantly felt the familiar yet slightly foreign aura that washed out from this arrival. He looked over and saw someone he clearly recognized as Irinixis, but there were some slight differences. The horns on her head had grown slightly and now curved like that of a goat, though they were still small, and her body had some... changes. It was easy to know what had happened.

[Demon – lvl ???]

She had naturally evolved to C-grade. The evolution had also not only led to growth in power but also in certain other areas. The red dress with a low-cut front showed off these features quite nicely, and she flashed a radiant smile when she saw Jake while bowing deeply, only emphasizing her improved assets further.

Jake did not have a hard time figuring out why succubi were quite a popular race among the humanoids in the multiverse. Not gonna lie; she is fucking hot, Jake admitted. She also was before, but damn, had the evolution done work.

“Thank you for calling upon me, Lord Thayne,” Irin greeted him. He also noticed how she threw quick glances at both Meira and Scarlett. Both glaring back at her.

“Thanks for coming,” Jake answered with a smile. “And congratulations on the evolution.”

“I should be the one thanking you for my recent advances,” Irin answered happily. “The opportunities our relationship have offered me are hard to comprehend, and even without those, the Records alone simply from knowing you allowed me smooth sailing. So, please do call me if you ever need anything.”

After getting done thanking each other, Jake finally got back on topic. “This here is Scarlett, a friend, and ally from my home planet. Could you give me a hand and get her into the Order? Oh, while you’re at it... Meira, what do you say about also trying to join the Order?”

Meira seemed taken aback. “I believe that is premature, Lord Thayne...”

Jake frowned a bit, not sure why it would be, but still shrugged. No rush. "Okay, just Scarlett then."

"It shall be done swiftly," Irin said as she greeted Scarlett. "My name is Irinixis; I am from the Humanoid Resources Department in the Order of the Malefic Viper. The Chosen alone referring you to join makes all of this simply a formality, but I would still offer you to go through the usual evaluation if you so desire."

"Oh, a dungeon again?" Jake asked curiously.

"Indeed," Irin confirmed.

"Should definitely go for it," Jake approved.

"Then I shall take part in this evaluation," Scarlett nodded.

Irin smiled at Scarlett as Jake considered aloud: "Should I also go for reevaluation at some point? Maybe at C-grade?"

"If you desire to, Lord Thayne. However, realistically it will be done for nothing more than vanity, as all the additional bonuses awarded from a better token are meaningless to you. Getting a dark green token would only result in more attention being placed on you," Irin explained.

“Maybe I shouldn’t then,” Jake muttered.

The demoness smiled and turned to Scarlett again. “Do you wish to begin right away or delay?”

“I wish to join as soon as possible!” Scarlett nodded enthusiastically.

“Then let’s go.”

With that, Jake sent off Scarlett and Irin right away, Irin making sure to give a low bow to show off before leaving. Meira looked as they left and threw Jake a few questioning gazes but didn’t say anything. Jake decided to just initiate the conversation himself.

“Let’s head inside, and you can give me the low-down of what has happened around here recently,” Jake said to Meira.

“Yes!” the elf agreed as the two of them headed inside.

As it turns out, not much had happened, at least not on a large scale. The entire thing with Ell’Hakan and Yip was clearly not knowledge spread openly, as it likely was – as Irin said – above their pay grade. Jake instead mostly heard of how much Meira had been studying and how she was still hanging out with that other elf Izil. The elf and human then divulged into alchemy talks, and Jake had to admit...

It did feel good to be back in such a low-stress environment. Not for too long, though. As in, only for a bit. Jake prepared to get started immediately with his checklist right away once he had caught up with Meira, and for the next two parts, Jake had a feeling he would need to consult his dear Patron god.

Chapter 576 - Not That Dense... Okay, A Little

Irinixis had wondered what had happened for a while after the Chosen had just one day disappeared. She had no way of contracting him as his token was unreachable, meaning he was either dead or not in the Order. She reckoned the latter for obvious reasons.

Her new teacher, the Velvet Mistress, also agreed that nothing would have happened to him. Geniuses did not die that easily, and if he had been gone, people would have learned about it. Irin also knew that the many statues of the Viper spread around the Order would reflect the loss of a Chosen through their aura, proving that he should be fine. Or that the Viper was capable of shrugging off the loss of a Chosen without much care.

Irin naturally hoped the Chosen was fine as he was her golden ticket. She had gotten a new mistress at the peak of S-grade, her status elevated above anything she could ever imagine, and her evolution had even come earlier than she had expected. Irin had always believed she would be able to reach C-grade, even if she didn't always vocalize it. However, she did have fears of how she would make it to C-grade. D-grade was already the end of the line for most, and while C-grade was expected of her due to her heritage and position, no one expected her to ever reach B-grade. Irin hadn't expected to ever get a shot at it either. Yet now... now it didn't seem impossible.

All she had to do was stay in his good graces and, if possible, get even more involved with him, no matter what kind of role she was asked to perform. It was premature, but her ultimate goal was to become his personal liaison between the Order and him. To be someone officially involved and linked to the Chosen and his matters. But, it was hard to get an "in," so for now, she could only try to deepen their personal relationship. One thing she had learned was that the Chosen cared little for decorum or tradition but preferred casual interactions and demeanors.

Her mistress had made her work on being more appealing to the Chosen, which included unlearning many of her old methods. The Chosen did not seem to enjoy the overly subservient types but wanted

someone who treated him far more equally than someone of this status was entitled to. Not too much, though, as Irin still wanted to make it clear she was there to make his life easier while hopefully also being a friendly face.

Anyway, she had worked on this for a long time but had worried as he had not called for her even once. Fortunately, the silence was broken as her token vibrated, and she felt the signature. Elated, she greeted him, and to make it better, he even asked for assistance – even being allowed to make a personal visit.

She had quickly gone and put on some more fitting clothes and got herself ready. The evolution to C-grade had done her many favors if she said so herself, even if the shape of the horns could get a bit annoying and get her hair tangled during showers.

Teleporting to the residence of the Chosen, she was instantly met by two auras surpassing her own. One was from the Chosen, whom she knew, even with her evolution, she stood no chance against. The second one was a female beast who had taken human form and, from the looks of it, was a snake of some kind. Irin also felt the Blessing from the girl and would naturally show the due respect such a thing dictated. Helping her was part of her job and something she would happily do.

However, what she cared most about was the gaze of the Chosen. It lingered for longer than it had to, making Irin very pleased. Still, she had a job to do and showed professionalism despite the gazes of the two other women that were certainly less friendly than the Chosen's. One gaze was from the assigned slave for Lord Thayne called Meira. Irin was a bit surprised he asked if she wanted to join the Order too, indicating he wanted to release her. On-brand based on what Irin had learned of Lord Thayne. If he wanted people to treat him as an equal, the thought of having a slave forced upon him must have been less than ideal. Irin had also learned a bit about Earth from the human called Reika and come to understand a bit of their planet's history – including how slavery was not popular in their part of the world. Downright hated, even.

The other gaze was naturally from the snake woman. A piercing one, Irin had to admit. Luckily she saw neither of them as threats to her goals, even if they were on good terms with Lord Thayne. She also got a feeling that her goals and the goals of the slave elf were somewhat similar, if very different in

approach. Both of them wanted to stay integrated with the Chosen, one way or another, to secure their own futures.

With the two girls evaluated, Irin answered some questions and led the prospective member, Scarlett, away. A bow towards the Chosen was only proper, and once more, his gaze lingered for a moment before Irin and the snake girl left. Irin, of course, knew what she was doing.

Was she what humans would call a golddigger? Yes, though the term in the multiverse tended to be parasites for those such as her who forcefully tried to associate themselves with powerful individuals and feed off their Records. She wasn't ashamed of it either.

Lord Thayne wasn't stupid and most certainly not unperceptive. He knew what she was doing and allowed it. If the parasite and target both enjoyed and found benefits in the relationship, it could only be called synergistic, couldn't it?

Finally alone, Jake could relax. Meira had gone off to her own residence to tend to her studies after their lengthy talk, and with Scarlett and Irin also gone, Jake had the main mansion all by himself. Free of the "drama" he had just been a part of, he felt relieved. Jake was a bit dense, sure... but even he could see that the three women were interested in him. Or at least interested in his status.

However, it was honestly easiest to just act like he didn't know. Things were just too complicated. Meira was still his slave, making it break at least a few moral lines to respond to her feelings, and Jake wasn't even sure she actually liked him, even though she thought she did. He had helped her, and she clearly felt indebted to him. Confusing gratitude with stronger emotions was not uncommon at all.

Scarlett was just... no. She reminded Jake of a teenage girl, and she also revered Jake to an unhealthy level. With both her and Meira, the power imbalance in their relationships was all out-of-whacks too. So... yeah, better to just ignore it.

Then there was Irin. That one made felt the most complicated to Jake. So complicated he didn't want to think too much about it but get on with working on his checklist.

Jake had two goals for now. Sagacity of the Malefic Viper and the entire situation with sim-Jake and their joint attempt to create a skill. For both of these, Jake had some issues he needed to overcome. After some consideration, he ultimately decided to take on Sagacity first as he wanted to fully dedicate his attention to the potential mythical skill. Also, the extra Wisdom would be nice.

With no need to delay, he got to work and sat on the sofa in the living room as he leaned back and stared at the ceiling while gathering his thoughts.

He already had some insights into the topic of Sagacity already, especially after the last vision. For a long time, Jake had wondered what the point of the Sagacity skill even truly was. For a good reason too.

[Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – To hold just a fragment of the wisdom of a Primordial is more than most ever achieve. Much less to be personally taught that knowledge directly by the god himself. Allows the Alchemist to peek into a fragment of the Malefic Viper's Records to seek his knowledge. Grants the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper a far better understanding of mana and of most affinities. Allows the Alchemist to make creations he does not have the associated crafting skill for (does not receive stat effectiveness bonuses without associated skill). Passively provides 1 Wisdom per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your search for knowledge be as inexhaustible as the Malefic One.

Sure, it did help Jake in some ways, but it was minimal. It had two primary passive elements: a better understanding of mana and the ability to craft without associated crafting skills. The first part had some value, but it was just a small passive bonus that he barely noticed.

Then there was the thing about not needing a crafting skill. It sounded nice, but... Jake had these crafting skills. He had all he needed, and his evolutions tended to just give the skills if he wanted them or not. Also, if Jake could choose, he would want the crafting skill anyway for the stat effectiveness bonus that Sagacity did not offer.

To summarize, Jake only really got anything out of the extra Wisdom and the mana thing. Which seemed really subpar compared to all his other Malefic Viper Legacy skills.

Okay, there was one final active part of the skill: to peer into the Record Fragment of the Viper. This part had been pretty useful, but... Jake couldn't see why he needed a skill for that. He had stolen the drop of blood without a skill, hadn't he? And he also restrained it within his Soulspace quite easily.

So, to summarize, Jake found little value in the Sagacity skill and even wondered what its primary function was and why the Viper had it, as clearly the blood-peering part was not a part of the Viper's version. At least Jake had wondered this until the latest vision. He had kind of misunderstood the core of Sagacity from the beginning, not realizing that the reality was... the skill wasn't made for the enlightened races. It was made for monsters.

Jake had seen the Viper try and craft without the required crafting skill and seen how difficult it was. It was, without exaggerating, a hundred times harder than crafting with a skill. The Viper had struggled to make health potions even after he found the issue, and that was while in C-grade. Jake could only imagine the pain of having to do this entire process of figuring out a "manual" approach to every new alchemical method. But Jake had a feeling the Viper had done exactly this and then condensed it into this one skill. A skill that was now part of his Legacy and could be obtained or taught to other monsters, allowing them to benefit from his trial and error.

It was a catch-all skill for alchemy crafting. A way for monsters to still be alchemists and compete on a far more equal playing field with the enlightened races. The things about affinities and mana were just passive elements gained from a better understanding of the fundamental principles of how alchemy worked. Or, perhaps, an added bonus as the system knew the significantly reduced value the Sagacity skill had for someone like Jake.

He felt like he was on the right track, but some things still bothered him... and while he tended to prefer to avoid it, he decided to approach the source of the skill itself to confirm his theory.

"Hey, Villy-"

"Yeah?" a voice answered as a smirking god stared straight down at Jake's face, obstructing his vision of the nice ceiling.

"I thought you were busy?" Jake answered without moving.

"I am. That is why you are talking to this avatar and not the real me," Villy said as he jumped over the back of the couch and sat on it. "Can you tell the difference?"

Jake stared at the so-called avatar for a moment and tried to find any indications of it not being the real thing. The aura was vast and powerful as usual, but in its muted state, Jake had a hard time getting a read on it. "No, not really," he admitted.

"No need to be embarrassed, you weren't meant to, and this avatar can exert a good ten percent of my full power if push comes to shove," Villy explained. "But this is not why you asked for me. What seems to trouble my little Chosen this time around? Oh, if it is love advice, then sure, you have fun with the succubus as you are both consenting adults, plus she seems like a fun one, and-"

"I wanted to ask about something with the First Sage," Jake interrupted loudly.

Villy shut up but still smirked. "He didn't strike me as your type, so not love advice, I see. What do you want to know?"

"It is actually more about Sagacity than it is about him, but I have a feeling they are related. Firstly, the name Sagacity was not chosen randomly or decided by the system, was it?" Jake asked.

After a few moments of thinking, the Viper sighed. "No, it was not. As you probably already guessed, then the skill is named after the First Sage. Tell me, what else have you concluded about this peculiar little skill?"

"It was made as a way to allow monsters to do alchemy without the crafting skills by creating one that does it all. It relies on your experiences and what you learned to fill in the gaps left by not having the many alchemical crafting skills," Jake explained.

"Partly accurate. Yes, it is good for monsters and primarily used by them. Shit, Sagacity is one of the main reasons why monsters who specialize in alchemy prefer the Order over other places like the Altmar Empire, and Sagacity is one of the few Legacy skills that can be taught; the Records easily obtained to get the skill during a skill selection. But, you missed that also certain enlightened races with only a profession or a class can make great use of it. Plus, it is a skill tied to my Legacy and not necessarily to the alchemy profession, meaning even those with a profession utterly unrelated to alchemy can get it and become part-time alchemists," Villy corrected Jake.

"Was it yours or the First Sage's idea to make this kind of all-encompassing skill?" Jake asked. He still felt a bit bad about not telling Villy about what he had felt at the end of the last vision, where clearly the First Sage had been aware of him before the Viper knew. Which made Jake wonder if what the Viper had done – learned to craft without a crafting skill – was one of the reasons the First Sage wanted to take him in, to begin with.

"Hm, a bit of both," Villy answered. "He did tell me one of the reasons he wanted to teach me was to also learn from me. He was interested in all sorts of ways one could perform magic without any skill or system assistance, as well as how one could make use of the peculiarities of the system. His teachings were part of the reason I advised you to practice mana the first time we met."

The Viper smiled a bit to himself. "The old man used to have a saying that the experiences gained by he who knows nothing are infinitely more valuable than he who follows a false truth, as only the true essence of reality can be found by an unspoiled mind. In other words, the potential truths one can learn alone without guidance are worth far more than those merely taught. Think of your arcane affinity. If I had told you about how to find an arcane affinity and how you could try and create one, I doubt it would have ever manifested. In some ways, your ignorance led to it appearing, as its very nature is rooted in your basic understanding of mana."

"I do remember you mentioning something like that before," Jake nodded. "But Sagacity strikes me more as a skill that is heavily tied to prior experiences and not new discoveries."

"True, true. Partly," Villy nodded in agreement. "Sagacity is, as you said, the result of a combined effort of the First Sage and me to make a methodology for those who cannot gain the alchemy profession. At least, that was the initial core of the skill, but it has, from there, expanded. The core now revolves around my experience and knowledge more than simply crafting methods. Your version also has some elements related to mana, and you got a drop of blood that contains Records, right? Those are now also tied to it. So, to sum it up for ya, Sagacity is knowledge incarnate."

Jake opened his mouth to ask something but forgot it instantly as a lightbulb went off. "I... think I have an idea what to do..."

"Then my job here is done," Villy smiled.

"May need you for something else if you are up for it later," Jake said.

"Then I guess we will see each other again soon," the Viper answered as he popped out of existence.

Jake didn't delay but instantly got himself comfortable and entered meditation. Once more, Jake felt like he had missed something very obvious...

Chapter 577 - The Library Of A Sage

Alone again, Jake had time to think. As Villy had said, then the core of Sagacity was knowledge, also reflected by it granting Wisdom. Yet Jake had not really received any instinctual knowledge when he got the skill about anything related to alchemy. It did add knowledge through the drop of blood, but Jake didn't count that as it was just another potential source. The knowledge of mana affinities did kind of count, but that was more just another way to identify things... which led to Jake's realization.

Jake had learned a lot since he became an alchemist, especially in recent times after joining the Order. He had gone through so many damn books, studied the drop of blood quite a bit, and eaten like a madman for Palate. Yet, even if he had done all of this, he had not been given a single upgrade to the two skills he had that dealt with alchemical knowledge. Herbology and Toxicology

[Herbology (Common)] – Grants knowledge of herbs found throughout the multiverse. The most numerous source of natural treasures comes in the form of herbs found throughout existence. The knowledge of plants and their effects is, therefore, essential to any alchemist. An alchemist must know what he works with in order to create his products after all. Grants the ability to recognize herbs at a glance and correctly identify their properties.

[Toxicology (Uncommon)] – The knowledge of all that is toxic. Be able to recognize poisonous substances at a glance and correctly identify their properties. To concoct the deadliest toxins, one must know what to mix after all.

Jake had these skills since the very beginning of his journey as an alchemist, neither of them upgrading or even showing signs of getting upgraded. Not getting one upgraded in E-grade was kind of understandable, but how could he not have upgraded one of them at D-grade? Especially Herbology that was stuck at common rarity? Toxicology, too, should have at least shown some signs of upgrading. That, or Jake should have at least an idea of how to improve them.

Now, Jake realized that these two would never upgrade. Not because Jake sucked so bad at learning things about toxic materials or herbs, but because the Records required to upgrade the skills went somewhere else: Sagacity of the Malefic Viper.

The Legacy of the Malefic Viper was a complete system for alchemy. With those nine skills alone, a monster or even a member of the enlightened could become an exceptional alchemist in no way inferior to more traditional ones. At least not when it came to poisons. To achieve this, the usual skills alchemists got from their profession had to also exist in some shape or form within the Legacy, including the knowledge-related skills that allowed him to know what he was looking at. Would it not only make sense for Sagacity to be where this knowledge was focused?

In fact, wasn't this logic also true with other passive skills or even active skills Jake had? Cultivate Toxin was already heavily related to Palate of the Malefic Viper, and Jake could also see Touch be related to Alchemist's Purification... maybe even the Alchemical Flame, though Jake had a suspicion that one was a bit different. Stuff for later. Focus on Sagacity now.

Jake believed that Toxicology and Herbology had both become obsolete, yet they still remained skills. Which led him to the most obvious conclusion: have Sagacity absorb them. He had tried two skills seemingly unrelated to the Malefic Viper influence and even formed a Malefic Viper skill before, so he knew it was possible. One had to remember that Sense of the Malefic Viper had come from the merging of Sense Herb and Sense Poison all the way back in G-grade. However, back then, it had happened by

itself, making Jake think there was more to upgrading Sagacity than merely merging the skills. Or maybe he didn't know how to merge them?

As he kept considering the skill, he went in the direction of what Sagacity was linked to. Sagacity was a bit like the focal point of all knowledge his other skills gave him. It was fed by Palate and Sense all the time. All he learned went into the Records of Sagacity, but also things he didn't know went into it. That is when another light bulb went off.

Back when Herbology and Toxicology had been gained, another skill had been affected. A skill that was even mentioned in both their descriptions: Identify. Jake slapped his knee and grinned as he activated his Path of the Heretic Chosen skill. He hadn't been sure, but the system thought he had considered the skill enough to be granted a vision.

Do you wish to experience the Legacy of the Malefic Viper? Uses remaining: 1

It was the final use, and Jake smiled to himself as he was whisked away.

"The system is limitless in possibilities. Even an immortal could spend an infinite lifetime to try and learn everything, yet after countless years the immortal would only come to learn that he has not progressed at all. For as he learns, new knowledge appears. This very same folly is what you are pursuing right now," the old man said with a smile.

In front of him sat the Malefic Viper, deep in thought, as he considered the words. Jake had appeared as usual, and predictably, he had popped in with the First Sage present. Jake was sure by now that the system wanted him to keep seeing this old man... that, or he had so much influence on Villy's formative years that seeing him was unavoidable.

"So you are saying I need to change course?" Villy asked with a deep frown.

"You misunderstand, for omniscience does exist; it is merely reserved for the system itself. It knows all, and sometimes the key is not to learn everything yourself but find a way to make the system give you the knowledge you require. To prove yourself worthy and entitled to the knowledge you demand. Your approach so far has been good, but it is not sustainable. You seek to learn of all herbs or toxins yourself, developing general skills based on your experiences, but as you progress, you will come to learn how unfeasible this is," the First Sage continued.

Once more, the Viper was deep in thought. After a bit, he voiced his considerations.

"I do see the problem... trying to design a method for every kind of potential product and with every single combination of ingredients is impossible. Just learning enough about different ingredients is utterly unfeasible..." the Viper spoke.

Jake nodded along as he knew the direction it was going. He saw on the face of the First Sage that he was also hoping for the Viper to realize what he meant. It felt good that Jake knowing he had figured it out before the snake god. Second time in a row too.

The Viper asked a few more minor questions as he slowly understood. With realization, his eyes opened wide. "Will the system allow such a thing? No... will it actively help to do something like that?"

"Never has the system demanded perfection, only adequate proof that you are qualified. Invisible thresholds are in place for us to discover, and all it requires of you is to pass this threshold, and it shall assist you," the First Sage answered.

As for what they were talking about? Well, system assistance, or more accurately, to have the skill recognized as what the Viper wanted it to be. He had hit the nail on its head already: manually improving everything was simply impossible.

When Jake used Brew Potion, the system assistance from the skill always did the same thing – at least if one focused on the outcome. However, in reality, its effects varied for each individual craft. No two ingredients were one hundred percent identical, sometimes it took a millisecond later to heat something, or perhaps a single more point of mana was injected. All of this led to variation, and with each variation, the minor corrections from system assistance varied in turn.

This is to say that if Villy wanted to make Sagacity based solely on his own experiences, then it would never work as he naturally couldn't have an identical experience as anyone else. No, what Sagacity – his current version, too – did was adopt the functionality of the usual system assistance. Because the system obviously knew exactly what corrections had to be made.

As for how the Viper had realized this goal... well, Jake guessed it still had to do with a shitload of trial and error and learning how to craft a myriad of different things manually. Then, at some point, he had passed a threshold, as the First Sage said, and the gaps had been filled in.

Of course, none of this related to the upgrade Jake wanted. This was just Jake finally understanding how his current version worked. However, realizing how it worked with the crafting skills allowed Jake to understand that the same concept applied to the alchemical knowledge skills.

Almost as if the old man had known of Jake's thoughts, he continued.

"The same is true when it comes to the knowledge of what. Learning the how of crafting only matters after you know what you can craft with and become able to recognize potential. Right now, you use

ingredients you have consumed countless of, or at most variants. You know them, but what about when you encounter something new? You eat it, I would reckon, but is that truly the best approach to learning even just the basics?" the First Sage asked.

Jake barely had to listen anymore as he already knew what he wanted to do and what direction he wanted to take the skill. He had not even reached the crucial part of the vision yet, where he merged with the Viper, but had already begun his own process of upgrading the skill.

Merging Herbology and Toxicology into Sagacity was a given. Keeping the crafting skills separate had a purpose, at least for now, so he had no interest in merging those, but the knowledge-related skills had no extra bonus. They just passively gave knowledge that he could access through Identify.

So, if he combined the two, it only made sense for Identify to also pull from Sagacity. It perhaps already did; Jake had no way of being sure. Jake reckoned it did pull from Sagacity, as Jake guessed one of the reasons he even got the skill selection option was because of the Trial of Myriad Poisons, which gave him a lot of knowledge through Palate. An event that should, in retrospect, have resulted in at least Herbology evolving.

But... Jake was not satisfied with merely pulling on Sagacity when he used Identify. The First Sage talked about pulling knowledge directly from the system. The Sagacity skill already did this in his usual form, but Jake did not have the usual form. He had a bastardized version tied to a drop of blood from the Viper. A drop of blood that Jake controlled inside his Soulspace. So, why couldn't Jake pull on this drop too? Link himself more with it and extract knowledge in a similar fashion to the old Herbology and Toxicology did?

Jake split his attention between his own internal thoughts and plans and the conversation between the Viper and the First Sage. The old man spoke more words of wisdom as the Viper worked on properly creating the Sagacity skill for perhaps the very first time. It likely hadn't been called Sagacity back then, but Jake knew it was a massive undertaking, nevertheless.

It was creating a framework. An entire methodology separate from traditional alchemy, all boiled into a single skill. Some corners had to be cut – such as the lack of stat effectiveness bonuses – and several other minor things here and there. This first version would be a far cry from what Sagacity was during the ninety-third era, but it was a monumental feat for a C-grade.

Such a monumental feat that the Viper obviously struggled. He had a hard time getting it all together and creating a framework capable of facilitating such a massive undertaking. He had clearly worked on it a lot, but even as the time in the vision sped up, he lacked progress. Days turned to weeks, weeks to months, and months to years. The Viper was unmoving for more than a decade as the First Sage never left his side. He remained there to answer any questions the Viper possibly had, even if months could pass between each time the Viper exited meditation.

Yet even after this long, the Viper was not done. Frustration began to appear on the future Primordial's face.

"I... It's difficult," the Viper said, shaking his head. "There are too many elements, too much to slot into place..."

"Visualize it," the First Sage said. "A metaphor is there to ease understanding. Simplify elements into a concept you do understand. What does your skill look like in your mind?"

"I..." the Viper said as he frowned, not saying more. It was obvious he wasn't sure where to go or what to do.

The First Sage sighed. "Once. Once I can assist you."

The Viper perked up. "Really, Master?"

"Yes. But only this once," the old man nodded as he stood up. He went over to the Viper and knelt in front of the cross-legged snake in human form. He smiled at his disciple as Villy began to look a bit conflicted. Worried, even.

"I already promised. Now, allow yourself to indulge in creation. Open your mind," the First Sage spoke as he raised a hand... and Jake felt like the world twisted.

He felt something he had only ever felt once more. Like the bounds of reality shifted to allow the impossible through sheer will and enlightenment. The hand gave off an aura that pressured him on a fundamental level as he even felt his heartbeat speed up. There was not a shred of doubt in his mind...

A Transcendence.

Jake had no idea what it did... but he knew he was about to find out. This had to be the most important part of the vision, and the system also clearly agreed as Jake felt himself merge fully with the Viper the second before the old man laid his palm on the head of the Viper.

A cool sensation spread throughout the Viper's – and thus Jake's – body. His mind felt clearer than ever before. Then everything changed. The walls of the room they were in disintegrated, revealing a world of nothingness beyond. A perfect white void, reminiscent of the spaces the system had conjured at times.

“Everything needs a foundation. Allow your mind to form the Origin,” the voice of the First Sage echoed. He was nowhere to be found, and yet it felt like he was everywhere.

The Viper focused as a massive disc of stone appeared below his feet, more than fifty meters in diameter. Jake felt how Villy somehow knew what to do, despite not being entirely sure why he knew.

“Visualize your desires. What do you want – nay – demand of the skill? Breathe in, and with your exhale, may your reality materialize.”

Villy inhaled as some unknown particles entered his body. In the next second, he breathed out as a storm of colored wisps exited his mouth. They swirled as a wood-like structure appeared on the edges of the disc in all directions as if the Viper was building a tower around him.

The wood-like structure began to morph further as it was divided all over. It took Jake a moment until he realized what was being made. They were bookshelves.

These shelves shot upwards into the white sky, expanding beyond Jake’s realm of Perception within a mere second as they just seemed to keep going. Then, from the bottom, books began to appear. All of them had the exact same black blank cover, but each gave off a slightly different sensation.

A hundred, thousand, million, billion... the books kept multiplying. Infinitely into the sky, though at some point, they stopped giving him any sensations. He knew it was because they had no content... no Records.

“A library of a sage. Its contents are not infinite, but it contains infinite space for expansion. The system allowed the role of the scribe as the blank books are filled with insight upon your demand. You, the sole librarian. With time, omniscience the goal,” the First Sage spoke, narrating what the Viper made.

“An ambitious desire. Can you truly realize it?”

The old man appeared as he stood in front of Jake and Villy. He held out his hand with the palm up as the Viper reached out. Villy held his own hand in front of the palm of the Sage as he gritted his teeth. Blood began to flow out of his eyes, ears, and nose as a bloody mist began to seep out of his body. There was something off with the blood, though.

This entire place was not real, or at least it wasn't directly linked to the outside world. The blood seeping out represented something different from physical damage. A sacrifice. An offering. It took Jake a moment to realize, but soon enough, he knew what it was. It was the Records of another skill. Villy was upgrading it or maybe sacrificing it to get what would eventually become Sagacity.

Jake watched on intently as the blood pooled together and formed a single drop. Then, in the very next moment, the entire library tower that Villy had created began to turn red and melt into blood. The blood pooled together towards the center of the platform they stood on before rising up and merging with the droplet. Finally, even the platform turned into blood and merged with the droplet.

“An offering made, a framework created, an Origin formed. Now claim it,” the First Sage said as his own body faded away.

The drop of blood floated forward and entered the forehead of the Viper. The moment it entered his body, the white void around them shattered like it had been made of glass. As the world itself fell apart, Jake tried to understand everything that had happened. He had so many questions, and he hoped to maybe figure out what the hell the First Sage had actually done.

Villy's body disappeared, disconnecting Jake from him and leaving him to float alone, ready for time to rewind again. He really wanted to once more experience the-

The collapsing world froze. It was as if time itself had stopped, and Jake felt an attention focus on him. In the next moment, the First Sage appeared right in front of Jake and stared straight at him.

"Records not of this time. An Origin that-"

And then Jake was back in his living room.

Chapter 578 - Profession = Done

Jake just sat and stared into the wall for a good few seconds, wondering what the actual fuck had just happened. It was as if the vision had been interrupted somehow or maybe forcefully ended. Or, maybe it was always meant to end in this fashion? Though that would also be incredibly odd.

The skill had allowed Jake to do something he thought was impossible. He had experienced a Transcendence, a skill that should be outside the system. Based on what Jake knew, a normal skill like his Path of the Heretic-Chosen should not have allowed this, in the same way that no skill would allow someone to hide from Jake's Bloodline-made Sphere of Perception.

Yet, it had. Maybe it was because Jake experienced Records of the past as they were? Though this experience did make him wonder if it truly was like that. Jake remembered how it felt like Valdemar had, in some vague way, been aware of Jake. Meanwhile, this time, the First Sage had one-hundred percent been aware.

Did this mean that all the way back in the first era, these two actually saw him? If that was the case, didn't it kind of play into the whole theory of pre-determination as it would mean that the system knew, all the way back in the first era, that Jake could be born in the ninety-third era and then get a skill to view these Record Fragments?

Or maybe it created a new kind of reality if they noticed, a bit like the simulated world sim-Jake came from... it was hard to tell.

Then there was the entire Transcendence itself. Villy had said the First Sage had several, and this was Jake's first time seeing one. What it actually did, Jake had no idea, but he reckoned it had something to do with skill creation or modification somehow. If that was the case, it was a damn strong one, especially as it could be used on other people, though it did make Jake question the repercussions of using such a skill. The First Sage had clearly wanted to avoid using it and had said he would only help once, indicating there was a good reason to not overuse this Transcendence.

Though Jake could not argue with the result. Even now, Jake remembered the feelings he shared with the Viper. The sheer level of comprehension as he felt like every book was at his fingertips. How his mind was clearer than ever, and only his desire to create the skill mattered. To call it enlightenment was not quite accurate, as it felt... different. Like it was more than that.

Jake shook his head as he tried to focus on what he could control and what mattered. To upgrade his Sagacity. While this vision had been the weirdest one he had ever experienced by quite a margin, it had done its job quite efficiently.

Visualizing a skill was not anything new to Jake. He was pretty good at visualizing things, his Soulspace being proof of that with a massive cursed chimera monster roaming about. Jake was a very visual person by nature, something his insane Perception should maybe have indicated. Seeing the library that the First Sage had Villy build made Jake understand far better what Sagacity truly was.

And allowed him to upgrade his own version.

Jake sat down in meditation as he got to work to properly condense all he had learned and all he wanted into the skill. He felt right at the cusp even before the vision and was now more sure than ever. In fact, he felt a bit bolder than before.

It still ended up taking nearly a full day for Jake to get what he wanted, but he got it in the end.

[Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Ancient --> Legendary)] – Blood containing Records, personal teachings, insights from a sage, and the knowledge of a traditional alchemist. Combined, you bring honor to your Patron as you strive for omniscience. Allows the Alchemist to extract knowledge from a fragment of the Malefic Viper's Records to claim his knowledge as your own. Grants the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper a far better understanding of mana and of most affinities. Grants the Alchemist knowledge of a myriad of alchemical ingredients, allowing him to far more easily Identify them. Allows the Alchemist to make creations he does not have the associated crafting skill for (does not receive stat effectiveness bonuses without associated skill). Passively provides 3 Wisdom per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your search for knowledge be as inexhaustible as the Malefic One.

Jake felt like an influx of knowledge slammed into his head the moment everything fell into place. It was like a library - akin to the one Villy constructed - appeared in his head and was being reorganized to be more systematic and useable. Almost as if all the alchemical knowledge Jake had before had come from a massive pile of books that had now all been sorted and categorized.

This knowledge was also far more than what he had before. One had to remember that Jake only really had knowledge of herbs and toxic materials, with the Identify skill also being restricted to these two categories of alchemical ingredients. What would have been the geology, metallurgy, and several more skills were part of Sagacity now.

It was all sorted into this metaphorical library, the books ready to be pulled out whenever Identify found something it corresponded to. It was not like Jake suddenly knew a shitload more about rocks, just that he could now at least pull out the knowledge.

This part of the upgrade was great, even if it was more wide than deep, with Jake not immediately seeing much value from his newfound abilities as he couldn't exactly use rocks and metal for much with his usual alchemy methods.

However, it did not end there. Herbology and Toxicology were now gone, but both had been intrinsically tied to another skill of his that now also showed signs of evolving.

Identify was a skill that had last evolved when Jake got his profession and thus the Herbology and Toxicology skill. It had not shown signs of upgrading since, which Jake partly recognized was his fault for never truly trying. Now that it showed signs anyway... Jake dove in as he still felt his mind be clear and focused from the Sagacity upgrade.

The skill did one thing and one thing only: it allowed Jake to peer into the Records of an entity. It could be protected against, but Jake had found ways to circumvent this protection before using his high Perception, so that was the first thing he thought about. Secondly, Jake had spent over a decade practicing how to sense and thus veil his own Blessing. It made no sense for him to not leverage this.

He thought it would have been harder to upgrade the skill... but surprisingly enough, it took little effort as long as he put his mind to it.

[Identify (Common)] - Identification skill, known by all but the smallest of children of the myriad races. The skill allows you to attempt to identify any object or creature you are focusing on.

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[Identify (Rare)] – An improved version of the standard Identification skill, a skill known by all but the smallest of children of the myriad races. The skill allows you to attempt to identify any object or creature you are focusing on. Allows for the detection of Blessings. The identity level limit and effectiveness is based on Perception. Cannot Identify any creature above your own grade.

The skill went up not just one but two entire rarities. The added effects were as expected, and honestly, Jake didn't feel anything different about the skill now compared to before. Seeing the limitation of still being unable to Identify anyone above his grade, it wasn't like being able to see a potentially higher level-cap mattered either. Though hopefully, it would be useful in C-grade. The effectiveness part linked to Perception was definitely the biggest bonus, as that could probably allow him to pierce a lot of veils people made to hide their levels. Finally, being able to see if people got Blessings was a nice addition.

Jake had also made it so that he pulled on the drop of blood that contained Records of the Viper quite a bit for the Blessing detection part. Jake knew how to detect if someone had a Blessing but was clueless as to what god had given the Blessing unless it was from someone he recognized. So he definitely needed system assistance for that part.

Leaning back on the sofa, Jake took a deep breath, satisfied by his results. Upgrading Identify had not been on his to-do list but doing it was definitely a welcome addition. He had even gotten some ideas as to how other alchemy skills could maybe be merged with the Viper's Legacy skills with time, but that was not something he would pursue. No, for now, he was more than happy.

All nine Legacy skills at Legendary.

That had to be considered quite the feat, right? Jake at least assumed it would have a positive influence on his upcoming evolution. Jake knew that his profession was unique, so anything he did now could result in a better version that gave more stats or maybe better skills when the time came. At least, that was his working theory.

Smiling to himself, Jake checked off the last thing that had to do with his profession before the evolution. Jake decided to pull up all his profession skills to check if he had missed something or had an obvious one he could try to upgrade.

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

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There were some skills of low rarity. Purification and Cultivate Toxin were two obvious ones. However, Jake firmly believed upgrading either of these wouldn't matter much for his evolution, especially not as Jake now believed that Cultivate Toxin would one day become one with the Legacy skills.

Jake concluded that he was indeed done with his profession for the rest of D-grade. Now, it was time for his class and the goal of creating a skill of a higher rarity than Jake had ever done before.

He and sim-Jake had considered this skill a lot and quickly come to realize that they were indeed arrogant idiots who thought creating a mythical skill was far easier than it actually was. However, more than arrogant idiots, they were stubborn idiots who would keep working on it until it worked. But to stand any chance of creating the skill, they needed time.

Well, they needed time to not pass as fast as it tended to. If not, then Jake could see himself missing a certain Prima Guardian coming to Earth, all his friends reaching C-grade and getting well into it, and not seeing his family for too long... Shit, maybe there would be a bunch of other timed system events he would miss. Also, going missing for a bloody long time could lead to unexpected issues, especially with bastards like Ell'Hakan still around.

Besides, all Jake would need to do was sit on his ass and meditate.

Jake closed his eyes for a moment and entered his Soulspace. He saw sim-Jake stand ready, giving him a nod, affirming that he was ready.

Now the only problem was figuring out how to have time pass a little differently to not miss stuff...

"Vil-"

"Hey again," the snake god popped up right behind the couch once more, even faster than last time. "This time, I am interested in knowing what the vision showed you as it relates to Sagacity. What did you see?"

Jake was a bit surprised at the Viper seeming to actually care so much. He decided not to hide anything as he told him what he had experienced from start to end – including the First Sage recognizing him.

After Jake was done talking, the Viper was sitting in an armchair across from Jake with a hand on his chin, thinking.

“Very... interesting. But not unsurprising,” Villy finally said. “It is a unique skill, so perhaps it makes sense that you can experience a Transcendence, though it does sound like you didn’t truly feel its effects. I can promise you that what you went through is nothing compared to me. First of all, for me, it felt like I was in that other world for... I would say about fourteen or fifteen years? At least it felt that long to me.”

“It did not feel that long to me... though it explains how you could do everything swiftly and perfectly from my point of view. But how about the fact that the First Sage saw me there? Could even see things about me? That is not normal,” Jake said.

“I tend to not comment on things I have limited understanding of. The problem isn’t that there is no explanation of what it means but that there are too many explanations. You peer at a Record Fragment, right? This means you cannot alter the fragments, only view them. I don’t subscribe to your theory of pre-determination, but more to the theory that the world you see is the same world from back then. It is a mirror of it. If it is a simulation like the Seat of the Exalted Prima event, or maybe the skill even creates a second true universe with a split timeline or something else insane like that upon you being seen. I have no way of knowing,” the Viper shook his head.

“Let me say it like this. There are other skills to see certain Records, or there have at least been prior system events where it happens. Tell me, have you ever felt someone observing you? Besides me, of course. I am talking about if you have ever felt like someone observed you the same way you observed me during your Path of the Heretic-Chosen?” the Viper asked.

“Not that I recall,” Jake said with a deep frown. Yeah... Villy had a point. If Jake had been observed, he would have damn well noticed it. At least, he believed he would have. So the only explanation would be that no one had traveled back and looked at him. He saw a few reasons that could be. A: Jake never

made it to godhood and was thus not worth looking at. B: He couldn't notice if they were looking at him. C: no one will ever, in the history of infinity, get a skill or anything like that to observe his past the same way Jake could with Villy.

He called bullshit on all three of those. It was way more probably that these Record-peering skills just didn't truly interfere with the past.

"You got a point. But even so, no comments on what he said? Something about my Origin... also, the way the vision ended was so weird. Like it was forcefully stopped. I didn't even feel the usual transportation out of the skill," Jake said with doubt.

"No comments indeed," Villy said. "It is your skill and your Origin. I am sure you have come across the word Origin before, so refer to that."

"Aight..." Jake relented.

He had come across the word Origin before, and he had a pretty good idea of what it was. Something to do with the core of a Truesoul or perhaps the "true essence" of stuff. Okay, Jake had to admit, he was still a bit iffy on the details.

"Now," Villy said with a teasing smile. "You said you had something else you wanted my help with before you went on a mental journey? What can I do for my dear Chosen?"

Jake was happy Villy brought him back on track as he nodded. "Yep. My simulacrum and I have been talking, and we will need some... time."

“You are asking for a time-dilated chamber?” the Viper asked with a raised eyebrow.

“That was the plan. Why, isn’t it possible? I know you said too much time dilation can fuck you up, and I did spend a long time learning about Shroud...” Jake said, a bit deflated.

“Jake, you spent less than fifteen years in time dilation while in D-grade. That is well-below average for people like you. As long as you don’t plan on actually fighting or doing any crafting, I see no issues with it. Will it primarily be meditation?” the Viper asked.

“And a bit of light practice, maybe, but yeah, it will just be me and myself,” Jake confirmed.

“In that case, sure,” Villy shrugged. “Though I do have to point out the absurdity of asking me for a time-dilated chamber personally when the Order offers them already for its members.”

Jake... did not know that.

“Well, you know, I want the best of the best. Top of the line time chambers only,” Jake joked.

“I doubt Aeon can be arsed to come by.”

"I guess the second-best is acceptable, too," Jake grinned.

"Acceptable compliment. Wanna go right away?"

"May as well," Jake said. "Though I have no idea how long it will take."

"Nor do I know how much I can crank the time magic," Villy grinned, almost a bit too giddy.

Chapter 579 - The Importance Of Time

The Sword Saint sat in meditation as his inner vision materialized. He stood up and drew his sword as he began his sword meditation, his movements slow and ethereal. Each swing took several seconds, allowing even the smallest of children to avoid them, but each also held insight beyond what most could handle. The air itself parted for the blade, rather than impede it, as an odd shimmer appeared around his body.

Getting blessed by the Primordial of time benefitted Miyamoto in many ways. It had helped him upgrade his skills, allowed him to modify his Transcendence, and taught him an entirely new form of magic. Or, perhaps, revealed to him the talent he had in this school of magic.

However, he did not allow himself to get carried away. Many called him a stubborn old man, but he had truly taken the advice of Jake to heart during their duel. His sword was his essence, and he saw no purpose in adopting magic that did not fit him.

In his eyes, magic was only a way to improve his swordsmanship. An extension of what he already had. Trying to integrate time magic into his swordsmanship appeared difficult at first, but Miyamoto soon found a path. Time magic was often viewed as external magic: a manipulation of the world and others. In the arts of creation, it was used on certain items that took a long time to grow and could take the hit

to Records. It was also used for time chambers and even applied to quite a few dungeons through system assistance, this being where most everyone encountered time magic on a more regular basis.

Miyamoto knew he was no mage. He truly did not believe himself talented in it. The conversations he had with Ms. Wells about formations or rituals only assured him of this fact. He already had a hard time understanding computers before the system; how was he to ever learn about these magical scripts? To him, programming had already been sorcery before, and now it had only become all the more complicated.

However, what he did understand was his own body. He also understood time, perhaps because he had experienced a lot of it. It was odd that even his Patron called him an old soul. By all measures, the Sword Saint was nothing more than a child before a Primordial, and yet he didn't feel like he was made to feel like he was a youngster.

This had befuddled him for a time, but Miyamoto soon came to have at least some insight into this. Time was, as most everyone knew, relative. The passing of time varied based on the concepts of space and movement, but also on a more personal level with how each person experienced time. As one grows older, it feels like time passes faster and faster, not because it actually does, but because of how time is perceived.

What was it called? The proportion theory the old man believed it was. The theory is that it feels like time passes faster as one grows older, resulting in each year feeling shorter than the one before, as it is a proportionally smaller period compared to your entire life. The old man could definitely attest to this, as it had felt like the last few years before the system arrived had passed in the blink of an eye. Yet, now, with the system, it felt... different.

From conversations with his Patron, the Sword Saint came to learn that this psychological concept didn't only exist before the system. In fact, it had gotten infinitely worse not only in regard to proportion theory but also in feeling the moment itself. Many negative emotions that would result in it feeling like time passed slowly by were suppressed by Willpower, and the ever-expanding lifespan as one could grow older and older only contributed further. Retrospective time, prospective time, felt time...

If one is busy, it feels like time passes faster. If one is bored and unstimulated, any period of time would feel like it drags.

However... there were also times when one was deep in focus where it felt like time passed slower. Periods where one got more work done than expected or where one enjoyed time enough to truly focus on the moment and for every second to count. Quality time, one could call it.

What the Sword Saint had realized was that even if he was not skilled at time magic in the outside world, his body and mind were primed to be affected by it. Perhaps his old age before the system made him considered ancient by proportional standards, even if that thought was a bit insulting.

Be it what it may, one of the first things he did was not work on actually interfering with the concept of time but merely interfering with his own perception of it. To make every moment last slightly longer. From a mere psychological concept, it evolved to one that affected time itself. His own time.

That was how his newest evolution of Sword Meditation was born. A personal time chamber of the mind where he became one with his body and his sword. Every second passing for everyone else was a dozen for the old Sword Saint as every moment mattered. Every sword swing was worth remembering. He came to learn that this still counted and came with the same negative consequences as something like a time chamber, but that was acceptable. For even with these restrictions, it would serve its purpose.

Others had ambitions for C-grade and how they wanted their evolution to be. Miyamoto was no different. He had spoken to Jake a bit about their plans before the evolution, and Jake had mentioned his plans of creating a mythical skill, making the Sword Saint consider...

Why shouldn't he?

This was Jake's... third time doing time magic stuff? Yeah, it should be the third. Wait, no, there was also that time during the trial dungeon for the Order. Yeah, so four. Four wasn't that many, so this should still be fine, right?

Jake had been a bit apprehensive about doing it for a long time but realized there were more pros than cons to it. Especially if Villy said, it was okay. The thing that had worried Jake the most was the fear of his Records getting damaged or something else intangible that Jake couldn't feel or even know was happening. He seriously doubted even his overpowered instincts would warn him about that kind of self-sabotage.

Villy had teleported Jake away with him as they appeared in the same chamber Jake had gone to while practicing Shroud of the Primordial. The two of them stood in the chamber as Villy turned to Jake.

"Do you have an estimation for how long you will need?" Villy asked.

Jake scratched his chin. "No, not really. This feels like one of those things that are done when they are done and shouldn't be rushed only to end up with a shitty outcome."

Also known as doing the opposite of a big videogame release.

"Got it, but I will drag you out if it goes on too long. I have seen people fucking themselves over too many times already by getting so engrossed in a singular goal that they lose all sense of time and simply let the years pass by. Trust me, I, of all people, should know what it feels like to lose track of time," the Viper said with a less cheerful smile than usual.

“And you have my permission to toss me out if you deem it necessary,” Jake nodded. He would also rather give up on the mythical skill than end up waking up to discover that a few decades had passed in Realtime.

“Great. We will do it just like last time, and I will crank the time dilation as high as it can go without negatively affecting you. Or, at least, negatively affecting you too much,” the Viper explained. “Do note that movement may be a bit more challenging than usual and that manipulating external mana will be quite a bit harder than you expect.”

“As I said, as long as I can meditate and do some light movements unimpeded, we are all good,” Jake once more clarified.

Villy nodded. “Good luck and see you in... well, let’s hope not too many years. At least from your point of view.”

The snake god released some energy as many runes within the chamber activated. Jake felt like something in the environment was slightly shifting. It went fast in the beginning before Jake felt it slow down. Villy stayed in the chamber and stared at Jake, who had taken a lotus position in the middle of the chamber, ready to start meditating.

With every second, the smile of the Viper grew, and after a dozen or so more seconds, Jake began to feel his body be affected. It was as if thin needles pricked him all over, making him grit his teeth from the uncomfortable pain. The Viper noticed and nodded as he cranked down the time dilation a tiny bit, making the feeling disappear.

Jake tried to move his hand and felt like he was underwater, though without the pressure of the water bearing down on him at all times.

“How many seconds pass in here for every second outside?” Jake asked.

“More than one, less than a trillion. I guess you will learn when you are done,” the snake god teased him one last time. “Good luck, Jake. I look forward to seeing what you and that simulacrum of yours have planned.”

With those words, Villy disappeared, though Jake could feel he still observed him. Jake felt grateful as he was still a bit apprehensive with this entire time stuff, but with a Primordial keeping an eye on him, it should be fine.

Closing his eyes, Jake entered his Soulspace. Within, sim-Jake was already waiting for him so they could begin. As for what they planned on actually doing? Well, that was a bit... complicated.

To create a mythical skill, they needed it to be both powerful and rely on high concepts. They had already agreed on one major aspect, more specifically, the fact that sim-Jake was, well, sim-Jake. A simulation of a separate version of Jake himself. This in itself was already a major thing and something it would be moronic not to leverage.

Next up was Eternal Hunger. The weapon was mythical already, proving it, too, relied on incredibly high-level concepts. Jake had done some weird shit when he created the weapon and had been a bit delirious throughout most of the crafting process, but he did know it had absorbed a lot of so-called Jake Juice – or Jake Records – from him. Coupled with the sheer quantity of curse energy and the ability to keep growing, it lived up to its rarity.

Throughout the past months, sim-Jake had also been feeding the weapon through its cursed beast manifestation in his Soulspace. Feeding it with his own Records. Those separate from Jake himself. Sim-Jake had fed the beast with memories that Jake did not have, experiences he never had, and all that made up sim-Jake that wasn't already identical or merged with the real Jake already. The ultimate goal? For sim-Jake to merge with the weapon, hopefully retaining some semblances of self.

Of course, for this to be possible, sim-Jake had to have more Records than the cursed weapon. This was perhaps the biggest gamble, as no one could be sure. Sim-Jake and real Jake already guessed that it would not simply spawn a cursed version of sim-Jake that was still "him" but something entirely different. One had to remember that the cursed weapon was a Sin weapon, after all. A cursed weapon that relied on a singular strong desire, and there was no way for sim-Jake to replace this, only become part of it.

This was the first aspect of the plan. For sim-Jake to merge with Eternal Hunger. This would add both conceptual and actual power to the new skill they would create. Jake was not sure how it would work exactly, considering Eternal Hunger was a weapon and the energy within it linked to a weapon. Was it even possible to create a skill relying on a specific weapon? Or would it somehow affect the weapon to make it "more" than just a weapon?

All very exciting things for sim-Jake and Jake to discover together.

The second aspect of the plan was the skill itself. With the fuel determined, they needed to know what it would actually do. First of all, it would rely on the Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra skill. That was a given. The big question was just how much of the skill they wanted.

Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra was a movement skill, something Jake didn't really need that much. This desired upgraded skill would still include movement, but exactly how it would work, none of them knew quite yet. Sim-Jake had worked a lot on upgrading the skill already, and if all they wanted to do was

create an ancient-rarity Shadow Vault, they could within a week's time. But this was not what they wanted, obviously.

However, this did not mean this time working on upgrading Shadow Vault was wasted. Far from it. Through practice, sim-Jake managed to not only learn more of the skill but also align himself far more with the shadow affinity. An affinity that was quite a bit more complicated than Jake had initially expected.

The shadow affinity was heavily tied to the dark affinity, but they were not the same. The shadow affinity was a rank of concept above mere darkness. It was, to simplify, that which existed within the darkness left when the light is obscured. As if it was a second layer of reality itself. Not to be confused with a layer of space but something... different. In fact, the shadow affinity and space affinity had no concrete connection, as shadows seemed to entirely circumvent the concept.

That was why the Court of Shadows had become so powerful. They could use the shadows far more than anyone else. They learned to enter and exit the realm of shadows, allowing them to strike from anywhere at any time. Those powerful enough could travel through shadows, jumping even from planet to planet if they so desired. Of course, while shadow magic was potent, there were also restrictions.

One still had to pass through the shadow realm, as many many called it. On a 2-D scale, using regular shadows was a lot simpler, and one could avoid many things, but interacting with the real world from the shadows was near impossible.

Shadow Vault did not interact with the 2-D shadows but instead temporarily made one "attuned" to the shadow realm. One did not truly enter it, but as the description said, simply embraced the shadows to temporarily become one with them. It was a gross oversimplification of what Jake assumed to be the true Shadow Vault of Umbra.

In its true form, it was more like a mix of stealth, teleportation, and a rapid movement skill. Sim-Jake and Jake theorized that this true version would allow one to fully merge with the shadows and travel within a 3-D version of the shadow realm. How exactly this would work was a mystery, but it would no doubt be damn overpowered.

Anyway, sim-Jake had learned a lot, and they would still rely on the concepts of shadows from sim-Jake. Sim-Jake even had the idea to use the remnant-Records of what had once been his Blessing from Umbra to upgrade the skill. They still wanted to make it separate from Umbra entirely, but from how they understood the workings of the simulated world, everything sim-Jake brought with him was considered his Records alone. It had been his world, after all.

As for the details of this entire shadow part of the skill, Jake was still a bit unclear. On purpose too. Because the final part of the skill relied on their separateness. It relied on them not being the exact same person with the same understandings and thoughts. Yet they also needed to fully understand each other... at least when it came to fighting.

So they had reached one conclusion to make it happen.

"Are you ready?" sim-Jake asked.

"I should ask you the same," Jake answered with a smirk.

Two katars appeared in the hands of sim-Jake. Jake himself summoned a bow as the two of them stood across from each other.

Naturally, they had concluded that the best course of action would be to fight. Fight until they could each perfectly read and mimic each other, and their two instincts harmonized. They would still take breaks for sim-Jake to keep merging with Eternal Hunger and for Jake to learn what he had to about Shadow Vault, but ninety-nine percent of their time would be spent fighting.

Both of them had infinite resources within the Soulspace. Neither had to ever rest. Neither could truly die or take damage. Both would only use the power of the current Jake, copying his stats for their duel.

“Then here I come,” sim-Jake said as he leaned forward and turned into a shadowy form.

Jake took a step and teleported back as his other self chased.

Thus began the longest fight Jake had ever had, if not the longest he would ever have.

Chapter 580 - Focus Perfected

Duskleaf appeared beside the Malefic Viper as he joined him in staring down at the young human within the time chamber.

“Did you ask me to come by simply to confuse me?” Duskleaf asked the Viper while looking down at Jake.

He had a break from assisting his Master as he could handle everything there himself for now. This had allowed Duskleaf to send his clone back to help the little elf girl catch up and make sure she stayed on top of her studies without any of his personal projects being affected. He even had time for this brief excursion to see what Jake was up to, though he, at first sight, didn't learn much.

Though there was one thing.

“Why has he embedded the weapon in his chest?” Duskleaf asked. He saw that Jake had the weapon he had created firmly stabbed into his own chest, more accurately, into his own heart. At first, Duskleaf thought he was absorbing some of the curse energy from it directly into his body, but he felt no movements of energy.

“Good question,” his Master smiled. “Sadly, I have no bloody idea. What I do know is that what he wants to accomplish is linked to that mythical weapon of his.”

“Further strengthening his connection to a Sin weapon does not seem wise... it may influence his Path and lead him somewhere he did not intend to go,” Duskleaf disapproved.

“It will only become a problem if he allows the curse to influence him too much. Besides, from my understanding, what he is doing is more than merely strengthening the Soulbound connection,” the Malefic Viper explained.

Duskleaf looked a bit at the young man below and sighed. “How long has he been in there anyway?”

“From whose point of view?” the Viper asked.

“His.”

“I would say... about forty years, give or take?”

Duskleaf frowned. Not that long for himself, but a notable amount of time for a D-grade. “Has he-”

“Yep. Every single goddamn second.”

The old alchemist nodded. He stared at Jake and saw how he still remained focused. Not a single disturbance could be detected in his aura. There was only a sensation of serenity and focus from his Master’s Chosen as he worked on his task.

Duskleaf had lived for... a while. He had many students during this time, having not taken the position of Grand Elder of the Academy in the Order just for show. Throughout the years, one learned things.

There had been heaven-sent geniuses. Individuals who had formed several legendary skills in F-grade, alchemists who had crafted as if they were three times their own level, living encyclopedias, and absolute monsters of mana control. Yet none of these had ever made it to godhood. They had made it far, they had gotten powerful and respected, but ultimately they had fallen short despite everyone saying they would no doubt ascend.

A foolish assumption on their part that they would make it. An arrogance born of talent. In some ways, Duskleaf even pitied them because geniuses tended to all run into the same problem down the road. They became impatient.

For a prodigy in magic, forming legendary skills, amazing all your peers, and showing off by killing foes in higher grades were all expected. They would be hailed and respected, but as they got stronger and stronger, things began to change.

Rather than compete with individuals that were D-grade and had trained for a century, they would meet C-grades who had lived for millennia. They would meet B-grades who had lived for tens of thousands of years. Even if this heaven-sent genius was only a few hundred years max, could he truly make up the gap fifty-thousand years of experience and practice had formed? Most couldn't.

Not to misunderstand, they were still talents. These people would catch up, becoming stronger than the old expert in a fraction of the time, but they rarely did. They got frustrated. They saw magic a mage had spent ten thousand years making and couldn't comprehend how they hadn't perfected it themselves in a decade. In a way, their talents became their downfall as they had never learned the act of patience.

Never learned to struggle. Never learned to truly focus. Never stood before what seemed like an insurmountable barrier, and rather than giving up or trying to find a way around, began to slowly and methodologically figure out a way to climb it, a single inch at a time.

Duskleaf smiled as he looked at Jake below. The young Chosen did not need to struggle. He could cruise relatively easily through these grades but chose not to. In all honesty, then Jake was not the most talented person Duskleaf had seen, far from it. He was good, definitely top-tier, but there were some true monsters nearly beyond comparison out there.

However, what set Jake apart was that his talent also seemed to include a different mindset. A mind that was able to have a singular focus on a task. He remembered hearing the assessment from the trial dungeon where Jake had gained the highest possible assessment from that part of the alchemy test. Coupled with his inability to give up once he set a goal for himself, and it truly set him apart.

It was like he loved every task set before him. As if the more challenging he found a task, the more enjoyable he would find it, and if the difficulty of a task was the mundanity of it, he would simply view overcoming his own boredom and lack of stimulation as just another challenge to beat. In a way, he truly was a born hunter, be it the hunt to kill or a hunt for success. Even if Jake was not talented, he would go far through sheer force of will.

This part of Jake reminded Duskleaf a bit of...

"I remember this one student I myself took in," the Viper spoke. "Not to mince words, but damn, did he suck. His mana control was all over the place. He took months to even figure out how to make the basic potions and even longer to properly learn how to make poisons without constantly hurting himself. Oh, and don't even get me started on rituals. The only thing he was even faintly talented in was using his alchemical flame."

The old alchemist shook his head and stroked his beard. "Master, I--"

"Man, was he a dunce. I was amazed at how bad he was, yet this idiot kept trying. Kept attempting to craft things even after failing a thousand times and kept improving himself one small step at a time. Usually, we talk about people meeting barriers in their Path, but this guy was running an obstacle course from day one. Yet he kept slowly trodding forward. Shit, he was downright crawling at times. He was just a stubborn fool who loved alchemy far too much to give up, no matter how badly he sucked at it. Though I guess he did become decent at it after spending a long enough time bashing his head into the cauldron."

The Malefic Viper looked at Duskleaf with a smile.

"Wouldn't you agree, my dear dunce of a disciple?"

Two katars clashed as the two identical men slid back, both also raising a hand and releasing a blast of energy. Simultaneously, they dodged and circled around to clash again. Every hit was blocked or dodged, both looking for an opening.

Finally, one presented itself. Both katars were aimed at the thigh of the opponent, but suddenly, both men froze as their eyes flashed yellow. The fight was paused for half a second as both disengaged from their attack, instead drawing bows, two arrows nocked and fired in unison.

The two arrows collided in mid-air, both falling to the ground where they had met. Two other arrows flew as each curved in opposite directions to not clash. Dodging them both was effortless for the two men as they switched tactics in concert.

They both stormed forward and clashed weapons as they each blocked and dodged. Rather than a fight, it looked more than choreographed dance, and in some ways, that was a more accurate description of what their bout had devolved into.

Their weapons stabbed and swiped as neither man was hit as they got closer and closer, each blow missed by mere millimeters. Then, they both swung, having their two katars impact each other hard. Both men decided to dive forward to tackle the other. Both failed as the other countered, and once more, both froze.

Two katars, each at the neck of the other. All either had to do was slightly move forward to find purchase. Yet, the first to move would also be the one to incite a response, and if everything went as it did the other times, that person would end up the loser.

“Another tie,” Jake spoke.

“Nine hundred and ninety-two in a row,” sim-Jake answered. “We don’t need to reach a thousand.”

Jake wasn’t sure how long it had been, but it felt like neither had landed a decisive blow on the other for more than a year. In fact, it had been months since either had even landed a wound on the other. Trading blows had entirely stopped as both knew that committing too far to actually deal damage would result in a worse counterattack.

“This has indeed become meaningless,” Jake agreed. There was nothing more to learn and nothing more to teach.

Sim-Jake and Jake had exhausted all there was to learn from the other about combat. Sim-Jake had learned to use the bow merely by observing and copying Jake, and Jake had done the same with the melee fighting style of sim-Jake.

It hurt for Jake to admit, but sim-Jake had reached the same level of archery as Jake far before Jake reached sim-Jake’s skill level in melee combat. However, now, and for the last few... years? There had been no difference between them. Outside of magic, neither could do anything the other couldn’t. Sim-Jake had even learned to use a few important skills of the regular Jake here and there, including Gaze.

There was no debate that the real Jake had benefitted the most from this. It had not been the initial plan, but Jake had naturally learned all there was to the fighting style. Both of them had kind of hoped to improve it together but found it impossible within the Soulspace.

Jake and sim-Jake were both the kinds of fighters who needed experience to improve. They needed actual combat. In fact, even trying to improve the style by only fighting each other could end up

worsening it, as it would be adapted to fighting against someone with his Bloodline. No, they needed new opponents to improve.

Both sim-Jake and Jake looked at each other for a bit as they both knew. Both felt it.

“It’s time.” “It’s time.”

Spoken in unison, they smiled. There was nothing they could do, nothing more to learn. Sim-Jake’s body already gave off a sensation reminiscent of Eternal Hunger, and the cursed beast no longer attacked sim-Jake whenever he got close, even if it did still want to eat the regular Jake.

“You finish up here and head towards the dungeon. I will finish up the final attunement progress and prepare for the final merge.”

Jake smiled a bit melancholy. “I guess this is goodbye then.”

No matter what happened next, sim-Jake would not be the same. Once the skill was made, and he was fully integrated with Eternal Hunger, his Records would fully join and become one with Jake’s. Jake felt a bit bad seeing his other self go, even if he knew it was for the best.

In the outside world, the bone that held sim-Jake’s existence had already begun to show signs of failure. Microcracks covered it entirely, and even if it remained sturdy enough and was still useful, Jake knew it was close to the end of its lifespan.

Sim-Jake staying a separate entity forever had always been impossible; they had discussed it so many times. His other self had even sped this up by giving away his memories and Records. Sim-Jake had admitted that he couldn't remember a damn thing anymore from before the system in his simulated reality - nothing aside from what Jake had seen during his vision, anyway. Even the Tutorial was just snippets here and there. His only reason for retaining an ego now was his inherent will to survive and that he had actively worked to remain separate.

But all things must come to an end.

"It does seem like that," sim-Jake nodded in response. "Though I think goodbye is a bit too strong of a word. It is more that I will change. In some ways, wasn't this what I wanted? To evolve to something that didn't need a profession, something more than human? Being an embodiment of an ancient curse must qualify there."

"Well-argued," Jake smiled.

"Besides, aren't you afraid that I am going to pull a fast one and try to take over your body at the very last second?" sim-Jake teased.

"We both know I would see that coming," Jake teased back in response.

"And my intuition is saying it wouldn't work anyway," sim-Jake shrugged. "Now get going. We have a hydra to kill and a skill to create. And stop being so damn gloomy. If everything works out, you will never be completely rid of me."

"Rather than goodbye... see you around, then."

In the outside world, Jake opened his eyes. The katar in his chest disappeared as the wound healed nearly instantly. Jake stood up, feeling his body be slightly rigid from sitting down for... years? Jake didn't know how long had passed. It didn't matter right now either.

"I'm done," Jake spoke.

He felt the odd sensation from the time chamber slowly grind to a halt as his eyes opened wide. He felt dizzy, and the world started spinning. His body began hurting all over, but he gritted his teeth and tried to soldier through. Nearly fifteen minutes passed before his body had adapted, making him feel normal again, just in time for Villy to teleport in.

"I assume it has been fruitful," the god said.

"Yeah... can we talk after I am done?"

"You don't even wanna know how long you were in there? How much time passed in the real world?"

"Later. For now, please help me get to the dungeon," Jake insisted. Sim-Jake, within his Soulspace, was ready. They both were. Delaying them would only reduce their chances.

The Viper simply nodded as the two teleported away, appearing before a gate.

“Good luck,” Villy said, not asking further or saying anything.

Jake nodded and placed his hand on the gate and accepted the prompt to enter. In the very next moment, he disappeared. He had been told of this combat dungeon. It was a gauntlet of sorts with several images of old powerful members of the Order saved. The strongest of which was naturally the Lord Protector.

He had no interest in any other target.

Appearing within a hall, a projection instantly popped up in front of him.

“Welcome to the-“

Without hesitation, Jake released his aura, as well as everything that indicated his identity.

“I am the Chosen of the Malefic Viper; take me to fight the Lord Protector’s image,” Jake said, having no desire or time to delay.

The projection did not even answer but merely waved its hand as Jake was teleported once more. He appeared in the same swamp as last time. In the distance, he saw his target.

Jake pulled out two items next. The bone katar and another item Jake had been saving for this occasion.

[Partly Digested Phantomshade Fang (Unique)] – A Phantomshade Fang granted by the system to the newly integrated ninety-third universe. Contains a vast amount of energy and Records that will allow any compatible beast that consumes it to grow far faster and gain magical skills and abilities related to dark and space magic. This fang is already partly digested, having only a bit of the original energy left.

He just needed its energy to stabilize the bone long enough for them to succeed while also giving sim-Jake a good boost of energy. As the energy within was already primed, Jake easily tossed the katar and fang into a cauldron and used Touch to temporarily strengthen the weapon.

It took less than ten minutes before Jake pulled out the improved katar that now had all its minor cracks filled with dark energy. The weapon wouldn't last much longer, but it should be enough. Jake took it in his left hand as Eternal Hunger appeared in the other. The hydra in the distance noticed Jake the moment he let his aura loose and began walking towards it.

[Two-Headed Hydra of Perennial Consumption – lvl 199]

Time for a proper rematch, Jake smiled to himself as he shot forward to face the beast in melee combat.