

Hunter 901

Chapter 901: Blood On The Ice

Jake's first time traveling to Skyggen had taken quite a few days of constant travel. After the Ell'Hakan incident, he made the trip again a lot faster. Now that he had reached well into mid-tier C-grade, he was practically zooming across the landscape, the entire trip only taking a few hours at most, and that was partly due to Jake checking things out on his way.

Of course, Jake didn't count his one planned stop in the travel time. The giant mountain was still among the largest Jake had seen on Earth, towering extremely far into the sky, so far that it easily entered the layers of the sky C-grades could occupy. One had to remember that C-grades and even D-grades, to some extent, were still restricted from entering the area designated as human lands. Jake was pretty damn certain this restriction would disappear with the arrival of the Prima Guardian, but for now, it was still in place.

Flying up the mountain, Jake rapidly felt the temperature drop. When he was there last, it was already cold as hell, but now it was even worse. While it maybe wasn't quite needed yet, Jake covered his body in a faint layer of arcane mana to defend himself from the environment.

If it was this cold when I was here last, I wouldn't even have made it to the wyvern, Jake mentally noted.

Continuing upwards, elementals began to appear in great numbers. None of them were strong enough to pose any kind of threat, but he still identified them.

[Ice Elemental – lvl 264]

[Snow Elemental – lvl 259]

Now, this did pose the great question of what the difference between a snow and an ice elemental was, outside of their difference in appearance. The snow elementals looked like badly built snowmen more than anything, while the ice elementals were partly see-through and a lot more angular. In fact, the main difference between the two was that one looked spiky and hard, while the other one looked round and soft.

Ignoring them just as they ignored Jake, he soon was close to the peak of the mountain. Jake was looking forward to seeing if the wyvern was still there and had purposefully held back on using Pulse to not spoil himself, but when he got closer and heard sounds of fighting, he couldn't help himself.

What he saw was a battle in the sky above the peak, with the expected wyvern in the midst of it. Jake had expected it to maybe be fighting ice elementals or monsters, which was why the opponents surprised him. It was a large group of humans, forty people in total. What's more, he saw many of them use a kind of familiar magic he hadn't seen since Yalsten, making him quickly realize who they were. They weren't humans but vampires.

Members of the Noboru clan? Jake quickly assumed. He knew the Sword Saint had the divine artifact of Sanguine given after the defeat of the Monarch of Blood, allowing him to turn others into vampires using it. He knew that some had chosen this Path, and from the looks of it, they were doing pretty well for themselves.

Jake kept watch as he decided to activate his stealth skill to get closer without them noticing him. Flying into the air, he soon saw the fight that was honestly quite intense. Concentrated blue beams of frost shot through the sky as layers upon layers of magic barriers tried to block the attacks. At the same time, over a dozen vampires attacked the wyvern from all sides, five of them carrying large chains as they tried to immobilize the wyvern.

Using Identify, he first focused on the wyvern.

[Northpeak Wyvern – lvl 271 – Greater Blessing of the Everfrost Dragon God]

Back when Jake first encountered the wyvern, it hadn't quite been in mid-tier C-grade yet, while now it most-certainly was. It had definitely grown significantly stronger, and it had even snagged itself a Blessing. Or maybe it always had the Blessing; he really had no way of knowing as his Identify didn't allow him to see Blessings back then.

As for the vampires, Jake was also quite impressed when he saw their levels after just checking out a few.

[Vampire – lvl 255]

[Vampire – lvl 259]

[Vampire – lvl 253]

All of them were between level 250 and 260, as far as he could tell. This did raise some questions of how the hell they had leveled so fast without Nevermore... or, wait, had they leveled without Nevermore? Jake was one of the first people to enter in this generation and also one of the first to go out as far as he knew, but maybe it was possible they had gone anyway? If not for their entire allotted time, but just some of it.

Either way, they were all pretty damn strong, as he saw them fight the wyvern. Individually, none of them stood a chance, but fighting against forty opponents could be very difficult, especially for larger creatures who had more surface area to protect. For Jake, fighting more people wasn't as big of a problem as someone like the wyvern.

Not to say that the vampires were winning, as Jake really couldn't tell who had the edge. After a minute or so of back and forth, he believed there was a turning of the tides when the wyvern unleashed its breath, hitting a party of five that had tried to flank it.

The five of them were blasted back as healers and mages moved to help them. Jake was about to shake his head, as he assumed they must have taken too serious damage to continue fighting, but to his surprise, the five of them had come out of it with only severe frostbite and one of them losing an arm.

Vampires have high resistance to frost magic by default, Jake suddenly remembered. They were weak to fire while more resistant to frost magic. Of course, as stereotypes would dictate, the sun affinity was also incredibly powerful against them. It wasn't as if they got weaker while in natural sunlight, but they did get stronger when there was no sun at all due to some passive skills from their race. This also resulted in their high resistance to all forms of frost magic.

The vampires had chosen their prey well from a matchup perspective. They were resistant to the wyvern's attacks, while their primarily blood magic and physical attacks worked fine against the budding dragon.

Jake seriously considered what to do as he observed the battle continue. He had come to this mountain to have a reunion with the Northpeak Wyvern, but it was already preoccupied. Jake also didn't want to just barge in and interrupt that fight, as that was just rude. After thinking for a while, Jake just lifted his legs and sat with his legs crossed in mid-air as he decided to watch how the battle would unfold and

then talk with the eventual winner. Not to attack them or anything, as that would also be boring, but just to talk as he was curious about both parties.

Focusing on the battle, it was clear the vampires had great coordination. With forty of them total, they had enough members to fill every role, with several healers and mages focusing solely on defense. A few mages also worked their offensive magic, and Jake even saw an archer in the group, along with two people wielding what looked like rifles.

The attacks rained down on the wyvern, few of them doing any damage as a layer of frost covered the large flying creature's body. Its eyes were glowing blue as it repeatedly unleashed magic, making the ground itself tremble as ice spikes shot up from below.

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Choosing to have the entire battle in the air was an interesting decision by both parties. It allowed the vampires to attack from all sides, including below, while the wyvern got more space to dodge and unleash its magic. It was also clear that the wyvern had better maneuverability and experience fighting in the air compared to all the vampires.

Jake had his eyes on one party within the vampire raid team more than any other. It was led by a middle-aged man wielding an axe and a shield, while his party members broke the holy trinity entirely by being two women and two men who wielded different light weapons, including shortswords and daggers, with no healer or ranged attackers in sight.

These five were an absolute menace and stood for the vast majority of the damage done. The leader was the highest-leveled person in the entire raid, and he proved that by repeatedly blocking the claws of the wyvern and creating openings for his party members to attack, as they left several lacerations on the wyvern, cutting through the ice and drawing blood.

From afar, Jake heard the man also yell several things, though it made little sense to him. He just yelled out numbers and what Jake assumed to be code words that all the other raid members reacted to, and-

Oops, the first death.

A mage had been too slow to react, as the wyvern dodged out of the way of a blow and, with a beat of its wing, sent a slicing blue wind toward him, cutting him in two with a web of cutting cold winds following, freezing and turning his body into thirty or so frozen icecubes.

Despite the death, the raid group didn't lose their cool, and a warrior even managed to use the opening to plunge a spear into the other wing of the wyvern. The five with chains also made their move but were rebuffed as the wyvern blasted away the raid leader.

A rogue who believed she hadn't been spotted tried to attack using the perceived opening as the wyvern snapped its head around and chomped down. It ate the woman whole, and a second later, an explosion of blood erupted within the wyvern's mouth, as she seemed to have blown herself up.

Her death explosion allowed the warriors with chains to finally get their chance as the wyvern's feet were wrapped up, disrupting the flight of the wyvern. Right as it was clear the wyvern was temporarily halted, a ritual spell was unleashed as eight mages combined their power, making a curtain of red light descend from above.

This curtain cut through the sky, the wyvern unable to dodge as it was struck, a massive flesh wound getting inflicted on its side, nearly cutting off one of its wings and going more than two meters into its mid-section, clearly doing a lot of internal damage.

"Good attack," Jake muttered to himself. "But they should have gone for the head."

The wyvern exploded with power as it roared loudly, releasing a freezing wave of energy that pushed all the melee fighters away. With its maws open, energy gathered as it unleashed a breath. A proper one this time around. The one Jake had been hit with back then had just been a casual one, and so were the earlier ones in this fight... but this breath was made with the clear intent to kill.

For a second, the world flashed a whitish blue as the breath destroyed all the barriers that tried to block it and hit the eight mages who had cast the ritual spell. They didn't even have a chance to fight back as their bodies froze and were blasted apart, as no amount of natural vampiric frost resistance was going to save them from this one.

Yelling loudly, the raid leader unleashed a large attack himself, as his party members also unleashed a coordinated assault, but the wyvern's entire body was practically burning with power as they were all blasted away.

A blue wind began to revolve around the creature as a blizzard appeared in the sky, enveloping all the vampires. Without any warning, the wyvern flew to the side to flank the group, going for the backline.

"Good decision to try and split the group to ruin their coordination," Jake approved.

The only reason the vampire raid could even hold on was due to their numerical advantage and teamwork, so if the wyvern could address that, this fight would turn into a one-sided slaughter. The vampire side also clearly knew this, as they moved to group up and take a defensive position, as the wyvern was clearly consuming a lot of mana with the summoned blizzard.

A barrage of large ice shards fell upon the grouped-up vampires as the wyvern flew over them. The harsh, cold winds of the blizzard also bore down on the vampires, who quickly summoned a large red barrier around them all to ward off attacks.

Interestingly enough, the barrier did not seem to block out blood magic at all, as the archer shot arrows made of blood toward the wyvern, with the two gun-wielding vampires also going fully on the offensive. While their attacks didn't do much damage, the three of them targeted one of the wyvern's wings, ripping holes in the thin flesh between the arms and body.

The mages who weren't focused on the barrier also tried to attack, as Jake saw faint cracks begin to form on the barrier from the constant attacks of the wyvern. However, before it broke, the vampires made their move again. Over a dozen warriors were buffed up by some of the healers as they flew out, leaving reddish afterimages, all going for the wyvern at once.

Two of them were cut apart by cold winds before they even reached the creature, while a third was ripped in four by a claw. A fourth managed to stab the wyvern before his head was bitten off, while the remaining eight all landed their own attacks.

Several large cuts lined the wyvern as two warriors went together and wrapped a chain around the wyvern's neck. The creature struggled as it did its best to shake off the eight warriors who were upon it while also dealing with range attacks and making sure those in the barrier of blood couldn't relax.

The situation was looking bleak for the wyvern, as Jake saw a faint smile on the raid leader's face, as the man still stood within the barrier, seemingly channeling some kind of buffing skill to those around him. The wyvern began tumbling toward the ground as another chain was wrapped around its wings, disrupting its flight.

As it tumbled toward the ground, it fell past the barrier of blood hiding all the less durable fighters... which was when the wyvern's eyes suddenly opened wide. Jake felt the mana in the air spike to unprecedented levels as from deep within the wyvern, he felt energy well up as it was all unleashed.

For a moment, the world turned white. Pure cold washed over everyone, including Jake who was quite a distance away, as even the mountain below was hit. When the light faded, Jake saw eight frozen statues falling down, as the barrier of blood had been torn open, deep freezing ten of the vampires within, while the rest didn't look that good either.

Jake saw the raid leader make a quick decision as he took out an item and crushed it. A sphere surrounded the leader and all the remaining vampires as Jake felt space magic at work, and in a flash, the surviving vampires were whisked away as they made their retreat.

"A good decision," Jake commented, as it was pretty sure the wyvern had won this fight. He couldn't exactly blame them either, as he closely inspected the tired wyvern. "Damn, it already has a budding dragon's heart."

Dragons were known for their hearts, which were pretty much unrivaled organs when it came to magic. This wyvern had a budding dragon's heart in that it had mutated slightly to more closely resemble one – a pretty common occurrence for wyverns with the potential to become dragons and likely even a required prerequisite for the evolution.

The white flash was the Northpeak Wyvern unleashing all the mana stored in the heart in one devastating attack. It had definitely been saving that one for a crucial moment.

Jake kept watching as the tired wyvern quickly flew down and caught all the falling statues of frozen vampires. With telekinesis, it carried them back toward the cave atop the mountain; Jake very curious about what it was doing with the bodies... wait...

“Not dead yet?” Jake muttered. The vampires were frozen solid, with even their souls frozen as far as Jake could tell, but they weren’t fully dead.

Flying closer, Jake wondered what the wyvern was planning to do with the frozen vampires as he decided to check out the cave. However, when he reached the cave, he saw that a set of powerful magic barriers protected it, and while his stealth skill was good, he wasn’t confident in getting through them without alerting the wyvern to his presence... so he stopped hiding as he dispelled his stealth skill and forced himself through the barrier.

Instantly, he felt the attention of the wyvern on him, but it didn’t make any moves. It just stayed deep within the cave as Jake heard its voice echo throughout.

“A mantis stalking a cicada is unaware of an oriole behind... have you come to finish me in my weakened state?”

Yeah, Jake wasn’t entirely certain what the hell that cicada thing was about, and he didn’t even know what an oriole was, but he made an educated guess the wyvern was shit-talking him for sitting back and waiting for his chance to strike.

“Relax,” Jake said in a loud tone. “I’m just here for our reunion.”

“Reunion?” the wyvern said, clearly confused, having likely fully expected Jake to be there with the intent to finish it off. This also explained the wyvern’s strategic position to blast the one opening to its main cavern with a breath the second Jake showed up, leaving him with no space to dodge.

“You really don’t remember me,” Jake said, more to himself than the wyvern. “Guess I’ll have to remind you and have a civil discussion about how rude it is to just blast people away with a breath when they come to talk.”

Chapter 902: Prima Preparations & Northpeak Wyvern

“It was far more powerful than our initial assessments. I believe it possesses a Nascent Dragon’s Heart, too, which is what ultimately led to our defeat,” the middle-aged vampire said in a serious tone as he reported to the raid organizer. “We may need to reconsider our approach or reach out for assistance.”

"I see," the organizer said as she wrote in her report. "Did you get any indication of the beast's inclinations for the upcoming event?"

"Nothing concrete, but what little interaction we did have made it clear the wyvern is incredibly arrogant. I have a hard time seeing it submit even to a far more powerful being, and with its aggressive nature... I believe leaving it be is far too risky."

"Very well," the organizer said with a nod. "I will refer it to the upper brass. Now go to your team... I reckon they need you right now."

"Thank you," the middle-aged vampire said as he stood up. "But... once more, I must warn you. The wyvern is far more powerful than we believed, so make sure not to just send anyone to be slaughtered."

"It's fine; if worst comes to worst, the Patriarch has returned from Nevermore," the organizer said with a smile, making the vampire's eyes open wide at hearing his grandfather had returned.

"In that case, I can go rest with a peaceful mind," the vampire said as he left to rejoin what remained of his failed raid party. Losing so many people was a horrible experience... but it had to be done, even though he regretted the outcome.

Preparation for the Prima Guardian's arrival was already well underway, with the World Council having made a strategy plan. Based on the knowledge provided in the original system message regarding the event, it was clear that beasts who had consumed system-provided natural treasures had to either sit out the event or join the Prima's side.

Additionally, it was theorized that when the Prima Guardian event truly began, all protections of human lands would be lifted. Putting these together, it had been decided to address certain known powerful monsters living close to where humans lived, while actively exploring the unknown zones of the planet.

One of the most powerful examples of a known powerful beast was the Northpeak Wyvern. It lived in between Skyggen, Haven, and two other smaller cities, all so close that the wyvern could reach them in a very short time if it decided to attack. To leave it unaddressed would be the same as leaving an enemy behind your own frontlines.

Originally, the vampires hadn't even gone to fight the wyvern but to try and reach some kind of compromise. Perhaps have the wyvern sign a system-bound contract making the wyvern agree not to fight for the Prima Guardian during the system event.

However, they hadn't even gotten that far before the beast attacked them, forcing the vampire squad to switch to plan B: simply killing it.

It was something they wanted to avoid when possible, but the Northpeak Wyvern had left them little choice. Plus, based on reports, this wyvern was incredibly aggressive toward anyone who entered its domain. It would kill without even asking any questions, so even if it wasn't going to ally with the Prima, getting rid of it was probably for the best, as keeping such a dangerous beast that couldn't even be talked to was simply too risky, especially with its domain being so close to human settlements, and its high level of power.

Sadly, it seemed that even with their high assessment of the wyvern, they had underestimated it. His party had been one of the elite teams that hunted down these known high-level monsters, so they had genuinely believed it was a done deal and that there were few monsters they couldn't handle, at least on the ground. The Sky Whale was leading the assault on the underwater creatures to ensure there wouldn't be an invasion from the depths during the arrival of the Prima.

As with many others, the vampires all had gone to Nevermore but not stayed the full fifty years. They were all fully aware they were not competing for any kind of Leaderboard position, so they had only gone there for the leveling and stayed a couple of decades until they exhausted most of their potential after evolving to C-grade.

The middle-aged vampire had returned not even a month ago and had already disappointed himself and the family immensely. Alas, with the return of the Patriarch, they hopefully no longer had to hold any fear of these powerful creatures hidden across the planet.

Especially when one considered that his return would also mean the return of all those who had competed in the Leaderboards alongside him. With all those elite members of Earth, he had a bright view of the future and foresaw a less-than-bright future for the wyvern.

Jake walked through the icy cave but remained unbothered as he channeled arcane mana through his veins and protected himself with an outer layer of arcane energy. He saw the wyvern ahead of him within its cavern, in prime position to launch a breath at the entrance. Seeing this, Jake had already made a resolution.

If it dares attack, I kill it.

No arguments or discussions. Jake wanted to talk, sure, but he did say he wanted to remind it of how rude it was to use its breath on people without warning. If, even with this warning and the wyvern's wounded state, it still decided to attack, Jake would rule this particular beast a lost cause.

Luckily for the wyvern, it didn't attack even as Jake reached the entrance to the large frosty cavern. Instead, it just raised its head and looked at him with wary eyes, seemingly considering if maybe it should attack.

Jake just stood still as he observed the wyvern for a moment. It was pretty large, about nine meters in length, which, in retrospect, probably wasn't that large. Or maybe it was; Jake's only comparison was the Viper back in the day, and he knew sizes between wyverns, dragons, and pretty much all kinds of beasts could vary significantly.

Upon closer inspection, Jake also noticed that the wyvern's injuries weren't actually that bad. Sure, they weren't great, but the frost wyvern seemed to have a lot of Vitality based on how it was already healing. Likely assisted by some passive skill, allowing it to heal faster in a cold environment like this.

What was clear, though, was that it had spent a lot of energy. The half-baked dragon's heart in its chest had been entirely emptied of gas and would take a while to fully recover. Which made Jake wonder why it had unleashed all of the mana at once into one attack. Did it have to? Or was it to ensure the vampires became the living popsicles they currently were.

Off to the side of the cavern, he had already spotted all the frozen vampires, with the wyvern throwing glances toward them as if afraid Jake was going to try and rob it of its loot.

"So, you really don't remember me?" Jake finally asked after a bit.

"You do perhaps smell faintly familiar, but no, I do not remember any creature such as you," the wyvern said in a cautious tone.

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“Oh, so you know how to speak normally?” Jake said, a bit surprised. What the wyvern had done before was more or less mana-speak, if one can call it that. It was sound produced solely through magic, not any physical movement of vocal cords or anything like that.

“What do you want?” the wyvern asked, not bothering with Jake’s question or any kind of politeness.

“I told you already, I want to teach you about hospitality,” Jake said with a smile. “The last time I came here, I did so with genuine curiosity. You see, this was my first time encountering a wyvern in the wild. Imagine my dismay when said wyvern proceeded to unleash a breath on me before I could even introduce myself, blasting me off the mountain. You really don’t remember that or who I am?”

The wyvern was silent for a moment before speaking. “... do you have the slightest idea how little that narrows it down?”

“Wow,” Jake exclaimed. Was... was this frost wyvern just an asshole? So far, all information pointed to the answer yes. “So you just attack anyone who comes here for no good reason?”

“No reason?” the wyvern huffed. “For an inferior creature to invade my domain is more than enough reason!”

“Inferior creature, huh,” Jake said, his smile entirely fading, and instead of using words, he answered with actions as he fully unleashed his aura upon the cavern, even going so far as to use Pride of the Malefic Viper a bit.

Instantly, the wyvern reacted as it opened its mouth, seemingly to release a breath, but at the very last moment, it stopped itself as its eyes opened wide. It had felt Jake’s killing intent the second it showed any indication of an attack, making the wyvern wisely hesitate.

“The only inferior creature I’m seeing here is you,” Jake said as he stared down the wyvern. “And not just because you’re a wanna-be dragon. You’re also a fucking idiot.”

Jake’s words were harsh and insulting, yet the wyvern did nothing but close its mouth as it lowered its head before the pressure.

“Do you have any idea about humans or the enlightened races in general?” Jake asked, making the wyvern hesitate. “Of course, you fucking don’t. Because if you did, you wouldn’t have decided to kill a group that clearly came here and sought you out specifically. Much less flee back to this lair as if nothing happened afterward.”

Based on the weapons that the raid party carried – and the fact they had shown up with a raid party in the first place – it was apparent to Jake that they had come here with the express purpose of hunting down the wyvern. Or at least to be able to fight it should negotiations go south.

Seeing as they were also from the Sword Saint’s clan and failed their raid, it also wasn’t hard to see what would come next. They would send an even stronger party... or the old man himself. Even if the wyvern was pretty strong, even for its level, it wasn’t peak-tier genius. Jake reckoned he could have killed this wyvern even if he was a lot lower level than he was now, and the Sword Saint would also be able to slay it without any issues whatsoever.

In some ways, this realization was a bit disappointing, though it would also be kind of weird if some peak-genius wyvern appeared on a random mountain on Earth. The mere fact a wyvern with the potential to evolve into a dragon was born there in the first place was already pretty damn impressive in its own right.

“Answer me, what do you think is going to happen now with that group of vampires who came to kill you?” Jake asked the wyvern.

It was silent for a moment before answering. “They will have learned to not attack my domain again... or report to their kin and come back with a stronger group for me to overcome.”

“Let’s assume it’s the second one – because it’s definitely the second one – what do you plan on doing when that happens? Keel over and die?”

“I shall defeat the-“

“Wrong,” Jake cut the wyvern off. “You die. If not with the next attack, the one after. The enlightened races operate like that. If you kill one member of their faction, they will keep coming back until they

wipe you out, and the people who attacked you belong to a faction where I'm aware of at least one person who could easily kill you if he so desired."

"Do you belong to their faction?" the wyvern asked with a hint of nervousness, making Jake believe he was finally getting through to the dense lizard.

"No," Jake shook his head. "Not directly."

The wyvern was silent for a while before Jake sighed. "Seriously, you have a Greater Blessing and yet you are this clueless?"

"My Patron has never interacted with me outside of our first meeting..."

"Well, that sucks for you," Jake muttered. "Could have at least told you to not stay in the same place if you piss off people you shouldn't. Makes you a sitting duck."

"I must remain here," the wyvern said with a tone of certainty.

"Even if it means your death?" Jake questioned with a raised eyebrow.

"Leaving would be the end of my ambition," the beast said, once more not leaving anything up for interpretation. This made Jake frown a bit, but he soon realized something.

Jake had walked a lot on the mountain, and while his boots had certainly made him aware of natural treasures, Jake honestly filtered away the feeling most of the time when on stuff like mountains. All the random metals inside the rock registered, which wasn't particularly interesting. He did pick up when a potent piece of metal entered his radar, but that had not appeared on this mountain.

However, now that he checked again, he did notice something peculiar. While there wasn't any particular piece of ore that registered as particularly valuable... there sure as hell was a lot of it. As in, the entire mountaintop was one big piece of metal with a thin layer of rock covering it, with a shitload of ice and snow stacked on top.

With this in mind, Jake quickly reached a conclusion: "You need this mountaintop to progress as you absorb the energies here?"

"Yes," the wyvern confirmed.

Jake also reached another conclusion as he scanned the room and found quite a few skeletons of different beasts encased in ice. "And you feed the mountain itself living creatures you capture in ice?"

The wyvern remained silent to that question, pretty much confirming that as a yes. It did also help that Jake faintly felt energy being drained out of the frozen vampires stashed off to the side of the cavern. With his sphere, he also saw what looked like the body of a large vulture hidden under some snow, having died recently from the looks of it.

"You plan on feeding those vampires to the mountain too?" Jake continued questioning the wyvern, even though it was mostly rhetorical in nature.

Despite it taking a moment, the wyvern slowly confirmed. "I need it for the cold energy to keep increasing."

Jake now also knew why the mountaintop had gotten so much colder since his last visit. The wyvern was the direct cause. From what Jake quickly gathered, the metal around them was rather unique in that it wasn't just cold; it also actively absorbed all heat energy others expelled. Freezing people would keep them still, and they would passively fight back against the cold energy until they ran out of energy and died, giving plenty of nourishment to the metal.

"I'm not saying that's necessarily wrong of you, but capturing any enlightened like this isn't going to end well for you," Jake sighed. "With that in mind, release them."

"What?" the wyvern exclaimed. "I thought they were not part of your tribe?"

"I'm not part of theirs, but that doesn't mean they're not part of mine," Jake said, shaking his head. "They live within my domain, after all."

“How can they live in your domain if-“

“You seem to misunderstand,” Jake cut off the wyvern with a smile. “You are also living within my domain. Everyone and everything on this planet is.”

His words seemed to insult the wyvern, but with his aura bearing down on it, it didn’t say anything as Jake continued. “Now, I’ll give you an easy choice. Release those vampires and stop messing around with the enlightened species. Additionally, if people come here, don’t just fucking attack them, but kindly ask them to leave if you really don’t want them here. You can do that... or I’ll kill you right here, right now. To make the decision easier for yourself, do me a favor and contact that Patron of yours.”

“My Patron will not be plea-“

“Just tell him the Chosen of the Malefic Viper demanded it of you,” Jake sighed.

It took the wyvern a lot longer than Jake thought it should before the wyvern finally reached out. Jake knew that anyone blessed could reach out at all times to their Patrons, though more often than not, they were just ignored or filtered out passively. He did hope that the Everfrost Dragon God would respond, though, as that would make things a lot simpler.

More than a dozen seconds passed as Jake saw the wyvern clearly preoccupied mentally. He saw its lizard face frown and change a lot during this time, probably partly due to dealing with a direct divine message and partly because of the nature of the message.

After what felt like half a minute, the wyvern finally looked at Jake, lowered its head to the ground, and spoke. “This lowly one begs for forgiveness and swears fealty to the Chosen of the Malefic One.”

Jake stared at the wyvern that had an entirely changed demeanor as he sighed internally.

... maybe I should have just gone with telling the wyvern to get divine customer support from the beginning, huh?

Chapter 903: Results Of (Un)Intentional Assistance

Flexing status was always a great way to get a message across, but it only ever worked when the other party knew who you were. In all honesty, Jake had been surprised the wyvern didn't recognize him even after being blessed. It wasn't that he expected every single god to tell those they blessed about him... but wouldn't it make sense to at least mention the Malefic Viper if you bless a wyvern living not even a day's flight from the home base of his Chosen?

Well, it definitely would; there had just been one problem:

The wyvern was a hermit.

As in, it knew literally nobody. It didn't know anything about the planet it was on or what was going on whatsoever, either. It had lived in its own little bubble, killing anything that dared try and approach it. It didn't even know about Nevermore. As Jake listened, he also realized that the damn dragon god that blessed the wyvern was partly to blame.

That asshole dragon had told the wyvern to just dominate its own domain and keep absorbing energy there. They only ever had one meeting, where all the talks were about making optimal use of the unique mountaintop.

However, now the beast definitely seemed to realize who he was as Jake saw the wyvern get what he assumed was a less funny Villy-style round of exposition. The beast kept its head low throughout, seemingly wanting to bury it in the snowy floor of the cavern every time the wyvern spoke its apologies, trying to excuse its own ignorance while groveling to Jake with promises.

"I had a severe lapse of judgment and can only wish to beg for forgiveness and make up for my transgressions through any form of assistance I can possibly provide," the wyvern said, definitely reading from a provided script.

Jake just stood back as he let the poor wyvern get a talking-to. When he thought about it more, Jake kind of understood why the wyvern had acted like it did. Earth was a pretty fucked up planet for it to be born on, and he was sure that in many other places, the wyvern would have been fine acting as it did. It would be the kind of creature the enlightened on the planet called a Beast King or something, and the mountain deemed a forbidden zone.

The problem for the wyvern was that Jake knew at least a dozen people who could kill the wyvern if they so desired, and when more people returned from Nevermore, it would be even more. Shit, based on the people he saw in Haven, he was confident a forty-man raid party could be gathered there capable of taking down the wyvern, not even to mention if Skyggen got involved and sent a group of high-level assassins recently returned from Nevermore. Jake's brother alone could quickly kill the wyvern.

So... while the wyvern had indeed been a dick, it had acted pretty natural if this had been a normal planet, and as long as it was willing to correct its ways, Jake wasn't going to unilaterally kill it. Besides, with its level, it wouldn't even give him any experience.

Before the wyvern could begin to practically beg again, Jake decided to let it escape from limbo as he spoke.

"Stop. You now seem to realize where your little mountain is located and why your actions up till now have been rather unwise?"

"Yes, Lord Chosen," the wyvern nodded enthusiastically. "My own foolishness and ignorance-"

"It's fine, as long as you know and will change your ways," Jake interrupted. "I can't have a wyvern living here causing trouble for people wanting to just pass by."

"I swear that I shall never attack another of the enlightened races again," the wyvern readily agreed.

"No need to go that far," Jake waved it off. "Just don't kill people randomly. If they attack you, go for it, but if they are just passing by or want to speak, don't automatically attack."

Looking over at the frozen vampires and the burrowed dead vulture, he continued. "When it comes to feeding this mountain, I would advise you to stick with beasts, especially those around your own level of power. You will dilute the quality if you aim for quantity. Needless to say, those vampires also aren't going to stay here."

"Na- naturally," the wyvern said as its eyes glowed for a moment. Instantly, the ice started to melt, releasing them from their icy imprisonment. As they quickly thawed, one thing also became pretty clear.

They heard everything... which means they were fully awake and aware despite being frozen. Pretty fucking scary way to die if I say so myself,

Jake thought as he saw the clarity in all their eyes, with a few of them even looking with reverence and gratitude toward him.

Jake waited patiently as he even saw the wyvern remove some of the cold energy from around the vampires, allowing them to unfreeze faster while not letting the cold bother them as much. It didn't take long before the first one was fully free, and he didn't wait to bow, despite it looking pretty damn painful as his clothes and even skin cracked in places.

"We thank the Chosen of the Malefic One for his assistance," the vampire said, with the others following suit once unfrozen.

"The old man would have been mad at me if I just left you all here. Now get out of here; I'll handle the rest," Jake smiled as he saw the look of confusion on their faces before they realized who the old man Jake was talking about was. At least they weren't offended, as they just thanked him once more before they left, supporting each other on the way. They didn't even address anything with the wyvern, seemingly trusting Jake to handle this issue without their input. He had kind of expected some calls for revenge, at the very least. Not that Jake would have helped them with that. If they wanted to kill the wyvern they could go home, heal, and then come back for a rematch once they were stronger.

With the vampires gone, Jake returned his attention to the wyvern that had kept its head lowered, not even daring to look up. Sighing, Jake really wasn't sure what to do about the big lizard. He could literally see it shaking, and it definitely wasn't from the cold. Alas, he had already decided he wasn't going to give it more anxiety.

"I believe this concludes our business," Jake said, seeing a look of surprise on the wyvern's face, as, despite the entire conversation they just had, it definitely assumed he still wanted some kind of personal revenge. Which, to be fair, Jake originally had. The damn lizard had blasted him off a mountain, after all.

However, taking everything into account, he really wasn't in the mood. He also had to admit to himself part of his reluctance was because he was dealing with a wyvern. No, not just a wyvern, the first wyvern he had seen in the wild. Killing it just for some slight born of ignorance would also make Jake feel like he was bullying a teenager or something.

“Truly?” the wyvern asked, though it was clear it was also this Everfrost Dragon God behind the words.

“Truly... though I do have one thing I will demand as compensation,” Jake said after thinking a bit.

“Anything,” the wyvern insisted.

“What did you evolve from? I do not believe you were simply born a wyvern, so what were you before?”

This was something Jake was genuinely curious about. Mainly knowing if this wyvern had also once been a snake, or if it had become a wyvern from something else.

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“The Chosen wants to know what creature I was born as?” the wyvern asked with a hint of confusion.

“Precisely. Just take it as fulfilling my personal curiosity,” Jake said. “Tell me how you became what you are today. The story of your life, if you will.”

The wyvern was silent for a moment before it spoke. “I was born as a creature called an iguana. I had lived on this mountain all of my life, simply surviving in the harsh environment. Back then, this was no snow-covered peak, even if it was cold at times. Then, the initiation of the system arrived and everything changed. Day after day, the mountain grew taller as the world expanded beneath me. We all turned feral, killing each other and fighting for this odd energy far more satiating than any food.”

Jake listened along as the wyvern told its story. It was interesting to hear the perspective of a beast and how they experienced the integration compared to humans. The entire thing was definitely a lot rougher than getting Tutorials. Unless you were thrown into a Tutorial like Jake’s, that is.

“I grew stronger and increased in size, fighting off all others at this peak. Some were also forced out when the temperature dropped too much, seeking further down the mountain. Yet I stayed until one day, we were all drawn to this cavern. We fought, and I killed all of my kin before I finally consumed that which had brought me here. It was an odd plant, and after consuming it, the cold began to be a source of nourishment, not something to overcome. I do not know specifically why, but when I evolved to C-

grade, I became a wyvern, and it was only then that I truly received a true self and realization of what I am.”

The entire story wasn’t overly long, and it did feel like the wyvern was almost talking about someone else. Which it kind of did, considering the final sentence. The wyvern didn’t have any true sapience before it became a wyvern but had acted solely on instinct.

“And how did you obtain the budding dragon’s heart?” Jake followed up. “A skill offering at some point?”

“Yes,” the wyvern confirmed. “I selected it, and it warped my heart into what it is today. I am also fully aware that I need to upgrade it once more to have any chance of becoming a true dragon in B-grade.”

“I see, I see,” Jake nodded. Yeah, that tracked. Based on all he read, if the wyvern failed to get the heart upgraded, it could become a quasi-dragon only in B-grade. Having heard the story, Jake looked toward the cavern exit. “This has been enlightening. I shall not bother you anymore than this, and thank you for sharing your life story. I hope this experience has allowed you to wise up, and I look forward to seeing if Earth will one day birth a true dragon.”

“Once more, I thank the Chosen for his magnanimity,” the wyvern bowed its head. “I shall ensure to not cause you or anyone in your domain further trouble.”

Jake just waved the wyvern off as he walked out of the cavern before he felt a minor shift that made him glance back and use one final Identify, which put a wry smile on his face.

[Northpeak Wyvern – lvl 271 – Divine Blessing of the Everfrost Dragon God]

I came here to scold the lizard and ended up getting it a free Blessing upgrade instead, Jake admonished himself jokingly as he made his way out of the cavern. His little pit stop for the wyvern hadn’t turned out how he’d expected, but it had been rather eventful.

Turning to the horizon, he looked toward Skyggen as he decided to continue his journey back to his family.

--

Thunder echoed in the skies as blue bolts descended upon the land, giving birth to elementals or simply killing anything they hit. These bolts carried the power to slay even S-grades easily, resulting in all but the most foolish or powerful avoiding clouds like these.

Below, the bare ground was filled with scorch marks and corpses, yet in the midst of everything, two figures were fighting, as the rocky terrain that had been molded and empowered by the onslaught of lightning for millions of years was torn up with every clash.

One figure was a tall man, swinging a battleaxe as he attempted to catch his opponent, a winged woman with more muscles than the warrior. She fought using her bare fists, deflecting the weapon of her opponent as blue lightning enveloped both of them, sending out shockwaves with every clash.

Their fight continued for several minutes until the man suddenly appeared distracted. A fist struck him in the face, blowing off his entire head as he stumbled back before it rapidly regenerated.

"A cheap shot," the man said with a scowl as he used his horns to crack his neck.

"Not my fault you got distracted," the woman said with a smile as she looked toward the newcomer who had been the cause of the distraction. A suit-wearing devil had appeared, carrying a light smile on his face.

"Duchess, Duke, I apologize for interrupting your past time, but his majesty requires your presence at the castle," the man said.

"We heading to war with the Fifth Hell again?" the duchess asked.

"No, you moron, it's related to Nevermore, isn't it?" the duke scoffed.

"Indeed it is so," the suit-wearing devil confirmed to the two other devils.

“Has the princeling returned?” the duke asked with a frown.

“Oh, did the kid take the top spot?” the duchess asked. “If not, I don’t see why we should bother being there.”

“No, he got third, just behind the Chosen of Yip of Yore and the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, who took second and first, respectively,” the suited devil answered. “The Chosen of the Malefic Viper also took the top spot on the All-Time Leaderboards.”

“Impressive,” the duke commented. “But I still fail to realize why his majesty demands our return.”

“It’s related to the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. It would be easier to simply see it rather than me wasting my time explaining everything,” the suited devil said mysteriously as he raised an eyebrow. “Besides, does his majesty need a reason to recall you?”

The duke and duchess gave each other a look, both knowing that opposing the Devil King of the Fourth Hell wasn’t a wise choice. With that in mind, they followed the third devil back to the castle nestled in the middle of the realm known as the Fourth Hell.

There, a massive mountain stood. Thunderclouds encircled the mountain in several layers, and unless one was welcomed, even gods would find it difficult to make their way through unscathed. Atop this mountain was the castle of the Fourth Devil King and the leader of the Fourth Circle of Hell.

Arriving at the castle, the three devils made their way into a throne room that was already filled with other devils and high-ranking mortals who had been allowed there. All these mortals were kneeling under the pressure of the many divine beings, yet one remained standing in the center, speaking to the devil sitting on the throne.

The Devil King stopped speaking as he saw the duke, duchess, and suited devil arrive as he addressed them. “Good. All are here.”

“We greet his majesty,” the three of them bowed, yet the duke couldn’t help but throw glances at the mortal still standing. His aura felt familiar, yet foreign, and there was something odd mixed in there...

The Devil King simply nodded as he returned his attention to the mortal. "Now, continue."

"Yes, father," the mortal said, making the duke and the two other devils realize this was the Cerulean Demon – also known as the Prince of the Fourth Hell. "During the gathering of those who placed high on the Nevermore Leaderboards, I approached the Chosen of the Malefic One, and..."

The Demon Prince continued to explain everything that had happened. How he had approached the Chosen, gotten him to agree to help, and the entire ritual that followed, including everything that had gone wrong. Many devils or officials frowned or scoffed when the demon described the ritual. It was a foolish endeavor, no doubt about it, yet the results...

"And this Chosen entered your Soulspace?" the Devil King questioned.

"Yes, and suppressed the Records of the Cerulean Devil entirely," the Demon Prince explained, not hiding anything. "His presence overwhelmed everything, and it was only due to his assistance I managed to become what I am now."

Silence roamed the hall as they observed the newly born Cerulean Demon Lord. The duke was confused about how all this had happened, even if he heard the explanation. He hadn't been particularly aware of this Chosen of the Malefic Viper before now, having only heard in passing that the Primordial had returned to the multiverse with a Chosen.

"Is that also why you remain standing now?" the Devil King followed up as his own aura spread through the room. The duke felt the pressure but remained standing, as did the grand duke, duchess, and a few other of the top devils... as well as the Cerulean Demon Lord.

"I believe that to be the case," the Demon Prince answered truthfully.

"How amusing," the Devil King smiled, the show of emotion shocking many. "I also heard you gave him your personal Crest that I bestowed upon you?"

"Yes, father. I seek forgiveness if that-"

"It was a wise decision," the Devil King interrupted him.

"Thank you... though I fear the Chosen may not use it himself but send a representative or envoy. Perhaps even an ally of his," the Demon Prince said a bit nervously.

"Even if it's so, treat whoever he sends as if they were my personal guest," the Devil King said after a brief pause. He then turned and looked at one of the devils in the crowd. "Begin preparations to send more of our young to the Order of the Malefic Viper. Additionally, contact the Second Hell and propose to them a joint venture to make use of their existing connections with the Order."

"It shall be done, Your Majesty," the devil bowed.

Turning back to his son, the Devil King observed him for a moment. "Let us also not waste time where unnecessary. A week from now, I shall appoint the Cerulean Demon Lord as my new Chosen and Crown Prince of the Fourth Hell."

Surprised expressions flashed through the faces of most in the room as the Demon Prince merely bowed. "It would be an honor."

Chapter 904: To Visit One's Parents

Jake rarely felt nervous these days. He was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, Harbinger of Primeval Origins, and now even the top performer on the Nevermore Leaderboards. Yet he couldn't deny his own trepidations before arriving at Skyggen.

There was no doubt that Jake was a pretty sucky son and now also uncle. Even before the system, he had been bad at calling home or visiting often enough, and with the initiation, he had become far worse. What made Jake feel even worse about everything was how he didn't really feel that bad for not visiting as often. Just the knowledge they were doing well was enough for him.

His father's words before he left last time also helped a lot, having pretty much given Jake permission to not worry about them. There was also the fact that Caleb was with them at all times and would ensure they were kept safe alongside Maja and Adam – his wife and son, also known as Jake's sister-in-law and nephew.

Mixed in with his slight anxiety was also a lot of excitement. The last time he saw Adam, he had just been a baby, while now he should be solidly out of the toddler years. He naturally also looked forward to seeing his parents and how they were doing.

He was also determined to get some way of contacting them this time around, if not for nothing else but the ability to at least call home once in a while to check in on things. Though, rather than talking about some promotion or a funny anecdote of what had happened that day, Jake would talk about how he had met some frost wyvern or helped create a Demon Lord.

Nearly at Skyggen, Jake decided to have a bit of fun and check the local defenses. Activating his stealth skill, Jake wanted to see if he could sneak in without anyone noticing him. If he could, he would definitely have something to tease his brother about.

Sadly, the moment Jake arrived floating above the city, he encountered one of the outer barriers covering the city that served as the headquarters of the Court of Shadows. It became pretty damn clear Jake couldn't sneak through without triggering it. There were over a dozen layers of barriers, most of which were only primed to be activated to defend against attacks. There were still three different ones designed for detection, though, as well as five, maybe six, made to help hide the city.

"At least Caleb made sure the city is properly defended," Jake nodded. Haven also had defensive barriers, but far fewer than this. Instead, the city was primarily defended by two people: Arnold and Miranda. Both had placed down their own protective measures, and Jake knew that Arnold had launched a number of satellites to keep a lookout.

Entering through the barrier, Jake instantly knew he was detected. He could have taken the main entrance but decided it was more fun to fly down from above. That way, it would also be easier to find where his parents stayed, something he used a quick Pulse of Perception to discover.

As with most other cities on Earth, Skyggen had grown a lot over the last many years. Despite only really being a city for members of the Court and their family members, it looked surprisingly normal, especially the area where he spotted his family. It looked like the regular suburbs of old, with modern-looking houses on a closed-off street and big gardens. It didn't look very defended either, which Jake perfectly understood.

Caleb and Jake didn't want to keep their family in a cage with the justification they were just protecting them. That would be insulting and unhealthy for everyone involved. No, Jake would rather make it so the entire planet was a safe environment for not only his parents but everyone else. Despite never

having spoken with his brother about this explicitly, he knew Caleb also felt the same way, which was why he had done things like this.

Flying toward the suburbs, Jake felt a few presences check him out, but the moment they realized who he was, they backed off, resulting in no one bothering him. He saw that his parents were currently both at one house, with his mother sitting in the back garden reading a book while his dad was in the house watching a projector – the system version of a TV. Assuming there weren't already normal TVs.

There probably were normal TVs, especially if Arnold could walk around with a tablet.

In the house next door, he saw Maja with three other women, as well as a group of seven kids. It wasn't hard to spot Adam, either. He looked uncannily like Caleb did when he was small, making Jake smile. The decision where to go first wasn't hard either because there was no fucking way he was going to intrude on his nephew's playdate. Especially not with his current get-up, as he had a slight suspicion a hooded masked man with glowing beastly eyes wouldn't be that popular with the kids.

Landing in front of his parent's house, Jake made his mask invisible, pulled down the hood, and tried to look as representable as he could. Knocking on the door, he was a bit nervous as he saw his father react inside by getting up and walking to the door before opening it.

Jake's dad froze for a moment when he saw Jake who just stood there smiling. "Hey, Dad, I-"

"Debra, there's another of those alchemist salesmen at the door!" his dad yelled, surprising Jake.

"Again!?" he heard his mother yell from the other side of the house as she made her way over to the door.

For a moment, Jake's mind worked at high speeds as he considered what had happened. Could karmic magic affect the memories of people, or was it-

"A fancy one from that snake club, too," his mother said as she walked over and smiled. "Doesn't he also seem oddly familiar, Robert?"

“He does look a bit like our younger son, doesn’t he. I wonder what happened to our estranged older one; we haven’t seen him in-“

“Ha ha, very funny,” Jake said in a dry tone. “Also, calling the Divine Order of a Primordial a snake club would definitely be considered heretical to most people.”

“Ah, sorry, I’m just happy you finally found a club you wanted to join since getting you to join any when you were a kid was a real struggle,” Debra teased him as she went outside and didn’t really give him any time before she pulled him into a hug. “Welcome home.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Jake smiled as she practically dragged him inside. His father put a hand on his shoulder as they walked in, giving him an approving nod and a look that said it was good he had finally visited.

“Do you want anything to drink?” his mom asked. “We have coffee and... a lot of different teas. Actually, you may know this, how come tea is so popular now?”

“Tea was always popular,” Jake argued. “But as for why it’s popular in the multiverse in general... well, think about it. Tea is just dried pieces of herbs and can come in a variety of flavors and forms, allowing whoever is making the tea to aim for certain desired effects. Meanwhile, for coffee, it needs to come from coffee beans, right? Limits the variety.”

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“I see,” his mom nodded. “So I take it you’re big into tea now?”

“Not really, do you have any hot chocolate?” Jake asked with a grin.

“I’m sure I can find something,” she answered with a smile and went into the kitchen. Jake looked after her as he quickly used an Identify to confirm how she was doing.

[Human – lvl 144]

He also used one on his dad, confirming a similar level.

[Human – lvl 141]

Both had reached mid-tier D-grade and were on their way. Neither leveled fast at all, but they were still leveling as far as Jake could tell. Actually, he was pretty sure that many would be jealous of his parent's ability to level despite neither of them being fighters.

If this keeps up, they should at least reach C-grade at some point, Jake assured himself as he took a seat at the dining table with his dad. Robert, his father, didn't look a day older than his last visit and still looked a lot healthier than he had been before the system. All good things to see.

"I hear you've been quite busy," his dad said after a brief pause. "Something about you placing first on the best Leaderboards in Nevermore?"

Jake was surprised that his dad knew about all that, considering how disconnected they seemed from multiverse stuff the last time he visited. Still, if he was interested, Jake saw no reason not to answer. "Yeah, I managed to snag the top spot above everyone else."

"Very impressive based on how I understand it," Robert said. "I won't act like I really understand how big of a deal it is, but Caleb seemed a lot more impressed than usual... so good job."

"Thanks," Jake smiled. "Say, where is Caleb?"

"At work," his mom answered as she came in carrying three mugs with hot chocolate, having made it a lot faster than Jake expected. "He is quite busy these days, and while he tried to take a small holiday after he returned from this Nevermore place, he was quickly dragged back to work. I guess his desk was full after more than three years of absence."

"Sucks to suck," Jake grinned, happy it wasn't him. In some ways, it was also good to have some one-on-one time with his parents.

“Don’t bully your little brother for having a job,” Robert scolded him in jest before he turned a lot more serious. “I know that to us, you’ve only been gone for a few years, but for you, it’s been decades... Caleb was quite affected and stuck to Maja and Adam like a magnet for the first day he was back. How are you doing?”

“I’m doing good,” Jake said with a reassuring smile.

“No, you’re not,” his dad said with an exaggerated sigh. “Charity workers do good. You’re doing well.”

“Way to spoil the serious mood with grammatical pedantry,” Jake shook his head. “And how do you know I didn’t do good? I recently helped someone transform into a Demon Lord, and just on the way here, I talked sense into a murderous and ignorant wyvern on top of a mountain while freeing a group of vampires from the fate of dying as popsicles.”

“The first one doesn’t sound like it counts,” Debra muttered.

“That’s just your bias against demons born from media misrepresentation,” Jake said in a matter-of-fact tone. “Most demons I’ve met have been pretty nice and chill.”

“You’re also part of what many call an evil snake club, with this Malefic Viper not striking me as a figure many would describe with the adjective good,” his dad couldn’t help but point out. “That may color your view a bit.”

“Is it just me, or do you two seem more educated on matters of the multiverse than last time I was here?” Jake asked with a raised eyebrow.

“We didn’t really have much of a choice, now did we?” Debra asked while Jake took a sip of his hot chocolate, which, for the record, was superb.

“What do you mean,” Jake asked after a good sip.

“You had a ceremony or something announcing yourself to the world a few years ago, didn’t you?” Robert chimed in again. “It isn’t anything new for the parents of famous people to get some attention from the public, now is it?”

Jake’s smile faded as he turned serious. “Have people been bothering you because of me?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” his mom sighed. “It’s more that there have been some odd types who’ve approached us, and sometimes it can be hard to judge who is there because of us or you. It isn’t that big of a deal, though. We were already having similar issues because Caleb is the Judge of the Court of Shadows. Maja, too, and Caleb is doing a good job of making sure we aren’t too bothered.”

“I... see...” Jake muttered. “What kind of odd types have appeared?”

“Most people from these new factions who arrived, and they are mostly very polite,” Debra answered. “There is this group of very weird people, though... what were they called again?”

“Primordial Church,” Robert answered.

“That’s right, the Primordial Church. There are these three in particular who are quite peculiar, though they don’t seem dangerous or deceitful in the slightest. They’re actually very straightforward about what they want, if a little pushy and overexcited,” Jake’s mom continued.

“What is it they want?” Jake asked with some concern.

He had no idea why it had never crossed his mind this could happen. Even if Jake had things like Shroud of the Primordial to hide him, people could still just do good old detective work to easily find out who his family was. Shit, the fact Caleb was Jake’s brother was far from a secret, so all they really had to do was find Caleb’s parents, and they would find Jake’s.

“They just ask questions,” Debra continued, shaking her head. “Their questions are just odd and kind of intrusive. They asked a lot about you, how you grew up, where, who you knew, what you were like when younger...”

"I think one of them mentioned something about writing a book?" Robert added. "Or a biography?"

"Are you sure? One of them tried to show me her poetry collection about Jake..." Debra muttered.

Jake stared at his parents as she scratched the back of his hand. "To clarify... you didn't actually tell them anything about me, right?"

"Not anything bad!" his mom quickly made clear, which didn't make Jake feel better. "But they were really polite and without any bad intentions, especially in the beginning."

His mom's words made a shiver run down Jake's back. He knew enough about the Primordial Church to know they were fanatics, and he really hoped she hadn't told some embarrassing stories he could now look forward to spreading all throughout the multiverse.

"Don't worry, they didn't get much useful," Jake's dad tried to assure him. "And a lot of what they got was just nonsense that will make them laughingstocks with no creditability if they actually try to share it."

"I'm sure they will just ignore the outrageous things you said," Debra sighed. "No one's going to believe any of that stuff you told them."

"What... what did he tell them?" Jake said, clenching his fists.

"As I said, nonsense," his dad kept waving him off. "No one, not even people as unreasonable as them, is going to believe a five-year-old fought off a shark or that a ten-year-old became the world record holder for ultramarathons on accidents just because he wanted to have a long run."

His dad laughed a bit at the last part, as Jake just had a look of horror. His father had no idea what he had done as Jake looked up at them.

"They are that unreasonable."

Robert looked confused and stopped laughing before shaking his head. "Even so, if they try to share it, no one will take them seriously."

"Dad... you don't understand these people," Jake said as he looked his father in the eye. "I accidentally showed a projection to a guy depicting a beer bottle and the words danger noodle, and the guy dedicated a significant portion of his life to creating a mythical rarity statue..."

"Wait, are you talking about Felix, the High Priest in Haven?" Debra asked. "I heard he was a sculptor who gained your favor..."

"That's him, and the fact he is now a High Priest should tell you everything," Jake said with a serious look.

"They aren't actually going to write down and publish everything I said, right?" Robert said with a tinge of nervousness.

"Every. Single. Word," Jake assured him.

Silence hung in the room for several seconds before something vibrated on a small table in the corner of the room. Debra hurried over to it as Jake contemplated if he should try and track down the members of the Primordial Church.

"Caleb is coming over," his mother said as she held the token with a smile. "He said he'll stop by and grab Maja and Adam on the way."

Jake wasn't surprised Caleb was coming, as someone had definitely reported to him that Jake had arrived, and he was happy to hear he was bringing Maja and Adam. Next door, he saw that Maja had definitely also been called by Caleb as the other women were packing up and leaving, as Maja herself got ready with Adam.

I'll deal with that damn Primordial Church later... for now, let's just try not to mess up my nephew's first impression of his uncle.

Chapter 905: Quality Family Time

Jake looked through the drawers, trying to find anything suitable as his mom stood at the door. He had never been a fan of his mom's tendency to buy clothes, as she had a horrible habit of not really remembering what size people were, but in this one instance, that came in handy as Jake quickly found a T-shirt and jeans that seemed about his size.

"I told you there would be something for you," Debra said in an almost proud tone.

"Not sure you should be bragging about buying things in the wrong size for Dad or Caleb," Jake smiled and shook his head before shooing her out of the room so he could change.

It probably shouldn't come as a surprise, but Jake didn't own any normal clothing. He had his armor, a few party outfits he used at the Order, and some more clothing that really didn't fit with a modern setting. With that in mind, Jake had decided to raid a drawer with clothing no one used, finding his current outfit that fit nicely after putting it on.

Looking at a mirror in the room, Jake felt like he looked weird.

Since when did looking normal become weird, and looking weird become normal? Jake questioned. In the multiverse, people really just wore whatever, and finding people walking down the street in full plate armor, or armor obviously made from a dead beast, was considered entirely ordinary. Not to mention polymorphed monsters that didn't even need equipment with enchantments, making them wear even weirder stuff at times.

Jake did still look a bit off, though. He had undoubtedly changed physically after the system arrived and with a few evolutions under his belt, but nothing was as notable as his eyes. While he hadn't exactly tested it, he was pretty sure they glowed in the dark now, or at least reflected light like the eyes of a cat, and if he tried to evaluate them objectively, they did make Jake look a bit... he wanted to say dangerous, but volatile was probably more accurate.

Wearing sunglasses was one option, but one Jake quickly dismissed. Firstly, because wearing sunglasses inside makes you look like an idiot or a blind person, and secondly, because his nephew would definitely end up seeing his eyes at some point anyway, so there was no need to hide them.

Exiting the room in his average outfit, his mom waited on the other side and looked at him from top to bottom, stopping when she reached his feet. "You're still wearing those old boots? According to Caleb, you should be doing pretty well for yourself, so couldn't you get some new ones? They certainly look like they have seen better days..."

"These are the best boots in the multiverse, and I will hear no objections to that statement," Jake said with a tone of utmost certainty. He wasn't really joking, either. Finding awesome mythical rarity boots like this wasn't exactly commonplace.

"Alright, not going to argue with you, but you should look into buying some product to treat the leather," Debra still insisted.

"I doubt it would work," Jake shook his head. "They haven't changed appearance no matter what's happened to them."

"If you say so," his mom finally gave up as the two of them walked into the living room to wait for Caleb and Maja. Jake could already see them next door, preparing to leave.

"Look at him; not wearing dark clothes and looking all grim," Jake's Dad said the moment Jake entered the living room. He had to admit that the blue t-shirt with what he was pretty sure was the logo of some company printed on it did make him look much less serious and grim than usual.

"I'll have you know cloaks and leather armor are quite fashionable," Jake defended himself as he took a seat at the dining table.

His Dad didn't say anything but just looked at the projector that was playing what looked a lot like a TV show of some kind. Except it was clearly one made after the system arrived, making Jake look at it with interest. It was a show about a tailor struggling with finding enough materials because a merchant union had recently moved in and increased the prices, but oh wait, a new shop just opened up on the street with a blacksmith who refuses to back down to the evil merchant's demands...

"You look like it's your first time watching a TV show," his Dad commented.

"It is my first time watching one produced after the system... not gonna lie, I didn't even know it was a thing," Jake readily admitted. Then again, all Paths were viable, so maybe stuff like this was too... though he had a hard time seeing how one could take acting to a particularly high grade. Like, what would the

difference between a D-grade and a B-grade actor really be? Straight-up polymorphing into other people? That seemed more shapeshifter-y, though...

"There aren't that many, but some people are trying to bring back a feeling of normalcy, and producing things like these is part of that," his mom added. "Not to say there isn't an entertainment industry, they just don't really do produced shows like this. A lot are recording and showing off spars, hunts, or creating lessons in certain professions and selling those."

"Interesting," Jake said. Recordings like these were pretty easy to make, and many were freely sold back in the Order, but most of the time it was done with the purpose of teaching and not entertainment. Sure, the teachers who were also entertaining were the ones who did best, but the primary objective was still to impart knowledge.

As Jake was watching the show, Maja, Caleb, and Adam finally arrived. He looked toward the door just before they knocked, and his mom got up with a smile. "You two just stay here while I go let them in."

"Alright," Jake nodded, his Dad just letting out a low grunt.

In the entrance area, he saw Debra open the door as he heard them greet each other. It was pretty clear that they visited often, which really wasn't a surprise considering they were neighbors.

The four of them quickly made their way toward the living room, and Jake felt nervous but tried to look as non-intimidating and normal as he could. The first one to come into the living room was Maja, who smiled brightly when she saw Jake.

"Jake, so good to finally see you again!" she said as Jake got up and she came over for a light hug before pulling away. "It has been years! You really need to visit more often; I'm getting tired of hearing about your exploits second-hand from Caleb."

"I know, I know," Jake said apologetically as he looked over her shoulder and saw the three others enter. Caleb looked... calm. A lot calmer than he had in the get-together of all the people who placed on the Leaderboards. While he hadn't really shown it much, Jake could really see now how tense he had been then, and it was great to see him more relaxed.

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Finally, he laid eyes on the newest addition to their family – at least if one talked about the humans in it. Adam looked as one would expect of a kid, and he stared at Jake with big eyes. He really reminded Jake of when Caleb was young.

“This is Uncle Jake,” Maja said as she introduced Jake to his nephew. Caleb helped by pushing the little guy forward.

“Hey there,” Jake said with a smile as he squatted down.

The kid stared at him for a moment, as Jake felt a bit uncomfortable but tried to not let it show. After what felt like forever, Adam finally spoke:

“Your eyes are weird.”

“Adam, that’s not nice,” Maja said in a scolding tone, as Jake just chuckled and shook his head.

“My eyes are weird, aren’t they?” Jake just confirmed. “Why, don’t you like them?”

“They’re cool...” he muttered shyly, much to the relief of Jake.

Jake didn’t really know how to deal with kids. It wasn’t that he particularly disliked kids, only when they were annoying or disruptive; he just didn’t really know how to act around them. It didn’t help that he had zero experience with kids of any age. The system had surely also changed things, as based on what his mom had briefly mentioned before he went to grab some more normal clothes, kids seemed a lot smarter these days. Adam had been able to speak a lot earlier than usual, as an example, though physically he didn’t seem older than Jake would expect.

“You might not remember Uncle Jake as he was away just like Dad, but he visited when you were little,” Maja said as she walked over to Adam.

Adam seemed interested in that as he stared up at Jake. "Does that mean you're super strong like Dad?"

Jake was a bit taken aback as he smiled. "I'm the strongest."

"Even stronger than Dad?" Adam asked with wide eyes.

Caleb's gaze bore into Jake as he stared at him with eyes that looked like they could kill, making Jake consider his answer carefully. "Your Dad and I don't fight, but we're both super strong. Strong people like us shouldn't fight without a good reason, right?"

That answer seemed to satisfy Adam's curiosity, as Caleb also threw Jake a thankful look. Jake got it. Flexing in front of his son would be a bit too much, and what kid didn't want to believe that their Dad was the strongest in the world?

Anyway, with that, the introduction Jake had been so nervous about was over, with the kid seemingly not caring overly much the second his grandma brought out some treats. It was almost anticlimactic, but honestly... kids were probably a lot simpler than Jake believed, they were definitely easily distracted.

Standing next to Caleb, he saw his brother with a content smile on his face as Jake sent him a telepathic message. "How are you holding up?"

Caleb threw him a look as he hid a sigh. "It's been hard. I missed more than three of his most important years being away in Nevermore. What's more, for me, fifty passed... it's like I've been away an entire lifetime. It will take a bit to adapt before I really feel like I'm back. Adam will also need some time. I... I'm not even sure he recognized me when I walked through the door after I returned."

Jake put a hand on Caleb's shoulder as he gave it a light squeeze of encouragement. He wasn't going to pretend to understand how Caleb felt. To be away from your kid for so long had to be hard for both parties, and no one could pretend fifty years was a short time, even if Caleb could live for thousands at the very least as a C-grade. One had to remember all of them were still very young in a multiversal context, and he was pretty sure Caleb had spent less time than Jake in time-dilation, meaning Nevermore had more likely than not been more than half of Caleb's entire life.

His brother threw him a thankful look, and the two of them just stood there and watched Adam talking with their mother as Maja unpacked a bag with some toys in it. Meanwhile, Jake and Caleb's Dad looked at the projection of the TV show with one eye while keeping an eye on Adam with the other.

If one took a snapshot of this scene, they could almost be confused for an entirely normal family.

Maybe visiting home once in a while isn't all that bad...

The Sword Saint had done much to divest himself from being involved in the internal politics of the Noboru Clan. He had put distance between them, but no matter what he did, they still recognized him as their Patriarch, and he realized there was nothing he could do about that and simply accepted the role. With that, he needed to, at the very least, understand the situation of the clan, if not for anything else but his role as a member of the World Council.

Upon his return from Nevermore, he was naturally swarmed by people who wanted to know of his exploits, and to update him on the happenings of the planet over the last few years. Something he gladly accepted, as he heard all that had happened during his absence, and it genuinely surprised him.

He had half-expected something major to happen during this time, but everything had just been calm. What happened instead was the rapid expansion of all human settlements, the development of technology, and the growth of the overall power of the planet. All the assistance their small rock floating through space received due to Jake was overwhelming, and while most of it was centralized in and around Haven, the Noboru Clan also benefitted greatly, as it was well-known the Sword Saint was a comrade of the Chosen, and also someone carrying the Divine Blessing of Aeon, making him a person of interest in his own right.

The clan did have one issue, though.

Vampires.

In the multiverse, they were not a very popular race, and the Sword Saint understood why. The clan had been forced to set up an entire system to allow the vampires to exist there, and donations of blood were a requirement.

One had to remember the massive downside of vampirism after Sanguine died, requiring them to consume life energy in the form of blood to regenerate their health. They had no other ways to truly regenerate it, and things like healing spells could only temporarily help. To make matters more complicated, the most effective blood was that of the race they turned into a vampire from, or at least a similar one. In other words, others of the enlightened races.

Ah, and then there was the problem of vampires entering a blood frenzy if starved for too long or injured badly. All in all, vampires were an incredibly problematic race, and that was before one considered the fact that the Risen, Holy Church, and a few other factions openly had kill orders out on any vampire, wanting to wipe the race from the multiverse.

The Sword Saint was fully aware that the only reason they were accepted in any way on Earth was because of Jake and his identity as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. The Order of the Malefic Viper was the only large faction that officially had vampires in it, and that was only possible because of the Primordial at the helm. The open support for vampires displayed was also apparent, especially after the Order had even been so bold as to bring a vampire to the post-Neversmore political meetings. For the Viper's Chosen to also be accepting of vampires was only to be expected; thus, no one dared openly bother the clan.

Miyamoto also had to admit that vampires were powerful. For their level, they tended to be superior to humans in combat. This primarily stemmed from them only having either a class or a profession, and most of the vampires went with a class. Combined with their racial skills and the often-seen high level of synergy between their class and race, their high combat prowess shouldn't be that surprising.

While sitting in his own courtyard meditating, the Sword Saint was interrupted as a person approached his residence. Opening his eyes, he waved his hand as the gates swung open, revealing a familiar face. It was one of his many grandchildren and one of those who had chosen to embrace vampirism.

"You looked disturbed," the Sword Saint asked when he saw the look on his face.

"Greetings, Patriarch," his grandson bowed. "I apologize for the disturbance; however--"

He proceeded to explain that he had recently taken part in an attempted raid on a frost wyvern and how it had ended in their utter failure. But, the most important part came at the end, as he explained the cause for urgency:

“The life tokens of those frozen are still intact, meaning the wyvern must have captured them. This may be presumptuous, but we have none capable of fighting this beast, so if the Patriarch would-”

“Very well,” the Sword Saint agreed as he stood up, understanding the concern. “I shall head out immediately.”

Chapter 906: All Good Things Must Come To An End

Miyamoto felt the cold winds sweeping across his body as he trekked up the mountain. Many of the ice elementals noticed him, but none approached as he soon reached the summit where this powerful beast known as the Northpeak Wyvern should reside.

Admittedly, an environment like this was far from favorable to him, as his water affinity was severely weakened due to the cold, but he was still confident. Its level more or less matched him, and while the vampire raid team described the wyvern as powerful, the mere fact any of them managed to return alive and that they could injure the beast was proof that it shouldn't be a threat to him.

As described, he found the cavern atop the mountain, and within, he felt the presence of a monster. The last update he got before he headed off from Haven said that the captured vampires were still alive, but he feared things may have changed as he only felt the presence of a single living being within.

If it was so, the least he could do was enact vengeance. The Prima Response Team, as the people in charge of preparing for the Prima Guardian's arrival called themselves, had designated this wyvern too dangerous to leave alive anyway, so someone would have to slay it anyway. May as well be him.

Walking through the cavern, he was ready should it attack with a breath, as he had been informed the wyvern was extraordinarily aggressive and impossible to talk to, and the design of the cave made it a perfect choke point to-

“Excuse me, can I help you with anything?” a voice echoed through the cave as the Sword Saint stopped and frowned. The tone did not carry the level of arrogance he had expected, but he wasn't going to let his guard down.

He responded as he infused his voice with energy. “I hope for your sake you can. A group of vampires recently fought you here, and I believe a number of them were captured alive.”

“That... that was all a misunderstanding that has been rectified,” the wyvern responded in a meek tone, making the Sword Saint frown even more. Usually, the data provided by members of his clan was extremely accurate, but the current situation certainly wasn’t in line with his expectations. Had he somehow gotten the wrong mountain? No... no, that wouldn’t make any sense.

“I question your claims, but please enlighten me as to the nature of your rectification,” he responded, not far from his goal.

“It’s... fine if you come to the big cavern to talk...”

Continuing through the cave, he soon reached the inner cave, where he saw the large wyvern nested in the middle. He was ready to draw his sword but felt no aggression as he got a nervous impression from the wyvern.

“Gre... greetings,” the wyvern said, seemingly trying really hard to be polite.

The Sword Saint didn’t respond immediately but scanned the room and saw no immediate signs of any trapped vampires. “What happened to the vampires you captured?”

“They left,” the wyvern responded quickly. “I, eh, I let them go, and they left a few days ago...”

Narrowing his eyes, Miyamoto placed one hand on the handle of his sword. “And why would you just let them go?”

“I saw the error of my ways?” the wyvern responded before seemingly nodding to itself as if to confirm the answer.

“Do excuse me if I question the validity of any creature changing their entire manner of acting so abruptly,” the Sword Saint said skeptically as he looked directly at the wyvern. “Unless there is more than one Northpeak Wyvern, you are known for attacking indiscriminately any who dares set foot atop this mountain, and you mean to tell me that has suddenly changed within a couple of days?”

“Yes?” the wyvern responded, staring unblinkingly at the Sword Saint. “I, eh... learned my lesson and will no longer be a menace, but always talk first and not just attack.”

“Forgive me for my continued skepticism, but what was the impetus for this change?”

“Impetus?” the wyvern asked, seemingly not understanding what the word meant.

“Reason. Cause. What event caused you to have such a sudden shift in behavior?” the Sword Saint elaborated. He hoped the wyvern had a satisfactory answer; if not, he wasn’t averse to doing what he originally came to this mountain to do, even if the wyvern claimed it had suddenly wised up, as everything could easily just be a ruse to avoid powerful people actually slaying it. It would need a really good rea-

“The Chosen of the Malefic Viper visited, and-”

Yeah, alright, that’ll do it.

--

More than two weeks passed, with Jake doing almost fuck-all in the progress department. Instead, he spent all this time just relaxing with his family, doing a variety of activities. He watched pretty bad TV shows with his dad, went shopping with his mom, and talked with Maja while playing with Adam.

Caleb sadly still had to do a lot of work, but he tried to be home as much as possible. Alas, he was still the Judge of the Court of Shadows, and he had certain responsibilities he simply couldn’t divvy out no matter how much he wanted to. Jake was sure happy he had managed to outsource all his responsibilities.

A lot of people would probably say Jake was wasting his time just relaxing with his family. He barely did any alchemy, only when Adam was sleeping – yes, children still had to sleep – or when everyone else was preoccupied. When he did do a bit of alchemy, he only ever made some potions and stuff, never focusing that much on the task.

Even so, Jake didn’t regret this time in the slightest. He wasn’t in some extreme rush to optimize every single second of his day, and in some ways, he even felt like a moment of downtime like this would be healthy for him in the long run, even from a progress perspective.

This time around, Jake didn't help Caleb with any kind of presence-resistance training either. Partly because Caleb didn't want to go with Jake and do it, taking them both away from spending quality family time. Jake wasn't complaining either, as he was totally fine, not helping train shadow assassins and learning all about what kids Adam's age played with after the system arrived.

Things had definitely changed for parents and nearly all for the better. Things like sickness weren't really a thing anymore, and many of the usual woes of children were no longer a factor. Kids were also a lot more durable. Adam could climb a dozen meters up into a tree and just jump down without any issues, and while he was still pretty damn clumsy, he wasn't ever really hurt, even when he tripped and tumbled down a grassy hill. Instead, he asked to go again.

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It definitely took a bit of getting used to. If Adam did end up injuring himself somehow, a simple healing spell or potion could also instantly fix the problem. Still, Maja was very protective at times. As an example, she rejected Jake and Caleb's idea of putting Adam in a ball of stable arcane mana and throwing it around up in the sky, no matter how much the three of them begged her to let them.

They ended up doing it anyway but got quite a scolding afterward, even if Adam had a great time.

He didn't speak to Villy at all during this time either but disconnected as much as he could from that entire part of his life. It was a nice reprieve for sure, and he had formed some good memories. Hopefully, he had also given Adam some positive memories of his cool uncle.

Alas, all things have to come to an end. One day, when he was sitting with Adam playing with stable arcane mana constructs, Jake making whatever shape Adam wanted to see, he got the message he knew would eventually come.

It even happened a bit later than Jake expected, not that Jake was in any way complaining about that. During his entire visit, he had just been waiting for Sandy to contact him for them to begin their own little adventure. He had expected this to only take a few days, but as mentioned, it ended up taking more than two weeks, with Arnold definitely getting a lot of good data from the giant space worm.

In fact, from the sounds of it, when Jake talked to the worm later, Sandy only left because the scientist had run out of snacks the worm's dietitian approved of. While the dietitian couldn't go out of Sandy's stomach, he could check through the things Sandy ate and make the giant space worm spit out whatever wasn't part of the meal plan.

According to Sandy, even if the worm had left before the scientist would have liked, Arnold had been quite happy and talked about how he could combine the data provided by Sandy with what he had gathered from the spaceship Jake had been gifted during his Chosen Ceremony and what he already knew from researching the ruined ship he purchased during the Treasure Hunt auction.

Jake was already looking forward to what kind of spacecrafts he would make, though it did sound like he was primarily working on improving his satellites before making any ships designed for travel. Plus, knowing Arnold, he would definitely want to do a lot of testing first to make sure he got things right the first time.

Finally... Jake already had a living spaceship available by the name of Sandy.

"I'm wriggling to you now," Sandy had sent to Jake as they headed off from Haven, which also marked the end of his family visit. "Should be there in a jiffy."

"Are you sure wriggling is the right term? Not flying or teleporting?" Jake asked semi-jokingly.

"I'm the expert here, and the correct term is wriggling. What else would it be? I am wriggling, after all," Sandy responded, leaving little room for discussion.

"Alright, alright... I'll be waiting,"

Jake said as he looked at his family, who had noticed his change in demeanor. They had just eaten dinner, and everyone sat in the lounging area on sofas, just talking.

"It's time for you to head off?" Caleb asked, having realized pretty quickly.

"Yeah," Jake nodded with a sigh.

"Jake is leaving?" Adam asked, confused.

"Sorry buddy, adventure calls," Jake smiled as he ruffled the little guy's hair.

"Where are you going?" his nephew kept asking.

Jake flashed a big smile as he pointed upwards. "To the moon."

Adam's eyes opened wide in amazement as Jake's mom scolded him. "You shouldn't just make up stories like that."

"I'm serious," Jake responded with a deadpan look. "I'm literally going to the moon."

"Are you going on a rocket ship?" Adam asked, incredibly invested.

"No, something even better," Jake said. "A big space worm."

Jake's mom once more threw him a look, but the gaze he returned made it clear he also wasn't joking with this one, making Jake's dad chuckle. Adam looked a bit skeptical, though, making Jake shake his head.

"You don't believe me?"

Adam didn't answer but looked at his mom as if he expected Maja to confirm if Jake was telling the truth.

"Well, if you don't believe me, I won't let you meet the big space worm," Jake said, acting offended as he crossed his arms.

"I wanna see..." Adam muttered, Jake taking the victory. It was not like he had much of a choice because if he knew Sandy, the worm would have absolutely no sense of caution or forethought with how they would approach Jake. He was also sure Sandy would indeed arrive fast and have no issues finding him.

One had to remember that Jake carried around a weird rock-egg-thing Sandy had given him, which was apparently the result of the skill Sandy had gained upon receiving the True Blessing of the Boundless Hydra, better known as the Lord Protector of the Order of the Malefic Viper, and even better known as Snappy.

This weird item allowed Sandy to always be aware of where Jake was by tracking that odd item.

As Jake predicted, it didn't take long before Sandy arrived in an as chaotic manner as Jake expected. With little warning, a hundred-meter-long giant space worm fell from the sky, landing right in the middle of the road outside, barely missing any of the houses, though definitely doing plenty of damage to the pavement.

Jake's parents, along with Maja, were shocked as Adam ran outside the house and saw the giant mass of wiggling flesh.

"Big worm!" Adam yelled as he ran forward, Maja going to grab him as they all exited the house.

"Hello, little human! And other humans that are also little, but not as little!" Sandy said in a cheerful tone. "Also, did I stick that landing or not, eh?"

"I am indeed surprised you didn't break anything. Well, break more than you did," Jake said as he walked forward and introduced the worm. "This is Sandy, everyone. A friend of mine and my travel companion for my upcoming adventure."

"More than a travel companion! I am the very mode of transportation itself!" Sandy said proudly.

"Are you gonna ride the big worm?" Adam asked with amazement.

"In a way?" Jake said.

"I'm gonna eat him," Sandy said.

"That's not nice," Adam accurately pointed out.

"It is if you have permission, and sometimes even if you don't have permission. Just ask Tom," Sandy responded to the accusations of non-niceness.

"Who's Tom?" Adam asked, a bit confused.

"Tom is Tom," Sandy refused to elaborate. "Now, you ready to head off?"

"Yeah, I'm good to go," Jake nodded as Maja picked up Adam, and Jake turned to his family. "It's been fun, and thanks for having me?"

"You remembered the token, right?" his mom asked in a concerned tone.

Jake flashed the communication token and nodded, the item allowing him to call them or them to call him. It was pretty much a magic telephone and even had video calls in the form of being able to project images.

"Take care of yourself," Jake's dad said as Caleb gave him a nod.

Finally, Jake said his goodbyes to Adam as he saw the kid was sad he was leaving. While it did suck Jake made him sad by leaving, it did make him a bit lucky his nephew at least cared he left.

"I'll bring you a moon rock; what do you say?" Jake said to Adam.

"Really?" he asked. "A big one?"

"The biggest one your mom and dad will allow," Jake grinned.

"Okay!" Adam said happily as Maja gave Jake a thankful look.

Going over to Sandy, the giant worm floated into the air.

"See you, everyone," Jake said as the worm opened its mouth and sucked him in.

"Bye, humans related to Jake!" Sandy said as they turned toward the sky, wriggling, and propelled themselves forward with a final battlecry that no one had any idea how Sandy learned.

"To infinity and beyond!"

As they watched Jake fly off into the sky, Caleb stood staring up with his wife alongside his parents. They saw the two of them disappear into the sky, as Robert commented:

"What an odd creature, I wonder how Jake even met and made friends with it."

"Oh yeah, you might not know this, but that worm is the Chosen of the Boundless Hydra and probably one of the creatures with the highest status on the planet, definitely surpassing me," Caleb added.

The others remained quiet as they let it sink in, Debra finally commenting.

"It was a very polite giant space worm, though. Or maybe all space worms are just like that."

"Can't say I would know; I am not familiar with that many space worms," Caleb readily admitted.

"I just hope everything goes well... I don't think anyone has ever been to the moon after the system arrived," Maja commented.

"I'm sure he'll be fine," Caleb said. Genuinely, he was more concerned about the moon and whatever unfortunate creatures lived there than Jake.

Chapter 907: To The Moon!

Who hadn't, at one point or another, dreamed of visiting the moon? Or maybe Jake was just weird, but he sure had wanted to at least try going there at least once. To see the world from an entirely new perspective, and, more important of all, finally confirm that Earth wasn't flat like a pancake.

Setting off from Skyggen with Sandy, Jake was naturally eaten and entered one of the space worm's many stomachs. At this point, Jake had no idea how many Sandy had, but he was sure he would figure that out eventually, as he expected the two of them to spend quite a lot of time traveling together over the next months.

Looking around the stomach he had entered, it was more just one large room. The floors were rock-like, with the walls also reminiscent of being inside of a cave, and the rectangular shape made it hard to imagine he was currently inside of a creature.

Inside this room, he spotted a bunch of furniture as the place was set up like an apartment, and when he looked toward the end of the rectangle, he even saw a sealed-off glass cube with a lot of familiar instruments and tools within.

"Is... this an alchemy lab?" Jake said with raised eyebrows.

"Yep, had some people from the Order set it up," Sandy responded quickly. "Plus, even if you do poison stuff, it won't be annoying anymore as it's sealed within the cube, and I added special ventilation!"

"Do I want to know how you exhaust these toxic fumes?" Jake joked.

"Why would I exhaust them? I put them in another stomach where the fumes are absorbed by some toxin-absorbant materials to help them grow," Sandy responded as if Jake was being an idiot.

"I see," Jake muttered, sad his fart joke had failed, as he instead turned his attention elsewhere.

One of the walls of the room displayed not just a wall but was entirely see-through so Jake could observe the outside world. Sandy had even placed windows elsewhere, making it seem as if Jake was flying within a big worm-shaped plane. Of course, Jake knew it wasn't as if these were actually windows. They were more just screens displaying the outside.

As he looked out, he saw they quickly flew into the sky with speed surpassing anything Jake could do. It actually wasn't that much faster than he was if he continually used One Step, though, but he knew this was far from Sandy's top speed. Just going by how fast the worm had traveled from Haven to Skyggen, he knew the worm's top speed was absolutely insane.

The reason Sandy didn't go full throttle right now was likely due to the way the sky worked. The atmosphere around Earth, and the sky in general, had several layers to it, and traveling through them haphazardly could get quite dangerous. Especially the outer layers of the atmosphere.

B-grade was recognized as the grade in which one could begin to explore space, and that wasn't only because that was when one rarely could find worthy foes on their home planets, but because that was often when one became able to even enter other planets safely.

Surviving in space wasn't that hard at all, and even D-grades could exist there. Sure, they would have to exhaust energy to protect themselves from the cold and the semi-vacuum of space, but it wasn't that bad at all. It was more akin to just being pretty deep underwater. Granted, there were a lot of threats that could kill one out there, such as rampant blasts of energy just flying across the cosmos or small meteors striking you, but technically, one could live in space. It wasn't recommended, but theoretically possible.

Thing is... you would be kind of stuck there unless someone helped you get back to a planet or you chose to settle down on a large space rock without any proper atmosphere. Going to a place like Earth was out of the question, and Earth wasn't even a massive planet by multiversal standards.

Jake, even with his current level of power, would have to go all-out if he wanted to reenter Earth again without the assistance of Sandy, with the atmosphere effectively creating a natural barrier protecting the planet from threats. Exiting was quite a lot easier than entering, but even that was pretty hard. Arnold had only managed to send out satellites and whatnot by coating them in special metals with high resistance to the concepts in the atmosphere, something Jake's body was definitely not made of.

Sandy was made of this kind of resistant material, though.

The space worm's thick skin seemed nearly unaffected, even as they entered the outer layers of the atmosphere. The dense energies and concepts that sought to tear apart anything they encountered washed over Sandy without any issues, and from inside the worm, Jake saw the grand vista that was Earth's atmosphere.

From below, it wasn't visible, but once inside, it was as if he was standing inside the northern lights. Waves of energy crashed everywhere, and whatever small rocks entered it were instantly torn apart. It was entirely different forces than before the system that protected planets now, and Jake could only imagine how much stronger the natural defenses of a planet could get if one added their own barriers on top. If the core of the planet was used as a medium, one could perhaps even enhance certain concepts of this natural atmosphere...

Soon, Jake saw as they passed the final layer. The waves of energy dispersed, and all became still as there was nothing but the emptiness of space all around them. Jake couldn't feel the concepts outside, but he got the impression that there wasn't much to feel for either. Space was called a vacuum for a reason, and while there certainly still was a lot of mana, the density was incredibly unvaried. The further they got away from any celestial objects, the less mana there would also be, with certain sectors of space nearly entirely empty of anything at all, save for the bare minimum of space energy required to hold reality together.

"So, are you ready? I will have to turn the lookout holes off when I jump into Sandy's Sand World," Sandy asked him.

"It isn't like I'll have to do anything, so sure, I'm ready," Jake smiled. "How long do you reckon it'll take to get there?"

Jake already had an estimate in mind. It had taken them over an hour to reach space, as Sandy couldn't go as fast in the upper layers as they wanted. Plus, Sandy had also clearly slowed down a lot and absorbed some energy here and there, while allowing Jake to take in the atmosphere. Traveling through empty space would definitely be faster, especially if Sandy's Sand World, as the big worm called it, was used.

Considering the distance from Earth to the moon was approximately thirty times the diameter of Earth and that proportions had been kept roughly the same, Jake reckoned it would take less than a week to get there, maybe even five or six days only if-

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“Like half a day at most?” Sandy responded.

“What?” Jake exclaimed. “Did you just say half a day?”

“Oh, here we go, making fun of the worm for not being fast enough. I’m trying here, and before I reach B-grade, I can’t go really fast, so it’s kind of rude to bully me like this. Actually, maybe I should just spit you out here and now, and you can just fly yourself. Yeah, let’s do that; let’s see who’s faster!”

Jake allowed the worm to vent their frustrations until it reached a point where he was afraid of getting tossed out before he responded.

“No... I meant that it’s faster than I expected,” Jake said in a calming tone. “From speaking to Arnold, the changes in space have resulted in pre-system space travel no longer being viable, as it’s no longer considered a complete vacuum, making the constant accelerations not a thing anymore.”

At least, that was how Jake had understood what Arnold said. He didn’t really know overly much about space travel, but he was pretty sure that traveling to the moon hadn’t even taken a week before the system, despite the long distance. Jake would have been impressed if Sandy, as a barely mid-tier C-grade, could rival that with the changes to space travel.

So, seeing Sandy not just match it but be a lot faster was great. It boded well for what the giant space worm would be capable of in the future when it was time to truly explore space in B-grade.

“Oh, you were praising me? In that case, ignore everything I just said and keep recognizing my awesomeness,” Sandy said. “Now get ready; we’re about to enter the sand world.”

“Ready,” Jake nodded. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to be ready for, though.

In the next instance, the windows to the outside world disappeared, and Jake felt the shift. Through his sphere that extended outside of Sandy, he saw everything warp. It was as if space contracted around Sandy before suddenly everything broke apart.

A headache instantly assaulted Jake as he took in the environment of the subspace. He saw reality itself stretch and contract in impossible ways as concepts such as distance became nothing more than relative terms. Despite the headache, Jake held on as he vaguely felt himself and Sandy move. Despite the odd changed space, Sandy still managed to wiggle forward, as if swimming through a world that simply didn't make any sense from Jake's perspective.

For a moment, Jake considered releasing a Pulse of Perception but thought twice about doing that unless he wanted to knock himself out. He was curious, true, but not curious enough to potentially deal soul damage to himself by overloading his brain. The chances of it happening were low but still too high to entertain his vanity.

Instead, he contracted his sphere to relieve his headache, pulled out his cauldron, and went into the alchemy bubble Sandy had created for him. Well, alright, that Sandy had people from the Order create for Jake, but it was the thought that counts.

Jake had a lot of profession levels to go before he would catch up to his class, and while half a day, or even half a year, wouldn't do much to close the gap, every little bit counted. Seeing as he was good on potions, Jake worked a bit on poisons, and the hours quickly passed as the trip to the moon, which Jake had expected to be a long endeavor was over before it had barely begun.

"Alright, we're pretty close now," Sandy said after what had only been ten and a half hours.

"How do you even know we're close?" Jake questioned, as the outside world still didn't make any sense to him as he expanded his sphere back out a bit.

"Because I'm smart."

"Yeah, that doesn't really answer anything... like, what's the tell?" Jake kept pressing.

"Alright, alright. You know how when you're swimming through the sand, all the sand looks identical, but if you get really close, no two pieces of sand are the same, and sometimes there's even other stuff mixed in, like small bones, stones, and whatnot?"

"Sure, let's say I do," Jake just agreed.

“Well, it’s a bit like that. Big stuff is like bones and stuff within the sand, while space itself is like every little sand grain. It varies a bit, and when close to bigger stuff, like planets or the moon in this case, every grain is also a bit different. So, it’s just about feeling for that. When I then know I’m close to where I wanna go, I wiggle out, and boom, I’m right at where I wanna be,” Sandy explained in a very sandy way.

“I see,” Jake nodded, as he was pretty sure he got it, at least partly, even if it still didn’t make that much sense. It was honestly interesting how stuff like this worked. Sandy legitimately saw the world as filled with sand everywhere, and going into subspace like this was just diving into dense sand. Others could see the subspace entirely differently, maybe like being underwater, a dark void, a beam of light, or nearly anything else.

The result was the same, though. This conceptual understanding also explained how Sandy would get faster and better at locating stuff in the real world with time and levels. Speed would simply be how fast Sandy could swim through the sand, while the worm naturally also got better at sensing their environment, same as when they were a sand worm.

“Alright, here we go...” Sandy said as the world shifted once more, and Jake instantly knew they had returned to regular space. Expanding his sphere fully, he quickly confirmed this was indeed the case. A few moments later, the windows also reappeared as Jake looked outside.

Jake had to admit... space was pretty. It didn’t interest him as much as the celestial object below him, though. They were still floating a good distance above it, outside of the thin atmosphere of the moon. Or, wait, what had Arnold called it... an exosphere? Not quite an atmosphere, but something that strived to be one.

“Can you let me out?” Jake asked. “I assume whatever natural barrier protects the moon won’t pose a problem.”

“Yeah, it’s super weak,” Sandy agreed as Jake felt himself be sucked out of the stomach and he appeared in space.

The shock of the sudden transition was a bit disorientating, especially as he went from somewhere with a nice environment to the cold emptiness of space. However, he quickly adapted, his body more than powerful enough to float in space without any issues.

Being outside, he would also finally make full use of his Perception as he laid eyes on the moon below, and, from the get-go things were looking pretty positive as he spotted a creature shuffling around on the surface.

[Lunar Elemental - 258]

Jake reckoned this elemental was some variant of earth elementals infused with lunar energies. Not lucent energies, mind you. The lucent affinity was moonlight, a mix between the moon – or lunar – affinity, as well as the light affinity. Meanwhile, this elemental was just pure moon rock.

“You feel any natural treasures?” Jake asked. Should he be surprised he could speak normally in space? Maybe, but he really wasn’t.

“Hm, a few, but nothing major. At least not on the surface. I do get some responses from inside, though, but they’re oddly hard to sense. Oh, and on the other side of this thing, I also feel a higher energy level there,” Sandy answered, making Jake smile.

“It’s only fitting the dark side of the moon is the most dangerous and interesting part of it.”

In reality, it shouldn’t really be called the dark side, though. Arnold had referred to it as the far side of the moon, as while only one face of the moon ever pointed toward Earth, due to its orbit, the moon did have a day and night cycle, and all parts of the celestial object received sunlight at one point or another during its orbit around Earth.

This remained true even after the system arrived, though it did look like the far side had a higher energy density than Earth. Why this was, Jake naturally wasn’t sure, but he looked forward to finding out as he and Sandy quickly reached an agreement.

“Only losers stay on the light side of the moon,” the space worm said.

“Well, I sure ain’t a loser,” Jake smirked. He and Sandy began flying above the moon as they headed for the big space rock’s dark – or far – side, Jake hoping to find something worth hunting, while Sandy

wanted to find something worth eating. Below, he kept an eye on everything that moved but, so far, had only spotted elementals, which was a bit of a bummer.

However, soon something changed.

Jake felt a shiver run down his back as he rapidly shifted his gaze and peered over the horizon. He felt something staring back at him, but it disappeared before he could see what it was. Nevertheless, his eyes opened wide as he felt the unquestionable presence of something he had never expected to feel so soon after returning to Earth.

B-grade.

Chapter 908: Dark(?) Side Of The Moon

Jake truthfully had never expected to encounter a B-grade on the moon. Further away from Earth around Jupiter or something? Maybe, but not so close to Earth that it was practically within striking distance. It didn't make much sense to him either how a B-grade had appeared on the moon of all places.

He was ninety-nine point nine percent certain there wasn't a single B-grade on Earth. The World Council had spent years hunting down or making contact with all sorts of beasts, and Arnold had sent drones out scouting to scan much of the underground world, with satellites covering much of what was above ground.

More than that, though... Jake didn't feel like there were any B-grades, and if he trusted one thing, it was his own intuition.

By all accounts, the moon was far more barren and less energy-dense, but it did have some things going for it. Due to the thin exosphere, it got a lot of energy from space, and generally, high-level concepts tended to propagate as many of the usual ones, like wind, water, and nature, weren't anywhere to be seen.

However, even with all of these, Jake only really had one good theory of how a B-grade had appeared, one he quickly shared with Sandy.

"I detected a-"

"B-grade," Sandy quickly said. "I felt it, too. It's gone now, though, and considering the fact we're still flying in the direction that we saw it and how we can't see it yet, I would guess it went underground."

"Right," Jake agreed. "Just to make sure, you also think it's odd that there is a B-grade here, right?"

"A bit," Sandy said. "Not that much, though. This moon is large enough to have a pretty powerful core but not large enough to have a fully formed Planetary Core, so it's probably unprotected and open to exploitation. So, if any creature managed to take advantage, that would explain it. The creature would have to be a rather specialized one, though. So my guess is that this B-grade is the one who controls the core, or at least found some way to siphon its energy."

Jake was surprised at Sandy's insight, though he probably shouldn't be. The worm had spent a good while in the Order studying under S-grades and even gods based on what he'd heard, and being a creature predominately made for space exploration, it made sense Sandy knew a lot about space and what one might find there.

"Would it be an issue if a creature is siphoning the energy from this moon core?" Jake questioned.

"Big depends on that one, as it's entirely up to the method, and there isn't really any way of knowing unless we go check more closely. Something I would definitely not recommend doing. Better to stay on the surface and the upper layers of the crust, as diving too deep might provoke it and make it think we're trying to contest the core. I say that, but I'm just guessing, so don't blame me if we get attacked the second we get too close to the moon," Sandy explained.

"Yeah, let's stick topside for now," Jake agreed. Even if he maybe wanted to give the B-grade a shot, he wasn't in a rush. Besides: "I didn't feel any hostility when it spotted us, so I don't think it will attack us out of nowhere. However, if it does, how confident are you in escaping?"

"I'm gonna be fine no matter what," Sandy said in a casual tone. "Better worry about yourself."

"Sure, sure," Jake smiled. Even if the worm was a tad overconfident, that confidence was well-earned.

The two of them kept flying for a good while, and soon, they reached further onto the dark side of the moon, which was actually pretty well-illuminated right now as it was daytime. Not that the time of day mattered much to Jake and Sandy. Sandy didn't have eyes, so they didn't care about light, and Jake had too high Perception to let something like bad lighting or even total darkness bother him.

As they traveled, Jake kept an eye on the surface and every one of the many holes he found leading into the moon. There were a lot of large craters everywhere, too, with some of them even having meteorites within. Around these meteorites, elementals tended to propagate, and Jake even began to see other variants of elementals.

No signs of any biological life yet, though. He wasn't sure if he should expect to see any, either. The chances of any kind of life appearing on the moon were incredibly small as it was just one big rock without any water or the conditions to facilitate-

Is that a fucking tree?

Jake's eyes opened wide, as far in the distance, above the horizon, he saw what looked like a treetop. Not some crystal tree or anything like that either, but what could be easily confused for a pine tree. Except for the color, as it wasn't green, but had more a very light blue color.

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" Jake asked Sandy.

"I literally don't have eyes, so no, but I'm going to assume you mean the dense life energy in the distance," Sandy answered. "Yeah, not going to lie, I wasn't expecting that either."

With an incredibly confused expression on his face, Jake picked up speed as he flew even faster than before. All throughout their flight, Sandy had passively helped by creating what was almost a tunnel in space, making them travel faster than expected by making it more of a vacuum, thus removing much of the usual friction that would slow them down.

After some time, they finally got close enough for Jake to have a proper look, and he saw it wasn't just a single tree or even just a small gathering of trees. No, it was an entirely damn forest, and not a small one, either.

The further they got, the more forest they saw. Far below, Jake even saw the edge of the forest off to the side. Grass-like blue growths spread out to a certain point before it began to wilt and disappear. He also saw the curvature of how the grass grew, as he quickly understood that this forest was shaped like a circle, which had a pretty obvious implication.

“There is something at the core of this forest that caused the growth,” Jake said in a confident tone.

“Yeah, and I feel it,” Sandy said. “It’s... big. Not of super-duper high quality, but very big.”

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Jake frowned as he wondered what it could be. An asteroid that had slammed into the moon filled with life-attuned energy? That did sound very sci-fi and very possible, if not probable. It could also just be that the system had decided to make a moon forest, but Jake doubted it.

As Jake was stuck in thought, something suddenly grabbed his attention below. Movement. With no wind, thus no swaying trees, any movement was notable, and after scanning more closely, he saw it. Between two trees, he could barely spot a creature moving about. It looked almost like a dog but had six limbs and a tail that was more than twice its entire body length, looking a lot like a whip.

Its entire body wasn’t made of flesh and blood but a mix of vines, bark, and stone. Like the trees and grass, it had a blueish color, and some of the vines running through its body had a slight glow to them. The creature’s entire body was around fifteen meters long, with the majority of that length coming from the tail. It moved rapidly through the land, and when Jake used Identify, he felt a tinge of excitement.

[Lunewood Stalker – lvl 316]

Whatever was going on here had led to the birth of some powerful creatures, as there was a good chance this random plant lifeform was at a higher level than nearly anything on Earth. As he kept scouting, he even noticed some more of them, proving this wasn’t just a rare creature but a staple of this biome.

“How big is the life-place?”

Sandy asked after a bit.

"I can't be sure," Jake shook his head. "But it's pretty fucking big. I would guess it covers nearly a third of this side of the moon based on what we've seen so far, and we're only in the outer edges of the forest."

"You know, I pretty much expected the moon to just be a big rock with some elementals on it, so this is a pleasant surprise," Sandy said after a bit. "A lot more fun than moons without anything on it. Which is the majority."

"For sure, for sure," Jake nodded as he considered what their next move should be. They could keep flying deeper into the forest and aim for the center, or they could take a pitstop here in the outer area and get a better feel for the region. He had to remember that he wasn't on this little adventure alone, though.

"What do you think we should do?" he decided to ask Sandy. "Stay here for a bit, or keep moving inwards?"

"I wouldn't say no to taste-test whatever Lifecore those weird plant creatures got," Sandy simply answered, which was enough for Jake as he smiled.

"Then let's see how tough they are," Jake said, pulling out his bow. Now, he did have the choice to shoot a Protean Arrow with all his usual bells and whistles, and chances are that would kill one of those Lunewood Stalkers outright, and even if it didn't, it would cripple the thing.

But, rather than do that, Jake wanted to learn more about these odd creatures, so he decided to go for a more prolonged approach. One that did still include a powerful opening attack, but he wouldn't use everything he had. Shit, to give the poor thing a chance, he wouldn't even do his opening attack from stealth.

Taking a second to summon one, he nocked a Penetrating Arrow. Jake took aim for a lone Lunewood Stalker as he made sure he had a free line of sight. Arcane Powershot charged for a few seconds before Jake let go of the string, and an arcane explosion erupted in the sky above the moon. Sandy had already retreated away to give Jake space to have his fun.

Below, the Lunewood Stalker reacted the second it noticed the incoming attack. The ground around it erupted as a barrier of stone and vines shot up in defense, proving Jake's decision to use a Penetrating Arrow the right choice as it pierced straight through and struck the creature, slamming it into the ground and sending a torrent of odd liquid flying up.

It's not blood... but it seems to have a similar function. Interesting to see that in a plant-creature.

Jake quickly shot another arrow, not giving the monster any more time to rest than he needed to. Besides, it quickly recovered and managed to avoid the second arrow, seemingly on accident, though it did struggle when a rain of exploding arrows descended upon it a moment later.

Nevertheless, it broke through as it shot upward toward Jake. He was flying just inside the exosphere of the moon, many, many kilometers up, but the creature displayed some impressive speed as Jake felt another affinity at play.

Got some space magic in there, too, but seems to only be for movement.

While it flew for Jake, he kept bombarding the creature with arrows, dealing significant damage to it as parts of it exploded off left and right. Root-wrapped stone bullets also shot up toward him, and with the moon's lower gravity, they easily made it all the way to him, even if he effortlessly dodged.

Jake smiled as the creature just tanked pretty much every arrow, as he had pretty high expectations of it... that's until he noticed something. He had just put blood on his arrows so as to not overdo it with the poison, and with the creature poisoned, he could feel its internals, and to put it bluntly...

This is the shittiest late-tier C-grade I've ever seen.

Before the Lunewood Stalker even fully reached Jake, its momentum stopped, and it began falling down toward the moon before getting blasted by an arrow sending it tumbling down, with Jake getting a notification.

You have slain [Lunewood Stalker – lvl 316] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

“Well, that was disappointing,” Sandy said as the worm appeared beside Jake. “I can also feel the Lifecore now, and I don’t even need anyone to tell me it sucks, though it does have an odd flavor to it. So, you good with me eating it, right?”

“Sure,” Jake muttered as Sandy shot down, disappeared for a moment, and then reappeared to suck in the still-falling corpse of the Lunewood Stalker.

To say Jake was disappointed would be... pretty accurate, actually. It wasn’t as if he had super high expectations, but he still found the outcome worse than he thought it would be, even if he, after only one “fight,” understood why it was so weak.

The creature had no sapience at all. Shit, Jake wasn’t even sure it had enough to qualify as being called sentient. It had just charged toward him without making any defensive moves outside of trying to defend against the opening attack. It was full-aggro from the moment it noticed Jake till it died, in a death that didn’t accomplish anything.

A few moments later, Sandy reappeared beside him. “Hey, Jake, I noticed something about the corpse.”

“What is it?” Jake asked with interest.

“You see this?” Sandy said, spitting out what looked like a weird rock that he recognized as a Lifecore of sorts, though it looked... wrong. He tried to use Identify, but the answer didn’t really tell him anything of value.

[Lunewood Meteorite Fragment (Uncommon)] – A small fragment of a Lunewood Meteorite. Contains a polluted form of life energy. Unknown alchemical uses.

“Yeah, it looks thoroughly unimpressive, outside of the part about the polluted form of life energy, and that something being both wood and a meteorite at the same time doesn’t really make any sense,” Jake answered. At least he was pretty sure meteorites were made of rock and metals.

“It’s from a wood meteor,” Sandy said.

"I learned just now those are even a thing," Jake muttered.

"Oh, alright, fair, that explains a lot. Anyway, I heard about these. Pretty much, they are meteors made of wood and filled with life that slowly morphs and changes as it flies through space until they crash into anything big and then spread whatever form of life energy was inside. I didn't really listen during the part where the lady talked about where they come from; all I know is that this is definitely what we got here," Sandy said.

"You learn something new every day, huh," Jake muttered as he looked more closely at the core. "But what do you mean by the 'that explains a lot,' part?"

"Just that it explains why you're still so calm," Sandy answered.

"... do I have a reason not to be calm?"

"Well, this Lunewood Stalker wasn't really its own thing, but more just one branch of a big ecosystem that's all connected, so when you kill one-"

Below, Jake saw more movement than ever before as more than thirty Lunewood Stalkers shot out of the forest, charging straight at Jake.

"- they all know and move to defend their territory and reclaim the meteorite fragment."

Chapter 909: Lunewood Forest

"Good luck, have fun!" Sandy said before disappearing, leaving Jake with the Meteorite Fragment floating in front of him. He didn't even bother putting it in his inventory or anything as he quickly nocked an arrow and turned his attention to the many charging Lunewood Stalkers.

Seeing no need to hold back, Arcane Awakening even activated at the stable 30%. Jake felt his body brimming with power as he released the first arrow rain down upon the many charging creatures who were all roughly the same level as the first Stalker. Another thing they had in common with the first Lunewood Stalker was that they didn't even try to dodge but simply tanked the blow as parts of their bodies were torn off. However, with around thirty of them, this reckless strategy was far more viable, as Jake now also understood why the first one had acted as it did.

These creatures were indeed just one part of a whole. They were individual limbs of a greater lifeform and simply had no sense of self-preservation. For them to dodge would be the same as Jake making his arrows dodge the attacks of enemies... which he actually did pretty often by making them curve around, but that was beside the point and, at most, just a commentary on how the strategy of these Lunewood Stalkers could still be optimized.

The point is, individually, these Lunewood Stalkers weren't valuable and were just defenders of the forest and life domain they came from. Attacking recklessly like this also tended to have a better chance of landing blows, as it would give the foe far less time to respond, even if the tradeoff was that you risked taking far more hits in return. The term "tended to" was used very deliberately in this case... as Jake just happened to be the exception to that rule, as few things ever had a good chance of landing blows, but less when they were as predictable as these Stalkers.

Arcane explosions lit up the skies above the moon, and Jake began to retreat as he kept shooting arrow after arrow. A constant barrage of attacks flew for him, forcing him to dodge all the time as the Lunewood Stalkers closed in ever-so-slowly. If Jake didn't have to dodge ranged attacks, he could have outrun them pretty easily, and if he abandoned attacking, he definitely still could, but retreat wasn't on the table. Not knowing how far they would chase, it was potentially even faster to just kill them all.

So, he upped his offenses and mixed in arcane bolts with his attacks, and before any of the stalkers even reached him, four were slain as their lifeless bodies fell toward the surface of the moon below... only for a giant space worm to swoop in and chomp them down before they could land, all while sending an encouraging message to Jake before disappearing again.

Right as the fifth one fell, the first Lunewood Stalker was also upon him. Jake dodged as the creature spun in mid-air, its tail whipping around as it cut through the, well, not air, but whatever existed within the thin exosphere of the moon.

After its initial attack missed, the Stalker tried to bite him with its thorn-filled mouth, as long vines erupted from all over its body, shooting forward to entangle Jake. Pulling out his katars, the vines were easily shredded as Jake closed in and landed a solid punch to the side of the Stalker's head. He wanted to continue and attack the core directly, but two more Stalkers arrived right at that moment, making Jake use One Step to teleport away and pull out his bow again.

A barrage of exploding arrows created some more space as Jake blasted himself backward. A heavily injured Lunewood Stalker shot after him, and Jake's eyes glowed for a moment as the creature flew past him, lifeless, as its already feeble and weak soul crumbled.

You have slain [Lunewood Stalker – lvl 309] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

Turning around, he released an Arcane Powershot, blasting away another Stalker while taking off two of its legs as he used One Step again to dodge two tail swipes from even more of the annoying plant creatures. His sphere expanded slightly as he made sure to keep an eye on all of them, every single Lunewood Stalker also hit with a Hunter's Mark.

It wasn't that hard to keep track of them, though. They didn't attack with any strategy at all but just charged for him in a straight line. There weren't even any attempts to surround or cut off his paths of retreat, making the fight far easier than it had any right to be.

One by one, he killed the Lunewood Stalkers, not taking any injuries himself. They simply weren't fast or strong enough to pose a real threat, and shortly, the final creature had its midsection exploded by an arrow as it fell dead toward the moon.

The entire fight hadn't even taken that long, as he methodically tore them apart. He also noticed that they seemed to grow a bit weaker the further they got away from the forest, just making things even easier.

Dispelling his boosting skill, Jake sighed as he hoped there would be better foes further inside the forest. While the levels of these Lunewood Stalkers were impressive, their power sure as hell was not. They were so weak that Jake doubted he even got any good experience from them. Disappointing was really the only emotion he felt toward them so far, and while they could offer the flavors of a horde battle if even more attacked him, Jake had always preferred singular powerful foes.

Oh well, at least Sandy had been eating well and made sure to snatch all of the corpses. The worm did spit them out again, though, only really caring about extracting those Lunewood Meteorite Fragments they all had. It effectively served as their cores, and during the fight, Jake noticed striking these cores did more damage than anywhere else, though he had been a bit afraid of accidentally breaking them.

"We should probably hide a bit," Sandy said after the worm teleported back up to him.

"I don't think we have to," Jake said, as he didn't detect anyone or anything coming for them. He had deliberately made sure to retreat away from what he had chosen to dub the Lunewood Forest to test out the detection range of whatever lived there, and it seemed like this was enough. The fact distance from the forest also made the Stalkers weaker had just been a happy bonus.

"Hm, does seem like we're outside of the domain where we can be detected," Sandy said. "I would guess that the second we reenter the forest, all the Meteorite Fragments will instantly give us away, and another attack will arrive to try and reclaim them. I doubt hiding the fragments in my stomach will be enough either."

"An attack should we enter does seem probable," Jake nodded in agreement. He didn't have that much confidence in his stealth skill either when it came to hiding the fragments. If Sandy wasn't confident, Jake sure as hell wasn't. He did have one thing he wanted to try, though. "Let's go down and land on the moon. I have one... no, two things I want to try."

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Sandy agreed as the two of them flew down with impressive speed. Jake did kind of like how he could travel a lot faster in space, even without subspace nonsense. He could simply fly a lot faster and even near-constantly accelerate to a far higher top speed. Even his One Step range was significantly longer.

Due to that, he soon reached the surface of the moon. Stopping just before he landed, Jake stood a few centimeters off the ground as Sandy looked at him, confused. Jake cleared his throat and raised a foot as he did something he had wanted to do ever since arriving on the moon.

"One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," Jake said with a stupid grin on his face as he stepped down on the moon's surface.

"I don't get it," Sandy commented, confused. "Also, wouldn't it be a man and not just man? Your grammar is off."

"Just let me have this moment," Jake said, throwing a glance at Sandy.

“Fine... actually, let me give it a try,” the giant space worm sulked before seemingly getting an idea as they also floated down to be just a few meters off the surface.

“One small wiggle for worm!”

A big crash shook the local area as the giant worm crashed down.

“One giant wiggle for wormkind!”

Jake just stared at the worm as Sandy giggled. “I kind of get it now; that was fun.”

“Stealing my moment,” Jake muttered, as he decided to just move on to the actual reason he had wanted to touch down on the surface.

With his two awesome mythical boots solidly on the ground, their ability to detect natural earthbound treasures was activated... and it may just be because the moon was primarily rock, but he got a massive response. Closing his eyes to focus, Jake felt hundreds, no thousands of responses below the ground, and as he focused and infused even more power into his old leathery companions, he finally got enough reach to detect the center of the moon.

It was a massive response as he felt the core of the celestial object. Giving Planetary Cores rarities wouldn't really make much sense, but it was unquestionable they contained an absolutely ridiculous amount of power. What's more, they had the ability to produce mana, making them incredibly valuable and near-endless power sources. Jake couldn't feel if anything was siphoning power off the core, but he could feel it and confirm it definitely had enough juice to give birth to a B-grade.

The second largest response came from the direction of the Lunewood Forest, and it wasn't hard to guess this was the Wood Meteorite that Sandy talked about. The fragments of the meteorites within each Lunewood Stalker were about the size of a basketball, and based on the response, he felt that the true meteorite was far, far larger. He wouldn't necessarily say that the size of the fragments had to proportionally correlate with power, though, as if that was true, the meteorite would likely have contained more power than the planetary core.

“You look like you've noticed something,” Sandy said.

"I more so just confirmed what we already theorized," Jake answered as he opened his eyes. "I think you are right on the money with that Wood Meteorite thing, and I want to go confirm for myself, but before that... do you want those Meteorite Fragments? As in, do you need them?"

"No, not really," Sandy confessed. "They are too polluted with lunar and other celestial energies. It's a horrible mix that doesn't go well with anything else, which is what tends to happen with these things. The life energy will evolve with time as the Wood Meteor flies through space, undergoing a constant evolution as what may as well be an entirely new form of life affinity is born once all is said and done. Not quite an arcane affinity, as it isn't a cohesive fusion of concepts, but just an amalgamation that could theoretically be split apart by someone successfully talented or powerful enough."

Jake nodded, once more impressed with Sandy's insights, as he asked: "In that case, can I have them? And would it be fine if I end up effectively destroying them?"

"You can, but you do know that the moment one of them breaks, every single living being associated with the Lunewood Meteorite on this moon will know?" Sandy asked to make sure.

"That's actually a very good point," Jake frowned as he reconsidered.

"If you want to absorb the fragments or use the energies for something, I would suggest maybe seeing if it's possible to merge them together or perhaps to return them to the Lunewood Meteorite? That way, you can absorb or use everything at once," Sandy suggested.

"Fair enough," Jake nodded along as he considered the plan he had begun to form in his mind. Sandy was correct that the life energy could indeed only be described as polluted. He had nothing to use it for alchemically, and the imbalance and the relative weakness of the Lunewood Stalkers compared to their level likely also had roots in the broken life affinity. In fact, the affinity contained way more raw power, hence the levels, than it had any right to. There was just no cohesion, leading to an ultimately shitty result.

"Say, what do people usually do when they notice a Wood Meteorite has crashed somewhere?" Jake asked.

“You like to ask a lot of questions where the answer depends on a lot of things. If the meteorite crashed in your backyard, better to get rid of it right away, as the corrupted life energy will try to keep spreading as much as it can. If it’s crashed somewhere far away from anything else, some people like to study it, before then getting rid of the Wood Meteorite before it can affect a too large area or become too dangerous. A third group keeps them around and cultivates them, as they are really good at spawning monsters, and if you regulate the environment properly, you even have pretty good control of the level of monsters there and turn them into training grounds. Some environments created by Wood Meteors even end up spawning unique and actually useful herbs within, so people keep those around. But, in the vast majority of cases, the end result is that it’s best to destroy the Wood Meteorite and get rid of the domain,” Sandy once more gave a lengthy explanation as Jake learned more neat space facts.

“So, if I say, want to eat the entire Wood Meteorite and kill the entire forest, there would be nothing wrong with it?” Jake asked.

“I would respect such wise eating habits,” Sandy said in a joking tone. “But I’m not sure if you can fit that Wood Meteorite in your mouth, though, I think it’s pretty big.”

“True, true,” Jake nodded. Even if he used Palate, he wasn’t sure he was able – or wanted – to eat it. But that wasn’t the only option. “I won’t be the one eating it, though. This bad boy will.”

Jake pulled out Eternal Hunger and tossed it up before catching it again. “Life energy is still life energy, and I’m sure this little one will enjoy it fully.”

That’s right, Jake’s idea was to get rid of this entire Lunewood Forest by absorbing it with Eternal Hunger. He even had a ritual in mind to do it and reckoned it would be a good way to get a few profession levels. Plus, based on what Sandy said, these kinds of Wood Meteorites could be problematic if left alone, so wasn’t he doing a good thing?

While he couldn’t confirm it, he wouldn’t be surprised if this Lunewood Forest was expanding and, with time, would cover the entire surface of the moon. So, better nip it in the bud before it could get that far.

“Well, I wouldn’t say it’s a bad idea to get rid of the meteorite... though do still consider the presence of a B-grade. Pretty low chances the two of them aren’t connected in some way,” Sandy pointed out.

“True,” Jake nodded. “I will have to scout out the forest properly to find out.”

"In that case, I'll hold onto these fragments in the meantime and go explore a bit myself. I don't really care about anything in that forest; it all smells yucky anyway," Sandy said in a disgusted tone.

"Fair enough," Jake nodded as he and Sandy prepared to split up. "You know where to find me, right? I'll also throw a Mark on you in case things go south."

"Eh, if all else fails, I can just ask the Big Boss Hydra, or you can ask Big Boss Snake for help," Sandy said in a casual tone.

"Not sure it's considered normal to consider your Patron a walkie-talkie," Jake grinned.

"I'm not," Sandy defended themselves. "A walkie-talkie would be far more effective."

Shaking his head, Jake smiled. "In either case, see you around. I'm gonna go on a picnic inside the creepy polluted life forest filled with weird monsters that wanna kill me."

"And I'm gonna go try and eat stuff inside the moon."

Indeed, just another normal day in the life of a giant space worm and a human on adventure.

Chapter 910: Vipers & Hunters

It was quiet.

Too quiet.

No forest was meant to be like this in Jake's opinion. There was no wind to rustle the leaves, no movements whatsoever anywhere to cause even the slightest song. No sign of any small wildlife hiding in the bushes or on top of the trees either, or the occasional sound of a bird chirping. It was just silence and stillness as if the forest was frozen over.

Jake walked through the blue forest as he took in the environment and felt just how corrupted the mana was all around him. No D-grade would be able to exist within the forest, and even weaker C-grades would find themselves negatively affected as the energy seeped into their bodies, corrupting them. Perhaps one would even turn into some kind of Lunewood creature if one spent too long there. He would almost compare it to an area hit by nuclear fallout, and he could only begin to imagine the devastation a Wood Meteor could cause if it ever struck down on Earth and remained unattended.

Then again, Jake wasn't even sure a Wood Meteor would be able to enter Earth due to the powerful atmosphere. It definitely wouldn't if they also added some additional barriers to empower the planet's natural defenses, something he would need to talk to Miranda about doing when she was back from Nevermore. The thought that random objects from space like Wood Meteors existed that could fuck up a planet was definitely a newly unlocked fear for Jake.

Anyway, back to Jake, even without defending himself from the environment, he managed to remain unaffected as he made his way deeper and deeper into the forest under the cover of Unseen Hunter. He kept a lookout for any odd herbs or natural treasures born in the environment of the Lunewood Forest, but nothing really caught his eye, and what he did spot wasn't anything he had any interest in using. The entire place really was a shithole, and Jake got the feeling that this particular Wood Meteorite was uniquely horrible.

At the very least, the brief time he had spent inside the forest only further strengthened his desire to get rid of the Wood Meteorite for good. Also, wouldn't the moon just look too weird if it was filled with a blue forest? Yeah, it definitely would, so best to get rid of it before the forest could spread too far.

Getting deeper than ever, he spotted many more Lunewood Stalkers, all just doing... nothing. They looked like beasts but didn't at all act like them. They were lying down but not even doing the beast-version of meditation, nor did they move to hunt anything. It felt more like their movements were robotic and pre-programmed to set patrol patterns. Entirely unnatural. A lot of them also just stood still like statues, with the only movement visible their pulsating vines filled with life energy.

Luckily, this did help with Jake not getting detected even if he walked right up to one. He did consider trying to give a Stalker a poke but reckoned that wouldn't go well for him. Unless his definition of things going well was to fight another horde of Lunewood Stalkers, that is.

Maybe later, Jake told himself, as he kept running forward into the forest. Soon, he finally spotted something noteworthy: another creature.

It was a large monster standing on four legs, but not like a horse or dog would, but more like a spider. Its upper body was vaguely humanoid, as it had four arms, each holding wooden staves. It definitely gave off stronger vibes than the Stalkers, even if it was still a very low-tier creature.

Using Identify, he also confirmed its level was higher than most Stalkers, at least by a little.

[Lunewood Keeper– lvl 322]

There was also one other difference between these creatures and the Stalkers. These Keepers actually moved around and did stuff, casting some form of magic on the ground all the time and tending to the trees and other plants. The name Keeper was very apt, but seeing that a part of their skillset was clearly reserved for tending to the Lunewood Forest, Jake guessed these would only be on the level of the Stalkers when it came to combat, even if they did feel overall stronger.

Ignoring the creatures and continuing, Jake only now seemed to realize what kind of exploration trip he had dedicated himself to. If his guess was right, and the Lunewood Forest covered a massive part of the far side of the moon, it wouldn't be fast to reach the center. It would take a few days, even if Jake hurried. Considering he also wanted to check out anything interesting he found on the way, it would likely end up taking an entire week.

Considering the long time he would just spend traveling...

"Is this inferior version of a walkie-talkie working?" Jake asked as he reached out to a certain snake god, who he was pretty sure had time. Despite Jake not reaching out as much, he knew Villy had an avatar or something watching at all times. Or, at the very least, he was aware of what Jake was doing, which should also mean he was free to take a call.

"Oh, so he does still want to talk to me from time to time," Villy said in a mock-offended tone. "I thought you had forgotten all about the snake god on your shoulder with how little you've reached out recently."

"In my defense, I blame this all on Nevermore. I spent fifty years being unable to contact you outside of a few city floors, and it takes a bit to get used to it again," Jake answered. "Besides, I got another limbless, long-bodied companion I could ask about fun system trivia. It's just unlucky for you. Sandy knew about Wood Meteorites."

"I can't believe I've been replaced by a worm," the Viper sighed deeply. "At least it's a unique and interesting worm who got quite a few things wrong during their little info dump."

"Such as?"

"Now, where would the fun be in telling you that?" the Viper joked. "Not going to spoil the fun for you. That would be rude of me, wouldn't it?"

Jake didn't really want to argue that point, as it would indeed suck to just have everything told to him. It would be a lot more exciting to explore the Lunewood Forest and find interesting things himself. He did have one question, though.

"What are the chances of a Wood Meteor – objects I'm going to assume aren't just flying everywhere all the time – crashing into the moon like this? As in, what are the chances the system planted it here directly? And if so, wouldn't it be a massive risk to Earth if a B-grade is just chilling this close to the planet? A B-grade should be able to reach the Earth pretty damn quickly and effortlessly, so have we just gotten lucky it hasn't decided to make the trip yet?" Jake asked about some of the things that had been bothering him with this entire Lunewood situation.

"Oh, it's undoubtedly by design that the moon turned out like this. A natural Wood Meteor wouldn't have had any chance to mature in the brief time the ninety-third universe has existed. They tend to float around in space for at minimum a few hundred thousand years before they crash into anything or burn up in an atmosphere," the Viper responded, making Jake nod along as he jumped from branch to branch.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

"As for the threat this B-grade may pose to your little planet, I wouldn't worry. It's more than likely bound to the moon and unable to leave the celestial object until sometime in the future. This isn't rare at all, and if you went further into space, I reckon you would encounter even god-level creatures who currently find themselves sealed to certain areas – a confinement that may be permanent, but that's beside the point. My actual point is that while a B-grade this close to a planet could be a problem, it would only be one if the planet was too weak to give birth to its own B-grades. And I would personally be very disappointed if that was the case in your situation."

"I see... that's good to know," Jake said with a bit of relief at hearing that the B-grade was likely restricted to being on the moon. Not only because he was afraid of the possibility of it deciding to attack Earth any day, but because it gave him more confidence to see if he could potentially make it prey.

Jake had considered what would happen if he tried to fight it and failed. Sure, maybe he and Sandy could escape, but what if it decided to chase them? Or it had some way to track them down after the fact, which would lead it straight to Earth?

Now, Jake wasn't worried about that anymore, at least. So, a test-fight at minimum was definitely on the table.

"I should also inform you that the little Demon Prince you helped become a big boy Demon Lord has been making some waves back in the Fourth Hell. The King of the Fourth Hell has made him his new Chosen, and the other hells have also begun to show some interest, not just in the newly born Cerulean Demon Lord, but the one capable of pulling off a ritual to give birth to one," the Malefic Viper continued, shifting the topic quite a bit.

"Can we use another term than giving birth? Feels hella weird when you say it like that," Jake muttered. "But, hey, happy to hear he is doing well for himself. Will the fact that more demons are now also looking curiously at me change anything?"

"No, not really. Your prior actions already gave birth to a lot of interest in your abilities, and all the ritual did was confirm some of the possibilities behind your ability. There was doubt if you could only birth new creatures like with the Vespernat Hive Queen, but now you've birthed the idea that you can also assist pre-existing beings in experiencing a rebirth of sorts. The only thing I could realistically see happening was them throwing more succubi at you, who no doubt would be more than happy to take the job of giving birth off your hands if you catch my drift," Villy said, clearly teasing his poor Chosen.

"This is bullying, and I will have you reported to the Humanoid Resource department," Jake shot back.

"Then I'll begin to release recordings of your most embarrassing moments," the god said in an evil voice. "Remember, perfect memory. So good that anything I've seen I can perfectly recreate a recording of to share with all."

“So now you’ve switched to blackmail and intimidating witnesses...”

“Some would argue I am not the most moral of snakes,” Villy continued in a sinister tone.

The two of them kept chatting, Jake gladly using the god to help pass the time. It was a bit like making a phone call in the car on your way home from work. It just made it feel like the trip wasn’t as long as it actually was.

They covered a lot of topics, and the Viper helped get him caught up on some multiversal politics and stuff. Jake also learned that a few of the people who placed well in Nevermore who didn’t belong to any large factions had begun to find new homes. One example was the weird sloth-like creature that had been sleeping under a table during the entire get-together and had ended up joining the United Tribes. It was not really a big shocker that one.

What was surprising was that the elemental called Wintermaul, that placed right after Jake and Ell’Hakan, had ended up going to the Altmar Empire. Why an ice elemental wanted to join the largest elven empire, Jake really couldn’t figure out, and Villy refused to offer his own theories.

There were a few other notable bits of information, but honestly, most of Jake and Villy’s talk was just shooting the shit. They even ended up discussing the controversial ending of a certain movie Jake had watched shortly before the system arrived, Villy having seen it through his divine Wikipedia skill.

On the way through the forest, Jake also ended up encountering two new types of Lunewood creatures. One was a floating vine-wrapped stone elemental known as a Lunewood Elemental. The stones were covered in glowing blue runes, and on the power scale, they ranked above anything else he had seen before. Not by much, though, and the “job” of this particular elemental seemed to be similar to what the Keeper did in that it helped maintain the forest.

Finally, there was a creature that made Jake chuckle. It was a large snake-like creature made up entirely of pulsating blue vines, and the reason Jake chuckled wasn’t because of its appearance but its name.

[Lunewood Viper – lvl 326]

“Look, Villy, I found your brother!” Jake joked while chuckling. “Or did you also give birth to something without telling me about it?”

“You do know I don’t have a monopoly on the name viper, right? It’s a type of snake. Plenty of vipers out there entirely unrelated to me, outside of how my Records may have affected them. Also, this isn’t even a real snake but just an overgrown vine,” Villy said defensively.

“The lengths one will go to to hide their shame,” Jake shook his head. “Maybe this is what a real viper is, and you’re the fake kind? Ever thought of that?”

“Wow... you’re right,” the Viper said in a mocking tone. “How could I have been so blind all along? Or, perhaps, have you just failed to realize I have just been a random long vine all along?”

“Truly, the plot twist that will shake the multiverse,” Jake grinned as he continued his journey.

It felt good talking to Villy again like this, and Jake had genuinely missed it during his time in Nevermore. True, he had been able to talk to his four party members then, but it just wasn’t the same. While he was rather open with them, he still had to keep a lot of secrets from them, while with Villy, the snake god already knew most of Jake’s bigger secrets about his Bloodline. That just made everything far more relaxed.

Days passed with Jake getting closer and closer to the center of the forest. One of the reasons he was running through the forest and not flying above it was to keep his feet on the ground to feel for natural treasures, but it also helped him be aware of the exact location of what he assumed was the Wood Meteorite.

And, sure enough, when he used a Pulse of Perception, he finally saw it. The meteorite was more than ten stories tall and had an almost entirely spherical form with spikes all over it. Around it were thousands of Lunewood creatures, including four of a kind he hadn’t seen before.

He didn’t need to closely inspect these ones at the meteorite, though, as he saw another one not that far away from him. Getting closer to it, he soon got a clear line of sight to inspect the creature. It was a tall, lanky, humanoid creature with two arms and two legs, along with a head that was eighty percent eyeball. As in, it looked like a cyclops with an eye that was way too big. It had to be said that the eye

looked like it was made of stone, though, so Jake wasn't even sure if it was a weak spot. In its arms, it wielded what appeared to be a sling of vines, giving Jake the impression it specialized in ranged attacks.

Using Identify, the name of the creature surprised Jake, as Villy couldn't hold himself back.

[Lunewood Hunter – lvl 334]

"Well, well, well. What do we have here? The true form of what a hunter is supposed to be? Oh, isn't that a sling? How perfect for a hunter, way better than some silly little bow!" the Viper teased Jake back for his own teasing earlier.

"At least this hunter is way better than that stupid viper before," Jake shot back, with the Viper not answering again, as if he had seen coming what would happen next.

Because, hey, at least there was one good thing about this Lunewood Hunter... compared to all the other Lunewood creatures he had seen, it was far more impressive. More than that, it was clearly specialized in hunting down those who managed to reach this deep into the forest, making it a purely combat-oriented creature.

As a hunter, it naturally also showed one other impressive trait that Jake soon learned as he felt the eye of the hunter land upon him:

High Perception.