

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 111: When the curtains fall...

The Malefic Viper stood in his Order as his gaze pierced through the void - the fight between the King and Jake reflected in his eyes.

A fight between a human that had only been part of the system for a mere two months and a being that had lived for a century or more. A unique lifeform that had been born at D-grade. A being that the human should have no right even to approach, much less fight. And yet he fought, and he didn't just fight but had brought the creature to a state of desperation.

But life was often cruel. Unique lifeforms came with abilities that many considered unfair. Often born with magic or skills that would take an enormous investment of time and effort to learn for any other.

They started ahead of the curve and often ended up becoming powerhouses. Possessed inherent Records to become pinnacle creatures of the universe.

Stat growth per level surpassing even those with special classes that came with severe limitations. Like Jake's pal, the Augur.

The Viper observed as the mask fell, and the true visage of the King was revealed. He sighed as he saw the wave of mental force fly out - an ability that the Viper had to admit that even he would have fallen to if he was still only an early... or maybe even middle D-grade snake. It was an attack that the god could see directly drained the soul of the being. It would take years for the King to recover after using it.

You did well, Jake. More than anyone could ever have expected.

His mortal friend had, indeed, done well. He had already felt that the King didn't intend to kill Jake, so he would get another chance. In a few days, he would exit the tutorial, still receiving great rewards. That is what his prophecy had shown him... Jake lying there till the end with the King recovering, eliminating all the energies ailing him.

The Viper was about to turn his gaze away as he stopped, his eyes opening wide in genuine astonishment.

The human before him fell backward from the wave of mental energy. The King had felt parts of the soul shatter, his consciousness disperse. The fight was over, and once more, the King reigned supreme. He admonished himself for allowing himself to get to this state, bu-

The human stopped.

His fall paused, his back bent at an impossible angle. Like a whip, the human flew forward towards the King. *Fast.*

Surprised, the creature didn't manage to react before he was struck in the chest by a fist. *Strong.*

CRACK

His rotten armor cracked more than before as he was shot backward, reeling from the force as blood poured out of the new deep imprint of a fist on his chest. Confused, disorientated, and in a state of utter disbelief, he gazed at the human before him, now with a broken hand from the attack he had just made.

The King couldn't understand. The mind had been shattered. How did he move? A thought that was interrupted as the human kept attacking.

This time he managed to repel the hunter with a blast of force, allowing him to float backward and create some distance. He didn't even consider attacking the human. He couldn't comprehend what was happening, and his only thought at that time was to get his bearing and understand the situation.

Jake had struggled for only a few moments, but it felt like ages and it was as if his head was on fire. When he was finally starting to get a semblance of control back, he was hit by it. A wave that hit him like nothing else ever before.

He felt everything being shredded as it turned dark. He felt his mind break, and he was no longer able to think or act. He felt himself lose consciousness. And then... he did...

THUMP!

And as his mind faded, that which lay beneath came forth.

THUMP!

A cold, unfeeling thing that held no thoughts, no considerations. Only instincts.

THUMP!

When thoughts disappear, there is no hesitation. No tactics, no strategy, no considerations - there was only action.

THUMP!

Jake was unconscious; this could not be disputed. But his body was very much awake. A part of that which was 'Jake' dwelled deep within. And that part had now taken over as he stopped his fall and attacked the King of the Forest. He didn't need to think about it; he just knew that the King was an enemy.

And enemies had to be killed.

He was faster than before, stronger than before. His fist impacted the King as every bone in his hand shattered. The veins burst as blood came out of countless small holes and ruined veins.

Limit Break had a pretty clear warning. Go above 20%, and there would be unforeseen consequences. Consequences Jake would logically aim to avoid. But in the state he was in now, he didn't consider those consequences.

He needed to be stronger, so he became stronger - his energy within flowing faster and faster as his energy rose. Before he even attacked, it had already gone far beyond anything reasonable.

25%

30%

35%

40%

50%

60%

...

His entire body began breaking down from within as the far too powerful energy ravaged it, but it gave him power far above anything he ever had before. His skin flaked and began breaking off, fissures opening in his flesh as his entire body echoed with power.

Charging again, he was shot back by a wave of force. An inconsequential action from his enemy as he charged again. This time even faster than before. Too fast for the King to react.

Another punch from the already broken hand impacted the same place as before. Blood burst out as his fist was embedded deeply into the creature. The King fell to the ground, hurt more than ever before. But Jake didn't let up.

A blast of mental energy hit the human once more, but it did nothing. There was no mind to attack, only a body moving on pure instinct.

The broken fist descended on the King's exposed face as he tried to push the human away with a blast of force. The creature saw the human be lifted off the ground as he tried to shoot him kilometers away, but he failed.

Thousands of strings of mana came out of the human as they bound up the human and the King both. Tethering them together while at the same time stopping the human's body from breaking apart. Trying to contain the energy.

The King tried time and time again to push the human away as the fists descended. Veins burst all over Jake's body, his already broken body breaking even further. The energy within him rotating faster and faster, showing no signs of stopping as his condition worsened by the second.

If Jake had been lucid, he would understand exactly how dire his situation was. The internal energy was now fully rampant, and even if he tried, he would be unable to stop it. In other words, he would die no matter what.

Like an injured cornered beast that ripped open its wounds to kill the predator that came aiming for its life, he attacked with reckless abandon. Paradoxically he exerted himself so much to survive but ended up dooming himself instead. A fight that wouldn't even result in his death would now be lethal.

Or maybe his instincts knew that the death of the King would mean his survival.

Blood was flying everywhere as the fists that descended could no longer be called fists. The King struggled still, but even his most potent attacks were useless. He couldn't do anything. The face was his weakness, hence the mask that covered it at all times.

Ah... I see, the King thought as he slowly became unable to struggle. He saw the sharp, yet hollow, eye that looked down on him.

Soon, the fists were little more than bloody pulps as the consciousness of the King waivered. His struggle slowly ending as the attacks only got more and more vicious. When Jake's hands could no longer move, he began biting.

I was mistaken...

When his teeth fell out, the human began smashing his head down. All that was in the man's world was to kill the enemy. Beating it down several times, he soon could no longer lift it up. The energies within him spent, his stamina and health both depleted.

I could... lose... I... could...

Everything started fading as the only thing that remained was an innate will to live within both Jake and the King. The deepest parts of their souls were struggling to stay alive. But willpower could only last so long as both their sparks of life began to fade. True death was imminent as the system message came.

...die

In the Order of the Malefic Viper, a hysterical laugh was heard as it echoed throughout the halls. All heard it and knew the source - the patron himself.

What could possibly have happened to cause the mood of the Primordial to rise like so?

The Viper himself stood as the final scenes were etched into his mind, a giant grin on his face. “Freaking monster.”

Her eyes narrowed as she felt the change. The Hunter chosen by the Viper had succeeded in doing the impossible. The outcome was different; the fate changed. Was this omen good or bad for the future? How would it affect the Augur she had taken under her wings?

The Holy Mother didn’t know. She couldn’t predict it. Something that rarely happened. Subverting destiny could never be seen as a simple matter, after all.

Feeling the change in karma, the old man gazed through the void. A tutorial had been cleared, and by one he had a karmic connection to. Naturally, he knew who.

Looking at his new disciple, he chuckled to himself. It would indeed be unwise to allow their paths to intersect. It would be a shame to lose his disciple that fast... wouldn't it?

The old undead sat on his throne as he smiled lightly. "I guess I didn't waste my time with that mortal friend of his..."

Jake opened his eyes once more, and he became aware. His mind was a jumble as he tried to collect his memories. The last thing he remembered was getting hit by a wave of energy as his memory turned black. But he felt there was more.

Putting his hands to his head, he noted that there was no pain. His body was fine... more than fine. He felt great physically. The last thing he did was... oh.

He remembered. He remembered losing himself for but the fraction of a second, and then it all just turned so... simple. Easy. All complications were gone as he fought, all considerations of anything but killing his foe disappeared. It was like recalling a perfect dream... it felt almost euphoric.

He fought the King until he could no longer move - until his last shred of will was slowly eroded, and he heard a notification.

And now... he was here. Fully healed and in a better condition than before.

Trying to dispel the feeling, he tried to focus on other things. His environment being one of them.

A quick assessment of the room instantly let him know what had happened. He had won the fight and, in turn, won the tutorial. The quest did say the tutorial would end at the conclusion of either chosen option... *I guess this was a conclusion.* When brought here, he had been healed by the system, just like when he had first entered the tutorial or after passing a trial in the Challenge Dungeon.

As for the room... it brought back a mix of memories. Completely white with only two chairs and a small table in between. The same room, or perhaps just one identical, to the one Jake had first entered when the initiation came. It felt like a lifetime ago, but it had only been a bit over two months.

He shook his head as he looked back on what had happened towards the end of the tutorial. It was something he wanted never to repeat... if he hadn't been transported here, he would be dead without a doubt. The loss of control was scary on so many levels... yet also liberating.

He was alone in the room, with no other being here. What he did find, however, was a stack of items on the table - very familiar items.

On it was his Windsoar Bow, his Shortsword of Icy Winds, as well as a bunch of other items he had thrown away or lost in the tutorial. It was far from all of them, however. It was only the ones he had actually used. Which meant he had lost the rare heavy sword that he couldn't put mana into. RIP giant sword that doubled as a pickaxe.

Putting the items back in his spatial storage, he stopped as one more was revealed at the bottom. A mask. A very familiar mask. It was identical to the one the King of the Forest had worn. Completely blank, with only a bit of wooden texture on it, as well as two eye-shaped holes for the, well, eyes.

Picking it up, he noticed that it felt oddly warm. Using Identify, it also became pretty clear that this was no simple item.

[Mask of the Fallen King (Legendary)] – A mask born from the Records of the one once known as the King of the Forest; a mighty Unique Lifeform that died just as its path began. The mask is made of a wood-like material unique to the lifeform it comes from. Does not obstruct vision when worn and regenerates itself from any damage taken. Enchantments: Living Wood. Passively absorbs mana in the atmosphere, increasing mana recovery rate by a large amount. Increases maximum mana by 25%.

Requirements: Soulbound

Needless to say, it was quite good. All of the properties of the item were ones Jake hadn't seen before on anything else. All of them useful. Having more mana regeneration was, of course, a huge boon and one that would help him at all times.

An increase in maximum mana was also a quite self-explanatory benefit. An insane 25% too. It made him wonder if it even worked considering the Malefic Viper's words that said individual stats could only be increased by a maximum of 20%. Then again, mana wasn't a stat...

The part about the Living Wood enchant was also impressive. Focusing on it, he felt that it was in many ways similar to Self-Repair. As the description said, it allowed the mask to regenerate while broken, but that wasn't the only thing. It also made the wood naturally adaptive, making it more easily able to grow with its user.

The last point of interest was that it was Soulbound - his second time encountering it after his necklace. He still wasn't entirely clear on what it meant, but he was by now 99% sure it meant exactly what it said. That the item was bound to his soul.

First of all, he noticed that he didn't even have to channel mana into the mask. It already belonged to him the moment he touched it. A connection was already there, and one deeper than the one between him and his bow for example.

Lifting the mask up to his face, he wondered how to put it on. It didn't have any straps or anything, so he just tried to place it over his face. The moment he did so, it seemed to snap into place as it covered his face entirely, leaving only his two brown eyes visible.

From his point of view, however, he didn't even notice the mask. He couldn't feel it on his face, and he couldn't see it. It was incredibly odd, though equally

beneficial. Wearing a mask or helmet would typically adversely affect one's field of view, and while he had his sphere, he also liked being able to see.

He knew he had the mask on, and if he tried to feel for it, he could. Taking it off, he also noticed how it wasn't in any way attached to him. Yet, no matter how he shook his head, it didn't move an inch but stayed in place. Odd, to say the least.

Of course, with the mask on, he also felt its effects. He felt like his mana swelled, and he felt the pool within him absorb mana from the environment faster than before.

With the items gathered and him focusing on his inner self, he felt it. He was more powerful than when he used Limit Break, and not by a small amount either. *What the hell?*

Chapter 112: Tutorial Rewards: Titles & Math

In a flurry, he opened his notifications window to a long list, not one of them insignificant. The first of which was the kill notification that had marked the end of the tutorial.

****You have slain [King of the Forest – lvl 136] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 300.000.000 TP earned****

Jake was nearly floored at just the first notification. He had assumed that the beast was just above level 100, but it appeared he had been dearly wrong. Level 136 wasn't a small difference; it was more than twice his own level. And yet, he had won.

Of course, he was fully aware it hadn't been entirely due to his own efforts. All of the dungeon bosses had helped him immensely during the fight. The Great White Stag, Nest Watcher, and Horde Leader had all significantly contributed with the epic rarity special items they had given him upon defeating them, with the Den Mother providing moral support and a bit of poison.

It was a fight he was fully aware he had no right to win. By every metric, he should have lost. But the many factors played together and ultimately led to his victory. If the King had been a more experienced fighter, been less arrogant, been less playful, his bloodline not coming to the rescue at the end, or one of many other things, he would now be a corpse, dead on the cold ground.

It was a victory that was, of course, richly rewarded by the system. One part was the 300 million tutorial points, his reward for clearing the quest he had been given. And then there was a massive amount of experience... and oh boy.

****'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 75 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points****

...

****'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 83 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 65 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

...

****'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 69 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

9 fucking levels, he inwardly cursed happily. It was completely and utterly insane and once more displayed the massive disparity between him and the King of the Forest. He couldn't help but imagine how much experience he would have gained if he had somehow won without using any special items... though it would likely just have been impossible.

Experience wasn't the only thing he had earned from the kill, though.

He had gotten not just one but two titles from his efforts and luck. The first one was a bit weird.

[Kingslayer] – A crown does not make one immune to death. Slay a system-recognized King. Increases resistance to all nobility-based abilities used by those of the King rank and below.

It was yet another example of something he didn't know what to do with. But resistance to pretty much anything seemed like a good thing, so he wasn't going to complain. Besides, the second title removed all his rights to complain.

[Prodigious Slayer of the Mighty] – A prodigious slayer who stands at the pinnacle of skill in his generation – possessing both the might and talent to slay those far superior. Due to your immense accomplishment of defeating the King of the Forest, a unique lifeform twice your level, you have proven yourself a Prodigious Slayer of the Mighty, even if you got assistance from auxiliary items. +10 all stats, +10% all stats.

The title's rewards were identical to his Legendary Prodigy title, and even the word 'prodigy' appeared once more. Jake felt like he was being conditioned to believing himself to be a prodigy. But on the other hand, he didn't want to fall into the same trap as the King and become complacent and careless.

Remind yourself; overconfidence is a slow and insidious killer, he thought. Words to live by if a little hypocritical coming from someone who just barely survived fighting something he really shouldn't have.

Moving down the list, the first one was about a quest he had quite honestly wholly forgotten he had.

Tutorial Quest: A Leader is born

Objective: Become the sole leader of at least 90% of the other humans during the tutorial.

Current progress: 100%

Eliminate other leaders: 0/0

Quest Complete!

Reward: [Nobility: Lord] title

It was a reward he hadn't thought of, and reading the title description, he was unsure if it was even a reward, to begin with.

[Nobility: Lord] – The first step upon your path to dominance has begun. You have usurped the path of leadership from another who qualified, and now you hold the privilege and bear the burden of lordship. You have unlocked the nobility system and become a Lord. Allows the hunter to control up to one city-level Pylon of Civilization.

The title description did answer some questions he had. Apparently, the system had some kind of nobility system that wasn't just someone proclaiming themselves to be king. The Kingslayer title did mention 'system-recognized' kings, after all.

As to what a ‘city-level Pylon of Civilization’ was, he naturally had no idea. Whatever it was, it gave him a bad omen. Jake had no intentions of being some kind of lord that ruled over some land, much less a city. Heck, he had chosen to live in an apartment because he didn’t want a garden as he knew he would suck at managing it and keeping it. He didn’t even want to imagine what to do if he had to take care of a city.

I guess I could hire a gardener?

The final item on the list was something that happened every 10th level.

****Ambitious Hunter class skills available****

He didn’t know what to expect when he opened the menu as he wondered if that final battle would net him a lot of new skills. And yet, he was still disappointed. The only thing he hadn’t expected was to find... pretty much nothing. There was just one new Uncommon skill, called Superior Explosive Punch, which appeared just to be another type of suicide attack...

Well... it isn’t all bad, I guess. Jake had skipped a lot of useful skills during all his prior level-ups. The first skill that instantly popped into his mind was one he had cut for Mark of the Ambitious Hunter back at level 40. He didn’t regret that choice at all, but he couldn’t help but consider how useful it would have been in the final battle against the King.

[Determination of the Ambitious Hunter (Rare)] – The Ambitious Hunter is not one to back down even in front of the most frightening foe. The mind a fortress, the hunter determined. Increases resistance to all mental- and illusion-based attacks. Increases resistance to suppressive effects. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Determination of the Ambitious Hunter based on willpower.

With that skill, he would maybe have been able not to be knocked out by the King's final attack. It was a resistance skill that would help him against certain opponents while being useless in many other scenarios.

It was a skill he had skipped over because he couldn't see the value in it, but now his mind was beginning to change. *Mental attacks aren't a joke.* To have your mind hammered directly was more than just a little uncomfortable.

But... he had a definite feeling the skill wouldn't have done jack shit for him versus that last attack.

The second skill he had considered getting was Hunter's Tracking.

[Hunter's Tracking (Uncommon)] – The hunter does not sit silently in his lodge but actively hunts for his prey. Unlocks proficiency in tracking down prey based on limited clues left behind. Also allows the hunter to more easily identify characteristics of the game, including mana signatures and aura. Adds a small bonus to the effect of perception while tracking.

He hadn't needed the skill back when it was offered, but now he was about to enter the larger world once more. In the small tutorial, he didn't need to track down anything, but on a large planet, tracking things would be far more useful.

Additionally... maybe it could help him track down his family. His general sense of direction had always been a significant shortcoming, something which the system could, without a doubt, help him with by giving him a skill. He had believed himself to be able to learn how to track on his own. He still thought that but he also realized that it would take him far too long, and he would rather spend his time hunting or doing alchemy.

In the end, he chose to get Hunter's Tracking. Losing his colleagues had been a wake-up call for him. If he planned to struggle so much to get all the strength he could, he might as well use it to protect those he cares about. He had failed to do that once, and he wasn't going to do so again.

Closing the menu, he felt the knowledge being imprinted on his mind. Old memories of when he spent a few months in the scouts as a kid surfaced as he now knew a lot more about identifying tracks and even felt his understanding of auras and mana increase. The feeling of getting knowledge imprinted on your mind would always be weird, but Jake was beginning to at least get a bit used to it.

After the feeling subsided, just as he was thinking about what he was supposed to do, something, or rather someone, just popped into reality in the chair across the table.

"Oh... hello again," Jake said with a nod as he looked at the creature in front of him. If it could even be called that. It was the same oddly human entity that appeared before him for the introduction. *Seems like even the system doesn't shy away from reusing assets.*

“Congratulations for completing the tutorial,” It said, still being just as creepy as last time.

“Your performance has been deemed exemplary during the tutorial. You have managed to complete the tutorial and slay the King of the Forest and the four Beast Lords alone. For completing the tutorial in a solo-capacity, you have earned the title of Progenitor and bonus points during the final calculation.”

Jake just nodded along at the brief summary of his time in the tutorial as he got a notification.

You have gained the title: [Progenitor of the 93rd Universe]

He instantly felt the warm glow of his stats rising and his body improving. And not just by a little bit. He quickly checked the new title, one that indeed didn't disappoint whatsoever.

[Progenitor of the 93rd Universe] – As the curtains fall, the standouts are clear. You have shown yourself to be among the most promising new initiates of your universe. But beware, for the road is long, and even the most talented can fall due to a single misstep. +25 all stats, +15% all stats.

Despite the slight downer that was the last sentence, Jake was more than elated. Truly a worthwhile reward for beating the tutorial. He had just gained a combined +25% in all stats and +35 all stats from the two titles. He was so much stronger than before.

This isn't to say he now would have the slightest confidence against the King of the Forest if he had to fight again. The gap between E and D-tier was not that easily overcome.

Turning to the system-creature-thing, he wondered what the plan was. "So... what now? Back to Earth?"

"Negative. Earth is still undergoing metamorphosis. Till the allotted time of the tutorial's original ending in three days, twelve hours, forty-four minutes, and fifty-one seconds, travel to Earth is not permitted. You must go elsewhere or wait here until then."

"Where else can I go?"

"Anywhere you have the ability to."

Thanks for nothing... so now I am just supposed to sit here and wait? he thought.

"If you do not manage to leave here, then yes, you will have to stay," the system-thing answered. Answering Jake's goddamn internal thoughts.

"What exactly are you?" Jake asked. A question he believed he had also asked the last time he was here.

“The entity in charge of your final tutorial rewards,” it said, answering much like last time.

“You said rewards, is there more than the title?” he asked a bit doubtfully. The title was already a great reward, but who would say no to more stuff?

“All who pass the tutorial have the opportunity to use the Tutorial Store by using their accumulated tutorial points.”

...right. Tutorial Points are a thing. Honestly, the points had just been flavoring so far. Useless padding on the kill notifications, and they were just mostly ignored. Even if Jake had just received a few hundred million from killing the King, he had already shoved the existence of points to the back of his mind once more.

Not that he had high thoughts for the use of the points. “What can I buy in this store?”

“First, we calculate your final score.”

With those words, a new panel appeared before him.

Tutorial Rewards Panel

The tutorial has come to an end, and the King has fallen to a single survivor.

Finding success even in failure, the tutorial's purpose was unfulfilled as only a single survivor walks out alive.

Tutorial Points earned: 698.312.987

The first part of the message was as expected, but the second was a bit off. Success in failure... *they were all so dumb.*

Jake didn't know why or when he thought that the tutorial's purpose was to have the least number of survivors possible appeared, but he felt it sadly ironic how they had all been so wrong. Jake hadn't exactly helped either...

He had managed to collect quite the number of points, though - a number that got amplified a lot by the next messages.

Achievements earned:

Level bonus: 690%

Challenge Dungeon bonus: 150%

Dungeon bonuses: 400% (4x dungeon solo clear)

Title (Legendary Prodigy) bonus: 400%

Title (Prodigious Slayer of the Mighty) bonus: 350%

Title (Holder of a True Primordial Blessing) bonus: 500%

Title (Nobility: Lord) bonus: 100%

Tutorial solo clear bonus: 500%

Survivor count bonus: 0,1%

Time Bonus: 44,9%

Total Amplifier: 3135%

Total Tutorial Points Earned: 21.892.112.142

...*okay*. That was a lot of points and many amplifiers to points for a store he was still quite unsure what could be used for. Still, big numbers tended to be good, and if he had to guess, then nearly 22 billion had to be a big number.

And once more, he could only find the 0,1% from the survivor count sad...

“Gotta ask, is my score low or high?” Jake asked.

“Your performance in the tutorial has earned you the Progenitor title, the highest possible reward for the tutorial.”

Positive affirmation yay, he joked internally. Jake wasn't stupid. He had done what he doubted many others could do, and he had risked his life, time and time again, to pull out a narrow victory. While he would never rule out that someone else could have done what he did, he didn't want to take away from his own sense of accomplishment.

“So, what can I use these points for?” he asked.

“The Tutorial Store is the final reward of the tutorial. Therein the initiate will find items and skills and a myriad of other rewards to choose from. However, do note that only five items can be bought, and all remaining points will be given in the form of Credits.”

Before Jake had time to ask anything more, a menu popped up in front of him.

Chapter 113: Tutorial Rewards: Narrowing down options

What appeared before Jake was less of a list and more comparable to an online shop with pictures of items and everything. What had amazed him, however, was the sheer quality and quantity of goods available. He had expected for a few epic or maybe ancient level items to be there at most. It turns out he had been sorely mistaken.

[Spirehawk Longbow of Endless Embers (Legendary)]

[Blade of Material Rending (Legendary)]

[Spear of Illea (Legendary)]

... and the items continued like that. He was amazed and awed but soon found an issue. All of them were marked with a small red cross, and upon further inspection, found what it meant.

You do not meet the requirements to use this item

To make it all the more aggravating, it didn't tell him what the requirements were for any of them. Like it was all just a big tease to annoy him. He could buy them, just not use them. However, his annoyance got better as he scrolled downwards where he did find some he could use, even legendary ones.

[Consuming Light (Legendary)]

[Boneblade of Umbra (Legendary)]

[Bow of Woe (Legendary)]

Of course, most of them being ones with ominous names or related to shadows, it appeared. He spent quite a while looking at the items but soon stopped as he noticed something else. In his excitement, he had missed a menu at the top. Putting his attention to it, a drop-down menu opened, and he had apparently picked the first option without even noticing.

Equipment: Weapons

Equipment: Armor

Equipment: Miscellaneous

Miscellaneous Items

Consumables

Skills: Profession

Skills: Race

Skills: Class

Custom (consult Guide for further help)

Jake got a bit giddy as he saw that he could get more than just a new dagger or bow. He had so many options he was frankly overwhelmed. He started slowly looking at some of the things under armor, considering what to do.

He must have spent nearly half an hour as he shook his head and put his attention away from the menu, trying to clear his head. He was overwhelmed with options that he found it paralyzing. He had so many points, and looking at some of the prices, he could get several legendary items if he wished... it was too much.

Instead, he tried to look a bit at the last option: custom.

“Am I right to assume that you are the guide?” he asked the human-like creature still sitting eerily in the chair.

“Correct,” the creature that would henceforth be known as Guide answered.

“What can the custom options give me?”

“Anything as long as you have sufficient points.”

Anything? Jake thought, a bit skeptical. Could he really ask for literally anything? He asked the first thing that came to mind.

“Can I resurrect someone who died during the tutorial?”

“Yes.”

“How many points would it require to do so?”

“If you wish for a true resurrection, you do not have enough to resurrect any.”

Jake decided to stop at that. He remembered his chat with the Malefic Viper on some aspects of life and death in the multiverse. Anything less than a true resurrection was something he didn’t want to even think about.

While he could maybe raise them as undead or maybe spirits of some kind, he believed it would lead him down a path he wasn’t comfortable with. Instead, he chose to pursue the second thing on his mind.

“Could you also just... I dunno, make me a god or something? Theoretically,” Jake asked curiously.

“You currently have enough points for 11 race levels, 16 class levels, or 9 profession levels,” it answered. “Note that any levels gained through this method may have adverse effects later on.”

Yeah, fuck that, he thought as he asked something he actually did want if it was possible.

“Can you enhance my bloodline?”

If he was sure about one thing, it was the value of his bloodline. It had been the thing that propelled him to where he was today and one that would surely continue to do so in the future. It had gained him a legendary skill out of nothing, and without it, he would, without a doubt, have died already.

As he thought this, he looked at the Guide. Every other question he had asked, the thing provided an immediate answer, but with this one, it had just... stopped. While it didn't move much, to begin with, this was the first time he had seen the Guide frozen like this.

"Hello?" he asked a bit tentatively. Had he broken it? A few more seconds ticked by as the Guide answered in a voice more mechanical than ever before.

"Insufficient data to provide a meaningful answer."

That a negative? he thought, but nevertheless tried again.

"How many points would it require to enhance my bloodline?"

This time the answer came instantly.

"Insufficient data to provide a meaningful answer."

“I take that as a no?”

That question that got no answer.

Getting the hint, he moved on. With resurrections and bloodline improvements eliminated as options, he went for the next most important thing: knowledge.

“Can I buy information?”

“Yes. Note that the price of said information is dependent on the value of it. Certain things are also off-limits. Any piece of information will also count as a purchase.”

“Then-”

“Don’t waste points on what you can get for free.”

A voice sounded out in his head as he was about to ask about his family’s circumstances - a very familiar voice.

“Villy?” Jake asked out loud after hearing the voice. He felt a weird connection between him and the god as the voice continued.

“Yeah, giving out a divine message here, oh prophet of mine. But cutting the bullshit, you should focus on improving your base power for now. Things that will help you going forward. Skills or items that can be useful for a long time. Skip weapons and armor, or any item with inherently limited power. You are good in that department, and too strong equipment may only end up being a crutch. Skills are a good start...a.... cauldron... wa.... shi...”

Towards the end, the voice turned harder to understand until it fizzled out completely. The first divine message Jake had ever received directly from a god turned out to be a rather casual one offering advice. Advice Jake decided to follow, especially the last part about getting a cauldron, sounded interesting.

He was currently using the unranked mixing bowl from the challenge dungeon for his alchemy. It had done its job so far, but that was about it. Like with nearly all other trade tools, there were many items he could use to improve the effectiveness of his creations.

One such item was a cauldron. Like a mixing bowl, it had a mana pattern and runes inscribed upon it that facilitated alchemy. Those patterns appeared to be basic system-provided ones that all such tools carried. Of course, that isn't to say those couldn't be improved upon.

Jake had learned to transform mana into vital energy in the form of health potions and inner energy in the form of stamina potions, but that was about it when it came to what the basic mixing bowl could do. The bowl was also only suitable for liquids.

While he hadn't learned to make pills yet, a cauldron would be absolutely necessary for that. A cauldron also came with a lid, making it easier to control and keep out external factors and make it easier to control the heat. Overall, they were just better than simple bowls in nearly every way. Except of course being more expensive.

So, the first thing he decided to do was look into the **Miscellaneous Items** tab and quickly located the window containing alchemy tools. Once more, he was taken aback by the sheer quantity of items on offer. Not just cauldrons, but mixing bowls, catalysts, crystals, herbs, alembics, and just a whole lot of things he had no idea what the hell was even for.

Focusing his attention on the cauldrons, he removed all other options and started going through only those. To his pleasant surprise, he could actually use his Identify on the cauldrons, but only the ones at ancient rating or below. The best ones carrying a legendary rating, and all but one had a big red X covering them. Looking at the one he could use, he quickly discarded that one too. Firstly, due to the massive cost of around 9 billion TP and secondly because it was far too specialized for what he wanted. It was one that was very explicitly made for pills, something he couldn't even make yet.

Looking over the ancient and epic -rarity ones, he couldn't help but marvel at how many different alchemy specialties were available. Heck, some were even made for attacking enemies, allowing the Alchemical Flame that all alchemists had to become a weapon. The most disturbing one being a cauldron made for living beings, allowing the alchemist to turn their bodies into mush to be used in pills or potions.

In the end, he was split between two cauldrons, both having different pros and cons.

[Cauldron of Myriad Essences (Epic)] – A cauldron made by infusing a vast array of essences within it, granting it the ability to far easier and more efficiently transform mana affinities. Allows the user to change affinities to elemental affinities the user doesn't possess himself. The cauldron has very high mana conductivity due to the material and the runes inscribed upon it, but it is somewhat fragile compared to many

other types of cauldrons. Enchantments: Mana conductivity (Very High). Mana Transparency (Medium). Durability (Low). Myriad Essences.

Requirement: lvl 50+ in any alchemy-related profession.

Price: 108.560.000 TP

[Altmar Cauldron of Supreme Simplicity (Ancient)] – Sometimes less is more. A cauldron made by the Altmar Empire's expert crafters; it was created with the express purpose of efficient alchemy. Given to the royal alchemists in training, it often becomes a cauldron for life for even the most talented. The runes inscribed are easy to use and greatly enhance mana efficiency and conductivity while also making the entire working process far more transparent for the user. Enchantments: Mana conductivity (Supreme). Mana Transparency (Supreme). Durability (Extremely High).

Requirements: Soulbound

Price: 990.000.000 Tutorial Points

The two he was looking at were indeed very different from one another. The first one was far more complex and made for more intricate works but didn't have the sheer dominance in efficiency and usefulness as the second one.

The Cauldron of Myriad Essences, however, allowed him to do things he couldn't otherwise. He knew he lacked some mana affinities, of course, ones that would, without a doubt, lock him out of making certain things. This cauldron would allow him to work around that.

The Altmar Cauldron of Supreme Simplicity, on the other hand, was just pure usefulness in a cauldron. It was good in every way and even had the extraordinary benefit of being Soulbound. The transparency was mostly something he liked, making it easier for him to learn as he worked. One of the benefits of a mixing bowl like the one he had was the incredible transparency in everything he made, something a cauldron would obscure in favor of improving the mixing process. This cauldron would allow him to limit that obscuration. Also... poisons tended to quickly whittle down the durability of a cauldron or mixing bowl. He wasn't even sure how long his current bowl would hold on.

If he had to pick one, he would go with the Altmar one. However... *do I need to pick only one?*

He could choose a total of 5 things from the shop, so maybe he would still want both. Of course, it all depended on what else he decided to buy. The combined price for both of them was not even a twentieth of his total points, so he had plenty more things to go for.

Next up, he moved over to the **Skills: Profession** window. To his disappointment, he didn't see a single skill related to the Malefic Viper within. It didn't even show the usual skills he could pick. There were only twenty skills or so in total, the best of which was epic rating. A skill that didn't interest him in the least.

What was there was instead things that appeared utterly unrelated to his profession. Two of them even related to landscaping. Something that would be kind of useful if he wanted to make a garden or something... but it wasn't really him.

The only fascinating thing was a type of magic circle or formation that could change natural mana's affinity into the nature-affinity. It was only a rare skill, and Jake was a bit surprised he could even learn it considering he hadn't picked the nature-affinity skill.

The purpose of the formation was to create an area to better grow herbs, of course. But Jake wasn't planning on settling down for a few decades and make a lovely garden any time soon. He would rather just have another cauldron or two that would allow him to better use whatever herbs he found in the world.

A bit disappointed, he moved on and tried the **Skills: Race** window, where he found absolutely nothing. Apparently, humans didn't have shit when it came to race skills. Somehow it didn't really disappoint him, though, as he just moved on.

Next, he checked the **Consumables** part of the store. There he found an utter shitload of items, including potions of all sorts. Luckily for whoever decided to buy them, you could get them in bundles of a dozen, so you wouldn't waste your limited five options by just getting a few health potions.

In there, he also saw Elixirs but was a bit disappointed by how weak they were. Each only provided +10 to a given stat. However, the price was low, costing only around a million for each one, but you could only buy them individually. Needless to say, Jake didn't have any interest in those. It would feel like a waste.

Next, he moved to the big one: **Skills: Class**. He feared to run into a situation similar to the one he had with professions but found himself pleasantly surprised. He had quite a few more options here, and the quality was far better, too, with no lack of both epic and ancient skills. There were even two legendary ones.

The epic skills did have a few interesting ones, but Jake wasn't sure about any of them. He felt like his basic toolkit for fighting was adequate in many ways already, his main weaknesses being his resistance to mental and soul attacks currently. Of course, he knew that he likely had many other huge glaring flaws, ones he would surely be in for a lot of hurt learning. Such as some good area-of-effect attacks...

This isn't to say he couldn't get better at fighting, but he did feel like he needed a better movement skill. Shadow Vault of Umbra was, undoubtedly, strong in many ways, but it also did have a lot of glaring flaws.

Its consumption of energy was rather large, and he couldn't use it properly in many instances. It didn't really speed him up that much, and more often than not, he found himself using its phasing functionality more than the movement part of it. He would also like a movement skill that could allow him to travel more comfortably. If his plan of locating his family were to come to fruition, he would likely need to go on quite the hike.

His second wish for a new skill was one to make use of his high perception stat. He was at a whopping 1483 perception with his recent powerups, his second-highest stat being agility at 865. He also had 61 free points to boost it further if he found the need, making it possible for his perception to go to nearly 1600 after the percentage bonuses from his titles and bloodline.

After looking over all the skills, he settled on three to move forward with. The first of which was a movement skill.

[One Step Mile (Ancient)]

And finally, two possible perception skills. Those two also being the two legendary ones.

[All-Seeing Eye of Oras (Legendary)]

[Gaze of the Apex Predator (Legendary)]

Chapter 114: Tutorial Rewards: Getting stuff

Jake began with the movement skill One Step Mile. Everything about it he liked and the description sounded just straight-up cool.

[One Step Mile (Ancient)] – A single step is sometimes enough to cross vast distances. It is said that the very space between the user and their foes shrinks with every footfall. By drawing on the concept of space, this skill allows the user to cross far longer distances with every step than otherwise. Note that there must be a clear path between you and your target. Grants a noticeable bonus to the effectiveness of endurance and agility when using One Step Mile.

Price: 2.200.000.000

The skill was straightforward in principle. It would allow Jake to move further with every step and be able to travel far more effortlessly. In combat, it would, undoubtedly, also prove valuable to dodge and create distance between him and his opponent.

The thing about drawing on the concept of space only made it even more interesting. It would literally allow Jake to warp space, or maybe warp himself through space. Either way, anything dealing with manipulating space itself couldn't be bad in his eyes.

He was fully aware that despite the name saying One Step Mile, he wouldn't be able to cross an entire mile with every step. At least he seriously doubted he could, and if he could somehow manage to do it, it had to cost an obscene amount of stamina to do so. Or mana. He wasn't sure exactly what resource the skill would require.

The last part of the skill was the price. While steep, it was still only 10% of his total, showing once more how obscenely many points he had managed to acquire. It was even one of the more expensive ones.

He was pretty much settled on picking the skill as he moved on to the next two. Both perception-based skills and both legendary, he expected a lot from both of them. And the first one didn't disappoint.

[All-Seeing Eye of Oras (Legendary)] – Eyes that pierce the veil of obscuration. Allows the hunter to see through most illusions and other effects that obscure the senses. Allows the hunter to project his vision in all directions around himself. Allows the hunter to project his vision to any place within his line of sight, acting like another visual organ. With practice, may your eyes observe all of existence with a single glance. All effects of the skill are based on perception.

Price: 16.145.000.000

The All-Seeing Eye of Oras was just straight up nutty in his opinion. It appeared not only to give what his Sphere of Perception already had but also a whole lot of other things attached. Projected vision, ignoring illusions, etc. If he had this skill during the sewer dungeon, he doubted the dark mana would have had any effect on him at all.

Without a doubt, the skill had many moving parts and several aspects to it. It felt more like three or four skills than one cohesive skill. While that wasn't a bad thing, it did seem to have many uses Jake doubted he would make much use of. It was also a utility skill for the most part.

The most obviously useful part of it in combat was the spherical vision part of it. But quite honestly... Jake had a feeling that he was better than whatever the skill offered. He knew that he hadn't practiced anywhere close to as much as he should with his bloodline abilities, and he would prefer to do that over picking a potentially worse skill.

Projecting his vision had to be the most exciting part of it. It would allow him to scout way further ahead and enable him to see things he otherwise couldn't. It, coupled with the ability to see through obscuration effects, had to make the skill extremely overpowered when scouting.

Thing is... Jake didn't feel like he needed to get that much better at scouting. He felt like his extreme intuition, and his already high perception would be able to spot most enemies far ahead of time. And those he couldn't detect would likely be able to whip his ass anyway.

Overall evaluation of the skill was strong; he just didn't feel like it suited him. The price tag of 16 billion was also an excellent deterrent. He would instead pick a more suitable ancient skill if it came down to it.

There was a chance that his bloodline would create shenanigans, but he didn't want to risk it with a legendary skill...

Based on the final skill... risking it didn't seem necessary either.

[Gaze of the Apex Predator (Legendary)] – A single glance, a fallen prey. The Apex Predator has grown to where their foes cower in fear as it lays its eyes upon them. A glance that penetrates into the very soul of its prey, the gaze of the Apex Predator can immobilize or even kill any it sees. Gives the hunter the ability to paralyze, knock out, and even kill his prey through visual contact. This skill directly targets the soul of the target, ignoring distance, physical defense, and most magical defenses. All effects of Gaze of the Apex Predator are determined by perception.

Cost: 18.457.000.000

Reading the skill, he couldn't help but remember the attack from the King of the Forest that had knocked him out and nearly spelled his doom. It had been an attack that had directly hit him just by the creature looking at him, though there were some differences.

The King had released pulses of energy that had hit him like a sledgehammer directly to his brain. This skill was likely different, but the effects very much the same. He would be able to potentially knock out and even kill just by looking at people. He had to admit that some juvenile part of him couldn't help grinning at the thought of Killing Eyes.

Taking a more realistic view of things, he could see so much potential. The part about ignoring distance was exciting. He could already imagine standing far away from his enemy as he channeled Infused Powershot and then freeze the target with Gaze of the Apex Predator as the arrow was about to hit.

Comparing it to the All-Seeing Eye of Oras, it was also clear that this skill was far more cohesive. It did one thing and one thing only. It was a skill that appealed to him in every way. If he could do just a bit of whatever that attack the King used could, it would instantly become an invaluable skill.

As he thought of the skill, another thought struck him.

“By using the **Custom option**, is it possible to merge skills?” he asked the Guide.

“Yes, provided the skills hold any compatibility, to begin with, and that you meet the minimum base requirements to do so.”

“Can you merge the Gaze of the Apex Predator and my Hunters Sight?”

“Negative. You do not possess the Gaze of the Apex Predator skill.”

.... *Fuck you.*

Annoyed, he did some quick math to see if he could afford all the skills he wanted. It was a bit tight. Honestly... the Gaze would cost him nearly all his points alone, showing exactly how costly it was.

If he bought the two cauldrons, Gaze, and One Step Mile, he would be left with around 150 million points - a substantial amount for sure and hopefully enough to merge his two skills. If not... well, there were other skills available.

Having decided, he started out by buying the Gaze of the Apex Predator.

If the price for merging is too high, I can skip one of the cauldrons, I guess...

Confirming his purchase, he felt the knowledge enter his brain... followed by a burning sensation in his eyes. It wasn't the warm, comfortable feeling he usually got upon getting a skill, but it felt more like someone had put hot iron directly onto his pupils.

Letting out a surprised yelp, he put both his hands to his eyes as he fell backward. The pain was comparable to the time he nearly got eroded from his legs up during the challenge dungeon. Perhaps because what was currently happening to his eyes was very reminiscent of that.

In his pain, he picked up how his eyes underwent a cycle of destruction and regeneration as they were fundamentally rebuilt. His eyes would no longer be like those of a human but

closer to those of a beast. If one day he died, his eyes would be considered great material for many crafters.

It felt like hours but only took a few minutes. Now lying on the floor, Jake slowly opened his eyes. The white color that covered the room looked no different than before, and upon sitting up and gazing about, he noticed nothing different. His eyesight remained unchanged.

What had changed, however, was what he felt like his eyes could now do. He didn't have any target, but he instinctually knew that his gaze now held power.

Getting an idea, he tried to activate Hunter's Sight. His sight sharpened initially, but soon everything turned blurry as his eyes started burning again.

Oh, for fu...

Congratulations, Gaze of the Apex Predator and Hunters Sight have merged into Gaze of the Apex Hunter

... ck... fuck yeah,

As his sentiment underwent a sudden drastic change, he couldn't help smiling. It turns out that having two skills, both directly affecting the eyes, are easily mergeable if you try....

The new description had just straight-up merged the skills, with only minimal changes to both.

[Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)] – A hunter who has seen his gaze reflected in the eyes of the Apex Predator and now stares back with equal zeal. A glance that penetrates into the very soul of its prey, the gaze of the Apex Hunter can immobilize or even kill any it sees. Gives the hunter the ability to paralyze, knock out, and even kill his prey through visual contact. This skill directly targets the soul of the target, ignoring distance, physical defense, and most magical defenses. Passively enhances the hunter's eyes, increasing the effect of perception while also making weak-points easier to spot. All effects of Gaze of the Apex Hunter are determined by perception.

As the description reflected, the changes were minor. But the one that was there mattered a lot... Hunter's Sight was now just a passive. Opening his eyes, he, of course, instantly noticed how everything appeared sharper.

Even before, he often had the skill active for long durations of the fight, but he had started neglecting it towards the end. He didn't really need to be able to see the big boar he was already stabbing better, and it highlighting weak-points didn't do much either. It just instinctually made him aware of where his target was weaker, which so far had been rather apparent places. Big surprise that eyes, hearts, and brains were weak points.

Feeling very happy, he quickly picked up the two cauldrons on the list he wanted. The two cauldrons appeared on the table before him, one of them incredibly beautiful and ornate, and the other one just looking like a big ball of metal with a lid.

The pretty one was the Cauldron of Myriad Essences. It was marked with figures of flames burning and a wave-pattern running all along with it. All of them carried and pushed by the wind as they struck the carvings of earth. It was quite honestly a work of art. Its size was only around 30 centimeters across, and it was nearly perfectly round except for four stumpy legs below it.

The other cauldron, the Altmar Cauldron of Supreme Simplicity, was, despite being superior, rather cheap-looking and unimpressive. It also had four stumpy legs, and its size was also roughly the same. And while he didn't notice anything else surprising about it, he did feel the differences upon laying his hand on it.

It felt like he was a part of the cauldron like it was an extension of his body. He nearly wanted to stop and do alchemy right there and then. Shaking his head, the Altmar Cauldron was put in his storage. It was already bound to him as it was Soulbound. After that, he bound the other cauldron and put that in his storage.

Next, he went into the **Skills: Class** menu and picked up the One Step Mile skill. Surprisingly, nothing impressive happened upon him doing so, as he just felt the knowledge enter his head of how to use it. He had expected a bit more after the whole incident with Gaze and didn't know if he should be disappointed or happy.

He didn't have space in the room to practice the skill and instead decided to look for something else. He had 136.552.142 points remaining, a significant number for sure, but it felt like so little compared to his nearly 22 billion he started with.

Going through the lists, he ended up settling on something relatively simple in the end.

[Omnitool (Rare)] – A favorite for nearly all professions. This tool is made of a liquid metal that can take on any pre-programmed shape that the user desires. While unsuitable for combat, it has incredible application when it comes to performing nearly any recreational task. Enchantments: Self-Repair.

Cost: 1.900.000

If it did what was on the tin, it would be a useful tool in the future. Jake had to remember that he was returning to earth once more, and having access to tools would likely be limited. He didn't even have any idea how the planet he returned to would look like, so having the overpowered equivalent of a swiss army knife available wouldn't hurt.

The other thing he took notice of was the low cost of it. It was roughly the same price as other rare weapons and smaller armor pieces, and compared to all the other things he had gotten; it was peanuts. Then again, he had to consider that others would have access to a similar store, and far from everyone would have accumulated billions, or heck, even millions of points.

He remembered the Aspiring Blade of Nature he had fought what felt like ages ago. He had gotten a bit less than 800.000 tutorial points from that guy, and he had been nearly E-grade and relatively competent. As he had gained half the points off him, it meant he only had around one and a half million, which wasn't even enough for the Omnitool. With that logic, was the store actually rather stingy?

Jake spent a bit more time going through all the menus but couldn't find anything more interesting. None of the skills or special items he could find spoke to him, and he was too lacking in imagination to come up with some custom stuff. He did consider if he could get an item to find his family or something, but he felt like he would instead just ask the Viper about it.

Finally buying the damn tool, he saw a small orb appear on the table in front of him. He was at first taken aback, afraid he had purchased a tool for a gnome or midget. Upon picking it up and injecting mana into it, however, he discovered that it was just highly condensed metal, and at his command, could expand to a size several times bigger.

He couldn't hold himself back from testing a bit, transforming it into a shovel, a hammer, and even an umbrella just for the hell of it.

This thing may just be my favorite, he thought as he continued transforming it into different shapes. Sadly he couldn't make it into any weapons, except a knife, and even then, he could feel that it wasn't made for fighting but cooking or maybe sharpening sticks or something.

Getting bored quickly of playing around, he put it away. A few seconds passed as he just stood there, staring into space. The store window was gone, the guide silent, and the room was still as empty as always.

So... what now?

Chapter 115: Records

"Hey Guide, what now? Is there really no way to leave here?" Jake asked the vaguely human-like creature that the system had conjured.

“You have been offered four invitations from gods who are willing to receive you. If you accept, you will be able to go to them for the remaining time.”

“That was an option? And what gods?” he asked. He knew one of them, but he was interested in the three others.

“First, the main contributor to the tutorial you have just finished, Karroch. He has offered you to come to his realm and the potential to receive his blessing and guidance.

“Secondly, the god Umbra. She has offered you the opportunity to join her court and receive training to better use your high affinity for dark mana and the guarantee of a blessing and high position in the court if you perform well and wish for them.

“Third is the god Gwyndyr. He has offered his blessing and the possibility to acquire his legacy, which revolves around archery and the concept of fire. He has also guaranteed his blessing as well as training and guidance.

“Fourth is the one known as the Malefic Viper. He has offered you a ‘cool-ass, time-warped training session in alchemy’ as well as a bottle of vodka. Do note that all offers are binding for the gods.”

“Well, can’t say no to that last one,” Jake smiled. He was still quite interested in the other three gods as he had only heard the name Umbra before from his bracers and, of course, his Shadow Vault of Umbra skill.

Sure, they would offer stuff, but he could only have one blessing, so he wasn't really interested. He also didn't really feel like meeting a bunch of people he didn't know... Jake remembered going to parties where he didn't know anyone but one or two, and that seriously sucked... *yeah, fuck that.*

"I accept the invitation from the Malefic Viper. How do I go there?"

A few seconds passed with nothing happening, until suddenly a doorway appeared, leading into a room Jake had seen that time he accidentally sent a part of his soul to the Viper. *Well, that was easy enough.*

Looking at the Guide, he still wondered what the hell it actually was. If it was indeed a personification of the system or perhaps something else. Maybe he would never really know.

"Been a trip. See ya around."

"If your path takes you."

The Guide's voice, appearance, and demeanor were all the same as the first time Jake had appeared in this realm more than two months ago. It hadn't changed. Jake was the one who had changed.

No longer was he in formal wear, wearing his shined black shoes and hair combed back. Now his hair had grown out to cover his ears and was unkept. His shiny shoes changed out for old worn boots, and the rest of his outfit a collection of fur and leather, all covered by a cloak and even a mask covering his face. The only thing similar was the color scheme, as he also wore quite a lot of black before.

But his looks weren't the only thing that changed. Jake had experienced a lot over the brief period, and he had learned a lot about himself. He had, of course, gotten significantly stronger and developed his skills in combat.

He had often been close to death, his encounter with the King of the Forest likely being the most immediate. It was his biggest crisis, but at the same time also his most significant achievement. The day he killed the Den Mother, he set the goal of killing the King of the Forest for himself.

That goal he had now met. When he heard the 'congratulation' for passing the tutorial, it truly seeped in. He had succeeded. He won. It was a lofty goal, to begin with, and yet he had managed to sneak out a narrow victory at the end.

Most other humans who had experienced the tutorial likely saw it as the worst thing they had ever experienced. For Jake, it also hadn't been a cakewalk. He had lost nearly all his colleagues, suffered emotionally and physically, and was in a constant rush to fight and grow stronger. And yet...

It was fun.

Jake had genuinely enjoyed his time in the tutorial. The constant tension and danger, the always looming knowledge that there was more to see and more to experience. And

naturally, there was the challenge... Jake loved a good challenge. No challenge was more exciting than one with your life on the line.

Now it was time to move forward. Jake stepped through the door with a satisfied smile hanging on his lips, already looking forward to whatever comes next.

“Your senses are adequate, but your movements too stiff. Don’t think. React,” the Grand Master said as he admonished the black and blue Bertram sitting on the floor. He had just gotten done getting another beating.

How long had it been so far? Two weeks maybe? Bertram wasn’t sure. He still had a hard time comprehending the concept of how time could somehow move slower in this chamber than just outside the door.

The Grand Master explained that it was through a formation put down by an A-rank High Inquisitor, but that was about it. The rest of the time had been spent training. Learning how to fight with his sword and shield properly.

Bertram had already learned to fight and thought himself competent with both a knife as well as a gun. But he had to admit that he hadn’t rigorously ever practiced swords, much less shields, before the tutorial.

On top of that, the man in front of him was just on an entirely different level. Every one of his movements was exquisite, every step calculated to the smallest detail. Despite him lowering his stats to the same level as Bertram himself, the bodyguard hadn’t managed to touch his clothes, much less land a blow.

He was still unsure how powerful the man was, but he couldn't be some lowly soldier having achieved the title of Grand Master. He was the leader of an order of Templars directly below one of the subordinate gods in the Holy Pantheon.

Bertram had asked if the man couldn't simply follow them back to earth, something he had gotten a solid negative answer to. The system didn't allow other universes to interfere in newly initiated universes. When Bertram asked to enquire further, he was told to pick up his sword and stop thinking about things above his station.

He was a bodyguard, after all. Or perhaps guardian would be more accurate now. That responsibility was the only constant in his life. A constant he would hold unto no matter what happened. He would follow the young master no matter what he decided to do. Be he a devil or a saint; it was not for him to judge. He was just his silent guardian. Well, mostly silent guardian.

Just outside the chamber and down the hall was his young master studying a large tome. Jacob had spent the majority of his time waiting for his return to Earth reading. His class had many benefits, one of them being his requirements to level.

Unlike nearly all others, he would get nothing from killing. Instead, the mere act of acquiring information on his faith, as well as just expanding his knowledge, helped. He had already read that other classes could level without fighting, but most still revolved around it.

To him, it was very different... for him to be involved in taking lives would be penalized. It would hurt his future potential as an Augur, and if he went astray, it could end badly. Jacob was also strictly aware of exactly how heavy these penalties would be: if he ever killed a single enlightened being, he would lose his class and many of his skills.

A warrior could level not just by slaying enemies but also by practicing with his sword and improving his skills. Needless to say, however, it was much slower. Slower, but infinitely safer. However, it wasn't a sustainable way of improving your strength with a combat-focused skill.

At some point, you would stagnate. You would be unable to level up further. Even going out slaying beasts at that point wouldn't necessarily grant a level. Jacob had come to learn that despite his and most likely most others' assumptions, that the system wasn't as much like a videogame as he sometimes assumed.

The largest difference was, without a doubt, the entire concept of Records. Jacob knew it was his translation of it, and it held many names, but all boiled down to the same thing in the end. Like the Akashic Records that the translation was based on, it was a collection of everything. Of all that has ever happened, and in some ways also all that would happen.

A warrior going out fighting would write upon these Records. Every single thing in the system carries within them a collection of their own Records - their own accomplishments, failures, and successes. Each person had their own story, and the Records describing their own path.

This is where the impact on leveling comes in. One needs to have sufficient Records to be able to level up. One could liken one's Records to being a pond, with experience points being the water filling it up. Records would expand the pond, but not just any Records. They had to be noticeable.

Fighting beasts weaker than yourself, training to level, or being taught by others would grant experience to fill the pond but wouldn't help expand the pond at all. One would fill it out at some point, and something drastic would be required to develop it.

Simultaneously, if one repeatedly risked their own life and fought beasts at the same level or stronger, one would expand their pond at the same pace or faster as the experience was earned. One would be able to keep leveling like that, but of course, it also came with a constant risk to your life.

In the same vein, crafters had to push themselves too. The non-combat professions and classes had to go beyond their comfort zones and strive to improve themselves. Craft items of higher rarity or greater difficulty, maybe even craft different things. Use more expensive materials and never stagnate.

Yet this method wasn't foolproof. One other major obstacle for leveling was one all faced - rank upgrades or evolutions as they were also called.

Ranking up from E to D tier or D to C tier wasn't simply expanding the pond. It was a renovation - one that required far more Records than just the ones needed to be able to keep leveling normally. Rank upgrades would more often than not mean a bottleneck. One most would never overcome - all of this, not even mentioning that sometimes just sufficient Records wasn't the only requirement for ranking up.

But how does one earn enough Records then? Jacob found several surefire methods recorded. The largest of them being titles. As a newly initiated human, Jacob had assumed the most substantial reward from titles was the actual title and their associated bonuses. But many, especially those of higher rank, would disagree. The most considerable reward from a title was the associated Records.

A title was clear proof of achievement. This isn't to say that all titles are hard to earn, but all of them indisputably add Records of quality. The easy titles that could be achieved even

with little effort were often gained through standard leveling, making them just another part of normal progression.

Records also aren't only what limits when you can level and rank up, but also what you can gain from it. The skills, classes, professions, races, etc., available. All of it was coming together to give you options. Options being the keyword.

Despite the system seemingly being limited through Records, it still emphasized options. And the more powerful one becomes, the more Records of quality one has, the more options. Better options. Often there was a snowball effect to having strong Records early and getting a great class and/or profession at E-rank or even race for monsters.

That isn't to say that getting a worse class or profession would be the end, though. The stronger your base, the more is required of you to move forward. Complacency would still mean the end of your path, while one who started out weak can become strong through perseverance. Sometimes slow and steady wins the race.

The book did, however, say that the destiny of everyone wasn't to fight. Sometimes one had to accept one's situation and instead of pushing themselves to improve, try and help those around you. That sometimes, you reach the end of your path, and you have to realize that and effectively give up.

There was also the entire thing called concepts. Concepts, nomological laws, dao, laws of nature, the essence of the world. It all had many names, but ultimately it boiled down to comprehending the incomprehensible. To understand that which cannot be truly understood.

Many powerful skills found themselves rooted in concepts. Jacob knew that his own skills did so too. His divination being firmly rooted in the concept of divination itself. And if he managed to understand that concept better, so would his skill improve. Like a swordsman enhancing his skills with a sword, albeit countless times more complicated.

Reading, it quickly became clear, however, that concepts were something that often would come naturally. Something more easily accessed and understood as stats increased and ranks increased. Concepts could easily be explained with them being the “why” something is.

Some focused on learning these concepts and gain power that way, but it wasn't strictly necessary. It was just one path of many.

They also were closely tied to affinities and mana as a whole. But to understand that tie-in and relationship was a concept in itself. Honestly, it all felt more complicated than Jacob had the brainpower to really get into.

To sum it all up, Records was the collection of who you are and the potential you possess - an impossible thing to truly quantify, affected by countless factors. Titles, achievements, concepts, affinities, bloodlines, innate talent, destiny, karma, personality, actions, thoughts, history, desires, emotions, comprehension, and countless other things incapsulated the sum of your Records. And those Records would be what determines your path of progression going forward.

Jacob himself was a great example of how weird to understand Records were. He had gotten the class Augur of Hope. A special class that was both rare and powerful in so many ways. Yet Jacob had no idea how he had gotten it. He just had. Maybe he had just been lucky, or perhaps the system knew things Jacob himself didn't yet - another concept that often occurred.

Just based on that class, he could go far. The Grand Master had said that he shouldn't experience any bottlenecks for quite a while as long as he kept true to himself and his own path. Whatever that means.

He knew that the new initiates were in a bit of a different situation than most. The 'history' upon their Records was short. There was barely anything to them, which meant that forming them and everything written upon the Records would matter far more in the early days.

This was why so many could more easily get rare classes and professions. The requirements were lower as you didn't have as much baggage to drag along. It would smooth out relatively soon, but it did mean that the new initiates had some inherent advantages if they pushed themselves here, to begin with. For now, at least.

Through his research, he had also learned a lot about the nature of gods. More accurately, why they seemed to be so involved in the tutorial and why they gave out blessings and such, unsurprisingly, it all had to do with Records.

To improve one's Records was something every single entity in the multiverse wanted, from the lowest of F-grades to the most powerful of gods. But for a god to do so was problematic. Often, they had to either do so by achieving something new or through their believers. Or through the last big way to get Records. Events.

And no event was more significant than the initiation of a new universe. Through that, gods could gain new believers, of course, but they could also help shape the new universe and the new people in it. Doing so would help their Records immensely. There were even some more tangible rewards set by the system, such as titles or opportunities. Rewards, all based on how well individuals perform in so-called 'sponsored' tutorials.

Jacob had been unable to read further into it from there. Likely due to the gods censoring the knowledge, or perhaps just distorting it. However, what he did learn was the importance of blessings for both the god and the ones receiving them.

A blessed individual would contribute Records to the god that has blessed them based on everything they do. Simultaneously, the blessed one is granted quality Records through the blessing, effectively making them stronger and raising their potential. It was a win-win in many ways. However, Jacob had suspicions that it wasn't all that flowery as the books made it out to be.

He knew that what he read was all written by the Holy Church. A lot of it was likely easily provable and obvious to those that lived in the system, but many details weren't. It was the knowledge he guessed was only privy to the gods or those of higher ranks. Or perhaps for you to discover yourself.

Of course, it was also a possibility that even the mightiest of gods didn't truly understand the system either.

Chapter 116: A Godlike Getaway

Jake stepped through the door into the bedroom that he remembered belonged to the Viper. He had barely entered the room as a loud popping noise was heard along with a... party horn?

“CONGRATULATIONS!”

... In front of him stood the legendary god known as the Malefic Viper wearing a small party hat with a horn in his mouth. Beside him, an old-looking man with a big white beard, messy clothes, and overall unkempt appearance. Except for his headwear. He, too, wore a party hat, though he seemed less than amused at the entire ordeal, and Jake would bet his entire potion stash on the Viper having forced him to wear it.

“Thanks, I guess?” Jake managed to answer, still bewildered by the beaming Viper and the bored old man.

The old man was plump, if not outright obese, and looked like he hadn’t taken a shower for months. Yet, the most noticeable thing about him was his sharp eyes and the faint aroma of soil around him. Looking at him, Jake also instantly knew that this man was a god. He didn’t know how he knew; he just did. Perhaps it was the aura...

“Man, that finale in the tutorial was great. Straight up burned your entire damn soul to punch him harder. If not for how absolutely suicidal that was, I would want to see it again,” the Viper joked, as he slapped the back of the old man.

“This right here is Duskleaf, my true-to-me disciple. Taught the kid alchemy from when he was a wee lad. When it comes to alchemy, he isn’t bad at all, I tell ya.”

“Still new to this, but anyone who can become a god can’t suck, I guess?” Jake answered. “Nice to meet you, name's Jake.”

“Hmph.” That was all the answer he got from the old man who still looked like he really didn’t want to be there. Which he likely didn’t, but Jake had the faint feeling that the Malefic Viper could be quite persuasive.

“Oh, come on, why so gloomy? Isn’t this great, just three buddies chilling?” the Viper said, still slapping the bored old man on the back. A bit harder this time.

With a grunt, the old man said in a weirdly meek voice that didn’t suit him at all. “You said you would actually teach me something...”

“I did, and I will!” the scaled god answered. “We are still gonna do alchemy, no worries, we just have another participant! The more, the merrier and all that.”

“I feel like I am intruding in the middle of something here.”

“You aren’t-”

“Yes, you are.”

Before the Viper could correct him, his disciple quickly shot him down. Jake could only inwardly chuckle at the two. Without a doubt, they had developed their own little dynamic over the eternity they had known each other.

“If it’s any consolation, then I am pretty sure I am only allowed to stay a couple of days before I am whizzed off back to Earth. Or whatever the planet has become.”

“I know, that is why we are in a hurry! Come on now, to the lab!” the Viper yelled as he began marching out the room.

Duskleaf, knowing arguing would be useless, simply followed, with Jake also trailing along. They walked at a brisk yet relaxed pace, as Jake failed to hold back his curiosity.

“You said that you could provide information on the circumstances of my family during the tutorial rewards-thingie?”

“Yeah, but not now. We’re going to go over all that stuff shortly before you return. Trust me; we got more time than you think.”

“Alright, I guess. By the way, did you know three other gods had also given out invitations for me to come and meet them?”

“Nah. Who were they? I guess one was the tutorial’s main sponsor, whoever that is, but who are the other two? The Shroud should make it impossible for most even to know you exist,” the Viper asked, with a hint of surprise in his voice. Something that also got a raised eyebrow out of Duskleaf.

“The main contributor, or sponsor, I guess, was a guy named Karroch. The other two were Umbra and Gwyndyr.”

“I see. Umbra is a bit alarming though unsurprising. Gwyndyr isn't that unexpected either, but I must say I am not really that familiar with Karroch.”

“To answer master, Karroch is a god from the 89th era. As a mortal, he was a beast tamer and commanded an army of beasts. He is just a rogue god, and all in all, he isn't very impressive,” Duskleaf interjected, answering both Jake and the Viper.

Jake knew from prior conversations with the Viper that an era was when a universe was the newest one integrated. In other words, if one was born during the 89th era, it means that the 89th universe was the most recent universe to the multiverse. Currently, the multiverse had just entered the 93rd era, with Jake's own universe's integration.

“What about Gwyndyr and Umbra?” Jake asked, addressing both Duskleaf and the Viper.

“Gwyndyr is a god from the 7th era. Leader of the Crimson Flame, a collection of powerful gods who have assembled, all focused on the concept of fire. As a mortal, he was an archer, most notable for having killed a god before achieving godhood himself. In other words, he isn't a god to be belittled. He is old and powerful,” Duskleaf said, as the Viper continued for him.

“Umbra is an old acquaintance of mine. She came to be during the 2nd era. She is strong, and in the concept of shadows and dark mana in general, has skills that are second-to-none. On top of that, she has an organization known as the Court of Shadows. Assassins for the most part, and one feared by mortals and gods alike. If you want someone dead, are filthy rich, and got enough leeway, they are the ones you go to. Be the target god or mortal.”

“Yeah, alright, sounds impressive, I guess,” Jake answered, not knowing even half of what the fuck they were talking about. He did find one thing very interesting, however.

“You call some of the gods strong and weak? How exactly does godhood work?”

“Honestly, just like mortals in most ways. Some are strong, while some are weak. It’s just more... complicated than mortals. Just know that the main divide lies exactly in that word: Mortal. To become a god is to become immortal,” the Viper answered.

“So, who is stronger, you, Gwyndyr or Umbra?” Jake asked, a bit teasingly.

“Hah, good question. Hard to know without fighting it out. Though if I had to answer... while Gwyndyr would be annoying, I can’t see myself losing. A bit of the same with Umbra, but I would put her a level higher than Gwyndyr. The thing with gods is that a lot of our strengths are conditional. To fight any god within their own realm is pretty stupid unless you are far more powerful than them. And even if you fight on neutral ground, there is a lot of difference between beating someone and killing them. Gods are notoriously hard to put down,” the Viper explained after thinking for a bit.

Considering the answer a bit, Jake inquired further. “is Umbra a Primordial too? Actually, what even is a Primordial? A rank of god or something?”

“Nah, she isn’t. Primordial is not a rank but a title. It doesn’t really have anything to do with strength. The title is for becoming a god during the first era, before the integration of the second universe. In other words, to be among the first gods.”

“Going out on a limb here assuming that any god who is among the first are considered strong... how many of you are there?”

“First of all, a good assumption. There are 12 of us in total. Not a single one of us weak. Not to brag - actually fuck that, to full-on brag - becoming a god during the first era was fucking brutal. There weren’t any gods to guide you; no one knew what the fuck was going on. The system was still new and very different from today, far simpler. No tutorials, no stores, just killing and getting stronger. For even twelve of us to emerge was a goddamn – pun intended - miracle. And anyone who can bring about such a miracle is strong.”

“Damn. So you 12 are the strongest around? It sounds like I hit the jackpot with my profession,” Jake half-jokingly said. He was still processing what he had just heard, trying to relate to how it was back then.

“That wouldn’t be very accurate. While we were the first, that doesn’t mean we are the strongest by default. A long-ass time has passed since the first era, and there are now more gods than ever - many extremely strong ones among them. Umbra and Gwyndyr in that batch,” the Malefic Viper answered patiently. Duskleaf was just silently wandering by their side, not showing any intentions of adding anything.

“Exactly how many gods are there?” Jake asked.

“Hell if I know. There were 12 during the first era, as I said, and that was, of course, the era with the least amount. After that, it has only escalated exponentially. Think about it, just because the second era begins doesn’t mean that the first multiverse stops producing gods. By the end of the second era, there were around 300 gods, while we were into the thousands by the end of the third one.

“That isn’t to say that it just kept growing. Let me be clear, that even with it being easier to become a god, it sure as hell is never easy; any god, no matter who, is an extreme talent. This was also about the time we began really seeing gods even die. With the guidance of the prior generations, becoming a god became more manageable, but it also meant that the quality fell. That is pretty much how it still is today, with each era having more and more gods, with the overall quality falling.

“Which isn’t to say we don’t have standouts still. The 92nd era, the one just before your universe, had Yip of Yore. A fucking lunatic of major proportions who killed half a pantheon the second he became a god himself, and from what I heard hasn’t stopped being bat-shit crazy since.”

“That is a lot to take in,” Jake said, after listening to the Viper’s lengthy exposition.

He felt more than a little lucky that he had his own source of direct information on the world of gods. From how the tutorial apparently had ‘sponsors’ and how blessings and all that worked, he had a solid feeling that gods were an essential part of the multiverse. And as a former financial analyst, Jake guaranteed that the more data, the better.

“Wait, didn’t you say that Eversmile guy is also a Primordial?”

“Yep. But enough of that, we are here!”

They stood before a big door that appeared to be made of some kind of dark metal. On it was countless glowing runes, and Jake felt himself getting a headache just by looking at it.

“What is here?” he asked, averting his gaze from the door.

The Viper didn’t answer but instead opened the door and led him and Duskleaf into the chamber. Entering, Jake found himself in a big room with a big table and chairs, with not much else around, except for dozens of doorways leading into other rooms.

He could see into those rooms with his sphere and saw that most of them just had a pillow placed on the floor. However, two of them were full-on alchemy labs, with more tools and equipment than Jake had ever seen before. Before he could ask about it, the Viper spoke once more.

“As you know, we are pressed for time, so I thought, why not just get some more time? This is a time-chamber. Think of it like in that movie Interstellar. Time spent within this room is slower than the time out here.”

“Seriously? Pretty sure this isn’t Dragonball?”

“Actually, that would be a more accurate reference. Good catch. Anyway, we can slow time, but the magnitude is dependent on you.”

“How so? How high can it go?” Jake asked. His imagination was already beginning to run wild. Could he spend years here, maybe even reach D-grade before returning to earth?

“Higher than you can handle. Time distortion isn’t all happy times and sunshine. It negatively affects a lot of things, including experience gain. Learning concepts, well, except for the concept of time, is also way harder, if not outright impossible. You also can’t do it too much, or it negatively affects your Records. Finally, the degree to which you can bend time is dependent on the ones affected.”

“In other words, I am too weak to handle it,” Jake stated, which just earned him a nod from both the Viper and Duskleaf.

“Well, let’s stop wasting time. I am gonna activate the formation, and time will begin to slow down within the chamber. Be warned that it will feel weird as fuck, and speak up if you start getting too disorientated. The first time can be tough,” the Malefic Viper said as he, without any further delay, picked up a weird crystal from the table and channeled mana into it.

Instantly Jake felt a... shift. Like everything turned murky yet didn’t. It was an oddly disconnecting feeling like it wasn’t really happening to him, but someone else. Yet the feeling disappeared just as fast as it came while he tried to make himself used to it.

Just as he was grounded once more, the time distortion got worse once more. Jake had closed his eyes at this point, just taking it all in. It felt very similar to when his Moment of the Primal Hunter activated, actually. However, those times were often too brief and too intense to really reflect on.

Jake had some understandings of time and relativity theory from his schooldays, but experiencing it like this likely wasn’t what his teacher had imagined. The notion that time moved at an entirely different pace, just ten steps away outside the door, was unsettling and incredibly interesting at the same time.

As the seconds ticked by, the feeling changed from weird to pressuring. Jake felt like a huge weight was pushing down on him. At the first sign of pain, he opened his eyes and asked, a bit worried.

“Is it supposed to hurt? My body feels like small needles are pricking everywhere.”

He had expected a fast answer, but instead, he saw the Viper and Duskleaf just stare at him for a while. After the two exchanged a quick glance, the Viper answered.

“It means that your body, or more accurately your soul, has reached its limit,” the Viper said as he scratched the back of his head. “Did you pick up a skill related to chronomancy or something like that as a reward for the tutorial?”

“No?” Jake answered, a bit confused. “I only picked two skills, and none of them had anything to do with time magic as far as I can tell.”

“I see. This may sound weird, but have you somehow ever experienced time distortion before?”

“Not like this, but I have a skill. One related to ‘that,’” Jake answered. He remembered not to mention his bloodline outright. While he didn’t distrust Duskleaf, he didn’t exactly know him either.

“I see... moving on!”

Before Duskleaf, who clearly had questions, could open his mouth, the Viper turned the time distortion down just enough for the prickling feeling to disappear.

“Now, follow me!” the Malefic Viper said, as Jake heard a sound he hadn’t expected.

Music with a title related to the visual organ of a large felid began blaring from nowhere, as Jake just looked at the Viper with a resigned expression.

“Really?”

“What? It’s training montage time!”

Chapter 117: Danger Bath

The days passed by quickly as the two gods and one mortal immersed themselves in the laboratory. At first, Duskleaf had been less than excited, to say the least. Jake had already guessed that the Viper had forced him into it, and he was entirely correct. What he didn't know was that Duskleaf didn't like Jake himself either.

Why do I have to waste my time on this, was what the god thought in the beginning.

Duskleaf was an alchemist. Period. He had always been an alchemist and never cared much for anything else. He had mostly ignored his class, only leveling it sparingly whenever necessary. It was due to his extreme talent and dedication that he managed to ascend to godhood. A commitment he had believed Jake to lack.

The old alchemist had believed Jake just to be yet another of the young talented fighters that had picked up alchemy as a side-profession. A sentiment he well and truly hated. The Alchemist of the Malefic Viper profession and its related evolution were among the most combat-focused of all alchemy professions. This had led many to simply pick it up for those reasons, and that they didn't care for alchemy itself.

After the first day, however, he began to change his mind. He had seen Jake fight the King together with the Viper, and from that had indeed formed the image of a talented fighter who was far more brawn than brain.

Yet the young mortal dove into alchemy with the same zeal as he did a fight with a formidable opponent. His eyes burned with passion whenever he met a challenge, and his happiness genuine whenever he overcame his own limitations. It was as if every brewing or concoction was a fight to the death. And that... that Duskleaf liked.

Of course, all of it would be for naught if the kid was untalented. Another doubt that quickly got dispelled. While Duskleaf found it hard to evaluate him properly, he did see endless potential. The issue was just how raw it all was. Despite his passion, it was clear that Jake had never had proper training in alchemy or mana control in general. But at the same time, his skills made it hard for Duskleaf to believe that he had only been in the system for a couple of months.

When he learned that Jake had spent two of his five chances in the tutorial store to buy cauldrons, he truly got his seal of approval.

Jake himself didn't have the faintest clue about the old man's thoughts; he had only noticed that he now appeared at least marginally less bored. The Malefic Viper was full of energy as always, and he had to say... he was having a damn good time. It was hard but fun.

The only downside was how little experience he got. After a week, he had only gained a single level in his profession, taking him to level 56. The leveling was incredibly slow, without a doubt, due to the time distortion going on. He had been warned about it, but it still stung.

This isn't to say he didn't improve. Because oh boy, did he improve. It turns out that having two gods giving pointers helped a lot. Their advice was minimal as they mostly just told Jake to try something and then observed, only giving general advice here and there.

From what he had gathered, the Viper didn't want to limit him in any way by giving him too clear directions. He was very much a hands-off teacher. However, he did have many fun tests and challenges, his favorite by far being a particular cauldron.

[Practice Cauldron of the Malefic Viper (?)] – A cauldron with imprinted challenges and trials.

His Identify didn't give much, but he didn't really care either. The thing was awesome. It was like he was doing actual alchemy when using it, except it didn't use any ingredients but focused solely on the crafting process itself. It was like simulating a brewing or concoction, and he loved it with all of his heart.

Sadly he learned that he couldn't bring it with him due to restrictions on new multiverses. A sad day indeed, but that only motivated him more to spend his time efficiently with it.

Restrictions on him were actually quite far and wide. He couldn't get any items, and he couldn't use any consumables items that weren't his either. Which meant he couldn't just get handed a bunch of elixirs and free stats. He had, however, learned that the Viper was onto something in one of the side-rooms. What looked like a jacuzzi was being filled with all types of herbs and poisons, with the god himself carrying a quite malicious smile.

Eight days after he entered the chamber, Jake collapsed. Initially, he startled Duskleaf until he scanned the human and found him merely asleep. Even with all his stats, Jake was, in the end, still only E-grade. What was surprising, however, was Jake being so immersed in his practice that he simply collapsed. Second seal of approval earned. Duskleaf remembered how he had once burnt off half his hair and melted off the right side of his face because he fell asleep during a concoction. Good times.

Fifteen days in the chamber, and Jake earned his second level taking him to 57. He had also learned that apparently, 4-D chess was a thing. Or maybe they were just fucking with him. Most likely, the last one.

Eighteen days in and Jake collapsed for the second time while grinding out the trials in the cauldron. This time the old alchemist didn't even react as he just nodded proudly at the young man lying face-first, bent over the cauldron.

On the twentieth day, the Viper came out of his secret room with a larger than usual malefic smile.

"It is done! The Trial of Myriad Poisons has been prepared!"

"Master..." the old alchemist said with a sigh. "We are teaching him, not killing him. Even then, with the restriction in place, you know it won't work..."

"Ah, but I am only giving out an already promised reward. Remember what I offered you, Jake?" the Malefic Viper asked, still grinning.

"Alchemy training and alcohol," he answered.

"Exactly. So follow me."

None of them bothered to question the god as they both just followed him into the room. Within there was a massive barrel of sorts - more than big enough to hold a human within. It was filled with a liquid that set his Sense of the Malefic Viper off like never before. He could sense so many herbs and toxins it felt overwhelming.

Thousands... no, more. Millions? What the hell is this? Jake thought.

"Now, what I offered was a bottle of vodka, to be more precise," the creator of the barrel said, as he pulled a bottle out of thin air. *Not a bad brand*, Jake barely managed to think before the Viper opened it and began pouring it into the barrel.

"Oh no, I accidentally dropped it into this suspicious barrel. Well, it appears you will have to consume the entire thing to get your vodka!" the Viper said, his grin not able to get any larger.

"... While I am into experimental cocktails, I do have my limits," Jake managed to answer after looking dumbstruck at the silly actions of the scaled god.

"Ah, but it will be good for you, I promise!" the Viper laughed for a bit before turning serious. "Cutting the bullshit, this thing is called a Trial of Myriad Poisons. It is something that is sometimes offered to talented alchemists of the Malefic Order. Jake, do you know why my class is considered one of the best for alchemists?"

"Membership discounts? Dude, this is the first and only profession I have ever really seen."

"Yeah, yeah. Anyway, the reason is of course because of the skills. The most sought-after being my Palate skill. A skill that is extremely strong even when first gotten and only gets better. However, the main issue is how difficult it is to upgrade and evolve due to its nature. One needs to consume and become familiar with a lot of toxins. Which is where the Trial comes in," he said, slapping the big barrel with his scaled hand.

"This bad boy can fit so many fucking toxins in it. The alchemist can, through this, enhance the skill, even possibly its rarity. Of course, while also vastly increasing their innate knowledge of many different toxins and herbs, which is undoubtedly a huge help

on their path. Of course, actually absorbing all of that isn't easy. Hence why it is considered a Trial."

Jake looked between the barrel and the Viper for a bit as he considered his words. It all seemed too good to be true. "Isn't this just a straight-up cheat? Also, Palate only works with toxins last time I checked, and this thing has plenty of herbs within."

"Due to how the concoction is made, the herbs have become mixed with toxins and will be recognized as such by the system, so in that regard, it is a bit of a cheat. For the first part, even by ignoring how ridiculously expensive and hard it is to make the Trial, most alchemists fail to get anything worthwhile out of it. Most just die, actually. Also, it is often done with far more experienced alchemists. You have to actively absorb and digest the poison during the Trial while also managing to stay clear-headed," Duskleaf muttered, clearly not a massive fan of the entire ordeal.

"Meh, stop worrying, it'll be fine!" the Viper said dismissively while gazing towards Jake. "Besides, it's up to Jake. So, you up for it?"

Jake looked at the barrel a bit as he considered what both of the two gods had said. Apparently, this Trial was both a great opportunity as well as risk. High-risk, high reward if you may. Just the way he liked it. "Fuck it, let's go."

"Knew it! Take off ya garbs and get ready. A fair warning, it will hurt like hell, and you will feel like your entire body is burning from the inside out the entire time while simultaneously being eaten by maggots and on a pain-amplifying stimulant. But just focus on absorbing the toxins. The more you absorb, the larger your gains."

"How long will it take?" Jake asked. He had no idea how long he had left within here. After entering, he had lost the timer and had no real concept of how much time had passed out in the real world.

"Once more, that depends on how long you can hold out for and how much you can absorb. But if you can't even hold out for a few hours, you suck," the Viper half-jokingly said while Jake disrobed. Disrobing, meaning just to put all of his clothes into his spatial storage. The only things he kept on were his rings and necklace as well as the mask. The rings and necklace because they were embedded in his body anyway, and the mask because he had completely forgotten he was even wearing it.

"I just jump in?" he asked out loud to the room, getting an answer from Duskleaf.

"I would suggest steeling yourself first. It will take every shred of willpower you have to succeed."

"Got some free points. Would it help to increase the stat?" Jake asked.

Shaking his head, the Viper answered. "I think I already told you this once. Willpower doesn't work that way. What my disciple means is to stay headstrong and determined. No number of stats can truly affect your mental state. Willpower helps defend against outside influences that can shatter or weaken that mental state, but it can never form it, to begin with. No skills or stats would help a thing against a Trial like this."

"Alright then, let's just jump right into it," Jake said as he leaped up to stand at the edge of the barrel. He stared down at the black sludge below him. Didn't look particularly appetizing or healthy. But he had already decided to do it, and he wasn't a quitter.

"Here we go."

Taking a step forward, he sunk into the sludge, slowly getting immersed into it. The first thing he felt was his feet, feeling like they were on fire. Then next was his legs, and then his entire body as his head slowly sunk beneath the surface. It honestly wasn't that bad. A thought he quickly came to regret.

It took only a few moments before he saw the Viper do something outside, making faint runes glow on the barrel. Around him, he felt the toxins and herbs become active. Like they had all been sleeping before, they now all awakened. The Trial had now begun.

Jake felt the toxins around him slowly seek out his pores and every other opening in his body. Resistance was futile as it slowly entered him. As if he had been hit with thousands of needles at once, it entered his body. Then the real pain came.

His teeth clenched shut first thing as he suppressed a scream. Blood began flowing from his mouth as his teeth pressed down. A few teeth even ending up being cracked, but he couldn't even feel it. The pain from that was trivial compared to what he experienced from the poison.

Now that he wanted to scream, he failed as his entire body was paralyzed from the poison. He couldn't move and felt like he was locked within his own body. Like a worse kind of sleep paralysis, he couldn't do anything at all.

Mentally gritting his teeth, he began focusing on his body and felt the many different poisons and herbs. He needed to not focus on the pain, no matter how hard it was. He needed to focus on all the energies in him. Feel them and absorb them.

His senses slowly faded away until there was only his internal realm. The pain a constant buzzing, knocking to try and shatter his feeble focus. He tried to concentrate on only his mana and internal energy. He distinctly felt a part of him grab onto the poison and absorb it. That part being the skill Palate of the Malefic Viper. It did so at a disappointingly slow pace, however.

For every unit absorbed, ten entered his body. He could feel his health dropping as his body began breaking down, yet he didn't feel any fear, only more focused. He slowly observed the process in which his skill made the toxins a part of him. Observed and emulated. He focused on how it felt over some advanced analysis of the skill.

It didn't take long for the process to get faster when he actively focused on it. Using his internal energy as a guide, he gathered the poison up to more easily absorb it. With every bit absorbed, he felt his understanding of what he consumed increase second by second.

One would think that his use of mana and inner energy would decrease those resources, but it was quite the opposite. He felt over-saturated as with every consumed bit of energy, he was replenished. Some of the poison would restore his mana, some his stamina, and some his health. He had reached equilibrium as he focused on the process, trying to push the pain to the back of his mind.

All went well for a while until it didn't. Jake had a huge misunderstanding of the Trial. Before, when the toxins were activated, it was only a tiny part of it - a mere fraction of a fraction. With a glow of the barrel's runes, the second wave came, harder than the first.

Nearly falling into delirium, he felt his mind waver for but a second until he steeled himself once more. It was a race, with the ever-increasing influx of energy competing against his capability to absorb it. It was a challenge that Jake didn't have the faintest intention of losing.

Time passed, and outside the barrel, the two gods stood observing the entire process - the Viper, a stoic neutral look on his face as his glowing green eyes seemed to peer directly into the young mortal's body - the old alchemist with a slightly worried look. Both could only choose to believe in the young man.

Without Jake noticing, the first day of the Trial quickly passed.

Chapter 118: Second part?

Many different organizations exist in the multiverse. Even if one took only the ones spanning across multiple universes, there were many. These organizations' structures and goals all varied widely - their ideology and vision were all their own.

Those with gods at the helm often had the beliefs of their god placed front and center. Some were more akin to churches and religions, while others were closer to companies. Yet even in those, the members held a deep respect and even faith for their godly leader. It all came down to respecting the powerful, and none were more powerful than the gods.

For anyone to join these organizations, they had to offer something - the most basic, of course, being a place to belong, comrades to rely on, and protection from the myriad dangers of the multiverse. On top of that, they also provided status and social standing, making the high-ranking members respected, even if it wasn't for their own personal power. In other words, it allowed the weak to become strong through association.

Other than that, it gave those less suited to combat a place to pursue their passions and talents. It gave those who fought a backdrop of support for all their needs, allowing them to focus on fighting and improving their own personal strength - a purely symbiotic relationship, allowing strong synergy between the two.

One such organization that mainly had craftsmen was the Order of the Malefic Viper. Primarily an organization comprised of alchemists, one would generally believe it to be weaker on the combat side of things. But to the contrary, it was quite the opposite.

Despite its derelict condition upon initiation of the 93rd universe, none would dare look down on it. Even ignoring the possibility of the Viper himself appearing to defend it, it had a lot of power in itself. Even to the day before the Primordial's reappearance, it still easily recruited powerful experts.

Because what the order offered was one of the other significant benefits of an organization. Classes, and especially with the order, professions. Alchemist of the Malefic Viper was, without a doubt, one of the most sought-after professions in the entirety of the multiverse due to the potent and influential skills it possessed, as well as its endless potential.

Of course, being a member of an order with some of the most talented alchemists to help you also didn't hurt. The association with a Primordial even less so.

Of the desired skills, Palate of the Malefic Viper was front and center. A skill that was rare by default and only grew from there. Its growth path was also well-documented and, once gained, presented a clear way to progress it.

Some skills came with clear paths of progression. Most didn't, but a minority did. For those with a clear path, it is often enough just to reach some kind of threshold of improvement or to familiarize yourself enough with the skill for its rarity to improve.

Those without a clear path require some kind of qualitative change. Needless to say, this was far harder. This isn't to say you cannot change a skill with a clear path, making it diverge, but it is far rarer due to the difficulty.

The skills with a clear path also naturally had an end to that clear path. A point when reached would require a fundamental, qualitative change to upgrade it further. This is where the exact endpoint of the skills' natural progression comes into play.

Gods powerful enough to have skills named after them were precisely that: Powerful. In turn, so were their skills, making them carry strong potential inherently. But even then, it varies a lot. So, few aren't tempted when represented with a vast array of skills associated with the Malefic Viper.

Jake, in his well-justified ignorance, of course, didn't know any of this. He didn't understand many things, and in some ways, that lack of understanding had strength in itself. He wasn't aware of what he could do. Nor what he couldn't or shouldn't be able to.

This leads back to the current Trial of Myriad Poisons.

The first hour was deemed the most crucial for all those who attempted the trial. Except for a few hiccups right at the beginning, Jake passed that stage with flying colors.

At the same time, however, Duskleaf noticed something that shouldn't be.

"Master... what did you do to the concoction?"

"Oh, I just added a little something extra," the Viper answered, a deep smile on his lips. His eyes were fixated on the internal movements of the energies within Jake, and with every passing moment, his smile only got deeper.

Duskleaf looked between the Viper and the barrel for a bit before he realized. "You didn't..."

"I sure did."

When the concoction was made, he had only made one minor change. A single small ingredient was added on top of everything else - a single drop of blood. His own.

"Master, we have to stop this. There is no way he can handle it. I am well aware he is a Progenitor, but the Soulstrain alone will kill him. Even in the best-case scenario, it will do irreparable damage to his soul," Duskleaf said with an anxious look on his face. He had no idea what the hell his Master was thinking.

“Normally, I would agree with you. But I have a feeling it won’t be so. Jake’s soul is more powerful than you believe. He can handle it.”

“If even the tiniest mistake is made...”

“It will be fine. I haven’t known Jake for that long, but if there is one thing I have come to learn, it’s that he isn’t one to back down from a challenge.”

“I hope you are right,” Duskleaf sighed as he returned to being a silent observer. Either way, it wouldn’t matter yet. It was far too early for him to reach the stage of the trial where the blood would be activated. He could only hope that the young human would fail before it reached that stage.

The system was fair yet tough. Like with earning experience and levels, one couldn’t simply get a free ride. If one tried to go above their means and forcefully increase their strength, one would more often than not suffer from Soulstrain.

Soulstrain was when one’s soul wasn’t large enough to hold power put into it. If one used the metaphor Jacob had read, it was like pouring in insane amounts of contaminated water into the pond, hoping for it not to completely ruin the existing water but be absorbed by the pond itself, making it into one’s own. In other words, the Records had to be strong enough.

The most normal consequence of this going wrong was death. It was to have one’s soul shatter, leaving only the indestructible Truesoul behind for the system to reclaim.

Another consequence was for the soul to simply crack, resulting in lost stats, resources, skills, or even levels. Repairing a damaged soul was insanely demanding and often resulted in irreparable damage anyway.

Duskleaf had thought that the plan was to increase the rarity of Jake's skill all the way to epic-rarity or maybe even ancient-rarity if all went well. To pour in a decent amount of water, but not too much. This wouldn't be a problem at all. It would barely matter compared to the titles the human possessed. But what the Viper attempted meant way more. He was forcefully injecting Records into his soul through his own blood. Records of a Primordial into a weak E-grade mortal.

Which meant he wasn't just pouring a lot of water into the pond but also tossing in a dirty bomb. If his pond weren't currently large and stable enough to absorb the impact, he would be... changed. The structure of the soul altered.

Even if he somehow managed to absorb it into his body, Duskleaf couldn't see it ending well. Yet his Master didn't appear to have the faintest doubt in his mind that the mortal could handle it. What had he missed?

He knew that the mortal carried some secret. The mere fact that his Master had blessed him with a Divine skill to obscure him was enough to prove that. But could that secret really be enough for him to survive? What secret could a mortal that was newly initiated even hold?

Duskleaf had his theories, but it was a fruitless endeavor with the multiverse and endless possibilities. Bloodlines, variant race, special class, or profession, just to mention the more common ones. The fact that the human already had a skill related to time made the old man believe it was maybe related to that concept. Had he somehow managed to attain a deep comprehension of the concept of time already? No, even that didn't make sense, considering his ignorance of the time dilation.

As the old alchemist thought, time marched onward. Soon, an entire day had ticked by. Jake within the barrel hadn't noticed any of this as he simply focused internally. Every shred of focus was on consuming the energy, to the point where he didn't even register anything from his passive sphere.

A day quickly became two, and then three. Every few hours, the runes on the barrel would shine, and more of the poison in the concoction would become active. Every time it did so, Jake would temporarily be attacked from all sides until he managed to stabilize once more. At the same time, he felt both his knowledge and general resistance to all the toxicity grow. He was slowly adapting.

After three and a half days, he heard a small notification but didn't have time to check it. Yet he instantly felt that his Palate of the Malefic Viper had undergone an evolution becoming Epic-rarity. With it also came a big leap in the skills capabilities, and he felt many of the poisons in the barrel now no longer able to hurt but only nourish him.

It was a slight reprieve that was quickly outdone by a wave of assault stronger than any before. Jake's growth didn't mean it would get easier, just that the trial's speed increased to match it. It was a nearly unwinnable trial by design - a fact Jake didn't know, as he only saw it as a difficulty spike for him to yet again overcome.

Four days soon passed. Then five. Six. Until an entire week had gone by with Jake still immersed. Duskleaf was astonished by the young man's fast adaptability and nodded in approval every time he quickly managed to overcome a new wave. His speed was impressive, to say the least - his ability to remain focused even more so. The ability to hold such singular focus was rare...

On the eighth day, something happened that surprised both the Viper and Duskleaf. The unmoving mortal appeared to smirk slightly as his closed lips parted somewhat, inhaling some of the concoction.

Duskleaf opened his eyes in fright while the Viper just began laughing hysterically. It appeared that Jake found the speed of the trial too slow. Something he indeed did.

After the sixth day, he was already assimilating the toxins faster than the difficulty increased. It was starting to get boring. Less challenging. He was a maestro in his internal realm, guiding the energies effortlessly. Every toxic shred of energy that entered him was surrounded and consumed from all sides before it even had time to begin attacking his vital energy.

Which is when he began eliminating what had paralyzed him. Enough to open his mouth slightly, at least. He wanted more. Even if he had to take it by force.

After he directly inhaled the concoction, he felt like his entire stomach was invaded by millions of small worms, all trying to eat him from the inside out. Throughout it all, the pain had never stopped. It wasn't the kind of pain one could simply zone out, but the type of pain that was all-consuming and impossible to ignore.

Yet Jake handled it. Despite his brief grimace when the poison entered his stomach, he didn't lose focus as he began consuming that too. His mana moved in on it, carrying with it a powerful intent to break down and destroy the poison.

What he hadn't noticed yet at this point was minuscule purple sparks appearing on his otherwise colorless mana. It was so unnoticeable that perhaps only the Malefic Viper

noticed it. Yet the intent embedded in these sparks was evident, as his mana broke down the poison faster and faster.

His first mouthful was consumed within two hours. The second mouthful an hour and fifty-five minutes. The third an hour and forty-seven minutes. The fourth an hour and thirty-six minutes. He was exhausted from not sleeping, but he kept going, the energy nurturing him constantly and the pain enough to always keep him fully awake.

Nine days passed, ten, eleven, twelve. Barely an hour after the two-week mark, Jake heard the second notification. The growth was instantly apparent, and he felt himself fill with inner energy. Most of the poisons in his body now no longer appeared to affect him, and he even felt much of his mobility return as the paralysis was mostly gone.

He directed a sliver of his attention to the sphere and observed the smiling Viper and the, for some reason, worried Duskleaf. Not long after, Jake heard a voice in his head as the Viper spoke to him telepathically.

“Congratulation for passing the first part of the Trial of Myriad Poisons. Ready for part two?”

Jake opened both his eyes, ignoring the burning sensation in them as he did so. He only managed to see the two for a few moments before his vision turned blurry due to the still-potent toxins digging into his eyes. Yet he clearly saw the shining green eyes of the Viper looking straight at him. The look in his eyes clear. It was a challenge.

He nodded his head as he prepared himself for whatever was to come. His intuition told him this part wouldn't be as easy. Because he frankly did think the first part was easy.

Everything outside of the first hour was just too easy as he had managed to familiarize himself with the process.

At his approval, the Viper's smile faded slightly as he turned a bit more serious. Duskleaf looked even more worried. He had heard the telepathic exchange too. He knew there was no part two to the trial. It was already over. No, what was to come was entirely new territory.

The Malefic Viper raised his hand as he pointed towards the barrel. From his finger came a green light that, upon hitting the runes, made them all turn green. At the same time, they twisted and turned, creating a script that Duskleaf had never seen before. One of a far higher level than what was there before.

Right after the runes changed, the liquid in the bowl changed from pure black to a dark green color. Mana in the entire chamber surged as an aura was released from the barrel. The aura of the Malefic Viper.

Within the concoction was a small drop of dark green blood. It hadn't dispersed as a liquid normally would but was still whole. No other toxic substance even dared come near it, as if a divine law kept them away.

The drop stirred with the runes. Activated, it began releasing its aura, affecting the poison around it. Simultaneously, Jake was hit with another assault of toxins, one more powerful than ever before. One he managed to somehow withstand through sheer willpower and by channeling everything he had learned throughout the last two weeks.

It didn't even take an hour before the assault ended. Jake felt a few seconds of solace as he consumed every last bit of poison, his Sense of the Malefic Viper informing him that there

were no more toxic substances in the entire concoction around him. He had won. Or so he thought.

While his Sense of the Malefic Viper didn't pick it up, his danger sense sure did. A single drop of blood was still in the mixture. Before he could react, it flew like a bullet straight towards his chest and, without any resistance, penetrated his skin, sinking deep into his very soul.

That was when the actual second part of the Trial began as Jake felt his consciousness shift.

Chapter 119: Embracing power

Jake couldn't quite comprehend what had just happened to him as he suddenly felt himself being transported somewhere else. What made it hard to understand was that he could clearly still feel his physical body - the sensation of the now toxic-free liquid on his skin, and the feedback from his Sphere of Perception was somehow... doubled. He could feel both the outside and the inside of where he was now.

He found himself standing on a vast dark field, with only black stone everywhere in sight. A place he would likely never forget. It was the Malefic Viper's realm and where he had first encountered the god that would turn out to be his new buddy.

Trying to focus, he felt his senses of the outside world be suppressed. Intuitively he also managed to move his sphere entirely into this new realm, making him now feel as if he was indeed there, and the disconnected feeling lessened. And just in time.

On the horizon, he saw a figure rise, one also familiar to him. He had seen it only for a brief moment, but one didn't simply forget the sight of the dark green dragon that was coming towards him. Its wings spread wide; they had to be several miles across as it took flight.

Smaller than the Malefic Viper, he thought as it flew towards him. With his sight, he also noticed more differences. The color was slightly off, the spikes on its back not present. Taking a second look, outside of the dark color and overall dragon-shape, there was actually quite a few differences. He didn't have time to feel shame for his inability to distinguish dragons before it was just in front of him.

Landing on the ground, it caused a small earthquake. Jake just stayed there unmoving, weirdly enough, not feeling any sense of alarm or danger despite the massive, powerful form before him.

"At least I didn't lack confidence back then either," the dragon spoke, with a voice Jake always cringed at in recordings. Simultaneously it was enveloped by dark smoke that dispersed just as quickly, leaving a humanoid form behind.

Jake used humanoid rather broadly. The figure was covered in the all too familiar dark green scales, and on his back were two jet-black wings. His feet and hands were a weird mixture between humans and dragons, making them appear suitable for melee combat and using tools alike.

What was most noticeable of it all, however, was his face and eyes. Two green reptilian eyes stared back at him, with a face identical to his own. Even having the same smirk he himself made all the time.

"So, what do you think?" the scaled version of Jake said, spreading out his wings and showing off his body. "Quite the upgrade, eh?"

More than a little confused about the entire scene playing out in front of him, he answered with the first thought that came to mind. "Isn't it hard to hold a bow with those claws?"

In retrospect, perhaps not the most relevant thing to know at the current time. Nevertheless, the clone entertained the question with full seriousness.

"Quite the opposite, actually," scale-Jake answered, pulling out a black bow from some kind of spatial storage. "You see, unlike hands, these can be modified slightly. On top of that, the scales and resilience of the claws actually make them more suitable for archery."

A fact he demonstrated as he took out an arrow from thin air too and nocked it. His claws appeared to slightly warp as he did so, making them better fit around the string and arrowhead. After a brief channel of dark green energy, he fired the arrow into the horizon.

"Not bad, eh?" he said as he turned to the real Jake. Less than a second later, the realm shook once more. In the distance was a large green explosion. Power akin to thousands of nuclear explosions going off at once.

Jake could only stand there, staring in awe at the might on display. Exactly what rank was the scaled Jake in front of him? A casual arrow released held enough power to blow up a damn planet.... It made the King of the Forest appear like a weakling. And yet...

"Why am I here?" he asked himself.

"Always wanting everything explained. Well, I guess that part of me is still the same," scale-Jake laughed. "You are here to catch a glimpse of what we can become. A mere fragment of the power we can obtain through fully embracing the legacy of the Malefic One."

Jake quickly caught something off. He had never referred to the Viper as the Malefic One before. On top of that, the way he said it made his stomach churn. Like watching yourself do something cringeworthy in an old school play.

"Coming off a bit fanatical there, mate. Me. Whatever," human Jake answered, shaking his head.

"Nothing wrong with that, man," his other version answered. "This a Primordial we are talking about. A top-of-the-line badass. Not embracing that kind of power just seems stupid."

"Yeah, but nothing comes for free and all that. So, what's the cost?"

"Define cost. We know enough of the system to know that picking one path cuts others off. I just made a choice. Realized that some existences are above us and that sometimes accepting defeat can be a victory in itself. Besides, you see the results before you," fake Jake said, spreading out his long wings as the air hummed with power around him. His mana was carrying a vivid dark green tinge.

"Class, profession, and even race far more powerful than that of a simple human. Skills more powerful than anything I could have ever imagined. To be honest, I don't see myself NOT becoming a god with this path. To cut off a few other paths is not a high price to pay for that at all."

"Making it sound like I can't become strong without relying on him," Jake answered, sighing at the version of himself in front of him.

"Powerful? From a mortal's standpoint, sure. But a god? Doubtful. We are talented, yes, but we shouldn't waste that talent by scrambling in the dark trying to reinvent the wheel. The path of the Malefic One is tried and tested. It works. With it, perhaps we can even one day be able to stand beside him, having enough strength not to be a worthless bug anymore. Maybe... even his equal."

Jake looked at his dragon version a bit, thinking. He saw the logic; heck, it was his own logic. It made sense. It would be like learning programming and design to create a new complicated accountant system when you can just learn excel to get the job done. Yet...

"Yeah, no thanks."

"Seriously? Are you going to give up on this kind of pow-"

"Yep."

"What the hell is wrong with you? When did I get that stupid?" his scaled version said, a genuinely confused look on his face.

"Oh, we have always been this stupid. We just never had the balls to pursue it before the system. Balls you clearly lack as you pussied out," Jake said with a smirk.

"Do you honestly believe that you can make it on your own? That you can even come close to godhood on your lonesome?" other-Jake said, an exasperated look on his face.

"Who knows? But I will sure as hell try. Besides, I am still not alone. I recognize that I am already well on Malefic Viper's path, and I am not giving that up. But it won't become all I am."

"Seems there is no arguing with you... oh well, if soft methods don't work," dragon-Jake said, pulling out his bow. "We can try it the hard way."

Jake stared at himself as his other version, with a flap of his wings, took to the air. Jake, still standing there, looking up at him.

His scaled version drew his bow as he nocked an arrow. The air cracked as reality itself seemed to shatter and reform around the channeling half-dragon. The mana was on another level. Yet Jake recognized the skill clearly. Infused Powershot. Or, well, a vastly upgraded version of it.

"Final chance. An obvious choice. Choose to walk this path, or be consumed unwillingly."

The voice echoed throughout the realm, yet Jake didn't move or respond. He just looked up at the other version of himself with... pity.

Seeing the look, the other Jake had enough as he released the pent up energy. An arrow filled with unbridled power was fired straight for the weak-looking human below. Its speed too fast to even register, its inherent power enough to destroy everything.

A moment before impact, just before the measly human was annihilated, he raised his hand. Faster than scale-Jake could see, the real Jake... caught the arrow. The pent up energy exploded out in the area around him, leveling an area the size of a smaller country. Yet Jake was unscathed.

"You know... I thought something was off from the beginning," Jake said, as he snapped the arrow between his fingers. "We may have the same roots, but we have diverged already. Do you remember the thought we had when we first saw the Malefic Viper on the mural in the challenge dungeon?"

He didn't get an answer from his clone, who just looked gob-smacked. But he could see that he didn't know. Or perhaps had forgotten.

"Only a single thought permeated my mind at that moment. I wanted to one day be able to fight that dragon. To have the power to. That goal hasn't changed. How do you expect me to in any way surpass that dragon if all I do is follow in its footsteps? Chasing its shadow like some fanatical sheep?

"Nah, man, that ain't me. Besides, I can see on you that you don't *feel* it. You are, in the end, just a cheap imitation."

With that, he took a step forward, appearing mid-air right behind his dragon version. He didn't hesitate as he lightly smacked him in the back of the head, making his other version turn around in fright as he flew backward at supersonic speed.

"I would have seen that one coming."

Stepping forward once more, he instantly appeared before the still retreating other-Jake. Raising his fist, he smashed into his back, sending him tumbling towards the ground where he left a vast crater. "That one too."

Jake had enjoyed the philosophical discussion with himself. It was an interesting and valuable learning experience for him - an excellent chance to reaffirm his own goals and convictions. The other version had good arguments, but his mind was already set.

The nail in the coffin, however, was what he felt standing before his clone. He didn't feel a shred of fear or weakness. In front of the Malefic Viper and Duskleaf, he always had a

small voice in the back of his head telling him that fighting them would mean certain death. That voice had been silent in front of his other version.

In the end, this entire world wasn't real. It was inside Jake's mind or soul or whatever. Within such a mindscape, the normal rules didn't apply. Jake had felt that too. He didn't use any of his skills, and yet his body was full of energy. He felt like he was in control of everything.

Another step later, and he was in front of his scaled version who was trying to get up.

"You don't have it," he said, staring down at his struggling clone. "You are just a shell of one possible path - one that is pretty damn incomplete. You didn't even replicate our bloodline."

"... Did I choose wrong?" his other version looked up at him with a hollow look in his eyes.

"I wouldn't say that. You just didn't choose what I would. If you had to choose a higher power to swear yourself to, the Malefic Viper does seem like a good choice. Just not my choice. I want to see how long I can go on my own path," Jake said with a comforting smile.

"Are you going to just give up the path of the Malefic Viper just like that? Be content in your gains so far."

"What? Of course not. I am gonna double-dip. Take everything and run with it. As you know, we have always been a bit of a greedy sort. Why should I accept something when I can take everything?"

"You are insane."

"Yep, but my insanity is my own," Jake said with a small laugh. "Now it's goodbye."

He didn't even have to do anything but will it as the body of the scaled version of Jake dispersed into dust. Yet, not everything disappeared.

Left behind, floating in mid-air, was a single droplet of dark green blood. It didn't take long for Jake to recognize its aura. The Malefic Viper. A droplet containing a fragment of his Records, of what he is. It held power beyond anything Jake currently was.

But not what he could be.

The blood simply floated there in the air, radiating power. Jake bathed in its power... and he wanted it. Reaching out his hand, he tried to touch it but found himself unable to. It was like a forcefield surrounded the blood, denying him access.

He wasn't having that. It was just a damn drop of blood. No way he was going to let it get away.

Strings of mana sprung up around his hand. All of them reached for the blood, only to be eroded when they got close. Jake didn't let up, however, but kept up his assault. Ten strings became a hundred, as they surrounded the blood from all sides. Until a single string of mana managed to creep close enough to nearly touch it.

At the same time as this happened, the world around him began to shake. The cold desolate stone began to crack. The sky was slowly swirling into itself as if space itself began to collapse above. The world was breaking down.

He felt that it wasn't actually the blood itself resisting him. It was just its passive aura keeping him away. If it actively had tried to fight him off, he doubted he would be able to do anything. But as it was, he was winning.

The aura around the blood finally gave in as Jake managed to grasp it in his hands. The moment his hand closed, so did the world collapse, and the final thing he saw was a notification.

[True Blood of the Malefic Viper (?)] has been successfully absorbed, strengthening your [True Blessing of the Malefic Viper (Blessing - True)]

[True Blessing of the Malefic Viper (Blessing - True)] – An Alchemist recognized by the Malefic Viper himself. Few throughout the ages have found themselves blessed by the Primordial, despite their desire to be so. You are his Chosen. Now even the true blood of the Malefic Viper himself is found within your very being, only strengthening your bond further. Through your direct karmic and bodily connection, the wisdom, willpower, and vitality of the Malefic Viper empower you. +10% Willpower, +10% Wisdom, +10% Vitality. Grants access to many new paths. Only one blessing can be held at a time

Chapter 120: Defiance & Gains

Duskleaf nervously observed the young human as he appeared to sleep within the barrel. He knew that he was not in slumber, however. He was deep within his own soul. His Truesoul even. A domain where no outside force could interfere or peer into.

“Relax. Jake is stronger than you know,” the Malefic Viper said to comfort his worried disciple. However, he had to admit that even he had some small doubts. The god believed that he had a good understanding of Jake, but one can never be entirely sure. The fact that he couldn’t provide any guidance or help was also infuriating. He couldn’t even see what was happening in detail.

What Jake was currently experiencing only he and the system would ever know. But whatever it was, it was something that would inevitably lead to change - a choice. What would emerge when he awakened would still be Jake, but the Viper could only hope it was his friend that returned. If he even woke up.

Records carry power. They carry history. To reach above your station and try to grasp power beyond yourself would always lead to issues. It would become a fight between your own Records and the Records of whatever you tried to absorb. It could change your soul, affecting all layers.

After Jake had been immersed for nearly an hour, the Viper felt a slight change. One through his karmic connection with Jake through his blessing. Jake had made a choice; it appeared. However, what the Viper wasn’t aware of was that it wasn’t quite as he had imagined. Something he soon became aware of.

What the Viper had hoped for was for Jake to take inspiration and possibly even absorb a fraction of the Records in the drop of blood, for him to make the choice that would lead him the furthest. He didn't want Jake to be his follower, but to be his equal. Yet, he didn't know that Jake's intent was different.

Defiance would be the only word to describe it honestly. Jake's intention had never been to stand beside him. It was to surpass him. To stand at the pinnacle of wherever the system could take you. Stand at that pinnacle, and then go beyond even that. The Viper could only feel a faint sense of that dream through his karmic connection. It was audacious, arrogant, naïve, and completely nonsensical.

I like it.

He saw that Jake had once more managed to go above and beyond his expectations. He hadn't just absorbed the Records in the drop of blood. He had claimed it. All along, it had been the plan to reabsorb the blood back into himself after the trial, but Jake had now managed to 'steal it.' Partly.

It was within him now. Dormant. In the end, Jake was still only E-grade. For him to absorb the power within the blood was impossible with his current strength. Yet, it was still suppressed, and it would only strengthen their bond for the future.

Two hours after Jake had entered his Truesoul, his eyes opened again. There were no brilliant colors or fanfare; he simply opened his eyes to see the two gods stand before him - one relieved and one grinning.

All mobility had returned to his body after his little adventure of literal soul-searching. Raising his hands, he lifted himself out of the barrel and unto the floor. Without even thinking, he used mana to dry his body in only a few seconds. Truly his mana control had undergone a noticeable change.

“That was quite something,” he said jokingly to the two.

“Sure was. So, all good? You don't suddenly feel compelled to fall to your knees and swear yourself to be my eternal servant?” the Malefic Viper said. He was only half-joking. He felt the power of the blessing had increased. The bond had undergone a qualitative growth. He was afraid of what kind of consequences that would have on his mortal friends' frame of mind.

“Good question. Depends on if I can get an actual bottle of vodka any time soon. Mixing it in with the bathwater kind of ruined the taste,” Jake answered, with an admonishing tone.

“I guess I do owe ya one,” the Viper said with a laugh, as he went forward and gave Jake a slap on his shoulder. “Now get on some damn clothes.”

Jake noticed only now that he was still in his birthday suit. Feeling a bit embarrassed, he quickly summoned his armor and put it on. It didn't take long before he was back in his nearly all-black leather armor. He didn't bother to put on the cloak as it was overdoing it a bit. He also noticed at that moment that he had completely forgotten about the mask. Not that it appeared to matter as it was utterly unblemished.

“So, what's the plan now?” Jake asked the two of them.

“First of all, check your system messages. If all went well, your Palate skill should have reached Ancient-rarity,” the Viper said, Duskleaf nodding along.

Having already wanted to do so, he opened the menu. He had already seen his blessing being improved as the newest message, but that didn’t mean it was the only one, far from it. First of all, on the list were several levels - more than he had expected.

****’DING!’ Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 58 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

...

****’DING!’ Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 63 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

****’DING!’ Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 71 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

...

****’DING!’ Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 73 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

Six levels in his profession were gained throughout the trial. He had been told that time dilation had effects on experience, so he quickly asked if perhaps it wasn't a waste to do it here.

"Nah, it doesn't really matter. Time and experience are weird like that. You do time dilation mainly to train skills or meditate on concepts. Experience is never the main goal, to begin with. Also, even if you lose out on a few levels now, it shouldn't matter. You are E-grade man; you got a long way to go."

Accepting the answer – not like he had much cause not to – he moved on down the list. The next few ones were Palate skill upgrading. A few times, actually, not all of them increasing the rarity. The final skill, however, did reach the desired Ancient-rarity.

[Palate of the Malefic Viper (Rare --> Ancient)] – The Malefic Viper has honed its venom by devouring myriad toxins found throughout the multiverse. In the same vein, the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper can consume toxins to learn their effects and properties. Further evolved, you can now also learn properties of herbs, while at the same time enjoying a greater benefit from all potions consumed. Grants immunity or resistance to most poisons. Passively provides 1 Endurance per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. Through consumption, may your power grow; through gluttony, may your Records expand.

The description had gotten longer, and the effects had increased by quite a bit. Immunity and resistance from weak poisons had the 'weak' part removed. Potions were apparently better for Jake now, and he could now also learn about herbs by eating - all-around good stuff.

But the last part was by far the best when it came to immediate gains - bonus stats. Like Scales of the Malefic Viper, this one also provided stats for every level he had in his profession, effectively just making every level even more valuable. He was a bit surprised it gave endurance, but thinking about it, it was strongly related to internal energy. Or perhaps endurance helped with resistance to poisons in ways toughness didn't?

"Does endurance help with resistance to poison?" He couldn't help himself from asking.

"Yes, endurance helps a bit with internal resistance, and internal energy automatically helps fight off harmful energies, though not as well as vital energy. It mainly serves to suppress the effects of the poison," Duskleaf said.

Nodding, he returned his attention to the notifications. Palate had been upgraded as predicted, and it was better than he expected. But it didn't end there. After his little journey in his mindscape, he had unexpectedly gotten another skill upgraded.

[Blood of the Malefic Viper (Epic --> Ancient)] – The blood of the Malefic Viper is a toxin more deadly than most poisons. Allows the Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper to turn their blood poisonous, imitating their Patron. It has been further improved, even carrying traces of the True Blood of the Malefic One within. The blood can be used as an ingredient in alchemy and as a deadly weapon against your foes. The nature of the poison is determined based on the Records of the Alchemist. The blood's toxicity level is based primarily on vitality and wisdom but receives an increase from all physical stats. Passively provides 1 Vitality per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your blood be forever the bane of all that wishes you harm.

Man, those descriptions are just getting longer, was his first thought. His second thought was how the skill hadn't really changed, except for providing even more stats. He was beginning to see a trend with these Malefic Viper skills providing stats upon reaching Ancient-rarity. By design, no doubt. If he didn't have his One Step Mile, he would maybe even suspect that providing stats was a hallmark of all ancient skills.

The extra vitality was, of course, more than welcome. With Jake's upgraded blessing now granting him an additional 10% vitality, the value was just even better. He was now getting a +65% bonus on vitality, even higher than his 60% in perception. The first title he obtained himself, Bloodline Patriarch, giving 10% added with all his others, was now making a difference.

He had actually surpassed 1000 vitality, making it the second stat to do that after perception. Which also meant 10.000 health. It didn't appear to do anything special, but it still felt like he had passed some kind of threshold. Either way, more health couldn't be bad.

It was also interesting how the description recognized the drop of blood he had absorbed. He could still feel that drop. It was inside of him somewhere, not quite physically, but more in a metaphysical way. Maybe a part of his soul? He wasn't sure. But it appeared to grant quite the benefits. He felt it, and he also felt how it was suppressed.

All in all, the trial had been a significant success in every way. Two skills upgraded, several levels, and all only in a few days. Counting the whole time-warp-thing.

"So, did you get it upgraded?" the Viper asked, interrupting Jake before he could go further down the list.

"Yeah, got it to ancient-rarity. Also managed to upgrade the Blood skill from epic to ancient," Jake answered, closing the menu to focus on the conversation. "That blessing you gave me also upgraded. Gives vitality also now."

“Nice, you got more than I expected. I can feel the blessing has strengthened too,” the Viper said, making a faux lecherous smile. “So, how does it feel to have a part of me inside you? Very intimate, eh?”

“... moving on, I have been meaning to ask, why even do the blessings? I get what I benefit from it, but what’s in it for you?” Jake said, ignoring the last part of what the god said.

“Well, we gods can progress in other ways than just earning experience. Faith is one of those paths. A blessing is more or less an investment in someone to act as a conduit of your faith. Follow your doctrines and such. At least normally. I blessed you just for the heck of it, and honestly, it has worked out way better than I expected.”

“Does that mean I have been hoodwinked into being your preacher when I return to Earth?” Jake asked, fully aware there was no fucking way he was doing that.

“If you want to? I don’t really care. I am benefitting enough just from you getting stronger and not dying. But if you want to establish an official order on earth and begin recruiting, it wou-“

“Not gonna happen,” Jake interrupted. Again, fuck that.

“Master, I think you have chosen a poor prophet,” Duskleaf interjected. His deadpan manner made it incredibly hard for both the Viper and Jake to discern if he was serious or joking.

Choosing to take it as a joke, the Viper agreed. “I must confess I could have done better. Hasn’t even done a single mass sacrifice or committed his firstborn yet.”

“I am a bit scared to ask, but are you actually interested in both of those?”

“The firstborn? Nah, I would suck as a babysitter, and kids taste funny. As for the sacrifice? Sure, why not.”

“This may be a bit late to ask, but what exactly is the doctrine of your church or order or whatever?” Jake asked. A question he should likely have asked way earlier.

Smiling, the Viper answered concretely. “Greed, power, and freedom. You know, all the good stuff. A god’s creed is more often than not just a symbol of their personality and personal path to power. My path is one littered with corpses and killing anything in my way; my doctrine is a lot like that. In other words, do whatever the fuck you want, and it is likely according to my doctrine.”

“Seems easy enough. What about you, Duskleaf?” Jake asked, turning to the other god.

“Alchemy.”

“And?”

“Just alchemy. No reason to place importance on unimportant things. Anything that can further my progress towards the pinnacle in alchemy is good. I don’t have any followers, though, so it doesn’t matter,” the old alchemist explained.

“A god without faith? Is that fine? No danger of you suddenly disappearing by being forgotten or something like that?” Jake asked with genuine concern.

“What? No, why would I? Where have you gotten such a silly idea from?” Duskleaf asked with apparent puzzlement.

“Eh, I just remember some fiction where gods were a bit like that...” Jake answered, a bit embarrassed. *Damn you, inaccurate fictional portrayals of gods.*

“Faith isn’t actually that big a part of many gods. I am not particularly into that path either. It isn’t even rare that gods exist without any followers or believers at all. A lot of gods don’t do anything and prefer to be holed up in a secluded alchemy lab or something like that for unspeakable amounts of time,” the Viper said, throwing shade at Duskleaf.

“I don’t see what having a bunch of nosy followers does to help me get better at alchemy.”

The two of them continued bickering for a bit back and forth. It was clear that despite them being master and disciple, they were also old friends. The type of friendship forged over... how long actually?

“Hey, been thinking, how old are you two?”

“Well, that came out of nowhere,” the Viper said after being interrupted. “I have been around since before the first era, so 92 full eras and change. Duskleaf is from the 4th era.”

“And how many years is that?”

“Well, each era varies. The 92nd era was around 15 billion years. In other words, the amount of time it took for your universe to go from a seed to what it was just before the initiation. Each era varies in length, the longest being 228 billion years and the shortest being only 7 billion. Do the math.”

Computing for a few moments, making full use of his high intelligence stat, he quickly concluded.

“Both a bunch of old farts. Coercing a young man no older than 28 into some weird religion.”

“More like: two old studs, disrobing and putting their liquids inside young man.”

“Two old men, bathing with young stud.”

“Or-“

One of these old studs/men stood with a hand on his face in the background, looking in exasperation at his master and the young mortal. Cursing himself for having gotten himself involved in this entire debacle.