

## Hunter 991

### Chapter 991: An Impetus of Possibilities

The closer Jake got to completion, the harder it felt and the more nervous he became as he questioned if he'd gone about this the right way. The external time pressure of the final Prima Guardian being slain and the potential of communication opening up with the wider multiverse didn't help either, but Jake knew he couldn't let it impact him too much. He simply resigned himself to the fact he wouldn't be done with his project in time...

And then a day passed. No news of the final Guardian being slain or any system messages appearing.

A second day went by. Nothing.

Followed by a third, a fourth, and soon, an entire week had passed by, at which point Jake no longer felt grateful he had some extra time but pure confusion about what the hell was going on. Enough to contact Miranda directly to ask if she had somehow missed telling him there were no red planets left. However, the response she sent made it clear she also wasn't sure what was going on.

"I know it's odd, and I'm doing what I can to figure out what is happening. So far, all we know is that the final planet is one firmly under the control of Ell'Hakan and the Holy Church, and honestly, one we expected to have had their Guardian killed far sooner. It took some effort, but we managed to locate a family who had once been living on this planet before the Prima Guardian event and had left because the Holy Church fully took over, and from the sounds of it, the planet is far from weak. It's really odd that they didn't join the Prima Guardian Alliance, though, even if they were powerful enough to deal with the system event alone. While I still can't be sure yet, putting all this together, we can only conclude that they're purposefully delaying killing the Prima Guardian for some reason. As for what this reason is... who knows? One would think the Church was also keen on reestablishing contact with their Patrons, but apparently, they want to get something done before that can happen."

To summarize, some kind of scheme was going on. Jake genuinely had no clue why they were delaying like this, especially considering there was a chance some kind of reward existed based on how quickly the Milky Way finished dealing with the entire event. The Church and Ell'Hakan were, in essence, grieving the entire galaxy by refusing to kill the last boss to the benefit of everyone.

Maybe they wanted Jake or someone else to travel there to finish the event, only for it to be a trap? Or were they waiting to fully stabilize their power? Some internal conflict? There were so many possibilities that Jake didn't even want to think about it but just kept focusing solely on his arrow.

There really was no need to stress about the outside world when he already had such a big stressor right there with him.

He felt like someone who'd been building the world's largest house of cards and was now placing the last few dozen cards. With every touch, he feared the entire thing would come falling down, even if he knew that wasn't really a possibility before he activated when. When Jake realized he only had about a day or two left of intense work, he contacted Miranda and told her not to contact him or allow anyone else to bother him until he was done. This final part would take absolute focus throughout.

Jake even went so far as to drink some of the soul-soothing dew water he'd used while healing to calm his nerves to ensure he could do the last touches properly. By now, only the top of the large arrow tip had to be covered with the rest of the formation. From there, Jake only had to make some finishing touches, and it was go-time.

Hours passed as Jake's careful hand continued crafting the arrow. He connected the magic circles, drew the runes perfectly, and put it all in an interconnected web that should hopefully be powerful enough to merge with Eternal Hunger without instantly being overwhelmed and consumed.

For the first time in a long time, Jake was sweating as he willed the final bit of arcane energy to cover the tip of Eternal Hunger's form. He added the required layers on top after that, double and triple-checking everything was according to how he wanted it. With a small nod, Jake lifted his hands away from the arrow that was now complete...

... alright, one more check-over to ensure nothing was out of place was definitely in order. And a good thing he did, as Jake spotted a flaw which was quickly rectified. He ended up spending nearly five hours just staring intently at the arrow from top to bottom before he felt satisfied and stepped back, having seen nothing obvious out of place.

Jake looked at the more than two-meter tall arrows-shaped Eternal Hunger and the translucent formation that covered it. It looked kind of bad, honestly, with the formation turning the arrow too bulky to look usable. It was as if Eternal Hunger was trapped in a crystal prison one was meant to break it out from, and the thing definitely wasn't shootable like this.

Luckily, this wasn't the arrow's final form... because he still had the last step left to go. Jake didn't have enough surface area to make the intricate runes and scripts he needed, which was why he added so many layers to give him space to inscribe, but naturally, this did result in the arrow becoming a bit too bulky.

So, the final step would be to remove those layers by combining them into one single-layered shell that would encompass and cover Eternal Arrow from top to bottom and merge with the mythical weapon. By far, this was the most crucial step, and Jake already half-expected something to go wrong.

If it did end up going horrendously, he had a few backup plans and was quite frankly fully willing to even pull out a bit of his Origin Energy if he believed it would help at some point. He hoped it wouldn't be necessary and that the innate concepts of his arcane energy and its ability to change would be enough to accomplish his goal, but this was unexplored territory... and let's be honest, something usually went wrong when Jake did things like this, and he had to do some hail mary to miraculously save everything.

Anyway, the primary goal of the formation was to empower the concepts of the Protean Arrow and his arcane energy which was core to the skill. For something to be Protean meant it was able to easily change. That it was versatile and adaptable. If that versatility was pushed to the extreme, then maybe, just maybe, it would be enough to even adapt to Eternal Hunger.

With a final look at the arrow, Jake decided to stop stalling and get on with it. Firstly, he dismissed the barrier all around him that had been stabilizing the space. This allowed mana to rush in and fill the room, putting him on a timer before it had any way to affect the in-progress arrow. Next, he reached out with his right hand and grasped hold right at the center of the arrow, where magic circles had been drawn for him to hold. ¶

Here goes nothing.

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Jake's body exploded with energy as he activated his boosting skill fully. With it active, he would have far less control over what was about to happen, but right now, he didn't need control but pure power. Potent arcane energy rushed through Jake's body as it entered the crystalline structure and spread all throughout it as the room lit up in the color of his arcane mana.

All he could do was trust he hadn't fucked anything up as the first crack sounded out. The outermost layer of the formation collapsed in upon the layer right beneath it, merging the two together in an instant using the arcane strings Jake had placed to function as bridges.

The entire structure seemed to be shaking as they were forcefully merged, with hundreds of small reactions happening every second, and Jake did nothing but infuse his intent and energy. He didn't try to manually control anything at all but believed that everything should fall into its right place... assuming he hadn't fucked anything up.

Another loud crack sounded as the two merged layers collapsed once more, colliding and merging with the one beneath it. The intensity of energy grew as all the arcane mana Jake had infused into the arrow over the last weeks was released, bringing more and more parts of the formation to life.

Shortly, another layer collapsed. One by one they all cracked and merged, the formation becoming more and more complex. Jake, despite his insane resistance to his own affinity and mana, felt his hand begin to burn with the insane amount of energy at play, as most of it was completely wasted and dispersed into the air or tried to enter Jake.

He didn't care about the utter inefficiency of his work, but only that so far, nothing had broken yet. However, he was about to reach the most crucial stage. On Eternal Hunger itself, Jake had placed several runes that were there to merge the formation and the arrow-shaped mythical weapon that the system refused to recognize as an arrow. When the final layer collapsed and fell upon these runes, it was make it or break it if all of Jake's preparations had been good enough, or all he had accomplished was to feed Eternal Hunger a buttload of arcane mana that, in truth, wouldn't benefit it jack-shit due to their connection anyway.

Finally, all the layers of the formation had merged, and so far, Jake was admittedly astonished nothing had gone too wrong yet. Sure, the last part was the hardest, but so far so good. He didn't exactly have the choice of stopping what he was doing either, but he just had to believe in his own skills and let his will guide the grand finale.

With a rush of intent, Jake sped up the last collapse. The many-layered formation that made up the shell covering Eternal Hunger was crushed into the weapon itself, as all the runes Jake had inscribed upon it came to life as they switched from being made of pure, stable mana to being fully active.

In an instant, the color of the room changed. The arcane affinity turned from the usual pinkish-purple to an incredibly deep purple as curse energy was released and mixed with it. Jake felt Eternal Hunger come to life as it began to greedily absorb the vast amounts of mana actively being pushed onto its form, the formation shell duking it out with the weapon.

Gritting his teeth, Jake continued doing nothing but hoping that things would work out. Cracks sounded out constantly, and shards of crystalized arcane energy fell on the ground, as the grand formation seemed to lose some of its prior thickness as more and more of its energy was drained.

Yet the integrity of the formation held. Rather than being broken, it was absorbed as the runes on Eternal Hunger continually grew in power. At this point, even with Jake's incredibly high Perception, he wasn't capable of keeping track of all the reactions going on between the formation and Eternal Hunger. This was many weeks of work and months of preparation leading to barely a couple of minutes of reactions all at once, with most of them happening now.

Jake was only waiting for the shoe to drop. For something to go wrong and his instinct to scream at him. For what he'd missed to reveal itself and force him to scramble to do a last-minute fix that would hopefully save everything... but it just didn't happen.

Seconds ticked by, and the reaction just continued. Jake stood there, tense as could be, as the arcane and cursed light began to slowly fade. The energy within the room began to rapidly disperse until, finally, the room went still. No more reactions, no more energy released.

Jake stared at Eternal Hunger and its slight change.

Nothing looked like it had changed besides a deep purple – almost black – layer of crystalline arcane mana now covering the entire form of Eternal Hunger. It was not even a millimeter thick and just looked like a thick coat of paint... but Jake, who still had a hand on the arrow, smiled as he felt it.

As of this moment, he was no longer holding a weird arrow-shaped spear in his hand... he was holding an actual arrow, even in the eyes of the system.

With a big grin, Jake finally opened his system notifications and saw it.

Skill Upgraded: [Protean Arrow of Avaricious Horizons (Ancient)] --> [Protean Arrow of Eternal Horizons (Legendary)]

He didn't delay and instantly checked the new description, and... hot damn was it long.

[Protean Arrow of Eternal Horizons (Legendary)] – Manifest your will as you forge an arrow to encompass all possibilities. Grants the skill to design and summon two types of extremely powerful arrows to strike down a targeted foe (only one arrow can be summoned at a time). Two versions of arrows can be created: one of pure energy and the other using a medium known as Impetus Arrows. Energy Arrows may be infused with several layers of energy dependent on the Hunter's will. Impetus Arrows requires a powerful medium to direct the nature of the summoned arrow. Creating Impetus Arrows requires a significant amount of time, focus, and manual input, while Energy Arrows can be summoned relatively quickly and with far less effort. The Hunter may envision his foe and channel his Willpower into the creation process to further empower the final creation. The arrow summoned deals significantly increased damage to the envisioned target, dependent on Willpower and your familiarity with the target. Damage increased further based on level disparity, Perception, and distance traveled. Due to the Hunter's powerful connection to the arrow, he can influence its flight path, and all effects can be further increased dependent on the Hunter's connection to the medium used to create an Impetus Arrow. Stat bonuses are applied depending on the nature of the summoned arrow. May the horizon of possibilities remain eternal, as no foe proves themselves too powerful to slay; you've simply yet to create the arrow capable.

Summarizing the changes to the skill seemed complicated, but it really wasn't. All that had changed was that Jake could now create another type of Protean Arrow using a medium, and the system had decided to call these arrows Impetus Arrows. Perhaps because all turning a medium into a Protean Arrow really

did was empower it and allow the medium to become a “perfect” arrow infused with the concept of the skill.

Of course, the details were a bit more complicated, and Jake only saw more possibilities for the skill in the future. However, for now, he was more than satisfied as he couldn’t help grinning. Not just because of the massive upgrade he’d just gotten, but the circumstances under which it had happened.

This felt like one of the first times nothing had gone terribly wrong during something like this. Shit had just worked the way Jake had wanted it to, and his preparations had proven sufficient. After the utter failure that was his attempt to forcefully upgrade Palate of the Malefic Viper, this felt like a massive win, and perhaps what had happened then had influenced his success this time around. It had made him extra careful and considerate to ensure nothing went wrong, as to not replicate what happened then... even if it couldn’t have been as bad no matter what, seeing as Jake wasn’t fucking around inside his own Soulspace.

Still feeling in a good mood, Jake kept reading over the description time and time again, as he still just stood there holding Eternal Hunger with his bloody hand that had been nearly burned away by the intense energies it had been subjected to.

However, that’s when he noticed something... he’d gotten notifications about the skill upgrade and the new skill description, but due to its sheer length, he had missed this wasn’t the only message he’d received. Due to his hyperfocus, he hadn’t even noticed it... but during the final parts of the upgrading process, another system message arrived:

The last Prima Guardian had finally been slain.

Chapter 992: Administrator’s Seal of the Exalted Prima



Jake's feeling that communication would open up for the Milky Way Galaxy hadn't been entirely based on his guts. Sure, it had been ninety percent just a feeling, but the reason others had entertained the idea was because it seemed probable with the other aspects of the event taken into account.

Clearly, the system differentiated between galaxies and their performances. Each galaxy did its own event, and as per the system message received before the Prima Guardians arrived on their respective planets, rewards would be given once the final Prima Guardian was slain:

"All rewards from this event shall be given once all Prima Guardians of the Milky Way Galaxy have been slain or at the event's natural expiration in five years. Rewards are based both on the performance of every individual and the planet's performance as a whole."

The wording also made it sound like the event would expire when the final Prima Guardian was slain, and if the event was over, why would communication remain jammed? All-in-all, there had been good reason to believe Jake had been correct.

Anyway... Jake was happy with his newly upgraded arrow and quickly put Eternal Hunger away with its new shiny coat of Protean Arrow goodness. The entire thing was perfectly stable after his success, and Jake wasn't in a rush to use the arrow, as the coat should remain stable for at least a few years if he put it away and didn't expose it to environmental mana.

To be clear, it was still only one arrow. The Protean Arrow enhancement would only last for a single shot and then Eternal Hunger would be back to just being Eternal Hunger and no longer an arrow in the eyes of the system. Hopefully, that single attack would be enough to kill most things, and even if it wasn't, it was sure to deal tremendous damage.

But all good things in time. For now, Jake had some system messages to attend to, and after that, he had to check in with Miranda, talk to Villy, and figure out what had been going on over the last day or so while Jake was busily hyper-focusing on upgrading his Protean Arrow skill.

Opening the system messages he'd received, Jake saw it was a long one and got to reading.

The final Prima Guardian of the Milky Way Galaxy has fallen, and with it, the Exalted Prima's assessment of your galaxy is complete.

Through their combined efforts, the Milky Way Galaxy is the first galaxy to slay every Prima Guardian, laying claim to their planets or losing them to the other native beasts of their homeworlds. The Exalted Prima has recognized and rewarded this achievement by naming the Seat of the Exalted Prima within the Milky Way Galaxy the top-ranked Seat of the universe. Records of this recognition permeate the galaxy and all those who hail from there. Be proud of what you have accomplished.

With the event concluded, certain restrictions placed upon the Milky Way Galaxy have been lifted; however, for the duration of the other galaxies of the universe doing their respective events, none can leave the galaxy, and communication within the universe shall remain fully restricted.

Due to their performances in this event, certain individuals have been granted additional rewards based on their contribution to the event and the number of Primas and Prima Guardians they have slain. Additional rewards have been granted to all Administrator Candidates based on their ranking. Due to the performance of the Milky Way Galaxy during the Prima Guardian event, the top five Administrator Candidates have been promoted to Seat of the Exalted Prima Administrators, granting them certain privileges once visiting the Seat of the Exalted Prima. Based on their rankings, their respective authorities differ.

There was a lot to unpack, but it was good to see their galaxy had indeed been the first in the universe to finish their event. Moreover, it seemed that the reward for this wasn't something tangible but instead what Jake would call a galaxy-wide "buff" of sorts to Records. It should make it easier for everyone to

keep getting levels and progressing... it wasn't all good, though, dependent on where you were coming from.

This only further increased the value of the Milky Way Galaxy. There were already many with machinations on claiming the galaxy, and now they had just been further motivated. Moreover, the Seat of the Exalted Prima in the galaxy had also been improved, meaning claiming the galaxy would likely even help you take control of a World Wonder, something every single top faction would be highly interested in.

Things really weren't going to end peacefully... but all that was a problem for later. Probably something he would have to think and talk about later that day, but still a little later.

The message also finally confirmed that some level of communication was indeed back on the table, though it was definitely still limited. No one could help other galaxies or contact them until they were done dealing with their own events, and traveling to other universes was also still out of the question. But it did sound like one could talk with those in other universes, and just being able to contact Villy was enough for what was to come, and the continued lockdown was only good for Jake and his plans.

Finally, the message ended with the top five Administrator Candidates being promoted to full-on Administrators, putting them one step closer to claiming the Seat of the Exalted Prima within the Milky Way as their own. Clearly, it was still a competition of who would ultimately claim it, seeing as there were five who got promoted.

As for who got the promotions... well, if it had been right after Jake had slain his first Prima Guardian, it would have been him at the forefront. Back then, he had the top spot, with Ell'Hakan second and what he now knew was the Desolate Child of Loss right beneath him. However, over the last months, things had changed.

Administrator Candidates promoted to Seat of the Exalted Prima Administrators:

1: Ell'Hakan

2: Jake Thayne

3: Servant of the Holy Church

4: King Iludar

5: Voice of the One

In addition to these five being promoted, all other rewards have been granted accordingly. Other Administrator Candidates have been rewarded and given opportunities for promotion.

Jake didn't particularly care about the last part, but the five people promoted were definitely of note... especially seeing as Jake had dropped down to the second spot. Actually, the mere fact Jake remained in second place was a testament to the power of the Prima Guardian Earth had faced and the faction Jake had ended up creating. Especially when one also considered the Voice of the One – Kindroth – was on the list.

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Miranda wasn't on the list because she was essentially an extension of Jake and not a World Leader. Ell'Hakan was there and had the top spot because he was the leader of the biggest coalition, while the Servant of the Holy Church was obviously from the Holy Church. On that note, calling themselves a Servant was obviously just some bullshit PR strategy to appear more humble and something the Holy Church loved doing way too much, which was also why they tended to not use names but only titles, even on places like the Nevermore Leaderboards.

As for King Iludar, Jake remembered Miranda mentioning he was one of the close aides of Ell'Hakan and the leader of a coalition that had joined him and the Holy Church. It wouldn't be wrong to say he was Ell'Hakan's Kindroth in that he was someone not directly connected to any of the largest factions of the multiverse but had chosen to align himself with them anyway and had reached his high position due to competence.

Jake didn't really have much else to say about this list. If he hadn't been a moron and gotten himself injured, he would likely have been able to take the top spot, as while Ell'Hakan did lead the top alliance in the Milky Way, he did so with many helpers who were bound to also show up on the list of Administrator Candidates. Meanwhile, Jake had a lot of people who weren't candidates, meaning their contributions would mostly be attributed to him. Well, he and Kindroth, based on how the Voice of the One had done pretty damn well and earned himself a promotion.

Seeing Ell'Hakan with his name ranked higher on a list than Jake's did feel bad, but it wasn't anything he stressed over. Maybe the other Chosen got better rewards, and he did have an advantage when it came to ultimately claiming the Seat of the Exalted Prima, but if all went well, none of that would soon matter. Besides, it wasn't as if Jake didn't get any rewards.

He hadn't noticed it, primarily because he hadn't been using the ring, seeing as it hadn't given any stats before, but now, the Seal of the Exalted Prima Jake had been rewarded after gaining access to the Prima Vessel was no longer just a useless decoration that only allowed teleportation. No, it had been

thoroughly upgraded, and it was definitely time for Jake to change out one of his rings... because this was a good one.

[Administrator's Seal of the Exalted Prima (Mythical)] – Proof that you are an Administrator of the Seat of the Exalted Prima and on your way to laying claim to a World Wonder. This item has been touched by the Exalted Prima, granting it potent abilities of adaption. This allows you to mimic a part of the Exalted Prima Guardian's powers, giving you adaptable stats. These stats will apply dependent on your situation and your actions. These stats can exceed the stat cap provided by equipment by up to 5% or 2880 stats, whichever is lowest. The Administrator's Seal of the Exalted Prima grants you ownership of the Prima Vessel on your home planet (Earth) and grants you the ability to teleport to it (limitations apply, cooldown based on the difficulty of the teleport). Wearing this Seal allows you to enter the Seat of the Exalted Prima of the Milky Way Galaxy (requires B-grade). Stat amounts granted by this item scale with level. Enchantments: +14400 Adaptive Stats. Adaptive Stat Amplication. Administrator's Privileges. Administrator's Teleportation. As you further your qualifications as an Administrator named by the Exalted Prima, this item can be further upgraded.

Requirements: Soulbound.

Jake very vividly remembered being jealous as hell of the version of this ring granted to everyone else but him after they had slain the Prima Guardian on Earth. He also remembered thinking that surely he would get his own version once the event concluded, and it turns out he had been entirely correct.

The ring back then had granted +10000 Adaptive Stats, and you could only exceed the stat cap by 2500. Jake's here was clearly better, and what's more, it would only keep getting better as he kept leveling up. Sure, maybe the others also got an upgrade to their rings, but Jake was more than happy.

Really, looking at the ring, it really was overpowered. Giving effectively 14400 stats was kind of close to half of the total stat points Jake could get from items, and one had to remember Jake had stupid high stats in the first place due to all his titles and the Malefic Viper Legacy skills being cheats.

Regarding the stats that the mythical item granted, it wasn't hard to see where the numbers came from. 2880 was clearly from the fact he was level 288 in his race level, and 14400 was just half of that times a hundred. When put in perspective, it made it feel like the ring gave Jake an extra ten stats whenever he leveled up due to the ability to go above the stat cap, with the total stats granted by the ring increasing by fifty every time he gained a level. With how high Jake's stat gain was, that did mean the ring with proportionally grow weaker with time, but the mere fact it scaled at all was huge. Plus, it said he had a chance to upgrade it further in the future, so he could totally see its scaling get re-adjusted later on.

As for all the other things the ring did... well, that was probably a big part of why it jumped to being mythical and not legendary, though the ability to scale and upgrade was already a pretty damn impressive ability. Granting the ability to teleport using the Seal was just the icing on the cake, not the mention the final part that, to many, was perhaps the most important:

It allowed him access to the Seat of the Exalted Prima in the Milky Way Galaxy... once he reached B-grade, that is. So still a way to go in that department, but at least this did seem to confirm that the fight for the Seat would continue in B-grade. Or, of course, one could also see it as it beginning right now, as every newly promoted Administrator had just been told they had until B-grade to get rid of any competition for the World Wonder.

Anyway, Jake naturally put on the new ring and discarded an old ring he bought even before Nevermore. Losing 1000 Perception, 200 Wisdom, and 200 Intelligence for 14400 Adaptive Stats definitely wasn't a bad trade, and Jake instantly felt the connection with the ring and even his ability to teleport to the Prima Vessel.

Before, he had been already wearing the ring, but due to equipment limitations, he hadn't been wearing, wearing the ring in the eyes of the system. Now, he was, and it felt pretty damn good. He tried testing it a bit as the others had done back when they got their own inferior versions of the ring, and it felt odd to actively have his stats amplified based on his actions. Summoning an orb of arcane mana, Jake felt his Willpower and Wisdom be amplified by the ring, and when he tried to make the orb more destructive, Intelligence also got boosted. Focusing a bit more on control with it, Perception even got improved.

Definitely an awesome damn ring, Jake concluded, happy with it. He also dove a bit into the teleportation feature of the ring to get a feel for how good it was. He had expected it to maybe work within the entire galaxy, but when he scanned the innate ability, he was surprised.

It was good... really fucking good. Jake wasn't entirely sure, but he got the feeling that the teleportation would likely even work as an extra escape method of sorts in certain circumstances. It was powerful and high in conceptual complexity, which should make it capable of piercing many kinds of seals and formations. He didn't think it would allow for teleportation between universes, but if combined with some extra help, then maybe...

Not that any of that was super important right now.

With his new ring on his finger, Jake considered what to do now. He had the option of contacting Miranda and getting an update on things from her, but he could also just reach out to Villy right away. He felt his connection with the god be more open now, but there were definitely still some restrictions on it, and he was pretty damn certain that while he should be capable of contacting the god, Villy couldn't contact Jake. Moreover, Jake couldn't just casually reach out but had to meditate and actively work on contacting the god.

This also meant Villy couldn't watch his livestream of Jake's actions. Probably for the best, as Jake would definitely have noticed even while hyper-focusing if someone was suddenly peeking at him, and that minor distraction could have been disastrous.

Seeing as contacting the god wouldn't be an instant thing, he decided to reach out to Miranda first. Jake went over to the phone installed by Arnold and used it to call Miranda in her office. Instantly, it was picked up, but not by Miranda. Instead, Jake heard Lillian's voice, and she sounded pretty damn stressed while speaking, not even giving Jake any time to get a word out.



“You’re finally done? Good, get your ass over here now... shit has hit the fan, and we’re not the only ones who’ve been plotting.”

Jake took a moment and saw he’d been hung up on. Lillian had definitely sounded like she was in a rush, and Jake didn’t delay as he quickly made his way up to the lodge and toward Miranda’s office, muttering to himself on the way.

“Probably a good thing I called there first...”

#### Chapter 993: Momentum In All Things

A lot could go wrong in a very short amount of time. Especially when there were so many factors at play and different people and factions with their own agendas running around trying to get the best out of the situation they possibly could.

To further complicate things, add on top of that people who thought they were allies suddenly no longer in agreement. Oh yeah, and to really fuck things up, have not only the ninety-third universe be in quite a state of change and turmoil, but have other places in the multiverse also reaching a boiling point.

Jake, after being told by Lillian to hurry, rushed to the office in Haven as quickly as he could and found the entire place scrambling. People were flying back and forth, and through his Sphere, he saw quite a few familiar faces being hard at work doing... something.

He didn’t spot Miranda anywhere, though, so he quickly headed inside and straight for Miranda’s office, where Lillian was yelling at two guys. They left quickly, and Jake took the opportunity to sneak inside. He revealed himself from stealth, with Lillian not even showing the slightest surprise at his sudden appearance.

“Good, you’re here, let’s go,” Lillian said, immediately going past Jake. “We’re heading to the Prima Vessel.”

Jake wanted to ask what was going on but followed for now as he reached out telepathically, talking as they walked.

“What’s happening?”

“A lot,” Lillian briefly answered before elaborating. “The moment the final Prima Guardian was slain, we barely had time to take it in before the attacks arrived. The Prima Vessels remain active even now, meaning the teleporters like the one Arnold made are still fully functional. What’s more, the regular teleportation circles for the Prima Guardian Alliance also still work and likely will continue to work until the event is fully over for the entire universe. We had half-way expected this, as the system clearly wants to facilitate diplomatic relations during this period, and allowing cultural intermingling is only expected... but we didn’t expect them to be used like this.”

“Who’s attacking? El’Hakan?” Jake asked, the two of them already heading to the teleporter in Haven to take them to the Prima Vessel.

“He’s certainly involved, but no, not directly... we neglected to consider a lot of things, including what would happen with the planets that had fallen to the Prima Guardians. The assumption was that they would be taken over by the local beasts, which did prove correct, but we didn’t expect them to immediately launch attacks once able, partly because we didn’t think they would be able to, seeing as they didn’t join the alliance,” Lillian said, the two of them having reached the teleporter as they kept speaking telepathically.

“How did they teleport when-“

“We’re not entirely sure, but we know they were allowed in by local beasts and monsters or at least allies of them,” Lillian cut him off as she activated the teleporter, making the two of them reach the other side of the planet in a flash. “Monsters usually don’t work together due to their nature, especially not different species... but in this instance, they have a unifying force: the alliance created by Yip of Yore. Most of the random gods we didn’t know much of have sided with Yip, or perhaps they had always sided with him... the result is the same.”

Jake tried to wrap his head around everything she was saying. He knew that Yip of Yore had a lot of gods on his side, sure. However, it didn’t sound like this was in any way within expectations just going by the otherwise cool and collected Lillian being this stressed out.

“Do we have any idea of how many gods are involved?” Jake asked. They had estimated at least a few hundred had to be involved and helping El’Hakan. However, if it was over a thousand, it could perhaps prove troublesome, but it shouldn’t-

“Thousands... way more than anyone could have predicted. The Holy Church is also far more involved than I first believed and seemingly ordered their followers to fully go along with El’Hakan’s plans,” Lillian answered, flying forward with her moonlight magic, Jake following her and easily keeping pace, the Prima Vessel right in front of them.

Inside, he spotted the expected characters. The Sword Saint, Miranda, Vesperia, Caleb, Sky Whale, Carmen, Kindroth, Casper, and several others who had also been in the lodge meeting had gathered, though absent were all the random World Leaders Jake had seen before.

Arnold, William, and Sandy were also inside the vessel but in the room with the teleporter, doing something. Jake wanted to ask Lillian about what but had more pressing questions.

“What in the actual fuck happened?” Jake asked, not even bothering with telepathy anymore as they reached the entrance to the Prima Vessel. “I know I was absent, but... alright, what’s the damage? What’s the nature of these attacks?”

“A lot of them are political, with people creating riots and what can only be called attempts at civil war. However, the biggest problem is the interference of the gods... they’re recruiting everywhere. Giving Blessings left and right to anyone who will do their bidding, including those who have any authority over the teleporters. Quite a few World Leaders have also even been tempted, with others switching sides. This is just talking about the enlightened, with the beasts and monsters a far bigger problem. We knew that the Holy Church didn’t consist solely of enlightened, but we didn’t expect them to have this many monsters hidden as part of their factions, too, just lying in wait.”

She proceeded to elaborate as they walked with hurried steps through the Prima Vessel, getting him fully up to speed about what had happened. As she said, two kinds of attacks had been launched instantly, one using the teleportation network established by the event and the other from internal conflicts on the planets. The primary instigators of this were the gods who supported El’Hakan, including many affiliated with the Holy Church.

Many of these individuals had apparently been prepared for what was to happen when it came to internal conflicts. Others were instantly informed as divine messages were sent from the gods the second communication was back on the menu.

Adding on top of that, the gods had begun spreading their faith and granting Blessings left and right. Usually, getting a Blessing from a god wasn’t easy at all, and getting a high-level Blessing required you to be an already extraordinary figure. However, now they were being offered with no more requirements than loyalty and being useful... with the most useful those who could operate the alliance teleporters.

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Two fucking days... that was how long Jake couldn't be contacted, and shit had well truly hit the fan as Lillian had said, and he wasn't even sure where to start. He was confused about one thing, though, and turned to Lillian as they fast approached the control room where Miranda and the others were already actively discussing.

"This all seems so damn fast," Jake said, now within earshot of the people in the control room. "Where did they get the guts to act this brazen? Aren't they afraid of how we'll retaliate?"

"They don't appear to be, and I believe it's strongly due to what's happening in the rest of the multiverse... more accurately, in the first universe," Miranda answered as she turned and looked at Jake with a grave look as he and Lillian had arrived at the open doors to the control room.

"Elaborate," Jake said, returning her serious look.

"Right as communication was reestablished, I made contact with my Patrons, and they were in a panic," Miranda said, looking Jake in the eyes. She looked as if she really didn't want to say the next part, but took a deep breath and did so as she knew there really wasn't a choice.

"I don't know how or from where, but it was leaked that the Malefic Viper had forcefully interfered in something in the ninety-third universe using a Transcendent Skill and had suffered a backlash from doing so, leaving him injured... Yip of Yore took advantage immediately. I'm still very unclear on the exact situation, but as I said, my Patrons are in a panic, and things aren't looking good as Yip and his allies have gone on the offensive, and the Order is in shambles."

The others in the room also had severe looks on their faces as Miranda spoke. A pit had opened in Jake's stomach as he heard this, guilt washing over him, and he clenched his fists hard.

“Jake... I know the Malefic One has some plans, but he couldn’t have planned for what happened a few months ago, and... this doesn’t feel controlled at all. I don’t think this is something the Viper intended or is part of his schemes, and you really need to talk to him if possible.”

A single drop of blood fell from Jake’s right fist as his nails dug into his skin, but he didn’t react and just turned around quickly, not even having to say that he was on his way to contact the Viper... assuming he was able to.

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Momentum.

Many factors played a role in a fight, but perhaps the most important was momentum. To have the other party move to the beat of your drum and dictate the flow of combat was essential to come out victorious and overpowering your opponent. Jake had won many battles throughout his life, not because he was stronger than his foe, but because he was able to claim momentum and never lose it, making the other party fail to fully display their power as he simply never gave them the opening to do so.

Control over momentum was one of the reasons why Valdemar was viewed as a near-unbeatable machine. He was able to forcefully break through your momentum and reclaim it with a single swipe of his axe and shift his gear in an instant if the battle required it. However, it wasn’t only in a fight momentum held so much importance.

In wars, it was arguably even more important. Having momentum meant you had high morale, motivated fighters, and belief in victory. For the longest time, there hadn’t been any true conflict between the Malefic Viper and Yip of Yore. Everything had just been a proverbial dick-measuring contest

or a proxy battle using their Chosen. Things hadn't truly escalated as Yip had continued to build himself up until he believed it was time to strike and begin their actual battle. He was waiting for a moment where striking would allow him to instantly claim momentum and set the pace of the conflict... and such an opportunity had been handed to him on a silver platter.

The Malefic Viper, a Primordial who hadn't proven himself for a long time and was someone only surviving on his reputation, had gone and gotten himself injured. When one spoke about gods getting injured, one never really considered physical injury, as such things could easily be healed.

Such couldn't be said about injuries to the soul. Soul injuries could take extremely long to heal for gods, and sometimes, the god couldn't recover fully at all. In lower grades, one could recover from nearly everything simply with time and the system helping out, but that wasn't the case for gods. Time tended to do very little, and expensive items and other such things were required for recovery.

Of course, seeing as the Malefic Viper was an alchemist, it was expected he had methods to speed up his recovery, but no one believed even he could heal instantly, especially not when he had presumably directly interfered with another universe with his Transcendent Skill during a system event. That's why Yip of Yore hadn't hesitated and pushed forward his plans as he made his move the moment he learned of it.

Starting a fight with your enemy already on the back foot was the best way to instantly claim momentum, especially for someone like Yip of Yore, who benefitted from concepts such as momentum far more than anyone else. The narrative escalation directly empowered him, and as he built to the grand finale, he would only grow stronger and stronger until it was finally time to face his fated enemy.

But before that, he had to keep building his legend while undermining belief in the Primordial.

Ever since the Malefic Viper had returned, his Order had begun to once more expand, but now these expansions proved to be nothing more than easy targets for Yip and his minions. Gods didn't even have to get involved, as branches in several universes were attacked before they even stood a chance at mustering a proper response.

Territories claimed by the Order were taken and promptly returned to the factions the Order of the Malefic Viper had claimed them from when they established their branches, assuming there were any survivors yet to reclaim the land, that is. Yip of Yore swept through like a hero, purging the presence of the Malefic One wherever he went.

The Order naturally responded as battles broke out that made the conflict in the Milky Way Galaxy look like children playing in comparison. S-grades died in the thousands as none had yet to deploy gods directly, but things were heavily escalating as the multiverse looked on.

Everyone waited. Waited for the Malefic One to make himself known and crush the conflict as the Primordial he was, yet as the days passed... nothing. No response at all from the Viper himself, and when it was leaked that the Lord Protector had taken charge of dealing with the conflict, doubt only grew.

Yip of Yore happily jumped on this, proclaiming the Viper was afraid of facing him. With every passing day, his words only appeared more and more like the truth, as it was clear the Order was on the back foot. They simply didn't have the numbers Yip of Yore had been able to muster, and many of the gods part of the newer generations were excited at the prospect of going after the old guard of the multiverse.

It wasn't even a secret that many gods were unsatisfied with the status quo of the multiverse. The largest factions were all established in the first few eras, with no new ones ever growing to even be worthy comparisons. They saw Yip of Yore and what he was doing as an opportunity to change this, and not just because it would make them feel better, but to set a precedent.



Records worked in mysterious ways, and if Yip of Yore managed to truly prove himself a being capable of standing up to the ancient gods, he would also prove it was possible for the new gods to catch up and rival the ancients. A real chance for a new peak faction to appear in the multiverse, not ruled by a god who ascended in the first couple of eras.

Of course, many still doubted Yip of Yore, but with every passing day, belief in him grew. Especially when no other faction stepped in to interfere. Perhaps because they feared Valhal would also step in if they got involved, but the result was that all the peak factions of the multiverse were nothing but passive observers of everything going on.

At least they were passive in ninety-two of the universes... but the same couldn't be said about the ninety-third, where they were far keener to get directly involved, especially the Holy Church and Valhal.

Not many focused on this new universe, though, as all eyes were on the two gods who were bound to face one another sooner rather than later, and all were waiting for when the Malefic Viper would finally respond... and if said response would be enough to turn the momentum in his favor, or only continue to build Yip of Yore's.

Chapter 994: Exactly What He Wants

Viridia stepped through space as a verdant aura followed in her wake, consuming the corpse of a slain S-grade who'd come for her life. Raising her hand, a magical seal filled the empty cosmos as a gateway to the Lagoon opened, sending out tendrils to attack the two S-grades, battling her guardians and putting them under immense pressure. Her two opponents both reacted as one of them raised a sword and sent a web of crescent blades her way, severing the tendrils before they had the chance to do any harm.

However, as the cut-up tendrils fell, the pieces all transformed into female figures that shot toward the same sword-wielding warrior from before. His eyes opened wide as once more his blade flashed, all remnants of Viridia's magic fully dispelled with his follow-up attack.

She had achieved her goal, though, and her two guardians had managed to team up on the second S-grade, injuring him heavily. The sword-wielding S-grade saw his comrade in trouble and, considering the two of them were also running low on resources after having battled for nearly a full day, made a decision.

Pointing his sword to the distant stars above, silver light erupted as his weapon seemed to grow in size. A thousand swords fanned out and bloomed from his raised blade, the aura of a man recognized as a true swordmaster spreading as space itself was cut and broken in several places. Viridia responded as she held out what looked like a doll resembling a toad. Crushing it in her palm, a mirage of a giant creature appeared behind her, opening its mouth as a wave of very much real acid was released, seeking to corrode the swordmaster.

"I will have to take my leave, Lady of the Verdant Lagoon," the swordmaster said with a bow as his blades met her beam of acid, the two attacks nullifying one another. "I hope you have time to realize the errors of your way before it's too late... and if not, let our next meeting be the last."

Her two guardians tried to attack the swordmaster, but he easily fended them off and created an opening as he and his comrade made their escape, teleporting after making some distance and getting out of the spatial seal created by one of her guardians.

Viridia frowned as she saw the Chosen of one of the Godqueens supporting Yip of Yore leave and clenched her fists in frustration at failing to take down someone so many levels below herself... but she knew it hadn't really been an option in the first place. Even if she had been stronger, someone of his status was bound to have plenty of trump cards hidden to, at the very least, keep his life.

"Hall Master, the enemy is retreating from this and the neighboring galaxy, regrouping here," one of her guardians promptly informed her as he summoned an elaborate map using mana, only making Viridia sigh more.

The moment they had any kind of advantage, Yip of Yore had his forces retreat, never giving the Order any chance to land a proper blow. She wanted to give the order to chase but was fully aware that wouldn't end well for them, so she focused on what she could do.

"Any news of Aisorok?" she asked, inquiring if anything had been uncovered related to the missing newly appointed Hall Master.

"Nothing as of now. He remains missing, but things point to their ambush succeeding," the guardian responded.

"How about the Bloodwing Duchess?"

"She got back in contact, having successfully escaped, but suffered significant injuries as she had to use a dangerous skill," the guardian shook his head. "She estimates full recovery should take her around a century, faster if she has access to high-quality blood."

"Providing that shouldn't prove too difficult," Viridia spoke, waving her hand as a portal appeared. "We're heading to the next battlefield immediately. Recover on the way."

"Yes, Hall Master," both responded in unison as they took to the next area.

For the Hall Master herself to be this involved in the conflict may seem weird to many, but Viridia truly didn't have a choice. There weren't that many S-grades officially part of the Order in the first place, and as the highest-ranked mortal, Viridia felt a responsibility to step up. In part, she did this to show that the Order was fighting back with full force, and so far, she had single-handedly slain over forty S-grades of varying power.

This number barely registered in the statistics of how many had fallen on both sides thus far, which made Viridia very worried. They were outnumbered, and not by a little, even when one considered the people deployed by the Hidden Ones supporting the Order from the shadows. Their faction had never been a large one in the first place, and while each of their S-grades tended to be stronger than the enemy's, the gap wasn't that large.

The battle had only been raging for a couple of months, but the damage was already great, and nearly all of the newly established Halls were destroyed. A few had their leaders manage to muster a defense, beating back the enemy and evacuating, while others stupidly tried to hold their ground, but the result was clear on all fronts... they had to retreat or die, taking down as many enemies in the process as possible.

Over the last decade, the Order of the Malefic Viper had actively expanded into most other universes, and now, in only a few months, they had been pushed back out of all but three, with that number rapidly dwindling to only the first universe.

Viridia was trying to help them evacuate while strengthening their foothold in the first universe. No matter what, they couldn't lose any ground on Primordial-4, and so far, Yip's forces hadn't even tried. The fact they hadn't wasn't a comforting thing, though, as Viridia knew this was only the beginning.

This was still nothing more than a battle of mortals. Gods moved the pieces on the chessboard, but neither player had decided to get up and punch the other party yet. No one seemed willing to make the first move either.

Yip of Yore and his side didn't have to. They were winning ground without any direct divine interference, so why would they want to escalate? Everyone knew that the second a god acted directly, it would turn the conflict into something entirely different than what it was now. Even the gods who had been in other Halls of the Order had only been able to stand by and do nothing as the local branch was destroyed, none willing or able to be the one responsible for an escalation. In many instances, even trying to help them evacuate could be seen as gods now getting involved... it was all so truly frustrating.

During all this, countless factions were watching on, but none had gotten involved, not even Valhal. The neutral factions expectedly stayed out of everything, and while some did believe many were just waiting for a chance to pick a side, the predominant belief was that none would get involved once more due to the fear of escalation.

No one knew if the Order had allies no one knew about. If any ancient accords existed that would come into effect if any of the other big players of the multiverse got involved. There was also a fear that an enemy faction would use it as an excuse to get involved. It was very well-known that whenever the Risen got into a big conflict, the Holy Church always found some excuse to also get involved, and vice-versa. There were no indications any of these two were interested in stepping in, though.

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An important distinction also had to be made there. While the Holy Church had allied with the Chosen of Yip and Yore, and the two factions supported one another in the ninety-third universe, there was no alliance or relationship of any kind outside of that one galaxy in the new universe.

However, even if no other factions stepped in, Viridia knew an escalation did have to happen at some point. The problem was that none at the Order of the Malefic Viper knew what their Patron wanted them to do. The Lord Protector had taken charge and directed the mortal forces of the Order, as he had done so many times before, but this time wasn't the same as the prior conflicts. Their Patron had returned... the Malefic Viper was back... yet so far, he'd done or said nothing.

Even so, Viridia refused to doubt him. He was the Malefic One. A Primordial. The Patron of the Order she had dedicated her life to, and even in this period of conflict, she didn't waver in her faith once. She would trust the Viper until he either proved them all wrong and dealt with the situation as he saw fit... or something happened that made it impossible to keep faith.

Viridia didn't see that as an option. She simply couldn't imagine a world where a Primordial fell, much less the Malefic One... and she wasn't going to give her enemy a chance to even reach him as long as her life remained intact.

No one could get in contact with the Malefic Viper, but one mortal was certainly trying.

Jake had hurried to leave the Prima Vessel and gone to the small outpost with the teleporter nearby. There, he'd quickly found an empty room in one of the temporary buildings, sealed it using his arcane mana, and gotten to work. He had to put down a pretty basic formation to contact the Malefic Viper, doing what was essentially a religious ritual.

He was nervous as he finished everything and tried to reach out. Guilt was eating at him as he blamed himself for everything that was going on. Jake knew the Viper had a lot of plans and intricate scheming, but as Miranda said, he couldn't have planned for Jake to fuck up. No one could. If he'd somehow messed everything up due to his own stupid experimentation with Origin Energy...

As these thoughts whirled around in his head, he felt the bridge between universes form as he made contact with the Malefic Viper. Jake also felt that the ritual was barely needed anymore, meaning that he could communicate like he had before all this went down. It could be compared to a phone line having been cut over, and Jake had now fixed it and fully reestablished the connection... at least for now.

Jake also instantly felt the Viper's gaze back upon him, and before Jake could speak, the Viper's voice echoed in his head.

"You look like a mess... something stressing you out?"

The tone of the Primordial felt out of place. He sounded relaxed and unbothered, making Jake confused as he answered. "You're stressing me out. What the hell is happening on your end? Something about a war? How are you doing?"

"Wow, instantly putting all the responsibility on me, huh? Well, alright, yeah, we got a little scuffle going on over here. It's just the kind of thing that happens when gods compete; mortals get caught in the crossfire. You shouldn't worry overly much about it. It's not like any of your C-grade friends will get involved. As for how I'm doing? Could be better, could be worse, I guess," the Viper said, the last part in an almost teasing tone.

"No, really, how are you?" Jake kept asking, concerned. "You used your Transcendent Skill to help me during the event..."

"First, let's just make it clear those are two separate things, both problematic. Interfering in the ninety-third universe wasn't something the system liked, and I did indeed have to pay for having done so. Transcendent Skills also all require a price to be paid upon usage, especially when the skill is fully used, as it was in this case. Combined, using a Transcendent Skill to interfere with a system event in a restricted universe is indeed not something that can be done for free, and a significant level of backlash is only to be expected," Villy explained.

Jake wasn't sure why the Viper wanted to point out that those two things weren't the same, especially in this situation where they both clearly mattered. However, he felt like the Viper didn't want to tell him everything, so he asked the most important question:

"Will you be alright?"

"I dare anyone to claim I won't be," the Viper simply responded, his voice confident. "I told you this many times before, Jake. Don't worry about me. You're far too young and weak to be worrying about me, and clearly, you've shown plenty of propensity to make yourself not alright on several occasions, so maybe you should focus on yourself first? Speaking of... how are you doing? You look a lot better than I expected you to."

"I'm fully healed," Jake said, and for the first time the response of the Viper seemed surprised.

"Already? Not bad, not bad at all... Palate is still fucked, though, but we can talk about that later. Hm, I also feel something else different... wait, what happened to that Unique Lifeform of yours?"

Jake didn't question how the Viper knew something had happened as he proceeded to explain what had gone down. He gave a super brief overview of the system event at the Viper's prompting and then explained what had happened to the Fallen King and everything related to the Desolate Child of Loss and what he'd learned, though he did get the feeling the god had guessed a lot related to the Desolate Child from when he healed Jake. Villy was quiet for a bit after Jake was done talking, as he seemed to consider everything.

"The Runemaiden is correct, and this is clearly a False God you're dealing with. Man, your little world really does have everything for something like that to appear, especially such a rare and powerful one. The Records of your galaxy are seriously out of whack and something worth studying more closely with all the weird shit going on. Also, I'm sorry about the Unique Lifeform. I can help take a look at the mask when you can come to the Order, but let me offer some words of comfort: as long as the Truesoul remains, there is hope. Even if the entire body is destroyed and there is nothing else, everything can be rebuilt with the Truesoul as the basis, assuming the system allows it and the Unique Lifeform was as competent as I believe him to be," Villy commented on the situation, his words offering some comfort. Jake had bitten onto one portion of what he said, though.



"You said "dealing with" the False God. Present tense. Do you mean that...?" Jake asked, hoping the Viper wasn't insinuating what he thought he was.

"Based on what you told me, it more than likely still lives. False Gods are very hard to kill as long as faith in them persists. They are very malleable creatures that are a pain to get rid of, as death often only means they undergo change rather than perishing."

"Well, fuck," Jake muttered.

"Eh, going by what you said, you clearly have the tools to handle it. If nothing else, send the Runemaiden after it; she can take care of the little False God," the Viper said casually.

"No fucking way am I sending her alone," Jake protested. "Unless you mean to take her with me. If we all go together, we can definitely find a way to kill it for good."

"Why bother? Just send her. She's a damn Runemaiden fighting a False God that seemingly possesses only the powers of desolation. It's not a fair fight at all," the Viper insisted in his casual tone.

"Does she hard-counter the Desolate Child or something?" Jake asked, unsure why the Viper insisted she could handle the False God and even more unsure why he seemed kind of annoyed at the prospect despite being the one suggesting it.

"Something like that... anyway, let's discuss more relevant matters," the Viper said, getting things back on track after what seemed like a random side track. "Get me fully up to speed on how things are looking in your universe because all I know from over on this side of the proverbial veil between worlds is that Yip of Yore hasn't just launched an offensive in the old universes."

"Yeah, shit's also going down here..." Jake said, as he very briefly gave the Viper an overview of what he had just been told only a few minutes prior.

"Sounds like he's going for a big takeover, huh..." the Viper said, deep in thought.

"For sure," Jake nodded. "Do you have any thoughts on things?"

"I do, I do. But I would like to hear where your mind is at first," the Viper said.

Jake was silent for a moment before sighing. "I just wanna fucking kill the guy and get this bullshit over with. I'm tired of Ell'Hakan just starting shit all the time. You know, I was already planning to launch an offensive, but the moment I am about to do something, he moves first. It's so damn frustrating. I wanted to attack before communication even opened up, but I wanted to talk to you first to make clear I wasn't messing anything up on your end... well, more than I already have. Anyway, that's where my head is at."

Villy thought for a while as he spoke in the kind of tone where Jake knew the god was grinning on the other side. "You know... we could do something really funny and entirely unexpected."

"What?" Jake asked, curious.

"Give the Chosen exactly what he wants... a heretic and would-be Usurper of the Malefic Viper."

## Chapter 995: A Grand Scheme

The conflict between the Viper and Yip of Yore was beginning to enter its later phases, pushed forward by recent happenings, and as any good schemer, the Viper had adapted to the situation.

In truth, Jake really didn't want to do more schemes to get one over Ell'Hakan, but he was caught between a rock and a hard place. While he didn't want to be a schemer, the Viper sure did, and it was a good thing Jake had talked to Villy because if he had just gone with his plan of attacking Ell'Hakan, it could have messed with Villy significantly. Especially if Jake succeeded.

Jake didn't really want to do anything that could mess with the Viper... especially not when he felt shitty about the entire situation with Palate, and he felt like he owed the god a massive favor. So, despite not being a fan of not just taking the simplified approach of putting an arrow in Ell'Hakan's skull, he would go along with whatever the Viper wanted. Assuming the plan didn't suck, that is.

"I'm not sure I'll like whatever you're about to suggest, but sure. Shoot," Jake said.

"Alright, this is going to be a long one, so strap in. I have been thinking how to really leverage this entire angle of you being unsatisfied with me as your Patron, and everything does really seem to be lining up well for us to tell a little story. Your display of catering to Valhal in front of Ell'Hakan's men was a nice touch, and for a while now, many have been expecting something to happen with you. So let's make it happen," the Viper said before he continued.

"Let me also clarify one more thing. While it's common knowledge by now I used my Transcendent Skill to do some form of interference in the ninety-third universe, no one truly knows what I did there. Not anyone who would rat me out anyway. If we want, we can even spin it to me having done something to you as part of my efforts of making you unable to be freed from me even if you wanted to. Honestly, me doing something like that would also fit my personality and reputation, wouldn't you agree?"

"No, not really," Jake shrugged. "You don't seem like the kind who would bother forcing someone into servitude that way. Seems inefficient, and I doubt anyone like me would ever take that lying down, making it seem childishly evil."

"Duh, of course you wouldn't, which is why you are really fucking angry I did it to you," the Viper said. "And looking evil isn't a problem, as I am evil, right? Evil and arrogant."

"One question," Jake said, skipping back a bit in the conversation. "How do people even know you used your Transcendent Skill? It happened inside my Soulspace, right? Through your Records and whatnot? No one should have seen any of that."

"It did indeed happen in your Soulspace, but I did have to pierce the veil between worlds to get there. Not fully, but I had to do something the system didn't like for me to assist you. Doing something like that is bound to send echoes out, and many felt I did something," the Viper explained. "Eversmile then confirmed it afterward, being the go-to kind of guy to notice stuff like that with his constant karmic tracking of most notable figures in the entire multiverse."

"And he then told Yip of Yore?"

"Not sure he even had to, but yes, he did help Yip reach the conclusion that now was a great moment to strike," Villy confirmed.

"At this point, I'm still not sure if that guy is a friend or foe..." Jake muttered.

"Sometimes the world isn't black and white."

"I would prefer if it was," Jake sighed, finding all of this scheming incredibly tiring. He wanted to ask more about if the Viper would really be fine, but held himself back as he returned to the topic before. "Anyway, you want me to come out as a heretic or what?"

"Kind of, but not really. Not fully, at least. I want you to aim higher than merely being a heretic... I want you to aim to be a Usurper of my Path," Villy said, Jake knowing he was grinning evilly on the other side before really laying out his plan:

"Think about it... the Chosen of the Malefic Viper is wavering in his faith, something the evil Primordial, of course, notices. Therefore, he injects – or had already injected - his Chosen with a conditional poison that will activate should he move too close to the line of being a heretic. This ends up happening during the system event, forcing the Viper to activate the poison, but due to the barrier, he ends up having to use his Transcendence to break through, and even then, he only ends up injuring his Chosen. Perhaps as a warning, or perhaps because he wasn't able to entrap him outright due to the system... it doesn't matter. All that matters is that the Malefic Viper knows his Chosen is rebelling and isn't happy about it."

Jake listened, looking for any obvious plot holes as he did point one out: "Why wouldn't you just retract your Blessing or outright kill me?"

"Kill you? Kill Jake Thayne, the Harbinger of Primeval Origins and the one holding the top score on the Nevermore Leaderboards? That guy? Nah, killing him would be such a waste and uselessly piss off other factions who want to use him. Nah, better to make it impossible for him to escape while skirting the rules set by the Bloodline Accords. You underestimate your own value, Jake. You're like a precious natural treasure, and would the avaricious Malefic Viper really give that up so easily?"

"Fair enough," Jake muttered, motioning for the Viper to continue to spin his story, gladly accepting the compliment.

"Anyway, clearly, you aren't happy with me and are looking for a way out. But you are also greedy. Ambitious. You have begun to read the currents of change and believe you finally found a way to escape my clutches without missing out on anything: becoming a Usurper of my Path. It makes a lot of sense. As my Chosen, you are in a prime position to do it, and it isn't like there's no precedent for Chosen ending up turning on their Patrons and trying to consume their Path. That's also why you won't outright denounce my Blessing, but you will show tendencies of a heretic, forcing me to either retract my Blessing and suffer another backlash or simply accept that's happening. You usurping me would allow you to not lose anything and keep your Path as an alchemist and all my skills without any restrictions. Of course, it would be hard for you to do as a mere C-grade, but with the help of Valhal? Yeah, it could totally happen. Naturally, for you to usurp me, having me be dead first is highly preferable, making you more than happy to help Yip of Yore weaken me further while empowering him through the narrative of turning me into a Primordial that's not even able to have his own Chosen stay loyal, while at the same time not being smart enough to cut my losses when I probably should have."

Jake had to admit the Viper had clearly been thinking about this a lot, or maybe he was just making stuff up on the spot, but Jake found himself nodding along as he imagined what he would have done if Villy turned out to be an utter dickhead. He didn't want to hurt his own Path, so renouncing the Viper entirely and joining Valhal didn't seem that appealing, but making the Viper's Path his own by usurping it? That would result in Jake losing pretty much nothing outside the powerful backing of a Primordial, something he would instantly replace with Valhal.

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"Of course, being an aspiring Usurper doesn't directly make you an ally of Yip of Yore or Ell'Hakan. Your interests just temporarily align, so it makes sense you remain cautious of the other Chosen, especially seeing as you are still competing. You switching to wanting to be all buddy-buddy with him wouldn't make any sense, but showing a bit of restraint until your Patron is dealt with? That you can do. Afterward, you will leave with Valhal, who also only has a temporary alliance with Yip of Yore. In other words, you're not allying or forming any positive relations with your opponents; you're just selfishly using them to fulfill your own goal of being free of me and usurping my Path. What's more, none of your emotions should you encounter Ell'Hakan would be wrong. He is no mind reader, and your feeling of dislike is only to be expected. You clearly don't like him, and this won't change that, and you will continue to restrain yourself until the situation between Yip and I is dealt with."

Again, Jake didn't find any obvious flaws in what the Viper planned, though he would still be very cautious around the other Chosen. None of them truly understood Ell'Hakan's Bloodline, and while Jake didn't think it was some perfect sniffer of schemes that could instantly determine Jake was up to something, he didn't see the need to risk meeting the guy if he could avoid it.

"Alright, let's just say I'm all on board so far... why the hell would they believe this tall tale? Also, you said I would be a heretic, but it doesn't sound like I'll actually reveal my identity as a heretic. Thought a part of your plan was to have this entire shocking reveal where I suddenly switched to fully unleashing my inner heretic aura," Jake pointed out.

"Oh, you'll have your moment, don't you worry. Just not right away. Can't frontload everything. No, you will become a heretic when I'm truly pushed into a corner, and in my pure anger at fully discovering your betrayal and the fact you're helping my enemies, I will reclaim my Blessing and brand you a heretic, at which point, you just go ahead and unleash that bad boy," the Viper said, enjoying this far more than someone who was currently in a deathly conflict with another pinnacle god.

"I assume you would let me know?"

"Naturally," Villy said in a cheerful tone, as he seemed to be enjoying how his scheme was coming together.

"Still haven't touched on why they would believe everything if I don't even reveal myself as a heretic," Jake once more pointed out.

"I was getting to that, jeez, the impatience," the Viper said, continuing to explain his dastardly plan. "Any good lie needs at least some element of truth. The fact you aren't a real believer and have that inner heretic is just one part that you can show off, you just need to keep the actual heretic aura hidden.

You can shit-talk me all you want to sell the lie, and I'll only be slightly offended when I hear what you said about me after all this is done."

"Oh, I thought I could shit-talk you at all times already," Jake joked with a smile.

"Rude... anyway, besides mixing some lies with truth, how about we do one better? Physical evidence that I poisoned you to keep you under my control," Villy definitely smirked on the other end.

"You know, I'm about fifty-fifty on if you actually did poison me or you are referring to something else," Jake muttered.

"Oh, but I did poison you. Don't you remember? Before you returned to Earth from your Tutorial, I made you undertake the Trial of Myriad Poisons, upgrading your Palate and Blood skills in the process," Villy reminded him. "Of course, this is where the version of what happened may differ a bit. But honestly, my version is way more probably, as who would believe that some weak E-grade managed to consume a drop of my blood, managed to suppress its Innate Records, and is now storing it in their Soulshape? Preposterous!"

Jake had a wry smile as the god kept going.

"No... no, it's far more probable this drop was planted there by the Malefic One. A bomb within your soul, ready to corrode you from the inside out at my command. Oh, the horror of living with this, with me having lied about it, saying it was there to benefit you, but as your doubt about me has grown, the truth was revealed, which was what led to all this and me using my Transcendent Skill. Only Valhal can keep you safe now, and only my death can fully ensure your safety. Oh, and the drop will surely function as an excellent jumping-off point to truly make yourself my Usurper."



"Man, all this is actually starting to sound pretty solid," Jake said, nodding thoughtfully. "Maybe you're onto something with this entire betraying you thing. Becoming a Usurper does sound kind of fun. I should ask Carmen if we can make this thing with Valhal official and unite to take down the evil snake god and his cult."

"Not a cult, it's an Order, big difference," Villy said jokingly before turning a bit more serious. "But you know what? If I do end up falling, feel free to usurp whatever you can. Take every scrap of Records you can get and put it to good use."

"When you say shit like that, it makes it really fucking hard not to ask if you really got this handled," Jake said with a sigh as he prompted the Viper to continue. "What's the big final twist, then? How are we going to reveal that we bamboozled Yip of Yore and Ell'Hakan all along before crushing them both with their power weakened from breaking their narrative?"

"Ah, you see, that's the neatest part of all this; we won't. At least you won't do anything like that while Yip of Yore remains alive," the Viper said.

"... isn't that the point of all this?" Jake asked, now genuinely confused. "To make Ell'Hakan and Yip of Yore believe in some false narrative that we can then show has been manufactured by us, making them look like complete and utter morons while weakening them in the process as their story falls apart?"

"Now, where would you possibly get such a misunderstanding from? Not to say you can't do that when I have handled Yip – which honestly will probably end up happening by default as naturally the story will fall apart with his death – but you can lean further into it if you want," Villy answered. "But, no, the plan isn't to ruin his narrative. It's to empower it."

"You want Yip to grow stronger?" Jake asked. Sure, he was all for making opponents harder to beat to get a good challenge out of it, but the Viper hadn't struck him as that kind of person...

"That is indeed exactly what I want," Villy confirmed. "Also, I would like to point out that revealing the story is bullshit in some big plot twist likely wouldn't even work that well. Yip of Yore's Path isn't as fragile as that, as the stories he creates become almost... sticky. It would take time for things to unravel, and chances are he would be able to counter any plot twist we tried to introduce by simply claiming he knew all along and had planned for it. While such a lie could be seen through with some scrutiny, in the final stages, there's no time for such scrutiny."

"But getting stronger is easy or what?" Jake questioned, feeling like that bullshitter's abilities were really way too damn overpowered.

"Yep, it is. Especially when he already has the narrative momentum. Right now, I'm nothing but an unreliable narrator in his discourse, meaning all my words are automatically doubted, while his are believed by default. He has the prerogative to make use of anything we give him, and he does genuinely believe you are unsatisfied with me and not at all faithful. However, even if he didn't actually believe any of the bullshit we feed him, he would still actively make use of it and do what he can to convince it's the truth, as that will only benefit him," the Viper continued explaining.

"That's part of why all this scheming even works. Yip wants to believe, and benefits from believing anything that makes him look better and this little Viper look worse. Be it lies or us trying to trick him, he will still gladly take advantage, having confidence in his own Path. In the end, it all comes down to who stands victorious in the end. The truth no longer matters when a victor is decided. As the saying goes, history is written by the winner... so Yip of Yore just has to win, and even the lies he knew we manufactured will become truth if he says they are."

"You know, I'm beginning to wonder... what exactly are you getting out of all this?" Jake asked, having wondered this for a while. "Why do you want him to grow stronger?"

"Now that is a great question and one I'm sure Yip is even wondering... but let's not ruin the ending of this story, alright? Spoiling isn't nice."

#### Chapter 996: Nothing Ever Goes Fully According To Plan

Jake still had a lot of questions regarding the Viper's plan, and even if the snake god didn't want to share the ending, there were plenty of potential problems in the middle of this act. Primarily was what would happen to everyone else around Jake.

It wasn't hard for Jake to lean into the plan alone, but if he did, others were bound to get involved. Miranda was blessed by the Witches of the Verdant Lagoon and has shown no indications of being a heretic herself, so she obviously wouldn't continue to back Jake if he betrayed the Viper, right?

Also, what about all the other people who were backing Jake precisely because he had the backing of the Viper? What about the galactic conflict that was going on? Was the plan to just flop over and let Ell'Hakan win? Because while he did feel like he owed the Viper a favor, he wasn't willing to do something like that, which would end up hurting those close to him.

So, naturally, he asked the Primordial, who shared his thoughts:

"You are correct; that is a conundrum. You also need to consider all the people who came to Earth because you are my Chosen. For you to – at least in their minds – suddenly turn your back on your Patron can't be a good look and will cause a lot of internal discord. But I have considered it, which is where I'll have to ask you something that is a bit of a gamble, but the best solution in my mind: tell them the truth. At least a version of the truth."

Jake was back to frowning. "Elaborate."

"Inform them everything you're doing is part of the Malefic Viper's schemes and that you are working together to deceive Ell'Hakan, Yip of Yore, and Valhal. At the same time, tell the opposite to Valhal and Ell'Hakan. However, and this is the important part, only show evidence of your claim to one side. Ell'Hakan and his people will be cautious, but the moment you turn on your aura of a heretic all such doubt should instantly vanish. From there, just stay away from your allies. Ell'Hakan will no doubt spread the word you have turned full heretic, but with information and travel still restricted for the most part, everything will be over by the time those on Earth can be convinced you turned heretic," the Viper continued, as things were definitely getting complicated again with this plan.

"Alright... alright, I think we can do that," Jake said after thinking a bit. "I just want to make sure I don't cause too much trouble or confusion during this time."

"Believe in the people you have around you. You've assembled a good team of supporters, and if nothing else, the swordsman, witch, and others can handle matters for you. You also have a True Royal on your side; remember that. As long as she stays on Earth, no one dares try anything there. People are already making a lot of enemies in these times, no need to piss off the Endless Empire on top of everything else," the Viper semi-joked.

"Speaking of huge factions... what the fuck are we doing about the Holy Church?" Jake asked, bringing up another thing he had been worried about. "I assume all the other factions, such as the Court of Shadows, will sit on the sidelines and not get involved, but the Church is very obviously making their move. As things are, I can't reasonably not do something to defend the allies I made to face Ell'Hakan and the Church... will me defending them be a problem?"

"Firstly, the neutral factions shall remain neutral, so don't worry about them. As for the Holy Church, they are kind of a package deal with Ell'Hakan in this, so if you want to stop the attacks of one, you have to stop both, and at the same time, if you stop one, the other should follow suit. However, rather than fight, have you considered going the route of diplomacy?"

"Not sure they are interested in peace with Earth," Jake muttered, taking into consideration all they had been doing over the last day or so to destabilize the Milky Way Galaxy and gain ground. What they were doing right now was the opposite of diplomacy.

"With Earth? Probably not. So don't negotiate as Earth. Remember what the plan is, you're about to abandon the Order of the Malefic Viper and join Valhal. It isn't premature to leverage them a bit, now is it? With Valhal at your side, force through a truce where each party keeps their territories for now, both sides backing off until the conflict between Yip of Yore and I is resolved. Ell'Hakan certainly has faith in his Patron's victory, so this will only benefit him as he will only grow stronger during this process. Plus, it will only make him look good that he successfully helped bring you to the side of Valhal; at least, I'm sure he will take partial credit. Meanwhile the Holy Church is certain to also want this truce. This will only put a pause on the war, sure, but if all things go well, you will get your chance to end it instantly once I've had my fill of Yip of Yore. At that point, you should also be able to limit losses as the enemy won't be in a good state."

"Minor problem there. Are you sure the people from Valhal will just be fine with all this? Sounds like I'm actually screwing them over quite a bit, using them to pressure the Holy Church when it's all based on a lie. Could cause them some trouble, couldn't it?" Jake questioned.

"Nah, it's fine, don't think too much about it. The Holy Church wants a truce and to limit fighting right now. They'll be on board and even push for it if you propose it first, trust me. You also shouldn't concern yourself about anything with Valhal. They won't complain either," the Viper said with a lot of confidence.

Jake couldn't help but ask when he heard how sure the Viper was: "Say... I get that Valhal is kind of in on the plan to some extent, but do you also have the Holy Church in-the-know or what? Because they sure aren't acting like they are."

"No, they are not. But they are led by the Holy Mother, a fellow Primordial I have known for way too long. I know how they operate. They definitely have their own reasons for taking part in this conflict, and it shouldn't be anything that negatively interferes with this little scheme," Villy said, remaining as confident as before.

A few more seconds passed as Jake was thinking, looking for more questions and concerns he may have. One did spring to mind:

"What do you expect me to tell the others here on Earth? Not the random World Leaders and the people in the alliance, but people like the Sword Saint, Carmen, Sylphie, Miranda, and so on. They're going to be confused as fuck even if I do tell them the truth, especially if they know I had the aura of a heretic. I haven't exactly shared that I'm a Heretic-Chosen with anyone," Jake said, not a fan of that part of this entire thing. The only people he wasn't really worried about were his parents as they quite frankly didn't care about all this and were more considered part of the Court than Jake's faction, so they shouldn't be a problem. But the others could prove problematic.

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"Honestly? I'll leave that to you. All I will ask is to not make them get directly involved with anything like the negotiations. Keep them on Earth. Maybe even use that as a bargaining chip during negotiations. Promise to have all your strongest assets remain on Earth until the matter is concluded. As for your concerns of them looking at you weirdly after all this is done... well, pretty sure they already look at you like the little freak you are, but I already planned on informing everyone I was behind you faking to be a heretic. It really shouldn't be a problem if your friends don't bring on the trouble," Villy explained.

"I can't make any promises that they don't have their own intentions," Jake muttered. "And I'm not going to put myself in a situation where I might end up fighting friends to sell a lie."

"If all things go well, you won't have to fight anyone besides Ell'Hakan, and even that will be entirely your prerogative," the Viper assured Jake. "I'm sure that if you've built any rapport, they will trust you over the rumors that are spreading. Finally, many of them are blessed by Primordials, and they really should be considered neutral parties and not part of your faction in the first place. You seemingly joining hands with Valhal shouldn't really change their relationship with you, either. They are your comrades because you are fellow Earthlings or have some other personal bond, not because you are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Nothing in my plan requires you to insinuate you will give up control of Earth. In fact, it can even be sold that you are forging a stronger alliance through Valhal than you had with the Order if

they have their own smaller factions to convince. Either way, as I said, trust them to handle things on their end as long as you inform them of the basics of the plan. I'm not claiming everything will end perfectly, but I do believe the end result will be satisfactory."

"Right," Jake nodded slowly. "Not gonna lie, all of this is still kind of vague, and there are a lot of elements I'm not clear on if will work out, so let's try to be a bit more tangible. What exactly do you want me to do once I leave here?"

"Talk to those you fully trust and no one else. I'll leave who you inform to your discretion. Follow their advice to carry out the plan, and have them handle most things here on Earth. But before that, spend the next day or so with the Runemaiden, preferably away from everyone else and without them knowing what you're up to, while, of course, making sure Ell'Hakan's spies know where you are. After that, go out alone and make the announcement you are acting like you ally with Valhal to get one over Yip of Yore to the people on Earth. Shortly after, leave the planet to the one Valhal currently controls. The Runemaiden will know which one. Once there, simply follow the plan and act like you are done with my shit and want to jump ship. The Runemaiden is the person with the highest level of authority in your galaxy, so with her, there should be no pushback in getting what you want, and it's not like anyone would question the guy that Valdemar tried to personally recruit at Nevermore. Especially not after you showed off that you have taken inspiration from his Path as a fighter. With them, negotiate peace, and from there, the initial time pressure should be eliminated, and things calm down until they escalate on my end," Villy said, really laying it out in an easy-to-understand fashion. **R**

Jake leaned his head back, looking toward the ceiling of the room he had isolated himself in as he considered everything. In truth, Jake kind of wanted to just reject all this, go to Arnold, and ask him to teleport himself and anyone who wants to join him straight to Ell'Hakan's homeworld to try and kill the Chosen.

However, he knew he couldn't fuck up the Viper's plans and be selfish. Also, he didn't even know if his ambush would work. Shit, he didn't even know if Ell'Hakan was on his homeworld in the first place. So, rather than voice these thoughts, he wondered out loud when he could finally make his own move and end all this. "How long do you reckon this will all take?"

"Now, that is a question I cannot confidently give an answer to. Ultimately, it isn't my decision when Yip of Yore decides it's time to directly attack me, but I believe your actions can speed it up. Also, I have a hard time imagining he will not take advantage the second you seemingly turn into a full heretic, and it will definitely happen before your universe fully opens up once more, as when that happens, the ninety-third universe will once more attract a lot of attention that he is right now very much enjoying. But be aware it will be a while. He is still building momentum with the war against the Order, and he is slowly encircling us and building his base of allies. Gods haven't even gotten involved yet, but when they do, you know we are truly in the endgame,"

the Viper responded. "But, if you need me to guess on a timeline... things should be over within the next few months. I can't see it go above half a year."

"I honestly imagined it would take away fucking longer," Jake frowned. "Don't wars between huge divine factions and gods usually last a long-ass time?"

"They do, but Yip of Yore is not looking to have an actual war but a display of power. Plus, think of the audience. Won't they get bored if things drag out too much and there isn't enough action? You can only drag out narrative escalation for so long before people just get tired of it and just want to see the resolution already. We aren't quite there yet, and Yip of Yore still has more attention to grasp and power to gather, but his momentum is rapidly approaching the crescendo."

"So, to summarize all this shit... I will make people on Earth think I'm going along with your plans while convincing Ell'Hakan and his goons of the opposite, travel with Carmen to the neutral Valhal planet, and use Valhal as a way to establish a temporary truce, showing me and Ell'Hakan are negotiating in good faith. Then, I will stay there for a while while shit escalates on your end until I will unleash my heretic aura, dealing you another blow and hopefully starting the final confrontation. Assuming you handle things on your end, Ell'Hakan will more likely than not find himself scrambling, his alliance crumbling, and I will take this opportunity to isolate and kill him before he has a chance to muster a proper response. I got all this right?" Jake asked, trying to catch the essence of the plan, ignoring all the minor details and adding on a bit of personal interpretation at the end, as there was no way this was gonna end without Jake taking his shot at Ell'Hakan.

"Yeah, that seems to sum it up pretty nicely," the Viper agreed.



“You are fully aware something, no, several things in this entire scheme will go horribly wrong, and shit is bound to hit the fan, right?” Jake asked. “Too many damn factors to just expect everything to go according to plan.”

“Nothing ever goes fully according to plan, which is why the best plans are those that aren’t overly strict and can be adapted on-the-fly. Usually, that is. This one is a bit more robust, though, as we don’t truly rely on actually tricking Yip of Yore in every aspect. Even if he was fully aware of this entire conversation, he would still lean into our lie, as it would only benefit him to do so,” Villy said. “El’Hakan, maybe not, but I’m sure you can handle that guy while I handle divine business. They have a lot of gaps in knowledge, and the absurdity of your state as a Heretic-Chosen is something no one could have accounted for, so we do have some big advantages.”

“I guess,” Jake shrugged. “As long as you beat Yip of Yore, everything should be fine.”

“Yeah, so let’s hope I didn’t accidentally miscalculate and make him too strong.”

“... I thought you said I shouldn’t worry, and you got him handled?” Jake muttered, concerned.

“You’re the one who brought up nothing ever going according to plan first.”

“Well, yeah, but-“

“So you would have been the one to jinx me and would have to live with the knowledge you were the primary cause of the downfall of a Primordial,” Villy continued, clearly teasing him... though Jake still couldn’t help but be worried.

Yip of Yore was powerful, and now, the Viper was seemingly trying to make him as powerful as he possibly could. Jake wasn’t sure why, even if he had some theories, but no matter, there had to be a reason why Yip had the confidence to go for a Primordial in the first place, right?

Yeah... things should be fine. Jake just had to focus on his own side of things and not worry about the Viper. Not like the things Jake had to do would be easy, and he seriously hoped the others back at the Prima Vessel would be able to help him sell all the bullshit he was about to peddle.

Chapter 997: Something Stupid (?)

Jake and Villy continued speaking for a good while more, discussing some additional details of what Jake’s role would be in all this. He felt like an actor having a role way beyond his skill level put upon him, and he felt a lot of pressure to carry things out properly as the Viper wanted him to.

Acting and Jake were two things that really didn’t go well together, and the Viper at least took this into account and did so that Jake needed to do as little acting as possible. Moreover, this acting would nearly exclusively be done in front of people who didn’t really know him in the first place, making it far harder to detect any discrepancies in his actions.

They both also knew all this was for the Viper and had little to do with Jake’s own goals or Path. Jake was fine with just teleporting right now and attacking Ell’Hakan wherever he was, and the only reason he held back and would agree to any of this was because Villy was the one asking him to. Sure, Jake did excuse himself for going along with everything by arguing he owed the Viper a favor, but honestly, it was more than that.

Time and time again, Villy had helped Jake without asking for anything in return. He'd given him access to far more resources than Jake could possibly use: knowledge gathered by the Order since the very first era, personal guidance... so many things. And for that, he'd never asked Jake to do anything Jake wouldn't have ended up wanting to do anyway.

Jake didn't count his exploits and performances during system events as favors to Villy. All those were just Jake being Jake, and the fact it benefitted the Viper because Jake was his Chosen was just a bonus. Counting these would just feel wrong.

At the same time, Jake didn't want to be the kind of person who counted favors between friends and made their relationship transactional... but that didn't mean he couldn't feel the clear disparity in how much one party helped the other. The best comparison Jake could make was with holiday gifts. Sure, gifts were not meant to be seen as transactions, and one wasn't meant to count monetary value between what two friends gave each other... but if Jake gave someone a damn toaster and they gave him a new laptop, he would feel really awkward about it.

So, even if the Viper didn't care – and kept saying he didn't care – about the disparity in how much they helped each other, this was an opportunity for Jake to at least feel less awkward about things. Oh yeah, and helping out the god was also just something a friend would do, as while the sacrifices Jake had to make were annoying, they weren't significant at all.

Finishing their conversation, Jake felt as ready as could be to carry out the plan and try to bring the others on board. It wouldn't be easy, but he was determined to do his darndest. Before they cut the connection, Jake did have one last thing to say, though.

“Hey, Villy?”

“Got more questions?” the god asked.

“No, no, I’m good... I just want to make sure we’re on the same page here. This all ends with us both walking away whole and better than ever, right?” Jake asked.

“And what do you mean by that?”

“That you aren’t going to do something stupid,” Jake said in a rather stern tone.

“Duly noted, but truly, you have no reason to worry... still, thanks for the concern, I guess,” the Viper said, seemingly not entirely sure how to respond.

“That’s what friends are for,” Jake shrugged before smiling. “Now, let’s go pull off the scam of the era.”

“Yeah, no, that’s never gonna happen,” Carmen said, her arms crossed as she stood in front of the golden projection.

“The feelings of mortals are transient, and no one truly knows the future. Assume it does happen, and take into account that I’m not asking you to ensure it happens now but that you merely lay the groundwork for the future. Do not act as if you wouldn’t prefer if he joined,” Gudrun spoke through the projection.

“Sure, that would be pretty cool, but I’m also fine if it doesn’t. It’s not like our respective factions will have fuck-all effect on things once all this stuff is over,” Carmen said, a bit annoyed at everything going on. “Can I also finally talk about everything once it’s done?”

“No, not for a good while. You would know that if you’d read the contract properly,” Gudrun said in a scolding yet motherly tone as she smiled. “Not like you would have rejected signing it no matter what had been included. Curiosity truly will be the downfall of mankind.” R A

“Can’t blame me for being curious when interesting stuff is going down in my own home galaxy,” Carmen smiled, preferring the casual tone of the conversation over the usual stiffness she had to adopt when interacting with gods in a more public setting.

Like Jake, she had gone to have a personal discussion with her Patron when Jake had. Rather than get Valdemar, she had ended up talking to Gudrun – which was honestly standard by now – and had begun this discussion. Her ritual for contact was to summon a projection like this, using a rather expensive item as a catalyst, as well as making use of her Divine Blessing, as a lower one wouldn’t allow this kind of thing.

As for what Gudrun wanted... well, as most times, it was related to Jake. More accurately, Jake, the Malefic Viper, and everything else currently going on, including the entire clash happening in the rest of the multiverse. Gudrun didn’t disclose much, perhaps because she didn’t know much, but things weren’t looking good for the Order of the Malefic Viper.

Gudrun didn’t seem overly worried, though. However, she did view this as an opportunity. She proposed to Carmen to take Jake to the planet in the Milky Way under the total control of Valhal and use that neutral ground to try and find a solution with Ell’Hakan and the Holy Church.

Carmen saw no way in hell Jake would be interested in going the diplomatic route. Maybe Miranda would try and convince him to try something like that, but she was pretty damn confident not even she could talk him out of just recklessly charging at Ell’Hakan to put an arrow in his skull.

Still, Gudrun seemed convinced he would be open to diplomacy. Assuming she was correct and Jake would come to the planet ruled by Valhal, Gudrun wanted Carmen to naturally come along. Once there, Jake would know no one except Carmen, and while he could certainly entertain himself, Gudrun believed this was a great opportunity to see the good things about Valhal and use the place to train.

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The plan was obviously to try and convince Jake that Valhal was a cool faction and totally one he should join. Even if it wasn't now, then in the future, he should consider them. If not, then at least he should have a very favorable view of Valhal and be willing to work closely with them going forward, perhaps even becoming an honorable member or something dumb like that.

Or, perhaps Gudrun was thinking on a far longer timeframe than that... because there was a great precedent for mortals switching factions upon ascending to godhood, going elsewhere if another place fit them better than where they currently were.

The part about the contract was related to something Carmen had pretty much felt forced to sign a long time ago. It was related to all the shady bullshit going on, and to ensure she wouldn't spill the beans, Gudrun had her sign it shortly before Nevermore. All it did was make Carmen unable to talk about certain things when around others, with a few people excluded.

Carmen didn't like it, as she felt herself clamp up at times, the words just not coming out when she was accidentally about to say something she shouldn't... so maybe the contract was a good idea? She wasn't sure, honestly. At least she could get out of the contract at any point if she wanted by just taking off the ring she had been given, which was what restricted her from speaking on accident, though she had a feeling doing that wouldn't end well for her.

Either way, the contract meant that Carmen knew a lot more than others. Walking around with secret knowledge did feel kind of cool, especially considering this knowledge was the kind not even shared with other gods. Carmen was one of the very few people who knew certain facts, such as that Valhal and the Order weren't truly in a conflict and that Valdemar and the Malefic Viper had their own deal.

However... she also knew that it was true Valdemar and Yip of Yore had one too. One that did obligate Valdemar and Valhal to assist Yip of Yore in suppressing the Order and facilitate the clash between Yip and the Viper.

Which did kind of make Carmen wonder one thing.

"I kind of get the gist that the Malefic Viper wants to fight Yip of Yore... but what if he loses? Will Valhal step in and help the Viper?" Carmen asked after a while, as she really couldn't imagine a world where anyone wanted that Yip guy to win. She didn't expect an answer but surprisingly got one.

"We will not do any such thing. The result of the fight between the Malefic One and Yip of Yore is entirely on them. No one from Valhal will interfere. In fact, we will ensure no one interferes, no matter what," Gudrun said with certainty.

"So if the Viper loses..." Carmen asked, frowning.

"He dies, and the first Primordial falls, truly giving rise to Yip of Yore and a new being recognized as at least equal to the other surviving Primordials," Gudrun answered, still in her matter-of-fact tone.

"And Valhal is okay with that?"

“Okay with it? Why do you think Valdemar is willing to help Yip of Yore in the first place?” Gudrun said with a smile. “He recognized Yip of Yore has the potential to reach the peak. Valdemar wants nothing more than to have someone willing to battle and worth fighting, and if this conflict gives him that, why wouldn’t he be okay with it?”

Carmen wanted to comment more but kept quiet. She had to admit she never really understood what kind of relationship Valhal and the Order had, nor what exactly was going on between the Viper and her own Patron. She didn’t know if they were friends, enemies, rivals, or just two really old creatures who didn’t have some set description for their odd and complicated relationship.

“Anyway, all you want me to do is bring Jake away from Earth and to our planet?” Carmen asked, clarifyingly, changing the topic.

“Precisely. I’m sure he can handle everything else from there. Just play along with him and back up whatever he does, but don’t personally get involved in any battle should the animosity between the two Chosen proves too much,”

Gudrun said. “Oh, and do not under any circumstances make direct contact with the Chosen of Yip of Yore.”

“I know, I know,” Carmen waved her off. “I wouldn’t want to anyway. Imagining someone fucking with my emotions just feels so damn icky.”

“It does appear rather unsettling, but some would be more than happy to have the power granted by such a Bloodline in their arsenal,” Gudrun said in her usual cryptic tone as the summoned projection flickered a few times. “It appears our time is up. May you complete your mission well, Runemaiden; we have confidence in you.”



The image faded away, the catalyst she'd used to summon it, having run out of energy. The act of projecting a god in this fashion definitely wasn't an easy matter or something one simply did. Sometimes, she was envious of Jake, who seemingly had the ability to talk to his Patron at all times without having to do any prep work or set up any rituals, but then again, she was totally fine with not having the kind of pressure on her that would bring.

Sighing loudly, Carmen rolled her shoulders, feeling the stiffness come out as it only now was clear how tense she had been. Just Gudrun's projection was unsettling to deal with on some deep instinctual level, and the only reason Carmen could even act normal was because of the resistance she'd built up from being close to Jake. Mortals simply weren't built to interact with gods, especially not for prolonged periods of time, and most certainly not while still only in C-grade.

Should get back to the Prima Vessel... I still can't see Jake agreeing to go the diplomacy route and negotiating with that manipulate emotion-fucking shitbag.

The land that had slowly begun to recover after the battle between powerful beings was rapidly meeting its end once more. Color had faded as the vast plains had its newly-grown grass, weeds, and any form of life wilt away whenever the desolation spread further, a mass of odd energy in its center. This odd mass came from a small fragment that appeared to house the remnants of the False God that had once been... and was soon to be once more.

No one had come to this planet in a long time, at least not before that day. Earth did have talks of sending someone to see if they could find proof the Desolate Child of Loss had survived or was truly dead, but had been reluctant in case the False God was there and still lived, making such a mission incredibly risky.

Yet now, a lone figure walked through the plains toward the land of desolation. Even as he reached the border where the world turned monochrome, and desolation ruled, he did not stop but kept walking dauntless forward.

Instantly, the desolation attacked, yet the man appeared utterly unaffected. He was like a beacon of light and color in a dead world as each step took him closer to the epicenter and cause of the desolation. Even as he got closer and the desolation grew in power and intensity, he remained untouched and unfaltering, and soon enough, he stood before the fragment on the ground.

For several seconds, he merely stood there, staring down at it. He made no motions or moves but simply existed within the desolation as he seemingly evaluated the fragment. Minutes passed, and faint echoes of mana could be felt from the man as he was clearly doing something, clearly not in any kind of rush.

After nearly half an hour, he seemed done. Nodding, he muttered to himself as he'd reached a conclusion.

Kneeling down, he scooped up the fragment in his hand, carefully cradling it with his palms. The desolation instantly invaded his body but once more found itself struggling against the man. He muttered once more as he kept kneeling there, just holding the fragment of desolation. Faint energies entered the fragment originating from his body as he kept speaking in a soft tone, the minutes passing by slowly within this world where the only color was the man.

Then, something surprising happened. The energy of desolation began to slowly weaken. It stopped attacking the man holding it and at the edges of the land being made desolate, stopped expanding entirely. Then, it, too, began to retract, the man continuing to speak.

Hours passed as the desolation became lesser and lesser until, finally, nearly all of it had merged back into the fragment. The fragment had also changed, now resembling a heart that looked a lot like that of a human's but clearly wasn't.

Satisfied, the man took out a small box, and as he continued to speak softly, he put the heart within the box. With a final smile, he closed the lid, the desolation all around fading entirely. Standing up, the man turned toward the Prima Vessel far in the distance and began walking again, holding the chest closely, cradled like the lost child it was.

#### Chapter 998: Great Minds Think Alike

"So, the plan is to go the diplomacy route and negotiate with the fucker before putting an arrow through his skull," Jake finished his explanation to the room of people he trusted the most. They all stared back at him for a few moments before Miranda spoke.

"This is all... a lot. So far, all our plans have been to find a way to use Ell'Hakan to weaken Yip of Yore, but the Viper wants us to do the opposite? I've heard nothing of this from the Verdant Witches," Miranda said with much concern.

"Are you confident you can carry out the tasks your Patron gave you?" the Sword Saint asked, having also thought over everything. "You will need something to convince Ell'Hakan you are being genuine and not trying to trick him. A good story is but the bare minimum, and you need to have swift replies to all imaginable questions, as you will no doubt end up talking to him directly."

While Jake had shared the Viper's plan with those in the room but left out some parts, specifically those related to his own secrets. He didn't mention anything about him being a Heretic-Chosen, nor did he bring up the fact he'd absorbed a drop of blood from the Viper. All of those things weren't something he should be sharing, but they were also vital aspects of the plan. All of this is to say that Jake understood the old man's concern, but he nodded confidently in affirmation to assure the man a little things would be fine.

"I believe I got this handled, and you are right. I will need a very good story and to have thought everything through. Trust me, the Viper already grilled me on this."

"If you say so," the Sword Saint said, not showing a lot of trust in Jake's social skills.

The others in the room, namely Sylphie, Vesperia, Arnold, and Carmen, weren't saying much but just listened in. Carmen hadn't been someone Jake had initially planned on including in this meeting due to her relations with Valhal, but he'd met her on the way back to the Vessel after she'd also spoken to Gudrun. She already knew a lot of the plot going on, and since Jake would have to leave with her later anyway, he saw no reason not to include her.

William had been a potential participant, but Jake still didn't trust him enough. He also didn't know enough about Eversmile to know if the god could use his former connection with William to spy on them, so he decided to just play it safe and not include the guy. As for other notable absentees, nearly all of them were excluded on purpose due to the factions they belonged to or because they had been busy doing other stuff. Sandy had left to eat some stuff, Lillian was busy, and he hadn't even tried to talk to Kindroth as the elf had left to handle other matters a while ago.

"To make it clear, you want us to function as your propaganda machine here on Earth, advertising that you are tricking Ell'Hakan into an alliance while actually just taking advantage of him, yet at the same time purposefully make undercurrents of doubt within the upper echelon of Earth's leadership if you truly are just performing a scheme. This undercurrent will naturally be leaked to Ell'Hakan, creating plenty of ambiguity about where your loyalties truly lie, and with some evidence you and the Viper planned for, hopefully, convince him to bite and actually believe you are intending to leave the Malefic Viper and permanently join hands with Valhal?" Miranda tried to sum up everything Jake had asked of them, hitting the nail on the head as expected and making Jake nod enthusiastically.

"Yep, pretty much," Jake said with a smile.

"That's not gonna be easy," the Sword Saint frowned. "A lot of local actors will try to take advantage of the confusion to cause discord. I'm also not sure our allies will be on board. Even if we tell them it's all part of the Viper's plan, they are in contact with the rest of the multiverse and are aware of what's

happening. They know the Order of the Malefic Viper is being crushed and has been for months now. Trying to convince them all of this is the Viper's plan is a ridiculous ask."

"You don't need to convince them for a long time... just long enough for a truce to be established and both sides back down," Jake tried to argue. "Also, you don't have a relationship with the Order of the Malefic Viper, so what if you act like you know I'm actually planning on switching sides and also deceiving Miranda to-"

"Won't work," the old man shut him down instantly. "We need to keep presenting a strong united front. If we begin to display any fractures in our core power base, many will jump ship and join the Holy Church and Ell'Hakan. The only reason many remain loyal is because of the power we wield. While the Church and Ell'Hakan have made moves on many planets, they have clearly acted with restraint, and restraint often comes from caution. It's believed that they are wary of Earth and our elites, and the fact many believe we would win a direct confrontation in an all-out war is the sole reason our alliance can even remain."

Jake frowned a bit as he thought of something else, but before he had a chance to, the Sword Saint continued.

"You are also incorrect when you say the Noboru Clan has no relations with the Order of the Malefic Viper. While it's true that there's nothing official, my clan has embraced the Path of vampirism. That will automatically make us be viewed as enemies by the Holy Church and many other factions, meaning should we stand alone, we are nothing but a target to be exterminated. However, if we are allies with the Order of the Malefic Viper, which is the only large multiversal organization publicly allowing vampires in it, we are under heavy protection simply by association. Oh yes, it's also no secret several members of the clan have gone to the Order either, meaning most assume we are pretty much already a minor branch of the Order."

"Suddenly showing internal strife will also raise a lot of suspicion as we all seemed so united before," Miranda said. "We also don't know the kind of information Ell'Hakan has, so complicating things further by adding more misdirection or schemes will only make us look like we're acting out of character. No,

better to just fully lean into us actually believing in what you are saying. To frame ourselves as not even able to consider the possibility that you are willing to betray the Malefic Viper, or, perhaps we are just hoping so dearly it isn't the case that we are willing to look past many suspicious actions as the alternative would be something we simply couldn't handle."

Jake slowly nodded as Carmen asked:

"How about Vesperia, Sylphie, and Arnold?" she questioned. "What will they do?"

"Nothing," Miranda said, looking at Arnold who seemed interested enough in the conversation to take part, as he shrugged.

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"This entire matter has little consequence to me. Should the ruler of Earth be part of the Order of the Malefic Viper or Valhal will not impact me in any meaningful way," he explained. ¶

"I echo the sentiment," Vesperia said. "The Endless Empire would be neutral in either case, thus, I would see no cause to even comment on it, outside of saying that I follow my Sire's decisions."

"Ree," Sylphie said, making it absolutely clear she had little understanding and interest in everything that was going on and was only participating in this meeting because everyone else was there, and she would have felt left out if she hadn't also taken part.

It was good she was there as Jake had been thinking: "How about we bring Sylphie with us to Valhal? Won't that communicate my trust in Valhal by bringing her along?"

"I can't see it negatively impact anything," Miranda had no complaints. "May even be good as she can't leak anything accidentally here on Earth. Ah, but it would be best if Vesperia stays on Earth. As a True Royal, her presence will-

"- help defend the planet and make others hesitate to take any actions here directly lest they piss off the Endless Empire. Yeah, I know," Jake cut her off and smiled.

"I do find that acceptable," Vesperia agreed to stay. "I will not involve myself in anything, though. I do not wish to take part in this conflict in any way if it can be avoided, and will only defend myself and what is mine if forced to."

"We expect nothing more," Miranda nodded, as she looked to have a lot of thoughts swimming around in her head. "I think the biggest challenge will be to convince those you already know... people like Kindroth won't be easily fooled and may even end up seeing through the scheme with his close proximity to everything."

"But we aren't really fooling him, now are we?" the Sword Saint smiled. "We are simply following the Malefic Viper's plan. If he believes he sees through the disguised truth and arrives at a lie, that isn't our fault but only shows a lack of trust in our and Jake's word. In fact, this entire thing can serve as a nice method to weed out those who are only opportunistic and have no real loyalty to Earth."

"True, but can we really afford to lose more allies?" Miranda asked, unsure.

“My question would be if they can afford having lost us as allies after Ell’Hakan falls. It doesn’t matter how big the Church or Ell’Hakan gets. As long as the other Chosen falls, they lose their ability to defend the galaxy. I refuse to believe the Church will oppose us without his involvement. No, they would rather just evacuate or negotiate to avoid fighting as losing believers is only detrimental to them,” the Sword Saint said.

Jake could see the gears spin in the old man’s head as he looked ready to take advantage of the situation. There was something assuring about that, and Jake felt that the Viper had been right... he should trust the people around him to handle this situation and focus on his own role.

He had noticed how none of them had questioned if they should do the plan at all. They had all instantly just agreed and pointed out potential issues with the goal of looking for solutions. Never once had it even been seen as an option to not go along with what Jake and the Viper had proposed. He had nothing but gratefulness for their support and knew that the best way to pay them back was to ensure that this entire mess had a satisfactory solution.

From this point onwards in the meeting, Jake just had to sit back and let the smart people talk, and surprisingly, they agreed on nearly everything. Great minds think alike and all that. He only occasionally had to answer some clarifying questions before the two of them dove straight back into their discussion. As Miranda and the Sword Saint had quickly taken charge and began discussing everything they would do, Jake threw Carmen a knowing glance, getting one in return. It was a tough life being the kind of person who solved everything with a punch or arrow to the face, but Jake definitely didn’t envy the two.

Soon enough, there really wasn’t more to say, and it wasn’t as if Miranda couldn’t get in touch with Jake after he left that day. The Sword Saint seemed almost excited by everything that was about to happen, especially when it was made clear he would be allowed to exert some pressure using his power should the negotiations prove in any way problematic. Jake being able to control the old man wouldn’t be realistic, after all, should anyone cross the line or not honor a truce.

Miranda only had some encouraging words to Jake as Carmen and Jake prepared to head to Jake’s lodge just the two of them. As the Viper had said, they should be seen together going there and leaving again



in a day or so. Considering the number of spies keeping an eye on the lodge at all times, especially now with everything going on in the Milky Way and the multiverse, this was bound to raise some questions, especially when it was later discussed among the top brass that Jake had left Earth with Carmen.

“Jake, remember, keep everything as simple as you can. Don’t try to overcomplicate and overthink things. Don’t act as you wouldn’t normally act, and channel some of what you’re feeling right now. You hate stupid schemes, and you hate shit that’s made complex just for the sake of it,” Miranda said. “You’re not trying to trick anyone, and you are just selfishly looking out for yourself. Nothing more, nothing less. Remember to always put your personal interests first and foremost, and try not to include any of us in your considerations, alright?”

“Pretty sure that’s shitty advice to give someone you want to be a decent person... but sure,” Jake smiled at her. Miranda gave him a smile and a nod in return and looked at Carmen.

“I would ask you to make sure he doesn’t mess stuff up or get into more trouble when with you... but I have the feeling you wouldn’t even try to stop him but instead go along with his antics if it seemed fun.”

“Guilty as charged,” Carmen shrugged with a grin.

“Ree!”

“I know we can always count on you,” the Sword Saint shook his head with a smile at Sylphie’s confident screech that she would make sure Jake and Carmen were on their best behavior.

They spoke a bit longer before Carmen and Jake left, leaving the rest behind in the Prima Vessel. The two of them teleported back to Haven, where he instantly felt some gazes upon him and Carmen. This

was why he usually preferred to use stealth when out and about, but this time around, he wanted to be seen, and he had the excuse he was with Carmen for why he wasn't sneaking about.

It didn't take them long to arrive back at the lodge, and once there, all the observers were gone, courtesy of the barriers placed over the valley to keep prying eyes out. Sure, some people could – and had tried in the past – to still sneak in and have a gander, but let's just say things tended not to end well for them once caught. Because they always got caught.

Once inside the lodge, Jake sighed loudly as he practically threw himself down on a chair. "This is going to be fucking exhausting... already is."

"You're the one who agreed to it," Carmen shrugged. "Can't say I complain that much. It's not like my job is hard, and I'm making my Patron and Valhal very happy just hanging out with you for a bit. Honestly easy as fuck, and I don't need to consider how I'm acting. It's not a secret I don't like Ell'Hakan, and this entire thing doesn't give me a reason to suddenly act like I do."

"True," Jake nodded slowly. "Not that I have to suddenly be all buddy-buddy."

"But you will have to talk to the guy which is more than I would be willing to do without a lot of convincing," Carmen said. "Well, at least you won't talk to him in person."

"No one should talk to him in person, ever. He's a walking public mental health hazard," Jake said as a matter of fact.

“He does feel like he’s contagious with some mindfuck virus, doesn’t he?” Carmen joked around as she sighed. “Anyway, let’s stop talking about that fucker... we’re meant to stay here, just the two of us, for an entire day without going out or doing anything suspicious.”

“We sure are,” Jake nodded.

Carmen looked at him with a wry smile. “Well... seeing as that’s the case, are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“You know, I just might be,” Jake returned her smile.

Chapter 999: A Day at the Lodge

Carmen forcefully pressed Jake against the wall and pushed her own body onto his with all her weight. Jake responded by elbowing her in the shoulder only because she dodged getting hit in the head, the movement allowing him some leeway before she could headbutt him in the face as he struggled to get free. His blow managed to gain him some space as he quickly jumped away and stabilized, trying to regain momentum.

She pounced on him instantly, Jake escaping her grappling hands that tried to restrain him. He dodged her blows one after another as they swapped who was pushing the other one back constantly, the soft sand beneath them making it difficult to move fast but also allowing them to really get some proper force behind their attacks.

Dodging another swift blow, Jake quickly landed a low kick, making Carmen stumble. However, rather than fall backward, she dove straight into Jake’s incoming fist, taking it on the forehead as Jake’s knuckle and fingers hurt from the impact. He tried to retract his hand, but she managed to grab his wrist, and in a move Jake felt was out of a movie, she lifted her entire body off the ground and twisted, making Jake fall down alongside her, held in an armbar.

Pain shot through Jake's body as his eyes opened wide because rather than use the move to pressure Jake into giving up, she straight up broke his arm. Probably a good choice as Jake had already determined himself to give it up as he used his legs to get leverage, and despite bending his now broken arm in a painful fashion, he tried to get on top of Carmen.

Sadly for him, she managed to roll away and quickly stand, Jake doing the same as he was forced to. Carmen looked at Jake as he stood there with his arm looking like just a useless slab of flesh. Smiling, she asked triumphantly:

"Wanna keep going?"

"I can still stand," Jake said with a smile, refusing to surrender just yet while he still had the ability to fight ba-

Five minutes later, he had a broken leg and was pretty sure at least one internal organ had entirely given up, and standing wasn't really an option anymore. Carmen stood over him with her arms crossed and a big grin as Jake sighed painfully. "Alright, alright... let's get out of here."

The Colosseum around them faded away as the two of them had their consciousness transported back to their real bodies still within Jake's lodge. They had both been sitting on the floor with legs crossed and opened their eyes at the same time as the emblem Jake held in his hand stopped glowing and powered down.

"That thing is really good stuff... a lot better than the one I got," Carmen commented, not trying to hide her envy.

"Yeah, I probably should have been using it more before," Jake nodded as he looked at the item he'd been rewarded for his performance during the Colosseum of Mortals Challenge Dungeon.

[Emblem of the Grand Champion (Mythical)] – An emblem infused with the powers and concepts of the Colosseum of Mortals, given only to those deemed worthy. This Emblem can create a replica of the Colosseum of Mortals arena within a virtual space for individuals to duel one another. Allows the user to choose two targets who must consent to take part in a duel within the virtual space. Those entering will leave their true bodies defenseless during the duel period. All levels and stats of those entering will be normalized. Most skills and abilities will also be restricted. Dying within the virtual space will have no negative consequences. As the owner, you can always observe the inside of the Emblem of the Grand Champion. Cooldown period: 1 hour.

Requirements: Soulbound

As he said, Jake hadn't really been using the thing, and in truth, he'd only been reminded of it because Carmen brought it up. She'd also gotten her own emblem, but it was a lot worse than Jake's in several ways. First of all it had a cooldown of a full day, which was kind of annoying, but the biggest thing was that Jake had way more options for customization within the Colosseum itself and the rules and restrictions the two people would be fighting under.

He'd been able to make it so that they both had the exact same stats for their many duels. He could also limit equipment and weapons effortlessly, making it a great sparring ground. At least for spars without skills, as most things wouldn't be replicated as the item description said. To many, this could be seen as a negative, but in truth, it was a massive bonus.

It allowed one to train skills without as much system assistance. It was weird, but the system clearly still recognized you had the skill even when in the Colosseum made by the Emblem, yet the assistance was significantly reduced. This meant one could do a lot of new experimenting, and it allowed one to get more familiar with one's skills than during regular practice while offering a new perspective and way to train. Especially if one had to pull off skills with far smaller resource pools and lower stats.

Jake and Carmen had just gone for a few rounds of sparring with close-to-mortal stats, very much akin to how the Colosseum of Mortals had been in Nevermore, but a little more restricted than even that. The two of them had fought with weapons twice, with Jake winning both times handily. However, when they went purely unarmed, he got his ass handed to him every single time, which to Jake was awesome as that proved he had plenty of space to improve. In the same vein, Carmen was also happy she lost to Jake, resulting in the two of them wanting to do the fighting where they were at a disadvantage... while naturally still enjoying their victories.

Of course, after the fights, with Jake and Carmen both fired up from just having fought, everyone knows what would happen next...

Post-match analysis.

"You still get too easily baited into favoring one side over the other, and while you really don't have many openings, if your attacks aren't able to do proper damage and create enough space in their own right for you to retreat, you tend to find yourself in trouble," Carmen criticized him, pointing to a magic whiteboard she had been carrying around all this time and had been great during her stay in the lodge. "Sometimes your attack pattern can also get predictable. You pretty much always aim for vitals spots, which I get feels natural, but it's also the most obvious. With a weapon, that isn't as much of a problem, but when unarmed, the amount of damage a single blow can deal tends to be limited even if you land a good hit on weak soft tissue."

She made some basic drawings on the board as Jake nodded along. He'd been the one doing presentations after some of the prior fights, pointing out how Carmen tended to rely too much on her tough body after becoming a fully-fledged Runemaiden, which was a problem when fighting in the Colosseum as she obviously wasn't a Runemaiden in there, meaning getting stabbed would actually result in her being stabbed.

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Unlearning bad habits of overreliance on her own toughness was something she seriously needed, as while she was incredibly durable, and Jake struggled to cause any real damage to her in a real fight, she was far from invincible. She'd learned that the hard way after asking Arnold to test a weapon on her, only to quickly learn that he apparently had bullets able to shoot straight through her using the powers of void magic. The Sword Saint could also pierce her defenses with several attacks, especially when he worked in the concept of erosion, targeting singular areas repeatedly to weaken them before striking. R

After discussing the fight, the two of them talked some more, got updates on the situation in the rest of the Milky Way, ate some food, and waited a bit before the cooldown was up, and they could dive into the simulated Colosseum of Mortals again to have another duel, this one with weapons.

Jake was still a bit surprised at seeing Carmen use a shortsword and a shield for these fights, but she explained it felt oddly similar to how she regularly fought, and it was better than going unarmed against Jake with katars. That didn't mean she didn't lose, with Jake not really ever having a hard time, but she insisted it was good practice, especially the last parts of the battle where she'd fought unarmed until blood loss made her fall over and end the simulation.

This was how they ended up spending the next day or so. Every hour, they would have a fight while filling the time in between just doing whatever they felt would be entertaining – after getting done analyzing the fight they just had, of course.

Their longest time spent in the simulation ended up being nearly two hours. Not because they were fighting all that time, but because they were experimenting with what was possible in there, and yes, a different kind of sparring was possible in the Colosseum, but that particular kind was definitely better in the real world, but that was neither here nor there.

In the end, they ended up spending a bit over a day staying at the lodge, as honestly, leaving at nearly exactly the twenty-four-hour mark would definitely have just been weird and looked pre-planned. Carmen and Jake went straight to fetch Sylphie, who had been chilling with Vesperia in a small home the True Royal had made for herself deeper inside the forest.

Throughout everything, they were being tracked. Jake considered for a while how to handle this, but on their way back to Haven proper, Sylphie now in tow, one of their stalkers honestly got too close, and Jake couldn't hold himself back anymore.

While looking as if he casually took a step forward, Jake instead used One Step and disappeared, appearing in the sky above. A second step brought him down to appear in front of a thin human male wearing a casual outfit while standing behind a tree. The man's eyes opened wide when he saw Jake, and he was about to speak when Jake made him freeze up with a quick Gaze.

"You should really get better at stealth or consider if this is really the career for you," Jake said in a dry tone as he glanced about, purposefully looking directly in the direction of a few more observers as he spoke up loudly. "Not like the four others are any better."

For the records, there were five others, but the last guy was pretty far away, and Jake only knew he was there due to his Bloodline, so he saw no reason to advertise how good he truly was at detecting unwanted observers.

"Now, I would normally just kill you or have you imprisoned, but I happen to be in a rush today, so I'll let you off with a warning to not be so damn obvious it gets annoying," Jake smiled as he turned to walk away before stopping after a few steps and speaking loudly again. "Oh, and do pass this on when you make your report to at least make yourselves useful: I will soon reach out, so be ready."



With those words, Jake took another two steps, teleporting with both as he went back to Carmen, who was walking with Sylphie on her shoulder.

“Got rid of the stalkers?” she asked him nonchalantly.

“Yeah, that should be all of them... now let’s go,” Jake answered, the two of them picking up speed as Sylphie gladly was just along for the ride.

The spies keeping an eye on them definitely backed off, with all the people Jake let know he’d seen backing off entirely, likely doing exactly what he’d told them to. He was certain their bosses would be very interested in what Jake had just said. Now, he didn’t actually know which factions these people were from, but he assumed at least the majority were related to Ell’Hakan and the Holy Church, which he would soon make contact with, so he’d kept his words purposefully ambiguous.

Also, while this hadn’t been part of the plan, Jake had been told to act like himself, and he sure as fuck wouldn’t usually allow a bunch of horrible stalkers to follow him unnoticed without at least giving them a good scolding for their offensive lack of skills.

With them handled and having picked up speed, Jake, Carmen, and Sylphie quickly arrived at the teleporter hub in Haven. From there, they went to the outpost close to the Prima Vessel, where more spies – who at least were a lot more subtle – waited and observed what Jake and Carmen would do.

No one really followed them as they went to the now nearly empty Prima Vessel. Only Arnold was inside with that assistant of his, seemingly analyzing the thing while trying to take samples of the metal the Vessel was made of. Arnold also tested some odd magic while scribbling down notes, making Jake and Carmen decide to not bother him.

The guards Miranda had posted at the Vessel naturally let Jake and Carmen through, and they went straight for the teleporter. Carmen already knew what planet they would be going to, and people from Valhal would be waiting on the other side. Once there, the true trickery would begin, and everything would go according to plan...

... alright, maybe that was a bit too much to ask for, but hopefully, everything would at least go acceptably according to plan. Had to be a little realistic sometimes...

--

Kindroth sat in a chamber, a vast ritual circle in front of him, as his surroundings were filled with the radiance of the Great Bright One. He bathed in this light as he felt the presence of his Patron channel into him as they communed with one another.

They spoke for a long time, Kindroth feeling the burden on his body, but this was far from the first time he'd done this. In fact, this was the third time in only a few days he'd made contact with his god, with this time concerning the latest news surrounding the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and his actions. More accurately, the actions of him and the Runemaiden of Valdemar.

Some of the spies who kept an eye on Jake weren't deployed by enemies but by people who were considered allies of Earth. Trust was still weak, resulting in several world leaders taking the approach of "trust but verify" when it came to the claims coming out of Earth.

During the last day, the top leadership of Earth had been hinting at something. Some big reveal or plan that many believed would fix the current challenges faced by the alliance Earth had established. Many were calling for a military response, but Kindroth had been one of the people firmly opposed to such an

approach due to the fear of escalation. It did help that his own world was untouched, though that naturally didn't come as a surprise.

Kindroth and his god discussed recent happenings, the decisions the elf had made during this time, and the plan going forward. They both reached the same conclusion from the newest updates and as the ritual circle faded away, Kindroth couldn't help but let out a sigh.

"So that's the kind of approach they've decided on... such level of foresight to have seen this coming is truly frightening..." he muttered before suddenly smiling. "Well then, better help make it happen as smoothly as possible while we sit back and wait for the grand confrontations between gods and their Chosen..."

As we reap the profits and claim our spoils of war, he thought, not saying that final part out loud, as he truly couldn't suppress his smile.

One just has to love it when a plan comes together.

Chapter 1000: Celebration

Jake was fully on board with the Malefic Viper's plan to trick Yip of Yore by using Valhal and the fact they wanted him to join their faction. He had proceeded with the intention of exploiting Valhal without forming any genuine relations with the people from the Milky Way. However... it turns out they made that really fucking hard.

The moment Jake, Carmen, and Sylphie arrived at Valhal's planet, Jake had expected a huge welcome party as they knew he and Carmen were coming. Instead, he was met with only three people, one of them being Sven, the former leader besides Carmen of Valhal on Earth. The two others were a woman who was effectively the foreign minister or something like that, with the final man the World Leader of the planet.

“Welcome to you all, Runemaiden, Lord Thayne, and Lady of the Winds,” the World Leader greeted them, speaking far more eloquently than his muscular form and large tower shield he wore on his back would indicate. This was also Jake’s first time hearing the term Lady of the Winds, but it was apparently some name a few people had started calling Sylphie after Nevermore.

“Good to see you again, Bobby,” Carmen greeted him with a smile, and Jake distinctly saw the man’s eye twitch as he turned to Jake.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Boolbaraspmyson Yalajunkarious, World Leader of this quaint little planet and servant of Valhal, and it’s a pleasure to welcome you here despite the strenuous circumstances of your visit,” he said with a smile.

“A pleasure to meet you,” Jake nodded, trying to hold back commenting on the overly long name as he saw Carmen snicker beside him.

The World Leader just kept smiling as he introduced the woman with him, who looked like the only non-warrior of the group. “This here is Elliandrailsapro-“

“-pretty sure it was meant to be sopro,” the woman commented with a raised eyebrow as she interrupted the guy.

“Hey, don’t blame me! How the hell can you expect me to remember something so stupidly long?” the man shot back as he grinned, shaking his head before looking at Jake. “I’m surprised; you’re a lot more polite than I thought you would be.”

At this point, Jake realized they were just fucking with him, and based on Carmen's reaction, she had clearly been part of setting this up dumb joke. Sven also cracked a smile, unable to hold himself back, as Jake also smiled and shook his head.

"Believe it or not, I've heard worse," Jake said jokingly.

"Oh yeah, wasn't there such a character in the Colosseum of Mortals?" Carmen commented. "Pol-something. A really long name."

"Pollaystrasirial," Jake corrected her, naturally remembering the mage he'd hung out with alongside Owen while in the Challenge Dungeon.

"You remember that, huh?" Carmen asked with genuine surprise.

"Why wouldn't I?" Jake shrugged. "Pretty sure the system makes remembering stuff like that easy when prompted."

"Unless you didn't really try or want to remember something in the first place," the World Leader added. "Anyway, let me introduce myself again. I'm Bob Bobbyson, but most people just call me Bobby, probably as a way to purposefully annoy me, as Bob is both shorter and easier to say and remember. Hm, maybe also because my old man was called Bobby, and they just like to make things needlessly confusing..."

"Well, I guess it's still nice to meet you, Bobby," Jake smiled, more than happy to continue the tradition of not calling the guy by his actual name.

“Likewise, likewise,” the man said, waving him off. “Carmen here did tell us you were, in her words, “pretty chill,” but I will admit I had my doubts, but I’m definitely not complaining.” RÃÑQBĚš

“No reason to be uptight for no reason,” Jake agreed.

“True that. Now, let’s not hold you up at the teleporter and get on with it,” the World Leader said as he motioned for them to follow. “Would be impolite to not show you the place a little.”

“We need to remember the reason why I’m here,” Jake said, turning a bit serious.

“Why the rush getting to the important stuff? I’ve gotten the general gist of things, and don’t worry, the Malefic One’s touch cannot reach this planet,” he said with a high level of confidence. “This world is hallowed ground. The presence of no other gods is allowed, and if they try to forcibly enter, we and the rest of Valhal’s Pantheon will know.”

Jake raised an eyebrow and subtly reached out to the Viper... only to feel as if the connection had been severely weakened. It was still there, but it was akin to going from a gigabit internet connection to a dial-up, and it would take some effort to even make initial contact. Plus, whoever was behind the formation would definitely know.

As for who was behind it? Well, it reminded him of Gudrun’s work, which made sense considering the Blessing of the World Leader in front of him.

[Human – lvl 282 – Greater Blessing of Gudrun]

"I guess rushing isn't that necessary," Jake agreed, making it obvious he had confirmed what the man had said.

"Great, because I have an awesome bar to show you. They make some really original stuff, and I'm sure the visit will be a memorable experience," Bobby smiled as they all followed him.

Sylphie had remained quiet throughout it all, just chilling with Carmen, who happily carried her around. The hawk was just there because it had seemed fun to come along, and it also communicated trust Jake was fine with bringing her in the first place. It was no secret Jake valued her highly, as they had plenty of public displays of affection, proving they were essentially family.

Their little group quickly went out of the teleportation hub placed in the middle of what Jake soon learned was the capital city of the planet. Before the system, this had been a planet inhabited by humans in the later stages of the Middle Ages by Earth standards, though they had some areas where they had been oddly modern technology-wise and with how progressive they were.

The capital city was pretty big and housed around twenty million people, with around half a billion living on the planet before the system, with that number now up to over a billion, fueled by the many humans who had traveled there from elsewhere in the Milky Way.

Looking around the city with his Sphere, Jake noted the relatively spartan design of most buildings, as there definitely was a focus on efficiency over aesthetics when it came to architecture. History-wise, Jake also learned that this planet had been one with two major factions for most of their recorded history, both constantly at war with one another until around fifty years ago where – in a real Romeo and Juliet story – the prince and princess of the two kingdoms fell in love and got married, uniting the two kingdoms and creating the empire.

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What followed was the establishment of a new leadership structure, which ended up focusing on placating the many nobles from both kingdoms, who were all still pissed at each other and fought over all the land that had changed hands dozens of times throughout the centuries, resulting in them gaining a whole lot of power. The citizens suffered with the nobles just raking it in, as the new emperor and empress just sat back, happy that the nobles were happy...

Anyway, a big revolution, lots of rolling heads, and a very messy reform primarily led by military leaders later, they ended up with an odd leadership structure that was pretty much just a military dictatorship but with actual upwards mobility. They had odd laws like settling disputes with combat and whatnot, and Jake did think it sounded pretty damn dysfunctional, but they, it had made them into a society that happily embraced the doctrines of Valhal, so it had kind of worked out, right?

Reaching the bar, Jake would also soon learn this odd culture meant something else.

Speaking of the bar... Jake didn't know if it should be considered normal, but the biggest building in that entire part of the city was the massive bar that reminded Jake more of a warehouse than any kind of bar he'd ever seen. The place was also absolutely packed from top to bottom, with people running about and yelling loudly.

A few people threw glances at Jake and the others, but no one really seemed to care outside of those doing a second take at Sylphie, probably wondering why the hell someone had brought a hawk to the bar. Not that it stood out too much, considering there were several beasts already present, including a large bear that currently seemed to have their head stuck in a barrel.

Bobby saw Jake glance about and began to explain: "It may sound odd, but many view a bar like this as our place of worship. Valhal does not do churches or really any kind of religious buildings, but places like



this one do come close. It's somewhere you go before and after a battle, a place to celebrate a victory and raise a final glass to those who have fallen. It may not be official doctrine, but it's pretty normal across the multiverse for members of Valhal to use places such as this for important events and everyday worship."

"Also helps that Valdemar is a brewer himself," Carmen pointed out with a smile as she took in the atmosphere in strides.

"Definitely doesn't hurt," Bobby nodded as he led them inside. A lot of the patrons greeted Bobby, and a few also said hi to Carmen, who had visited the planet before during this entire system event.

Jake admittedly wasn't a big fan of bars like these but still chose to come along and experience a bit of Valhal's culture. It did certainly have its charms, and when they found a table near the bar itself and got some drinks, Jake also had to admit they had some good stuff there.

Bobby told Jake more stories about their planet and just discussed Valhal in general. It was self-evident he was trying to make Jake's view of Valhal even better than before and show that he truly did belong with them and not the Order of the Malefic Viper. Or, considering he seemed to have some gist of why Jake was there on the planet in the first place, he wanted to assure Jake he was more than welcome to become one of them.

Jake genuinely appreciated it, even if it did make things harder, considering he felt like he was lying and screwing them over by acting as if he would join when he never planned to. Still, he chose to enjoy his time, as even if he didn't join, that didn't mean he wasn't their ally and could share a beer, right?

About an hour passed, and after Jake was introduced to a few brands of beer that were a bit too experimental for his taste, something he probably should have expected to happen happened. A

particularly brawny guy who definitely had a drink too many walked up to Jake and rudely poked him in the back.

“Hey... hey, you’re that Chosen fella, right? I heard you’re-“

Before he could finish, a fist collided with his face as the otherwise polite and well-spoken World Leader threw a haymaker, putting the guy on the floor. Instantly, the mood of the entire bar changed as a lot of people sobered up quickly and turned their way.

Jake was confused, thinking Bobby’s reaction was a bit over the top, but Carmen just grinned. “Now comes the best part of a bar visit and my favorite memory from my first visit.”

Quickly leaning back, Jake dodged a glass thrown at him as another patron had gotten themselves involved. The guy who threw it had an almost bestial look of excitement as he stared at Jake, many of the others doing the same. Jake was confused for a moment... until he understood.

Valhal. Fighting fanatics. A bar full of warriors... and a newcomer hotshot who everyone praised as powerful. Could they really call themselves warriors of Valhal if they didn’t at least test his claim?

Another glass was thrown Jake’s way, but he quickly caught it and sent it back where it came from before motioning to the guy, now covered in beer, to throw another. Others took the invitation, and Carmen put a hand on Bobby’s shoulder and dragged him back and down into his chair.

“Enjoy the show, Bobby. Oh, and try not to kill anyone, Jake,” Carmen said, leaning back, Bobby doing the same, so easily convinced Jake was certain this entire thing wasn’t actually a surprise to him.

“Ree?” Sylphie asked if he wanted her to make a big tornado.

“Nah, I’m good,” Jake said, enjoying the welcome prepared for him by Valhal as three people charged him at once.

Jake emptied the wooden mug before tossing it on the ground. His chair moaned from the movements, but Jake didn’t particularly notice as it was drowned out by all the other pained voices.

The bar was an utter mess, with chairs and tables broken and thrown everywhere, one of the walls was halfway missing, and the floor was covered in blood in most places. In the center of everything was what could only be described as a small mound of people who were beaten up pretty damn badly to the level they could barely move.

On top of this mound sat a shirtless and unharmed Jake, having taken off his cloak and armor as he felt it unfair that so many of his attackers weren’t wearing anything either. Plus, people kept grasping onto his clothes, and they had turned all wet and red from the fighting that it was honestly easier to go without.

Only a single table in the entire bar was untouched as Carmen still sat there with Sylphie, enjoying themselves with the foreign minister lady who hadn’t joined the fight. Sven was now somewhere beneath Jake in the mound of people, with Bobby embedded in the wall not too far away.

“I told you it would be fun,” Carmen spoke loudly as she looked up at Jake with an almost envious look. “I would have joined too, but I get the feeling there wouldn’t have been a building left if I had.”

“Hey, if nothing else, I now understand why they go with simple building designs,” Jake answered with a grin.

Why would one bother making pretty decorations and intricate designs when chances were the building would get broken from a fight within a week or two? Better to make things practical and easier to quickly reconstruct while aiming to make everything as durable as possible. The fact one of the walls had survived Jake throwing Bobby into it with enough force to kill a weaker C-grade was proof of quality construction for sure.

Speaking of Bobby, the guy soon enough got himself off the wall as he fell on the floor. He quickly stood up, one of his legs not able to carry his weight, but he still walked forward as he raised his head and looked at Jake. “How did ya like your welcome party? Quite the celebration, eh?”

As Bobby said, this was Valhal’s way of welcoming him as a warrior. Jake had been impressed by the average quality of fighters in the bar but now knew they had been the cream of the crop Valhal in the Milky Way Galaxy had to offer. They were pretty strong, stronger than most of the elite teams of Earth. It was respectable, but when held up against Jake, there naturally was no comparison, and they all knew it. Yet they allowed him to display his power and feel it on their bodies directly. They allowed him to prove himself a warrior and one of them.

It was all truly a celebration of power and comradeship, and Jake felt no animosity from any of the people he’d just beaten to a pulp. Instead, some even seemed as if it was an honor to have been punched in the face by who they believed would soon be a fellow comrade of theirs. Jake felt welcomed for sure... which only made the real reason he was there harder to swallow.

“A celebration indeed,” Jake smiled as he leaped off the mound of warriors and landed in front of Bobby. “I would love to keep enjoying myself... but things can only be delayed for so long.”

Bobby nodded in response as he pulled out a healing potion to quickly get himself back in better shape.

“You’re right,” Bobby said, cracking his neck after the healing energies of the potion allowed him to recover somewhat. “It’s not like we won’t have plenty of time to celebrate victories in the future.”

“Let’s hope we will,” Jake just smiled as the celebration was over, and it was time to get back to work.