

## Hunter 961

### Chapter 961: An Obvious Trap

It should be pretty clear by now that Jake didn't like any of the people he had met on this planet so far. When he first appeared from the teleporter, he was met with unfriendly gazes from all the different scalekin and beastkin, replaced by fear after he showed off his power. The World Leader was pretty damn incompetent, his wife a backstabber, and based on the reactions of those around, half were on her side. Calling this entire "faction" led by the scalekin World Leader a shitshow was an understatement, and Jake seriously doubted how he had even gotten that title in the first place. Actually, it was probably because the guy was the strongest Jake had encountered so far...

On the other side of the conflict, there were the people who were part of Ell'Hakan's alliance. Two World Leaders Jake naturally had no idea about but assumed sucked because of the Chosen they had decided to follow. They clearly had plans of their own, more likely than not at the directions of the orange bastard.

Jake had considered what kind of response Ell'Hakan would predict Jake to have and how he would use Jake's actions against him. He also considered how Miranda would want him to handle the situation. There were many factors to consider, and ultimately, Jake ended up with a conclusion:

He genuinely didn't give a fuck about any of this... but he wouldn't play that orange fuck's game.

So, his plan was simple. Have the World Leader release the Prima Guardian, kill the Prima Guardian, and leave. No need to complicate anything. If the people sent by Ell'Hakan then decided to create any serious trouble for him, it would be on them and not Jake's fault.

Jake ended up heading out with the scalekin and winged beastkin shortly after, despite their continued nervousness. Well, Jake called it heading out, but in reality, it was the two of them traveling, with Jake following along with Unseen Hunter active. He purposefully made himself known to the scalekin so the guy could take him along when they used the teleporters, but otherwise didn't interact with them or did anything to give himself away.

Once they were done teleporting as close as they could to the Prima Vessel, they would have to fly the rest of the way, a journey that should take about five or six hours. Jake could definitely do it faster, as it turned out the husband was indeed a bit of a slowpoke when it came to travel speed.

Being out in the open and just flying across the landscape, things truly got bad. The wife and husband chatted along the way, and Jake even felt the scalekin lose track of his position due to how heated things got. In fact, he was pretty sure they both forgot he was even following along about an hour into the flight as they began to get even angrier and fight more loudly, bringing up old shit like how the beastkin's dad had never liked the scalekin in the first place.

Couldn't really blame the dad there...

Jake then learned about three affairs from the scalekin's side, one of them with the wife's cousin... which she very healthily responded to by sleeping with the scalekin's brother, nearly inciting a war between two factions as, shocker, he had also been married.

For the next four and a half hours, Jake was made to listen to two mentally deranged people and their fucked up relationship and utterly dysfunctional family dynamic, making it really no surprise why this entire planet was so truly and utterly screwed.

Yet, some-fucking-how, the two of them ended up making out sloppily in the air during the last ten minutes of the flight as it could be their "last moments together," and they somehow ended up making up. He wasn't sure how, as Jake had tuned them out as best he could... but good for them?

Jake had never been more grateful in his life that they were spotted by an enemy scout at the perimeter around the Prima Vessel. It finally made the two people with the worst marriage he had ever heard of back off from one another and look a bit more serious as they stopped flying.

In the distance, a small group of around twenty people appeared, flying in their direction. With a Pulse, Jake quickly scanned the area ahead and saw the Prima Vessel along with a few thousand people. The ground was also covered with a large formation of some kind, so they had definitely set up to give them a home turf advantage. Likely both for the scalekin World Leader and for when the Guardian would eventually be released.

"None of the World Leaders are in the group," the scalekin muttered as he saw them approach. Jake had a lot of questions due to that comment, as the guy had never mentioned he had seen the World Leaders or bothered to share their appearances, but at this point, Jake really shouldn't be surprised at the guy's lack of foresight.

About a minute later, the group arrived, and their leader stepped forward. "You must be Lord of the Curved Tail Clan and elected World Leader, correct?"

"That is me," the scalekin, who even had a shitty clan name, answered with a nod.

"I was told the Chosen of the Malefic One would also be arriving alongside you. I'm certain that he could remain hidden if he so desired, considering his vast power; however, I believe it would make things simpler if we could interact with his lordship directly," the man said, the scalekin looking surprised at the comment while throwing a glance at his wife, who just shrugged.

Great, so there were even traitors with an open line of contact in the midst of that group in the tent. Who could possibly have seen that coming? Jake asked himself sarcastically.

He'd planned on hiding, but that would probably just slow things down. Besides, he'd never actually planned to sneak around in the first place. Instead, he decided to make a proper entrance, and he quickly snuck behind the group before revealing himself.

"I'm here," Jake spoke calmly, making the group turn around in fright from the jumpscare as he'd just appeared out of thin air from their perspectives. A few even looked ready to attack, but their leader held up a hand. The elven man, who clearly wasn't a native of the planet, looked at Jake with apprehension before asking:

"I greet the Chosen of the Malefic One... and request to know his reason for being here?"

"To kill the Prima Guardian," Jake answered instantly.

"That is-" the guard squad leader responded, but Jake cut him off.

"Let's go to the Vessel," he said to the scalekin World Leader, who for a moment wasn't sure what to do, but Jake's glance made him do the wise thing and quickly nod and follow.

"Excuse me, I-"

"I see no reason or cause to waste more words or time on you," Jake threw the leader a quick look, making him shut off and back off. He did seem to send some sort of message, though, and with his

Pulse, he saw the whole camp around the Vessel had already come alive. They were preparing, and part of this group leader's job had been to delay Jake at least a little.

It was almost cute that they thought any period of preparation would allow them to actually put up a fight.

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Jake took the lead as the three flew toward the Vessel, the greeting squad following them a reasonable distance behind. The scalekin looked nervous as hell, with his wife not that much better. Jake could readily admit that the two of them doing any kind of negotiations with Jake there would be hard, but honestly, wasn't that their own fault for having the worst security measures imaginable?

Shit, how dumb was it to have everyone meet him together like that in the first place instead of taking him to a private and secured room? How moronic would one have to be to have their meeting where they discussed plans in front of everyone? The answer was that Miranda would have smacked Jake over the head if he proposed doing the same.

The closer they got to the Vessel, the more people there were, and Jake soon spotted the two people who were clearly in charge of this entire expedition of Ell'Hakan's. It was an elven man and a beastkin woman, and both didn't look like natives due to their clothing and the fact one was an elf. Plus, he saw both of them had purposefully made their rings visible on their hands, signifying they were both World Leaders who had also killed their Prima Guardians.

On a quick side note, Jake really hoped his ring was better than theirs, or at least would be, as if not, he was seriously wasting his time going through all this just to kill some more Prima Guardians.

The two World Leaders below quickly flew up to greet Jake and the scalekin. Correction, they flew up to greet Jake and entirely ignored the scalekin. Honestly? Fair enough.

"We greet the Harbinger of Primeval Origins," the elven man said in a polite tone as he bowed deeply, the beastkin woman doing the same.

Jake noted three things right off the bat. The first one was what they called him. To use his title of Harbinger of Primeval Origins was already very odd as if they were purposefully avoiding saying he was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper... something he recalled Ell'Hakan had also done in the past, specifically during the "apology" from the Nevermore afterparty.

Secondly was how the two were clearly tensed up, seemingly ready to battle should Jake do anything aggressive, with the people below also more than prepared to jump into action.

Third, their levels and how utterly hopeless they would be if Jake did decide to start a fight.

[Elf- lvl 279]

[Beastkin – lvl 283]

They were decent enough for their levels, and Jake guessed they would be able to kill the Prima Guardian, especially with all the people they had to help and the formation below... but Jake wasn't at the same level as these Prima Guardians. Especially not now that they were weaker than when the event first began.

"You seem quite aware of me," Jake answered after a brief pause, his words holding double meaning. It was both that they seemed to know a lot about who he was, but also that they both were watching him very carefully right now. They hid it well, but he sensed their nervousness.

"It is only natural to be aware of such an outstanding individual, especially once we learned that we share a galaxy," the elf continued. He was definitely the speaker of the two World Leaders, with the beastkin woman quite a bit stronger, there as the main fighting force. Jake could estimate she was a bit better than Olliandra from the first planet he ever visited. That is to say, impressive in the eyes of the majority but not anything to write home about for Jake.

"That makes sense," Jake just muttered, his scanning gaze making the two of them more nervous. They were definitely expecting a fight to break out at any moment... which was exactly why Jake wasn't going to just hand them one. "I would advise you to pull your people away from the Prima Vessel. We plan on freeing the Guardian, after which I will slay it."

“This...” the elf said, looking a bit perplexed. The World Leader quickly gathered himself and rebuked Jake’s words. “We have already laid the groundwork for the fight, and our strategic preparations are all complete. Would it not be preferable for us to handle it and his lordship to not waste any time on such a trivial task?”

“Oh no, it’s all good. I was asked by the rightful World Leader for assistance, and who am I to reject offering a hand when I’m capable, and we all benefit from the death of the Prima Guardians?” Jake spoke, his smirk hidden beneath his mask. “Now hurry. The more time we waste, the longer the Primas remain at full power, leading to unnecessary deaths.”

Jake could see the cogs turn inside the head of the elf, as Jake clearly wasn’t acting as he had expected. Now, Jake didn’t think they knew he would be coming to this planet in the first place, but they had known he would arrive at the Vessel once they did hear he was on the planet. Releasing a few pulses also confirmed what he had expected was going on there.

At that moment, Jake felt pretty smart for not falling into a very obvious trap.

He could always feel people observing him, though it could get a bit tougher when there were a lot of people at once to pinpoint singular observers. However, with a bit of time, he had spotted them, though. People who held odd-looking crystal balls standing all around the place, with a few hidden in the distance.

In the multiverse, there were many ways to record events and equally as many to confirm the authenticity of such recordings. One of the premier methods was the use of such crystal balls as the ones he saw people holding. They were created from recording crystals, and Jake made the educated guess these were the kind with backups. Some really high-end recording crystals could clone their records perfectly to a matching crystal somewhere else, though it often couldn’t be that far away. It had to be on the same planet, at least.

The thing is, leaving the planet wasn’t hard. While the scalekin World Leader had locked down people teleporting to the planet, he couldn’t restrict them from teleporting away using the circles this group clearly had access to.

This also led Jake to the second reason why he had been extremely suspicious of everything that was happening with this group. What they were doing didn’t make any sense whatsoever, and the reactions of the two World Leaders confirmed it. They expected a fight to happen. For Jake to move to kill them.

All despite knowing they didn't stand a chance. Ell'Hakan certainly also knew this. So, if they knew they couldn't win, time wasn't on their side, and they had easy access to teleporters to take them all off the planet – or the rings of the World Leaders if they worked like Jake's – why the hell hadn't they just left?

The answer was simple enough. They were here to potentially sacrifice themselves and have Jake kill them in a fight. Why Ell'Hakan wanted such a recording despite his recent attempts to act as if he wanted to buddy-buddy with Jake, he didn't know, but he clearly did.

Jake was pretty confident in his theory, and while he still didn't really care how Ell'Hakan wanted to paint him, he didn't see any reason to play into the other Chosen's hand either when he had the choice not to. Besides... the two World Leaders and their entire armies were below his level, so it wasn't like killing them would even give him any experience.

"You are putting me in a very difficult position, my Lord," the elf said, looking very troubled. "We were tasked by the Celestial Child himself to defeat this Prima Guardian. To simply have another do it would be very dishonorable, especially when we have come here doing the bidding of the Chosen of such a prominent god."

The tone of the elf had shifted a bit, and while he certainly remained polite, it was clear he tried to bait a reaction of some kind out of Jake. The elf's words insinuated that the god they were carrying out the bidding of was superior to Jake's, and thus, he should back off. Any Chosen would naturally find such a notion incredibly insulting... but Jake wasn't just a Chosen.

"I'm sure the two of them will be satisfied as long as the Guardian is slain and lives are saved," Jake kept smiling. "Once more, please pull back. Clan Leader, please head to the Prima Vessel and release the Guardian. Slight warning: once released, it may chase you, so be ready and hurry out as fast as possible. I'll handle things from there."

Jake gave a look to the scalekin that left no room for arguments, and for the first time, the World Leader seemed to not be a dum-dum as he nodded and answered before the elf could intervene again. "Thank you for your warning. We cannot even begin to express our gratitude for your assistance."

With that, he flew toward the Vessel. The elf looked like he wanted to say something, and the beastkin looked ready to block the scalekin's path, but none of them ultimately did anything. Instead, they seemed to consider their options for a moment before the elf nodded and sighed.

“Very well, we’ll pull back.”

His surrender surprised Jake as he was fully expecting them to keep pressing, but instead, they all did indeed begin to retreat right as the scalekin entered the Vessel. Jake looked after the retreating figures and noticed that all the people recording were still going strong, and the elf and beastkin didn’t look that upset... no, they looked downright relieved.

Weren’t they afraid that their dear Celestial Child would be disappointed in them, or did they have some extra backup objective? Wait a second... Jake was just about to fight a Prima Guardian alone, with a few thousand live observers affiliated with Ell’Hakan and people recording...

Should definitely have seen that coming. They want to record my battle with the Guardian to gather intel on me... maybe they even want the recording for something else, too?

Jake wasn’t sure... but what he was sure of was that the recording he was going to give them wouldn’t be the most useful one.

## Chapter 962: Putting On A Show

Jake had many ways to approach the fight with a Prima Guardian. Usually, he just killed the creature quickly with everything he had, with the majority of those he had killed so far unable to survive even a single fully powered blow.

Out of everyone in the ninety-third universe, Jake legitimately believed he was the one with the most powerful opening attack. For his level, that is. He was also fully aware of how intimidating it was to see a boss you had made preparations for or had even battled and lost to meet its end from a single arrow.

The question was if this approach would be the smartest in this situation. It would reveal quite a lot of what Jake was capable of, and he also had to consider that it wasn’t like Ell’Hakan had to ever make any of these recordings public. He could keep them for personal study, use them for blackmail if he thought that would work for some reason, or even just destroy them if he felt like the recording only made Jake come off looking good – which him showing off his ability to one-shot a Guardian would surely do.



However, Jake saw another possibility. A chance, if you will, to do something that would be fun, confusing, and perhaps even a bit helpful in the future. Mostly fun, though.

He had wanted to mix up these Prima Guardian battles for a while, and this time around, he wasn't in any particular kind of rush, so he decided to put on a show for the audience. A show that wouldn't actually show off that much, but what he did display, he believed would prove both puzzling and useful to Ell'Hakan. Though likely not in the way the other Chosen had hoped.

First of all, Jake wouldn't use a bow. That would just make it way too easy, and he would show off his growth with his primary weapon, which he saw no reason to do. Secondly, no Malefic Viper skills. This was for his plan of potentially making the recording useful in an unexpected way. Third, he would fight it using a style he hadn't explored in a long time. One he had deployed the last time he was to face a stream of weak enemies to keep himself entertained.

That's right... it was the return of the man, the myth, the legend: Doomfoot.

Alright, Jake would also use his katars, definitely some other stuff, but he would still be doing a lot of kicking here and there! Granted, things did depend a lot on the power of the Prima Guardian, but if it was at the level he expected it to be, this very basic plan of his should work. No matter what, he couldn't forget the most important aspect of this entire show he was about to put on:

To have fun.

Jake waited patiently as all the followers of Ell'Hakan, along with the two World Leaders, retreated, leaving the magic circle and temporary structures behind spread all around the Prima Vessel. The wife of the scalekin was also with them and seemed way too chummy, but oh well.

Soon enough, everyone had retreated and now just stood back and watched. The scalekin was to purposefully not release the Guardian immediately, primarily to give Jake time to prepare, but now none of that was necessary.

The observers also looked perplexed when Jake just stood there, only a hundred meters from the entrance to the Prima Vessel. He had his arms crossed, waiting patiently while seemingly not preparing anything. It took about two minutes before a figure flew out of the Vessel. It was the scalekin, and he looked like he had blocked a few blows but was otherwise unharmed.

A second after he appeared, hot on his heels, a very humanoid Prima Guardian appeared. It looked like a mix of many different kinds of beastkin and scalekin, with a few pure monster features mixed in, though it was hard to tell.

Jake took a few steps forward while activating Arcane Awakening in its balanced state, getting a running start before he stomped down hard, teleporting and appearing in between the scalekin and Prima. The observers had likely expected to see many things during this battle... but Jake would bet none of them had dropkicking the Guardian in the face on their bingo cards.

His feet made solid contact with the monster that tried to bite down on his boots at the very last second but only ended up doing more damage to itself in the process. His dropkick sent the Guardian shooting back, smashing into the Prima Vessel with a large thunk, Jake using Identify on the boss while it was still mid-air.

[Honored Prima Guardian – lvl 301]

Truly, it wasn't worthy of his bow. Jake didn't let up his assault either as he charged forward, the Prima Guardian roaring loudly as it met his charge. Dodging its first swipe, Eternal Hunger appeared in his hand as he stabbed the creature two times before large fangs sprung from its hand and swept down.

Pivoting around it, Jake kicked the Prima in the side, sending it stumbling as a follow-up kick hit it in the head in a nice one-two combo. Throughout, Jake couldn't help but smile a bit as he felt the impact left by his kicks. He didn't really do any impressive damage, but it did something.

Angry, the Prima Guardian tried to catch Jake, but he was an elusive specter and danced around its attacks while landing counters. These Primas varied widely in quality even when they shared the same name, and this one certainly wasn't anything impressive... not that he could say any of the others he had killed recently were.

From the reactions he saw from the audience, they still looked plenty impressed, though. Keeping up his aggressiveness, Jake continued damaging the Prima Guardian with his barrage of kicks and stabs, the fight looking incredibly one-sided as Jake willingly proved his skills as a melee combatant. He showed off how the Prima Guardian seemingly couldn't land a single blow on him, no matter how hard it tried. The two of them flew across the entire area, having an extremely intense battle, tearing up the surroundings in the process and really making a spectacle of it all.

This was just the first part of Jake's plan, though. He was waiting for something to happen... and as expected, it did when he had done enough damage. The Prima Guardian slowly began to change. It got thinner, more lithe, grew longer legs, and overall its speed increased to new levels. In return, it lost some of its raw power, but, really, did any level of raw power truly matter if it couldn't land any blows?

With its newfound speed, the Guardian went on the offensive for the first time in a while. Jake was seemingly pushed back and could only focus on dodging while barely landing any counterattacks. Finally, he saw a good chance as the Prima attacked from above, and Jake decided to block as he was launched downward toward the ground.

He slowed his descent and landed, the Prima Guardian floating above as it seemed to be gathering mana for some kind of magical attack. Jake was more than happy to see the Guardian be so cooperative, as it gave him plenty of time to act in front of his audience.

Jake made a show of glancing about before going and picking up a metal pole that was about three meters long that had been left by a tent that broke during their fight. Such a pole wouldn't really be useful for anything under regular circumstances... but Jake had a way to make it into a valid weapon.

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Purposefully speaking in a low and unassuming tone – that he was certain would still be picked up by the recorders – Jake activated the skill as he claimed the weapon as a tool of humanity.

“Fangs of Man.”

As he spoke, Jake infused energy into the pole as it became one with him, strengthening it significantly in the process and, for a brief moment, made it give off a very faint golden luster that faded as quickly as it had come... but it had been there.

This was the most important aspect of what Jake was doing. The secret option of what the recording could become. Fangs of Man was not usually a skill that had any real visual indicator, and even if Valdemar seemingly could detect some trace of it during their encounter, he hadn't been entirely sure. Now, Jake wouldn't leave anything up to doubt.

He could already imagine it. The murmurs spawned from the Chosen of the Malefic Viper battling a Prima Guardian like a battle maniac in a brawl, not using any skills related to his Patron but those of another Primordial.

Jake wasn't afraid of Ell'Hakan not knowing what he was seeing either. Jake knew that while Fangs of Man was far from a normal skill, the energy he had given off while using it had the all-too-familiar glow of a skill related to Valdemar. Even if Ell'Hakan wasn't certain what he was looking at, Yip of Yore would surely know once he was shown.

The two of them wanted a world where Jake bailed on the Malefic Viper and potentially joined Valhal, right? He would more than gladly play into that fantasy to mess with the two of them. The only thing he felt a bit bad about was potentially fooling Valdemar into thinking Jake had a genuine interest in joining his glorified fight club, but if the god felt too sad or disappointed about it, he was sure they could settle any bad feelings over a beer.

It was clear none of the observers put any significance in what Jake had done, which was just what he wanted. He didn't want people to think this was staged and something Jake purposefully wanted others to see. Instead, he wanted it to look like a battle junkie, not really thinking as he was engrossed in the heat of battle, experimenting and going wild.

A role he would gladly continue to enjoy playing, as the Prima Guardian released a massive bolt of pure mana that split apart in mid-air into over a hundred crystalized homing bolts. Focusing, Jake shot upwards, dodging many of the bolts while using his new metal pole weapon to smash away a few others.

The Prima Guardian wasn't idle either but charged down to meet him while using its swarm of crystalized mana bolts. They reminded Jake of a shitty version of his own stable arcane mana, and he easily broke them apart one after another.

They did add a bit of pressure as Jake and the Guardian clashed, but not enough for Jake to bother increasing the output of his boosting skill. The moment they met, Jake swung the metal pole hard, the Prima Guardian seemingly not even seeing it as a threat. This proved to be a big mistake, as the hand it tried to swipe the pole away with had a finger broken while not even slowing down Jake's swing and earning itself a metal pipe to the head.

Using the pole as a weapon, Jake kept up his assault, swinging recklessly. The weapon very quickly began deteriorating, as despite the effects of Fang of Man, it was still just a regular metal pole. Luckily for him, he had plenty of replacement weapons in the rubble below.

Before the pole even fully broke, Jake held out an open hand as he used telekinesis to yoin a shorter metal pole from below. The second he caught it, he once more actively showed off his use of Fangs of Man, and just in time before his first pole snapped in two.

Jake decided to heighten the tempo as he upped his boosting skill and used its offensive mode, increasing certain stats by another 20%. His increased speed and power took the Guardian by surprise as it was struck three times in a row with Jake's metal pipe, and from below, more improvised weapons floated up.

Fangs of Man was the kind of skill Jake never actively used or considered much. It was just there in the background, functioning as Jake's weapon skill. It could most easily be compared as the melee counterpart to his archery skill. It wasn't rooted in any particular fighting style or weapon, though, but the nature of humanity and their ability to use or transform nearly anything into a weapon should the need arise. It made him innately understand how to use any melee weapon he picked up, with Jake knowing this stemmed from tapping into the ancient Records of humanity.

The skill even partly worked when he used his bow, except pretty much all the bonuses were overwritten by his actual archery skill, as the stat effectiveness bonus and whatnot didn't stack. One could only have one such effect at a time, after all.

Either way, Fangs of Man was a powerful skill, and while Jake wouldn't say he had neglected it, he had most definitely never properly utilized it. It was just really hard to justify testing the skill out and using it in a fashion like this. Finding an opponent strong enough to put up a good prolonged fight to really get into it was hard, and things were only made harder when Jake felt pressure to kill his opponent fast.

However, against this Prima Guardian, he had a very durable opponent that was strong enough to make the fight a little hard, and no time constraints he cared about. Needless to say, swinging random improvised weapons was far less effective than using his katars, but Jake had fun with it as he also explored the Fangs of Man skill a bit more and put on a good show for the audience.

Sadly, all good things must come to an end. Jake's relentless barrage of attacks had left the Prima Guardian beaten and battered, both its arms broken in several places, with nearly a dozen metal poles sticking out of its back, with an entire leg missing.

Jake went in for the killing combo, as he used Eternal Hunger for the first time in a while but not to kill the Prima. Instead, he dodged one of its desperate blows before cutting off the clawed hand, and while twisting his body, caught the hand and used it as a weapon as he stabbed its own claws into the neck of the Guardian.

Finally, he pulled up one of the remaining metal poles from below, a particularly large one that had been used in one of the bigger tents, the thing nearly four meters long. Jake focused the second he had it in his hand as he recalled the battle he had seen using Path of the Heretic-Chosen. He remembered how Valdemar had caught the broken fang of the Malefic Viper and transformed it into an axe.

That wasn't something he could do, but with enough focus, he could alter his improvised weapon slightly. A golden luster enveloped the metal pole, more intense toward its tip as it slightly swarped. It sharpened, taking on the shape of a simple spear as Jake smiled.

The still-reeling Prima Guardian couldn't defend itself properly as Jake stabbed forward, hitting the Prima once in the chest. It roared as Jake predicted, and he took advantage as he used a quick regular Gaze to freeze its body with its mouth open. He pulled back the spear and promptly stabbed the Guardian through its open mouth, the metal pole penetrating through and exiting out the top of its skull. The tip entirely broke during this, but it was good enough.

With a good wrench, Jake shattered the skull of the Guardian even more, not stopping as he flew around the creature and twisted its neck one-eighty degrees before finally twisting the pole to an upward angle, fully breaking the neck of the Guardian and stabbing the improvised spear into the back of the Guardian.

In truth, the Prima had already been a goner the second he had stabbed it through its open mouth, with the rest just a show of violence to fully end its existence. Jake did one last swing as he lifted up and tossed the Prima down onto the ground with the improvised spear and many other weapons still sticking out of its body, the boss dead before it even hit the ground.

You have slain [Honored Prima Guardian – lvl 301]– Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

Jake, floating in the air while covered in blood from head to toe, cracked his neck as he looked toward the many observers, the scalekin World Leader among them. They got the message as a few flew over, the two World Leaders affiliated with Ell'Hakan naturally among them.

Their facial expressions weren't hard to read. If they had been afraid before, they were absolutely terrified now. He did also see traces of confusion. Chances are they had been told what kind of fighter Jake was, which hadn't at all fit what they had just witnessed.

"That was decently fun. Sadly, the Guardian was disappointingly weak," Jake spoke casually with a smile beneath his mask as they approached.

He was very much looking forward to the reaction Ell'Hakan would have seeing the recording, but more than that, he was interested in Yip of Yore's reaction. Jake wasn't sure exactly how they would interpret it, but if nothing else, Jake had at least created a bit of chaos and confusion with his performance.

However, not even he could have predicted what kind of effects this strategy, which was in large part just a glorified excuse to experiment and have some fun, would end up having.

#### Chapter 963: A Very Interesting Recording

Skipping forward a bit in time, to a few days after Jake had slain the Prima Guardian and the recording had found its final destination, two gods were discussing its contents.

"What are your thoughts?" the first god asked the man standing not far from him within the vast library that made up his divine realm. Both of them had just watched the very interesting recording. Very interesting indeed...

"It was so obviously staged it's almost comical," the other god responded, an eternal smile hanging on his face. "Knowing his Bloodline and abilities, he was clearly aware the recording was taking place."

"Yet he chose to do nothing about it but offer us this show..."

Yip of Yore and Eversmile had met to discuss the recording of Jake slaying the Prima Guardian in quite an unusual fashion as they tried to make sense of his actions. Yip did have some understanding of the Chosen, but Eversmile far surpassed him in that area. Plus, the god of karma clearly had some personal

interest in the human, so he was more than happy to provide his opinion. As for how they had even gotten the recording in the first place?

While it was true the ninety-third universe was cut off from the rest of the multiverse during this system event, that didn't mean it was impossible to get around these limitations. Ell'Hakan could not contact Yip of Yore directly, but the ability to provide offerings through a skill of his wasn't cut off.

Usually, a god would have two choices when receiving an offering. One would be to turn the offering into energy of some form, which tended to be the default choice, as it was very rare mortals had any items a god actually needed as-is. More often than not, the item was one that held significance only due to its Records. A good example of this was how the warriors from Valhal often offered parts of their slain enemies to their gods. The items themselves had little value, but the Records by which they were attained through battle did.

The second option was naturally to receive the actual item, something that could also only be done when the one giving the offering had a good enough skill and high enough level of Blessing. Needless to say, Ell'Hakan fulfilled both of these requirements.

Speaking of Ell'Hakan... it was a shame he could not get contacted to hear his thoughts on the matter, but oh well. Yip of Yore didn't know how much his input would offer in the first place, as he naturally couldn't use his Bloodline on a recording like this.

"We know that this recording was purposefully created for yours and Ell'Hakan's eyes, and as you say, the question that remains now is why," Eversmile spoke. "You are aware of the skill he so blatantly showed off?"

"Fangs of Man," Yip nodded. "Seen and experienced myself. I reckon you also concur on its authenticity?"

"Yes, that is undoubtedly a skill belonging to Valdemar's Legacy," Eversmile confirmed. "And I'm sure you also noted how he didn't use a single skill related to the Malefic Viper's Legacy. He didn't even use any poison during the battle."

"I sure did," Yip smiled. "It's all so odd. If I saw this without context, I could easily have been led to believe that this was some fighter from Valhal showing off their skills. Or, more accurately, showing off one of their skills. Also, as far as I'm aware, Fangs of Man is not exactly a typical skill."



Eversmile looked to be in thought for a moment before he spoke. "Fangs of Man is as much a skill tied to the Records of humanity as it's tied directly to Valdemar. He is just the progenitor of it. One of the basic requirements of the skill is to embrace your Path as a human and acknowledge human supremacy, something that usually comes more naturally to members of Valhal due to it being predominately human. One has to truly view the human race as the strongest in the multiverse – or at least the one with the most potential. Many of Valhal are never even qualified to learn this skill simply due to unconscious doubt about themselves or their race. Yet clearly, the hunter sees humans as a race belonging to the apex of the multiverse. As you said, quite odd for the Chosen of a beast to have such thoughts, especially if we assume he knows the history between Valdemar and Vilastromoz."

"Almost a bit heretical, huh? Tell me it isn't just me... but do you also believe the Chosen of the Malefic Viper is walking down the Path of a heretic?" Yip of Yore asked probingly, carefully considering all of Eversmile's words. While the god of karma rarely, if ever, lied, he was good at concealing truths by only revealing parts of what was real, using wordplay or hidden meanings, or any other method to fool the other party without technically lying. Getting a straight answer to a question of any importance was almost impossible, but-

"Yes," Eversmile answered, short and sweet, his next words only hammering it home. "I do believe Jake Thayne is a heretic or at least will be labeled one by the system soon enough. Saying that, I will readily admit I have no actual proof, only my own assessment."

Yip of Yore couldn't help but grin at Eversmile's statement. "Your assessment is good enough. Assuming he is indeed well on his way to becoming an actual heretic... do you think the Malefic Viper knows?"

"That, I cannot know for certain," Eversmile shook his head. "Now it's my turn to ask you something. Do you intend to offer Jake Thayne the opportunity to become a Divine Usurper of the Malefic Viper's Path?"

"I'm not, not considering putting it on the table," Yip answered after a bit of consideration. "I fully acknowledge that Jake Thayne is the peak of this era, perhaps even the peak of history. While there have certainly been those who can match his power, he is not simply a fighter capable of standing at the pinnacle but the Harbinger of Primeval Origins. An identity so meaningful the system bestowed such a title upon him, letting everyone know. He is a rare breed indeed."

"But?" Eversmile asked with a raised eyebrow.

"That doesn't mean he cannot be killed. Only if it's necessary, of course. But I will not take the option of ending his life away should he prove someone that cannot be negotiated with. If he chooses to remain at the side of the Malefic Viper, he will die, and as the slayer of a Primordial, do I truly have to fear the animosity such an act would breed? The Malefic Viper has done considerably far greater damage to the multiverse than killing some Harbinger of Primeval Origins ever could. I would perhaps even make a few allies should I succeed," Yip of Yore answered.

"You have yet to truly answer my question," Eversmile pointed out.

"I was getting to it," Yip smiled, relaxed. "My point is that I'm not sure it's even possible to put such an option on the table in the first place. Someone like Jake Thayne is bound to be stubborn and, from my understanding of him, a bit simple. This entire recording is proof of that, and seeing as how obvious it is he clearly isn't the most subtle either. Someone like him doesn't strike me as the sort who would be open to being told to do something or feel forced into a particular Path. My ideal outcome is indeed that he becomes the Divine Usurper of the Malefic Viper, and I slay the Primordial, but if I or my Chosen are the ones who suggest that do him, he's only going to be more opposed to the option. No, the only way I see to get him on board is to either make him think it's his own idea, or by having someone he actually seems to respect recommend it."

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"Getting Valdemar to propose such a thing won't be easy," Eversmile answered, shaking his head. "I would also point out that it's not even necessary you have to present the option to him. There is a chance that is already what he's planning, especially if we look at this recording, which feels almost like an application to join Valhal. In my opinion, you should find a method of letting him know about his options, though, in case it wasn't on his radar."

"I will," Yip nodded. "Based on how he didn't even kill the mortal fodder who serve my Chosen, it appears he can at least be communicated with."

"And if, in the end, he still continues to see you and your Chosen as mortal enemies?" Eversmile questioned.

"Then he'll die," Yip of Yore said casually.

The god who would be a Primordial Slayer looked at the recording playing on repeat once more but didn't see anything new worth noting. By now, many of the plans Yip of Yore had put into motion had been derailed or destroyed entirely, yet he didn't feel the slightest bit upset. Jake Thayne was an incredible element of chaos in any situation he found himself mixed into, and while that certainly made things more complicated for Yip, it had to be worse for the Viper. In fact, as things were looking, this would lead to a better final outcome than initially expected.

Yip of Yore was a god of stories. Legends. Any situation could be rewritten, meanings twisted, and plans retconned. As long as the right building blocks were laid down, he could manifest the reality he desired. The Chosen of the Malefic Viper was just one element, but ultimately... nothing he ever did would have more than a marginal effect on the plan to slay the Viper. Sure, it could make it a bit harder or less annoying, but what he really impacted was what came after.

No, in the end, the true decider between Yip of Yore and the Malefic Viper would simply be who was stronger. Yip, in his most powerful form, or the Malefic Viper, a Primordial who had sealed himself away for the vast majority of the multiverse's history. Even so, a Primordial was a Primordial, and it was a massive gamble, but one Yip was willing to take if it meant overcoming his limits and reaching the next level.

Truly, if there was one thing worth regretting in this entire ordeal with Jake Thayne, it was that the Malefic Viper had gotten to such a human first. He truly was extraordinary in every sense of the word. Ah, the legends Yip and such a human could have written together. Alas, Yip shouldn't be too disappointed. While Jake Thayne had shown little of his true power during the fight with the Prima Guardian, he couldn't hide his true strength from the god's eyes... and Yip wouldn't say his own Chosen was that far off, if at all. Especially if the conditions were right. In such a case, their fight could truly be legendary.

Because no matter what, there would be a fight. Two geniuses of a generation like that were bound to clash, no matter the circumstances. The only difference was if it would be a fight to the death between mortal enemies or a spar to decide who is better between allies or perhaps even friends.

--

Jake had never wanted to just get the fuck off a world that badly before. After he'd killed the Prima Guardian and "saved" everyone, he instantly noticed how half the people recording quickly teleported away, likely to preserve at least some of the recordings should Jake now choose to turn on them. The remaining half stayed filming the aftermath.

An aftermath that was really annoying. The scalekin quickly stormed forward to profusely thank Jake while the two World Leaders related to Ell'Hakan remained as vigilant as ever. Jake didn't do anything to them, though. Quite frankly, he just wanted out of there... but while the scalekin was an idiot, he wasn't that dumb.

The scalekin knew that the moment Jake left, he would be surrounded by potential enemies on all sides. With the Prima Guardian dead, they had even less reason to keep him around, at least from his perspective. So, the guy desperately wanted to convince Jake to remain a bit longer at least, and with the ongoing recording, Jake felt like he couldn't just outright bail.

That's how he ended up going to claim the Planetary Pylon with the scalekin, returned topside once more, and somehow ended up part of a big clan meet with all the different clans on the planet gathering for final peace talks.

The two World Leaders also stayed around, with a few people recording always nearby. Seriously, Ell'Hakan had to have invested some serious resources in hiring this many camera operators, but oh well. Jake just went along with things as a new grand declaration was signed, the scalekin swearing to create a council that would lead the planet with him only having a single seat on it. To make it clear, Jake gave this entire alliance about a month tops before it collapsed based on how the majority of clan leaders stared at each other with pure hatred.

All this shit that would more likely than not turn out to have been a complete waste of time within a month took a few days to do after returning from the Prima Vessel and claiming the Pylon, and Jake really only stayed around to keep up appearances. Alas, there was only so much he could take.

When Jake was asked to be the officiant for the scalekin and his wife renewing their wedding vows – because some-fucking-how that trainwreck seemed salvageable to them - Jake knew it was time to run, using any excuse he could come up with to get away.

Only once Jake was back on Earth could he breathe out a sigh of relief. He returned to the Prima Vessel once more and coincidentally bumped into Lillian, who had been standing there looking at the map.

"Ah, Lord Thayne, you've returned," she said politely, throwing him a look. "How did things go? You were gone a bit longer than usual."

Jake didn't immediately answer but pointed to the planet he had just been to, which was, of course, now green on the map. "Make sure Miranda knows to not accept anyone from that planet. Ever."

Lillian instantly got a serious look as she looked at the planet Jake pointed at. "What's wrong with it? Is it controlled by Ell'Hakan's alliance?"

"... probably?" Jake said, honestly not entirely sure. Chances are they were based on how at least three-fourths of the planet seemed to support the two World Leaders sent by Ell'Hakan. And, no, Jake did not want to try and force them over to "his" side because that would have required him to stay there. That wasn't why Jake wanted to blacklist them, though... he just really didn't ever want to see about or hear about any of them ever again. Of course, such a reason was a bit petty, and Lillian did have a good point, so:

"Actually, yeah, they are allies of Ell'Hakan, and we should avoid anyone from that planet ever getting here to prevent spies," Jake said with a stoic nod.

Lillian threw him a glance before sighing. "You really didn't like the natives there?"

"They were really annoying, okay?" Jake sighed loudly. "Also probably, definitely, now allies of Ell'Hakan. Which, in my book, is a pure win for us. Because going by how goddamn dysfunctional everything there was, I see no world where they contribute anything positive to any alliance."

"It sounds best you tell Miranda about what happened if the other Chosen was involved in this matter," Lillian reminded Jake.

"I should, yeah," Jake nodded in agreement. Only now did he also look at the map and saw what Lillian had been staring at when he arrived, and...

"A second one?" he blurted out with wide eyes.

"Yeah, it happened only two hours ago," Lillian shook her head. "We confirmed it was marked with a blue flag before."

Jake stared at the map where he now saw not one but two planets marked with a black flag. A second world had faced destruction, and Jake couldn't see any other explanation than that "I" creature. He hoped he was wrong, though, and it was just some freak coincidence... but his guts told him it wasn't, which indicated only one thing:

This creature had now found a method to destroy planetary cores somewhat fast and consistently... and it was actively traveling around doing so.

#### Chapter 964: Keeping Up the Good Fight

Jake and Miranda met up inside the Prima Vessel as they both looked at the map that had more and more green flags by the day but also more grey ones as quite a few of the planets who had tried to face the Prima Guardian event alone fell to the attack. This was an expected outcome, as nobody had expected every planet to get out unscathed.

The appearance of the black flags was not expected, though. However, they had held on hope when they saw only one of them that it was some kind of anomaly. Jake had even theorized that maybe the creature had given its own life to somehow destroy the core or done something it could only do once.

Now, it was clear this wasn't a one-off. What's more, the creature known as "I" had figured out how to destroy a core far faster than before. This also fully eliminated any possibility of it consuming these cores in any way, as there was no way in hell it had enough time to digest a Planetary Core this quickly. It was purposefully destroying them, dooming entire worlds.

One huge question still bothered them, though.

"Why is it doing this?" Miranda thought out loud. "I checked the notes we had on the targeted planet, and it wasn't just some random place. It was part of Ell'Hakan's alliance, so unless this is some extreme plan to make us think they are unrelated to one another, I can't see a world where this creature and Ell'Hakan are allies. This makes me think this targeting is indiscriminatory and random."

"It likely is," Jake muttered. "This creature appeared out of nowhere. It didn't hesitate to end its own planet and now moved on to do the same thing with a second one. I believe it's just following its Path. There is no logic or reasoning behind the action besides just doing what it's born to do."

"So it's a living calamity of some kind," Miranda sighed, less than amused by the notion.

Jake slowly nodded, thinking that was entirely possible. Creatures like that could just be born anywhere randomly but tended to be in areas with powerful Records... and the Milky Way Galaxy was already a maelstrom of Records at this point. The unexpected was almost to be expected with their circumstances.

"Any idea what kind of creature it could be? Doesn't seem to fit the description of a Plague Spirit or anything curse-based. It's also clearly intelligent if it can teleport to other planets using the Prima Vessel or other system-provided magic circles... do you think it might be enlightened, seeing as it was the World Leader?" Miranda asked curiously, though Jake knew she was as much surmising out loud as she was actually asking.

"We simply don't have enough information yet," Jake shook his head. "There is one more thing, though... why would anyone accept the creature's request to teleport to their planet if they see it applying from a planet marked with a black flag?"

"A better question would be if its request even needs to be accepted anymore or if it can force its way in," Miranda said in a grave voice. "Either way, we should stay alert in case it somehow ends up going to Earth while hoping it chooses to focus on Ell'Hakan's alliance. If we get lucky, perhaps your rival Chosen deals with it."

"Not sure I count him as my rival," Jake muttered. "Who knows, maybe this creature ends up killing Ell'Hakan? That would sure be a plot twist of the ages."

"A rather anti-climactic one after all the buildup of his story," Miranda commented in a deadpan tone.

"Would be kind of funny, though," Jake joked, fully aware it wasn't going to happen. Ell'Hakan was definitely the careful sort, and he wouldn't risk fighting an unknown entity like that without any information. He was way more likely to throw a few planets at "I" to learn what he was dealing with before stepping up himself.

It was far more likely that should Ell'Hakan conclude this "I" wasn't something he could handle himself, he would try to find a way to make it fight Jake and potentially even kill Jake. Not only would that allow Ell'Hakan to get rid of Jake, but it would also minimize the backlash from having done so. Yeah, that was definitely something that orange fuck would gladly do.

What had happened on that scalekin World Leader's planet was proof of how underhanded the other Chosen could be when he wanted, as Ell'Hakan had clearly been willing to sacrifice two World Leaders and every single person he had sent there just to get a recording of Jake. Speaking of that entire thing... Miranda hadn't made any negative comments about Jake's conduct, even when he explained what he'd done. In fact, quite the opposite. In her words:

"You were put in a situation with no good options. If you killed the World Leaders, you wouldn't just have to slay them but many of their supporters, all of your actions getting recorded. Such a recording could quickly spread to the rest of the galaxy, and it would make our job much harder, even with Kindroth helping out. On the other hand, backing down entirely and letting them handle the Prima Guardian would make you appear incredibly meek and weak. Ultimately, I do agree your approach of killing the Prima Guardian while seemingly not being that interested in the two World Leaders was the best. It made you appear as nothing but a professional hunter just going around killing Guardians and not much else. As for that entire thing with your Fangs of Man skill... no comment. That is, in all honesty, far above my paygrade and something you'll have to talk to the Malefic Viper about directly once that's possible. No way I wanna risk saying the wrong thing, potentially pissing off a Primordial or two."

So, yeah, Jake was pretty proud of himself for that one, and he had honestly expected a bit of scolding once he was back. Not to say Jake thought he had done things perfectly, but he hadn't messed up enough for Miranda to make a big deal out of it. He just hoped that the moment he reestablished his connection with the Malefic Viper, the god wouldn't instantly tell him he was a bloody moron while making fun of him for how much he sucked at scheming.

Returning his attention to the present situation in front of the star map, Miranda turned to Jake. "What's your next target planet? Anything particular in mind?"

"I'm undecided," Jake said, shaking his head. "How about all the others? Are they keeping busy?"

"The Sword Saint had some things he had to deal with here on Earth and took a few day's break. Sylphie, the Fallen King, and the True Royal are taking quite a while with each planet due to their unique circumstances and lack of proper enlightened infrastructure. From what I heard, these planets also aren't very stable and they were helping a bit there. Your brother and Maria haven't been back here since the last time we spoke, and Casper is still working on the... I don't wanna call it a reservation, but as things are right now, that is effectively what it is," Miranda answered.

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The "reservation" she was talking about was the permanent presence the Risen wanted to establish back on Earth, and the solution they had landed on was to give them their own pretty large area to rule independently while naturally still being under the umbrella of Earth's council and Jake.

As Miranda said, it did feel a bit weird to call it a reservation, but she also wasn't wrong in that it was pretty accurate. The Risen had been given an island quite a good distance into the ocean, with extremely deep water all around it, which would serve as a natural barrier for all the miasma and death energy a land ruled by the Risen would release.

Water, in general, tended to be great at absorbing other affinities and mixing with it – hence its use in all forms of alchemy. This would attune the waters around the island to the death affinity, but they didn't fear it spreading out into the wider ocean. While they would release a lot of death affinity energy into the water, a far greater constant infusion of life energy would limit its spread.

As for where all this life energy would come from? The big ball of life and flames hanging in the center of their little solar system, shining down its rays upon their planet and infusing it with life every day. As long as the Risen didn't put up barriers also covering the water, the powers of the sun were more than enough to keep death at bay.

On a small side note, Casper informed Jake that death-affinity stars existed elsewhere in the universe. There were entire galaxies that only had stars like these, turning them into domains where the dead tended to live in great numbers. Countless undead monsters could appear, especially in the unique galaxies that happened to have both death and life stars at the same time, leading to a balance of constantly giving birth to powerful life that in death tuned into powerful undead. It was definitely the kind of galaxy Jake would one day want to visit for recreational and leveling purposes.

Either way, it was good to hear the Risen were settling in. He just hoped the rest of the population wasn't being too dickish about it.

"Have there been any issues due to their presence yet? Lots of complainers?" Jake asked, knowing that the Risen was still a very unpopular race.

"A few dozen protests, false alarms that the Risen kidnap people to turn them into zombies, conspiracy theories and fake news everywhere, as well with a few nearly-violent encounters with Risen just minding their own business. Not really any problem from the Risen side, though. Casper and Priscilla

have been good at controlling the ones they sent and making sure to properly vet and inform them of issues they could face returning here, so they are handling it like champs,” Miranda said with a sigh. “And before you ask, I have considered several times taking off a few weeks to go kill a Prima Guardian or two with a few others for a damn holiday, but I fear that by the time I come back, everything will have gone to shit.”

“Look on the bright side, this has to give a lot of experience,” Jake grinned.

“I’m in no way concerned my profession won’t reach peak C-grade first. It’s class levels I really need, and I’m not sure trying to get more class levels through this conflict will help calm things down,” she sighed.

“You could always rain down frogs on the protestors. That ought to make them stop and think,” Jake shrugged.

“What makes you think I even know how to make a frog rain? Learning to do something like that is in no way simple, and actually using such a skill isn’t practical in the slightest and pretty much useless,” Miranda asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Are you saying you don’t know how to make a frog rain?” Jake asked, seriously questioning if Miranda was even a real witch.

“... I hate that I do know how,” Miranda sighed. “My Patrons insisted it was a vital ability to learn despite it having no use-case. Would you believe me if I said they even want me to learn how to make the frogs yell insults at people?”

“What good frog rain doesn’t also include a rain of insults,” Jake said as if it was obvious.

Miranda just stared at him for a moment before gladly changing the subject entirely as if the prior conversation had never happened. “Of those who left Earth, I have yet to hear anything from the members of the Holy Church. Not that I necessarily expected them to come back and visit, but their silence is a bit surprising.”

"We already know they work with Ell'Hakan or at least have some kind of agreement," Jake shrugged, allowing Miranda to change the subject before she decided to throw frogs at him. "Speaking of their allies... heard anything from Carmen recently?"

"Nothing since the message that Valhal put together a team to roam the galaxy to kill Prima Guardians," Miranda said with a shrug. "I did hear from third parties that they aren't only killing Guardians on the planets under the thumb of Ell'Hakan, though. Even went to two Kindroth had been in contact with and we had to remove them from the list due to that."

"Great, more competition," Jake sighed, not actually that upset. "Is Arnold and-"

"I'm sure they'll let you know first thing once everything's ready," Miranda cut him off, knowing full well what he was about to ask, considering Jake had asked the same question more than a dozen times already over the last couple of months.

"Alright, alright," Jake muttered, a bit down. If only he could teleport to the red planets that weren't part of the system-made Prima Guardian Alliance, he would have so many more bosses to kill. More than that, he would be able to speed up the end of this entire system event. Alas, he would have to wait a bit longer. Not too long, hopefully.

Jake considered if he wanted to go and visit Haven or something like that, but ultimately landed on just keeping up the good fight. There were still so many planets on the list created with the help of Kindroth, even if he and the Sword Saint were pretty damn efficient. Once Caleb and others were done handling their own matters, they would likely also come help. If not them, then Sylphie, Vesperia, and the Fallen King shouldn't be that much longer dealing with all the planets with an Endless Empire presence.

Going over the list of planets, Jake quickly found the ones that looked the least complicated to handle, as he really wasn't in for any more complications. He especially wasn't keen on finding himself in another situation where he felt like an unwilling marriage counselor who just sat in the corner listening to the couple fight before randomly making up and making out.

Luckily, the next few Prima Guardian kills happened quite uneventfully. The planets he visited were relatively stable. If you ignored the fact they were dealing with a potentially planet-destroying invasion of powerful monsters, that is.

The point is there was no huge drama or involvement from other large factions, just extremely grateful World Leaders and military personnel. Sure, there were a few minor incidents where arrogant "heroes" who were still scared shitless of the Prima Guardian tried to play tough and cause trouble, but a good staredown tended to be good enough to handle most of those.

Jake also made sure to mark down another important number. He had a bet going with the Sword Saint, who would get the most marriage proposals or just proposed concubines thrown at them during this entire event. So far, Jake was at eleven, with eight women and three men... which was still behind the fifteen the Sword Saint had the last time Jake checked in with the guy. This was despite Jake killing more Guardians, thus also getting more opportunities.

Both of them were losing hard to Miranda, though. Most factions didn't dare try to make such propositions to people like Jake or the Sword Saint, but Miranda, the political figurehead in all this, seemed a lot more approachable, allowing her to now sit at more than fifty such offers. Luckily, she wasn't part of their bet.

Over the next two weeks, Jake got his number up to fourteen as he killed nine more Prima Guardians. Between every kill, he returned to Earth to quickly check in on how things were going before heading off again. After killing number eight Guardian – and thirteen days since the last one – another black flag appeared on the galaxy map.

The planet this time was one that hadn't been part of El'Hakan's alliance, nor one Kindroth had any particular contact with. This only gave more credibility to the theory that this targeting was random.

When Jake returned after killing nine Guardians, ready to quickly go and kill number ten, he met Lillian once more in the teleportation room, taking notes at the galaxy map.

The two of them locked eyes for a moment, and as Lillian spoke, Jake already knew as he couldn't help but grin.

"Arnold asked to see you... he said they are ready for beta testing."

## Chapter 965: Jake the Beta Tester

Jake had been looking forward to this day for several months, and now it was finally here. Granted, it was only called a beta test, but Jake still chose to remain excited. He had played enough video games

before the system to know that calling something a beta test was just another term for a demo and to convince people to pre-order the product.

It turns out that wasn't the kind of beta Arnold was talking about... the guy actually used the term correctly, as when Jake arrived at the teleportation circle, it clearly wasn't fully ready yet. In the room with the teleporter, Jake found Arnold on what looked like a large terminal with wires of mana connected to the teleportation circle, with William writing something on one of the walls in deep concentration and a shrunk-down Sandy chilling in the corner, seemingly asleep, contributing nothing.

"So... how are things progressing? Does the circle work now?" Jake said as he walked in, Arnold not even turning to look at him.

"We completed all the milestones of alpha-testing after a period of twenty-six days and have now entered beta-testing. The teleportation circle now successfully taps into the power inherent in the Prima Vessel, using the star map and our own relative calculations of coordinates of every target planet based on this map. This is further corrected using a scan for mana signatures correspondent with Prima Vessel teleporters to accurately estimate the final teleportation destination," Arnold briefly explained, Jake nodding along as he glanced at William.

"I noticed no mention of any karmic magic involved," Jake commented.

"That is part of the elements we are working to implement in the first phases of the beta testing," Arnold answered, with William still deeply focused on... something. "It is intended that we will be able to get a general scan of what will be found on each planet to supplement what is provided by the Prima Vessel. More accurately, a method of knowing if notable figures are there that are either best avoided... or pursued. Additionally, karmic considerations are part of the calculations, but due to my own lack of knowledge on the subject, I cannot make effective use of the karmic mage's knowledge."

Jake raised an eyebrow, as honestly, the way they wanted to use karmic magic did sound kind of neat. It also didn't escape Jake how Arnold clearly stood up for William, even raising his gaze from the terminal and giving Jake a look that told him to back off. Jake also instantly realized why.

William was part of the project.

Arnold was the project leader.

Arnold was a good boss who wouldn't allow his project members to be thrown under the bus.

Jake took the hint and changed the subject as he kept asking about the teleporter: "What is left to be ironed out before you would say the teleporter is complete?"

"The most substantive challenges right now are the power consumption and relative inaccuracy of every teleport. We are working over long distances with many concepts and factors at play that may disrupt our calculations," Arnold continued. "The more entities are teleported, the more inaccurate it will also be. We have done a few tests already with objects or captured low-intelligence beasts with trackers on them, and the results are both encouraging and troubling."

"How so?" Jake asked, hoping the problems weren't too bad.

"Let me first clarify that the power of those we teleport only affects energy consumption and not the inaccuracy. During some of our first tests, as we honed in the accuracy of the teleporter with single-entity tests, the outlook was positive. However, the moment we tried to teleport two at once, things proved difficult," Arnold began as he looked a bit exhausted just talking about it. "Every subsequent entity added to the teleportation exponentially increases the energy consumption and the inaccuracy. When we teleported two, they appeared five days of Sandy's full flight speed within subspace from the planet. Three entities were over a month's worth of travel distance away, four over a year, and with five entities, they appeared too close to the local star to even get any proper readings, indicating a travel distance of more than twenty years if we are conservative. These are just rough estimates, but I hope this clarifies my meaning."

"It does... how about teleporting several entities one after another instead of all at once?" Jake asked, though he probably didn't have to as Arnold would have, of course, considered that. Which he had.

"The circle takes time to cool down after each teleport, built in as a safety mechanism. Additionally, as we weaken the immediate void membrane around the circle with every activation, we need to give it time to fully restore lest we want to risk ruining our work entirely. Plus, unless everything is stable, the inaccuracy only increases," Arnold answered.

"Just out of curiosity, what would happen if we break this void membrane?" Jake asked curiously, as he was interested to know what an actual void user would think happened.

"We wouldn't be able to, so it's a moot point, but if you are speaking from a purely theoretical standpoint, we would temporarily open a hole to the void and, without the ability to stabilize this gateway, likely end up consuming most of the Milky Way Galaxy before the natural laws of the universe naturally fix the hole," Arnold answered casually.

Jake nodded as Arnold's answer was in line with what Jake had read. The void membrane was just another term for the wall between the universes and the void, and the only ones capable of breaking it open were people with the power of gods. The thought that gods could poke holes in reality that consumed galaxies was a bit of a scary thought, but considering the feat some gods had in history, not even anything worth noting.

"How long do you think this beta testing will last?" Jake asked, having looked forward to teleporting to other places in the galaxy. However, it seemed like he would have to wait a bit longer. At least that's what he thought... having yet to realize he was their beta tester.

"That's why I asked for you," Arnold said, keeping his usual tone. "This beta test will not be as short as the alpha testing, and I cannot make any guarantees we will even finish everything before the Prima Guardian system event has concluded, if ever. However, that does not mean it isn't useable. Single-entity teleportation is already stable and accurate enough that I have full confidence in its ability to teleport you or any other singular person within a short distance of any target planet in the database. The reason why I believe you are the best subject is because we have no method to return the one teleported. It is possible the teleporter within the Prima Vessel can be used, or the local population that remains can offer assistance, but your ring remains the most consistent method available to ensure the return is possible. Even if that should fail, you are the Chosen of a Primordial, and I'm certain the Malefic One would gladly assist you should you find yourself lost in space."

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In summary, Arnold believed the teleportation circle was good enough to work decently, and Jake was the only one who was a World Leader and could teleport home by himself. Oh, and should the accident be out and he couldn't, his sugar daddy Patron could always bail him out.

It was a bit insulting, but it wasn't like Arnold was wrong, and Villy would definitely laugh his ass off if he had to save a Jake floating about in the middle of fuck-all nowhere.

"Alright, I guess I'll be your beta tester," Jake agreed without any fight or arguments. "Now, I assume this works on the red-flag planets, right? Does it also work on the gray ones?"

"It works on every planet with a Prima Vessel on it," Arnold answered. "That includes the three marked black. While they may be designated as destroyed, there are still Prima Vessels on them."

Jake was pleasantly surprised that he could pick any planet, as that was just what he had hoped for. Thinking about it, these Prima Vessels were all incredibly durable, so they shouldn't be destroyed by C-grades fighting. Secondly, it wasn't like the planets that were marked with a black flag had all just exploded. They were still there, even if they were no longer considered actual planets.

"One more note before you go. We were forced to ensure anyone teleported would appear outside the planet's atmosphere. Those we tried to teleport inside any atmosphere found themselves destroyed as they teleported through the atmospheric layers, so you will have to find your own way through. I'm certain you can handle it," Arnold explained, which was probably another reason they had picked Jake for this thing.

"I'll get through the atmosphere somehow. I have a few ideas. Now, do you have any particular place in mind you want me to go?" Jake asked Arnold. It was his teleporter, so it was only nice to ask.

"I don't. You are free to choose yourself," Arnold said as he pressed a few buttons, and a screen was projected onto the wall. Jake instantly recognized it as identical to the one in the Prima Vessel, making Jake believe Arnold had just restreamed it.

Having an open choice for where to go, Jake considered his options. Going to a blue planet was quickly written off. He could go to those without this teleporter, and those he couldn't were part of Ell'Hakan's alliance, and he saw no reason to head there.

Red ones were the most obvious choice. They were the ones where he had the highest probability of saving the most people while knowing there was a Prima Guardian there. It was also possible planets marked with a gray flag still had Prima Guardians alive, and there were likely people to save there, too, so those two options were kind of close.

However, ultimately, Jake didn't want to head to any of these. Instead, he looked at Arnold as he pointed toward a certain planet:

The homeworld of "I" and the first planet to get marked with a black flag.



Arnold looked at the one Jake had selected and nodded. "I understand. Trying to discover more about the nature of this anomaly seems like a wise choice."

"That's also my thoughts," Jake nodded. He also desperately wanted to sate his own curiosity. What kind of world had given birth to a creature now just going around destroying worlds? What the hell had the natives done to make such a thing happen? These were all questions he would hopefully soon have an answer to.

"Step onto the teleporter once ready," Arnold said as he took out sixteen glowing cubes of metal, all overflowing with energy, and levitated them over to different focal points of the formation. Batteries of some kind to power the circle, and based on the energy Arnold had packed into them, Jake understood why they couldn't just teleport people around willy-nilly.

Jake did as told, stepping onto the teleporter. With Arnold typing away at his console, different elements of the magic circle came alive one after another. The first thing Jake felt was space itself, seemingly loosing up all around him, and through his sphere, he saw William carrying out a sleeping Sandy so they weren't in the room. Arnold had also put up some defensive barrier around himself, which really didn't make Jake feel super comfortable.

Next up, Jake felt space vibrate and stretch. Small cracks formed in reality, and for a fraction of a moment, Jake felt the presence of the void as Arnold's unique brand of magic wormed its way in. Intuitively, he knew it was about to activate.

"One final thing," Arnold said casually just before Jake was teleported away, his voice sounding distorted due to the formation. "The journey may be a bit rougher than you're used to. Just know that is entirely within expectations."

Without any further warning, Jake felt himself move as if he was yanked upwards. His vision turned dark, and his sphere began to pick up so much noise he had to rein it in to not needlessly stress himself out. He kept flying upwards for a good while before suddenly, he was flung to the side as if pulled by some invisible force.

This happened several more times as Jake was sent tumbling around in a realm of total darkness, broken up by the occasional misplaced flash of light that disappeared as fast as it had come. The entire process

took over a minute before Jake was finally pulled downward, and he appeared in the real world once more.

"That was fucking scuffed," Jake cursed out loud as he worked to orient himself. The contrast between feeling as if you are being tossed around at incredible speeds to suddenly losing all momentum and coming to a standstill was jarring, to say the least.

The entire teleportation process was far from consumer-friendly and definitely not very refined yet. Still... it had seemingly gotten the job done as Jake found himself floating above a planet right outside where the atmosphere would be. He used "would be" very purposefully here... because there wasn't any atmosphere.

For a moment, Jake had even questioned if Arnold's teleporter had been even worse than first thought because he could barely recognize what he saw below him as a real planet, and definitely not one enlightened once lived on.

It looked more like some sort of asteroid. The atmosphere was entirely gone, and below, Jake felt no trace of... anything. He frowned as the sensation was so odd. He had expected to feel something. Death energy, earth energy, some kind of wind. Yet there was nothing at all.

Scouring the planet from far above using his high Perception, he could see a substantial part of it. He saw deep valleys and massive crater-like holes so large they covered most of the planet, and he soon realized these had once been oceans. There were no traces of structures anywhere on the "mountains" he assumed were once islands or continents.

It was a surreal sight, to say the least, as he kept scanning the planet carefully.

Finally, on one of the landmasses, he found what he had been looking for. It was the only structure-like thing on the entire former planet, so the Prima Vessel stuck out quite a lot. However, even the Prima Vessel was gray and had lost all its shine. What's more, it even had clear signs of damage, which was more than a little unsettling considering its durability.

Without delaying, Jake began his descent, his considerations for how he would get through the atmosphere never even relevant. Without any mana of note in the air, Jake could speed up near-constantly, allowing him to reach the surface of the former planet a lot faster than expected.

As he got closer to the Prima Vessel, he released a Pulse of Perception and saw something that made his eyes open wide. Not within the Vessel itself but what was around it. Buried beneath gray sand, he saw bones. So many bones. They looked vaguely human but were a bit off, and after some scouring of his memories, he realized they were orc skeletons.

When he landed on the ground, he also noticed something else disturbing. He had naturally used some resources getting down there... but he wasn't regenerating anything. Instead, it was the opposite. The very land itself was draining just to stand on. The effect was slight, but it was there.

Releasing another Pulse, Jake finally felt as if he caught all the skeletons, and... he couldn't even count how many there were. Hundreds of millions? Billions? It was as if the entire planet had died there.

Jake walked a bit before he knelt down and pushed enough of the sand away until he saw a bone. It was also gray, and with a slight touch, it crumbled into dust. Jake felt this dust run through his hands as he felt the sensation of a concept that made a shiver run down his spine.

Desolation.

## Chapter 966: The Concept of Desolation

Desolation...

A concept Jake knew a lot about yet felt like he barely understood. Not because he was a moron – though that could be debated - or didn't have the affinity for the concept, but because he was only a C-grade. The concept of desolation was simply not something Jake had ever expected to see in a context like this.

Not to say the concept couldn't be used by those at C-grade or even at lower grades, but this was desolation in its purest form. It wasn't just a part of some skill that had some aspects of desolation added to it. No, this was far scarier. One thing was certain... Jake was a lot more apprehensive about this "I" character now than before. If it was a creature that could actually control the concept of desolation to this extent, this system event had just gotten a lot more dangerous than before.

One of the distinct aspects of the concept of desolation was its ability to cause "permanent" damage. As was shown when Villy removed the arm of the one from the Azureflight back in the Order, the concept wouldn't just erase the arm itself but the part of the Soulshape it usually inhabited. That meant there was no easy way to heal it, and no amount of potions or meditation would help.

Not to say it couldn't be healed... but Jake had no idea how to, and he doubted anyone on Earth knew how either. The only surefire way of healing something like that was through evolution, where you were effectively reborn. Jake had no desire to lose any limbs or anything like that, though, but the mere fact such a risk existed for him and the others from Earth was unsettling. If someone did get injured, they would likely have to wait till the event was over and find someone worth healing them in one of the larger factions in another universe.

Standing up, Jake really took in the environment and its effects on him. His energy was slowly being drained, but what's more, his resources weren't regenerating at all. Jake even felt that should he sit down and meditate, he would only be draining himself further.

Turning to the Prima Vessel, he decided to inspect it more closely. He found that the damage caused to it was primarily surface-level, but the mere fact it had taken any damage at all was surprising. After inspecting the Vessel a bit further, he found its entrance that was unlocked after killing the Prima Guardian, which he honestly wasn't sure if he could even enter.

However, when he got close, the barrier allowed him inside. Jake even noted how it didn't seem to check his key at all but just let him enter, which definitely wasn't how it worked on other planets. At least not those with living World Leaders.

The inside of the Prima Vessel was pristine for the most part, except for one thing. Down the hallway leading to the three different rooms, a set of footprints could clearly be seen. They had left imprints that gave off the same concept of desolation as the world outside. When Jake used his foot to wipe away one of the footprints, he saw they had all been made up of gray dust and that the Vessel itself hadn't been affected.

Jake continued further into the Vessel and saw more traces of the creature that had entered it. From the form and size of its footprints and other minor clues, he estimated it was some kind of humanoid being. Oddly, it also seemed to have some kind of limp. He couldn't gather much more from what was left behind, except for the fact he only felt the concept of desolation and nothing else from all its traces.

While desolation was an incredibly powerful concept, it was also very limiting. It tended to not work well together with other affinities or concepts due to its nature. In fact, its properties made it so very few

creatures natively able to use the affinity existed. In many ways, something being alive or at least possessing a soul was counter-intuitive to the concept in the first place. Desolation was all about not only non-existence but the continued state of non-existence, and a creature existing while being all about non-existence was weird.

There were some creatures and people in the multiverse well-versed with the affinity, though... Jake's very own Patron being one of its most well-known users.

To the Malefic Viper, the concept had been a part of his Path for a long time. Likely all the way back to when he was known as the Wyvern of the Desolates. At least Jake doubted it was a coincidence the snake god was known under that name back then while also being well-versed in the concept of desolation now.

Later on, desolation became one of the fundamental aspects of the malefic affinity, which was an affinity Jake couldn't even begin to understand yet. He said that, despite his own constant usage of the affinity through Touch of the Malefic Viper, the glowing dark green color broadly considered a signature aspect of the affinity.

Jake had never felt the existence of desolation when using Touch, though. He was sure it would come one day.

Arriving at the control room within the Prima Vessel, Jake saw everything was still active and working, with the only traces of the creature a bit of gray dust here and there. After only a moment of hesitation, he began seeing if he could control the Vessel. This also didn't prove any trouble, as Jake did something potentially risky and teleported the Prima Vessel down to the center of the planet.

Having seen the state of the planet's surface, he could only begin to suspect what the core looked like. That's also why he knew this wouldn't be without risk. The core room was bound to be far more dangerous than the surface of the planet, but Jake felt like he had to risk it to better understand what he was dealing with.

Going to the exit of the Prima Vessel, Jake began preparing himself. He started by summoning his Scales of the Malefic Viper, covering his entire body, followed by several powerful layers of stable arcane barriers. While doing this, Jake even used Arcane Awakening in its stable defensive form, increasing relevant stats by 50% while forming yet another layer of defense in the form of the small membrane of protective arcane energy right above the scales.

Feeling about as ready as one can be when about to enter a very hazardous environment, Jake exited the Prima Vessel. Instantly, he felt a shiver run down his spine as a sense of wrongness overwhelmed him. Everything within the core room was gray, even Jake himself and his arcane mana; the concept of color itself seemingly made desolate.

As he looked at his defensive barrier, it quickly began fading away. Desolation was not destructive or showy. It just drained everything and anything, allowing nothing to exist. Jake looked on with wide eyes as his barriers simply faded away one after another. He had to focus while he still could as he scanned the core room.

This book was originally published on Royal Road. Check it out there for the real experience.

The colorless and lightless room made it difficult to spot anything in particular. However, locating the Planetary Core wasn't difficult. It was by far the greatest source of desolation, and Jake focused his eyes as he saw the cracked gray core that had once been the Planetary Pylon. It had been reduced to a Planetary Core and was now nearly unrecognizable.

Seeing this core brought Jake all the way back to the Tutorial, where he corrupted a Quintessence to poison all the water in the lake of those big boars. The item had been intrinsically bound to the lake, and as long as he sufficiently corrupted that, the corruption would spread to the entire lake automatically, effectively turning it poisonous permanently.

This was no different. The Planetary Core was bound to the entire planet. It was what caused the atmosphere to exist, regulated affinities, maintained balance, and was the source of constantly spawning new energy for the world. Now, it had been corrupted. Rather than do all those things, it had become the source of the planet's total destruction. It permeated desolation into every single part of the planet until, one day, the constantly growing power of desolation inside the core would become too much, making it crumble alongside the rest of the planet.

As Jake focused on the core, his final arcane barrier broke as the energy of desolation made contact with his scales of the Malefic Viper. Jake was ready to quickly charge back into the safety of the Prima Vessel as something unexpected happened. For the first time within the core room, he saw not only color but light.

His scales subtly lit up with a dark green color as the energy of desolation was stopped in its tracks entirely. That wasn't all, as Jake felt something even more unexpected next: Mana. A little bit of mana traveled from Jake's scales and into his body, restoring his mana pool.

Jake was in disbelief at what happened as he quickly recalled parts of the description of his Scales of the Malefic Viper:

"The scales are legendarily resistant to magic and will store excess mana from any magical attacks that would have otherwise damaged you... this mana will be slowly refined and be absorbed or dispersed into your surroundings."

In truth, this mana-restoring feature wasn't new; it was just pretty bad so he didn't really ever think about it. It mainly sucked because Jake didn't really get hit a lot by small constant attacks to absorb a bit at a time, but when he did get hit, it was by powerful attacks where the scales could only offer some extra resistance and nothing more. The mana he did absorb would simply be too powerful with too much quantity, resulting in the effect pretty much not doing anything.

Unless it was certain affinities, that is. Scales were incredibly potent at absorbing the light affinity, as one example, and for any poison-based mana, it was straight-up overpowered.

Now, he'd discovered another affinity that the scales were incredibly effective against, and it had come at just the right time as Jake smiled.

The formerly scary environment Jake was incredibly apprehensive about even approaching had, in an instant, turned from a danger into an opportunity. With gusto, Jake tried opening his mouth as he breathed some of the desolate energy in, and-

Jake felt all the energy drain from his internals; his tissue began to die as it was emptied of all energy, and one of his lungs had a part of it begin to smolder like it was made of ash. Never before had Jake shut up so fast, as luckily, new energy flooded in and restored the damage done in an instant, leaving no traces except for a lesson learned:

This place was still fucking dangerous even if he now had a method to exist there. In retrospect, it was a bit as if he was wearing a space suit and decided to open the helmet and take a deep breath... in other words, really moronic.

Having learned not to be too much of an idiot, Jake focused on the sensation of his scales absorbing the desolate energy. It was odd to imagine that the concept of nothingness could be turned into mana like that, and Jake seriously didn't understand how it worked... but it seemed like he was on his way to finding out.

The process by which his scales made the constant attack of desolate energy into mana wasn't only dependent on the scales but a skill specialized in turning harmful energies into resources: *Palate of the Malefic Viper*.

In other words, Jake wasn't just absorbing mana from the environment; he was also absorbing knowledge and Records related to the concept of desolation. A little bit at a time, and with how complicated the concept was, this wouldn't be a fast process if he wanted to actually learn anything useful. If he stayed in this core chamber for a prolonged period, Jake did believe he would benefit, but he just didn't have that kind of time in the middle of a system event. If he wanted to really benefit, he reckoned he would have to stay there for a few years at least, which did suck as this wasn't the kind of opportunity one could come across often.

Encountering a C-grade version of the concept of desolation wasn't something Jake had ever expected. This was at a level where Jake stood a chance at absorbing and understanding it. An environment like this wasn't something the *Viper* or anyone else could artificially create, and even if there likely were quite a few members of the Order who could use the concept of desolation to some extent, he doubted any of them could use such a pure version as he was experienced right now.

Leaving a place like this was truly a waste... but he didn't have much of a choice.

Going to this planet had still been totally worth it, though. Jake had learned something very useful about his Scales of the Malefic Viper, learned a bit about the creature known as "I," and now even absorbed some Records related to desolation.

Not to say he was fully ready to leave quite yet. With his scales, he felt confident to get closer to the core, as he still wanted to learn more about how this entire planet had become this way. Floating within the monochrome chamber, Jake approached the core as the energy began to overwhelm him when he got too close. His scales definitely had a threshold, and Jake had to stop a bit away as he carefully inspected the core, trying to get a feel for what the creature had done to it.



Making use of his stupidly high Perception, Jake scanned the core. It turned out he didn't really have to try that hard to figure out what had happened, though, as he shook his head. "Crazy fucking bastard."

Jake had many theories about how "I" had corrupted a Planetary Core. Everything from grand rituals to being in possession of some incredibly powerful item akin to Eternal Hunger... yet the answer was far more simple. What the lunatic creature had done was by far the most simplistic and risky method... it infused its very soul into the Planetary Core, using itself as the catalyst of corruption.

This not only left the creature vulnerable during the entire corruption process, but risked losing parts of its soul in the process. Especially when dealing with a concept as dangerous as desolation. Even if Jake was taken aback had to admit this discovery was quite a relief.

It proved the creature wasn't some ritual expert or anything like that. Shit, Jake was confident he would be better at corrupting a World Core. A lot faster, too.

Continuing to look at the core, Jake took in the intense and powerful energy it gave off. As he stood there staring, an idea began to form in his head. Turning around, Jake headed back into the Prima Vessel and to the teleportation room there. There, he made sure it worked as he checked to see if he could teleport back to Earth, something he could, and he didn't even have to put in an application but could teleport straight there.

Having confirmed that, Jake headed back out of the Vessel once more. Floating toward the Planetary Core, Jake was thinking as he shook his head before muttering out loud.

"No... it would be too much..."

But... with the cracks already in the core and its unstable nature and clearly lowered durability...

"Yeah... I should be able to handle a good mouthful of it, at least."

## Chapter 967: Advanced Meal Prepping

A C-grade eating a Planetary Core? Yeah, that was such a ridiculous notion it wasn't even worth thinking about, even if it was a broken core. Jake had said it before, but there was no way for a C-grade

to consume all the energy within a core, and besides, when the core was removed from a planet, it would lose connection and naturally grow far less powerful and lose many of its properties.

But... what if Jake didn't try to eat the Planetary Core but just a little piece of it? Just a good chunk seeped in the potent C-grade desolation affinity energy. That couldn't be too harmful, right? Yeah, it should be fine, what's the worst that can happen?

Alright, the worst case was Jake accidentally killing himself, but he believed in the powers of the Malefic Viper. He wouldn't eat this fragment of the core any normal way but store it within the internal stomach of Palate of the Malefic Viper to then slowly absorb the energy over a long period of time.

Even if it turned out Jake couldn't handle eating the core fragment, he remained fairly confident he would get out of it alive. At least, he assumed so, remembering everything that had happened with the Dark Witch when he got his last skill upgrade. Recalling parts of the description, Jake felt pretty confident.

"Natural treasures can be swallowed... If the item is not a toxin, the item will still be refined but at a slower pace... allows the Alchemist to fully consume a swallowed item, destroying it in the process if possible. If the item cannot be destroyed or the result of its destruction is too violent, the Alchemist will suffer a backlash, and the internal space will be damaged."

Clearly, the skill could absorb something like a fragment of the core. The only big questions were if the "failsafe" of destroying the item for immediate consumption would even work, and if it did work, would the backlash potentially prove lethal? Even if it did... it wasn't like Jake didn't have more tricks up his sleeve.

Right now, he still just had a legendary Blightroot from the gifts the Risen gave him during the Chosen ceremony, but now he wanted to replace it with something even more dangerous than a root of pure death. As a legendary item, he naturally still had much to absorb from it, but a part of this core would be so much more valuable.

Well... as the saying goes, nothing ventured, nothing gained. One had to take big risks to get big rewards, and Jake had never been the risk-averse sort. With that in mind, Jake made himself commit by getting the Blightroot out of his Palate stomach and into his regular storage.

As a final precaution, Jake quickly entered the Prima Vessel and took out one of the devices given by Arnold to communicate with people back on Earth. However, it couldn't reach all the way back to Arnold, and he wasn't sure if it was because he was inside the Vessel or too far away, but he quickly got an idea.

Taking the device, Jake purposefully summoned his Alchemist's Flame and destroyed it. He remembered Miranda had a skill to contact him that was tailor-made for the task, and he gambled on that working... and considering he felt a telepathic probe not even two minutes later, he was indeed correct.

"What's going on? Arnold reported one of your communication devices broke. Are you okay?" Miranda asked in a worried voice, which made Jake feel a bit bad as he quickly reassured her.

"I'm fine, no cause for concern, but I needed a way to quickly contact you. Can you make sure to clear out the Prima Vessel on Earth for me? I may bring something pretty dangerous back, and it would be best if there weren't anyone around,"

Jake asked quickly.

"Can't we clear out the area around one of the other teleportation circles? The Sword Saint and Eron are still on Earth, so they could potentially render assistance," Miranda asked, likely assuming Jake would drag back some monster.

"No, best to keep everything contained within the Prima Vessel... but having Eron around might be a good idea. Ask him to go to the Prima Vessel and be ready, but only if he is confident in handling the concept of desolation," Jake said after some thought.

"I will... wait, why are you talking about the concept of desolation? What the hell are you doing?" Miranda asked, and Jake got the feeling much of her concern had now been replaced with an understanding of what Jake was up to – an understanding he gladly fully confirmed.

"Something very reckless and probably a little dumb," Jake said, unable to hold back a small smile.

"Just don't get yourself killed... and good luck," Miranda sighed on the other end, not even arguing or asking for more details. Something Jake appreciated.

"Thanks. See you in not that long if things work out," Jake finished the conversation as he returned his attention to the task at hand. He was even a bit proud of himself that he had the forethought to take precautions and clear out the Prima Vessel back on Earth. There was definitely a point in his life the thought wouldn't have even crossed his mind.

Anyway, with that handled, now he just also had to figure out how to break a part of the core off. Normally, Jake wouldn't even have considered it an option, but this was a very special case. The core was already cracked in many places due to the powerful energy of desolation, making it far less durable. Secondly, one of the properties of desolation was that even things that hadn't turned completely desolate yet became a lot more brittle.

The Prima Vessel was a good example of that, and Jake even tested his theory after leaving the Prima Vessel again by taking out Eternal Hunger, and with some struggle, he could leave cutting marks on its surface. There was no way he could do the same back on Earth, but simply being in this environment, the Vessel's durability had been significantly reduced. He did notice after cutting it that it seemed to have an even tougher inner shell, but with time, chances are the desolation would still manage to seep through.

Jake wasn't sure that would ever happen, though. It would take a lot of time, after all, and he didn't believe this core chamber had a lot of time left. The core would naturally break far before the Prima Vessel would, and even if it didn't, Jake was about to break stuff all on his own.

Looking at the core more closely, using both his eyes and his sphere, he circled around a bit, trying to find the best weak point. Soon enough, he found somewhere the crack went deep and had a good angle for what Jake was planning.

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He did a bit more testing to see if what he wanted to do was viable, and he quickly hit some problems. As getting close to the core wasn't the healthiest, Jake wanted to shoot a Protean Arrow designed to function as a wedge to break apart the core.

However, when he tried to test by channeling an Arcane Powershot, he quickly found the first issue. The arcane energy Jake gave off actively fought and was suppressed by the environment, and what's more, even the bow began to take in some energy of desolation. Not a lot, and it wasn't a problem, but it was concerning.

He also began to question if the arrow would even remain stable for long enough. Even if it didn't outright get dismantled, would it work properly as a wedge? It would turn brittle, especially that close to the core.

Quickly, he put away his bow, shelving that plan. Instead, he took out the one weapon he knew would be fine even in this environment. As expected, Eternal Hunger didn't – to put it politely – give a flying fuck about some C-grade desolation energy being pumped out by a corrupted Planetary Core.

Jake did feel an innate sense of disgust from the weapon, though. The concept of desolation was nearly the exact opposite of the sin curse of hunger. Desolation didn't consume anything. It just removed energy and did so no energy could ever return. If desolation won, there would be nothing to eat, something the curse innately felt and couldn't accept.

Trying to absorb any of this energy of desolation would also be incredibly stupid, as all it would do was slightly weaken the energy of the curse. On a funny side note, using the concept of desolation was one of the most effective methods of getting rid of curses or safely destroying cursed objects. Normally, if you destroyed something like Eternal Hunger, you would just let all the curse energy loose, but if you forcefully filled it with the energy of desolation, it would kill the curse until the weapon turned into dust.

To clarify, this wasn't a risk here. Even if Eternal Hunger somehow managed to absorb this entire Planetary Core, it wouldn't have much of an adverse effect on the curse. There was simply a far too big difference in power between the two.

Either way, with archery out of the question, Jake had to stick with Eternal Hunger. Luckily, the weapon had some very useful properties for this type of scenario. Continuing to inspect the cracks in the core, Jake began to slowly change the shape of Eternal Hunger to something more suitable for the job.

Once he was done, he mentally and physically prepared himself. Having to enter melee, Jake would take a far higher risk as he would have to get right up to the large Planetary Core and try to break a good part of it off.

Focusing more on his Scales of the Malefic Viper, he pushed the skill as far as he could. While he would have loved some fortunate moment of enlightenment and an upgrade, he wasn't quite there yet. Finally, before it was go-time, Jake held nothing back as Arcane Awakening activated fully and wings sprung from his back.

Here goes nothing, Jake thought as he flew forward, the powerful energy of desolation washing over him the closer he got to the core. Dozens of arcane barriers were summoned to take off some of the heat, but they would only do this much in an environment where summoning anything outside his body was borderline impossible. His scales struggled, some of them cracking as Jake quickly summoned new ones, and he felt some of the energy begin to enter his body, his destructive energy rushing to cancel out the desolation.

Jake couldn't do this for long... but he held on, and soon, he was right in front of the core. He lifted the weapon he would use to break this core right open as quite an odd sight played out that would definitely have made any observers have a second take.

Eternal Hunger, a mythical weapon born from an ancient curse from a long-forgotten vampiric land, fused with the simulacrum from another system-created reality, and undoubtedly one of, if not the most powerful weapons in the entire ninety-third universe, was currently transformed into an oversized crowbar that Jake slammed into the crack in the Planetary Core.

With a subdued yell, as he really didn't want to open his mouth, he used all his strength on the crowbar to try and pry the huge core of desolation open, yet it remained stuck in the crack. Feeling the pressure only mounting more, Jake did something even more risky, as he trusted the one thing he could always trust: his boots.

He had wanted to avoid directly touching the core, but he saw no other choice as he stepped down on the core for increased leverage. Instantly, he felt the rush of energy trying to invade his body, with its first target being the boots it directly touched.

The foolish concept did not know the foe it had encountered. The Best Boots proved far more resilient to desolation than even his scales, shrugging it off entirely. This looked like a good thing on the surface, except the boots didn't really stop the energy from attacking Jake, and while it was nice enough to have his feet mostly spared, his legs remained open season.

Not that Jake planned on standing on the core for long. With increased leverage and a good yank, Jake felt the core give way. With another good pull, he finally managed to crack the whole core wide open and break it apart... but...

Fuck.

Jake had wanted to split a good piece off, and the way it was cracked, Jake hoped to only eat about a fifth of the entire core. Maybe a quarter. What Jake had instead done was break the core infuriatingly cleanly in half, leaving two giant halves of the core slowly floating apart as a torrent of desolate energy rushed over Jake, forcing him to retreat. Even so, he was still heavily inflicted as a lot of energy got through his scales, making his skin and much of his flesh turn gray.

Eating half a core was way too much... way more than he had planned.

He had to make a decision here and now. The entire core room was shaking as it was about to collapse with the core no longer keeping it together, and the rush of desolation making all the cave walls so much more brittle, making much of it crumble on its own.

His gaze darted to the Prima Vessel and back to the two halves of the core floating apart as he cursed internally at his own reckless stupidity and refusal to give up.

Fuuuck!

Opening his mouth, Jake's stubbornness had won out. One of the two halves – the ever-so-slightly smaller one – began to shrink as it flew toward Jake and straight into his Palate of the Malefic Viper's stomach. Before he could even register it was fully in there, he moved.

Flying toward the Prima Vessel, he saw the barrier blocking the entrance fading away as he entered the hallway of the Vessel, the barrier fully fading behind him when he passed it. Desolation invaded the Vessel as Jake flew for the teleportation room as quickly as he could, with the only signs of the desolation following him that the hallway turned entirely gray in his wake.

Inside him, he felt the consumed half of the Planetary Core settle as it pumped out vast amounts of desolation, Jake gritting his teeth as he focused as best he could to keep it contained until he was in relative safety.

Arriving at the teleporter, Jake didn't hesitate a single moment before he activated it to teleport back to Earth. The entire Vessel was shaking, and through his sphere, he knew it was currently in movement and falling, the ground it had been standing on having given out due to the instability of the entire core room.

With everything shaking and the desolation flooding toward the chamber, the teleporter couldn't activate fast enough. Jake's eyes were wide as the colorless presence entered the chamber, but just before it reached the edge of the teleportation circle and destroyed it, Jake's vision turned black as he was whisked away.

He appeared within the Prima Vessel back on Earth near-instantly, but he didn't have any time to think about how much better this teleportation was than Arnold's. The moment he returned, Jake sat down in meditation and closed his eyes, as one thing was clear...

Jake had bitten off a lot more than he could chew. Scratch that, he hadn't even tried to chew it but swallowed the damn thing whole, and he was now in for perhaps the worst case of food poisoning imaginable... likely even worse than the result of eating supermarket sushi on its last best-by date.

#### Chapter 968: Understanding the Scales of Desolation

A pulsing sensation echoed through Jake's entire body and soul as waves of desolation were released from within himself, seeking to spread out from its containment. This situation was very different from the scenario with the Dark Witch. Back then, he had a volatile and explosive core, but the Half-a-Planetary Core Jake had eaten this time around was the exact opposite of volatile.

In many ways, it was far scarier than something that just went boom. Jake didn't even feel any pressure on the inner walls of the Palate stomach, nor did he feel any pain. He just felt a sense of emptiness and numbness wherever the desolation passed. It was honestly soothing and relaxing, making Jake think that it was okay to just relax. Perhaps he should even take a nap.

However, he still knew his situation wasn't good, and his survival instinct was fully engaged, as surrendering to the calmness and letting his consciousness fade away would mean he would never wake up again. He tried different methods to handle the desolation, but it quickly became clear there was simply too much energy to handle.

Palate of the Malefic Viper's internal stomach was a separate space within Jake's Soulspace, where anything he ate was sealed within and slowly extracted of energy and Records. Now, the walls were being made desolate faster than they could absorb the energy, which forced Jake to not try and suppress all the energy of the core, but let some slip through and into his body.



To fight back, whenever desolation washed over him, a wave of destructive arcane energy followed, destroying and canceling out the energy of desolation. This did have the problem that Jake repeatedly hurt his own body, and things were far from ideal. He still had options if things continued like this... but just then, he felt something.

A warm flow of energy came over him, as he felt the parts he destroyed with his arcane energy be restored. He had been so focused on the fighting within himself that he hadn't noticed the external world at all, nor the man who now stood in the chamber with him. Jake wanted to open his eyes, but he stopped when a message entered his mind.

"Focus on doing what you must do. I shall maintain the integrity of your body in the meantime," Eron's voice echoed in Jake's mind. As he spoke, even more energy fell over Jake's body as the desolation still lingering was rapidly pushed back by what felt like a tidal wave of pure vital energy.

The bane of desolation was something too powerful or too filled with energy to make desolate... and Eron was like an endless wellspring of pure vital energy. Jake truly didn't know how much energy Eron had, but in that moment, he had an odd sense of confidence that should this be a battle of endurance between the consumed core and Eron, the healer wouldn't be on the losing side.

That wasn't what Jake wanted, though. He didn't want the core "fixed" of its desolation, and every bit of energy that seeped out of the Palate's stomach and into the rest of his being was a loss. Still, with Eron now watching over Jake, he could fully refocus on his internal realm without worrying about his body becoming an empty husk devoid of energy and life in the meantime.

Using Serene Soul Meditation, Jake let his consciousness enter his own Soulspace. Opening his eyes within the vast realm that was his soul, Jake took everything in. The shadowy figure representing Eternal Hunger, the single drop of blood floating in the middle of nothingness giving off extreme power, and the sky the color of his arcane affinity all struck his eye first, as he took in the world representing his own soul.

The stomach created by Palate wasn't in this space, and yet it kind of was. It was like another layer of space, separated from the rest of his Soulspace. Perhaps this was by design to protect the user of the skill, but it was clearly still connected. If it was not, how else would the drop of blood from the Malefic Viper have ever appeared within his true Soulspace after he consumed it using Palate?

Focusing, he observed Palate's stomach more closely than before. He was still purposefully allowing it to leak out energy to not flood the stomach. It was a bit like if the core constantly leaked water into a

limited container, and if Jake didn't allow some of it out, the Palate stomach would end up bursting. To stop that from happening, Jake would really only have one of five choices:

Firstly, he could purposefully explode the stomach and destroy the core while suffering a backlash. The second option was the simplest one, as he could always just spit out the core... though that would definitely turn the inside of the Prima Vessel into a permanent no-go zone, and Jake would probably have to ask Arnold to send the entire thing into empty space to avoid a disaster in the future. Option three was to not allow the stomach to leak into his body, but try and redirect everything into his real Soulspace, but Jake seriously didn't know the consequences of that. Of course, besides these three options, he could also just try and hope things would eventually work out on their own as he let more and more desolation leak out into his body with expectations that Eron could keep it at bay until the core weakened enough for Jake to be able to handle it. Needless to say, this option was shit, and honestly, the other three weren't exactly appealing either.

His fifth and final option was one most others wouldn't even consider. Not because it was a bad idea but because it wasn't at all feasible, especially not in a situation like this.

The fundamental source of all Jake's problems was that his Palate of the Malefic Viper couldn't handle the core. Jake was the type who liked the easiest solutions to the most complicated of issues, and the easiest way to handle this was to simply make his Palate capable of withstanding the Desolation Core, as Jake had just impromptu decided to call it.

But... how would he do that?

Standing within his Soulspace, Jake honestly didn't think that option three – to simply release the desolation into his Soulspace – would do him much harm, but he did fear that it would effectively waste all the desolation energy within the core.

If Jake was dealing with any other kind of extremely dense energy source, he would be afraid of it exploding or something like that, but desolation didn't work like that. Jake imagined it would just flood his Soulspace, wake up an annoyed Eternal Hunger, or even encounter the droplet of blood from the Viper and end up being erased entirely. Of course, that assumed it even got that far and wasn't annihilated by the passive environment within Jake's soul.

Also, as to why he was currently leaking desolation energy into his body to lessen the pressure and not into his soul... well, Jake didn't know how to only pour a little into his Soulspace. He was only confident

in effectively breaking down the wall and letting it all in, which, again, wouldn't lead to anything productive or good.

However, Jake was convinced he still needed to break down that wall. He just had to do so very purposefully and with proper preparation. The problem was that right now, the stomach created by Palate only relied on the Records of Palate itself, which limited it far too much. If Jake wanted it to be able to withstand something like half a Planetary Core, he needed it to fully rely on Jake's overpowered soul. At least, that's what he believed.

As mentioned, he couldn't just let everything flood into the Soulspace, though. He would need for it to be far more controlled, and as Jake considered what to do, he got an idea. However, he wasn't sure how feasible it was nor how time-consuming it would be.

Without waiting around just theorizing, Jake planned to test out what he was thinking. While still within his Soulspace, he activated Scales of the Malefic Viper on his manifested form. The scales appeared, and Jake watched them closely as he tried to pry one off. Once he did, it turned into energy, disappearing instantly. Frowning, Jake tried something else. With his arcane energy, he formed a barrier and tried to make a scale appear on the barrier, but it didn't work either.

Undeterred, Jake tried several more things until finally, he reached some level of success by doing something a bit brutal. Scraping off a sheet of his own flesh, Jake purposefully didn't let it disappear as he made it float in the air. With focus, he then made scales grow on the flesh as Jake nodded, satisfied.

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This... can work. But it will not be fast... and Scales isn't good enough yet either, I think.

He had ideas, but none of them were fast. They all required time, and Jake didn't know how much time he had. It was all dependent on his current healer, and rather than wonder on his own, Jake dedicated some of his attention to reaching out telepathically to Eron, communicating his intentions. The response he got was instant.

"Dispel all worry; I shall provide you all the time you desire. In fact, I implore you to not be too fast. An opportunity to encounter a C-grade version of desolation is a valuable experience, and it would sadden

me to have this fortunate moment be too short,” Eron answered, sounding like he very much enjoyed healing Jake’s body, which was constantly in a state of being made desolate.

With a go-ahead from the local medical team, Jake didn’t hesitate any longer as he began to put his plan into motion. As to what his bat-shit plan was?

Well... he wanted to effectively create a “vessel” within his Soulspace for the Palate stomach to occupy. That was the oversimplification, anyway. The space within the stomach of Palate was integral and not anything he could afford to mess with. Anything swallowed wasn’t just slowly being consumed but also refined by Touch of the Malefic Viper at an accelerated pace, and that wasn’t something he could afford to lose.

So, Jake would need the stomach to exist within his Soulspace, yet still not be entirely within his Soulspace. His solution? An actual physical barrier within the metaphysical realm of his soul. A wall made of something with the innate properties of absorbing any energy it encountered and feeding it back to Palate. A wall made of scales from Scales of the Malefic Viper.

To clarify, Jake definitely didn’t actually know what he was doing or if this would at all work how he expected... but he sure as hell hoped it would. If he could connect his Palate more closely with the rest of his Soulspace, he could rely on the full power of his soul with Scales and create a feedback loop even when he ate things too powerful. Based on the power of his soul, Jake even theorized that should he succeed, having eaten the full Desolation Core wouldn’t have been impossible.

All things in good time, though. For now, Jake had to deal with the most pressing issues: his scales simply not being good enough for what he wanted to do in their current form. Right now, they had a lot of waste and Jake also wasn’t sure if his silly plan would work if Palate was at a higher level than Scales.

Plus, Jake had already commented before how he felt close to an upgrade with Scales. He didn’t really have the time back then to truly focus on improving the skill, though, but now he most certainly did. Finally, the circumstances for working on the upgrade were great, as Jake could really experiment with what he wanted to do.

Splitting his focus between his internal world and the external one, he covered his body with scales in the real world, allowing some of the desolation to seep all the way through and into the scales. Eron got massive credit as he noticed Jake purposefully led some of the desolation to his scales, and didn’t interfere but just healed everything Jake dragged the desolate energy through on the way.

Jake observed closely how the desolation didn't affect the scales like it did everything else. His scales were the only thing Jake had seen that wasn't outright made desolate when encountering the energy, and as he observed them... he understood why, and he couldn't help but smile a bit at the explanation.

Had it all backward...

From the get-go, Jake had assumed the scales were just supremely resistant to the concept of desolation, however, he now realized that he had it wrong from the beginning. It wasn't because the scales weren't made desolate... it was that they already were desolate from the very beginning.

All the scales encountering desolation did was activate the inherent concept already existing within them and empowered it until the concept of desolation became too strong and overwhelmed everything else within the scale. From the outside, it looked and felt the same, but the difference was far from negligible.

Jake made full use of his high Perception as he dove into the inner workings of his scales as best he could to really understand them more. As he did so, he realized just how complex those small dark green things really were. They were like marvels of magical engineering, perfectly evolved and improved over time as the Viper grew in power. From the time he was a small snake to a wyvern and finally a dragon... but that understanding wasn't entirely accurate either, as Jake realized something the more he looked at the scales.

He had already thought of Scales of the Malefic Viper as being the scales of a dragon. Why wouldn't he? Dragon scales were known as one of the most powerful natural defenses any race had in the entire multiverse.

However, the more closely he looked at his scales now, the more he realized they weren't truly the scales of a dragon, even if they looked and felt incredibly similar. They weren't made to simply resist magic but to absorb and consume it, and their form was... off. They were too thin and weren't hard and tough like dragon scales tended to be.

Jake once more could only sigh at his own lack of understanding. His Patron wasn't the Malefic Dragon, now was he? He was the Malefic Viper. The forefather of all snakes. Why would his legacy skill include dragon scales and not something that evolved beyond that? They were snake scales and had always been.

Actively pushing, Jake began to try and manipulate his scales even as desolation kept pouring into them. He felt the process during which the desolation within them was activated when encountering the concept and remembered that sensation. He still had fuck-all understanding of desolation as a concept, but his scales clearly knew it very well.

Minutes turned to hours as time passed, and Jake kept exploring the sensation of his scales. How they absorbed the energy, the connection with Palate, their inner workings as best he could... and the more he explored them, the more he realized how much he had yet to uncover. He had put off truly trying to understand his scales for too long and could only marvel at their ingenuity and infinite complexity. It was like he had just climbed out of a pit and saw an entire world before him, yet to explore.

However, what he did find and was able to awaken was enough for the system to recognize his efforts and reward him with an upgrade that was perhaps long overdue. There was nothing flashy about the upgrade, which shouldn't be surprising, as desolation tended not to be.

[Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] --> [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] (Rarity Unchanged)

[Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – The Malefic Viper's scales are the first, and often the only required, line of defense. These scales harken back to the days the Malefic Viper lived as a dragon and retain many of these draconic properties... but the Malefic Viper is far more than just a dragon. Allows the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper to turn parts of his skin into scales, vastly increasing the effect of Toughness and adding a certain damage threshold. All damage below the threshold is nullified. You have further awakened inherent concepts within the scales, making them more durable and allowing you to turn a portion of all damage taken desolate while making your scales poisonous to the touch when they are infused with mana. The scales are legendarily resistant to magic and will store excess mana from any magical attacks that would have otherwise damaged you. If the damage taken by the scales is above the threshold of the scales, take it directly with a portion made desolate or dispersed into your immediate surroundings. Otherwise, this mana will be slowly refined and absorbed using your current level of Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary) if possible. Passively provides 9 Toughness per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper (C-grade version). May your scales be as perennial as the Malefic One, those foolish enough to touch them waste away, and the very sight of your scales let all know that resistance is futile.

As always, these damn descriptions of the Viper's Legacy skills only got longer and longer with every upgrade. But to highlight the changes... Jake had successfully managed to unlock some of the concepts within the scales, more accurately, some of their inherent desolation that was part of the malefic

affinity. This resulted in even better defenses against both magical and physical attacks, though the actual effectiveness of this was yet to be determined.

One other thing was that his scales were now poisonous to the touch when infused with mana. In all honesty, Jake hadn't even actively tried to awaken this part, it was just something he stumbled upon when exploring the scales.

Finally, the description now also directly specified it absorbed energy using Palate of the Malefic Viper. Oh yeah, there was also the fact he now got more Toughness from the skill, but that was the most expected outcome.

With the upgrade done, Jake quickly took status of himself. In the outside world, Eron still looked like he was having a swell time healing Jake, which made Jake decide to continue with his plan.

Using these empowered scales, Jake wanted to build a cocoon or a sphere or something within his Soulspace to contain the Palate stomach within. Something he promptly started doing as sheets of human skin began floating off his body with scales growing on them, as a massive sphere was slowly being formed. He had to make sure it was perfectly made, but even so, doubt remained.

Jake was far from certain this idea would work with his current version of Palate. There was a good reason not a single one of Jake's skills was fully represented within his Soulspace, outside of maybe Eternal Shadow, but that was bound to his mythical weapon.

To allow the skill to manifest within his Soulspace would be to integrate it far more deeply with Jake than anything else, and Jake honestly had no idea how to do that. He could temporarily manifest a skill within his Soulspace, but this wouldn't be that.

But... he still wanted to give it a try, though he had a feeling he would need something more than just time and hard work to get any kind of result. Which did make him wonder...

What would happen if Jake Juice was used within his own Soulspace, and what would its effects be when interacting with a skill where its Origin was his good friend Villy?

Chapter 969: Something Incredibly Questionable

Jake had never used his Jake Juice on a skill before. In fact, he wasn't even entirely sure how to do it. So far, he had only really used it for two things. The first one was naturally amplifying Primeval Origins within existing items, making them incredibly valuable and unique treasures. He had even done it to some of his arcane mana for a very interesting result.

The thing is, using it on anything external was very different from using it on a specific part of himself, such as a skill. In fact, using it on himself was still something Jake had never truly done.

To say he had used the Origin Energy or Jake Juice on himself during fight fight with Valdemar wasn't entirely accurate, either. It was more correct to say he had used it on his Bloodline, and while Jake and his Bloodline were intrinsically intertwined, there was still a big difference.

Origin Energy came from Jake's Bloodline in the first place, so it was only to be expected it was capable of handling the energy. Moreover, Jake didn't have to think about applying it to his Bloodline. It wasn't a conscious action made with intent... it was pure instinct. Jake viewed it as fully awakening his survival instinct, choosing fight over anything else.

All of this is to say Jake had to figure out how to use his Origin Energy on a skill before he could get further, and even then, he had no idea what the result would be. He was also very skeptical if it would even work, but he hoped that with Palate of all skills, it would have some kind of positive effect.

Palate was all about absorbing stuff, after all. Jake reckoned it had built-in concepts and Records related to consuming and integrating energy, and hopefully, Origin Energy would be something it could gulp up for a big upgrade. If not, something else interesting was bound to happen, right?

As for what aspects Jake wanted to upgrade... he wasn't sure either, and in all honesty, he wasn't under the delusion he could actually control what would happen. When Jake used Origin Energy, he never controlled it. He simply let it be the impetus of change, allowing something to return to its Origin.

Using it on Palate should allow it to at least transform into something closer to its Origin, right? Jake asked himself, and the more he thought about it, the more he thought he was onto something. Maybe Villy could even somehow interfere and give a hand like he'd done when Jake consumed the drop of blood. He was the Origin of his own skill, after all.



With a bit more confidence, Jake sat down within his own Soulspace and observed the separate space where the Palate stomach was currently being made desolate by the Planetary Core. He considered if he could just try and pour Origin Energy into the stomach, but that felt wrong. It would also be odd if the way to apply this unique energy worked only on Palate. No, Jake would need some universal method, and as he thought about it, he quickly formed some kind of idea.

Eternal Shadow had a visual representation in the form of the shadowy version of himself Eternal Hunger had taken on after fully merging with Sim-Jake. Jake could also manifest his actual skills within his Soulspace, so Jake wondered... couldn't he create some kind of symbol representing a skill in there?

The Soulspace was all metaphysical and metaphorical nonsense in the first place with what form objects and other things took in there. Usually, it was mostly empty, with Jake's being a bit weird as he had eaten some stuff that he chose to house in his soul – something that seriously wasn't recommended – but he still didn't see why one couldn't create some physical manifestation of a skill, same as Jake could manifest his own body in there.

These manifestations would just be representations of Records. A mental connection with the skills of sorts.

Jake thought about how he would go about this as he considered his skills for a moment. What was the simplest skill to really represent? Without even thinking much, one instantly sprung to mind, and willfully, Jake manifested it... yeah, he was honestly a bit surprised it worked.

Within the Soulspace, another person appeared. A large, muscular, and shirtless man, covered in blood and wounds, wielding an axe made from the fang of a dragon, stood there with a bit grin a moment later, seemingly a frame frozen in time. It was naturally an image of Valdemar from the vision of when he'd beaten the living hell out of Villy back in the day.

This was the first thing that sprung to mind. Perhaps it was because of Jake's recent plot where he used the skill to fool others, but the Valdemar from Path of the Heretic-Chosen's vision was also such a vivid memory burned into his mind. If he thought about Fangs of Man, no other representation could do it justice.

It also felt right. Like the image in front of Jake truly did contain Records of the skill. Smiling to himself, he had to admit that perhaps he had overthought this entire thing about manifesting skills, as it did seem to come down to one simple question:

What was the first thing he thought of when thinking about a particular skill?

To confirm he was right, he tried with a few other examples, as he purposefully stopped thinking as much and just thoughtlessly summoned the first thing that sprung to mind, starting out with the easy ones. When he thought about his Arcane Arrows skill, an arrow that was constantly shifting between two forms appeared, looking as simple as the skill was. Arcane Powershot, Jake saw an image of himself in his usual draw-stance. Many of his skills were incredibly simple like this.

A few other skills were a bit odder, though. When Jake thought about One Step, Thousand Miles, he just summoned his old boots, perhaps because he had begun to associate those with the act of stepping down now. Meanwhile, a skill like Core Manipulation of the Primal Hunter ended up just showing him an image of Jake giving Vesperia head pats... followed by Arcane Curse Manifestation showing him the cursed figure of Temlat after his transformation.

There were a few other odd ones, but some also just didn't work at all. In fact, the majority didn't seem to work properly, perhaps because Jake just didn't have any set mental image associated with them. At least not one strong enough for it to manifest with the current method Jake was using... a method that was really just him trying to forcibly be impulsive. So, chances were that nothing would appear if there wasn't one singular powerful image that sprung to mind when he thought about a skill.

Some skills had kind of the opposite problem. Big Game Hunter didn't show anything, but it wasn't because he didn't have any vivid images in mind. He simply had too many thoughts associated with the skill. When he actively tried, he managed to summon several different representations, such as one of him fighting the Badger Den Mother all the way back in the Tutorial or even his fight against the B-grade within Minaga's Labyrinth Challenge Dungeon. All were valid representations of that skill and seemed to work.

Jake wasn't really sure if what he was currently practicing was at all useful outside of being a fun thought exercise to anyone but himself and what he hoped to accomplish next. The implications if things did work out were huge, though... because if he could infuse his skills with Origin Energy and upgrade them like this, it would be incredible.

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He summoned many mental images during this little practice session and quickly dispelled them all as he focused on a single skill: *Palate of the Malefic Viper*.

For this one, he had a clear mental image already. One that he wasn't the proudest of when he saw it.

What appeared was a small black snake about to eat a blue glowing mushroom. It was from the vision Jake had seen from the mural back during the Tutorial before he had even gotten the skill himself.

To Jake, Palate was significantly associated with beginnings. It was the very first Legacy skill Jake had chosen from his profession all the way back at level 5 in the skill. Without a doubt, it was the most instrumental skill to Jake's Path as an alchemist, and so had it been for the Viper all the way back when he began his Path. It had been what truly got him started, and the mushroom wasn't without symbolism either, as Jake had eaten way too many of those little fuckers.

That was why, despite not being very proud of what he summoned – and how potentially heretical some people would even find it – he wasn't surprised at it. Jake just smiled as he knew it was time to gamble.

He had already wasted more than enough time doing all his practice, and despite Eron clearly being fine with things dragging out, Jake didn't want to risk potentially taking some permanent damage from the desolation or wasting too much of the core's energy by being a slowpoke.

Jake sat down with his legs crossed in front of the small snake that was no longer than his own forearm. He focused as a small magic circle appeared beneath the snake and mushroom and Jake teleported himself and the image so the image appeared within the cocoon of scales he'd made earlier. Jake took a deep breath as the small snake and mushroom were nestled within, and he knew it was time. Holding out a hand, he reached deep within himself... and pulled.

The sound of a heartbeat echoed throughout the entire Soulspace, making everything shudder. Jake pulled again as a second heartbeat sounded out, and in his hand, a small string of energy reached out and went toward the small snake and mushroom.

With a final push and a third heartbeat more powerful than those prior, the string connected with the snake...

And at that moment, Jake knew:

This was not going to go according to plan.

Sometimes it was good with a holiday. Alright, it wasn't as if Vilastromoz was actually taking time off and doing nothing, but he did at least have a break from Jake and all his shenanigans. A forced one, mind you, as the god would still have preferred keeping an avatar dedicated to enjoying the livestream of his Chosen messing about.

Alas, for now, he was cut off due to the system event and decided to just take this mental break in strides. On this particular day, he was having a meeting with one of the many people who had come not to seek out the Order of the Malefic Viper but the Primordial himself.

An elven man in a pristine light blue robe with shoulder-length hair sat with a casual smile as he seemed to enjoy the tea-like concoction he had been offered, admiring the liquid. "Quite an interesting combination. How long did the withering of the Timeless Winterback Lotus Leaves take? And what method did you use to avoid melting them?"

"It seems counterintuitive, but the best way to wither the leaves without melting them is using extreme heat, activating the innate survival instincts of the lotus, making it use up all its own energy to try and survive, thus withering away. You do need to get the environment and temperature just right, though, and I will admit it took quite a bit of trial and error," Vilastromoz answered honestly. "Now, how goes the work on that odd crystalline cluster I heard you were working on?"

"Progress is slow and steady, but I do believe a demonstration will be possible should you choose to visit," the elf answered.

"I might just have to stop by at some point," Vilastromoz smiled before getting down to business. "We both know you didn't just come here for pleasantries, though. What do you need?"

"As curt as ever, I guess some things never change no matter how many eras may pass," the elf shook his head. "I am in need of a certain acid. I have all the ingredients, but the alchemists I have visited so far have looked full of despair before saying they could not do what I asked, while others outright called my commission impossible. Which is odd, considering you made me the same – albeit a less powerful – variant all the way back then."

“What can I say? If you want the best, you come to the best. Show me what you need,” Vilastromoz said, holding out a hand as a crystal appeared in it. He quickly scanned the information in the crystal and nodded. “Yeah, I can see how this one can mess others up. It does look impossible at first look. Took me a while to make it possible back then.”

“I take it the expanded list of ingredients doesn’t pose an obstacle?”

“If you don’t count my increased commission cost as an obstacle, then no,” the snake god said in a teasing tone, knowing the elf wouldn’t care.

“Oh, It’ll be no problem. I’ll even help make the cores you want myself,” the elven man reassured the Viper. Something that was an actual reassurance.

Few – if any - in the multiverse could compare to the Autarch of the Altmar Empire when it came to magic engineering. It was often a discussion if he or Rigoria stood at the apex of magic engineering, which honestly was a useless endeavour as they both specialized in very different areas, even if they looked similar to an outsider.

With business concluded, they had some more time for recreational discussion as the two of them talked about some more unimportant issues until the Autarch brought up something that, while not interesting to Vilastromoz himself, did pertain to his Chosen... and a certain other Chosen.

“I was also informed through the grapevine by one of the noble family heads that your disciple has taken on a disciple of his own and even made her his Chosen?” the Autarch asked. “I wouldn’t have expected Duskleaf to do that, considering his disdain at people even suggesting it in the past. What’s more, I heard his disciple is a C-grade elf with an old connection to the Altmar Empire?”

“Not sure about the part where they have a connection to the Altmar Empire,” the Viper shook his head. “But yes, everything else is correct. Including the part where it’s weird that Duskleaf decided to take a Chosen.”

“Ah, I’m sorry, we simply looked into the clan of this... Meira, was it? From what we discovered, the clan she comes from was originally founded by an exiled member from a lesser noble house, so while the connection is minor, one does exist,” the Autarch insisted, Vilastromoz knowing what he was getting at.

“Without you even asking me, I’m sure the little elf will visit the Altmar Empire at some point,” the snake god said. “It isn’t really up to me, though. Mainly because I don’t care to get involved in any of that. If you want to convince anyone to accelerate the timeline of her visit, it’s either Duskleaf or my Chosen you should be talking to.”

“Oh yes, I nearly forgot. This elf was originally a slave of your Chosen, wasn’t she?” the Autarch said, no sense of animosity in his voice despite his hatred of people ever enslaving elves. Probably because, in the eyes of many, including his, becoming the slave of a Chosen didn’t even count but was viewed more as a fortuitous encounter.

“Yep, she was. And before you ask, dear Jake never wanted a slave of any kind. I just forced one on him as I thought it would be interesting and fun to put him in an awkward situation while also confronting him with a bit of how the multiverse worked, seeing as he’d just come here from his far too peaceful planet. He unsurprisingly didn’t like it and ended up freeing and uplifting her to where she is now. Not sure her becoming Duskleaf’s Chosen was ever in his plans, but I’m pretty sure he’s on board with it,” Vilastromoz said, remembering the good old times.

“I see... now, this may be a bit presumptuous to ask, but did their relationship evolve enough for her to potentially-“

“Nope, and if you hoped to recruit her to the Altmar Empire and potentially get a little bundle of Bloodline joy out of it, I wouldn’t count on that happening,” the Viper said, cutting off the elf and shaking his head. “In fact, I wouldn’t expect to-“

Just then, the Viper felt something. A faint echo, a memory awakening, and a connection formed that shouldn’t exist.

“What is it?” the Autarch asked, surprised. He looked like he had also faintly detected something amiss, an expert in reading the flow of Records and fate, but the elf wasn’t sure what he’d felt either.

Not that the snake god was either, as Vilastromoz frowned deeply as he did at least have a good idea of what had happened. “My Chosen just did something... something incredibly questionable.”

Chapter 970: Bound To Happen

Calling what Jake had done a gamble was definitely an accurate description. He was messing with a concept no one really understood, not even someone like the Malefic Viper, making everything unpredictable. The only real question was how good his odds were that he would end up with something beneficial. Using Origin Energy tended to result in a good outcome for him... but this time, he quickly concluded something was off.

The string of Origin Energy entered the small snake and mushroom, representing the Palate of the Malefic Viper skill, and at first, Jake thought things were going well. The skill accepted the energy and responded to it.

He felt the two merge, and then... then everything no longer went as Jake had hoped.

A loud heartbeat made his entire Soulspace shake, and in return, a green pillar rose from the small snake and mushroom. It pierced toward the sky as Jake's arcane energy was scattered, and Jake stumbled back, feeling the pressure both inside his Soulspace and on his body outside.

Focusing, Jake lifted his hands to try and control the energy output, not panicking quite yet, but it kept growing. He spotted the shadowy version of himself representing Eternal Hunger back away before falling to the ground not far away, utterly suppressed, and from the floating drop of the Viper's blood, Jake felt almost a sense of glee as it began to react without Jake doing anything.

Refusing to give up, Jake poured in even more energy as he refused to see himself suppressed within his own Soulspace. Within his own damn world. Jake's heartbeat sent a wave of power through the entire Soulspace in response to Jake's conviction, his Bloodline refusing to surrender, and with this wave of absolute power and control, the green pillar seemed to stop growing and consuming his Soulspace...

And with it came the notification.

Due to your Bloodline, the skill [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] is evolving.

Jake smiled as he felt the pressure remain, but he believed that things would work out as another notification appeared... and right as it did, Jake's eyes went wide as a sensation unlike anything he'd ever felt before washed over him, and from the depths of his Bloodline... uncertainty and powerlessness.

Skill Upgrad- ERROR: REQUIREMENTS NOT MET

Some skills related to the [ERROR] may be lost or changed

Warning! INSUFFICIENT [REDACTED]

The system messages flooded Jake's vision and mind as they kept coming, warning and error upon warning and error. For the first time, Jake wasn't sure what to do. The green pillar began expanding again, unstable as its power kept growing along with its Records. From the system messages, Jake was only sure of one thing: this was extremely fucking bad.

A sense of hollowness began to sneak into his body as his arcane energy in the sky flickered, and a headache struck his body. He tried one final time to rein in the pillar representing the Palate of the Malefic Viper skill, and as he did so, he finally understood what was happening. The Records of Palate were expanding endlessly... forcibly being upgraded. But in the process, everything else was being consumed, leaving nothing left. Not even the C-grade vessel not powerful enough to contain what the skill would eventually become.

With this realization, he also knew what he had to do. In this moment of desperation, clarity struck him, as his Bloodline fully backed him, and he was ready to mobilize every bit of Origin Energy he had... but not to get Palate under control.

There was no other choice.

He had to destroy the Records related to Palate of the Malefic Viper and the skill, no matter the consequences. It was that, or certain death... and not just for Jake.

The Fallen King was flying toward the Prima Vessel alongside Vesperia and Sylphie, the hawk speeding them up as a gust of wind carried them forward. The travel distance was annoying, but the Unique Lifeform saw no true cause for complaint. This entire part of the system event didn't strike him as particularly interesting in the first place in the first place. All they had to do was kill weak Prima Guardians that any of them could handle on their own. The only reason the Fallen King even stuck with Vesperia and Sylphie was because he believed it a waste to try and travel around pretending to be a hero on his own.



What fool would accept a Unique Lifeform traveling to their planet? Even more so than that, what cause did the Fallen King have to save a bunch of enlightened races? He cared not who won between the Guardian or the native enlightened. They were not his subjects, thus not his problem. Meanwhile, there was some value in having a True Royal feel a closer sense of kinship and gratitude toward him.

He had to make plans for the day he was no longer bound to the hunter, after all. Preserving the valuable connections he had formed through the Chosen only seemed like a logical approach until he finally managed to fully reclaim and restore his soul.

Just then, as he was flying, he felt something odd. For a fraction of a second, he believed it was the sensation of when Jake teleported the Fallen King to his side... but this wasn't it. This wasn't the Unique Lifeform being pulled toward Jake, but something coming toward the King.

Before he could even stop his flight, it hit him. Like a sledgehammer striking his soul, the Fallen King was forced to dedicate everything to defense. He faintly felt Vesperia and Sylphie stop as they noticed the Fallen King rapidly falling toward the ground as he stopped maintaining flight, golden cracks forming all over his mask.

All the Fallen King could do as he struggled with the invasion of his soul was to curse Jake for whatever he was doing, but even that, he did not have the mental power left over to do so.

--

Eron watched the hunter closely as he kept healing him, battling the desolation trying to consume his body. Seeing the effects of desolation firsthand was an incredibly valuable experience and he did admittedly sometimes allow it to infect an area a bit longer than he had to before healing it, just to see what would happen. A minor crime he was confident his fellow Bloodline Patriarch wouldn't care about.

It wasn't like Eron could risk Jake dying. He needed him for his own goals to come to fruition. Taking any kind of permanent or even semi-permanent damage also wasn't an option, as Eron couldn't have Jake slow down too much or fail to continue evolving. As C-grades, Eron and Jake were both too weak to accomplish Eron's goals, so he needed the hunter to keep up with him at the very least.

Time passed, and Eron kept healing as a seemingly inexhaustible source of desolation kept releasing energy from inside Jake's soul and into his body. He didn't mind when he felt Jake move his energy or summon scales or anything like that. None of it disturbed him.

At least nothing had since suddenly, Eron felt something. It was as if a third presence appeared within the Prima Vessel, and as Eron stared at the flames that represented his soul... an ethereal second spark emerged before rapidly igniting, as Eron's vision was filled with green flames that seemed to consume everything, Eron included.

His eyes rotted away as Eron was forced to explode his own body to escape. He appeared again, stumbling back as he sought to restore his own damaged soul... but he refused to heal his eyes, as even without them, he felt it. The unmistakable presence of a god had appeared within the Vessel... and the soul of the hunter, which was the source, was crumbling under the pressure.

If it fell entirely... Eron did not even want to think what would be unleashed, but he doubted it was something the Prima Vessel would be able to contain for even a moment.

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Gritting his teeth, Eron still reached out as he didn't stop healing Jake, as it wasn't only his soul that was being destroyed. He would have to keep preserving Jake's body, hoping the hunter could deal with... whatever was happening. It was clear this wasn't something intended or good, which only left Eron wondering:

What have you done?

Jake prepared to mobilize every bit of Origin Energy available as he acted decisively to empower his own Bloodline, giving him a chance to fight back. He knew this wasn't a situation he would walk away from whole, and the losses would be extraordinary and permanent... but nothing was less permanent than death.

His body within his Soulspace filled with energy as he reached out to-

"It was bound to happen at some point, wasn't it?"

The voice echoed throughout the Soulspace as Jake's body froze. Not only in surprise but due to the pressure that fell over him, making him utterly unable to act or move. Even the Origin Energy and his Bloodline fell utterly silent in front of the presence. The only thing that acted with glee was the drop of blood from the Malefic Viper that began to glow even brighter.

Jake looked up as the giant pillar that was consuming his Soulspace began to shrink until it formed a small snake that rapidly changed its form into the recognizable humanoid Jake had shared many beers with.

"Playing with Records and transcendent-level powers such as Bloodlines can bring out both fantastical and calamitous results," the Viper said as he slowly floated down and landed on the ground, with everything else within the entire Soulspace besides the Malefic Viper and his drop of blood seemingly frozen in time. "This, Jake, is an example of the latter."

The Viper slowly walked toward Jake as he observed everything around him. "The idea was novel. To take a skill and infuse it with your Primeval Origins energy to try and get an upgrade. Perhaps you tried to just give it a little push in the right direction, eh? Well, here we are. This is the result."

He stopped in front of Jake and sighed. "I'm not saying it couldn't work. In fact, I would argue quite the opposite. It worked a bit too well. You are now well on your way to turn yourself into nothing but Palate of the Malefic Viper. Of course, there is no way a C-grade would be able to handle that, and seeing as you were effectively operating outside the system, I doubt it would have come to your rescue, either."

Leaning in, the Viper flashed a smile as he raised a hand and flicked Jake's forehead, unfreezing him and making him tumble backward. "You fucked up badly. Commendable attempt to minimize the damage, though. Empowering your Bloodline fully to try and destroy the Records of the skill could work, leaving you with either no skill at all or a fractured mess at best. Oh, and some pretty damn severe soul damage I wouldn't expect fixed before your next evolution."

Jake, able to act again, propped himself up as he looked at the Malefic Viper standing within his Soulspace. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm not," the Viper grinned, no longer bothering to infuse his voice with power. "You are currently speaking to Palate of the Malefic Viper in all its glory. At least the form I chose to adopt once I became aware of what you were up to. I will say, it was quite lucky you did this experiment of yours on one of

my skills. If you had done it on any other, you would be dead or had to carve the Records of the skill from your being.”

Jake kept staring as the Viper kept explaining. “Palate is made from my Records. I am its Origin. Your little trick empowered it enough from a qualitative standpoint for me to appear as a representation of my Records within your Soulspace. Of course, under usual circumstances, I would not be aware I had appeared here with my true body, especially not with a system event going on. Oh, and I would be way less lucid and far more insistent on carrying out the task of devouring all your Records. But, well, you’re not the only one with a capable Bloodline.”

“Fuck me...” Jake just muttered as he allowed everything that had happened to sink in. “I did really fuck up catastrophically this time around, didn’t I?”

“For sure,” the Viper nodded as he turned serious and looked Jake in the eyes. “Jake, I’m not going to question your potential or talent. I don’t think anyone can. But to put it bluntly, you’re still pathetically weak. Your Bloodline may allow you to sometimes overcome the impossible, but that is only when it can have a fair fight of quality. In quantity, you are like a squirt gun trying to outfight an ocean-sized bucket in a competition of who can make the most people wet. Sure, your little squirt gun is damn good at it and far more accurate and efficient, but what the fuck can it do in my stupidly contrived and abstract example? The answer is fuck-all.”

Jake just kept quiet as the Viper continued.

“What’s more, you chose to take on this fight without any system-backed method to refill your little squirt gun with water. So, what else did you expect to fill it up with? The Records required to fuel this entire shitshow would have to come from somewhere. Of course, pulling them directly from me in this instance wasn’t an option, as that isn’t how any of this works, so the system had to find the building blocks elsewhere. All on your unwilling dime.”

“Yeah... I realize I overestimated myself and my Bloodline significantly and had no idea what I was doing at all,” Jake confessed.

The pressure of the situation from the half-a-Planetary-Core filled with desolation - that was definitely still a problem, by the way - had made Jake not really think things through more than he should. At least that was one excuse... but in truth, Jake had just been stupidly overconfident and thought himself infallible.

"As I said, your Bloodline is strong, and the only reason Palate could even hope to evolve to the level where it would erase your existence is due to how overwhelming your Records already are. However, you need to understand that you are still growing. With your Bloodline, perhaps you could have won this bout and gotten rid of Palate of the Malefic Viper to save yourself, which is a testament to its power, but remember, all you would rid yourself of was a single one my skills trying to grow into the true Palate of the Malefic Viper. A process that was more than capable of consuming all that you are, your Bloodline, the only survivor, to be recycled by the system," the Malefic Viper said in a harsh tone.

"You're saying that...?" Jake muttered.

"Yes. Palate of the Me, as a singular Legacy skill, has more Records than your entire existence, and it's not even a close competition in the slightest. My mere existence here, capable of fully suppressing you within your own Soulspace, should be proof enough of that."

"Then... how in the hell could I have gotten rid of it?" Jake questioned.

"The same way you created the problem. This is just my theory, but I believe you empower and awaken aspects of your Bloodline whenever you apply your special energy to it, which would allow it to grow tremendously in Records to a level I cannot even begin to guess at. Just for a little while, but likely long enough to overwhelm and deal with Palate, saving your life," the Malefic Viper made his guess. One that did sound very probable and as good as any theory Jake had.

The two of them for silent for a few moments. Moments Jake wasn't sure they had with everything else going on, the desolation still a pressing issue. Plus, how long could the Viper stay manifested like this? All this definitely left him with one essential pressing issue.

"This might be too late to ask... but how do I fix it?" Jake asked after a bit. "What happens now?"

"Always the practical sort," Villy smiled. "The short answer is that you already know how to fix it. Pour some of that special Jake Juice into your Bloodline and get rid of me. Of course, that's the solution where you fix things yourself and don't ask your wonderful Patron to offer you his assistance."

"Not sure my own solution could even be considered a fix, as it includes breaking one of my best skills and fucking over my Path as an alchemist," Jake muttered.

"True that," Villy nodded before sighing. "I want you to know this doesn't come cheap to me either. The system tends not to like interference like this, but it's better than the alternative. Also, to clarify, everything I said today is just my own theories and gross oversimplifications of everything that happened, and there might be some minor hiccups. This shit is complicated and way above what you should be messing with, and it's even annoying for me to deal with."

"Thank you, my wonderful Patron," Jake said in a semi-joking tone, despite still feeling like shit with everything that was happening.

"You better thank me," the Viper said, his body flickering for a moment. "I can't maintain this form for long, so let me give you a quick explanation of what happens next. I'm going to fix what I can, but there will be some damage no matter what. You have lost a lot of Records already, all of which I will have to forcibly reclaim as you cannot handle them. When it comes to dealing with Palate of the Malefic Viper, I can see you have eaten quite an interesting object – something I'm not going to question anything about because I don't want the backlash I'll suffer after this shit to increase – but I will help you address it a little bit."

The form of the Viper began glowing as he seemed to be pulling in energy. "You fucked up Palate. I can't unfuck it. But I can stabilize and freeze it for now, but be fully aware this will have consequences. The internal stomach will be completely sealed and you can't take anything in or out of it. Moreover, upgrading Palate won't be an option either due to its fragmented Records. I'll look for a solution to this, but in the meantime, just be happy these are the only consequences... besides the severe soul damage you have already suffered, that is."

Jake could only nod, as this was way fucking better than Jake just ripping the skill from his soul entirely.

The Viper smiled and shook his head. "Let's hope this becomes a teaching moment... but not a too important one. Your reckless experimentation and willingness to do the moronic is also one of your greatest strengths. Just maybe think it through a tad more next time. Now, let me get to work. Oh, and Jake?"

"Yeah?"

"This is gonna hurt. Like... a lot."