

Hunter 601

Chapter 601 - Extremely Difficult Questions Of Varying Complexity

Two weeks after Jake had returned to the Order, he was hard at work with the many cores he still had in storage. Meira had continued to buy new cores to keep the ritual going during his absence and had quite a stock built up to complement all those Jake had also dropped off.

Working on the cores was slow progress as Jake tried to figure out how to infuse this energy he had decided to call Primal Energy. Could he call it Origin Energy? Yes, perhaps, but he felt like it wouldn't be as accurate.

From the beginning, he knew this energy was pretty much just his arcane affinity. At least a part of the arcane affinity. If his arcane affinity had a unique name, Jake would naturally name it the primal affinity, as that seemed to fit him well, hence why he landed on Primal Energy.

Anyway, Primal Energy was something Jake had a hard time properly understanding. It seemed utterly unrelated to the two concepts of destruction and stabilization. It leaned more into the concept of simplicity as far as Jake could tell, though that also didn't perfectly fit either.

There was also the ultimate question he needed to answer... what exactly was an Origin? The word held great meaning, and Jake had met it in so many different contexts. The very first time he saw it was when he got his Bloodline, more specifically, in the Bloodline Patriarch title.

[Bloodline Patriarch] – Unlock a unique Bloodline ability. The power found in the Origin of your Records is yours, and yours alone to wield and pass down throughout the multiverse. May your Bloodline prevail. +15 Vitality, +10% to Vitality.

It said Origin of his Records. Origins and Records were tied intrinsically to one another. In fact, when one spoke of an Origin, one always spoke of Records. From what Jake had gathered, most, if not all, things in the multiverse had an Origin of some kind. A place where they first appeared. That is to say, the first person to ever create a sword would have created the Origin of Swords. However, even that would still be far behind someone who made the Origin of Weapons or someone who somehow was the first to ever craft anything.

All of this is to say the word Origin stemmed from the word original. The first. Jake was the first one to ever have his Bloodline, and hence he was the true Origin of the Primal Hunter. In the same vein, Sanguine had been the Origin of all vampires.

There was some power in being the first in something, but being first did not hold innate power if what you were the first at had no meaning. A bit like back on old Earth and world records. Being the world record holder for running a hundred meters was damn impressive, but being the world record holder for eating the most sausages during a skydive, while impressive, didn't exactly hold much meaning to most.

All of this made Jake think. Sandy had Genesis in their name, a word that was often synonymous with Origin and also meant the beginning of something. In fact, out of every evolution Jake had been the cause of, Sandy was the most straightforward example as it had happened through one natural treasure. A natural treasure that Jake amplified to bring forth some kind of Origin through his transmutation and infusion of Primal Energy. So the question is what he amplified.

The full name of Sandy's race was Juvenile Cosmic Genesis Worm. If he took the genesis as a standalone, it didn't mean much, but what if the two were meant to be read together? Cosmic Genesis. The beginning of the cosmos itself. Based on what Jake had gathered on cosmic energy through recent research, it was often seen as some combination of space, creation, and the concept of matter. It was the presence of space and objects existing within the space.

Many theories put forth the claim that the first matter to ever exist was cosmic dust that then slowly formed into everything else tangible. Based on what Sandy had said and their ability to always sense this

cosmic dust like it was sand in space this did seem entirely possible. Cosmic dust was present anywhere space was present, after all.

So, if what Jake thought was correct, Sandy had become infused with Records of the Origin of the cosmos itself, which would explain the worm's level of power. He had felt some energy within the meteor back then he had amplified, and Jake now believed that a tiny bit of energy very close to Primal Energy was present within it for him to grasp onto.

If that indeed was true, then what about Sylphie? With her, there had not been this spark of Primal-adjacent energy. Back then, Jake had clearly amplified the Origin of Wind, which had ended up being related to sylphs, an extremely powerful variant of wind elementals. How exactly that had happened, Jake wasn't sure about, and there were too many factors in the ritual circle back then, but one thing was for sure: whatever this Origin was, it had an extremely profound effect on the Records of Sylphie.

When it came to Eternal Hunger, Jake was also somewhat stumped. He knew that he had simplified the curse into the base emotion of hunger. Perhaps one could say it now held Records related to the Origin of hunger itself. On that note, distinguishing hunger from consumption or gluttony was essential.

Gluttony was the act of overconsumption to the level of unhealthiness. Consumption was the act itself, not an emotion at all. Hunger, on the other hand, was a constant gnawing feeling of never being full. Rather than gluttony, where one consumed simply because one wanted to, hunger felt like a necessity. You needed to eat, or you would die. At least you would feel like if you didn't eat, you would be at death's door, making it a far more powerful emotion, and thus curse.

Anyway... finally there was Jake himself.

What was Jake's Origin? Well, he had many. That was another thing; few concepts had only one Origin. Jake was the embodiment of the Primal Hunter, but he was also a human, meaning he was related to

the Origin of humans. Had his innate PrimalEnergy from his Bloodline amplified his Origin as a human? Mutated it into something that wasn't quite human at all? Knowing the answer to that was honestly far above his pay grade. Who knows, maybe his race variant was only possible to have for someone with his Bloodline?

So, where did this leave Jake? Well, it left him with some hypothetical answers and a million more questions. He still wasn't even sure why his Bloodline allowed him to use Primal Energy and why this Primal Energy could even influence Origins. But more than that, if all Jake had theorized was true, one thing bugged him more than anything... why did Villy and everyone seem so surprised by him being able to do this?

Why was it not a normal profession to have Origin Amplifiers? What made it uniquely tied to Jake?

Jake had nothing to do with the concepts of Origins. At least, he didn't think so. He wracked his mind over this for so long but didn't come up with a good answer. All he could truly do was trial and error and try to transform some of the energy into energy holding Records of an Origin. It was an uphill battle, as often Jake just ended up infusing his arcane energy, which had effects he didn't want, like simply destroying or stabilizing the energy within without altering it at all.

All in all, he had a long way to go, and the only thing that would lead him toward success was repeated experimentation. So far, he had chosen not to use Touch of the Malefic Viper in any way, but he knew that, at the very least, he would have to introduce aspects of the skill with time, however, wanted he wanted was not simply corruption or transmutation, but something even... better.

At the beginning of the third week since his return, Meira finally came to him, saying she had obtained all the materials on the list given by Arnold. She sought out Jake, who was busy in the laboratory, and waited patiently for him to get done with the core he was currently working on. Jake saw her through his sphere but still continued his current experiment. After a few minutes, the core in his hand crumbled into dust, making him shake his head. He had delayed a bit more, but now it was time to have an annoyingly hard conversation.

Meira, non-the-wiser, patiently stood outside the lab and greeted Jake as he exited.

"I have acquired all the requested goods, Lord Thayne," she said with a light bow.

"Great, let's head out into the garden and go through them; I want to see exactly what that mad scientist wants," Jake said with a smile.

That wasn't entirely a lie, either. Jake did want to properly see what Arnold had wanted Jake to get. Additionally, he wanted to frame this not as him distrusting Meira to get the right things but as him going through them purely for his own vanity.

"Yes," Meira nodded, using the same a-bit-too-cordial tone she had adopted ever since his return to the Order.

Jake and Meira walked to the garden at a relaxed pace, with Jake studying Meira closely throughout. She was good at hiding her nervousness, but Jake still picked up on it. She was on edge all the time, almost fearful. Based on Jake's conversation with Duskleaf, he now also understood why. She probably had legitimate fears of Jake no longer wanting her around, something he also now knew probably shouldn't surprise him. In fact, getting rid of her would be considered standard practice.

Within the Order, replacing your slaves with ones of a similar grade to yourself was expected, as slaves a grade lower were considered far less useful. It was also a problem of status for many, as having a slave an entire grade below yourself was viewed as something only those unable to afford an "upgrade" would do.

To be honest, Jake had not even considered this before after his conversation with Duskleaf. That was probably also why Meira had been so disturbed by him giving her a deadline to join the Order before C-grade. In her eyes, he had pretty much told her that even if she evolved to C-grade, he would no longer want her around. That him having her join the Order was just a gentle way of firing her.

Once they made it to the garden, Meira got started right away. "Does Lord Thayne want to view all the items or only those considered as standouts?"

"Just the standouts; based on what I remember, he also wanted a whole bunch of boring, mundane stuff," Jake waved it off, trying to lighten the mood a bit. "Was these things hard to get, by the way?"

"I had to request assistance from Izil for two of them as they were manufactured exclusively in the Altmar Empire, but for the others, the usual channels proved adequate," Meira explained matter-of-factly. Jake did bite onto how she seemed to emphasize she had gotten help from Izil... almost as if she tried to say: "hey, look, I do have some personal connections I can use to be useful."

"Let's see those things from the Altmar Empire first," Jake simply said.

Meira proceeded to take out a weird sphere filled with holes in it, all of which looked to be filled with some kind of glass, as well as something quite recognizable. A human-sized golem, looking a bit like the Altmar Census Golem, but Jake could see this one was far more straightforward in design.

"The first one is known as a Sunflux Core Amplifier. It stores light and sun magic to power up certain kinds of attacks, while the second one is an Altmar Battle Golem, both the model number and version requested," Meira explained.

"I have to ask, what do you think he will use them for?" Jake asked, trying to start some conversation. "For context, the guy who requested them is a mad scientist who loves technology."

"The Altmar Empire is one of the greatest factions when it comes to technology-based concepts, so I would argue he primarily got them to study. However, this will likely prove incredibly difficult due to innate safeguards, so perhaps he simply needs them to use as-is," she answered promptly.

Yeah, this is getting nowhere, Jake muttered internally but nevertheless kept going.

He tried to make a joke here and there and make Meira respond as they went over all the items of note. Jake tried damn hard, but Meira remained annoyingly stoic throughout, making his efforts wasted. He really couldn't figure out what her plan was... did she think acting more professional would make him change his mind or something?

As they finished up the last item, Jake stored them all in his own spatial storage. There was honestly a shitload of goods, Arnold having ordered tons of different metals Jake didn't even know the name of before being sent shopping.

"I hope my performance has been satisfactory. If allowed, I shall take my leave and-"

"Why are you acting so weird?" Jake asked, having had enough.

Meira looked confused but quickly collected herself. "What does Lord Thayne mea-"

“There you go again. You’re acting weird,” Jake said, shaking his head. He closed his eyes for a moment, resolving himself just to rip the bandaid off. “Okay, let’s go to the living room and have a proper talk about this entire thing. About the future.”

Finally, Meira showed some emotion. She looked incredibly nervous and stammered out: “If... if I have done something that Lord Thayne dislikes, I-“

“The only thing you have done I dislike is acting like a robot,” Jake shut her down as he motioned for her to get moving. She looked like she wanted to say something more, but Jake’s insistence made her stay silent. He saw her skittering hands as they moved, even if she tried to hide her apparent nervousness.

Thoughts of just abandoning this serious talk went through his mind several times, but ultimately he knew he couldn’t back down. He would have to sit down and discuss with her at one point or another.

Entering the living room, Jake made Meira sit on the couch as he sat across from her. His mask was already made invisible, and he looked at her as she just stared at the floor. Jake knew he had indeed made the mood accidentally mirror that of a firing or scolding, but in his defense, he wasn’t exactly comfortable doing this either.

“When I said you have to attempt to join the Order or find an alternative before C-grade, what did you think I meant?” Jake asked her first thing.

After a brief pause, Meira responded in a quiet tone: “Change my current status as a slave and become free...”

“So, at least we both understood that the same,” Jake nodded, happy at least that got through. “Now, why do you think I want this to happen and even set a deadline?”

“Lord Thayne has no need or desire to have any slaves,” Meira answered, still meek. “And... I became one unintentionally... so... naturally, Lord Thayne wants to correct this error, but in a way he finds acceptable.”

“Right so far. I don’t want any slaves, not you, not anyone,” Jake did clarify. Seeing Meira look hurt that he stated his dissatisfaction with having her be a slave felt so bloody weird to Jake, but he soldiered through. “But where I think we have a breakdown of communication is what do you think this change of status means for you. What do you think will happen?”

Meira, for the first time, looked up at him.

“I... if Lord Thayne possibly... if... I don’t know,” she finally confessed, tears almost in her eyes.

“Me neither,” Jake shrugged, trying to lighten the mood. “Which begs the question. What do you want to happen? The fact that you stop being a slave is non-negotiable, but no one says that has to be a bad thing.”

Meira just made a weird face as she seemed to try and understand what Jake was getting at. Like he was fishing for an answer. Sadly for her, Jake truly did just want her to make the choice of what she wanted to do herself.

"I won't get mad no matter what you say you want to happen. What you want me to do with your future? Where do you want to see yourself in ten, a hundred, or a thousand years? Again, you can speak freely. Any desire is valid. I swear that I will consider what you want no matter what."

Jake really wanted her to feel like she could just say what she wanted. He has spoken as sincerely as he could, even going as far as swearing he would consider her words – something Villy had actually warned about doing, as oaths could hold real power, especially with Jake now being C-grade.

He hoped her words had worked as he saw her look up with determination in her eyes.

"I... anything?" she asked for clarification. "So... if I wanted to stay here with Lord Thayne even after joining the Order, would it be okay?"

"Yes," Jake said, happy he had gotten through to her and allowed her to speak freely. "As I said, I will respect your opinion."

"So, will Lord Thayne allow me to keep working for him?" she once more wanted him to clarify.

"I told you, yes," Jake smiled, looking straight at Meira. "I do consider you one of the people I care about, and I will be more than happy to keep you here, but not due to some contract but your own free will. We met by circumstance, yes, but I am not one to just toss those close to me away."

Meira looked at him for a bit with teary eyes before wiping them. She seemed deep in thought as she clenched her hands and stared at the floor, seemingly unable to meet Jake's gaze.

“Can... could I maybe...” she turned beet-red as she stared intently at the floor, trying to gather her courage. “Would Lord Thayne also consider taking me as a...”

Jake got a bad feeling. “A... what?”

“If possible... when I am C-grade... would Lord Thayne also make me his mistress like the others?” she said with much determination as she looked up at him with hopeful eyes.

That is when Jake realized he had perhaps allowed her to speak a bit too freely.

Chapter 602 - A Conversation Long Overdue

Jake stared at the elf for several seconds as his brain tried to process what she had just said.

“Mistress like the others.”

When the hell had he gotten any mistresses!? Why would she even think he had any to begin with?

Few questions truly stumped him, but this one just didn’t make any sense, as it was rooted in non-existent reasoning. He hadn’t even adequately processed the question as he just muttered out:

“I have mistresses?”

Now it was Meira's turn to look confused back at him. She stared at his face for several seconds before finally speaking.

"You know... the others."

"Who?" Jake asked, more confused than ever and genuinely curious.

"I... the ones you talked about," Meira tried to clarify, only making Jake more confused. Had Eversmile decided to take Jake's form to fuck with Meira, who would then fuck with Jake in turn?

Jake tried to calm himself down and get to the bottom of this. "Who are these people you think are my... mistresses."

Just saying the word felt wrong.

"You know... the witch you have mentioned so many times... Miranda..." Meira said nervously.

"She works for me, and our relationship is strictly professional," Jake said stoically.

"Then... then miss Scarlett, the-"

“Fangirl at most. Definitely not,” Jake shot it down.

“The other alchemist woman.... Reika, she-“ Meira tried

“Is the descendant of a friend, and she too is also just a friend.”

“Irin...?”

“Nothing there,” Jake said. Not yet, at least...

“Syl-“

“No!” Jake practically yelled. Fuck no.

“I-“ Meira said, a bit scared at Jake’s outburst. “Then... then...”

Meira seemed to realize something then. Jake saw the look of realization in her eyes, making Jake feel a sense of relief.

"I apologize; I failed to realize..." Meira began as her head turned red from embarrassment. Jake nodded, happy that she had-

"Draskil?"

Jake just stared at her. His look alone made her shrink in her seat, as she seemed to understand. "I... I don't..."

"Meira," Jake said before she began spitballing even more names. "I don't have any mistresses. Zero. Nada. Of any sex or gender. Which begs the question... why the hell do you think I do?"

It took several seconds with Meira just staring at him before anything happened. Then she seemed almost relieved as she breathed out a huge sigh. Before promptly shifting back to nervous realization. "Does that mean Lord Thayne isn't interested in-"

"I never said that either," Jake clarified quickly. "I am just not... interested in that kind of serious thing or any labels. Or to get involved in that entire dynamic. That doesn't mean I am not interested, and I do have someone I am casually with at times back on Earth, but she would punch my head off if I ever called her a mistress. But this isn't about that, but the question of why you would think I even had any mistresses at all."

Meira once more went through some emotions Jake couldn't quite read, but she at least seemed to have calmed down quite a bit. Still super nervous and embarrassed, but no longer a wreck.

"It's... I was told..." Meira said as she looked at the ground.

“Told by who?” Jake asked, glaring.

“When... after Izil was here, we stayed friends, right?” Meira began. “She never really asked much about you as she knew it was a secret, but we both called you Lord Thayne at times, so maybe someone heard and told someone. So... Izil and I were approached by a dragonkin who joined us in studying.”

Jake frowned as he hadn’t heard any of this before. Then again, Meira rarely spoke of her everyday life, and Jake hadn’t exactly asked either.

“She was really nice and helped us both a lot, but she talked a lot about heritages and stuff and seemed super interested in Izil and the Altmar Empire, but also asked me some questions. I... mentioned that you were a black token holder called Lord Thayne, and she asked stuff about you. I didn’t say anything, really, but the dragonkin seemed interested still. I... I may have also mentioned the Grand Elder. Not who he is or anything, I just called him teacher, but I think she realized he was strong, and I also said once he taught you some stuff too, so...”

“And what may this dragonkin be called?” Jake asked, even if he already had a good idea.

“Helenstromoz of the Emberflight, she-“

“I know who she is,” Jake said in an annoyed tone. “So, what more happened?”

Meira continued explaining the rather long story with a lot of unnecessary fluff and apologetic over-explanations that really weren't needed, but Jake still got the gist of it. He also realized part of it was his fault.

When Jake had first come to the Order, he called himself Hunter but stopped bothering rather quickly. Same for hiding his level, actually. He reckoned anyone who cared to find out would know him as Lord Thayne by now, and while they likely couldn't connect him back to Earth – only the ninety-third universe – much less know he was the Chosen, that still meant they had some real information on him.

A member of the Emberflight must have overheard Meira and Izil talking, and they were apparently also still trying to figure out who his backer was. So they had sent Helen to talk to the two of them to probe for information, potentially even bribe them, to tell her who backed him. The teacher Meira mentioned was then who Helen began to think was also his backer, making her even more curious about Meira.

She seemed to have fully integrated with Izil and Meira, at least for a while, and the two of them had no reason not to keep her around. Meira said she also happily shared things about her Dragonflight, so neither of them thought it weird that someone so obsessed with background would ask others about it.

Anyway, the three of them had become friends and even shared some classes, and with Helen being so good at all of them – likely because she was a peak D-grade who was probably far older than both Izil and Meira – the two of them liked her even more. That is also where the trouble started.

“So where does this entire mistress thing come in?”

“Well... Helen said that all powerful people have mistresses if they so desire. Izil agreed,” Meira said, her embarrassment back in full. “I didn't know... but then they asked, and you had mentioned a lot of people, so I thought that...”

To summarize, it was all bloody girl gossip that led to this entire misunderstanding. Izil and Helen had convinced Meira that any female name Jake mentioned in a positive light was actually his mistress, and the worst part is Jake wasn't even sure they did it maliciously. It was annoying, but Jake knew they weren't wrong and that other "young masters" tended to be quite frivolous.

What he did see as shady was Helen approaching Meira to begin with. It was clearly done with an agenda and to find out who backed Jake. That, too, was probably something ordered by her superiors. By Villy, did Jake hate stupid politics.

Meira, seemingly also realizing by now that Jake was being serious and truly didn't have anything going on slightly in the vein of having mistresses, making her fall deep into thought. After being silent for a moment, leaving Jake to also consider his next steps with that damn dragonkin, she spoke.

"Why does Lord Thayne not have any mistresses?" she asked in a small voice.

"Call it personal values. I grew up in a place where having mistresses wasn't a thing, and I still don't really see it as a thing. I don't really care if others decide to build a harem, but to me, it seems utterly exhausting," Jake answered honestly.

Meira was about to speak when Jake cut her off.

"Also, mixing relationships and imbalanced power dynamics seems unhealthy. I, at least, wouldn't be able to do it with good conscience. I do realize that with being a Chosen and all, it is hard to not have some imbalance in power in nearly all circumstances, but... never mind. I am just not interested in anything right now," Jake said, shaking his head.

He was about to say he didn't want anyone around him who just wanted to be there to benefit from who he was and what he could offer them, but he knew that wasn't entirely true. Jake was a Chosen, someone with a potent Bloodline, and he was relatively powerful. All of these things were part of who he was, and he knew some of the people around him were only there due to who he was. Miranda would not be around if he wasn't the Chosen with a city, Sylphie and Sandy not without his Bloodline, and Villy would not even have looked at Jake twice if not due to the Bloodline and what it allowed Jake to do.

I guess the point is I don't want those to be the only reasons, Jake thought to himself. Damn, did Jake hate these annoying introspective moments that forced him to consider complicated emotions and complex interpersonal relationship dynamics.

Meira also looked to be dealing with some complex emotions as she sat there silently. Jake didn't want to break the silence as he let her think. Nearly a full minute passed before she spoke.

"If I join the Order... can I stay here even if I have somewhere else to go?" she asked.

"Pretty sure I already told you that you could," Jake confirmed.

"Can I also keep working for Lord Thayne?"

"That would be ideal. Not having some kind of assistant in the Order would be a hassle, and I don't plan on getting any other slaves or trying to hire someone, so I would be more than happy to have you," Jake said with a smile.

“How about the lessons and stuff?” she inquired further.

“As I said, nothing much has to change besides your status,” Jake made clear once more. “What will change is that you will work for me out of your own free will, which also means you can quit at any time and leave if you so desire. We will also need to change some other minor things, but all in due time. Once you have joined the Order, we will draw up a proper employment contract. One with far more equal terms.”

“Okay,” Meira nodded, thinking a bit more. “I will make sure to do the test to join before C-grade for sure.”

“Great,” Jake said, giving her a thumbs-up as he felt a sense of victory. However, he quickly got a bad feeling as she turned slightly red and twitched a bit.

“If I am working here... without being a slave... would that make us... friends?” Meira then asked her nervousness back in full force.

“I already consider us friends,” Jake said with a shrug, not seeing the big deal.

“When I am free, would I also be able to do some things... outside, the Order?” Meira asked, but Jake got the sense she wasn’t just asking for permission.

“You will be free to do whatever you want,” Jake answered. “And as I said, we are friends, so if you need help, just ask. I can’t promise anything, but I will at least lend an ear and consider it.”

Meira smiled and nodded. Neither of them said anything for a while until Meira got up and bowed. "I apologize for the misunderstanding and will make sure to clarify to Izil and make sure no rumors are spread. I will also talk to Hel-"

"I will handle her," Jake cut in.

"Okay," Meira said with a relieved nod. "I shall take my leave now and return to my studies... and look into including classes on how to join the Order proper. I want to pass whatever tests everyone else does to join."

"Best of luck. And don't feel too bad about this entire thing, okay?" Jake said with a grin. "At the very least, I can see the humor in it."

Meira nodded once more and smiled as she went towards the door. She stopped in the doorway for a moment as Jake saw her hesitate.

"Will... has Lord Thayne ever considered taking any mistresses?" she finally asked after a long pause, her back still turned to hide her beet-red face. Didn't help much when the redness extended all the way to her long ears.

Jake knew it was a leading question and shook his head.

"No, not really," he said honestly.

“Does that mean you will never have any?”

Jake was about to answer but stopped himself. Forever was a long time. A very long time. Potentially forever would mean literally forever if Jake managed to reach godhood. So...

“In a multiverse of infinite possibilities, I wouldn’t say never... just not now,” he finally answered. Even he couldn’t know what the future would bring or if his outlook on things would change. Feelings were also annoyingly unpredictable, and he couldn’t promise he wouldn’t ever make any spontaneous emotional decisions. If someone had asked him if he and Carmen would have ever done the deed before they headed off on their trip with Sylphie, he would have laughed at them... but here we are.

He saw Meira breathe out a sigh of relief but quickly caught herself as she scurried out the door and towards her own residence without saying another word. Jake saw her through his sphere as she walked with hasty steps, as he just stayed sitting on the couch. He stopped looking when she reached her residence and jumped onto her bed, screaming into a pillow.

Smiling, he shook his head. He had other things to deal with, things he had put off for too long. So long they had now come back to bite him in the ass. Plus, they had committed a cardinal sin in Jake’s eyes: they had gone after those close to him.

Jake took out a token he had hidden in his storage for quite a while. It depicted a red dragon and was what Helen had given him during their one and only meeting. It represented a standing invitation for a more formal chat, and by now, Jake believed it was time to have a chat about boundaries.

“I say he should have gone for it,” Vilastromoz said with a grin as he took another chip from the bowl. He had naturally watched the entire thing, and it did not disappoint. Who didn’t like some good relationship drama? Ah, to be young again.

"We both knew this would be the outcome, though I do find it regrettable," Duskleaf agreed as he also looked at the large screen showing what had just gone down in the living room of Jake's mansion.

"Oh? You do like that elf girl, don't you?" the Viper turned to his dear disciple.

"Meira has grown on me, yes," Duskleaf didn't deny. "She is hard-working and determined, and her loyalty to Jake goes beyond anything stated in a contract. Overall, she is a good student, and if her talent keeps growing, she may even be able to form a proper Path."

"You could bless her, you know?"

"We both know that wouldn't be wise," Duskleaf shook his head. "I have not given out any Blessings for a long time, so if I do give her any, it will no doubt lead back to Jake and risk exposing him as your Chosen."

"You could just decide to bless a whole bunch at once like I did. Muddy the water, so to say," Vilastromoz proposed.

Duskleaf just looked at the Viper, the glare alone saying enough. His disciple really hated doing that kind of stuff.

"Fine, your choice," he shrugged. "You can always do it after Jake makes his identity as my Chosen public knowledge. Shouldn't be that long."

“That was the plan,” Duskleaf agreed. “Though I will have to instill some more confidence in the girl. She will need it if she wants to make her hopes a reality..”

“You really do want it to be a thing, don’t you?” Vilastromoz asked with a smirk.

“Jake is still stuck with a mindset from before the system arrived in his universe, and I doubt that ingrained thought process can be changed quickly. What I do know is that a closer relationship would make Meira happier and help her future tremendously. If that means she will have to learn to disarm Jake, then as a good master, is it not my job to help guide her?” Duskleaf argued with a raised eyebrow.

Vilastromoz just smiled and shook his head. His disciple was usually a lost cause when it came to anything that wasn’t alchemy, and yet he seemed to have a grasp on these kinds of things even the Viper sometimes couldn’t compare to. If Duskleaf decided to guide the elf girl... Jake had a tough challenge ahead of him.

“Whatever you do, I believe it will be sufficiently entertaining,” the Viper said as he emptied the bowl of chips into his mouth while watching Jake stare at the token from the Emberflight.

Chapter 603 - Meeting Before The Meeting

Jake tossed the token up and down as he looked at the beautiful carving of a red dragon on it. It was clearly made of high-tier metal, produced as a show-off piece for the Emberflight to display how wealthy and powerful they were.

Which was just the problem. They were large and powerful. Annoyingly so.

Could Jake just use the token, contact Helen, make her meet him, and force her to take him to some superior who could make everyone fuck off? Potentially, but in order to do that, Jake would have to show he had enough backing to not either get himself thrown out or killed outright. Considering he was a member of the Order – or at least it was believed he was a member – they probably wouldn't kill him. Not wanting to meet him, however... yeah, that one had a big chance. In fact, chances are they would use this opportunity to have Jake bring out his backer to discuss the issue in his place. They believed Jake's backer was an S-grade, after all, which wasn't something the Emberflight was afraid of in the least.

"Why is this so damn complicated," Jake muttered to himself. He needed that damn Helen woman to just back off. That was the crux of it. It wasn't like the entire Dragonflight bothered him, just her. As long as he could make her not bother him or Meira, that should at least buy them some time.

Of course, there was always the option of just outing himself as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, but he wasn't that keen on it. Not yet, at least. It would also make life even harder for Meira if everyone knew he was the Chosen and would get her flooded with people wanting to use her to get to him. Reika and the others would also get bothered if anyone found out they had arrived at the Order together.

Jake himself also didn't see himself living a quiet life, but he at least had some countermeasures. Shroud of the Primordial would allow him to hide his level and presence from everyone, and he was a human, so as long as he changed his clothes a bit and still wore a mask, no one would be able to figure out who he was.

I need to approach this differently... Jake thought after thinking for a while as he considered different things he could do. He needed to get Helen off his back and...

"Oh!" Jake suddenly realized. A big grin appeared on his face as he took out his black token to contact a certain someone who would be able to offer more than an adequate distraction. Someone who had shown interest in the dragonkin before and wasn't someone even the Emberflight could disregard.

Draskil.

He had not seen the Malefic Dragonkin for a while but hoped he was doing well. Jake also wanted to check in to see if he was a potential candidate for the Nevermore party he was assembling, though he felt Draskil already had other plans.

Making a magical phone call, Jake soon got a response.

“Why does the Chosen contact me?” Draskil responded in an odd mix of annoyance, respectfulness and snark.

“I was wondering if you remember that Helenstromoz woman,” Jake answered.

“The hot dragonkin with the large tits and sexy tail? Yeah, I remember her,” Draskil confirmed.

“Great, I have some issues in that department and wondered if you could assist me,” Jake asked, kind of happy that Draskil remembered her, though he wasn’t sure how to feel about the way he remembered her.

“Sure. Meet up? Can be my place or yours.”

Jake thought for a moment. "Let's make it your place."

When he considered it, Jake had never seen the residence of another member of the Order besides Reika. Plus, he wanted to see if Villy had done some weird stuff with his mansion or if getting a huge compound of several buildings really was the standard for those with black tokens.

"Fine, I won't bother cleaning anything up, though. Also, there are others around, so be sure to hide your status," the dragonkin said, sending over his address.

He reconsidered meeting at Draskil's place for a moment but still decided to go.

As for what his plan was when it came to the Emberflight? Well, to distract Helen by setting her up with Draskil, or to, at the very least, have her feel what it was like to have someone annoying you the same way she annoyed him. Draskil also had a Divine Blessing, while Jake only displayed himself as having a lesser Blessing, so if some old ancestor did decide to get involved for some reason, Draskil would offer solid backup when it came to status. Plus, the dragonkin had joined the Order proper.

Going to a gateway wall, Jake activated his token using the address of Draskil. It took a bit as the dragonkin had to give permission for him to come, and Draskil wasn't the fastest, it seemed. A few minutes later, he was allowed to open it.

Jake walked through, and immediately, an odd smell hit him. Frowning, Jake observed his sphere and saw the source straight away as his eyes went wide. Bloody hell.

“Thayne!” a voice came from the side as Draskil walked over, wearing what looked like a bathrobe. “You evolved too!”

Looking at the dragonkin, he indeed had also evolved, though that wasn’t exactly a surprise.

[Malefic Dragonkin – lvl 204]

What was surprising was that he was only level 204. Given the level advantage he had on Jake, he would have assumed the dragonkin would be further ahead by now. Then again, maybe he had purposefully delayed leveling due to Nevermore.

“Yeah, not too long ago,” Jake confirmed, though he cared more about the two other people he saw in the background. Two heads peeked out a doorway, spying on them as they talked. He recognized neither of them, but he knew why they were there.

“Say, Draskil... can we find somewhere private to talk?” Jake asked.

“Sure,” the Malefic Dragonkin answered with a large grin. “Follow me!”

He turned around and motioned for Jake to follow, and instantly, Jake noticed the way the dragonkin chose. It wasn’t the fastest route, but it went through the large living room quite purposefully. All done for the Malefic Dragonkin to show off.

Draskil had said there would be other people around. When he had said people, Jake had assumed he maybe had some friends over or something... what Jake had not expected was for these “people” to be seventy-six women of different races. Humans, elves, dragonkin, beastfolk, even a vampire...

The Malefic Dragonkin proudly let Jake through the room as the many women directed their gazes at Jake, making him feel awkward.

“If you see any you like...” Draskil said with a grin as he turned to Jake.

Jake didn’t even give him a response but kept a stoic face as he tried very hard not to look anywhere. Oh yeah, had Jake forgotten to mention that less than half of these women wore any clothes whatsoever?

Luckily, they soon reached what in Jake’s mansion was the laboratory, but Jake quickly saw that Draskil had transformed it into a training chamber. On the topic of the layout of the mansions, Draskil’s wasn’t entirely like Jake’s, but it was pretty similar. The most significant difference was that in the main mansion, Draskil had removed a number of walls to make a massive living room, and some of the other buildings around the place were different. Jake’s library was far bigger, too, something he was certain Villy was the cause of.

“Really? Not interested in any of them?” Draskil turned and asked the moment they entered the training chamber. “I didn’t want to say anything out there when they could hear, but that is kind of cold; a lot of them seemed excited when I said I would have a human friend over. It isn’t like they need to know who you really are or anything like that.”

“No, I am not interested,” Jake quickly made clear. “And... who are all those women?”

“None of them are slaves if that’s what you are asking,” Draskil said as he took a seat on a sofa off to the side of the chamber. “They are chicks I met, liked, and asked to come back to my place and stay around. They come and go as they like.”

Man, is having a damn harem really that common? Jake asked himself as he also went over and took a seat in a chair.

“I wasn’t accusing you of anything; I was just curious,” Jake said with a sigh, now beginning to doubt his plan of having Draskil distract Helen. He seriously doubted the proud dragonkin woman would want to be one in an army of mistresses.

“Yeah, so don’t worry, a lot of them seemed interested when I mentioned you,” Draskil once more made clear. “Though a lot also aren’t, as they prefer a more... scaled companion. Though I guess with Scales of the Malefic Viper, you cou-“

“That isn’t what I came here for,” Jake quickly shut Draskil down.

“Oh yeah, it is about that dragon woman, Helen, right?” Draskil asked with a grin. “You decided to take her up on the offer and take her as your woman? Or is it the opposite, that she won’t take no for an answer and leave you alone?”

“Primarily the latter,” Jake answered as he roughly explained the situation of how Helen had approached Meira to get close to her and learn about Jake plus whatever backer he may have.

After Jake was done explaining, Draskil just looked at him weirdly. “And?”

“And what?” Jake asked, confused.

“I don’t see the problem here. Helen goes to the elf girl, helps and befriends the elf girl, and just wants some information in return. What is your issue here? Sounds like it is a win for both and the elf if the elf girl knows how to keep a secret,” Draskil shrugged.

“It is about the intentions,” Jake made clear. “That someone close to me got led behind the light and used to try and get to me.”

“Everyone uses everyone; that is how things work,” Draskil shook his head. “You think those women out there all like me for who I am? Fuck no, they like that I have a Divine Blessing, that I am a Malefic Dragonkin, and that I have a black token. Luckily for me, I do have all these things making at least half of them want to carry my offspring. It sounds like the elf girl only benefitted from this encounter, and if she only benefitted because someone wanted something from her, then who cares? As I said, everyone wants something from everyone.”

“And that is fine,” Jake clarified. “As long as those intentions are made clear beforehand and not hidden. If she had come to Meira and tried to bribe her or something, I really wouldn’t care, but this shady shit isn’t okay.”

Draskil just shrugged. “I still don’t see the big deal, but sure, if you don’t like it, you don’t like it. So, why did you want to meet me, and what do you think I can do about it?”

“I don’t want to reveal myself as the Chosen quite yet, but I still want to throw some weight around. With my lesser Blessing, I don’t have much clout, but with your Divine Blessing, the Emberflight might

just decide to listen and back off,” Jake explained. “Plus... if I can get Helen to be less interested in me and more interested in you...”

A smile toothy smile broke out on Draskil’s face. “I wouldn’t complain, though she seems like the type of woman who would demand to be the wife and not just another mistress. She is from the Emberflight, after all.”

“Who knows, maybe she has her own harem already,” Jake smiled and shook his head.

“Doubt it when she has a Bloodline. The faction wouldn’t wanna risk her making a dumb emotional decision and getting knocked up by someone unvetted,” Draskil shook his head.

Jake considered for a moment and nodded. That kind of made sense. He had already suspected she was a honeytrap but based on all Draskil said, she seemed like a really high-level one. That is if she even was a honeytrap or just meant to set Jake up with someone else. Considering her talk of Jake having mistresses, Jake began to suspect it may be the latter. She was trying to offload a bunch of mistresses on him, wasn’t she? Entirely possible.

“But what do you want me to say or do specifically?” Draskil asked. “Would be weird if I just tagged along and told them to leave you alone because we are friends or something.”

“Say you came with orders from the higher-ups,” Jake said with a smile. “As a Chosen, I am technically your higher-up in the Order of the Malefic Viper, and it will play into me having a powerful backer within the Order itself. Someone able to even make someone with a Divine Blessing do something. Chances are they will also have someone or something capable of detecting lies present, which would only help us as you will technically be telling the truth.”

"Hm, could work," Draskil nodded. "What will our explanation be for you not wanting any chicks? I assume that will be what you want them to stop with, right?"

"That I am not interested and will wait until the time is right," Jake simply said. This, too, was the truth. Jake having any kids right now, even if he wanted to, would be an objectively bad idea if he wanted his kids to be as powerful as possible. It was best he did it when he reached the grade his race was meant to be. Humans were naturally considered at their peak when C-grade, so his reasoning was still a bit suspicious, but he believed it would still fly as the partner's race still mattered if they were of a higher-tier race.

Villy had also said that Jake should wait. Plus, the ultimate reason of all: Jake just wasn't interested.

"Seems like the kind of explanation some master who wants to remain anonymous, while still being extremely powerful, would give," Draskil smiled. "Fine, when do you want to head out? And how do you want us to act?"

"What do you mean want us to act?" Jake asked, a bit confused.

"Who is superior?" Draskil asked as if the question was obvious. "One party is always superior to the other. This is one of the Nine Dragonflight of the Draconian Accords here, not some minor faction. They will read into what we do."

"Hm," Jake considered. "If I am superior, it would indicate my backer is superior to someone with a Divine Blessing by quite a lot, and if you are superior, it would indicate my backer may not be as impressive. There is also some suspicion you may actually be the Chosen..."

Draskil just grinned at him saying that. “Ya could just come out as Chosen and tell them to fuck off.”

“Yeah, no,” Jake dismissed the idea. “I think we will go as equal friends as I don’t doubt they know we did a dungeon together.”

“To be viewed as an equal with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper,” Draskil said in a joking tone as he shook his head. “Fine. We can do it whenever you want.”

Jake smiled and nodded. “Thanks, mate.”

“You make it sound like I could reject you without being a moron,” Draskil shook his head. “Everyone wants something from everyone, and me helping you benefits me too much to turn this opportunity down.”

“I won’t complain that it is mutually beneficial,” Jake said and shrugged as he once more took out the token he had gotten from the Emberlight Clan and infused some energy into it. There was no response right away, and Jake chatted with Draskil for fifteen or so minutes before the token finally reacted. Jake infused his energy once more as a connection formed.

“Hunter... or should I say, Mr. Thayne. It gladdens me to finally hear from you,” he heard Helen’s voice through the token.

“You have done quite a lot to get my attention and get a meeting, haven’t you? Fine, you got one.”

Chapter 604 - The Most Important Aspects Of Culture

Jake and Draskil left Draskil's residence soon after, with the Malefic Dragonkin making sure Jake once more walked through and saw his entire damn harem that Jake was pretty sure had grown by a few people in the short time they were in the chamber.

The conversation with Helen had been short and matter-of-fact, with Jake wanting to finally set up a damn meeting. He honestly hadn't cared where it was, so he didn't question when Helen proposed meeting at one of the local headquarters of the Emberflight Dragonflight. It was only after Jake had already agreed and planned to meet Helen to take them there that he became aware of where they were going.

He came to learn that the Emberflight Clan apparently had quite the local presence on the Great Planet known as Primordial-4, right in the vicinity of the Order. Close enough so that there were teleporters between the Order and the land controlled by the Dragonflight nearby, though they were locked for anyone, not of the Dragonflight.

The place they were supposed to hold the meeting was called Firebound City. From what Jake had gathered – by asking Draskil – the leader of this Firebound City was a dragon god from the main clan who resided on something called the Firebound Peak close to the city.

Yes, their names were less than imaginative. Jake blamed the translation skill.

As they prepared to teleport away, Draskil turned to him. "What happens if you piss off one of their elders or something, and they decide to just kill us? Or, well, at the very least, kill you."

Jake just shook his head. "Well, then that would suck, so let's hope that doesn't happen."

Chances also are Villy would take that as an opportunity to show himself and force Jake to reveal his identity. Not that Jake would disagree with that approach, as he found being known as the Chosen publicly a slightly preferable fate to being dead.

“Would suck,” Draskil agreed as the two of them teleported towards the common area they would meet Helen in. When they appeared, Jake instantly spotted the dragonkin woman in his sphere, but he also noticed her aura.

She hadn’t evolved to C-grade yet.

[Dragonkin – lvl 199]

Jake also got an idea as he looked at her. His Identify skill had upgraded to also allow him to see if people had Blessings, but Jake didn’t use it normally due to not really needing to. A lot of people could detect when someone used Identify on them, and a lot of skills protected the user from Identify. The less information one tried to Identify, the easier it was to do and the harder it was to discover. Hence, his default was not to also look if people had Blessings or try to see what else he could get out of the Identify skill. Finally, it was kind of considered rude by some to just go around Identifying people all the time.

Of course, with it being Helen, he didn’t really care about offending her, so he gave his improved Identify a try.

[Dragonkin – lvl 199 – Intermediate Blessing of Matriarch Fireplume Emberflight]

“Hey, Draskil,” Jake sent telepathically. “You know who a god named Matriarch Fireplume Emberflight is?”

The dragonkin looked at him briefly. “The Grand Elder of Firebound Peak, the place we are going. She is the de facto leader of this branch of the Emberflight and one of their Matriarchs. Don’t tell me this girl is blessed by a Matriarch of the Emberflight?”

Jake threw Draskil a smile and looked toward Helen.

By now, she had spotted them, and Jake saw the surprise on her face. Not just from seeing he had evolved to C-grade, but from Draskil being with him. Oh yeah, he didn’t bother telling her he would bring a friend along either.

He waited for her to approach, and it didn’t take long for her to walk over. “I congratulate Mr. Thayne for reaching C-grade. The same to you, Lord Draskil; I apologize for not having prepared for you to join too.”

The way she spoke them made it clear she viewed Draskil as someone of higher status. Sure, they wanted more from Jake than the dragonkin, but they also seemed to be under the impression that offending Draskil was worse than offending Jake.

“Why would I reject orders from above when they’re to help a friend?” Draskil smartly answered.

I am pretty damn sure he has gotten smarter since reaching C-grade... or maybe he has just finally integrated and learned stuff about the world, Jake thought. One thing was for sure, Draskil had become a lot more articulate... in most circumstances.

“Also, when I heard it was to meet you, I at least knew there would be something pleasant around to look at,” he added needlessly.

“Charmed,” Helen simply nodded, though she seemed to care more about his first sentence. “Bringing both should be no issues. Ah, I also forgot to mention that Albaromoz Emberflight will join us. I am sure you remember him as the one you attended a lesson on Soulflames from.”

“So, the elders are getting involved directly, huh?” Jake asked rhetorically. Jake remembered that this Albaromoz – not that he remembered the name – was an A-grade, someone quite unexpected to see in this kind of discussion.

“Only he and I are known by you from the Emberflight, so we thought it the simplest,” Helen answered with a smile as she motioned for them to follow.

It totally wasn’t a weird mix of intimidation tactics, having someone around who could probe him, and a show of respect. It was totally just because Jake had seen the guy once before.

Draskil didn’t say anything but just followed behind. Soon enough, they reached another kind of teleporter than the usual gates used by the Order. This was one capable of teleporting out of the Order and over greater distances, though it required a key of sorts based on the destination.

Helen naturally had this key as she took out a token that looked a bit like the one she had given Jake. He felt it give off some energy, and he planned on using their time queuing to study it a bit closer. Something that did not come to pass. The queue was long, and Helen clearly did not want to wait as she began acting like an entitled princess.

“Excuse me, could there be made way? I am on an important task to escort guests by order of the Emberflight Clan,” she spoke loudly to those ahead, loud enough for all in the queue to hear.

The others in the queue turned to her and, upon seeing the token, began giving way. Clearly, no one wanted to offend this young mistress, especially not after noticing she was with Jake and Draskil – a Malefic Dragonkin. Jake even heard some whispers from someone with a minor Blessing of the Malefic Viper that Jake and Draskil were both blessed.

Helen proudly walked forward onto the platform as she motioned for Jake and Draskil to join her with a bright smile. She looked back at Jake and Draskil before frowning.

Jake and Draskil hadn’t moved an inch. Draskil, because he was with Jake, and Jake, out of pure fucking embarrassment.

What the actual fuck, Jake thought.

The others in the queue who had given way stared at him and Draskil as they stood before the open path to the teleporter. Jake just mentally yelled at Helen and praised the fact he was wearing a mask before collecting himself and looking at Helen.

“We aren’t in a rush, so get back here and respect the queue.”

Jake hadn't been raised to skip queues just because he was impatient. Only true assholes didn't respect the culture of queuing. If Jake hadn't liked Helen before, he sure as hell didn't now after learning she didn't respect one of the most important social norms in the civilized world. What would society be if people couldn't even stand in a line properly?

Helen looked perplexed back at Jake, but he saw a flash of anger and shame in her eyes soon after as she gritted her teeth and slowly walked back towards them.

"Dude, you are so much better at this politics stuff than me; that was such a powerplay. Have you also been taking classes?" Draskil sent to him telepathically as he flashed him an approving smile.

Jake didn't even comment on it but waited for Helen to come back and join them. They stood for another fifteen minutes in awkward silence, with only Draskil trying to make some small talk before it was their turn, and Helen once more took out the token and activated it. The teleporter charged up for a good thirty seconds before they teleported away without any words exchanged.

The teleportation itself was smooth as could be, and soon enough, they arrived on a large platform. Sunlight and fresh air washed over Jake as they found themselves standing on a large platform that extended out from what looked like a massive palace in the center. A palace clearly not built for those of human size.

Raising his head, he saw more platforms were higher up, with some of them having creatures lying on them. True Dragons.

"Welcome to Firebound City," Helen said, having regained some of her composure upon entering her home turf. "I am not from here originally, but I was sent here by the main branch due to my Bloodline and talent in alchemy and was taken under the wing of Grand Elder Fireplume and given her Blessing, so I have called this place home for the last few decades."

She spoke with a lot of pride and looked at Jake and Draskil as if they should be impressed. Jake was about to ask if this Fireplume would join them for their discussion but stopped himself. Gods joining in on conversations like this wasn't really a thing. Usually, Villy was just weird and liked to get involved.

"So, where are we going to hold our meeting?" Jake just asked, not commenting on her bragging. One good thing about his publicly known Bloodline being about resisting presences was that he had an excuse to not be affected by stuff like the many dragons above and Helen's intimidation tactics.

Her mood dropped a bit, but she quickly regained her gusto. "If Mr. Thayne desires to head straight for a meeting, we can do that. A tour of the city would also be—"

"Just the meeting room, thanks," Jake rejected the offer. He wasn't there to make friends.

"Very well, then please follow me," Helen said and turned her back to lead them into the main palace. Jake saw her grimace through his sphere as she no-doubt cursed him beneath her breath.

Draskil looked around curiously, and a few of the powerful dragons above also directed their attention down at Jake and the Malefic Dragonkin. Jake's buddy nodded up at a few of them, potentially even having a few telepathic exchanges here and there.

Following Helen, they indeed did enter the main palace. From the outside, the structure had already been massive, but inside it was even bigger as it spatially expanded. Once inside, he also saw that it was a massive atrium of sorts, everything made in huge sizes to accommodate dragons staying in their true forms. Only on the higher floors, though. Towards the bottom, things took on a more reasonable size, and it was also down there they would have their meeting.

Once they made it down, Jake felt a presence approach from above. He looked up and saw a dragon several hundred meters long fly down toward them. Its red scales glistened from the sunlight above, and its form practically radiated power and heat. The presence was a familiar one, and Jake realized it was the aforementioned Albaromoz.

This was clearly another display of power, as there was frankly no logical reason for him to swoop down in dragon form like this while blaring his presence all over them. The dragon landed gracefully, and his body rapidly began to shrink, and a red flash of light later, a dragonkin stood before them.

“We meet once more, young Bloodline Patriarch,” Albaromoz said with a smile as he walked forward to greet him and Draskil. “I am also pleasantly surprised to see an esteemed Malefic Dragonkin join.”

Draskil nodded to the true dragon, Helen standing at the side with a pleased smile. Until Jake spoke.

“I guess I got you to thank for this entire mess, don’t I?” Jake sighed. “Let’s just head to the meeting room, okay?”

Albaromoz did not seem even slightly offended as he simply nodded and took out a token. Jake felt the space distort around him as he was forcefully teleported along with Draskil and Helen. They all appeared before a door with heavy enchantments on it, one of which made it automatically open.

The true dragon was the first to enter, and he invited Jake and Draskil inside, with Helen entering last. Even something as small as entering a damn room had to be politicized by these people. The same was true for whom took a seat first, but this time they allowed Jake and Draskil to sit first, Draskil thanking the dragon for the courtesy.

Once they were all sitting, Albaromoz spoke. "This meeting was on quite short notice, so please excuse me if I am not fully up-to-date on what the issue may be. Could the Bloodline Patriarch explain to me why he wanted this meeting?"

Jake nodded as he looked at Helen. "Let me first ask Helenstromoz why she decided to approach my attendant Meira and get close to her?"

The true dragon looked at the younger dragonkin as she nodded and spoke. "As per our introductory meeting, I was to leave you alone and approach your backer in order to facilitate any agreements. In order to find out who this backer was, I decided to ask someone who may know who the backer was and have information about who you are to learn more about Mr. Thayne in general. That is why I approached one of your mistresses upon identifying her and-"

"Not my mistress," Jake shut her down. "I don't have any mistresses."

For some fucking reason, this was the thing Jake had done that day that seemed to stump her the most. Even the damn A-grade dragon seemed surprised at his answer, with only Draskil letting out a chuckle.

"My friend here comes from a place where taking mistresses is not common practice, even for the strong, and he doesn't have any interest in the practice," Draskil came in with the assist, only to ruin it right after. "His culture leaned towards monogamy, so he doesn't want any women he can't turn into wives introduced."

Jake glared at Draskil. The dragonkin looked confused back at Jake, making him let a sigh as the dragonkin did not look like he would correct the error.

“Not... exactly. I am not interested in any relationships right now. At all,” Jake said clearly.

“Oh yeah,” Draskil tried to save it. “As per the higher-ups, he isn’t to take any wives or anything like that before the time is right.”

A lot better, Jake thought.

“If I may ask, who are these higher-ups?” Albaromoz asked.

“You aren’t qualified to know,” Draskil simply answered.

The true dragon then turned to Jake. “And when do you believe that it is the right time for you to spread your Bloodline?”

“I don’t know,” Jake answered honestly. Good thing too. He felt a probing from something that impacted his Shroud, and Jake quickly recognized it and let it through. It was a lie-detecting skill of some kind, and Jake didn’t doubt he had also used it on Draskil.

“Hm,” Albaromoz said with a frown. “This may be overstepping, but would the Bloodline Patriarch and his backer be interested in still discussing potential future plans? While the time may not be right now, perhaps we can reach an agreement still. We value the Patriarch’s Bloodline highly and would be more than willing to offer plentiful compensation. Including offering assistance for you to progress and hopefully even reach B-grade. Perhaps even A-grade.”

“No, we will not discuss such potential agreements,” Jake shook his head. “My backer has already made it clear that I should not make any long-term commitments when it comes to anything with my Bloodline.”

The true dragon kept frowning but didn't look annoyed, just frustrated. Jake kind of got it. The Emberflight was powerful, and if any normal person was offered assistance from them, they would happily agree. Jake's backer, whom they assumed to be S-grade, would also view it as an absolute win in nearly all cases, which probably made Jake's rejection a bit confusing. Sadly for them, they truly didn't have anything Jake wanted.

After thinking for a while, Albarmoz sighed and smiled at Jake. “I understand. You carry a heavy responsibility as a Bloodline Patriarch, and passing down your Records is no not something done without thought. The offer is a standing one.”

Jake nodded at the true dragon, feeling like he had finally had some progress. Said true dragon then turned to Draskil.

“I wonder why the young Malefic Dragonkin decided to participate in this meeting?”

“Orders from above,” Draskil explained for the second time that day. “It was also an opportunity I would not want to miss.”

“Oh?” the true dragon asked.

Draskil made a toothy grin. "I may not be a Bloodline Patriarch, but unlike my friend here, I come from a far more free-spirited world."

Jake mentally gave his dragonkin buddy a thumbs-up. A great misdirect to make them focus on him instead of Jake. While Jake was the prize they wanted... Draskil wouldn't be bad to forge a relationship with, either.

"Thayne here has a mindset of his own and took offense to the actions of Lady Emberflight, but I personally do not see the issue, and neither does my Patron or my teacher. In fact, I find her approach admirable and fully acceptable," Draskil laid it on thick, and Jake saw the attention of the true dragon focus more on him. Helen also looked at Draskil, albeit a bit suspiciously.

That is when Jake pulled out his ultimate trump card.

"Oh," Jake suddenly exclaimed as he quickly took out his black token, acting all surprised. "I apologize; matters have come up that I will have to attend to promptly. I hope that Draskil can help smooth over any other potential issues that may appear, and if not, it was nice to meet you two again."

"How unfortunate timing," the true dragon said in a suspicious tone.

Draskil quickly cut in to assist. "I, too, have been made aware... and this matter includes someone higher-up in the Order than myself or even my teacher. From the very top."

Albaromoz seemed surprised at Draskil's grave tone, and he looked at Jake apologetically. "I wish the Patriarch a fortunate day and hope all goes well. Would you like for me to help you to the teleportation circle?"

Jake hid a smile as he tried to look serious while he stood up and used a second trump card. "Villy, can you beam me up without them knowing it is you? Ah, but do make it divine-like."

Villy was, of course, on board as Jake answered. "No need."

Without further ado, Jake felt Villy's amusement as he acted, teleporting Jake away in the very next moment – through all the enchantments and defenses of the Emberlight Clan.

Chapter 605 - Complicated Confusions & Blowing Off Steam Time

The meeting room was silent for several seconds as Albaromoz stared at the spot where the Bloodline Patriarch had disappeared from. No, he had been teleported away. For a moment, the dragon had felt a divine presence before the teleportation, making so many questions appear in his head, but it did dispel one doubt.

Albaromoz felt ashamed of even questioning the urgency of the Bloodline Patriarch's issue. He had thought it was just one of the oldest tricks in the book that people used to get out of meetings early, something he himself had even done several times. However, it clearly was something far more serious than Albaromoz could understand when it was deemed necessary for a god to directly interfere and assist in bringing the Patriarch back. That meant it was a situation where every second mattered.

But... Albaromoz was still perplexed. Why was the Bloodline Patriarch even involved in something of such importance? Who was the god that had acted? Likely his backer.

The formation used to defend Firebound City was created in part by Patron Fireplume herself, a powerful god in the seventh circle of divinity. For someone to so effortlessly teleport a mortal without even triggering an alarm or their presence being recognizable... they had to at least be of the same level or perhaps a god specialized in space magic.

"Uncle... what just happened?" Helenstromoz asked, having also felt the divine presence.

"Something far out of our league," Albaromoz said with certainty. One thing he knew now was that the Bloodline Patriarch had far more to him than the Emberflight had initially concluded. Sure, they recognized he had a powerful Bloodline, and Helenstromoz even admitted it was more powerful than her own, but that had been it. He had just been a junior who carried something valuable with an unknown S-grade backer.

But now... now Albaromoz was not so sure. We may have severely underestimated the Bloodline, he considered, especially as it seemed like the secrecy around it was enough for gods to get involved. Luckily for the Emberflight, they were not entirely cut off from the Patriarch. They had an in right there in the meeting room.

"Lord Draskil, would you be willing to shed any light on what happened?" Albaromoz asked the Malefic Dragonkin.

"I apologize; I am not," the young dragonkin answered. The question was asked very specifically if he would be willing to, not if Draskil was able to. It seems their appearance of friendship was not entirely a ruse, he concluded with his lie-detecting skill.

Albaromoz nodded in understanding. "May I ask how long you have known the Bloodline Patriarch?"

“Met him when we entered the Order,” Draskil answered honestly. “We both carried the Blessing of the Malefic One and were two of the most powerful there, so it would have been odd for us not to talk.”

“I see,” Albaromoz kept nodding, the answer making sense. “I heard you two even went on a dungeon dive together.”

“We did,” Draskil confirmed.

“You are both from the new universe, so you two bonding shouldn’t come as a surprise. Do tell, how are you integrating with the Order?” Albaromoz asked.

Draskil just grinned in response. “A needless question.”

Smiling, the true dragon thought for a bit. “I must say, I have not encountered any Malefic Dragonkin before you. Your race is incredibly rare, and I am rather curious.”

The malefic dragonkin’s grin just intensified. “Isn’t it a bit early to ask such a question? Though maybe I would share with Lady Emberflight... she did offer a tour of the city earlier; is that still available? I am sure plenty of conversation would happen during that.”

Looking over at Helenstromoz, she simply nodded. “I had my day cleared for this meeting, and seeing the unfortunate departure of Mr. Thayne, there is no reason to decline.”

Good answer, child, Albaromoz approved. "This old one shall take his leave then. May you two have fun and enjoy your time."

While they had not achieved their goal, getting closer to a Malefic Dragonkin with a Divine Blessing wasn't a bad thing either. It was unfortunate he had joined the Order of the Malefic Viper fully, making it impossible to recruit him, but it still offered the opportunity of strengthening the bond between the Emberflight and the Order.

Saying his goodbyes to leave the young ones to talk, he left the room and began making his way toward the Firebound Peak. He had not been called there, which mattered a lot due to what had just happened, as that meant his Patron had not detected the teleportation. Either way, he knew he would have to report as this matter had transcended above anything he, as a mortal, should be in charge of.

After considering the situation, Albaromoz reached his conclusion and would report it. The Emberflight had been under the interpretation that the Bloodline Patriarch was backed by an S-grade... but now, that was practically disproved. That still left the question of why the Malefic One would be the one having blessed him, but Albaromoz did see two scenarios where that could be possible.

The first was that he was backed by one of the hidden gods. Recently, Albaromoz had heard rumors that many gods had returned to the Order of the Malefic Viper, rejoining the Malefic One. Many of these gods were notorious figures, some hunted by major factions or powerful individuals, and some outright viewed as cursed creatures to be killed on sight. Perhaps it was even a vampire god, which fit both these descriptions to many. If the Bloodline Patriarch had carried the Blessing of one of these shunned gods, it would have led to many questions and potential issues. Many of them preferred to stay hidden to the level of never giving out Blessings to even hide the fact they were even alive.

This was the explanation that made the most sense to Albaromoz. It fit quite nicely, and even the timing seemed right, though no one besides the gods truly knew when these hidden gods rejoined. It also made sense to bless him with a lower Blessing as it was just a mark to communicate to other gods to not

try and bless him. Finally, the fact the Patriarch had not joined the Order fully backed this even more as many hidden gods were still individuals and were more just working with the Viper than outright subordinates.

Though there was one other option that was technically also possible. One that did not include any hidden gods but one that was more than well-known. Based on how the young human acted, the progress he displayed, his presence, Identify-obscuring skills, and his ability to have a Malefic Dragonkin with a Divine Blessing essentially work for him... this option was preposterous, but it was possible, if barely.

If either option proved true, it meant they would have to act far more carefully and not antagonize him in any way. Especially if the second hypothesis of Albaromoz was true:

That he was the rumored Chosen of the Malefic Viper.

The problem was that they didn't know... and without knowing, Albaromoz was lost as to what they could do without potentially making a huge mistake or pissing someone off even the main clan of the Emberflight couldn't deal with.

"They looked so spooked," Villy smiled, shaking his head.

"I do think that went pretty damn well," Jake also grinned, looking at the recording of the dragons just sitting there staring at the place Jake had disappeared from. "Though it was a bit risky, wasn't it? Is there a chance they can find out you were behind the teleportation?"

“Nah, no chance unless the Grand Matriarch from the main clan of the Emberflight herself had been present when it happened. Even then, she would only have been able to detect it happening while not necessarily knowing who did it,” Villy dismissed Jake’s concern. “Now, that would probably let her know it was me through the process of elimination, as not many can do that in her presence, but this Fireplume isn’t exactly a top-tier god, so no worries.”

“Aight,” Jake said, a bit relieved. He knew it was a gamble to do all this, but he believed it would work out well. At the very least, it would sow a lot of doubt in their minds and make them apprehensive. At the same time, he had given them a distraction in the form of Draskil, making them focus on him instead. Getting on good terms with him should be something they wanted, and Jake had also tacitly given his approval to use Draskil to try and learn stuff about Jake. Plus, Jake had noticed the way Draskil stared at Helen’s tail... so clearly, the dragonkin approved.

“You will have to come out as my Chosen eventually,” Villy then said. “At some point, you will stand out too much and have too much attention on you. Something will slip, and once just a few people realize, the dam of concealment will break, and the knowledge will spread like an unstoppable flood.”

“I am aware, but I can still try and delay it as long as possible by trying to haphazardly duct-tape all the cracks on the dam,” Jake said, playing into the metaphor.

“Up to you, but I do think you are overexaggerating the problems it will bring,” Villy shrugged. “Though I guess I can see how it would annoy all those around you.”

“That is my main concern. I can handle it, but Meira, Reika, and anyone I would ever bring from Earth would be swept up in the flood,” Jake said.

“If you make sure they are well-prepared and give them life vests beforehand-”

“Okay, I think we can stop with the metaphor,” Jake interrupted the Viper. “Anyway, I decided to delay, and I am sticking to that decision.”

“Not gonna lie, I had kind of hoped you would fuck up and reveal yourself,” Villy said in a joking tone. “Sadly, the damn dragons didn’t cross any lines or annoy you too much. Oh well, there is always Nevermore.”

“Nevermore?” Jake questioned. “What do you mean?”

“I told you there are events at Nevermore, but they are more competitions. There are rankings and stuff. Tell me, are you planning on going there and being mediocre or doing your damn best to try and go as far as you possibly can?”

“The latter, duh,” Jake said without any hesitation.

“So, don’t you think someone will question why this random guy with a lesser Blessing from the Malefic Viper shows up with someone carrying a Divine Blessing from Aeon, a bird with a Divine Blessing from Stormild, a Unique Lifeform, and whoever else you get to go?” Villy asked pointedly.

“That... may be a good point,” Jake said.

“No matter what, there will be a spotlight on you, and I don’t see you remaining in the shadows with that much exposure,” Villy shrugged. “I am also surprised you didn’t ask the Malefic Dragonkin if he wanted to join you for Nevermore.”

Jake opened his mouth to respond before slowly closing it again.

“You forgot to ask him, didn’t you?”

“I got distracted by politics,” Jake defended himself.

“Good thing either way, as it would put him in an awkward spot to reject you,” the Viper said with a nod.

“Huh? He already got a group?” Jake asked in surprise.

“While the Order does not require much of its members, representing it in places like Nevermore is expected of them. A full team of people from the Order of the Malefic Viper will naturally be formed, and Draskil is one of the strongest of this generation, so naturally, he will go with other Order members. Even if you were revealed as my Chosen, your performance in Nevermore would be colored by those you go with, and it would never be called a group from the Order,” the Viper explained.

“Didn’t know that was a thing,” Jake confessed. “But it does make sense; I just didn’t know the Order cared much about the social credit doing well at Nevermore would bring.”

“It helps with recruitment and to establish that the Order is still powerful, especially now that we are making a comeback.”

“Fair,” Jake nodded. “Oh well, thanks for the assist with the Emberflight.”

“What would you have done if I hadn’t bothered teleporting you away?” Villy asked teasingly.

“I know you would, as you would find it amusing, and besides, with how you are constantly stalking me through your little livestream, I damn well expect some kind of payment for the broadcasting rights,” Jake said with a grin.

“Touche,” the Viper admitted defeat. “So, what are you up to now? Back to experimenting with cores?”

Jake thought for a moment before shaking his head. “Maybe I should, but no. I just spent an entire damn day dealing with annoying politics and getting asked about mistresses on three separate occasions. I am bloody exhausted. I need to blow off some steam.”

“I am already feeling sorry for them. Poor termites, just wanting to live peacefully in their hive when the big bad hunter arrives to steal their lives and their cores,” the Viper shook his head in a dramatic way.

“Sadly, it is the cycle of life. They failed to kill me the last time I invaded, and now I am coming back with fury to get my revenge. It is inevitable,” Jake said, joining in on the dramatics.

“Then go, my Chosen, carry out justice in the name of the Malefic One and make my will a reality!” Villy said, holding back a laugh.

“But I am mainly doing it for the loot,” Jake said in a deadpan voice.

“As I, the Malefic One, willed it,” Villy said, grinning. “Now be off and have fun killing insects for a while. But remember to not overdo it with the levels. I feel like I have to keep reminding you, considering your forgetful nature. Oh, and if you decide to create another Sin weapon with apocalyptic properties, do it intentionally this time, alright?”

“No promises,” Jake teased as he jumped off the couch. “And I am not that forgetful. Shit, I even remember that I have to go by Arnold to drop off the things he ordered.”

“I am so proud,” the Viper said without a trace of emotion.

“Ass,” Jake shook his head. “See you around; I do plan on coming back here in not that long and continuing work on the ritual.”

“Have fun committing termite genocide,” Villy said as he disappeared. Jake walked out of the living room and headed towards the teleporter to get back to Earth. On the way, he sent a quick thank-you to Draskil for the help.

Teleporting back to Earth, Jake appeared in the underground laboratory where he had set up the circle last time. Having nothing to do in Haven, Jake quickly made his way out of the laboratory and began One Stepping towards the Fort. Could he have used the teleportation circle? Yes, but honestly, just using One Step was about as fast, and it allowed him not to stand in queue for the teleporter and avoid people altogether.

His not teleporting could be compared to how one couldn't be arsed to take the car just to pop down to the corner store a hundred meters from home. Maybe it would be slightly faster, but it felt superfluous.

Soon enough, he was at the Fort, and Jake headed straight for the big metal dome Arnold called home. As he approached the Fort, he felt something observe him, and he knew it was whatever monitoring Arnold had set up. This was pretty much confirmed by a hole in the metal dome opening up for Jake to enter through as he got close.

Jake had already seen Arnold with his Sphere and went to the massive workshop to meet the craftsman. Walking in, Jake spoke as soon as he saw Arnold.

"Hey, Arnold, I brought those things you asked about," Jake said with a big smile, feeling a bit proud of himself.

Arnold turned to him. "Good, then I can restart the delayed project."

His response instantly made Jake feel bad about his tardiness, and he scratched his head. "Yeah, sorry for the delay; I have had a lot going on."

Arnold just nodded. "Please follow me to the storeroom."

Jake did as asked, and they soon made it to a massive underground vault. He was about to ask why Arnold didn't just store the things in a spatial storage but soon got the answer. The vault was not only there for safekeeping but was far more complicated. Magical formations lined the walls, and the entire

thing was practically overflowing with mana, infusing all the items within. It was like a greenhouse for metals.

Dropping off all the things took a while as Arnold categorized each item and ensured they were stored in the right place. Some of the items, like the two Meira had pointed out from the Altmar Empire, he did store in his personal storage.

Once they were done, Arnold seemed satisfied and looked at Jake. "Would you be interested in inspecting the Nanoblade? It is completed to a satisfactory degree."

Jake smiled. "Who would say no to that?"

Chapter 606 - Blackpoint Nanoblade

Jake liked loot. Who didn't like loot? Wait, did getting a weapon from a craftsman even count as loot, as he technically didn't loot it off anything? Jake wasn't sure, but he kind of hoped it did, and if it didn't, he just refused to care and still classified it as getting loot.

Arnold escorted Jake back to the workshop and led him toward one of the walls that contained a large locked case. Jake could already see inside using his sphere and saw the weapon within, but he waited for Arnold to open it properly. Because there was one thing bothering Jake... it looked like the tip of the katar in the box was broken.

"The Nanoblade is still considered a work in progress, and constant iterations keep being made, with this being the newest deployable version," Arnold explained as he opened the case. The moment he did so, Jake saw the weapon in its full glory.

The Nanoblade had now been attached to a handle to make it into a katar, and the design of the blade itself had changed a lot. Rather than being a single-edged cutting weapon, it was now a proper stabber, with thin edges on both sides, though that did mean Arnold had to add some more bulk to the middle. The blade was around the same length as his Eternal Hunger, so that was nice. It made sense as Arnold had based the design on the mythical weapon.

The handle was of a single design and did not include any guard, but the part he held with his hand still seemed a bit thick. The entire thing was of a grayish color, except for one part that really stood out: the tip of the blade.

It was pitch-black. Not normal black, but the kind of impossible black that made no damn sense. It looked impossibly dense, yet at the same time, Jake felt he could stare straight through like it was translucent. However, more than anything, it showed up weirdly in his sphere. Like there wasn't a physical tip but that it was just made of pure energy.

Using Identify, he got some clues as to what was going on.

[Blackpoint Nanoblade Katar (Ancient)] – A katar with a nanoblade made of a composite alloy formed into an ultra-thin blade. The blade itself can cut most materials effortlessly but has little to no effectiveness against magical wards or defenses when not infused with mana. The tip of the blade appears to have been touched by the void. A coating on the blade allows it to have an incredibly high level of mana conductivity and can handle most types of mana. The handle contains a series of energy cores capable of storing mana of any affinity. This stored energy can all be released at once through the tip of the Nanoblade. . Enchantments: Extreme Conductivity. Blackpoint Burst. Requirements: lvl 200+ in any humanoid race

The rarity surprised him, as Jake had not expected anything this good. There were a lot of parts at play, but Jake very much suspected this rarity came to be primarily because of that tip. Jake was about to ask more about the weapon, but Arnold began speaking without being asked.

“This version of the Nanoblade integrates far more concepts than any prior iterations and has moved away from Altmar-based methodology to one not fitting any set category. The blade is more durable than ever and has been strengthened through the merging of eleven metals and coating it with an improved version of the old aluabsorbant for improved mana conductivity and to facilitate the Blackpoint functionality of the weapon,” Arnold explained in detail. He pointed to the tip of the blade and continued.

“Rather than focusing on potent single-edged cutting, this weapon is optimized for stabbing attacks, taking inspiration from my current work-in-progress speartips. Through methods I will not disclose, I was able to momentarily allow the tip of the blade to touch concepts related to the void, allowing it to far more easily penetrate any matter. Make note that is all it does, and it has no inherent void-based abilities. However, as long as the rest of the blade retains integrity, the tip will never lose sharpness and remain virtually indestructible.

“Finally, there is the handle. Due to the design of the katar compared to a sword, I was able to make more use of it as I have inlaid energy cores capable of storing mana, including your arcana mana. This mana can then be unleashed through the tip of the Nanoblade, resulting in an explosion. It is heavily advised you activate the Blackpoint Burst enchantment after the successful insertion of the blade into your target for optimal damage unleashed internally. Only the tip will be able to release the stored-up mana, as it is the most resilient part of the blade and able to handle the pressure applied upon it caused by the intense outburst of mana. This was a necessary limitation, especially if it is meant to handle your destructive arcane mana.”

Hearing Arnold talking about how causing mana explosions inside people was a recommended feature of the weapon was a bit funny, especially with how he said it so... objectively. Jake also considered the part about the tip being the only thing to handle the blast... an issue Jake didn't really have with Eternal Hunger. Destroying that weapon was just not a thing, especially as Jake could reform it if he somehow lost it.

“Can I pick it up?” Jake asked.

Arnold nodded. "The Nanoblade was created for you specifically, and I already view you as the owner of it."

Jake didn't hesitate as he lifted the katar out of the case. He grasped the handle and tried to move it around a bit. It didn't sit as well in his hand as Eternal Hunger, but that was only to be expected. The mythical weapon was able to adapt and change form to better suit him, after all.

"Initial thoughts?" Arnold asked.

"Feels okay, and the weight is balanced. However, I do need to ask about the durability of the blade as a whole. The last Nanoblade broke when I tried to block with it, and that proved quite problematic. How will this one stack up against serious brunt force?" Jake asked.

"The durability should be at a far higher relative level, but the Nanoblade is still ultimately designed with offensive power in mind, not defensive prowess. Blocking is still possible; however, attempt to do so with the tip. It may seem counterintuitive, but it will never chip, and the pressure put on the rest of the katar's internal structure will be mostly nullified, even reducing the force your body will suffer."

"How does that work?" Jake asked curiously.

"The void is the antithesis of matter, giving it innate nullifying capabilities. Any force hitting the tip that has been touched by the void will thus be partly nullified. The same happens when you are striking a foe, making the tip automatically nullify some of your opponent's defenses, thus making penetration far easier, especially against highly resilient foes," Arnold explained.

“I see,” Jake said, still not entirely sure how it worked conceptually. It was the kind of thing he would have to test in practice to truly understand. The mere fact it had anything to do with the void – a place only gods could go – meant it had to hold some interesting properties. Powerful properties.

“Wait,” Jake suddenly said as he had a thought. “The mana burst is released from the tip, right? Isn’t that counterproductive as it nullifies part of the mana?”

“The mana of the wielder is unaffected by the void concepts due to system-imposed natural laws,” Arnold simply answered.

“Ah, so system-fuckery makes it work,” Jake nodded in understanding.

Arnold looked at him, confused for a moment before understanding. “System-fuckery does strike me as an apt description for these often non-sensical and illogical rules applied by the system.”

“Does that mean we make that the official scientific term?” Jake asked with a grin.

“No,” Arnold said without even a moment of hesitation.

“Too bad, I would have trademarked it if you had said yes to make big money. Then again, trademarking a term that may or may not end up being commonly used seems like a major dickmove,” Jake joked.

Arnold did not deign him a response as he looked towards another spot in the workshop. "I have other projects underway, but nothing that is ready yet. With the materials provided today, I will be able to restart them. I currently estimate it will be a month before most are operational if you intend to inspect them before your journey to Nevermore."

"Speaking of Nevermore, are you going?" Jake asked.

"Yes," Arnold confirmed.

"Oh, do you have a group, or are you just doing the solo portions?"

"Plans have been made," Arnold answered, his tone making Jake guess he wouldn't get any specific information. He was curious about who the mad scientist could go with...

Oh well, he would find out eventually.

"Well, thanks for the blade, and let me know if you need another heavily-delayed shipment at another time," Jake said with a smile.

"In what form will you take the payment? Assuming there is an itemized list, I can--"

“No need; I see it as an investment,” Jake dismissed the scientist. Had the stuff been expensive? Yes. Was Jake still ridiculously loaded and could get access to near-infinite funds if he wanted to by being a Chosen or just selling alchemical goods? Yes, yes, he could.

“Very well,” Arnold said, not arguing with him at all. Kind of refreshing to not have someone do the old back-and-forth where he would insist on paying, and Jake would keep rejecting him.

“I am off now,” Jake said as he began making his way out of the workshop with the Nanoblade. “Gotta go test this bad boy on an army of termites.”

Arnold nodded as he turned his back and began walking towards a table, and the last thing Jake saw before he made his way out of the metal dome and into the air was Arnold taking out some of the things Jake had gotten him and beginning to tinker with them. Next destination: termite plains.

Jake took this travelling opportunity to finally let loose a little and push himself. The termite plains were quite a bit of distance away, so Jake had some time to truly test his speed. One Step and wings combined as Jake began flying and teleporting across the landscape, slowly picking up speed.

Momentum accumulated as he got into a rhythm. He flapped his wings and stepped down in an alternating matter, propelling him forward faster and faster. Air resistance soon began annoying him, an issue he didn't have while flying with Sylphie.

Experimenting a little, Jake formed a thin layer of stable arcane mana all over his body. On top of it, he then formed a layer of purely destructive energy intending to simply destroy the air which impeded him.

A peculiarity of Jake's Arcane Affinity had always been that the only thing his destructive mana could and would not even attempt to destroy was his stable mana. Usually, he relied on mixed energy, and the destructive parts would try to turn all the stable arcane energy into the destructive variant, but if one part was pure destruction and the other pure stability, they would simply not interact.

Jake felt proud of his anti-air resistance barrier but was a bit worried about the cost. He destroyed a lot of air mana and had to keep supplying the barrier, so he kept an eye on it. To his surprise and delight, he saw the mana cost be utterly negligible and nearly outpaced by his high mana regeneration.

Definitely wasn't like that in D-grade, Jake was sure. Having mana that was just qualitatively better was sure nice.

He kept doing many small experiments while traveling as he focused on his own body and methods of moving his energy. It was something he had neglected while busy doing alchemy, and only now he truly had time.

Time passed as Jake quickly sped through the land, putting any human-made transportation device ever made to shame. With air resistance nearly nullified, he could accelerate as if in a near-vacuum, though he did still experience some resistance as he simply couldn't destroy everything in his path fast enough.

Exactly how fast he was going, Jake didn't know. With his high Perception, his surroundings didn't even blur or get affected much, which oddly enough made him feel like he wasn't actually going that fast.

As for how he knew where to go... well, he had a nice guiding beacon. From up in the air, spotting the mountain with the frost wyvern on wasn't difficult – even if it was many thousands of kilometers away.

Speaking of the frost wyvern, no, Jake would not go after it. At least not before his underground dive. He still had to think about his levels as he seriously hoped the Sword Saint would soon evolve. Carmen, too, of course, though Jake suspected she wouldn't join them for Nevermore even if Jake wanted her to. She was part of Valhal, and based on what Villy had said, chances are she would go with a group from there. Of course, he would still ask and test her if she wanted to join him and the others from Earth.

The mountain got closer and closer, and soon he was near his destination. While Jake wasn't entirely sure how long time had passed before he spotted the insect plains, it couldn't have been more than a few hours. He began slowing down, finding it a bit harder than expected due to the sheer speed he had picked up. Dispelling the barrier, Jake was surprised as flames from pure friction actually formed across the still-active stable arcane barrier. It was unexpected, but it sure made him stop fast.

Standing in the air, Jake stared down before frowning. "It's... bigger?"

The insect plains had been huge, true, but not this huge. Looking around, Jake spotted the place he had fought the Fallen King after his rebirth and frowned. It's too far inside the plains.

There were also far more holes and mounds everywhere, making it clear the termites had expanded despite Jake killing so many during his last visit. This wasn't a good thing.

Jake had studied ectognamorphs a lot to prepare for the Bee Queen, and through his research, he had learned quite a lot about them. Most insect monsters were called ectognamorphs with a few exceptions, but when ectognamorphs were usually discussed, no one talked about the mantis or the dragonfly. They talked about insects with an already overpowered ability before the system: eusociality.

The ability to act as one to form what was essentially a superorganism. Ants, termites, bees. These were all insects that formed hives or colonies with set societal structures, with each hive capable of housing

countless individuals – all without true individuality. To these insects, they were not independent lifeforms but part of a greater whole.

After the system, as scary as it sounded, this hadn't changed. This resulted in these ectognamorphs not only being respected as powerful but also feared. Each colony needed resources to keep growing. The only true way to get these resources was through constant expansion. But, while in the old world, this would just result in big hives with impressive tunnel systems scientists found fascinating, it meant a potential apocalypse in this post-system world.

No one just spoke about a few plains being taken over. Continents, planets, solar systems, and entire galaxies could be consumed by a single hive that never stopped expanding.

Their only true limiting factor was the Queens. A common way for a hive to die was when the dominant Queen could not keep progressing or give birth to a new Queen with higher or similar talent.

That was one way for a hive to end... but there was one more way that was most often seen in a contested area. It was what happened when the hive was found before it could truly rise to power. What Jake was about to do:

Extermination from someone who decided they were too dangerous to let be.

Chapter 607 - Hive Dive Time

There was one good thing about exterminating ectognamorphs compared to other races. If someone wanted to wipe out a faction of humans, one had to kill every single one to be successful. Failing to do so risked that the survivors could keep reproducing and reviving the faction, with there even being a chance a talented individual could be born and make the faction more powerful than ever.

Such was not the case with ectognamorphs. Ectognamorphs needed a Queen to survive, and if all Queens died, so would the faction crumble. A common ant could not evolve into an ant Queen, so you could eliminate the entire faction as long as all of them were killed. So that is what Jake planned on doing. He usually didn't like killing things too weak to even give him experience, but this time he would make an exception.

Leaving a nest of this size so close to Haven and within the territory of Earth humans lived on was simply too risky, and he had a hunch that after the Prima Guardian ordeal, the limitations of where monsters could go on Earth would be removed entirely. If that were the case, Jake would prefer not to instantly hear news of millions of termites swarming nearby cities or, worse, attack them from below with both D and C-grades. As the new World Leader of Earth, he had to do some things to protect the planet, right?

Sure, Jake had only seen two C-grades the last time he had visited, but there was one other scary thing about ectognas – their rapid growth. Due to funneling so many resources into their leaders, they often leveled up fast, so Jake wouldn't be surprised if the Queen and Termite King he had encountered last time were now far more powerful.

Not that he was worried... because he had grown even more than he believed they possibly could have.

Jake flew down and landed on the ground right in front of one of the mounds. He knelt down and closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. As he breathed out, he unleashed his Sphere of Perception for a moment, getting a snapshot of everything a couple of hundred kilometers down into the hive. It was straining, but what appeared in his mind was a massive network with millions of termites everywhere. Moreover, the network expanded not just down more than two hundred kilometers but was also massive horizontally. Far larger than he could see even with his Pulse of Perception – as he had decided to call it.

He scanned the mental image quickly and located an area that stood out. Two, in fact. Egg chambers, one of them quite a lot further up than the other, with Jake suspecting the one further down was the one he had been to before. If there had come a new D-grade Queen or if he had just missed this

chamber last time while killing the other D-grade Queens, he didn't know, but what he did know was that both were in for a purging.

Jumping into a hole, Jake entered the tunnel system and just started running. He ignored anything in his way, not bothering with the termites at all. They were only F and E-grades at this layer, so they were not even worth his time to even look at. They would all die shortly if the Queens fell anyway.

Jake considered trying to just drill down or even use his newly gained Unblemished Arrows skill to see if he could just blow a massive hole in the ground, but he decided against it. Doing so would be far too time-consuming compared to just running through the tunnels. Ah, but he did create personal shortcuts here and there by blowing a hole through a wall or floor to enter another tunnel.

His utter lack of subtlety naturally made the termites aware of his invasion and put them on high alert. He didn't really care much about it as he didn't see much they could do about it, but he was soon proved wrong.

While running down a tunnel, he spotted that the path in front of him was now blocked. It had not been during his Pulse. Blasting a hole into the tunnel below, Jake ran through that for a bit until he hit another thick barrier of earth. No... more than that. The soil and stone had been strengthened magically to make it harder to break through, which made Jake realize what these damn termites were doing: they collapsed their tunnels to stop his descent.

Sneaky bastards.

Not that it would stop him.

He began breaking down more walls, blasting more floors apart, and continued his descent at a rapid speed. Termites tried to attack him, but none of them could do anything as they were simply too weak. Soon, he approached the area where D-grades could be, and this area was also where he would find his first egg chamber.

Beelining for it, he saw how the termites multiplied, and high-level D-grades began barring his progress. They formed walls with their bodies, blocking the tunnel entirely. He also saw a few of the Royal Guards around, making it clear there was a Queen in the egg chamber ahead.

Looking at the wall of bodies ahead, Jake pulled out his bow and nocked an arrow. He didn't hesitate as he fired a quickly charged Arcane Powershot, making the entire tunnel rumble as he blasted a hole through the wall of bodies, giving him an opportunity to use One Step to the other side.

A few more of these walls tried to stop him, but soon he reached his first destination. He blasted his way through a wall and entered a large egg chamber with Queen's Guards and a single Queen.

[Isoptera Queen – lvl 175]

He felt the hatred from the ectogna but paid it little mind. They were a threat he had decided to remove.

Jake raised his hand towards the Queen as energy gathered. A giant blast of destructive arcane energy burned through the egg chamber, destroying every single egg, Queen's Guard, and even the Queen. Nothing was left alive within the chamber as the blast faded, except for the pulsing veins of pure arcane power lining the walls.

The last time Jake had been there, he had struggled a bit with all these D-grades, but now they weren't even worth pulling out a weapon to kill.

Moving on, he continued his hive dive, destroying anything in his way. His speed picked up despite armies of D-grades trying to impede him, corpses lining the tunnels from their futile actions. Deeper and deeper he went, not stopping for anything – not even to pick up the cores. He didn't need more D-grade cores, not even from Queens or their guards.

Due to the sheer size of the tunnel system, getting to his destination was still annoyingly long, and on the way, he occasionally released pulses to search the surrounding area. To his annoyance, he found that he had severely underestimated the network these termites had created.

He even spotted what looked like another D-grade egg chamber, making him realize that clearing out the entire nest was too much for him. Sure, he could probably do it alone, given enough time, but with no comprehension of exactly how large this hive was, it would be foolish for him to attempt. Unless he wanted to potentially waste weeks, if not months, just running through tunnels killing D-grades.

Jake stopped in the tunnel and found a small crevice he went to stand in. Activating Arcane Stealth, he hid as he took out a walkie-talkie to contact Miranda – one made by Arnold, of course.

"Hey, got the time?" Jake asked, not wanting to impose.

"Depends entirely what for," she answered within a few seconds.

"I am right now exploring the termite plains we talked about a while back, and it is far larger than I had first anticipated. I am talking absolutely massive, expanding hundreds if not thousands of kilometers horizontally, and who knows how deep. I am aiming for the C-grades, but-"

"I understand," Miranda said in a serious tone. "I will get on it immediately. Leaving a nest of ectognas alone seems like a very bad idea."

"What do you plan on doing?" Jake asked. "It is huge... sending a few parties like Neil's won't be enough unless they plan to live down here for a while."

"First, we will need to survey the situation, and I know just the man for the job," Miranda answered.

"Let me guess, Arnold?" Jake said semi-rhetorically.

"Naturally," Miranda confirmed.

"Good. I will continue my dive down the hive to take down some of the C-grades further down. See you around," Jake said.

"Gotta say, I am proud you actually contacted me like this and didn't just ignore the potential ramifications of leaving a nest like that alone. I am incredibly proud."

“Cya!” Jake cut off the connection by tossing the walkie-talkie back into his storage. He didn’t have time to get bullied for prior bad decisions when he was on an extermination mission. While others from Earth could handle all the D-grades, Jake knew few could kill C-grades, especially not on their home turf deep beneath the ground.

With confidence in Miranda taking care of things, Jake went out of hiding and sped up his dive. Trying to stay stealthy was impossible since he had to break down walls of soil and termites to get to his destination. Down and down he went until, finally, he felt the environment shift.

He was now in C-grade territory.

The mana here was different and far more vibrant, and as he entered this area, he also felt the auras of C-grades. Plural. They were waiting for him.

Jake frowned as he realized he had underestimated this termite hive. Presences were hidden, and while he couldn’t pinpoint how many there were, he knew it wasn’t just a dozen or two. It was hundreds, all of them organized, no doubt delaying their assault till he made it further down the tunnel system in case he wanted to escape.

Yet... he didn’t feel even a shred of fear. Instead, he continued to make his way down the hive, releasing pulses occasionally to keep track of the termites. Through the snapshots, he saw himself become surrounded by squads of large termites, with three to five members in each group. Tunnels were cut off, and soon enough, Jake felt their approach.

Jake moved quickly as he blasted through several tunnels until, finally, he made it to a large cavern he presumed to be natural, filled with greenery. Sense of the Malefic Viper made him aware of several herbs, making him question if this was some garden set up by the termites, but he didn’t have much time to ponder on it.

Standing in mid-air, Jake looked towards the wall of the cavern as parts of it crumbled, revealing four large forms. Each one was about the size of a horse, with large mandibles and thick carapaces. On the outside, they didn't look that impressive... but they were indeed C-grades.

[Isoptera Warrior – lvl 201]

Several more tunnels opened up all around the cavern from all sides as Jake was truly surrounded. He counted more than sixty groups, making the total number of termites over two hundred. All of them were between level 200 and 205, and all their attention was on Jake as they prepared their attack. Energy gathered within each of them, preparing to strike.

Jake just smiled.

He had met many C-grades already, and one thing had become very obvious from all these interactions. The qualitative difference between variants only grew with every grade, the difference between the weakest and the strongest becoming a nearly impossible gap to cross.

And these termites? They weren't even real monsters in his eyes. They were at the lowest rung and nothing more than disposable footsoldiers to the C-grade Queens of the hive. So despite being surrounded and outnumbered hundreds to one by creatures of his own level, there truly was no need for fear.

A dozen figures pounced at once, making Jake scoff at their attempt. He barely moved as he dodged all but one that he caught by its back legs and swung into another, sending both falling toward the bottom of the massive cavern.

Using One Step, he then avoided more than a hundred brown beams of highly consensed earth mana, surprising him a bit. They were meant to just incapacitate me for a moment... and also get hit.

Damn termites and their full willingness to sacrifice their own to land a blow on an enemy. It was like fighting insect versions of the Holy Church.

Pulling out his bow, he decided to clean up before it was time to continue his dive. The cavern was chosen because it allowed him enough space to move around while not getting locked down, as while he didn't fear these termites, that didn't mean he would come out unscathed after getting hit by a beam from a hundred.

Dodging a few more beams, Jake began to pick off the ranged termites first. Splitting Arrow was released, blowing up on five of them, sending them all flying back into the tunnel they had come out from. Shooting quickly again, he promptly charged an Arcane Powershot. It hit one of these five in the head and tore it straight off, making it fall to the ground. It died only a few moments later.

You have slain [Isoptera Warrior – lvl 202] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

"Unimpressive Vitality," Jake muttered to himself as he stepped down and teleported right in front of a termite that stood in a group of five. Two katars appeared as he stormed forward, arcane mana revolving around both blades. In less than a second, he stabbed the termite a few dozen times, each stab several meters deep due to the arcane energy.

You have slain [Isoptera Warrior – lvl 200]

Mandibles descended from above as one of the large monsters tried to tear off his head. He dodged and rolled beneath its body as he stabbed his new Nanoblade up into the body of the termite. It smoothly went in, the Blackpoint enchantment truly doing work. While he was at it, he also tested the mana burst.

Infusing the katar, all the energy stored was released instantly. Jake had not infused it himself after getting it, so he wasn't sure how much mana it could contain, which is why he was a bit surprised when a massive explosion resounded above him, the termite blown up into hundreds of pieces from within.

You have slain [Isoptera Warrior – lvl 204] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

So that's definitely workable, Jake grinned as he went for his next target. Sadly, he would have to recharge the Nanoblade again to release another burst, so till then, it would just be an impossibly sharp katar. Truly a loss.

Jake continued his rampage as he killed termite after termite, truly indulging himself and getting used to his newfound power while also trying to find his limits. He soon found that it only took a few arrows coated with his blood to kill a termite, with one probably being enough if he was fine with waiting for the poison to do its work.

After firing an arrow, Jake felt another termite from behind. For a moment, he considered just blasting it away but decided against it as he smiled. Turning around, he put away his bow as two large mandibles snapped at him.

Jake raised both his hands and met them straight on. He felt the impact on his palms as the sharp mandibles hit them, but he could only grin. “Better Strength than Vitality, but still lower than me.”

He pulled hard as he raised his leg, kicking the termite in the face. The two sharp mandibles ripped as Jake tore them off, only to promptly return them as he leaped forward and stabbed them into the head of the termite – each of them functioning as the Fangs of Man.

The termite staggered for a few seconds before it fell over, dead.

You have slain [Isoptera Warrior – lvl 203] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

Jake was forced to teleport again as more beams came for him, the swarm of termites not looking like it had reduced in number at all. Releasing another pulse, Jake counted them. Two hundred and thirteen C-grade termites remained.

I give myself an hour.

Chapter 608 - Carefully Calibrated Preparations

Calibration of Pathfinder-18 was complete as he tested the basic specs and parameters of the new scouting drone, finding the stats within expectations. Offensive options had been limited in favor of higher speed and increased stealth capability, making it a more specialized drone than most others. The added light refraction enchantments had made it near-invisible for most mid-grade C-grades, with the rest of the enchantments allowing it to hide from other senses. He was not aiming to hide it from the senses of someone like Lord Thayne, but just the average monster.

Arnold released it as it went for a test flight, the sleek drone taking to the air, having long moved away from those same unstable and slow rotor-based designs but instead used anti-gravity and air enchants to make it move. Far more efficient than any old-world design.

He was still working on making them self-sustainable for long periods of time, but alas, that would come with time. Batteries were not difficult, but generators small enough for scouting drones had many potential challenges before a stable version was possible.

For now, Arnold regarded the monitoring screen, seeing everything was as expected as he sent it on a scouting mission to map out more of the area humans had not scouted or mapped out properly yet. A 3D map of the part of the planet they occupied appeared, including general reads of which territories powerful creatures occupied, with his current aim being an exploration of the ocean and other continents. On a side note, he had attempted to map out the forest but found his drones quickly getting picked off as their movement capabilities and ability to sense dangers were significantly hampered in there, with ambush predators often taking them down. It was a waste of valuable resources to keep attempting to scout it, so he would have the other humans do that. News had come back that Lord Thayne had recently cleared out many of the powerful C-grades in there, so perhaps it was time to reassess.

His workshop was rapidly expanding as he examined some of the other in-progress projects, primarily the ones he was about to restart after a resupply from Lord Thayne. A lot of what he did had been automated by now, and the mana-gathering dynamos were working at full capacity to power the enchantments that would be placed on the weaker drones.

Arnold had primarily gotten the inspiration for the dynamos from the half-destroyed Altmar Census Golem given to him by Lord Thayne. The technology had been incredibly impressive and, frankly, far above anything Arnold had any chance to comprehend while still only in C-grade. It reminded him of when he was eleven and went to university for the first time for a special lesson with one of their professors. Rather than intimidate him, it just expanded his horizons of all there was to learn.

It was an emotion he had felt rarely in the last few years before the system arrived and one he greatly welcomed. There had always been more to learn before, but it all felt so limited. Unapplicable in most cases, even.

The field of theoretical mathematics was interesting in its own right. However, it often dealt with concepts and hypothetical postulations improvable and inoperable in the material plane, making them little more than inspiration for future scientists. It was not uncommon that a theory or hypothesis would be proposed by a scientist or great mind decades, if not centuries before it was proven or at least partly demonstrated through empirical evidence as research methods and tools evolved.

Societal constructs that dominated the scientific culture rewarded this prescient way of thought with social capital to further one's career and acquire future funding by gaining recognition through the lens of the public eye. They desired the articles and to create public discussion, not true discovery. Arnold had never strived for such vain recognition, but then again, he had never truly attempted to innovate and shift the current paradigms – simply to comprehend what was already there and apply it in the most efficient way possible.

At least, this was his methodological approach before the system. However, the scene changed, reality flipped, and limits were removed. No longer would he create a theory for a future scientist to prove in a hundred years; he would be that scientist himself in a hundred years.

Some realities remained, such as the constant requirement for funding, but he had found such a thing was attainable through simple trade, and with the man called Sultan, he had a financial broker to handle any products he no longer needed while acquiring new raw materials.

Of course, one could not forget Haven itself and Lord Thayne, providing him with new interesting objects and paths for obtaining high-level goods. The Treasure Hunt and subsequent Auction had already been an exemplary learning experience, allowing him to collect technology of Yalsten to disassemble and learn from.

Many creations were under construction, hundreds of blueprints had been created, and his head contained ideas for thousands of potential inventions or recreations. His most impressive right now was called New Horizon and had recently been put into operation.

New Horizon was an exploratory vessel sent out into space, and to his knowledge, this was the first time a man-made object of their planet had entered space since the integration. It had not been an easy task making that a possibility. Firstly, the skies on Earth were now incredibly dangerous, and there were many natural barriers. He also theorized that the atmosphere would kill most creatures mid-to-late-tier C-grade trying to pass through, and even if one made it to space, the dangers were far from gone as the concept of a vacuum was not as absolute anymore. Space held many dangers.

At least there was enough of a vacuum for New Horizon to still have constant acceleration as it absorbed mana from the atmosphere. But once more, the biggest challenge had been the atmosphere, as most powerful creatures in the sky ignored unmanned vessels.

The key had been an item from the Auction:

[Damaged Transportation Pod (Rare)] – A pod created to transport individuals over a long distance. This pod was originally made to allow the weaker denizens of Yalsten to travel outside their realm safely through wormholes, and the vehicle has an incredibly high resistance to all space magic. The inside of the pod is spatially expanded. Due to damages incurred during an escape and subsequent decay of the entire vehicle, it has led to a severe decrease in rarity. The pod is still functional but has severely limited speed and limited spatial expansion. During the escape, the generator was damaged, making the pod require constant power infusion too.

Arnold had completely disassembled the pod to use its skeleton. The materials used on the vessel's surface were made of a special metal that seemed to almost ignore the heat and much of the other concepts that would hurt something exiting the atmosphere.

He saw no use for the spatial expansion feature and had gotten rid of those parts entirely as he filled the pod with modules to optimize flight as well as its control range and ability to relay information through almost impossible distances.

Long-range information of any kind was difficult to transmit without mana or other concepts interfering, but that is what he had the skill given by his Blessing to handle. He was grateful to his Patron, Oras, for that one, as it had been instrumental to his current Path.

The destination of the exploratory vessel was not entirely determined, though it was sent out at first to explore their own solar system.

While examining that everything functioned within parameters, he was contacted for the second time that day. The City Lord had sent over a message, and as she rarely contacted him, Arnold established it had to be important.

Reading the message over, he frowned for a moment before realization struck him. For a while now, he had measured seismic activity, but he had assumed it was perhaps just C-grades fighting deep beneath the earth or perhaps just a natural shifting of the environment. Now he hypothesized it could perhaps even be these termites.

He agreed with her assessment that a scan of this hive was necessary, but he also believed she and Lord Thayne had underestimated these termites. If his current scans were accurate and the seismic activity was truly caused by these termites, then the size of this hive wasn't just a country underground but an entire continent.

Making his thoughts known before being sure would be unwise, so Arnold decided to prioritize dealing with this hive.

Taking off his current work coat, Arnold went towards an elevator off to the side of the workshop – one Lord Thayne had never bothered using. Not that he needed to, as it was primarily made not to go up but down.

Descending deep into the ground, he sent a message to the City Lord before he went to the production facility and hangar. It was there he now produced the weaker drones, such as the ones used for collecting data. Pathfinder-18 had just been made, but Pathfinder-17 had been in mass production ever since he reached C-grade.

The Treasure Hunt was far behind him, and Arnold was no longer as inexperienced as he was back then. His drones had also improved in both quantity and quality, allowing them to function far more effectively. After little consideration, he decided it was time to operationalize all of them and attempt a full field deployment and stress test.

Inside the hangar, he had an operations room. Walking inside of it, he activated the many enchantments to feed him mana and make sure he wouldn't run out. As he sat in the chair, its back opened up. A helmet was attached and lowered towards him before placing itself on his head.

All it then took then was a mental command to initiate the operation.

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Miranda had contacted Arnold but knew it would likely take some time to hear anything back. She hadn't expected him to respond within an hour and was actually a bit surprised at the swift answer. It was a short message, and reading it only made her frown.

“Exercising full deployment of scouting drones.”

She had expected him to do something, but it seemed like he took it more seriously than she had first anticipated. Exactly what a full deployment meant, she also wasn't sure. Luckily – or unluckily – she got her answer not even ten minutes later as reports came flooding in, one of them even including a recording.

Miranda opened it swiftly as she wondered what the panic was all about but understood upon seeing it.

A giant hatch more than a hundred meters across had opened up in the middle of a restricted zone of the plains outside the Fort, leaving a giant hole in the landscape. Then, it looked like a river of silver emerged from the hole, streaming upwards. It was only on closer inspection Miranda noticed what she was seeing, taking her aback.

Spherical drones. Thousands.... If not tens of thousands. All now flying towards the insect plains.

“Forty-two minutes. I underestimated myself,” Jake said with a smile as he blasted through a tunnel wall to continue his descent. He had given himself a lot of leeway with the timer, so it was only to be expected. As for levels, he had gotten a nice round zero. If this was a sign of things to come and the increased difficulty of leveling in C-grade, he didn't know, but he did know that the fight had been easy, and that had no doubt resulted in less experience. It was also possible that this lack of difficulty had given him an even larger experience reduction than others due to his new class, though that would indicate an accompanying reward from killing truly high-level foes. So maybe not entirely negative.

Behind him, he left an utterly destroyed cavern filled with corpses of C-grades. Looking at the haul of that entire session, Jake didn't feel like it was overly worth it. "Only eleven cores from that many termites."

Due to how weak the termites were, most of them simply didn't drop any loot of value. Sometimes a mandible or one of their legs or something like that would be infused with their Records after death, making those into items, but only with the semi-strong ones did he get cores. It was no coincidence only 204 or 205 warriors had been the ones to give cores, and even then, it was not even one in five. Based on statistics Jake had read, that meant he had even gotten lucky.

No matter, there were plenty more of these termites to gain cores from, and after releasing a few more pulses, he saw that the termites were now reorganizing after their initial assault failed. Exactly how many C-grades this hive had was hard to determine, but Jake reckoned it couldn't be that many. At least not when speaking of ones capable of fighting. Many termite variants would focus on expanding and maintaining the hive, not combat.

For a good while, Jake ran through the tunnels without encountering any life. He did spot a few D-grades hiding in the walls or burrowed beneath his feet in the ground, but none of them made even the slightest movement as he ran right over where they were buried.

The C-grade Queen wasn't stupid and had likely concluded sending more of its C-grades after him would be a waste of life. Jake remembered reading that it was a common skill for Queens to be able to see the final moments of their spawns after they died. If this Isoptera Hive Queen had that skill, it would now have plenty of short films on why sending more core donations to Jake wasn't in its interest.

As his progress remained steady, Jake began to frown a little. Using the pulses too often was giving him a bit of a headache, but he felt like it was necessary to not be taken by surprise. Knowing he had his legendary Wings of the Malefic Viper at least made him feel a bit safe as he knew he could escape from most situations, but it was still a bit eerie being this far down.

Through his scans, he became aware that the Queen had chosen her response: to fight him straight-on. Focusing, he spotted quite a few figures within its egg chamber, many of which he assumed to be Queen's Guards, but there was one that still stood out. It looked different than every other termite in the chamber, its frame smaller yet deadly-looking. It was not the Termite King Jake had expected, as this one looked slightly different, but chances are it filled a similar role.

Jake began to slow his progress to a more relaxed pace. He got a feeling that perhaps this could get more dangerous than he had first anticipated, so Jake did what any reasonable person would do when stuck kilometers beneath the ground in a giant hive of giant termites out to kill him. He sat on his ass and pulled out a cauldron to make some potions. If he had time, perhaps even a bottle of poison or two, though he was plenty happy with just using his blood so far.

Afterward – or when the termites got tired of waiting and attacked – Jake would finally go take a look at how far the Queen had come since his last visit.

Chapter 609 - A Wholly Unrecommended Experience

For one and a half hours, the termites left him completely alone. In between every few crafts, Jake released a Pulse of Perception to see what was up, only to find them all unmoving. What he did find surprising was that the Queen was no longer in the egg chamber but in a large cavern that had been dug out in front of it. There was only one other entrance into this egg chamber beside the cavern, and that was a path leading down into the depths of the earth.

Being left alone had honestly been nice because it had allowed him to get quite a lot of crafting done, including new health, stamina, and mana potions. Having evolved, his potions had naturally gotten a lot better, but his resource pools had also grown. The first of the potions crafted was naturally the Malefic Health Potion.

[Malefic Health Potion (Common)] - Restores 30200 health when consumed. Will cause damage to anyone besides the creator if consumed.

It now restored 7000-8000 health points more compared to before his evolution, which was a good increase, though not exactly a fantastic one. He knew that with practice, he could make it even better, and he also needed some better materials to properly make it.

On the note of materials, then the herbs still mattered a lot, especially when you jumped between grades. While the primary source of energy was the creator, the herbs still functioned as the cornerstones, and it was best to use herbs that had mana of a certain qualitative level. One that was the same as your current grade. Using herbs grown in an A-grade environment – even common-rarity ones – would be possible but highly detrimental to the crafting process, and in the same vein, then the current herbs Jake had weren't the best either, as they contained peak D-grade energy. So, yeah, he would need to stock up on new herbs soon.

Even then, he would still be a bit away from the 100.000 health points the potion would need to restore to be of uncommon rarity. With a health pool of a bit over 81000, he really shouldn't be complaining about a potion restoring roughly forty percent, but he liked to always push himself to be better.

As for mana and stamina potions, they were quite a bit less interesting.

[Stamina Potion (Common)] – Restores 19569 stamina when consumed

[Mana Potion (Common)] – Restores 38420 mana when consumed.

He still admittedly sucked a bit at making stamina potions, but it was also the one he had by far the least practice with. Well, Jake said he sucked, but based on what everyone had told then, he was fine. 19500 would still restore a bit under a fourth of his entire pool, which was about the same as the mana potion percentage-wise.

As for crafting poisons, Jake never quite got to it, as the termites got tired of sitting around and interrupted one of his crafting sessions. Singular individuals or groups of up to four began to attack him occasionally, with it mostly being individuals, making Jake quite sure the Isoptera Queen indeed had a skill to see when one of them died.

Continuing his descent, Jake tried to be smart by not killing a termite that attacked him, but just wrapping it up in mana strings and leaving it behind to not inform the Queen of his locations. However, the moment he fully immobilized the ectogna, it stopped moving before its presence entirely disappeared. It had killed itself just to tell the Queen where he was.

After that, he didn't try to be fancy but just killed any insect he came across if they were alone, and if groups came that he found too annoying to kill in a short time, he just avoided them and kept running down the long winding tunnels.

Soon, he was close, and the tunnel began to open up. It was now more than fifty meters wide, giving him ample space to move around and fight if it came down to it. And come down to it, it did, as shortly he spotted a large figure blocking his path, surrounded by many smaller termites.

[Isoptera Queen's Guard – lvl 228]

[Isoptera Warrior – lvl 210]

[Isoptera Warrior – lvl 213]

[Isoptera Warrior – lvl 215]

There was one Queen's Guard and a dozen warriors, all of them above level 210. He wouldn't exactly call these the elites of the hive, but it was clearly a group sent to test him.

The Queen's Guard did not look that much different from its D-grade counterpart but did give off a far more powerful presence. Seeing as it was level 228, Jake guessed that the Hive Queen had to be above level 230 at least. Probably closer to 240. That meant it had grown quite a lot since his last visit, but there was still no cause for concern.

Looking at the Queen's Guard, Jake decided to give the Hive Queen a demonstration of what awaited her. He took out his bow, and at the exact moment he did, all the termites charged in unison, Queen's Guard in front.

Jake rapidly nocked an arrow and pulled back the string as Arcane Powershot activated. He had a full second before the Guard reached him, which was ample time to get a good charge in. While running, a few of the warriors released blasts of earth mana towards him, but a shield of arcane mana sprung up to block them all, Jake's charging remaining undisturbed.

Just when the Guard's massive mandibles were about to sink into Jake, he released the string, releasing a massive blast of arcane mana that made the entire tunnel network crumble and crack; the termite hit right in its mouth. It was blown back down the tunnel, taking two warriors with it, with the other ten continuing their attack unbothered.

Stupid termites, Jake scoffed as his bow disappeared and two katars appeared. Two termites came from each side, and Jake chose to just kill both. Jake himself went for the one on the left, stabbing it in the head with both katars as his Eternal Shadow went for the other, a second katar appearing in its hand

identical to the Nanoblade. He knew that it wasn't actually the Nanoblade but that both katars of the Eternal Shadow were Eternal Hunger.

All four katars penetrated deep, leaving festering poison from Fangs of the Malefic Viper behind, ensuring that they would succumb soon. Seeing as they were both poisoned plenty, Jake didn't bother with them anymore but went for another as his Eternal Shadow disappeared behind him, leaving both termites confused.

He managed to kill another monster before his primary foe returned. The Queen's Guard had lost a part of its head but was otherwise mostly uninjured, except it looked like it couldn't move its mandibles anymore. Nevertheless, it charged straight at Jake, making him shake his head. It couldn't touch him with its primary weapon functional, and now that it was without it?

The earth below him rumbled as spikes emerged, the Queen's Guard switching to using magic, and the remaining warriors jumping at once, just throwing their bodies at Jake. Almost baiting him to just kill them.

Semi-clever, Jake admitted as he saw the tunnel all around him begin to contract. Jake raised his foot and stepped down, teleporting towards the Queen's Guard just as the place he had just been standing imploded, the earth smashing together, crushing several warriors in the process.

The collapse continued as it moved towards Jake and the Queen's Guard, aiming to bury him alive. Jake glanced at the Guard and charged his foot with arcane mana as he kicked the termite hard, sending it flying down the tunnel before promptly following it.

He began sprinting with everything behind him collapsing, sending dust everywhere. While running, he took out his bow and shot at the Guard again, blasting it further down the large tunnel toward where the Queen was.

He shot it two more times before sending out a Pulse of Perception. His eyes went wide as he saw the tunnel leading towards the cavern with the Queen now gone, having already collapsed. Sending out another pulse, the situation truly became clear:

The tunnel was getting destroyed from both sides with Jake in the middle.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Jake said with annoyance as he picked up speed to make it as far in the direction of the Queen as he could before he reached the collapse. A few kilometers later, he saw the dust cloud ahead. Looking back, he saw the collapse speed up. Stopping in the tunnel, he stared at the heavily injured Queen’s Guard as it stood unbothered. He still stared at it as the soil hit him and the entire tunnel collapsed on his body, burying him under many kilometers of dirt.

The cavern was silent, only the sound of clattering termites heard here and there as they scraped their mandibles together. In the middle was a massive termite with a huge abdomen. Larger termites guarded closely around this large specimen, making it clear she was the Queen. One other termite also stood out as it closely guarded its leader, its status clearly above all except for the Queen herself.

Time slowly passed as they all stood there silently. It was difficult to tell if they were waiting for something to happen or perhaps hoping that something wouldn’t happen.

Then, suddenly a rumble. All of the termites turned toward a particular wall and stared at it as the Queen let out a screech, putting all of the Royal Guards on guard. Just in time, too, as suddenly a giant pink-purple blast of mana exploded from the wall, making all the termites brace themselves from the shockwave.

The Queen began gathering energy as a figure appeared in the opening of the newly blasted hole.

“Bloody hell,” it spoke, too relaxed in the eyes of the Queen. However, only one thing mattered: protecting the hive and eliminating the intruder.

As the dust cleared, the Queen finally saw the form of the intruder and was surprised... it was the same one that had tried to invade earlier and had been pushed back by the Hive King, making the Queen relax. The intruder had nearly died the first time, and there was no need to even call the Hive’s King to deal with such a minor matter.

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Jake really didn’t like getting buried alive and considered it a wholly unrecommended experience. He also made it harder for himself by making sure he finished off the Guard and looted it. Killing the ectogna had not been hard, as it was already battered.

You have slain [Isoptera Queen’s Guard – lvl 228] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

And he was happy to announce that this one had a core. One he had seen before, though that had been the D-grade version.

[Isoptera Queen’s Guard Ectognacore (C-grade)] - An Ectognacore left behind by a C-grade Isoptera Queen’s Guard, containing remnants of its Records within. Can be used as an alchemical ingredient for many types of creations but is most often found in Elixirs.

He had plenty of time to study the core as he dug himself out, using his destructive arcane energy to burn away anything in his way. He didn't even need to use the conceptual advantage of his Alchemical Flame but could just blast his way forward using normal mana. Luckily he "only" had a few kilometers before he would reach the cavern.

It took him half an hour before he finally blasted through and entered the cavern where his target was waiting, cursing a bit to himself out of relief. Standing at the edge of his newly created tunnel, Jake got a great overlook of the cavern as he had dug into it quite far up the cavern wall. Scouting out, he saw what he had expected for the most part. First was the Guards.

[Isoptera Queen's Guard – lvl 226]

[Isoptera Queen's Guard – lvl 229]

Jake counted eighteen, all of them between 225 and 230. All of them looked up at him, with only two other types of termites in the cavern, not a single warrior to be seen anywhere. The first of these was a new variant Jake had not seen before. It was smaller than the Guards and honestly looked like a budget version of the Termite King. Its level was quite respectable, though.

[Isoptera Queen's Protector – lvl 239]

Thirty-nine levels above him. A gap that would usually make people afraid, but to Jake, all he could think about was if he could finally get some damn levels if he killed it.

The last termite was naturally the Queen herself. She observed him as Jake observed them, and he felt like the Queen tried to use Identify. Jake was about to use his own Identify, and as he was doing it, he decided to also check if it had a Blessing as the skill faintly made him aware it had one.

[Isoptera Hive Queen – lvl 239 – Intermediate Blessing of the Fourth Desert Queen]

Jake wasn't sure what to think, as he had no idea who this Fourth Desert Queen was, but as it was only the fourth, it couldn't be that impressive. It also didn't really matter much in the grand scheme of things, though it did show that some smaller forces also had designs on Earth. When he thought about it further, it was also entirely possible this Fourth Desert Queen had no idea they were even on Earth or what else was going on there, considering the termites only operated underground.

With a hand motion, his bow appeared, signaling the beginning of the fight as the termites all moved in unison. The Queen still seemed relaxed as it released a large beam of condensed earth magic towards him, forcing Jake to dodge away.

Two-thirds of the Guards charged while the others stayed back, mana surging in their bodies as they either released beams or manipulated the soil and stone to try and attack the invader of their hive.

Jake teleported a few times as he got a feel for the speed of the termites, and after ten or so seconds, he had a good enough read to go on the offensive. He nocked an arrow and ducked as a termite flew over him, swiftly drawing the string and shooting two grouped-up ranged Guards with a Splitting Arrow.

The resulting explosions from the many destructive arrows blasted them back with minor injuries, but Jake quickly followed up as three arrows hit one of them, each impact making it stumble as the wounds began to fester and rot.

More Guards tried to surround and strike Jake, but he dodged and got off potshots easily as they were simply too slow to catch him. Whenever he did get surrounded, he teleported away or blasted away one of the guards using Arcane Powershot to use the opening that was created.

Down on the floor of the cavern, the Queen was observing everything and had not made any moves since that first strike. By its side stood the Protector, having yet to do anything either. As Jake began thoroughly dismantling the Guards one by one, these two seemed to realize they had to get involved as he felt energy gather within the Queen.

Golden energy spread out of her, entering the injured Guards and slowly beginning to heal them, and at the same time, the Protector made its move. It bent its legs and aimed itself toward Jake. He knew what it was doing, and he was ready.

With a loud explosion, the Protector shot forward, far faster than anything else Jake had encountered so far in C-grade besides Sylphie's charges. He pulled out both katars and met the monster head-on as they clashed, resulting in Jake getting pushed back and slamming into the wall of the cavern, finding himself outmatched in pure Strength.

He dodged to the side as it struck again, its mandibles ripping off a huge chunk of stone from the cavern wall where he had just been standing. Two Guards came from behind, trying to cut off his path of escape as Jake smiled.

Finally a bit more challenging. Just a bit, though.

Chapter 610 - What Does That Even Mean?

Jumping, Jake avoided both Guards trying to get him from behind, focusing his attention on the Protector in front of him. It leaped up to chase him, making Jake kick off a platform of condensed mana to clash with it again. However, this time he didn't make it a competition of pure power.

Rather than block, he dodged in mid-air, using Eternal Hunger to stab it in the side three times. It turned to try and catch him, but Jake was faster, vaulting on top of it as he stabbed into its abdomen with both katars as he pushed mana into them. Two explosions resounded within the Protector, yet despite the obvious pain, it spun its body, throwing Jake off.

He was forced to teleport away before he could land as more Guards tried to pin him down. Teleporting three times in a row, Jake got quite a distance into the cavern and found a good spot. Whipping his body around, his bow appeared, and he started blasting, having decided to get rid of some of the guards.

Nocking an arrow, he drew the string and loosed it, quickly nocking another and releasing that too. With Steady Aim, he had ample time to aim properly, despite firing several arrows a second, each one capable of blasting back a Guard.

Each shot was methodical, and he managed to release twenty shots before the first Guard made it to him. Finding himself in the groove, he didn't bother switching weapons. He sidestepped its charge without even looking as he kept shooting at a particular guard in the distance that was already injured.

More guards came, but their charges were simplistic and nothing more than simply throwing their bodies at Jake, mandibles first. Calling them C-grades was honestly a shame, even if they did have powerful bodies. Before even evolving, he could have killed these Guards one on one.

Now it was just one-sided. The only two in the cavern posing any sort of danger were the Queen and Protector, and even then.

Jake repeated his current tactic as he dodged everything while shooting down the termites one by one. The poison quickly took hold, and even if the Queen tried to heal them, it was far from enough. She seemed to realize this and got serious.

Energy gathered around the Queen as she used the same group buff he had seen last time. A wave of golden energy washed over all the Guards, with the Protector shining especially brightly. They all got stronger and faster, making it a bit harder to dodge them all.

Jake glanced at the Queen and tried to target her. After dodging, he rapidly fired an Arcane Powershot, but to his surprise, the Protector that was behind him suddenly appeared in front of the arrow as a shield appeared, blocking his arrow and sending it flying back.

He tried again, but the same thing happened as somehow the Protector managed to teleport perfectly into the trajectory of his arrow. Even when he tried to curve the arrows and shot rapidly, the Protector teleported several times in a second to block every single arrow, displaying a level of speed far above anything shown before.

A conditional skill to protect the Queen, Jake concluded. The name Protector was not for nothing, and while there probably were ways around it, like disrupting space to make teleportation harder or limiting the movements of the Protector, none of these were things Jake could do. So he chose an easier tactic.

If the Protector wanted to protect the Queen that badly, he was all for it, as it made aiming every shot the easiest thing in the world.

After teleporting a few times and blasting a few Guards to the other side of the cavern, he bought himself enough time to charge a proper Arcane Powershot. The Queen seemed to be charging some magic of her own, but Jake felt that it wasn't of the offensive kind, so he didn't care much. At the same

time, only one Guard was close enough to disturb him, and he had a way of handling that one without disturbing him.

Three seconds into charging, the one Guard made it to him, but rather than block, he chose to remain standing there. Yet he still responded. A shadow emerged from his body to meet the Guard, intense curse energy revolving around Eternal Hunger in its hand. It clashed with the Guard, resulting in the Eternal Shadow dispersing and the Guard being thrown to the other side of the cavern with a deep stab in its head, leaking out curse energy.

Five seconds into charging, he was forced to release the shot as more Guards approached, including the Protector itself. Jake released the arrow just as they were upon him, the blast from loosening it pushing back the Guards while the Protector disappeared in mid-air to appear in the trajectory of the Arcane Powershot.

The Protector tried to block as usual, but things did not go as expected. The barrier it conjured was broken instantly – Unblemished Arrows helping a bit there – with the shot then continuing into the head of the Isoptera Queen's Protector. At the very last moment, it managed to angle its body a bit, making the arrow skirt off its side, making the attack miss the Queen by only a dozen or so meters.

Severed limbs fell to the ground as every single leg on the Protector's left side had been torn off, with one of its mandibles also missing. Yet when Jake shot another arrow, it still teleported and blocked, using its body to protect the Queen from any harm.

As for the Queen itself, she seemed to redirect whatever energy she was gathering toward the Protector. A stream of gold went towards it, and Jake saw legs grow out in real time as it rapidly began healing from all its injuries. Annoyed, Jake considered repeating the blow he had made before but decided it would be easier if there were no annoyances to deal with. Hence why he chose to do a proper cleanup.

Raising both his hands, they began glowing green as he felt the poison within nearly all the Guards from his many previous arrows. He pushed Touch of the Malefic Viper as all around him, the festering wounds of the Guards began growing as the poison was empowered and amplified.

This seemed to truly get the attention of the Queen as she sent out another wave of golden energy, combating Jake's poison and trying to cleanse her Guards. Unluckily for her, she was not powerful enough to fully cleanse it, and the flaring poison gave Jake time to shoot off two Powershots, each cleaving off the head of a Guard, promptly ending their lives.

The remaining ones tried to kill him. Then, something unexpected happened. Jake was about to dodge the Protector as it suddenly teleported away, appearing down on the floor of the cavern to block a Guard that had tried to attack the leg of the Queen.

Jake saw that this Guard was the one he had struck with the Eternal Shadow earlier, and he felt the heavy curse energy from it. The curse of hunger. It desperately tried to attack the Queen with its mandibles, but when the Protector stepped in, it simply switched its target and tried to eat the Protector – its instinct entirely superseded by the curse.

A welcome surprise, Jake mused as he refocused on killing Guards. One by one, they died, with the Protector finishing off the Guard down on the ground, the Queen seemingly unsure how to handle the curse.

Soon, only three living beings remained in the cavern. The Queen, the Protector, and Jake. By now, the Queen had to realize it was fucked, and he reckoned they both knew what it had to do: call the Hive King. But before that, he wanted to make sure he could face it in a proper one-on-one.

Making distance, Jake decided to fully abuse the reactive skill of the Protector. From the other side of the cavern, he began shooting arrows at the Queen, every one of them forcing the Protector to teleport

back and take the blow. The Queen did try to dodge, but it was big and slow, with Jake's curving arrows easily still finding their target.

It then tried to counterattack, but Jake easily dodged or blocked every attempt. The damage on the Protector quickly accumulated, and while the Queen tried to heal it, she faced an uphill battle. Jake finally managed to blast off a leg, slowing down the Protector, making it unable to attack again until it was healed by the Queen.

Jake took his time with the next attack. A proper Arcane Powershot to finish off the Protector only seemed right, so he nocked an arrow, took a deep breath, and began charging. Arcane power revolved around his body, making the air vibrate and causing the wall behind him to crack and crumble from the destructive energy.

Ten seconds passed, then fifteen. The Queen seemed to realize this was bad and conjured a large barrier around itself, with the Protector now fully healed and charging toward Jake. Sixteen seconds into charging, Jake released his breath and let go of the string. Partly because he felt the bow beginning to give up and partly because he deemed it powerful enough. The blast decimated the cavern wall, the arrow itself flying straight toward the Queen.

The Protector teleported as expected, appearing right behind the Queen's barrier. Its own barrier appeared, ready to meet the arrow that thrummed with power. It tore through the cavern, distorting space in its wake and causing widespread damage. Jake felt the fear of the Queen just as it impacted the barrier, blasting straight through it and into the Protector. The termite tried valiantly to protect its Queen, but its own barrier fell as fast as its mother's, allowing the arrow to pierce into its body. It had no time to try and angle its body this time around as the arrow penetrated through its head and out of its backside, sending legs and flesh flying everywhere as the Protector's entire body exploded.

You have slain [Isoptera Queen's Protector – lvl 239] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

The arrow did not stop but continued as it hit the Queen, pushing her back and leaving a large hole in her carapace. She screamed in desperation, summoning several more barriers to defend herself. Jake showed no mercy as he simply released another Arcane Powershot, blasting her again. And again. And again.

Every blast sent flesh and blood flying as parts of the massive ectogna's body were blown off. The Queen kept healing, kept making barriers, and kept trying to do anything she could to survive. The cavern began to rumble as weak Isoptera Warriors began swarming in, all of them only in late D-grade. It was truly a desperate move, and Jake decided to finish it for good.

Arcane bolts appeared behind him as he took out a massive arrow from his quiver. It was naturally an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter which he had summoned quite a bit ago but only now found a good time to use. He charged his blow while releasing a few arcane bolts to blow up E-grades getting close. After charging enough, he released the rest of the bolts towards the Queen, with the sole intent of taking down her barrier for the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter to strike her unimpeded.

The bolts impacted the barrier and shattered it effortlessly, just in time for the arrow to arrive. It hit the Queen, making her screech out in pain as the energies invaded her soul, causing immense pain. The army of weak termites tried to stop Jake and even began raining from the roof of the cavern to cover him and the Queen. An endless army was before him, impeding his path to the Queen, making it impossible for him to teleport over and finish her off. Even finding a trajectory for his arrows to fly was unfeasible, making him frown in annoyance.

"Fuck off," Jake spoke as he opened his eyes wide and used Gaze of the Apex Hunter. For a moment, all was still as the clattering stopped. Then, the termites on the cavern roof began falling, limp. They hit the ground hard, never to move again, as the ground of the cavern was entirely covered in thousands of corpses.

For a brief second, only two living beings remained within the cavern. More were entering, but Jake now had the opening he needed.

He teleported forward, releasing a blast of arcane mana to blast away all the D-grades falling towards him as he beelined for the Queen. She tried to escape down the tunnel towards the egg chamber, but Jake was far faster. He caught up and teleported above her as he released an arcane blast to send himself downwards. With an axe kick, he smashed the Queen into the ground before letting loose with both katars, stabbing away and leaving rotting wounds with every hit.

Soon, the Queen stopped struggling and collapsed, dead on the ground.

You have slain [Isoptera Hive Queen – lvl 239 – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

Behind him, the many D-grades also stopped what they were doing. From running at him with fervor, they became almost catatonic and just laid down on the ground while making small clattering noises. Jake already knew what they were doing.

The Queen was dead, and they were waiting for a new one to take control. That, or they would stay still till they died, something that would usually take only a few months for D-grade ectognas. Such was the life of their race.

Jake closed his eyes and released a Pulse of Perception, scanning downwards. Through the scan, he saw the endless network continue, with only a few changes. Pockets of magma were also visible here and there, as they were beginning to get pretty damn far down. He knew that the planet was far more hollow than before, but seeing how the hive just kept expanding did make Jake wonder... were the termites digging all the way to the core?

If they were, he could only see them having one goal: the Planetary Pylon.

The Prima Guardian also contesting the Pylon did not mean only it or the World Leader could claim it. In fact, what would happen if an army of powerful C-grade insects managed to defend the core long enough so that no one else could even attempt to take the planet? At some point, the protection would fall, and the Pylon ripe for the taking.

Jake could see this tactic work out very well on most other planets as the natives simply wouldn't be able to handle it. Unluckily for these termites, they were on Earth. Even if they managed to dig far enough down, if the elites of Earth decided they wanted to get to the core after slaying the Prima Guardian, Jake seriously doubted they could do fuck-all to stop them.

Gotta report this to Miranda too once I get back, Jake thought, wanting to scout out some more of the hive first to confirm his suspicions. He was also pretty sure there were other C-grade Queens deeper down now for one simple reason: the Hive King had not appeared. If there was only one C-grade Queen and the King had just been too late, that would also be fine, but he hoped it would at least come to give him a rematch.

He would dive down further, but first, it was time to loot. First, he looted some of all the Guard's cores, getting seven in total, which was a pretty damn good haul. Then he went to the Protector and got quite an interesting core from that.

[Isoptera Queen's Protector Ectognacore (C-grade)] - An Ectognacore left behind by a C-grade Isoptera Queen's Protector, containing remnants of its Records within. Can be used as an alchemical ingredient for many types of creations but is most often found in Elixirs. Contains faint Records of the Queen itself, indicating a permanent investment.

Seeing it had Records of the Queen itself was very intriguing and definitely a boon when it was time to experiment again. Moving on, he checked out the Queen itself – having saved the best for last.

[Isoptera Hive Queen Ectognacore (C-grade)] - An Ectognacore left behind by a C-grade Isoptera Hive Queen, containing remnants of its Records within. Can be used as an alchemical ingredient for many types of creations but is most often found in Elixirs. This core is especially useful when used as an ingredient to empower another ectognamorphs of a similar variant.

He looked over the description of the core and nodded, glad he had gotten one, as he knew it wasn't a certainty. All-in-all, he had been quite lucky with the haul so far. Smiling, he opened his notifications as he knew he had gotten some outside of the kill notifications, but skimming them, his smile faded.

What does that even mean?