

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 211: Matriarchs

A massive crash sounded out throughout the forest as a tree nearly 300 meters tall toppled over. The wooden behemoth that would ordinarily be borderline impossible to take down looked old and worn, its bark with many black rotten spots throughout, especially in the section that had been broken as a massive tail smashed into it.

Dust and soil flew up everywhere before being cleared by an explosion caused by a blast of force and an arcane arrow colliding. Blood was sizzling on the ground many places in the area, mixed in with non-toxic blood and flesh left by the over a dozen dead monkeys scattered everywhere.

Jake rolled and kicked up a bit of this blood-covered ground as he dodged the fly-by of a sluggish-looking Dervish. As it flew by, the long cuts on both his arms spewed out blood drops that hit it while it was also diving through the ever-present poisonous mist from his wings.

He smirked as he saw it collide with a tree nearby, its senses severely weakened due to its many injuries and constant exposure to his toxins.

It was nearly three hours ago that Jake first engaged the Matriarch.

One slightly annoying thing he had noticed was that the damn Matriarch was actually more of a mix between a Crusher and a healer than just a pure support-beast. It had

managed to heal its own wounds and even counteract some of the poison he had spread, making the fight even more prolonged than he would have hoped.

To his advantage, though, he did discover that the Matriarch had quite the lacking mana pool. Or maybe it was just because it used all its magic too liberally, not hesitating to try and cure the poison Jake inflicted on its children, even healing many of their wounds.

This had lead to Jake shifting to a hemotoxin-based fighting style. To simply poison and bleed them out while always staying a step ahead.

Because he was a well-rounded fighter with high stats across the board, he could constantly adapt. He was durable enough to tank a blow when necessary, his resource-pools large enough so that he would not run out of magic or physical strength, his vitality high enough so that he could keep his body healthy, and his offensive power powerful, be it magic or physical blows that he chose to use.

The Suppressors required one to swiftly strike them down as they had weak defenses but could debilitate even Jake if he allowed them to stack up their weight-increasing magic for too long. Those were the ones he focused on first, killing them with potent poison and Arcane Powershots, not allowing the Matriarch to save them.

Crushers were relatively tanky and dealt significant damage, but they were the slowest of the bunch, not counting the Matriarch herself. For the most part, he could ignore them and just slowly poison and bleed them out. With the Suppressors gone, they simply had no way to ever catch him. At that point, they just became walking mana-drainers for the Matriarch.

Dervishes were overall the most annoying to handle. While they indeed were weak defensively, they were incredibly fast and hit insanely hard, making them ideal strikers. With seven of them on his tail, Jake was forced to fight them directly at times as kiting them was simply out of the question. The only good thing was that they couldn't fly and were so fast that they could pretty much only attack in a straight line when they leaped for him.

He had already gone over the Matriarch, the one he was saving for absolutely last. She was incredibly tanky, could heal herself and others, and hit even harder than the Crushers – the fallen tree evidence of that – and could even do a bit of supportive magic. The downside was that.. holy damn was she slow. Coupled with a few monkeys, always staying close to defend her made it far easier to kite them.

If Jake was honest, then the group of monkeys would be more dangerous if they just abandoned the Matriarch and all went straight for him. Sadly for them, they hadn't done that but allowed him to poison them all over several hours.

The fight was now in its final stages, with only a single Crusher, two Dervishes, and the Matriarch left standing. All incredibly injured.

Jake himself wasn't all fine and dandy either, his clothes cut up and with several long cuts all over his body, including one several centimeters deep, streaking across his entire chest – the result of a Dervish getting him real good.

His health was already below half, and that was after drinking a health potion just ten minutes ago. He had also consumed two mana potions throughout the fight to keep up his constant bombardment of arcane arrows, poison mist, and even the occasional blood-covered Arcane Bolt for good measure.

He smiled as he blocked a tail from a Dervish with his Venomfang while swinging the Scimitar of Cursed Hunger with the other. He cut the one remaining Crusher by extending the blade with an arcane edge, tearing open its stomach.

As he did the damage, a flow of energy was absorbed from the beast and delivered into him, restoring a bit of his health as some minor wounds on his body healed. The blade had proven very valuable in these kinds of prolonged battles.

The Crusher fell back from the blow, the Matriach trying to push out a bit more mana to heal it. At the same time, Jake took a step forward but teleported back with One Step Mile, avoiding the blow of yet another Dervish that came flying in.

It was a desperate battle for the side of the monkeys. Jake had outlasted all of them, and none could put up even half of their total power by now. Their insides were more mush than flesh, and blood was flowing from all their orifices. Yet none retreated.

That was a tendency Jake had noticed many beasts had when heavily poisoned. They didn't flee but instead just tried to kill him even more desperately. He had theorized before it was because they believed the poison would stop if he died, and he was only getting more and more sure of that. It was actually a good indicator that these monkeys were incredibly dumb – if they decided to chase a poison-spreading human for hours wasn't proof enough of that.

The monkeys had also given up their last-ditch suicide tactic where they amplified their auras. Jake had found a way to break that already and just One Step Mile away, leading to a Crusher and two Dervishes effectively just killing themselves with their own auras. A bit funny, actually, depending on how black your humor is.

Dodging yet another whirling blow of tails from a Dervish, Jake managed to cut off one of them before the monkey could reinforce it with energy, and as it was distracted by the pain he grabbed hold of it with his other hand, holding it down to the ground. Touch of the Malefic Viper activated as the poison spread in the beast, and with a good squeeze, he heard a crack as the Dervishes neck broke. Now the only two foes left were a heavily injured Matriarch and one kind-of-already-dead Crusher.

Jake didn't even need to cut the Crusher anymore directly but finished it off merely using Gaze of the Apex Hunter. Finally, only two living beings remained, staring down each other - One a heavily injured but spirited human and the other a Tri-Lighttail Monkey Matriarch that looked utterly unable to decide what to do.

Its indecision quickly turned to despair as it began screeching in anger, but instead of attacking, it started sprinting away, back towards the old temple grounds.

It didn't get far, as an Arcane Powershot hit from behind, blowing off one of its legs. It began trying to crawl before Jake leaped from above and smashed his scimitar down through its skull, ending its life for good.

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****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 104 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 107 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

Jake looked down on the Matriarch and the hellscape he had left behind and couldn't help but chuckle a bit to himself. *Note to self, do not have big battles inside or too close to Haven, or we will require some serious landscaping afterward.*

He left the area in a very nice and dead state, relocating in case more monkeys came to investigate, found a good tree, and sat down to recuperate while doing a bit of alchemy. He wanted to create better Hemotoxin poison now that he had reached D-grade and discovered how good it was against the Matriarchs. As well as a single batch of health, mana and stamina potion.

And if all went well, he would be able to wipe out those shitty monkeys before it was World Congress time.

In a rather large house in an even larger city, two women and a baby sat around a table, talking as the older one of them rocked the sleeping child back and forth.

"I still find it quite weird, if not a little unsettling," the older woman said as she held the child. "Babies aren't supposed to be this quiet and relaxed when this young."

Another woman sat to the side, observing the grandmother hold her grandson, and smiled as she tried explaining what her husband had said. “Caleb says it has something to do with no longer having the same needs... you know, no longer as hungry anymore. Many of the other ailments usually affecting kids also aren’t really a worry either... gosh, did I waste a lot of time reading books on parenting that are now irrelevant.”

“I won’t say they were wasted; I am sure a lot of what was in them is still very relevant for a new parent,” Debra said as she played with her grandson. “How is Caleb doing these days? I feel like he is less and less home.”

“He and Robert are busy preparing for the upcoming World Congress with all of the other administrators. With nearly all the influential forces brought together in one room, they want to be ready for any scenario and are making way more plans than they could ever need.”

“Well, I guess it must be hard being both the leader of some assassination guild fashioning themselves a court and a father at the same time,” Debra said, clearly not approving of the entire situation.

“Caleb is doing the best he can,” Maja said, shaking her head. “Things are a lot more complicated now than before, and I also find it hard to adapt. I am just thankful that at least we are all safe and together. For the most part, at least.”

Caleb Thayne, the current Judge of the Court of Shadows placed on Earth, had not held back from using his authority to help his family at all. He understood that not being selfish to some extent was viewed more as a sign of weakness than strength. It was also just an advantage that the Judge was not burdened by worries outside the Court.

He had used this influence to not just help gather his entire family, but even Maja's parents, who had lived not that far away before the integration. They had gotten a similar experience to Jake and Caleb's parents by suddenly having a squad of shadow-wielding assassins appear before, explain the situation, and offer to escort them to the city claimed by the Court.

Jake and Caleb's parents had it worse. A notorious figure in their tutorial had one day appeared before them, being all nice and sweet, saying he had been given the job to make sure they safely made it through the tutorial by some shadow god.

Maja had been in a very different tutorial than any of the others. Hers had only consisted of children, pregnant women, and people who worked with children or in the medical profession before the system. Barely any fighting had been going on in hers, and she was escorted to the city after the tutorial by Caleb himself, who had split off with a few others to get her.

He had talked about how apparently that had earned him even more respect by the second-in-command of the Court, Matteo, as he now viewed Caleb as a man who "valued family above all else" and that the former assassin turned magic assassin approved of that.

"Yeah... nearly everyone. Has Caleb said more about Jake? How come he isn't having some of his men help him get here?" Debra asked, still not quite understanding why Caleb just kept insisting that Jake was fine and that there was no reason to go get him.

"Jake doesn't need our help from what Caleb said... he is doing just fine on his own. He even has his own thing going on with another settlement," Maja explained, trying not to give too many details. It would be easier just for Jake to explain himself, and honestly, even Maja found it hard to really understand.

Caleb shared everything he knew with his wife, but that only made Maja understand how different this world really was. Her parents and her mother and father-in-law were all just regular people in this new world. They weren't standout performers, and their only outstanding quality was their relation to outstanding people in the eyes of the higher powers.

That Jake was doing well wasn't that surprising to Maja, though. He had always been able to do well for himself when he put his mind to it, but she and Debra did share one fear...

"Do you think he is being dragged into something he shouldn't? You know how he is," Debra said, sighing. "He always just goes with the flow and gets dragged into things... hangs around with crowds he really shouldn't... wouldn't it be better if he just came here already? He hasn't even seen his nephew yet. Does he even know he has become an uncle?"

"He'll be fine," a new voice said as Caleb landed in the small garden outside of the house, having heard what they said towards the end through the open window.

Debra looked unamused out of the window and unto her son as she admonished him. "You keep saying that, but are you really sure he hasn't been influenced by some bad people? And also, how come you are back already? Where is Robert?"

"Dad is busy trying to figure out how to design that new high-rise he is working on and told me to just go back by myself first. We don't really have much more planning to do, at least nothing I want to be involved in, so I'll have to head out for a bit more training before the Congress," Caleb said before finally addressing the first question that Debra had asked.

“And while I can’t really say anything about if Jake is being influenced by bad people, we will find out soon. I am 99% he will be part of the World Congress.”

“Really?” Debra said, a bit more relieved. She knew she couldn’t come to the World Congress itself, but at least Caleb should be able to check-in with him.

After that, they relaxed a bit together, Caleb playing with his son and giving his wife a kiss before taking flight once more as he headed outside the city to the closest suitable hunting ground.

Because no matter what faction one was from, power was still the most important factor, which is also why Caleb and Maja, weren’t that concerned about Jake.

Chapter 212: City/Monkey Management

Jake sat on the ground as he breathed in heavily, waiting for his left arm to regrow. His right eye was also still a bit blurry after being regenerated, as it turned out that taking a blast of force to the face resulted in quite a lot of it being funneled into the holes in the mask. He was lucky his head was tilted so he only lost one of them.

He was also, of course, half-naked from most of his armor being shredded or blown apart, a lot of the damage done by his own explosions of arcane mana. He had to be honest; he was close to having bitten off a bit more than he could chew here towards the end.

It was now only a bit over 22 hours away from the beginning of the World Congress, and Jake was still in the forest hunting monkeys. After the first Matriarch, the second one to move was the highest level one, but it had gone down quite easily. Mainly because Jake had the tactic down and more and better Hemotoxins than before.

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****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 105 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

He regenerated to full with that one down and had then gone to pull another one of the Matriarchs, hoping to finish it off quickly. Oh boy, that hadn't at all turned out as planned. Not at all.

When he shot an arrow on the third Matriarch, the fourth one had decided to join in too, with all the young monkeys being ushered into the buildings surrounding the ancient temple. Jake had already found out earlier they led to some small underground caves that were pretty much safety shelters.

Jake had no interest in going after the young ones. He was no sand-hating youngling-slayer, after all. Besides, he didn't have a lightsaber.

Anyway, Jake had pulled the third Matriarch, the fourth had decided to follow, and eventually, this had resulted in the majority of D-grade monkeys in the entire temple-area chasing him. The only lucky thing was that the Prima was still chilling within the center temple, not taking part. It appeared to honestly not give a shit what the rest of its tribe was doing, and all the other monkeys were just afraid of it from what Jake could tell.

All of this had resulted in Jake on the run from an entire fucking army of D-grade monkeys, including 2 Matriarchs, more than 20 Dervishes, even more Crushers, and a dozen or so Suppressors. The number of normal D-grades Tri-Lighttail Monkeys was above a hundred total. Very much not a good time.

The first hour had been the hardest by far, Jake trying to slow down and injure the horde as much as possible as he ran. He killed and ripped and poisoned with everything he had, with both his blades absolutely covered in blood towards the end.

He did discover that the health draining effect of his Scimitar of Cursed Hunger was extremely valuable against the normal D-grades. It meant he did not have to consume health potions as much but allowed him to regenerate by beheading monkeys.

With his sphere and Sense of the Malefic Viper sensing all the poisoned monkeys, he managed to never get surrounded and outnumbered too much, allowing him to always fight back or escape when things got a bit too spicy.

In the end, the entire ordeal had still taken more than an entire goddamn day - an entire day of running, fighting, killing, and slowly whittling down his foes. A few more monkeys even joined the hunt when they noticed what was going on, making Jake feel like he was facing a neverending tide of simians.

He had to chug down a potion every hour on the dot to keep himself at least a bit healthy, most of them stamina potions. Jake had to use Limit Break at 10% nearly the entire time but had towards the end activated it at 20% to finish off the final Matriarch.

Jake had discovered over the course of that god damn marathon of a fight that he could indeed still get tired. Not because he lacked stamina or mana or anything like that, it was just pure mental exhaustion. His mind wanted to rest; he *needed* to just not think or do anything intense for a while. Not even necessarily sleep, just at least not have to focus.

After reaching D-grade, you never had to sleep anymore. You barely had to at E-grade, needing only a few hours a week tops, most of it just being done with meditating anyway. But as he had discovered, that didn't mean rest was unnecessary.

Ultimately, this mental exhaustion hadn't had much effect except Jake maybe not fighting in an as tactical manner towards the end. He was lucky in the sense that he didn't have to truly focus when fighting; it was actually quite the opposite: the less he focused, the more he could just move instinctively.

Of course, that wasn't always optimal and worked best in melee. It also wasn't perfect either, far from it. Hence Jake's lack of an arm and newly- regenerated

eye, and a massive amount of wounds on his body. But it had helped him to never suffer any truly lethal blow... though he did have to trigger Moment of the Primal Hunter in the very end to finish off the last Matriarch.

So now, Jake just sat there, completely exhausted, his health, stamina, and mana all below 20%, and the negative after-effects of Limit Break taking their toll. Luckily, nothing was alive anywhere close to him, and the destroyed area and miasma of poison and stench of decayed and still-rotting corpses was sure to keep most anything away.

He felt tired as fuck, but also very accomplished as he went through his wall of notifications. The first of which was the many monkeys, but most importantly, the 2 Matriarchs. Though he did see that there were Dervishes all the way to 140 also mixed in.

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****You have slain [Tri-Lighttail Monkey Matriarch – lvl 146] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

And the best part: Levels.

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****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 111 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 112 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 107 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

Getting levels always just felt great. So, with great satisfaction, he lay down on the bloody grass, ignored the toxic miasma all around him, and fell asleep.

Usually, she would be a bit annoyed or even question where he was, but quite honestly, she had become immune to his whims and constant absence and just accepted to do things herself. It worked out fine that way anyway, and in the moments when it truly mattered, Jake would be there. There is no way he would miss the World Congress because he was too busy hunting, right? *Yeah, definitely not. Definitely.*

Miranda had just woken up from another journey to the Verdant Lagoon, where she had ended up spending most of the time going through paperwork and dealing with stuff through the system menus, making use of the time distortion to get work done. Creating new quests, taking stocks, and all that. The system even had interfaces for all that, and Lillian had recently unlocked a skill that allowed her to send and receive messages through the powers of the Pylon. This meant she could send it to anyone connected to it, such as Miranda, Phillip, Hank, or anyone else with an official position granted by Miranda or someone she had given the authority to grant positions to. A position-giving position, if you will.

This should also have worked for the owner, but Lillian had tried and found that it failed every time. It was like the skill couldn't find its destination. Miranda just wrote that up to him having some kind of skill to block it, or maybe he was just too strong. Both seemed like reasonable explanations.

They had a meeting earlier that day – they being herself and most of the people with positions of leadership in the city – and agreed on a few things concerning the World Congress. One of the largest subjects of discussion was related to immigration.

Through interaction with merchants and travelers from Sanctdomo, they had become aware that the other city was truly massive and that other far larger settlements also existed out there. Many of Haven's current citizens had family or friends elsewhere and were only in Haven right now because it was the only settlement they had come across that offered at least a modicum of safety.

Many guesses about what the World Congress was all about had been made, and the only real thing Miranda was certain of was that it would allow the different world leaders to interact – the quest making that quite clear.

Haven didn't intend to make themselves antagonistic to any forces, but she was damn sure that some other faction would try to cause strife or perhaps even attempt to lay claim and annex the city. Their population appeared to be a weakness, which is why another choice they had made seemed to not make a lot of sense – limit immigration.

Due to the city's geography, Haven would never become a metropolis unless they chose to abandon what made it special and ruin the entire atmosphere of the forest. Nobody wanted that, and Miranda was also fairly certain Jake would prefer not to have high-rises surrounding his valley.

At the Fort and the area surrounding the Fort, a proper city could be constructed, and Miranda was even working on having the area influenced by the Pylon extend to there. Once she reached D-grade, that should be possible.

No, they would keep Haven as an area more specialized and – as arrogant as it may seem – reserved for the “elite” and their immediate family. Nobody currently living there would be thrown out, but they would limit how many newcomers could become official citizens.

Haven was placed in the outer parts of a beast-filled forest, and just a few hundred meters outside the area influenced by the Pylon, one could run into beasts. If one delved further in, high level E-grades were aplenty, with D-grades eventually appearing. Miranda was pretty sure Jake was currently out fighting those.

The owner had even mentioned a nearby D-grade dungeon. It was currently closed off with warning signs still at the cave entrance, and Miranda had even placed down a small alarm spell around the cave to make sure no one entered. Jake clearly wanted to be the first to do the dungeon, and there was no way Miranda would deny him that right. It was also just safer to have someone scout it out and get some general information for subsequent parties. She knew no one better than him to do it.

There wasn't really any threat of others going to the dungeon currently, though. There was no other D-grade in the city than Jake and the birds. They just stayed in the valley most of the time, and while she knew beasts could enter and do dungeons, they apparently very rarely did. Besides them, no one was really even close to D-grade. Miranda herself was now the second-highest leveled individual with a race level of 86, with Neil and his party all sitting between 75-85 - Neil the one at 85. She was actually impressed by the continued zeal of the party to keep progressing. She did believe a part of it was due to what happened at the Fort, as the entire party appeared both ashamed and motivated after being utterly embarrassed by Jake and Mystsong Hawk.

Besides all those decisions, they had also discussed who should go to the World Congress. Based on what she could tell, only two additional people except for the City Owner and City Lord could enter the Congress per Pylon. The wording was a bit weird, making her wonder if perhaps both she and the Owner could bring two people each, but she was now certain that wasn't true.

As for who they would bring? She wasn't sure yet. Maybe Phillip would be smart or perhaps Lillian due to how loyal she was and because she had already signed a system-enforced contract. Neil could also be a good idea as he was making rapid progress with making a functional teleportation circle. It would be good if he could meet other space-mages to maybe create a teleportation network – something Miranda had learned was quite commonplace on most other civilized planets.

Either way, it all came down to if Jake had any plans himself... assuming he would actually come. He said last time he would. Miranda felt a bit bad for doubting him; she knew she really shouldn't as she was his inferior in every way, but a small part of her still held doubt.

He still has half a day.

Jake awoke with a great yawn as he sat up and scratched his head. Actually, his body was itching quite a bit all over. It was probably the coagulated blood. Yep, definitely the blood. Who knew blood could be itchy? Jake sure knew now.

He got up and quickly took out a large barrel of water to clean himself up. He had a date with a monkey a bit later, so he would need to look presentable for that, wouldn't he?

After cleaning himself up, he did a bit of light stretching to get all his sore and newly-regenerated muscles up to speed. His entire body felt great, and his resources were maxed out once more. It was actually a bit funny because he found a bunch of empty potions on the ground, and he couldn't at all remember drinking those. *Drinking in my sleep... am I becoming a potion-holic?*

Checking the time, he still had more than 12 hours left until it was time for the World Congress. He had slept for a good 10 hours, and he felt fresh as a cucumber.

With everything ready, he began making his way back towards the temple. He noticed how he barely encountered any monkeys on the way, and those he did see were solitary regular D-grades and even a few still at E-grade.

Jake landed on top of a tree as he stared down at the temple grounds and saw how it was now entirely desolate. There was only a single living being atop the highest point of the ancient temple. Waiting, almost baiting, him.

[Penta-Lighttail Monkey Prima – lvl 134]

Grown three levels since last time I checked, Jake noted. Perhaps it had seen its interference in whatever Jake was doing as unnecessary as it progressed its own strength at a rapid pace.

Alright, pal... let's see what you can do, he thought as he focused on the monkey in the distance, an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter slowly being summoned.

Chapter 213: Monkey Business

The arrow slowly emerged from his palm as he focused on the monkey in the distance. He had a feeling that it knew he was there, just not where exactly he was hiding. It was just sitting on top of its temple, inviting him to attack - something Jake would gladly do and even open with his most decisive blow possible.

On a side note, Jake had tried to use Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter with his new Splitting Arrow, and it still didn't work. He couldn't split an arrow fired with Arcane PowerShot either. Then again... it would be pretty silly if he could effectively triple the power of a powerful epic-rarity skill with a rare skill. No, copying the Arcane Hunter's Arrows didn't really feel like he copied an entire "skill".

With the arrow fully summoned, Jake was careful as he took aim at the monkey. He was far away - several kilometers - and its back was turned, yet he felt like he knew. He couldn't help but use Identify to once more confirm it was indeed the Prima.

[Penta-Lighttail Monkey Prima – lvl 134]

Yep, that's the one...

His instincts also made it clear it was the real one... that it wasn't some mental magic trick or an illusion or anything like that. It genuinely was just sitting there, waiting for him to strike. Was it stupid, overconfident, or did it have a plan in mind? Perhaps all three? Jake didn't know.

But he was sure as hell about to find out.

He didn't hesitate to activate Limit Break to 10% as he charged his Arcane Powershot. He released the string just as he felt the Windsoar Bow no longer able to endure it anymore, and with an explosion of arcane mana and stamina, the giant arrow flew forth.

Just before he let go of the string, the Prima sitting atop the building turned around and looked his way. Jake instantly froze it, and just as he did, he noticed how he had frozen it mid-smile.

CRASH!

The two upper floors of the ancient temple collapsed in an accelerated manner as if the entire building and Prima had suddenly gotten dozens of times heavier - that damn smile still on the monkey's face when the arrow passed over its head and harmlessly into a tree on the other side of the temple grounds.

You little shit.

Able to move again, the monkey didn't jump or do anything in particular; it just slowly stood up on top of the ruined upper parts of the temple and stared at Jake, who still stood far away on a tree branch. Their eyes met for a moment, and Jake felt the provocation and confidence in the gaze of the Prima - a sentiment he returned in kind.

Neither of them felt like they could lose.

Jake quickly drew a pre-poisoned arrow from his quiver and began charging another Arcane Powershot. In response, the monkey pointed one of its five tails in his direction - a move he had seen the other D-grades make many times before but never at this range.

The immediate surroundings of the tail distorted for a second, and Jake was forced to jump. A massive shockwave hit the tree below him as he fired his arrow while in mid-air.

His Powershot was intercepted by another wave of force, but clearly, one attack was superior to the other. The wave of force was broken as a sonic boom sounded out midway through the arrow's flight caused by a small explosion from the clash. The Prima was

forced to dodge the powerful arcane shot with a frown and an angry screech, still being scratched even then.

It responded by three of its tails firing off blasts of force, and Jake happily dodged all of them as he returned an arrow for every tree that had a large part of its bark blown off. It was a ranged battle with several kilometers between the fighters – Jake coming out on top initially, as the monkey took a few minor injuries. Unluckily, Jake didn't manage to land much of his poison quite yet. It was still infected, though.

This whole exchange clearly didn't sit well with the monkey that had clearly had its pride hurt. It screeched angrily once more as its golden hair began standing up, and it flew towards Jake. Not jumping or floating or whatever, but true flight.

Weight and force magic combined? Jake thought as the monkey soared towards him, even faster than Hawkie. It was a speed that would have stumped him before, but Jake had a trick up his sleeve... called having thrown all his free points into agility.

He reacted by summoning his wings of poison and death as he fired another arrow after the charging monkey. It didn't even attempt to dodge as the exploding arcane arrow split in three, and arcane energy appeared to consume the Prima in a raging flood of destruction as they clashed.

For a second, at least, before the figure exited the explosion, not a scratch on it. But Jake saw the reason right away. It had a rippling sphere around it that appeared to have perfectly blocked the attack and kept the destructive energy out.

A powerful barrier... but... compared to the King...

Their levels were similar. Both were clearly not average beasts. Every single D-grade Jake met, he compared to the King... he just couldn't help it. Especially not after the mask on his head now hinted about some ominous return.

And when he compared any creature to the King, he just found them... lacking. Perhaps it was due to a part of him inherently overestimating the King as he, for all intents and purposes, was the only foe Jake fought that he felt like he didn't truly "beat".

The Prima is not to be underestimated, however.

That barrier was strong, and its speed impressive. He managed to fire one more quickly charged Powershot before it arrived, and he had a stable version of his arrows for that blow. The shot managed to pierce the barrier but missed the monkey itself as it was deflected slightly by the barrier.

As he had no intentions of entering a melee brawl right away, Jake swiftly took a step as he teleported down from the tree he was standing on. The monkey was clearly even better than himself at flying, and if it could increase his weight like its brethren, then mid-air fighting wasn't advised. He could totally see himself be forced down and smashed into the forest below.

The monkey didn't hesitate to follow after as it descended like a meteor straight towards him. It looked like it intended to just crush him outright with the sphere around it. Jake wasn't sure exactly how a direct clash with the monkey would go, and he really didn't see any reason to find out.

Just before the monkey hit the ground, he took another step away, arcane bolts spinning to life, floating where he had just stepped away from.

BOOM!

Once more, the forest shook as the ground exploded with even more arcane mana, followed by a quick Arcane Powershot straight towards where Mark of the Ambitious Hunter told him the monkey was.

If the screech of pain didn't tell him he had hit, the new response from Sense of the Malefic Viper sure did. Hemotoxin successfully delivered.

With a swipe of one of its tails, the Prima dispelled the cloud of dust and soil, making Jake see that it had an arrow sticking out of its shoulder. It looked more annoyed than angry as it ripped it out, stared a bit at the poison, and then tossed it aside. It stood in a weird pose, with one hand on the wound and another over its forehead, just looking at Jake.

"Can't talk, can you?" he asked the beast as it looked to have calmed down a bit after being infected by the poison. At least Jake thought so for a moment until he felt its real intent. *Fucker was just buying time.*

It saw that he noticed and smiled at him, removing its hand from its forehead as he saw the silvery motif that was hidden by the monkey's hand glow. The motif didn't at all fit the rest of the monkey's golden hide... and neither did its effects, as just a moment later...

The Prima disappeared.

Not invisibility either, as his Sphere of Perception made him know it truly was gone... even the Mark was gone, and so was any response from Sense of the Malefic Viper. Jake was stumped... had it decided to flee?

He stood confused for a bit, wondering what the hell to do... as he dodged to the side, narrowly avoiding a whip-like tail that would have taken his head off.

Where the monkey had disappeared from, a new figure had appeared. It looked a lot like the Prima before, but its hide was white, almost silvery, and its tails looked more like those of a Dervishes than a regular Lighttail Monkey.

But... Jake's Identify and instincts made him aware. It was the same beast.

[Penta-Lighttail Monkey Prima – lvl 134]

Jake was confused, as this figure was completely unharmed. All the small wounds earlier were gone, no poison in its system, and even his Mark was no longer there... *some kind of double-body skill? Or is it just its long-lost brother?*

Ultimately, it didn't matter... what mattered more was that this new figure was quite different, not just in appearance, but style.

Dervishes were tough with their three tails constantly attacking... unsurprisingly, five was a lot worse.

Jake dodged and weaved, blocking with his Scimitar and Venomfang all the time, yet still getting hit here and there. The wings on his back were pumping out poison, making the Prima now target those. It moved in closer as it momentarily stunned Jake by suddenly making it like a mountain was pressing down on his shoulders. He used both weapons to protect his vitals, but this allowed the monkey to go for its true targets.

Like two snakes clamping down, two tails moved and stabbed through the fleshy parts of the wings, and with Jake now being unable to move them and distracted, two other tails swept down and severed both wings entirely, making Jake hiss in pain.

Yet he couldn't be outdone as he took the four tails being busy as a chance to attack. He pushed himself forward and found that while the beast was faster than him, he won out on pure strength. He stabbed Venomfang into the arm used to block his blow, had his Scimitar blocked by the fifth tail, which left just his final weapon: his teeth.

The monkey looked surprised as it raised its other arm to attack, and Jake happily chomped down. His canines were already coated in a highly potent toxin. Yes, while Jake had said he really didn't think he would ever use that part of Fangs of the Malefic Viper... the opportunity was just too good, and his instinctive way of fighting didn't really take into account any potential embarrassment after the fact.

BOOM!

Jake was instantly impacted by a massive wave of force that aimed to send him flying back, but he had predicted it as he also released a wave of disruptive mana from his pores, resulting in both him and the monkey just exploding mana into the other's face.

Their whole stalemate was disrupted as the hunter was forced to let go with his mouth as two tails came down to smash his skull, but at the same time, it also allowed him to sweep up with his scimitar and land a long cut across the chest of the monkey as he took a step back – poisoning the Prima even more while draining a bit of health.

The Prima attacked back, and they proceeded to brawl a little in melee, Jake taking the occasional wound but landing two in return. His opponent tried many different techniques, all variations of what other monkeys had used on him before. This allowed Jake to predict many attacks, and it eventually allowed him to dodge under an attack, and with a swipe, cut off one of the monkey's tails in a moment where the Prima failed to strengthen it with mana.

However, he wasn't done as he swiftly took a small step forward and teleported back, summoning his bow. He quickly nocked an arrow, drew the string, and loosed the arrow for the beast that was already preparing to dodge to the side but found itself frozen by Gaze yet again.

Another arrow penetrated the monkey's stomach as it was sent flying back, blood flowing from several wounds on its body and the poison spreading throughout. It was far less durable in its silvery form, and Jake happily took advantage of that fact.

He didn't let it relax as he kept attacking, as the Prima acted nearly suicidal. It stormed him, slashing with its four remaining tails, clawing with its hands, and even tried to bite him a few times. It released a constant pressure increasing his weight, and every slap of the tail felt like he was hit by a sledgehammer. Clearly, it held nothing back.

Jake felt like the entire situation was off, but he couldn't exactly just stop fighting. However, he did try to minimize his own wounds and just buy time as he suspected not everything was as it seemed. Besides, the Prima was growing weaker by the second as the poison spread in its body – the injection from his bite doing a hell of a lot.

In a final clash, Jake took a nasty stab from a tail to his shoulder, but in return, he severed the entire right arm of the Prima and sent it flying back with a kick. It coughed up blood when it smashed into a tree and looked to be on the brink of death, yet Jake still felt like something was off.

A sense of wrongness only amplified when the monkey looked listlessly up at him, with a huge grin on its face as it laughed. It raised its one remaining arm to the golden symbol on its forehead as it disappeared.

“Oh fuck me, this is bullshit,” Jake said as he already knew what would happen. He took out a health potion and chugged it down as he prepared for round 3.

A second later, the monkey reappeared with its golden fur back in near-pristine condition. At least Jake felt a faint trace of poison from it still – the hemotoxin he had inflicted before it switched to its silver form before.

At least it doesn't just fully heal itself when it does that bullshit... Jake bitterly thought as he cracked his neck and stared down the Prima that just looked tauntingly back at him.

But what can you do... Jake had no intention to back down as he teleported back, drew his bow, and continued the fight. He just hoped there wasn't going to be any more monkey business going on.

Chapter 214: Enjoyment

There was going to be more monkey business going on.

Once more, the Prima was fighting in a way that just didn't make any logical sense. It took far more damage than Jake with every exchange; in fact, it was even worse for the Prima now that it had changed back to its golden form. It relied on magic and ranged combat, which was a-okay with Jake.

Its magic was something he was getting very used to, even if it did spice it up sometimes. At times, random areas around him would suddenly increase in weight, only making half of his body heavier, while at other times, the monkey threw a small stone that probably weighed a few tons post-weight-amplification.

The waves of force were something he easily dodged to by now, as he had learned most of the Prima's tells, and yet despite it all, he still couldn't help frowning. A few injuries here and there against a foe of equal or slightly greater strength was expected, so Jake did take quite a few blows, while the monkey looked to not give a damn about taking several poisoned arrows just to return a blow that did far less damage.

Can it do that transformation again? Jake asked himself, genuinely unsure. He believed it shouldn't be able to based on how the golden version of the monkey was still a bit wounded after it transformed back, and the silver version had been left close to death.

Besides that, the silver symbol on its forehead currently wasn't glowing. It was still there and gave off an odd gray color, even with a bit of black mixed in. Jake even thought for a second it was due to toxins as it looked almost deathly, but Sense of the Malefic Viper didn't give off any response.

However... he was sure the symbol meant something. Maybe it truly was just a sign to show the silver version was out of commission? But why did the monkey then fight as it did? Had it given up or something? Decided to try and take him down with it? It was doubtful... because it looked to be in pretty high spirits, and even if it did try for mutual destruction, clearly, the monkey would fall first as things were going.

Did it not know I drank the health potion and now believes my health points to be lower than they actually are?

So many thoughts, just searching for an explanation, went through his head as he kept fighting and exchanging blows. Jake dodged under a blast as he fired off one of three arcane bolts floating above him, making a hole in the monkey's barrier as the arcane mana tore it apart. He followed up with a quick arrow, penetrating the monkey's stomach, sending even more blood flying.

The Prima retaliated by pointing all its five tails forward and released a massive wave of force that expanded in a giant cone in front of it. In a display that must have consumed ridiculous amounts of mana, it managed to make Jake lose his footing for a second, allowing the monkey to land a quick blast of force, sending him flying back.

He felt a few ribs be pushed in, but nothing was broken. It did worsen his wounds a bit, but currently, Jake was fine with not moving too fast. While he was confident the monkey had more tricks up its sleeves, Jake also had a trick. Or, well, a potion cooldown.

Perhaps the monkey noticed he was just dragging the fight out, too, as it finally decided to use its final card and changed up the fight. It kind of had to do something as it was dying of poison pretty damn rapidly. It released a few gigantic blasts, likely running itself out of mana, and it was only when it looked barely able to fight that it made its move.

Jake was unsure what it would do... until he saw it raise its hand towards its forehead once more.

You got to be fucking kidding me.

The moment it touched the mark, the Prima disappeared, just like all the times before.

He just took out his bow and began charging an Arcane Powershot, hoping to give it a good opening blow when it appeared again. Which it did a few seconds later.

Jake instantly fired his arrow before even seeing the figure fully appear. The Arcane Powershot tore through the air towards the Prima, the monkey unable to possibly respond to-

Jake instantly fired his arrow before even seeing the figure fully appear. The Arcane Powershot tore through the air towards the Prima, but the monkey was already dodging before it was fully visible.

Well fuck, Jake thought as he just felt something he had experienced before... the concept of time. Even if time had somehow been reversed, or perhaps the timeline changed, he still remembered all of it. It wasn't due to any bloodline-shenanigans; the monkey just wasn't good enough at the concept to truly control time. He quickly used Identify on the monkey as he now truly inspected its changed form.

[Penta-Lighttail Monkey Prima – lvl 134]

Its level was unchanged, but its form was not. Before, it had been hunched over, while now it stood with a straight back. It had even grown nearly half a meter to be as big as Jake. Its fur was now dull and gray with several scars all over its body, including one across its forehead. The symbol there was gone, destroyed by whatever had caused the scar. Even more surprising was its back... where five tails usually were, there was now only one with four stumps surrounding it.

The Prima looked older. Far older. Like it had gone from a young, arrogant master to an old veteran. Its demeanor had followed suit as it stood there silently observing him. Yet there was still a trace of impatience, not born of stupidity or inexperience, but from an inherent time pressure... *It's a limited transformation*, he instantly concluded.

That was all he had time to think about before the monkey made its move, or well, had already made its move. It was before Jake the same moment he reacted, doing some more time-magic bullshit, allowing it to move extremely fast if Jake had to guess.

It swung not with its tail but its clawed hand. The hands that the monkey could barely use competently before now soared towards Jake's throat like an eagle's talons, forcing him to bend back and dodge as he kicked the monkey in the abdomen.

With grace, it dodged back as he did so, sliding across the ground before swiftly attacking again. Jake had his scimitar and dagger out now and blocked the first swipe with ease. He had expected to cut a bit into the bare arm of the beast but found its fur as hard as metal, no doubt caused by a skill of some sort.

Jake moved forward as he compared his strength with the beast's. He found himself be slightly pushed back at it retaliated, proving he was inferior in pure stats. Its speed slightly above his too. In a purely physical melee fight, it was a difficult foe to face... but Jake wasn't a pure physical melee fighter.

He dodged back as he swiftly began condensing two arcane bolts floating above him. The monkey hesitated for a second if it should attack, allowing Jake to summon his bow. The moment he did so, the beast knew it had to attack as it didn't wish to face the hunter in a ranged battle.

It only managed to take a single step before it froze up for a second and only became able to move just as an arrow struck its chest, finally delivering a good dose of poison.

Or at least that is what Jake first experienced happening before suddenly the monkey became able to move a fraction of a second earlier than expected and dodged the arrow by the narrowest of margins. With Jake momentarily stumped by his own immense annoyance, he barely managed to block its next claw-attack but found that this one was different.

Like it had hit him with a fucking sledgehammer, he felt his arm buckle and the claw sink into his chest before sending him flying back into a tree. It was only after being sent flying he noticed the faint white energy surrounding the hand as Jake nearly slapped himself.

How the fuck could I forget the weight magic...

Just because it now did time-bullshit didn't mean it had lost its other school of magic.

Jake did hurt a bit from the blow and had five small holes in his chest from the fingers of the monkey... but honestly, that wasn't a big deal. His entire body was already a mess from the drawn-out fight, and he was in many ways at a disadvantage.

Yet... in an almost ironic twist of fate: time was on his side. The monkey could only remain in its current form in a limited amount of time, and Jake had his "trick" coming up.

The monkey knew it had limited time as it continued its assault, Jake being purely on the defensive. He blocked with his blade at every turn, his scales already summoned all over his body to lessen the damage a bit more. Throughout it all, he could feel the monkey building *something* up deep within itself. Like something was slowly being conjured and prepared.

It gave Jake a small sense of dread as he knew that the monkey before him was no longer as dumb as before. It had a plan to finish him off before its transformation ran out. A plan Jake naturally would prefer to do without.

Their clash continued as they exchanged blows. They were far more even than one would expect, and Jake's many levels from committing monkey genocide came in tight. His agility allowed him to keep up, and even if his strength was subpar, he could make up for it with his magic.

The Prima seemed pressured yet sure of itself. It dodged his blows with grace and counterattacked only when opportune, never overextending. A few clashes did end with both taking a heavy hit, but yet just as Jake felt that happen, it just became a feeling of Deja vu. Another obvious weakness of that time magic trick – it worked on both parties. It truly was like it turned back time.

Finally, the two clashed, and Jake stabbed the monkey in the chest with his scimitar as he believed it had fucked up and finally overextended a step too far. He was proven wrong as suddenly the monkey flew backward, as he noticed its tail embedded in the ground behind it, acting as a rope to drag it back.

At the same time, it chopped down on Jake's wrist with both its hands, making him momentarily lose all strength in it, allowing the monkey to effectively disarm him.

Well...

The monkey ripped the sword out of its own chest and tossed it into the air before catching it with its tail.

...this is annoying.

With a swing of the tail, Jake was forced to dodge his own damn scimitar. While he was fully aware the blade wasn't actually "active" in the hands of the monkey, that didn't mean it wouldn't hurt to be hit by what was now practicality just a metal rod.

Fuck me, Jake thought as he got smacked in the side, the blow barely hurting but still throwing him off balance. The tail's power in its older veteran form was weaker than both its golden and silver form, but it made for that in pure upper-body strength and experience.

On the backfoot, Jake did what he could to avoid taking too much damage as he tried to get some range between him and his foe. Without his best weapon, it was far too dangerous to fight the Prima in a straight battle.

He leaped back as he used One Step Mile the moment he landed, teleporting away as he swiftly summoned his bow and turned in the air to fire a shot towards the monkey. It responded by punching the air and sending a wave of force out that broke all three exploding arrows mid-air, far too close to Jake for comfort.

The resulting explosion sent the human flying back as he finally became aware. It was time for the big turnaround. And just in time, as he saw that the Prima was just about ready to do whatever the fuck it was planning.

With great vigor, he took out the small bottle and chugged it down as if his life depended on it – because it likely did.

Instantly the warm liquid spread in his body as it rapidly healed. His sore arms began to feel more flexible, his aching bones regenerated and became tough and resilient once more. All of it happened within seconds as the potion did its job, and for the first time, Jake saw the Prima look truly surprised after its transformation.

It was also the first time he saw it show anger and annoyance as it activated what it had prepared.

Jake felt it before he saw it. An odd sense of pressure overtook the entire area as the symbol covered by the scar lit up on the Prima's forehead. Its light was intense enough to shine through the scar tissue and be fully visible.

The symbol's color was at first gray until it split, and one side turned golden and the other silver. This energy spread down the upper body of the Prima as Jake saw the symbol itself split in two directions and also begin moving. He saw it glide across its skin of the monkey due to it shining until finally, both symbols found their home on the back of the Prima's hands.

And then... then it attacked.

One hand first punched as it released a massive wave of force towards Jake. At the same time, it took a step forward and practically teleported to him as it swung the other in an overhead punch.

The shockwave hit exactly at the same time as the punch, as if it had somehow been delayed. Jake raised both his arms to block the hit and the blast simultaneously, even summoning a barrier of arcane mana as quickly as he could.

BOOM!

Scales and blood flew out everywhere as the punch landed, and Jake felt both his arms hurt like hell as he was pretty sure his left one was broken. The arm with the silver symbol on it was like the pinnacle of a melee weapon, while the golden one was now a master of releasing its magic.

Jake was sent flying back, but he had managed to get a bit of a counterattack in at the final moment.

The Prima stumbled back in a loud screech as it was now covered in a liquid that it had been the cause of releasing: blood. More accurately, blood infused with Blood of the Malefic Viper.

It had even gotten it in its eyes as it looked furious at the human, its eyes red and burning with rage. Jake just slowly stood up from the tree he had hit, cracked the bone back in place on his left arm as he looked back at the Prima.

Their eyes met as both moved.

Jake jumped as he dodged a blast of force that blew a huge hole in the tree he was just at – a bow already in hand as he fired an arrow at the Prima. It reacted by swatting it away with his own scimitar, making Jake grumble a bit as he just fired another shot.

The Prima only had its current form due to a temporary powerup. Now, it had used another powerup that also felt very temporary. By all accounts, Jake should just try to open up space, buy some time, and play it safe. It would be the smartest thing to do.

So, of course, Jake charged a fast Arcane Powershot as he took a step at the same moment, appearing straight before the surprised Prima that had expected him to make the smarter choice. Even more surprised when it was punched in the face.

Because the thing is... there was something Jake valued far more than being efficient and smart in a fight:

Enjoying it.

Chapter 215: Fragmented

BOOM!

The Prima was sent flying back as Jake's hand exploded in an assault of arcane mana the same moment he punched it. Its silly belief in Jake playing it smart clearly backfiring on it, as Jake was more than happy to be risky. The reason he had held back before was due to the uncertainty of what it was cooking up, but now... now he knew he could face it head-on.

His opponent got up with a nosebleed, looking more than a little pissed as it zoomed forward. Jake was ready as he met it; he had also decided to now hold nothing back.

Energy began pouring out of his pores more than before as the ground cracked beneath his feet. The internal flow of his energy sped up to new levels as his body began

overflowing with power. He hadn't done it many times since reaching D-grade, but damn did he love the feeling.

Limit break at 10% had been active the entire fight, but now he pushed it to 20%. Instantly all his capabilities increased as he clashed with the beast.

He had lost his primary melee weapon... but that didn't mean he didn't have any. In fact, he had a whole lot of them.

In the hand he didn't hold Venomfang, an arrow appeared that he had no intentions of using with a bow. It did mean that the arrow wouldn't benefit from a lot of what made it good, but it could still be used to stab stuff.

The monkey clawed at him with its swift hand, leaving a silver trail after every swipe that burned with energy as it cut into Jake's Scales of the Malefic Viper. In return, he stabbed an arrow into the shoulder of the beast, and in just as swift a motion, pulled one from his quiver and slammed it down too. His Venomfang was used to deflect the golden hand that the monkey extended in a palm-hit, firing off a massive shockwave.

Jake followed up with another quick jab and a kick to the monkey's leg, which made it decide that enough was enough as it slammed its hands together. Yet another shockwave of golden and silver light hit him, and Jake felt his body first lighten for a moment as he was sent flying back, but a moment later, he became heavy and slammed straight down.

Another explosion created yet another crater as Jake was forced to quickly roll away from the monkey. It had jumped and slammed its foot down where his head had just been, Jake feeling quite a bit of aching all over his body from that last one.

Not that the Prima was doing any better. It had two arrows sticking out of it, one of them coated in his hemotoxin. It had tried to avoid being too poisoned, but fighting someone like Jake, it was truly impossible to altogether prevent it.

Without waiting for the beast to make the first move again, Jake moved in closer as he tried to stab it with another arrow. The monkey was having none of that as the silver claw flew up and just straight-up ripped the tip of the arrow off, making the entire arrow just disperse.

The golden claw flew up as it tried to blast his head off, but Jake tilted it as he dodged the blow and landed an uppercut on the monkey. It grit its teeth as it was lifted off the ground for a moment before it suddenly slammed straight back down, also slamming its tail into Jake together with it, the full might of its weight magic behind the blow.

His own scimitar slammed into his shoulder from above, bringing him to his knee as he felt like something broke. Yet he also took the opportunity to grasp out with his other hand as he pushed the monkey to the ground, the hand glowing a dark green.

The Prima stabbed its silver hand into Jake's guts as he held it down, but he didn't let up but kept pumping Touch of the Malefic Viper into its body. Jake even knelt down a bit and flexed his muscles to make the monkey unable to retract its hand from inside his body. He used his other hand to hold the golden hand away so it couldn't blast him off an-

He tried to use his other hand to hold the golden hand away but failed as it just blasted him from an awkward angle.

This is getting damn annoying, Jake thought as he landed softly on the ground, a trail of blood in his wake that sizzled as it hit the ground. The monkey also screeched angrily as its silver hand looked like it had just been put into a vat of acid - which it kind of had, considering Jake's use of the Blood of the Malefic Viper on all the blood around where the monkey had stabbed its hand in.

But... he was beginning to learn. He got a faint tingling in his mind as it cast its time magic - a sense of wrongness. He got it after, while, and before it happened, as weird as that sounds. Jake felt that if he could feel it, he could impact it somehow.

Both parties moved once more as they clashed, landing blow after blow on the other. The confidence of the Prima had begun waning long ago as it found the human before it was far more resilient and resourceful than expected, and Jake, too, was surprised. Despite its weak-looking state, the monkey was tough and durable. Its ability to avoid most blows to vital areas helping it immensely too.

In the end, the big difference-maker was once more the poison. Its time magic could help it heal immediate wounds, but the accumulated poison was still too much. The monkey was clearly aware it had to finish things now, or it wouldn't end well.

And while Jake didn't have to, he chose to face it in a final clash. Be it due to arrogance or well-founded self-confidence, he genuinely believed he had no way to lose.

They flew at each other as Jake saw the symbol on the half-rotten and broken silver hand move to its other one. At the same time, the entire arm began glowing with newfound energy, but Jake was also fully aware the monkey's entire arm could only handle a single blow before breaking apart from the sheer stress caused by the power.

Jake himself placed both his hands on Venomfang as he focused every fiber of his being on the weapon. He pumped mana into it to strengthen it as he even coated it in a bit of excess mana. At the same time, he tried to use Descending Dark Fang, feeling it instantly not work as he wanted it to do... but he wasn't taking no for an answer.

He forced his will upon the blade as the arcane mana swirled and extended as an edge, the dark mana burning into it meanwhile. In the end, the energy was forced to mix and mingle, destroying each other until they finally reached equilibrium as it split away from each other.

The arcane mana formed a coating around the entire dagger, looking almost like the weapon was made of crystal, while the dark mana swirled around that. The whole blade was volatile as he, with both hands, stabbed it down towards the head of the Prima

At the final moment, he saw the Prima smile as he felt his weapon smash into the head of the Prima, ending its lif-

At the final moment, it dodged to the side as it prepared to strike but found that Jake had also halted his blow, not doing as he was supposed to. It was too late for the Prima as it smashed its fist towards Jake's face in an attack that would undoubtedly blow his entire head off.

An attack no doubt counting as a fatal blow.

An attack that resulted in the Prima learning that while it certainly was a talented user of time magic...

As the moment was seized, it learned it wasn't the only one who could use the concept.

Moment of the Primal Hunter

Time slowed as Jake saw the fist about to impact his head. He swiftly moved around it as he stabbed his dagger down towards the head of the Prima. The moment he did so, he felt it try to once more interfere, and for a fraction of a second, he saw the despair in the eyes of the monkey as it realized – this was a moment that didn't belong to it. A moment where it was utterly suppressed as a superior concept of time had taken over.

Everything returned to usual as the clash happened.

One fist missed the human and sent a wave of golden and silver light flying out, tearing up a huge part of the forest as the Prima's entire arm was mangled by its own power. However, it failed to hit the human with anything but a bit of the remnant energy.

The other attack was a dagger that swirled with a mix of arcane and darkness that plunged down into the skull of the Prima, making two loud cracks sound out – one from the broken skull and the other from the dagger itself.

A torrent of arcane and darkness penetrated through the entire body of the Prima as the edge extended, and its screech of pain turned to silence.

****You have slain [Penta-Lighttail Monkey Prima – lvl 134] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 113 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 114 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 108 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 115 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

Jake stood almost frozen as his arm shook from the impact of his own attack. The energy around the dagger faded away as it revealed the form of Venomfang – a large crack down the middle with many small fractures throughout. He instantly knew; this battle would be the last for the good old reliable fang.

As for the attack he had unleashed at the end... it was yet another skill upgrade that came in clutch. One that shouldn't really come as a surprise with how much he had been practicing using his arcane mana, even making a few arcane edges here and there.

[Descending Dark Fang (Rare)] – A fang coated in dark mana descending like the clamping mouth of a snake. Do a downward strike with a melee weapon, significantly increasing penetrative power and damage inflicted. Dark mana makes the wound harder to heal and drains energy until dispelled. Damage improved further if the weapon is benefitting from Twin Fang Style. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility, Strength, and Intelligence when using Descending Dark Fang.

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[Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Epic)] – A fang that strikes from the darkness – one that clamps down with the fury of your arcane. Infuse your blade with a mixture of dark and arcane mana as you do a downward strike, significantly increasing damage done and penetrative power. Dark mana makes the wound harder to heal and drains energy until dispelled. Arcane mana creates a powerful coating and extends the edge while increasing all its basic capabilities. Damage improved further if the weapon is benefitting from Twin Fang Style. Adds a bonus to the effect of Agility, Strength, and Intelligence when using Descending Dark Arcane Fang.

The skill got stronger in every way, even if its name was beginning to look a bit silly. Either way, Jake couldn't help feeling accomplished. He had won. Gotten a skill upgrade and three whole levels for the effort too. Even with how slow leveling was supposed to get in D-grade, Jake had an extreme pace, likely due to the difficulty of the foes he faced. He was truly living up to the name of his class – surely increasing his speed even further.

Jake stood smiling as he looked down on the dead monkey. He was slightly perplexed when he saw the Prima slowly turn to dust, its eyes still wide open with surprise, but he nevertheless spoke his genuine thoughts to the figure moments before it disappeared.

“Good fight.”

Jake saw the entire figure of the Prima disappear, leaving nothing behind but a small piece of golden metal and a core. He quickly used Identify on the golden fragment, and it left him more confused than anything.

[Key Fragment of the Exalted Prima (Unique)] – A key fragment to the Seat of the Exalted Prima. Collect three fragments to form the Key of the Exalted Prima to gain access.

I guess it is good to know the system can still be like a videogame sometimes, Jake thought with a small chuckle. Maybe collecting the key would unlock a secret boss or a treasure vault? Either way, it sounded like something he was definitely gonna do.

As for the second item, it was, of course, the Beastcore.

[Penta-Lighttail Monkey Prima Beastcore (D-grade)] – – A Beastcore left behind by a D-grade Penta-Lighttail Monkey Prima, containing remnants of its Records within. Can be used as an alchemical ingredient for many types of creations but is most often found in Elixirs. Contains powerful energy related to the concept of time.

Jake looked at it for a bit and picked it up together with the fragment and, of course, his dropped scimitar. It was good to have that back. While getting a key fragment and a Beastcore may seem a bit shitty for the tough fight, Jake totally got it. It would be weird if creatures out in the wild just dropped random high-rarity items. It would break the economy and make most crafters obsolete for sure. *Maybe dungeons still do a bit of that? Hmmm....*

It was also a bit weird that the monkey just turned to dust and left a key behind, sure, but what can ya do. Jake wouldn't really feel comfortable running around in an old monkey's hide anyway. That would just be weird.

As he stood there, looking at the core and what he could possibly make with it in the future – or who to possibly give it to to make something – he remembered something slightly important.

“Oh yeah. World Congress.”

He checked the time and saw that he still had... a bit less than 10 hours - *plenty of time, plenty of time.*

Jake could get back in three hours tops. He was more than good on time.

Well, he did feel like shit, so maybe a bit more than an hour as he needed to wait for his potion cooldown to be up. The fight with the monkey had lasted nearly two hours, the vast majority of it spent just on the ranged parts of the fight. It was actually a damn long time for two D-grades to battle.

With all that in mind, Jake had plenty of time to check out that ancient central temple that the Prima had been guarding and going into while Jake was busy slaughtering the entire local Lighttail Monkey population. Maybe it was hiding all its shiny stuff there?

In a dark cell, the chains hung from above. Ancient magic marking every part of the walls and floors. Within, trapped only a single living being.

The figure opened its eyes as the chains that bound it rattled to the movement - a mighty beast. It barely had time to realize why it had been awakened before one of the chains broke, and a spike that was inserted in the beast's body vanished.

A single seal now broken.

A single stub where something had once been now regrowing.

A single stub of 999.

998 chains remained - 998 spikes sealing the beast.

The figure closed its eyes once more as it waited for release.

Chapter 216: The Calm Before the Politics

He wasn't sure if he should be disappointed or not as he entered the central temple. The inside sloped down a bit as he entered a small underground chamber – a perfect place for a secret treasure vault.

What he found instead was just a damn bush... tree... thing. As he looked at it, he actually found it a bit odd that his Sagacity of the Malefic Viper didn't toss out a snippet of knowledge. His Herbology skill was also not giving him any idea what the hell he was looking at.

Luckily, the system still came in tight and offered a nice explanation as he used Identify.

[Ancient Celerita Musa (Ancient)] – This plant has been grown from an ancient Musa seed and brought new life by the advent of the system. Also commonly called a banana tree, this plant produces different sorts of bananas, a type of fruit unique to the newly integrated planet Earth. This tree has become intimately connected to the concept of time through unknown means, making its growth pattern highly unpredictable. Destroying this tree will have unpredictable effects, and using it in any kind of alchemical creation will require one to first anchor it in time. Can only grow in certain areas with intense amounts of mana.

You learn something new every day. Jake actually thought bananas grew on trees, something the system acknowledged. Maybe it was just being extra-nice with these new things and giving all of that sweet info? Either way, it was much appreciated. As for the banana Musa itself...

Well, this was without a doubt the rarest and most powerful herb Jake had ever come across. He felt the pressure just standing before it as he observed the weird plant.

It looked like it was growing in real-time. At least it was until suddenly it wasn't. A minute or so later, a part of it suddenly began growing in the opposite direction – in other words, began retracting into itself as if time reversed. That was likely because time kind

of did reverse... this was a time tree... time musa. Whatever. *Anyway...kinda awesome, not gonna lie.*

It wasn't very big, only about five meters tall, though it was pretty wide with its large leaves. There was nothing else in the entire underground chamber aside from a few other minor herbs that Jake decided he may as well just pick up.

As he stood there considering that, something happened on the plant. One of the flower-like growths suddenly appeared to bloom as four small bumps began growing out. Within less than a minute, the bumps took the shape of bananas before the growth stopped.

It was – to the surprise of no one – bananas. Yellow and ripe, looking just like what Jake was used to buying in the supermarket. Jake was pretty sure modern bananas were selectively bred or something like that, but who's gonna complain about delicious-looking bananas?

He went up to the tree – yes, Jake had decided to just call it a tree because it looked a bit like a tree – and felt like he passed a weird barrier as he got close. He felt like time being ever-so-slightly affected in the area a few meters around it.

Using Identify on the bananas, Jake was honestly a bit taken aback.

[Celerita Banana (Rare)] – As a banana from the Ancient Celerita Musa, this fruit contains intense amounts of Celerita-affinity mana with agility-enhancing effects. This fruit can be used in many different creations and is especially suited for flasks and elixirs. Due to this banana's origin, it will be returned to the rivers of time if it is removed too far from the tree. Consuming or transforming the fruit will anchor the energies in time, removing this effect. +3 Agility upon consumption.

This was the second natural treasure he had seen that just stated how many stats it gave, the first being the Argentum Vitae Mushrooms all the way back in the challenge dungeon. These bananas were clearly a step better, giving three stats each.

With four of them, that was just 12 free agility. Well, not entirely free, as with most things, there was a cap.

Jake had considered at one point if the rich and entitled kids of the multiverse couldn't just have their mama and papa give them a mountain of elixirs and whatnot and instantly make their children absolutely overpowered for their level, but that – luckily – wasn't a thing.

Villy had explained to him that the cap was actually quite low and based entirely on race level. For level 1-24, aka F-grade, you could get 3 stats per race-level; for E-grade, you could get 5 per level and D-grade 15 per level. This ultimately resulted in Jake having a maximum cap of stat-bonus from consuming stuff sitting at 585 currently. Of course, he had already used a bit of that.

Jake had eaten his way to a total of 86 stats gained. 51 of it in vitality, 25 in toughness, and 10 in willpower. The stats were coming from the elixir he had chugged down after clearing the Valley of Tusks dungeon, the fucked-up concoction he had made to clear the challenge dungeon, and the mural with the history of the Malefic Viper in that same dungeon. Yes, things like that “glimpse” counted towards this cap too. This cap was pretty much everything you could get from outside sources.

There was one big difference between this and something like equipment, though. First of all, it counted towards base values, and secondly, there was no limit to increasing any one stat. This meant Jake could go drink perception-increasing elixirs and get 499 perception at his current level if he so wanted. Which he kind of did want, but that wasn't the current issue.

The current issue was that he was under time pressure in front of a giant time tree-thingie that he really wanted, and based on all the descriptions going around, there was some magic going on he didn't really understand.

He did understand that he couldn't just take the bananas that were growing on the tree. Maybe he could put them in his storage, but he had a feeling they wouldn't come out the way he wanted them. The barrier around the tree was likely what kept them ripe as they currently were, and he would have to find a way to "anchor" them before using them in any alchemical creation.

Well, with the four bananas that had just grown, he anchored them the easiest way possible as he grabbed the first one and peeled it.

You have assimilated a powerful energy of Agility.

+3 Agility

"Damn, these are good," he spoke out loud as he munched on it. He had always liked bananas. They were like the candy of fruit and fit in any good smoothie. Banana cake was also good.

Jake didn't hesitate to eat all four of them, getting a sweet +12 agility total. If all things went well, this would only be the beginning as Jake took out an item he hadn't used for a long time. His Omnitool.

[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 desire. While unsuitable for combat, it has incredible application when it comes to performing nearly any recreational task. Enchantments: Self-Repair.

The item he forgot about 99% of the time and should have totally given to some of the crafters back at Haven, so it didn't just sit uselessly in his spatial storage like so many other things. Anyway, with that in hand, he transformed it into a giant shovel.

Now, did Jake have any idea if he could even steal the banana tree? No, not at all.

How to properly move it? Of course not.

Was it possible it could only grow within this temple, and he would just kill it? It sure was.

Did he 100% bank on his valley counting as an area with "intense amounts of mana" due to the Pylon? He sure did.

Was Jake just 100% taking a chance as he decided to dig up the entire tree and bring it with him to just plop it down outside his lodge just to get a cool-ass banana tree? Yes. Yes, he was.

Shit, what is the worst that can happen? I kill a tree and still get some weird-ass-time-tree-musa-thing I can play around with, Jake thought as he began digging it up, finding it a bit annoying as the soil randomly moved back from where he had just dug it up from. Time magic and all that.

Jake was just going to risk it all and try to steal it. He knew it was a high-risk, high reward move, but if he was candid, he wasn't sure he would ever come back here. This temple was in an area that would be swarmed with new D-grades within a day or two once they noticed the Prima was dead, and a new alpha would claim the tree. Could Jake just kill that new alpha? Sure, but he was pretty sure it wouldn't be nice to him and save the bananas.

So, Jake would have cut it down or tried something similar to that anyway. No way he would just leave it here. It was also damn far away from Haven, and it wasn't like he could position anyone here. Even Mystie and Hawkie wouldn't be safe at the temple with the kinds of beasts he saw around the place.

Eventually, Jake realized he had to dig around the barrier of the tree to not have the soil be put back all the time. Stupid tree. So, he dug around the tree just where the barrier was in a radius of three meters or so. It did take around two hours, which still left plenty of time to go back.

Him missing the World Congress had never been an option. He would rather say "fuck this tree" and fly back right away if getting it meant missing the meeting. Because while he

didn't give much of a shit for all the political bullshit that would be going on – that was for Miranda to handle – there was something he had genuinely been looking forward to: Meeting his family.

He was only willing to spend this time to bring the tree back because he did have time. There was just one minor issue left.

“Now, how do I carry this...”

Miyamoto cleaned his blade as he waited, not because he expected to use it, but to clear his mind as he got more used to his reforged body. His blue robe was in impeccable condition, and he was ready. His great-granddaughter was already waiting at the Pylon together with his grandson and one of the managers.

He had also gotten word that the two other Pylons had prepared, each bringing in four people. This meant the Noboru clan would have twelve representatives present at the World Congress. Their preparations had been excellent, and Miyamoto was especially looking forward to finally laying his eyes on Earth's elites.

Jacob drank a cup of coffee as he read over the latest reports and prepared for their final meeting before the World Congress. The Pylons had the ability to link up and connect to each other, which was undoubtedly one of the major reasons for the World Congress, as it required either the owner, lord, or someone with an assistant profession to meet another representative.

Naturally, the Holy Church had already linked up their three Pylons to better facilitate cooperation. The hope of this World Congress was not just to link with a few of the

remaining factions – they aimed to at least reach some kind of agreement with 90% of other Pylon holders.

Caleb rocked back and forth with his son as he took the time to clear his mind and relax before the World Congress. Maja was with him as they talked about the upcoming meeting, not just between the many faction leaders around Earth but also the reunion with Jake.

There were many powerful people on Earth, and while Caleb did believe in Jake, he was still worried as any family member would be. They hadn't met in over half a year, and to say that a lot had happened during that time would be an understatement.

His only consolation was the words he had been given by Umbra in a divine message that his brother was fine. Besides that, he had only heard some vague rumors that may or may not pertain to Jake. He had to be honest; it would be good seeing his big bro again.

“Remember, we do not seek any hostile relationships with any factions. Play it safe, be courteous and recognize that some may be scared, at least to begin with. This will be the first time for many to see a Risen; it is our job to make the first impression a pleasant one,” Priscilla said with a big smile to the three people in the room with her.

One of those people being Casper, who looked like he was listening but was actually more busy thinking about how much he really didn't want to attend the World Congress and at the same time how much he would hate to miss it. On the one hand, it would mean meeting many people who would hate him by default just because he was an undead – his general aura amplified by his powerful curse-skills not helping either.

On the other... it would be good to see Jake and even Jacob again. At least he hoped it would...

“I am not wearing a fucking dress,” Carmen said as she looked at the other woman enter the room.

“No one says you have to,” the older woman answered with a shrug. “Just remember we aren’t going to fight. Who even knows if we will be able to fight? It would be quite silly if the first World Congress ended in a bloodbath.”

“That does sound more fun than sitting around a table with dim lights discussing trade,” Carmen sighed, annoyed she even had to attend. The woman in front of her was the current City Lord while she had taken the title of city owner. She was called Pam, and the only reason Carmen had picked her was that she was the only one she had gotten along with of all the annoying survivors she came across so far. Oh, and she was her old boxing coach.

“Who knows? Maybe something fun will happen,” Pam said with a smile as she sniffed the air. “However, one thing you are doing before the meeting is taking a shower. No discussion.”

Many other factions around Earth prepared as the most important geopolitical event was approaching. A meeting between all the most prominent factions of the planet. It would be the time to forge alliances that could last for ages to come.

No faction dared take it lightly. All with just the slightest hint of competency knew this, and even if they didn’t have the smarts, most at least still got intuition skills related to being a City Lord, making them aware of how important it was.

“Jake, what the hell are you doing!” Miranda yelled as she stood half-panicked at the Pylon as she saw a figure descend carrying what looked like a small fucking island with a plant on it.

His response was throwing Neil, who stood beside her, a glance as he smiled.

“Big hole, there now,” he said as he pointed at the ground beside the lodge.

“You want to-” Neil asked before Jake just threw him a glance. Neil sighed and used his space magic to create a hole in the ground by teleporting a cube of dirt away. A task he had done quite a lot these days as he had helped with the construction efforts at the Fort.

Jake happily plopped the tree down as he began filling it with dirt and trying to make sure it would survive.

The flight back sure as hell took a bit longer than expected. Who would have thought that flying with an Ancient-rarity natural treasure would attract attention? Well, he should have guessed it... either way, the banana tree was safely returned with... 9 minutes remaining.

“I need a shower,” he said as he stood there, covered in dirt. At least he had managed to pump enough mana into the Self-Repair enchant during the flight back for his clothes to be back in top condition.

“Then hurry up!” Miranda yelled, her panic overpowering her usual restraint.

“Geez, I’m on it, I’m on it...” Jake said as he jumped over to the pond and entered it, swam around a little before jumping out, and, with his mana, pushed off all the water and dried himself off. A final Alchemist’s Purification was used on himself for good measure.

“Alright, ready to go!” he said as he stood there staring at them - all of them looking at him a bit hesitantly before Lillian finally spoke up.

“We did kind of plan on going with more... formal attire.”

To which Jake had the perfect response.

“Excuse me, this is premier dungeon boss fur and leather...”

Which was about as far as they got before a system message popped up in front of Jake and Miranda, warning them there was one minute left. Jake had also gotten one at 1 hour, which had been a bit stressful.

With everything ready, the four of them prepared as the first World Congress began.

Chapter 217: The World Congress Begins

Jake, Miranda, Lillian, and Neil all stood at the lodge as the timer ticked down.

The question of who would attend the World Congress had never been an issue for Jake. In fact, he didn't have any input at all but just left it all up to Miranda to handle. The only ones he could possibly bring along were birds, and birds aren't known to be great political negotiators. Or maybe they were? Mystie did come off as very smart, even by human standards...

Either way, Miranda quickly managed to fire off a few quick bullet points in the final seconds. Mainly just: avoid fighting, politics and good relations first, no starting wars, agreeing that she should take charge of the primary negotiations, no killing other City lords and/or owners, and other such essential things.

When the timer reached zero, Jake and Miranda both got the option to join along with the ability to invite up to two people total. Neil and Lillian were naturally chosen.

With everything in order, they accepted as they disappeared from the valley.

Jake appeared with the three others inside a large circular room that was much akin to a conference room of the old world. He stood on a small platform with a table and four chairs in front of him. He also immediately noticed similar platforms to his sides, except the one he was on was slightly raised compared to the others, and the design of the table was also a bit different. The most significant of which was a sign saying "Haven – Earl."

The one to his immediate right had the name: “Saya – Viscount”, with the one to his left saying: “Sanctdomo – Viscount”. Jake counted nine of these Viscount platforms total, with theirs being the only one with the Earl tag.

Ten or so meters separated each platform, and Jake felt that each had a barrier of sorts surrounding it, one Jake naturally completely ignored with his Sphere of Perception. Well, that wasn’t that significant a thing as the barriers were invisible and didn’t affect sight at all.

“Do we take a sea-“ Neil tried to ask before figures appeared to their sides. Before Jake even had time to inspect anyone in his sphere, he felt the auras.

To his left, a serene presence appeared that sought to soothe all around it. It inherently had magical and mind-affecting properties and was one Jake recognized instantly as his old superior: Jacob. There was also one other presence mixed in by a middle-aged man, but it was nothing compared to Jacob’s. Besides those two, there was also Bertram and a woman.

To his right, the aura he felt was far different, and it was the reason that the first direction he looked wasn’t towards his old boss, Casper, or even his own brother that he had already noticed with his sphere. No, he looked straight at an old man who met his gaze with a smile.

This was the first human that Jake had ever met that made his instincts warn him so directly. That old man... wasn’t simple. Not at all.

The old man looked towards Jake as they both sized up the other until finally, he bowed. Jake returned his greeting with a deep nod. Their eye contact never breaking as both saw something similar in the gaze of the other: a desire to fight.

Yet they both knew now wasn't the time as they broke their staring contest just as they began attracting the attention of their companions. Jake saw the old man speak but couldn't hear his voice. *Guess I just found out what the barriers do.*

"Who is that?" Miranda asked, also feeling the aura, though she was more affected by Jacob based on how she kept throwing glances his way.

"Someone strong," Jake answered as he looked to his left towards Jacob. Jacob also turned to him with a nod, Jake gladly returning it. *Well, Jacob seems normal... as normal as someone with that Augur stuff going on can be.*

"Alright," Miranda said as she also now truly inspected the platform with Jacob on it. "Sanctdomo... and the Augur... how do you know him?"

Miranda had read the notebook Jacob had given Jake, and in that, the Augur class was described. She was smart enough to put two and two together, especially after talking with Neil about having met the man. The only thing she had never figured out was Jake's relation to the Augur.

"He used to be my boss," Jake answered nonchalantly, as he turned his attention towards the two other people in the large hall that he knew who looked his way. Miranda just shook her head, not even bothering to deal with the bomb Jake had just dropped.

“That’s the guy?” Matteo asked as he looked over to the highest platform in the entire room – the singular Earl on Earth.

He saw a masked figure wearing nearly all-black clothes, giving off quite a mysterious and unapproachable aura. Thinking about it, the guy would fit in quite well with the rest of the Court of Shadows.

“I can’t Identify him,” Nadia said as she shook her head, getting a glance from Matteo and the current manager of trade of Skyggen, the sole city controlled by the Court. Nadia had an upgraded version of Identify that allowed her to better pierce normal obscurations, so if she failed to Identify him, he had to have some great skill or technique behind it. As for the City Lord of Skyggen himself...

Caleb looked over and saw Jake look back towards him. He met his yellow eyes, and despite their outward change, found his brother’s gaze as familiar as ever. He saw the mix of relief and happiness in his eyes, and Caleb could only return the sentiment as a wave of relief washed over him.

Good to see you again, Jake.

So far, only ten platforms were filled as it looked like the system brought in people based on nobility, with 1 earl and 9 viscounts present so far. And while Jake’s platform attracted a lot of attention because it was the only one that was earl-tier, one attracted even more.

It was the only platform that wasn't occupied by humans... at least not the usual definition of humans.

The aura given off that platform was different from all others. It had an inherent concept of death seeped into it, making it automatically repulsive to most living beings who didn't possess the affinity themselves. Needless to say, this was more noteworthy than the three far stronger auras present, as it was simply too foreign.

No one could speak to each other yet, but there were many whispers around the chamber, especially by the ones with the old man as they were placed right beside the undead faction. The same was true for the faction on their other side, one consisting of a bunch of burly men and women who looked straight out of a medieval festival. All of them holding axes or maces for some reason. Well, it wasn't that weird to have a weapon, most did, but the majority at least had them sheathed.

Jake threw a look the way of the undead and saw Casper on the platform along with three others. The one in the lead was a woman with long white hair and equally white skin. She smiled like the negative attention didn't bother her and looked like she tried to appear as inoffensive as possible.

Casper looked like he wanted to make himself invisible. *Should have gotten a mask*, Jake joked to himself, honestly feeling bad for his old friend. There was power in wearing a mask, and Jake knew he would in no way feel comfortable with the attention on him currently without it. It was like a powerful shield that put a barrier between him and everyone else.

Hang in there, buddy.

After a few minutes of everyone sizing each other up and a bit of a dick-measuring contest in the form of auras, it was time for the rest of the chamber to fill up.

People began appearing on the platforms one by one, nearly all of them with four people, but there were a few with less than that. In total, 94 new platforms were occupied, meaning a total of 104 Pylons of Civilization had been captured. Four more than the day it announced a week was left till it was World Congress time.

A flood of auras overtook the room once more. Of the 10 first factions, six of them had at least one D-grade on them. The old man, Jacob, Jake, the white-haired undead woman, the leader of those bulky cosplayers, and the tenth platform with a middle-aged woman on it.

As for these new arrivals, all of them were E-grade except for three. All of them were automatically noteworthy for their strength, but one was more noteworthy than anyone else in the entire room - old dangerous swordsman included.

The two less noteworthy D-grades were a young red-haired woman who already looked annoyed at being there, and the other a man wearing full plate armor. As for the last one...

It was the only individual who had shown up only with two and not the allowed three companions.

He looked to be in his mid-thirties and had deep brown eyes and combed back hair and a small mustache. Jake's first impression was that he looked relatively harmless; the aura he gave off did not threaten him either... it was what he felt in the aura.

Jake felt an emotion he hadn't experienced before... an innate recognition of sorts. They both held something unique, something no one else possessed in the room beside them. A power that was their and theirs alone.

A Bloodline.

The two men stared at each other for a while before the other guy raised his finger to his lips and made a shushing motion. Jake answered back with a toothy smile as he understood. *No sharing secrets, eh?*

He could get on board with that.

Jake spent the next minute or so observing others while being closely studied back by the various factions of Earth. Most attention on their platform was focused on him as he was the sole D-grade, but Miranda, Neil, and Lillian also suffered quite the scrutiny. Miranda looked unfazed, Lillian like she didn't care, and Neil a bit uncomfortable. Jake himself hated every moment as he hoped for the system to do *something*.

Which luckily, it did.

Welcome to the first World Congress of Earth.

The World Congress is an opportunity for the newly integrated Earthlings to establish political connections and an arena for discussion, voting, and international politics that can impact the planet as a whole. Note that no fighting will be allowed during the World Congress. Each booth has an aura that will offer privacy to each city.

During the first World Congress, three votes will be held with one three-hour intermission between each to discuss the proposal. The total length of the World Congress will be 10 hours.

The first vote will be held in one hour and pertain to the election of a World Leader. The World Leader will automatically have their noble rank advance one stage. Becoming a World Leader requires more than 60% of the total votes.

Jake and everyone else got the notification. This was easily concluded as everyone suddenly stopped for a moment as they took in the information. To be honest, it was a lot more... formal than he had expected.

A small part of Jake had expected this entire World Congress to just be a big room they were all tossed into like the tutorial, and Jake having to dunk on some morons to set them straight. Luckily – or perhaps unluckily – this wasn't that kind of event.

Though he would like to fight that old man with the sword... *maybe later.*

The whole World Leader thing was a bit of a surprise and not something Jake expected was relevant here and now. Seriously, even if Jacob went full-on mental interference with his Augur stuff, he couldn't convince 60% of the attending to vote for him. It only became more apparent how daunting the task would be with the next message that popped up.

Voting rules of the World Congress:

The number of available votes is based on the nobility rank of the attending members. The number of votes per nobility rank is as follows:

Earl: 10

Viscount: 5

Baron: 3

Lord: 1

The noble in question may distribute their votes as they choose if there are multiple options. The noble may abstain from voting. Votes are final and cannot be appealed. Any agreements will come into effect until the next World Congress or if all included parties choose to revoke it. All tie-breakers will be decided by the highest-ranking noble present at the World Congress.

Going through that, it only became clearer how much harder it would be to be voted World Leader as the more prominent nobles had more votes, so you would have to convince the big factions to vote for you. It was without a doubt a feature not for this first World Congress but for future ones after the political landscape had formed and strong alliances were established.

As for all the rules... Jake didn't like them. He already felt a few more eyes upon him now, likely due to that last sentence about the highest-ranking noble deciding at tie-breakers... seriously, no way there was even going to be tie-breakers.

Also, why did he need 10 votes? Heck, Miranda had 5, Lillian 3, and Neil 1... their small group of four had 9 votes total. They were, without a doubt, the group with the most votes. If Jake had given Neil a baron title, it would be even more. Actually... maybe he should give out titles. That would be something to talk with Miranda about.

With the final message out, a countdown appeared.

Vote for first World Leader will begin in: 59:59

And with that, the barriers around each platform faded. They could still be re-activated, but now everyone was free to move. Everyone seemed hesitant until one person moved.

A figure teleported from the tallest platform, first towards the middle of the chamber before he a moment later stood before the four people from Skygge and the Court of Shadows.

Three of them tensed up as the figure spoke to the only calm member of their group.

“Hey Cal, how’s mom and dad doing? Did everything go well with Maja?”

“Yeah, they are doing quite well considering the circumstances. As for Maja... congratulations. You’re an uncle now,” Caleb answered Jake with a big proud smile as he thought about his son.

“Damn, good to know the system didn’t do anything weird in that department at least,” Jake said, genuinely relieved but also feeling a bit weird. He had suspected he was an uncle now, but it was still something else to have it confirmed. Well, he was also kind of an uncle to Sylphie, but Sylphie was a bird, so that is different.

“Anyway, how have you been doing? Heard some stuff through the grapevine that you went and did some impressive stuff,” Caleb asked with a raised eyebrow. Umbra hadn’t given that many details, and confirmation from primary sources were always best.

“Oh yeah, it’s been fun. You haven’t slacked too much either, though you should really hurry up and get to D-grade; the evolution is damn nice.”

Jake was so embroiled in his reunion that he didn’t care that the entire hall’s focus was now on him and Caleb. Miranda staring confused at him barely registered, and the three people with Caleb also just looked utterly confused, as their boss clearly hadn’t told them that the mystical Progenitor they had been warned to stay away from was the brother of the Judge.

The two of them lit the spark and broke the ice of the entire hall. The tense competition of auras died down, and while many were still wary – especially towards the undead faction – they eventually began moving about, a dozen or so already beginning to group around Miranda, Lillian, and Neil.

The reunion of two brothers split by the integration to the multiverse was something everyone could relate to. Many had lost touch with family, and so much uncertainty still remained for so many. The sight of two influential faction leaders just talking about family was... human.

It was an element that had been sorely lacking for many of those present. Many had spent the last few months just struggling, but perhaps this congress was a time to return to something more... civilized. Without Jake knowing it, his spontaneous action of impatiently approaching his brother had set the entire mood of the World Congress.

Chapter 218: World Congress: Friendly Talks

”Should we not be out attempting to sway the vote for World Leader?” Jacob was asked by the middle-aged trade manager he had brought along for the Congress. Maria and Bertram also looked at him questioningly.

They controlled several Pylons already, had many votes between them, and an Augur with frankly overpowered skills for convincing people. Yet Jacob did not look like he carried any intentions towards securing votes for World Leader.

“It’s too soon, and there are far too many unknowns. Becoming World Leader will undoubtedly come with a lot of power but also a lot of responsibility. In addition, fear that it may put a target on our back from those who disagree. Finally... I see no possibility of us securing 60% of the votes. At least not yet.”

“I am confused... I find it doubtful that any faction will dare move against us directly? We represent the Holy Church on this planet, and any powerful forces with divine connections will surely want to join hands with us or, at a minimum, not dare stand in opposition. While I understand that the Court of Shadows and the undead are not to be taken lightly, I do not see-“

“Exactly, you don’t see it. The problem is that I don’t either. This entire World Congress is an utter enigma to not just me but the gods too. Not just due to the inability of skills to predict the system itself, but also due to the leader of Haven and the Sword Saints’ presence here,” Jacob explained.

Jacob would have loved to be able to divine what the best choices for this World Congress would be - to see the fates that the voting would result in and in concert the future of their entire planet. Sadly, things didn’t work that way.

The individuals present formed a maelstrom of destiny that threw all predictions off. Jake was the primary issue due to whatever fate-bending skill he had been given. If Jacob was honest, he knew that just the mere fact that Jake was a Chosen was enough to toss off all predictions, even if he didn’t have a skill. A single sentence from the Malefic One would throw off all predictions.

Anyone being blessed made it harder to predict anything related to them, but not to the level of Jake. Not even close. He could at least get a general feel for things with most people, but with Jake and Haven, it was just a black hole.

Additionally... usually the Holy Pantheon or even the Grand Master who was in charge of their section of planets would throw in a tip here and there... but in regards to Jake, it had been radio silence except the warning of not interacting with the Malefic Viper's Chosen at all, and if he had to for some reason, limit it as much as humanly possible.

A warning Jacob had no intentions of following.

Stronger than me.

That was the assessment Miyamoto had when he saw the masked man for the first time - the enigmatic Earl that had claimed the very first Pylon.

Miyamoto was prideful and, in the eyes of many, arrogant, but he understood when he locked eyes with the man. He wasn't the only one. He saw the arrogance and inherent challenge in the eyes of the man. He was an old man, but at that moment, he could barely contain his childlike excitement as one of his biggest fears was alleviated.

A fear that he would have to wait for the multiverse to open up to meet peers with the same drive and desire as himself. A tiny part of him had feared that the first to claim a Pylon had done it simply as a fluke and not due to his own power... something that clearly wasn't the case.

Their duel would come... but not today. Today was not a day of fighting but one of forming bonds.

The masked man clearly understood this, too, as his first choice was to greet his brother. Miyamoto smiled as this was the first action taken, and his respect for the hunter grew. That he also possessed such a profound movement skill only making it all the better.

“Grandfather, should we still move according to plan?” his grandson, a middle-aged man, asked him.

“Yes. Focus on getting a good feel for the state of things, and as for this whole World Leader business... we shall abstain as our default choice. To make such a choice this early would be an act of foolishness,” Miyamoto answered as he threw a glance towards the Augur.

“What about... those?” an assistant to his grandson asked. The man didn’t even bother hiding his contempt as he looked at the undead.

Miyamoto frowned as he shook his head. “Do as you would with anyone else. Do not make enemies because you fear the unknown. The system has brought us here as equals – as humans – so treat them as such. The world is changing, and the Noboru Clan will change with it.”

The last words were said as he looked the assistant straight in the eye, making him freeze up from the implied threat.

“Mistress Carmen, it’s an honor to finally meet you in person,” the large burly man said as he smiled at the far smaller woman.

“Sven... you look utterly ridiculous... and don’t call me mistress again. Ever. Carmen is fine.” Carmen looked the man up and down.

Standing at nearly two and a half meters, he had clearly grown with his evolutions, the evolution to D-grade no doubt coming in tight to make him the tallest man in the entire World Congress. He was built like an absolute tank, but his outfit...

He was wearing fur clothes and a bear-head-cap on his head, with the three following him looking equally ridiculous. Of course, Carmen knew it was actually equipment that was likely as good as her own, but that didn’t make them look any less silly.

While the majority had shown up in clothes ready to battle, that still meant most looked presentable. You could never go wrong in plate armor or the robes worn by nearly all casters and healers, with many of those present also just wearing large cloaks, making it entirely possible that they looked ridiculous beneath it.

“Bah, who cares about something as trivial as that,” Sven dismissively said as he waved his hand. “Here, let us first establish an official alliance before anything else.”

Would you like to enter an Alliance with Midtgaard?

Carmen got the notification as the city owner but just shook her head as she directed Sven towards the actual city lord who was busy talking to their neighboring city. As one of the rare groups outside of the first 10 with a D-grade in it, they instantly attracted quite a bit more attention.

“Handle it with that guy,” she said, pointing to the city lord behind her. “Got any other orders from the big shots?”

“None recently. I am sure the gods of Valhal believe we can handle ourselves and are judging our ability to make our own decisions. We have backing of the highest level, so let’s use that and find likeminded individuals to join our ranks, and-“

Sven kept talking proudly as Carmen slowly zoned out as she looked around the room a bit more. That ability to split your attention between different things in D-grade was awesome when it came to listening to a boring speech and doing something actually interesting without the other party noticing.

Needless to say, Sven was blessed by a god related to Valhal too. Valhal was a pantheon of gods founded by the Primordial named Valdemar. Unlike many others, it focused far more heavily on combat over everything else and didn’t care much for higher goals or complicated ideals. It was just about finding strong people who liked fighting and bringing them together with like-minded individuals, and Carmen liked that.

Well, it did have a few tenets of sorts, mainly related to getting proper fights, and was, in Carmen’s view, more common sense than anything. It talked about how there was no honor in mindless murder of those weaker than yourself and how one should fight foes in a straight-on fight.

This isn’t to say one should fight stupidly. It was fine to use any advantages you got and research your foes or use all your skills to their full extent. An assassin sneak-attacking was a part of their strength and not something to look down upon. Well, it likely also had something to do with how instantly killing anyone of equal strength was pretty damn hard in the post-system world – a sentiment that only got more and more true as one advanced

through the grades. So a powerful sneak attack just meant the fight started with one party injured.

The entire organization didn't recruit as actively as the Holy Church, yet it had a lot of faith. Many warlords or career warriors of the multiverse found themselves recruited to Valhal, where they would interact with their peers, which lead to another difference.

Valhal didn't recruit factions, empires, or kingdoms – it focused on people. That those people then made Valdemar and Valhal the figurehead of their entire faction was another thing entirely, that quite frankly, not a single god Carmen had met cared about.

This had lead to Valhal not being a large “faction” of the multiverse in the truest sense... yet it was still one of the most feared – because even a faction as massive as the Holy Church didn't dare fight the massive amount of war-crazed powerhouses belonging to Valhal.

These experts could even be found within other factions. Many members of the Holy Church or large empires were part of Valhal while also belonging to another faction. In the truest sense, Valhal was neutral and so far had only taken sides in conflicts a few times throughout the history of the multiverse. And those times were often just because Valdemar really didn't like something and personally went on a warpath, and the warriors of Valhal just following him on his quest.

Carmen began to feel bored just looking at the people in the hall talking as she picked up something from Sven she did find interesting.

“-between the Sword Saint and the Hunter that guards Haven, I am unsure who is the most powerful human currently on the planet, but if I had to guess, it would be the

Hunter. Of course, it is entirely possible some hidden powerhouse exists, but beating out a Progenitor is no easy feat.”

“How would you compare me to them?” Carmen asked. Sven was many things, and a competent warrior and leader were undoubtedly one of them. With his axe in hand, he had reached D-grade about the same time as her and was strong, even for a D-grade at his level.

“Without an actual bout, it is hard to say... but I get the feeling that the two of us wouldn’t win if we fought either of those two together. Of course, my senses may be off, but I am getting some serious vibes from both of them,” Sven explained as he shook his head. He was a proud man, but he wasn’t stupidly overconfident.

“We’ll see,” Carmen said as she threw another look the way of the masked man who was talking with that shadow-assassin leader who was apparently his brother, before shifting it to the ancient-looking man who was currently moving with his entourage towards meeting people she assumed were his allies... mainly based on how they all called him Patriarch.

“That King sounds like an absolute monster,” Caleb frowned as Jake had just quickly gone through a few key points of his own tutorial. He didn’t really bother to keep things a secret as he was pretty damn sure Umbra already knew, and if she hadn’t told anyone... well, a bit of bragging never hurt anyone.

“Yeah... I blame all those gods messing with shit to get their way. Well, it turned out pretty well in the end, if you ignore how nearly everyone died...” Jake said, shaking his head.

Thinking about it, four out of five survivors of the tutorial was present in this meeting. Jacob and Casper both part of two of the largest factions of the multiverse. Which left the question... *what is that psychotic metal mage up to? Actually, who cares...*

Caleb had also told of his own tutorial, and Jake had already learned about some cool stuff. Like that virtual fighting arena they had where one could safely fight to the death without actually dying. He needed one of those for Haven, that's for sure.

"Being immortal beings of untold power must be boring with how much they bothered messing with your tutorial. At least Umbra and the Court of Shadows seems pretty decent. Pretty sure they subscribe to the whole freedom under responsibility-doctrine," Caleb said with a chuckle.

Caleb's comrades just stood silently behind him, not uttering a word but just observing Jake and Caleb interact.

"Villy is also pretty chill, too, especially considering how stuck-up gods tend to be from what I can tell," Jake agreed.

That got a confused frown from the three observers behind Caleb before the woman suddenly seemed to realize and asked before his brother had a chance to.

"Are you speaking about the Malefic Viper?" she asked a bit cautiously.

"Who are you?" Jake asked, a bit annoyed that someone was butting in on his family time.

“This is Nadia, one of the higher-ranking members of the Court and a real meanie with a sniper,” Caleb came to her rescue, not knowing what he had just unleashed.

“A sniper?” Jake frowned. He felt a bit bad for her... using inferior weaponry like that, but he nevertheless gave her a chance. “What’s your longest kill?”

“112 kilometers,” she answered without hesitation, clearly quite proud of it.

Okay, that was longer than expected... but I still win. I guess snipers are technically better at extreme ranges... bah.

“Not bad,” Jake acknowledged a bit reluctantly. “And yeah, Villy is the Malefic Viper. I just call him Villy because all his other names are just too long or feel weird... like calling him a Viper all the time. It would be like if he called me Human.”

“Is the Malefic Viper fine with that?” Caleb asked with a hint of worry.

Jake knew that his brother was worried about him getting into problems with authority again, which was totally unfair to expect just because he had a history of it. Jake couldn’t even remember how many teachers he had pissed off by being stubborn before authority throughout his life.

“As I said, he’s a chill dude. Has mom or dad received any blessing? How are their levels, by the way?”

“No blessings, but they are both getting levels slowly. Dad more so than mom... but they shouldn’t have any issues getting to D-grade, at least,” Caleb said with an assuring smile, knowing that Jake was truly asking.

It was an uncomfortable conversation they would have at some point... but not yet. It was too early. Either way, his parents’ ability to reach D-grade quite easily was exemplary proof of how relations and connections to others could positively impact your Records.

Their two sons were both extraordinary beings of Earth already. Jake had no worries about his brother reaching D-grade soon, and he was sure Caleb could go even further than that. While his current level of power was far from Jake – or any other D-grade present – he was still one of the strongest E-grades present, if not the strongest. Moreover... he had Jake.

A lot can be said about nepotism, but Jake sure as hell would deploy that aplenty. He would gladly help his family out, and he was already planning on getting them a bunch of potions and hopefully even elixirs and such in the future.

With, of course, also making it clear everywhere that he would hunt down anyone who touched them. Was he fully aware this would cause some political issues with his brother literally being the leader of some semi-corporate assassin organization? Sure, but he didn’t really give a fuck.

“I’m going to come by and visit once I get the chance... but I need some directions,” Jake said with a goofy smile.

“Oh, I’m sure we can figure something out,” Caleb said, returning the smile.

The first half an hour of the World Congress turned out to mainly be networking and reuniting with allies or friends. The factions that possessed more pylons teamed up and made their size and influence clear, while the smaller ones began talking to their neighbors as alliances already began slowly being formed.

Some conversations were very business-like, but with the original mood set by Jake, the entire atmosphere turned out to be way more relaxed than one might expect the first clash of the majority of the strongest humans on Earth.

Chapter 219: World Congress: Reunion

After the first half an hour, four people found themselves within one of the closed-off platforms that belonged to a city. It was at the table belonging to Haven with the sound-proofing barrier active. Even sight into the area was disrupted, making anything less than a Sphere of Perception unable to pierce inside. One could still see out, but not in.

In there was a reunion of sorts. Bertram and Jacob sat together with Casper and Jake, making it quite the unlikely group. Their entering the barrier had already grabbed plenty of attention.

Undead and the Augur of the Holy Church meeting together with the first man to claim a Pylon? Very suspicious, and undoubtedly many theories were already being conjured up. Theories instantly debunked if anyone actually managed to peer inside...

“I think the use of Credits will become far more normal with time, especially as we open up to the wider multiverse. The merchants naturally also push it as their skills incentivize and use it, and from what I have gathered, using Credits is also beneficial to their progression,” Jacob said, as they discussed the use of Credits over usual bartering.

“A digital currency that is universally accepted and endorsed by the system will also more easily be adopted by people. It is also far safer than anything of the old world, as I have yet to hear of any way of stealing Credits from someone without their knowledge. Except, of course, good old blackmail or extortion or stuff like that,” Casper chimed in, his entirely black eyes having a glint to them.

Jake just chuckled a bit inwardly as he sat back and enjoyed the conversation. Casper had worked in the R&D department before and had always been a bit of a geek, one of the big reasons he and Jake had gotten along so well.

Casper had been passionate about digital currencies, especially cryptocurrencies and how they were the way of the future... and he kinda got it right, didn't he? Credits were kind of a digital currency, though Jake would more call it a magic currency. Or a system-fuckery currency?

"From what I have gathered, the establishments of banks and such is only a matter of time. They appear to be quite common across the multiverse, and it is quite understandable to want to ensure your assets away from yourself. Losing all Credits upon death and leaving nothing to your family or comrades is a harrowing thought," Jacob said, shaking his head.

"Considering how Credits can be bound to a city, I am sure there are other skills or methods to create organizations independent of a single individual that can store funds, effectively acting as banks as you said," Casper agreed.

"... Wild thought, is the Holy Church on the stock market?" Jake butted in with a very stupid question.

"I am pretty sure stocks aren't really a thing," Jacob chuckled in response. "At least not in the way we know them. There likely are methods to invest in

organizations and get a return, but I doubt it will be through a stock market or anything like that.”

“Well, I would invest in Haven if it was me, Mr. Progenitor,” Casper joked with a snicker before he turned a bit more serious. “By the way, I never got to thank you... so thanks for killing that fucker William. He had it coming even if it does suck that he ended up being revived in the end.”

“No problem, dude was a fucking lunatic,” Jake said, shaking his head at the appearance of a few bad memories as he looked at Jacob questionably. “Any news on what the psycho is up to? I reckon the Holy Church has quite the information network, and you are an Augur and all that.”

“No information that I can confirm pertains to him... but from what I can tell from the most credible cases, he seems almost... normal? Altruistic even. At least I have heard no rumors of a metal manipulating psychopath committing mass murder, and it isn’t like our planet is lacking people like that,” Jacob said as he looked up towards the ceiling of the hall with a sad gaze.

“Oh yeah, on that note, are you guys gonna try to do some large magic ritual and turn the entire planet into a land of death?” Jake asked Casper. He was happy to know that at least William wasn’t running around being a dirtbag

openly, but that didn't mean he wanted to offer the guy any more attention than he deserved.

"Nah, at least I haven't heard of any plans of that. We do have things set up so people can turn into Risen and become undead if they want to, though, and the areas we control are being affected with a bit more death-affinity than anywhere else. Already had quite a few converts, mainly family or friends of Risen or those that just want a longer lifespan, even if that isn't that relevant yet. Being dead does come with some other perks and drawbacks, but honestly, it is mostly just cosmetic. I barely feel the difference myself," Casper shrugged.

"Good to know. Both that you aren't planning on any mass-purge of the living races and that you seem to be fine with technically being dead and all that," Jake said. They had kind of danced around the elephant in the room of Casper kinda being dead.

"I should ask you the same. The Order of the Malefic Viper isn't exactly known as being part of the good guys," his undead pal asked.

"Gonna be honest, I wouldn't really know. I haven't joined it as far as I can tell. I will go visit in the future, but no plans of any planetary sacrificial rituals currently."

“No one mentioned planetary sacrificial rituals...” Casper said with a mix of joking and just a tinge of suspicion.

“And no one is going to make one,” Jake agreed, giving a joking smile.

“Not that it matters; our Sacred Purification Ritual will wipe out all you heathens before any of that can come to pass,” Jacob said with a grand gesture.

Bertram looked at Jacob with a mix of confusion and doubt before catching on, and with a big smile, declared: “The unholy ones will never see it coming.”

The four men looked at each other with stupid smiles as they joked out things that, to any outsider, did seem like serious topics.

Jake also knew that they maybe would be put on opposing sides due to their affiliations in the future, especially Jacob and Casper. Jake himself had no intentions of picking any sides as he honestly hated politics, but if either came to threaten what was his, he would protect it.

But that day wasn't today. They continued to talk about minor things, Casper talking about how he was learning about dungeons and even making his own, Jacob primarily complaining about the difficulties of dealing with ass-lickers and managing a city, and Jake talking about the dangers of shit-flinging monkeys.

"On a more serious note, what are your thoughts on the election of a World Leader? That is what this intermission is made to discuss, after all, and the vote begins in... oh, four minutes," Jacob suddenly changed the subject, reminding them all what they were actually supposed to discuss.

"We are going to abstain; no way anyone would vote for us anyway. I doubt anyone is going 'oh yeah, let's vote for the undead!' during the very first Congress, if ever," Casper said, his tone making it clear he truly didn't care about the subject.

"Dunno, man, I am just going to listen what the City Lord says; it ain't my job," Jake said dismissively.

“The Holy Church will abstain too, and,” Jacob said, shaking his head at Jake, “I find it amazing that the highest tiered noble of Earth appears to be the least interested noble of Earth.”

“I don’t care either?” Casper said, feigning offense.

“Yeah, sounds annoying as hell,” Jake agreed. “Anyway, get out of my system-box-thing; people are waiting.”

Miranda had been standing with Lillian and Neil outside the barrier for a minute or so now. She and the others were looking troubled if they should enter or not, seeing as how the leader of Sanctdomo and a high-ranking member of the undead faction were within. None of them could see inside either, so they were likely afraid of interrupting.

“Harsh,” Casper laughed as he got up. “Good to see you again; you should come by some time. I promise not to eat your brains.”

“Likewise. The good to see you again part. You are welcome to visit Sanctdomo if you wish, but do be a bit discreet not to cause a ruckus,” Jacob said with a nod as he also stood up.

“I say you should cause a ruckus; it would make things more interesting,” Bertram added, mirroring Jacob’s nod. “Keep doing what you’re doing. Clearly, it’s working out for you.”

“No one knows what the future may bring,” Jake said as he saw them out. “I promise not to purposefully fuck things up too much.”

“We only got 80 seconds left,” Lillian reminded Miranda, who was already tapping her feet.

“I know, I know, but we can’t just barge in,” she said, despite really wanting just to barge in. Luckily, she wouldn’t have to.

Three figures walked out of the barrier, the first two being the Augur and his bodyguard. The Risen left in the direction of his own city, practically rushing there.

The Augur stopped just as he walked out and greeted her. “I apologize for the inconvenience, Ms. Miranda; I was just catching up with an old friend.”

He spoke loud enough for everyone around to hear, which was pretty much everyone who tried due to senses improving and all that. Miranda knew it was on purpose. With a simple sentence, he made it clear that he was related and on friendly terms with the Progenitor and didn't hold any antagonistic relationship with the only Earl of the planet, despite being competing forces on paper.

While Sanctdomo was large, people also knew their one D-grade in this meeting wasn't a fighter, so the move also helped inadvertently plant a seed of doubt about their true power. Especially if Jake was willing to move to their defense and take their side in a conflict.

"It's of no consequence; I hope you had a pleasant time," Miranda said with a courteous tone.

No way she would complain if the largest city on Earth showed good intentions towards their small Haven.

“I did,” Jacob said as he walked by, as he added a few more words that only she could hear. “Do take care of Jake, I know he can be a handful, but he is good at what he does.”

Miranda felt the magic deployed as he spoke, making her shudder inwardly. It was just a simple skill to obscure his words, but the amount of pure power packed into it was intense, showing that while the Augur looked harmless, he was far from it. While he couldn't beat anyone in a fight of fists, he could crush nearly anyone in a bout of words.

She nodded at him in understanding as she entered the barrier with Neil and Lillian, who both read the mood and stayed silent throughout the exchange.

However, inwardly Miranda was fuming by those words because they reminded her of the last hour of her life and the infuriating comments she got from half the groups.

The notion that women were treated as “lesser” in many cultures was something she was used to and was something she had experienced plenty of times throughout her professional life. After the system, it seemed to be a bit less from what she could tell, though there were still issues.

During the initial meeting, her level and position were enough for most to recognize her as the City Lord of Haven, but what made her furious was *why* people thought she was the City Lord. After Jake had taken off to talk to his brother, the first of her meetings was with the trade manager of Sanctdomo, and that had set a precedent for the bullshit that was to come.

For some fucking reason, everyone thought she had her position because she was the mistress of Jake. No one dared say it to her directly, but the implied words and motions were so damn obvious it was nauseating. They talked to her as if she was the wife of the household that was Haven, and couldn't truly make any decisions, at least not any of the important ones.

Granted, she could, in retrospect, see how some of these rumors came to exist. She *had* spent entire nights at Jake's lodge, but that was all for work... okay, sometimes it was more leisure, but nothing untoward had ever happened.

Anyway, this meant that she had to spend the beginning of every negotiation making clear that she wasn't just some figurehead put in place because she was sleeping with the "true" lord of the city, but that she could make nearly all decisions independently. Sure, Jake was technically the true leader of the city,

but considering how she was the one in charge, she was still the de-facto leader.

This is why the Augurs comment pissed her off, even if he didn't mean anything bad by it. She walked through the barrier with a sour mood and saw at least part of her grief sitting there on one of the chairs, staring up unto the ceiling.

His mask was gone, and from the looks of it, he hadn't worn it during the meeting with the Augur and the Undead.

He turned to her as she entered and smiled. "Sorry about that; time ran away from us. Anyway, quick thoughts on voting?"

Miranda instantly felt her anger towards him reduce to nothing... *yeah, the thoughts of those idiots aren't his fault.* Jake was in the department of people who seemed to honestly not care about such things. At least he killed Abby as mercilessly as anyone else, despite being a woman. A champion of equality right there.

“My focus has been on creating relations, and quite honestly, this one hour is far from enough to adequately identify anyone qualified as World Leader, so I believe most if not all will skip or just vote for themselves,” she said, just as the system popped up before them.

Please place your vote for World Leader of Earth. You have 5 votes and can distribute them as you desire or choose to abstain with any or all of your votes. Voting time is set to 5 minutes.

Votes remaining: 5/5

Time remaining: 4:59

“So, we skip? From what I can tell, Jacob and Casper plan on doing the same,” Jake asked while also informing her of two names she didn’t know.

“Can you place some titles or at least races on those names?” Miranda asked, not mincing words. She had learned that just being straightforward worked best with her boss long ago.

“Oh yeah. Jacob is the priestly-guy, and the big guy with him is Bertram, his butler of sorts. Rich person stuff. The Risen is Casper, another former co-worker. We used to hang out quite a bit before the system. He did some weird ritual to turn himself into an undead during our tutorial to help his girlfriend, who is now a ghost,” Jake explained.

Miranda wanted to hit him over the head due to the utter insanity he was spewing. These were the kinds of moments she forgot the constant reminders from the Sisters of the Verdant Lagoon to remain super courteous.

“You will have to give me a quick summary of your relations to the major factions you apparently have personal relations with. You know, such as the Judge of the Court of Shadows being your brother. A prominent figure of the undead faction, your old pal. And the Augur, your old boss. The Sword Saint wouldn’t happen to be your grandpa? Or do you have an ex-girlfriend or former roommate among the other city leaders?” she asked, her tone of voice just a tiny little bit soaked in annoyance.

She just *really* hoped that the rest of the World Congress wouldn’t be filled with as many surprises... but hey, on a positive note, her annoyance at Jake failing to inform her about vital information had completely overshadowed and made her forget about all the other annoying stuff.

Chapter 220: World Congress: A Quick Vote

Jake didn't know why, but he got a faint feeling that he *maybe should* have told Miranda that a good third of the first ten Pylons were claimed by family or old friends. Perhaps it was her very sarcastic tone... nah, it can't be that.

Alright, I did kind of drop the ball on that one, Jake had to admit, as he scratched the back of his head a bit embarrassed. It was a bit of a dickmove not to inform her beforehand, but in Jake's defense, he didn't know that Casper would be a big shot in the undead faction or that his brother would attend the World Congress. He really should have mentioned Jacob, though.

Either way...

"Yeah, sorry about that. But no, I don't know any other people than them here, though I did half expect one other guy to attend here today. Luckily he hasn't. His attendance would make it hard to follow the no-fighting rule," Jake apologized. The person that he had kind of expected to attend was, of course, William.

Jake hadn't really thought about the metal-caster at all since the tutorial ended before today, but in retrospect, he had to wonder why he wasn't present. He was blessed by Eversmile, after all.

"Just... don't spring any more surprises," Miranda sighed before switching the subject. "While you were meeting old friends, we managed to make contact with quite a few other factions, mainly to gather information and to try and understand the state of the planet. Haven has yet to enter any official alliances yet, but there are a few good prospects... but I wanted to get your thoughts first."

“Do what you think is best, Miranda. Make as many alliances as you want, and if you make a few enemies along the way, just let me know. Ah, but don’t go around making people mad on purpose; that could get a bit annoying to deal with...” Jake answered but quickly backpedaled as the mental image of a dozen small factions descending on Haven emerged. He would hate having to waste time on getting them to fuck off...

“I have no plans on making enemies for no good reasons, geez,” Miranda said, with a small laugh, clearly finding the notion preposterous.

“Just saying,” Jake clarified.

“Needlessly,” Miranda interjected.

“Importantly,” Jake countered.

“Wastefully,” Miranda shot back.

“Clarifyingly,” Jake double-clarified.

“Neil and I managed to talk to the trade manager of Sanctdomo and begun early talks of establishing a trade network using spatial formations. Something the Holy Church is

already working on themselves to connect their own cities,” Lillian came in, totally ruining the critical discussion with actually helpful information.

“Guys... shouldn’t we vote?” Neil also asked, clearly feeling a bit out of place.

Jake turned to the space mage in confusion. “You haven’t already? Weren’t we just going to abstain?”

“I hadn’t voted either,” Lillian said, Miranda also shaking her head as she said: “Me neither... but yeah, we skip this one.”

A minute later, the notification popped up before all of them:

The election of World Leader has now concluded!

Results: No individual obtained at least 60% of the total votes. No World Leader will be elected during this World Congress. Note that a World Leader must be elected within the first 3 World Congresses.

Jake read the message and tried to see if he could see a breakdown of votes but couldn’t find any way to do that.

“Miranda, can you see who voted for what?” he asked, hoping maybe she could somehow.

“No, I can only see what it says,” she shook her head in response, also clearly wanting to see a breakdown.

“Well, that sucks. Then again, it isn’t like the system is known for being overly transparent when it comes to details... imagine if you could get a breakdown after getting a skill upgrade telling you exactly what you di-“

Sadly he didn’t get any longer than that before he was interrupted by a new system message.

The second vote of the World Congress will relate to accelerating the growth of the planet and its inhabitants.

A system store with limited wares will be offered for a period to assist the enlightened races of Earth. This store will both buy and sell wares, with any sold item then becoming available to other cities through the store at a price set by the seller. All items can also be sold directly to the store with compensation determined by the system store.

To determine what wares the store will offer, a vote will be held.

The store can only be used by the City Lord and individuals designated by the City Lord. The stores will use Credits as their currency and will, in addition to items being

sold by other cities, contain three types of crafting materials depending on what receives the most votes. Votes may be distributed as the noble desires between any number of options.

The voting options are as follows:

1.Herbs

2.Ores & Metals

3.Gems & Crystals

4.Mixed Monster Leather, Hides & Bones

5.Mixed Monster Body Parts, Meat & Innards

6.Wood

7.Stone

8.Chemicals

9.Fruit, Grain & other Foodstuffs

10.Cloth, Thread, and other Textiles.

The stores will only be available for a limited time. All unsold items will be returned to the seller once the period expires. The Pylon can be accessed from anywhere within the city's borders, and materials will appear at the buyer's location.

Voting will begin in: 2:59:59

Jake stood there for a bit as he took it all in, Miranda, Neil, and Lillian doing the same. A system store... Jake had expected such a thing to not really appear as the Viper had made it clear that the tutorial store wasn't something he should expect as a regular occurrence.

Then again, this one was quite a bit different from a store that offered legendary skills and pretty much whatever the heart desired as long as you had enough points. This store was just a store for materials to help craft stuff... and as Jake read over the options, he already knew what he wanted.

"Herbs for sure," he declared. It was a no-brainer. Jake was starting to get low on many herbs, so wouldn't it be awesome if he could just buy them? He had so many Credits, after all. Maybe he could even get a small garden started... or stock up so much he wouldn't need one.

“That does seem like the clear choice for us,” Miranda nodded. “As we don’t plan on particularly expanding, we aren’t in dire need of building materials. Besides, we are in a massive forest, so it isn’t like we need wood, and as we only really build using wood, so the Stone isn’t needed. Everything is basically a luxury to us and to help grow the professions of our inhabitants.”

“Which means we want the herbs,” Jake fully concurred.

“I believe we have a task ahead of ourselves then,” Lillian added. “I doubt many others will vote for Herbs. Most larger factions are at the moment focusing on expanding their populations, so I am 90% sure either Stone, Wood, or both will be voted for en-masse.”

“Yeah, and I also think many will want ores and metals. There seems to be a perpetual lack of proper materials for the blacksmiths, and it is also a barrier of entry to making the teleportation circles. Personally, I would prefer Gems and Crystals, but I don’t see that happening,” Niel said.

“Anything is fine, as long as Herbs is one of them,” Jake said. He really didn’t care what else was picked. He doubted any leatherworker or blacksmith could make him any good equipment right now, even if he now did seriously need a second melee weapon after Venomfang took irreparable damage.

Before Jake could mourn over the loss of his long-time weapon some more, another person spoke up, someone not from the first ten, but a level 85 E-grade who was the lord or at least appeared to be the leader of a city. He was the highest leveled individual of his city, at least.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the young-looking man begun. “Would it not be wise to agree on what we will vote for before we split up once more so we can focus on creating connections rather than needlessly discussing this vote?”

“I agree,” a neighboring City Lord said, clearly already on good terms with the first one who spoke. “If we determine what Earth needs most now, we can focus on other important topics during this intermission.”

A few others voiced their opinions, none of them in the top 10. It was kind of a show of solidarity and was perhaps because they felt like they needed more time than the larger factions. The Holy Church had no issues forging alliances, but those who didn’t have a single D-grade and had yet to make contact with another city outside of the World Congress were quite strapped for some good diplomatic relations. If not, they risked being absorbed by larger forces quite swiftly.

Jake threw Miranda a look as she made everyone able to see inside their barrier by making it transparent. Jake had already summoned his mask. The barrier around each city’s area had quite a few functions, and many were still locked off as people no doubt were discussing what to do within. He used the term “no doubt” because... well, he could see them in his sphere discussing - cheat-like bloodline for the win.

With some actual negotiation about to begin, Jake happily let Miranda take full charge as he just stood by her side, being the scary Progenitor he was.

“Haven’s first priority will be Herbs,” Miranda spoke loudly, instantly turning the attention of everyone in the hall to their platform.

What Miranda said wasn't an invitation to negotiate or a proposition: it was a declaration. She was informing them what Haven was planning on doing, nothing less and nothing more. But there was quite a bit to it.

Miranda knew that everyone else knew that Jake, the weird masked man, was on good terms with several of the larger factions in the top 10. He even had familial relations to the Court of Shadows, a faction that was quite honestly a bit of an unsettling presence for many. Who would have thought that a Court of assassins would unnerve people? Not to speak of the undead...

It played to Haven's advantage as many now had an opportunity before them... one that was instantly grasped by another of the lower-tiered City Lords.

"New Heartland will also support Haven's selection of Herbs as one of the options," the woman said, voicing her support of Haven. It was a good political move that Miranda had counted on as a few others also voiced their intent to vote for herbs.

Honestly, it was just a cheap way for them to curry favor with the one Earl of Earth. While many of them would likely prefer Wood or Stone, they didn't need it as much as they needed strong allies. Also... there was three options total. They could still get what they truly wanted *and* make a great political move. A win-win, if you may.

The only thing was... she could clearly see Jake's eye twitch at the many city names. Four of the seven contained the word "new", making him twitch every time. Miranda also had to admit that the imagination of most lords certainly wasn't the best. Not that Haven was the most original, but at least it wasn't New Haven.

Finally, another of the top ten also spoke up, this one from the group that Jake had talked about as the “stone age cosplayers”.

“We have no objections to voting for Herbs, and we nominate Monster Leather, Hides, and Bones to be selected. Defensive equipment is one of the most important things at this stage, with the constant battle against beasts at our doorsteps, so a secure source of high-quality crafting materials will be incredibly beneficial. The bones can also be used for weapons, with leather having a use for many other professions too, making this option overall perhaps the most valuable package,” the overly tall D-grade leader of the city called Midtgaard said.

Miranda barely held back a scoff as she knew most of his reasoning was only half-truths at best... he just wanted leather and hides for his own city, as based on their equipment, they evidently had quite a few talented leatherworkers.

She wasn’t the only one to call it out either.

“While I agree that there is much truth in your assessment, I don’t think it is our best choice. Lack of building material leads to many lacking homes and cities being unable to properly help ensure the safety of their citizens. We believe it would be best to focus on constructing our cities before prioritizing personal equipment. Therefore I believe we should select both Wood and Stone. If only one, I think Stone would be best,” a woman spoke.

She was one of the D-grades from the top 10 that hadn’t drawn that much attention yet. Jake had told her she was exactly level 100, having clearly just evolved, but that still meant she was one of the stronger people present. Jake did mention that she felt weak, though, so Miranda doubted she had achieved the Perfect Evolution.

“Do you need tall walls if the warriors can stand firm and make no beast come near?” the man in fur countered, looking a bit annoyed that he wasn’t instantly offered the same support that Miranda had gained.

“Your axe will not place a roof over anyone’s head if you spend it slaying beasts and not chopping wood all day,” the woman said, clearly also annoyed.

The discussion continued for a while, as others also bid in with their opinions, and it quickly became clear at least one of Wood or Stone would be chosen, but now the choice was which one...

Jake looked wholly uninterested, and quite frankly, Miranda didn’t care much either. Haven was already a bit strapped for Credits, so it wasn’t like they were going to buy a lot, and pretty much all resources chosen would benefit the citizens in some way.

Phillip would love ores and metals for the large smithy at the Fort, Haven had many wood-working professions, and a source of high-quality Stone was always welcome for construction. Again, the same held true for everything.

It quickly proved that the other cities didn’t have the same opinion, however. Jacob, the Augur, didn’t engage this time but had the trade manager do the talking as he advocated for both Stone and Wood, but surely Foodstuffs had to be another valuable option if they could only get one.

A few tried to question if Herbs was truly necessary, but Miranda found that other forces also supported it, not just to kiss ass. Herbs were generally harder to get by than most other resources, and most settlements had at least some alchemists. Even if they didn't, then many cooks or other types of artisans could still use herbs. This ignores that some herbs were also beneficial just to eat raw, functioning as suboptimal healing or mana potions mostly, but it was better than nothing.

In the end, the proposition to quickly decide what shops to get turned out not to be that quick.