

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 221: World Congress: "Confrontations"

Jake had always liked to play strategy games, mainly those of the good old 4X genre. 4X was an abbreviation of Explore, Expand, Exploit and Exterminate, and was in 90% of cases, macro gameplay and economy ruled as one of the most important aspects. While they weren't the most realistic, he and Casper had spent many hours nerding out over making optimal builds and strategies, and one of the most important factors was always location.

In these games, the resources you had available nearly entirely dependent on the starting location. You may have valuable metals or expensive crystals or be placed close to a forest for logging or seaside with great fishing possibilities.

The placement of the Pylons was a bit of the same. Most, if not all, citizens prefer to be within the scope of the Pylon for obvious reasons. It increased experience gain for non-combat-related activities, and the City Lord also wanted it for all their skills to work properly.

This meant that unless you had valuable resources extremely close by, you would have to travel outside of the safety of the city to get it, something very few liked to do. There was always the risk of some high-level asshole bird descending and killing you or some huge earthworm suddenly come up and gobble you down.

Haven, as an example, had a mine placed within the area of the city with some ores and metals. Perhaps a few gems and crystals too, but nothing worth writing home about, and

far from enough to call it a strategic resource. According to Miranda, they already spent all the metal they mined, making them lack that a bit, so it wasn't like getting more would be bad.

There was plenty of wood to go around being placed in a forest and all, with stones also aplenty primarily because they didn't feel the need to expand senselessly.

Jake was already fairly confident that they wouldn't lack monster material – again, forest – and fruits and foodstuff they also had plenty of. Heck, even herbs weren't that hard to get, and Jake had collected a few during his hunts deeper into the forest, but it still took time, and most herbs he found he didn't know how to use.

Other materials such as chemicals and cloth Haven didn't have anything of at all as far as Jake knew. Haven would win out in nearly every area but wood or anything from monsters. They kind of needed everything but didn't severely need anything. Except for herbs... because Jake wanted that.

The same wasn't true for other cities. Sanctdomo appeared to lack nearly everything due to their large population but apparently had plenty of gems and crystals. Other cities had one or two resources that they all seemed adamant on not needing a store for.

All of this is to say... no one could fucking agree on anything.

Jake really just wanted to leave or go chat with one of his many acquaintances present, but that was a bit hard with all the borderline yelling going on between the City Lords. It would also just be rude to tell Miranda, Neil, and Lillian to leave the platform for him to invite friends over... so Jake had to wait. The only positive thing was that you really got a good feel for the other cities based on this entire thing.

A "quick discussion so we can move on to other things" ended up taking nearly two hours, leaving only a single hour remaining before the actual vote would begin. Jake wasn't even sure any definite agreement was reached; it just sounded like people would vote for their own thing. A massive waste of time. Everything except for the first five minutes where everyone agreed on herbs that is.

Finally free, Jake considered if he should go over and ask the undead a bit more about how their stats now worked, but he noticed a figure approaching before he could do that. He was from one of the lower-ranking cities and was a person Jake recognized by aura over appearance.

It was the sleek-looking man with a bloodline.

His brown eyes were a good brown with what looked like a small flame burning within, and his gaze seemed to pick up something no one else could perceive. Jake felt uncomfortable under his gaze... like his eyes bore into his body, and he was certain of one thing... the man had a perception-based skill like himself. At least it had aspects that allowed to "see" something. No... it wasn't a skill... it was his bloodline.

What does he see? Jake wondered as the man got closer. The man's eyes flickered between Jake's chest and face as an intrigued smile adorned his face.

"Pleasure to meet you, Hunter; I am Eron," he said, extending a hand towards Jake.

Jake looked at him for a bit. Miranda and the two others stood uncomfortably behind him, not sure what to do or say. Before Miranda had a chance to come to the rescue, Jake just smiled as he shook his hand.

"Nice to meet you... **Patriarch**," Jake said, his voice infused with a bit of will to make it harder for anyone but Eron to hear it. It wasn't foolproof, and Miranda and the others still heard it as well as anyone using a skill or technique to snoop, but it was good enough to mask it for the casual listener.

As for why he used that term...

Eron returned his smile with an even larger one of his own. "A rarity, those like us. It would be my pleasure to host you in the city of Cardius if you find the time and wish to speak further. I believe we have much to learn from one another, and it would be my honor. You have a certain... spark in you."

The last words were said a bit weirdly, and Jake squinted his eyes.

"I'll think about it," Jake said, honestly just wanting the creepy guy gone. He got the heeby jeebies from him... but he also got another weird emotion.

Everything within Jake was telling him that the man, Eron, wasn't a danger to him. He was a D-grade, and he did have a certain aura to him, but it was far from enough to threaten Jake. Yet, Jake felt like if they fought... he couldn't win.

It was an odd feeling... he felt like fighting the man would be a meaningless endeavor. He kinda wanted to try fighting all the D-grades present just to try and battle a fellow human at D-grade. All except for Eron. Odd indeed.

Eron, hearing Jake's tentative affirmation, just smiled once more as he nodded. "Know that you are welcome."

His eyes looked at Jake's face... not his eyes, but face... or perhaps what was on it.

"Both of you."

With those words, he walked off, leaving a frowning Jake behind.

Casper stood with his eyes closed as he ignored the entire discussion about what resources to get and all that. He knew his opinion wouldn't add any value, and he would rather spend his time focusing on something more important.

Such as talking with his ghost girlfriend.

"*Your friends seem nice,*" Lyra said, her voice echoing in his head.

They had tried and discovered that Lyra couldn't be summoned inside the World Congress, much to the annoyance of Priscilla and the schadenfreude of Casper. He didn't want to put her out there just because Priscilla wanted to flex their strength a bit.

Lyra had evolved to D-grade a week or so before the World Congress and was already damn strong for one her level. Her blight magic was damn intense, and she seemed to like fighting, which was a relief to Casper. They had even worked on ways for her to help enhance his traps to have better synergy in the future.

While it was expected that someone of the enlightened species was stronger than monsters, it wasn't a rule, far from it. Priscilla didn't like to admit it, but Lyra was stronger than her in pretty much every way when it came to a straight-on confrontation. Her race was incredibly powerful, and something equally important was something Casper hadn't even considered... she was practically immortal.

As long as the locket existed, she would always be able to reform her body. The locket itself contained at least parts of her soul... to be honest, Casper wasn't sure exactly how it worked; he was just happy that his girlfriend would be safe in most circumstances. A bit like a lich, actually. It was weird how an item could both be functional equipment and essentially the body of a "living" creature. He had been warned that certain soul-affecting attacks could still hurt her and that she was even a bit susceptible to them due to her state, but it wasn't something they had to worry about against regular beasts.

Even if he didn't care overly much about this whole negotiation, Priscilla and the others were sure going at it. They didn't really need stone but actually really wanted wood. Many trees couldn't grow within their area or wouldn't last long, and they hoped that the store would have types of wood fit for areas with high death-affinity.

He himself would like some gems and crystals, but he wasn't desperate.

They were for his profession as a Dungeon Engineer, and he needed many crystals, gems, and other energy sources to power stuff. Casper was called a Dungeon Engineer, but that didn't mean he could actually make dungeons... at least not yet. He could make certain areas with desired properties, and with his class as a Cursed Trapper, he could make some damn nice defensive fortifications. Together with Lyra, they had taken down quite a few D-grades already.

Well, Casper had taken them down alone after she reached D-grade, after which she just kept close to keep him safe. It hurt his experience gain a lot and wasn't great for his Records either, but he saw that as a small sacrifice to spend more time with her.

"Yeah, they're good people," he replied. Communicating telepathically with her had been a lot easier than he thought, and it helped him not look ridiculous by standing there and talking to himself.

"But... your friend Jake is a bit... how do I say it... unsettling. I felt like he knew I was listening," Lyra said, a bit unsure.

"Wouldn't surprise me. Also, can I point out how funny it is that a ghost is scared of a human and not the other way around?" Casper joked back.

"I am not scared! I said unsettled, not scared. Geez. If anyone is scary, it is that Augur. I feel like half of his words somehow touch my soul or something. I don't think we should interact too much with him, at least too frequently and only in small doses. I have a feeling that kind of passive mental magic can seriously affect someone," Lyra said, voicing her concerns.

"True. I don't think Jacob would do anything on purpose, but better safe than sorry. It also isn't like people can't change... and I wouldn't have thought Caroline able to do what she did, so I guess I am not the best judge of character."

They kept talking for a while, mainly discussing non-World Congress-related topics.

It was soothing, and they did have to touch a bit upon some sad facts of reality. This would likely be the last time Casper could meet this casually with Jacob and quite a few others. The political stage had yet to form into circles and alliances, but more defined lines would begin separating the factions once that was established. And there was no way the undead and the Holy Church would ever be in an official alliance.

They were only interrupted as the talks died down, and people began wandering. Casper didn't think about going anywhere, but his attention was still grabbed as a "confrontation" many had looked forward to was taking place.

Progenitor vs. Sword Saint.

Jake stood before the man as they looked each other in the eyes. Quite a few other parties, including the Holy Church, were interested to see what would come of this, as the two had just stood there for a good five seconds now.

Blue eyes deep as the ocean stared into beastly soul-piercing eyes. Their gazes could nearly not be any more different, yet they both held the same challenging intent.

At the same time, both raised their arms as they shook hands, both giving a good squeeze. The old man winced as they both let go, Jake smiling triumphantly. He won out in pure strength.

He could see it in the Sword Saint's eyes... and he knew it himself... if not for the rules of the World Congress, the old man would have drawn his sword, and Jake summoned his bow at this very moment. Sadly, there were rules, and this wasn't the time or place for a fight between what were likely the two strongest humans on Earth.

"The Noboru clan wishes to enter a formal non-aggression pact with Haven, with the goal of a true alliance," the Sword Saint spoke, finally breaking the silence with words no one had expected him to say to curtly. "I do not believe our two cities have any reason to fight. We can discuss more... personal arrangements for the future at a later time. What say you?"

"Sure," Jake agreed. "You can have your people discuss it with my people."

"We are in agreement then. Pleasure meeting you," the old man said as he bowed and moved away. Jake returned a nod, ending their second interaction the same as the first.

Their interaction was brief but impactful. Many eyes had been on them, some of them hoping for the two to enter an actual conflict.

And while Jake would love to have a fight, he didn't see any reason to involve Haven or the other guy's cities. Jake also had a feeling that they would get their chance eventually,

even if a vast distance separated them... and quite frankly, while Jake was vain, he wasn't silly enough to spend so much time traveling to another city just to fight an old man. At least not before he got faster.

Jake wasn't sure what to do with the rest of the time before the next vote and just returned to his seat on their platform. Everyone else was gone again, Miranda and Lillian having taken the chance to talk to the representatives from Saya and Neil chatting with some space mage woman from a lower-ranking city.

With a mental command, he obscured the platform and took the mask off his face.

He stared down at the wooden mask. It looked entirely the same as the day he got it... but he knew it was not. Things had changed. During his race evolution, it had absorbed some of the weird energy in that space, and he had a feeling that while it increased his mana regeneration, it also constantly pulled in energy for itself.

"Hey Villy, wou-" Jake began but instantly felt something was wrong. He closed his eyes and focused and only noticed now that he couldn't feel that small, subtle connection he usually felt. He also only now discovered that he couldn't feel the Viper's presence at all.

Usually, he just zoned out the occasional peek the god took, but he hadn't peeked for this entire World Congress... and it turns out it was because he couldn't. All connection to outside sources, at least divine sources, appeared to be cut off while inside this weird World Congress space.

I guess that means all the other factions are cut off too... good riddance.

It was good to know that this entire World Congress, in actuality, wasn't a bunch of gods discussing with mouthpieces. It was also once more proof that the system was the real OG on the power scale. That it could fully cut off the connection like that so flawlessly was quite a powerplay.

Anyway, what he wanted to ask Villy was pretty simple... so he decided to ask the one other "person" on the platform with him.

He looked down at the mask once more.

"So... do you think I could beat you now?"

Jake got no response... but he was sure the King was there. Still alive. Eron had seen something... it had taken energy... the description had slightly changed... and Jake couldn't wait for a proper rematch. Of course, it was entirely possible he had misread the situation, but one can always hope...

Chapter 222: World Congress: On The Flip Of A Coin

The second vote quickly approached its end, and by now, there was quite a bit of nervousness going around. The last hour had contained plenty of closed-door deals and under-the-table agreements on what to vote for.

Miranda told Jake that she and Lillian had gone to reaffirm the vote for herbs with those who promised it before. She even went as far as making binding system agreements with them, not allowing them just to make empty promises.

With the many votes of Haven and at least a few from some of the other top 10 ones, Herbs was pretty much secured as one of the chosen options. Honestly, no one was sure what the other options would be, but Wood and Stone had apparently become *less* popular over the last hour.

This was due to the ability to sell to other cities using the store, and the different factions had begun just making deals with those who had plenty of a particular resource. Of course, there was the issue that you couldn't sell to designated buyers based on the description of the store, but it would at least mean *some* wood or Stone was up for sale.

Haven would likely sell some wood, too, logging from around the outskirts of the forest towards the Fort. They didn't want to ruin the city of Haven itself, but no one really cared about the outskirts closer to the Fort. All it would do was make less forest between the Fort and Haven... and there was plenty of forest to take from. More than they could possibly log for many years.

There were some worries, though. Such as... what did the system consider an item? Or a material? Many types of wood apparently weren't Identifiable without some mild processing or until transformed into an item, just like some herbs and fruits didn't recognize as an item before they matured. Could you just throw a pile of trees into the store? How would the system communicate what you were selling?

He was also aware that he didn't have full information on this. Identify only worked on items you could actually Identify... like how he couldn't Identify herbs back before

becoming an alchemist. Miranda also couldn't see the properties of herbs before she got some general appraising skill for magical catalysts from her class that now allowed her to Identify some herbs. On a side note, everyone could apparently Identify stuff like equipment or consumables, but the details may vary. Like how Jake can see how much a potion will restore and others can't, and how a blacksmith can see details if Identifying a weapon or armor.

The only ones that could kind of Identify everything were merchants. According to Miranda, rather than an Identify skill, they often got it upgraded or get a new similar skill called Appraisal or something like that. That made sense to Jake... as a merchant kind of has to know what the hell he is handling.

Actually, would merchants be able to do something special with the system store? Maybe some additional options? An easier way to sell items?

All of these were questions Jake was glad he didn't have to really think about, outside of interesting consideration to what an item is. He could just ask Miranda or someone else about it after the fact.

Jake had also considered if he should try and flex some potions and promise to put some up for sale if everyone voted for Herbs... but he didn't really want to put himself out there like that. He would also seriously need to commission some more bottles soon.

He had Miranda give him back quite a few, and she had even scrounged up some additional ones from a merchant, but Jake still needed a lot. He had this bad habit of sometimes throwing a poison bottle or his potion bottles breaking after drinking them.

Hmm, will potion bottles be a part of Gems and Crystals or maybe Stone? Jake considered. Glass is made from sand, and sand is technically small annoying underwear-invading stones. Which begged another question... were they even made of glass? He didn't actually know. Maybe it was just some special kind of crystal?

As these thoughts passed through his head, Neil entered the barrier, and Jake also noticed that the vote for the system store would begin in around 5 minutes.

Jake nodded at Neil and asked. "Any progress on getting some teleportation network up and running?"

Neil looked a bit surprised that the unmasked Jake asked, but just smiled and answered. "A bit, but it isn't easy. We need to properly link things up, which will require us to travel to other cities and set them up as it is now. We are hoping to find a way to sync them up without having to travel.."

"How would that work?" Jake asked, genuinely curious. He loved figuring out how all the magic stuff worked.

"Hm, it is a bit like finding a radio frequency that we can tap into - one not currently used. You can say that the usual space we occupy is the stable wavelength, and any deviations to it result in spatial distortion. Space magic, as I understand it, is basically just fiddling with the frequency in a localized area," Neil began, as he gladly continued, clearly happy to see someone interested.

"So, what we are trying to do is to create matching spatial radios of sorts, all running on the exact same wavelength to make the entire journey between the two stable. We need it to be a frequency that is also properly compressed and warps the space between the two

locations. Like that old movie trope where the science guy folds a paper in half and pokes a pencil through. We need to make sure the frequency properly bends the paper and then for the teleportation to poke the whole with whatever we transport on the edge of the pencil.”

“Wait, won’t you need the spatial radios as you call them to be able to differ in frequency dependant on where you want to go? And what if that space is distorted by other means during travel?” Jake asked.

Neil just looked at him for a few moments. The surprise on his face from Jake actually having listened palpable.

“It is indeed a challenge. Outside interference isn’t really that big of a deal as we can stabilize it, so unless another expert messes with it or someone booby traps the teleportation circle, the teleportation itself should be safe and 100% reliable. You are also right that the teleportation circles will need to link up to each other. Luckily, we think we have found a solution to that,” Neil said quite confidently.

“Do tell.”

“We will use the system store to sell items with spatial signatures imprinted on them as well as confidential codes only known and understandable by us space mages. It will take a while, but with it, we should be able to establish a good network of participating cities. This does require the teleportations circles to be absolutely stable, and they cannot be moved around after being established and linked. Luckily planets heavily stabilize the frequency of space, but we would still need regular maintenance for the circles to not have them de-sync due to the planet moving and stuff like that.”

“Well, sounds like you have quite the task ahead of you,” Jake chuckled. “How will you power the circles?”

“Yeah... that is another issue. The circles will require A LOT of spatial mana to work. More dependent on the distance. It will also get more expensive the stronger the person we send. By the way, these teleportation circles aren’t our inventions at all, but common knowledge in the multiverse, confirmed by how we pretty much all have the same understanding based on the study resources we had access to. I still have quite a few books stored in the Orb,” Neil said, getting a bit sidetracked. Jake already knew these teleportations weren’t their invention as so many damn books he read talked about them as being regular business across the multiverse.

“Didn’t answer my question. How will you power it?” Jake asked again

“Right. To begin with, it will 100% require one of us space mages present to power it, and even then, it will require consumables. If Gems and Crystals got voted, there might be useable energy sources there, but it is honestly a big maybe as items with space affinity are rare. No, it makes more sense for us to make such that regular mana can be transformed into space mana to power the circle, but that will take a while to get up and running. Even then, it will result in it needing even more maintenance as these catalysts to transform mana will wear out quickly. Again, this is how it is often done throughout the multiverse in the early stages of these networks. There are better ways, but they will take even longer and even more power to get up and running. Of course, if we suddenly had a B-grade space mage, he could just toss up super-advanced circles running on atmospheric mana and tapping into high-level concepts to power it, but I don’t see that happening any time soon.”

“Sounds like you have a major task ahead of you,” a female voice said.

Miranda and Lillian entered the barrier, making Neil look a bit embarrassed. He was really getting into it, and Jake found it quite interesting. Sadly, the time to vote was approaching. But more importantly...

“Hey, that’s what I said,” Jake said, cracking a smile.

“Great minds think alike,” Miranda smiled as she turned a bit more serious. “I have done what I can, and I believe Herbs should be locked down, but it would still be risky for us not to pour our votes into it. Based on the talks, I also strongly believe that Ore and Metal will be voted in. As for the last option... it is honestly up in the air.”

“I reckon it will still be Stone or Wood, though I did hear some talk of Foodstuff in some of the rapidly expanding settlements. Food has a lot of value in regenerating resources faster. People still have to eat a bit... I can’t talk about D-grade, but even at E-grade, we can’t go entirely without food,” Lillian pitched in.

Jake had to admit.. he had barely thought of food as one of the things that could possibly get voted. There was so much to find, and people needed far less. Yet people still needed a little... Jake had just never noticed it.

Did he really get his fill from herbs and stuff? Actually, about the time he stopped eating as many herbs, Miranda began bringing him food. Was he really just a spoiled brat who got all the food handed to him on a platter – literally?

I guess I shouldn’t judge others like that, and I am sure chefs and cooks can make some awesome stuff; if not, they wouldn’t get their own entire profession. The food Miranda brings is also godly... if Foodstuff was voted, maybe they could make even better things and level faster. Haven needs a D-grade chef sooner rather than later.

Anyway, the timer slowly ticked down, and by now, everyone had returned to their own platforms. Nearly all of them were fully obscured as the factions went through a last-second discussion on what to vote for.

Voting has begun!

Please distribute your votes.

Votes remaining: 10/10

Time to vote: 4:59

Options for store offerings:

1.Herbs

2.Or

Jake stopped reading there and poured all ten votes into Herbs. Miranda, Lillian, and Neil did the same, as they just waited and made some small talk to pass the time. He felt a bit nervous about Herbs possibly not being voted as it was really the only option he cared about. *Should I have done more to convince people? No... put trust in Miranda. You would just have made things worse.*

The vote for the Limited System Store has concluded!

Voting breakdown (ordered based on the number of votes received):

1.Ores & Metals

You got to be fucking kidding me. I swear to fucking Villy I will-

2.Herbs

Okay, all good. Phew.

3.Stone

So Stone won out, eh?

3.Fruit, Grain & other Foodstuffs

Wait, what? Two threes?

4.Wood

5.Mixed Monster Leather, Hides & Bones

6.Cloth, Thread, and other Textiles.

7.Gems & Crystals

8.Chemicals

9.Mixed Monster Body Parts, Meat & Innards

Does two threes mean there is a tie? Wait, doesn't that mean-

The vote has resulted in a tie. The highest-ranking noble shall function as the tiebreaker. The highest-ranking noble present Is the Earl [?] from Haven and will have 10 minutes to decide.

This isn't all good anymore, not at all.

As the high-ranking noble, it is your privilege and responsibility to take charge during a political impasse. You must exercise your power and choose either Fruit, Grain & other Foodstuff, or Stone as the third resource to enter the Limited System Store.

Time to choose: 9:57

WARNING: If you fail to select, the decision will default to the second-highest ranking noble present, chosen based on who obtained the Viscount Title first.

Well, fuck me.

Jake was the only one that could read the last few system messages after it said the decision was now up to him... and he felt it. Every single fucking pair of eyes turned his way, and the damn barrier was always made see-through just as a vote ended, making everyone look straight at him.

He wanted to make it obscure him, but he grit his teeth as he prepared himself for what was coming.

“Excuse me-“

“Sir, I believe-“

“For the sake of-“

“I implore you to-“

A dozen voices spoke up, all directed towards Jake to try and make him choose their preferred option. Jake felt like it was all a bit overwhelming but kept his cool. He focused on the mask on his face and that *he* was the one in charge here... but more importantly, he chose to believe in the person he had appointed City Lord.

Jake raised his hand to silence everyone. Saya – the city of the Sword Saint – the undead, Sanctdomo, the Court, and many of the other major factions hadn’t said anything; it was mainly all the smaller factions. Soon, everyone quieted down as Jake spoke.

“Let’s do this fairly.”

With a motion, a small item appeared in his hand - a coin. He noticed a few people's eyes go wide. His brother made a big grin on his platform, one mirrored by Jacob, Casper, Bertram, and even the Sword Saint, who clearly found his decision amusing.

Jake placed the coin in his hand, and with a flick, he tossed it into the air. It spun at incredible speed before it landed on top of his hand and was instantly covered by his other hand.

He looked out into the hall and spotted a random City Lord from one of the lower-ranking cities. "You there. If you're right, Stone, if you're wrong, Foodstuff. Choose, Heads or tails?"

The poor City Lord took a few moments to notice he was talking to her, and all the attention switched her way. She was clearly surprised to be put on the spot but managed to collect herself as she asked.

"How do we know you aren't doing some trick?" she asked, clearly not wanting to choose.

"You don't, and I don't care what you think. If I wanted, I could just pick a random one myself. So... heads or tails?"

She stood there hesitating before Jake just shook his head and looked to her neighbor, another low-ranking noble. "You then. Heads or tails?"

The man looked a bit more assured as he shrugged, gladly playing along. Perhaps not caring that much himself. “Heads, I guess.”

Jake smiled as he lifted his hand, and the coin was revealed: Tails.

“Foodstuff it is.”

He didn’t even give the objections time to come as he chose it, and the system notification went out to everyone.

Voting for the Limited System Store has concluded.

The store will include an assortment of Ores & Metals, Herbs, and Fruit, Grain & other Foodstuffs. The store will be available upon the conclusion of the World Congress.

Jake heard a few yells of people claiming it was unfair and other silly objections, but he didn’t care. Nothing was fairer than a coinflip. Sure, it would be cheating if he picked himself with his intuition, which is why he made someone else pick. Though the complaints still annoyed him. Miranda had even given him an approving smile, so it couldn’t be that bad.

Luckily, the next system message quickly came to make people shut up.

The third and final vote of the World Congress will pertain to the upcoming System Event to help the enlightened races of Earth.

Chapter 223: World Congress: System Events

"System Events are exactly as the name suggests events put on by the system itself. More often than not, they offer great rewards but equally great risks. Well, as a new universe, you may get some safer versions. Events can be pretty much anything and are great ways to challenge yourself and achieve a breakthrough to the next level for many mortals and even gods. They can even offer things one cannot find out in the multiverse. As I told you, I got my Bloodline through an Event, so that should put things into perspective. They can also offer titles, items, and all sorts of things. I wouldn't count on any events you experience in your early days to offer anything overly great, as I have yet to hear of any bloodline-granting events for anyone below C-grade. Also, as your events will likely be of the safer variant, it won't offer the best there is. Danger and opportunity are intrinsically linked, after all," the Malefic Viper has explained to Jake long ago.

Actually, the tutorial was considered a System Event, though still special even by System Event standards.

Jake was certain most, if not all, factions related to higher powers were aware of these things. At least he saw their eyes light up at the mention of a System Event, and most seemed to nearly instantly forgive and forget his coin-flipping antics.

The third and final vote of the World Congress will pertain to the upcoming System Event to help the enlightened races of Earth. All System Events will primarily compose of combat, and any participants are advised to recognize such.

All events will offer unique rewards and opportunities.

Options for the System Event:

1.Tournament (Singles)

2.Tournament (Groups)

3.Town Defense

4.Treasure Hunt

5.Event Dungeons

The Tournaments will include both battles against monsters as well as other enlightened beings of Earth. If Singles are chosen, the battles will primarily consist

of 1 vs. 1 fights between monsters and enlightened ones, while Groups will include group battles and larger combat scenarios against monsters. The monsters will be rare variants from across the multiverse, both powerful and valuable. Groups can consist of up to 10 members. For Singles, all rewards will be given individually, while for Groups, it will be split evenly among Group members.

The Town Defense event will see the enlightened beings of Earth in a city of old, and they will have to defend it from ever-increasing waves of invading monsters. Every Pylon will be granted their own minor settlement to defend. However, an alliance of up to five Pylons may be established before the event and allow them only to defend a single City instead. The invaders will carry much bounty for you to claim. All rewards will be split among the defenders, partly based on contributions.

The Event Dungeons will offer three distinct dungeons that can be challenged in parties of up to five and two Challenge Dungeons that can only be attempted by individuals. Rewards will be split according to standard dungeon rules, with a final reward given depending on overall performance.

The Treasure Hunt will see the participants travel to a foreign land filled with treasures to be unearthed and discovered or hidden away by a lost civilization in their safest and well-defended chambers. Beat challenges and claim your spoils. During the Treasure Hunt, the participants will encounter other creatures attempting to claim the items, as well as the ever-present threat of the other enlightened ones and the environment itself. The Treasure Hunt will be entered individually, and all rewards are individually earned.

All events will take a total of 10 days and will begin in three months (90 days). Beware that death is a risk, but all participants will have the possibility of surrendering and exiting any ongoing Event at the cost of a reduced reward. All participants must be D-grade or above or be granted an exception to participate by the system. Anyone who meets the requirements to participate will be given an invitation upon initiation of the chosen System Event.

Three days after the chosen event concludes, there will be an Auction where the participants and cities may auction off their spoils as well as any other valuables they hold onto. More details regarding the Auction will come after the conclusion of the System Event.

Only one option may be chosen.

Voting will begin in: 3:59:59

It was a massive notification, and everyone in the entire hall was silent for a moment as they all took it in. Jake also carefully took it all in, already considered what option he liked the most. Actually... it was a bit like when he was choosing skills. 5 options too. Of course, there was the difference that he would have to discuss it with a massive group of other interested parties this time.

Miranda didn't hesitate as she obscured their platform, and just in time as Jake saw many other factions do the same. There were a few that didn't, but the vast majority did. They needed to discuss the new information and reach an internal consensus.

"Thoughts?" Miranda asked openly.

"I think the solo tournament would be best for Haven. We don't have a lot of powerful groups besides Neil's party, and most of the other events seem more catered towards groups. However, if it is purely solo battles, I believe we have the strongest person on Earth," Lillian said, being the practical person she was.

There was just one issue with that. "No thanks," Jake answered, shaking his head.

A tournament honestly just sounded... boring. Besides a handful of the people present, he didn't see anyone even capable of putting up an entertaining fight. The Sword Saint and maybe one or two others could likely offer a good bout, so the entire tournament would just be him fighting monsters. And while that did sound quite entertaining, he liked many of the other options more.

Lillian looked a bit confused, but Miranda seemed to understand his thoughts as she nodded in acknowledgment.

"I think Town Defense would be the worst option for us. That event seems heavily focused on the power of cities as a whole, and Haven simply isn't big enough for that to seem like a good idea. Also, the rewards seem to be heavily biased towards large parties, and even if one has an exemplary performance, they will very likely have to share a lot of the bounty with others. As Haven is more focused on singular, powerful individuals, that entire options seems like a bad idea," Miranda said.

Jake agreed. Also, it said waves, which likely meant hordes, which meant a lot of busywork killing weaker enemies.

"I am personally leaning towards Dungeons or that Treasure Hunt," Jake said.

While Haven already had a D-grade dungeon close by, that wasn't the part of the event he focused on. It was the two Challenge Dungeons. Jake had only ever been in one Challenge

Dungeon, and that had awarded him his current profession and put him on the Path of the Malefic Viper. It had been a major turning point for his progress and an invaluable experience. The gains outside of the profession were also good for a dungeon you couldn't even be level 10 to enter, having provided both stat-gaining items, that mural that gave 10 willpower, and of course the entire garden and living area he cleaned up. Oh, and on top of it all, he even gained usual dungeon rewards, aka the spatial necklace and fabulous boots.

He wouldn't discount the regular dungeons too. If they gave loot the same as in the tutorial, he would come out with quite a haul if he managed to clear just 2 of them during the ten days. It was all a gamble, of course, but he should be able to make solid progress, considering his relative strength compared to the rest of the planet.

The other option he liked was the Treasure Hunt. Why? Well, it was in the name. Jake liked treasures, and he liked hunting. How could he not like an event centered around hunting down treasures then? Moreover... he felt like he was quite suited for it.

Hunter's Tracking, Sense of the Malefic Viper, an insanely high perception stat, not to mention all the benefits from his Bloodline such as improved intuition, his danger sense when breaking into well-defended chambers, and of course his Sphere of Perception that had grown immensely since his evolution. If anyone was good at finding cool stuff and getting to it, he felt like it was him.

Also... of all the options, Treasure Hunt seemed the most "open". The rest looked way more regulated with set challenges to overcome. Based on the description, the Treasure Hunt would be an area perhaps a bit like the tutorial, allowing those who truly stand out to exemplify themselves. That meant Jake could spend the entire ten days going for the good stuff and not waste the first few days slogging through the easy parts.

Heck, it even mentioned competing with other humans and the Risen, so he would even get a chance to test his mettle against the other powerhouses of Earth.

Out of all the options, he also felt like it synergized best with the subsequent Auction.

Thinking about it, the idea of an Auction was quite interesting, especially considering it would be in three months. With a system store now available for at least a while, many would be able to craft more and better stuff than ever before, and surely they would save the best for the Auction.

Jake voiced his opinion to the others, as well as his reasoning. They seemed to get it, but Miranda did have a point of concern.

"Based on the rules, there is nothing stopping factions from grouping up during the Treasure Hunt. While the minimum requirement of D-grade will mean you can't enter with an army, I can still see most of the major factions enter with quite a group in three months. Haven won't have as many, so we may be outmanned severely and be taken advantage of."

"I am very confident Eleanor, Christen, Levi, Silas, and I will achieve D-grade for the event," Neil chimed in.

"Me too, but that will still leave us severely behind pretty much every faction besides some of the smaller ones," Miranda said, shaking her head.

"You are only making it sound more enticing," Jake said with a toothy smile. "While I can empathize with you guys being ganged up on, I personally welcome it. Besides, I doubt they will dare grouping up on me. The system said death is still a risk."

"Yeah... but needlessly killing anyone will be a diplomatic disaster," Miranda, shaking her head again.

"If they try to start shit, it isn't needless. While I would prefer not to have to, I am not averse to making a few examples," Jake said, mirroring her shaking head.

He truly didn't want to kill humans if he could avoid it, as he knew how complicated it was. It was the same reason why he tried to avoid killing even invaders like Abby and Donald, but just like Abby and Donald, he wouldn't hesitate to kill if he decided it was necessary.

Jake still vividly remembered the ambush that had nearly killed him back in the tutorial. If he were ever put in a similar spot, he wouldn't hesitate to kill every single fucking person involved; consequences be damned.

If he were worried that there would be retaliation, Jake would just rely on the nugget of wisdom from the Viper... become strong enough for them not to dare and try anything. Of course, he knew that as humans, they were emotional creatures and didn't always act logically, but the stronger one gets, the more people tend to value their lives. Well, Jake was a hard exception to that, considering the still near-suicidal behavior he was willing to exert if he could get a good fight.

"Just don't overdo it and tell me if you kill a scion of some faction or the son of a City Lord or something like that," Miranda answered. She looked like she knew she couldn't convince him otherwise... and she was right.

"I don't think most factions will try anything either. Is it really worth the risk to attack those from Haven?" Jake asked, trying to convince her.

"Not with you around, no, but the rest of us? While some might still be rebuffed, just as many won't care," she answered. "Anyway, dungeons or Treasure hunt. Got it. Which one would you prefer?"

"Treasure Hunt," Jake answered, having convinced himself quite a bit as he thought about it and the subsequent discussion.

"Alright."

Their platform was made visible, and they just stood there for a while and waited. Soon, Sanctdomo to one side and Saya to the other also became visible. Jake looked towards Jacob, who returned his gaze, and Jake threw him a questioning look.

Jacob smiled as he mouthed the word: "Treasure."

Jake smiled and subtly nodded. He wasn't surprised at all. He had expected Jacob and the Holy Church to either want Treasure Hunt or the Town Defense one. Town Defense because they were the largest city Jake knew of, and Treasure Hunt because they had a living cheat with the power to divine where valuable things could be found.

As Miranda had noted, then high city populations weren't necessarily *that* big of an advantage. This event would only be for the elites, no matter what. Three months seemed

like a long time, but one must remember that D-grade wasn't that easy to reach. Neil and his party were all regarded as powerful experts, yet he couldn't promise they would all reach D-grade before the deadline.

One by one, all the platforms became visible. No one stepped forth right away to voice their opinions but waited patiently for the entire hall to be ready.

This vote was a bit different from all those prior. This vote wasn't one that truly concerned the trade managers or was even really political. It was a decision only those who had reached D-grade or had the confidence to be D-grade by the deadline should really be involved in making.

As the silence permeated the room, Jake soon noticed that most were looking up towards him and the platforms to his sides. Waiting for them to start it - Something they didn't get a chance to as one of the few factions present nearly entirely based on combat spoke first.

"The Court of Shadows proposes we vote for the Singles Tournament," Caleb spoke, breaking the silence.

Many frowned across the hall, but Jake's brother didn't give them time to comment before he came with his explanation.

"Properly establishing the power rankings of the strongest on Earth will surely be a valuable thing and will allow the strongest to battle each other in relative safety. From my understanding, as long as you surrender, you won't die, and the system has a tendency to heal people as they exit trials, so this would allow us all to go all out and have the best learn from each other. Additionally, the tournaments differentiate themselves by a winner being guaranteed, and hence bountiful rewards being guaranteed. In all other events, we

may get unlucky and end up with nearly nothing if we fail to complete enough of the event.”

Even more frowns filled the room, and many glances were also thrown towards Jake, with also quite a few directed at the Sword Saint. Everyone knew that either the old man or the masked man would win if a tournament was to begin here and now, and chances are that dynamic wouldn't change unless either of them began slacking off.

As to why the Court would choose to vote for the singles tournament when they didn't have the winner on their team?

It was something even Jake could quickly figure out. First of all, Caleb believed Jake would likely win, and secondly, while the Court wouldn't win, they would probably have quite a few good placements. Assassins tended to be quite good at one versus one fights, after all.

”Would it not be equally valuable to know which city ranks the highest?” a female voice sounded out from the platform with the undead. ”We propose the Town Defense event to help cities and experts prove they truly can defend their citizens while at the same time allowing us to work together and form stronger bonds among our fellow Earthlings and prove the strength of our alliances. If we fear missing out, would it not be an idea for some of the top settlements to group together? Haven, Sanctdomo, Saya, Midtgaard, Skyggen... if such cities banded together, wouldn't we surely be able to lay claim to the best the system has to offer by putting our best experts together?”

And thus... another long discussion began.

Chapter 224: World Congress: Challenge

If one called the discussions for those damn materials heated – a vote where Herb truly was the only worthy choice – then the current discussion revolving around the System Event was absolutely blazing.

At least many cities needed some of the same materials, plus the angle of potential trading. It meant that there was at least a strong desire for consensus. However, for this vote, everyone went straight for what played into the strengths and desires of their own city.

The undead wanted Town Defense – or City Defense, really – for several reasons. First of all, Jake had the feeling they were quite good at defensive stuff. Heck, Casper had an insanely defensive class and profession combo, and as the undead had many enemies throughout the multiverse, it made sense they had developed many means when it came to defensive battles.

On top of that, they had the angle of teaming up with other powerful cities. It would give them 10 days to prove they were valuable allies and form strong alliances. They were clearly desperate to form at least some strong alliances or even defensive pacts to offer them some protection.

During their chat, Casper had briefly mentioned that sometimes the Risen in new universes got wiped out on the planet quite quickly as they were seen as undead abominations. Filthy creatures to be purged. Jake thought it was just silly prejudice and bigotry. Being a bit dead doesn't make you any less of a person.

People tended to fear what they don't know, so being put in an environment with them for 10 days where you had to work together and get to know each other would allow

humanity to become more adapted to their existence. As has been said, then the best way to battle bigotry was to actually get to know those you are bigoted against.

So, their angle made a lot of sense.

Meanwhile, Midtgaard really advocated for the dungeons. As in, really hard, though they did say they could also support the group tournament. It was pretty damn obvious that their city had many powerful parties, or perhaps the leader was just a bit of a selfish guy in a powerful party.

The Sword Saint seemed intrigued at the dungeons, but his faction appeared the most open-minded out of everyone in the top 10. He looked confident in handling anything, which kind of made sense.

He had both a powerful faction and was strong as an individual. No matter what they ended up doing, they would end up on top... which is why their next move made a lot of sense.

"The Noboru clan is open to negotiations for our votes. All four cities worth," one of the people on the Sword Saint's platform said. It was the guy Jake assumed to be the City Lord, and he also looked related to the old man. Which he 100% assumed they were since they were from the same clan and all.

The declaration threw the entire hall for quite a loop. The Noboru clan was behind a tenth of the total votes, making their offer quite enticing for everyone. Yet surprisingly enough, the first response wasn't someone trying to get the votes but denouncing them.

"To openly sell your votes like that... have some shame."

It was one of the lower-ranking cities; one Jake couldn't even remember speaking up before. Actually, there were a few cities that had barely talked, if at all. That Eron guy and his city were one of them, though the two people with him did go around doing stuff during the intermissions.

Jake had to admit; it did seem a bit corrupt if that was even the right word to just pretty much put their votes up for sale like that. Then again... who really gives a shit? And isn't these political discussions pretty much just selling votes and promising stuff for benefits? People just tended to be a bit more subtle about it.

"Oh? What does your clan want in return?" the woman from the undead faction asked, completely ignoring the complaint.

The man from the Noboru clan frowned a bit but responded nevertheless. "Such things are better discussed in a smaller setting. The Noboru clan will abstain from the discussion till an opportunity to talk more closely with the interested factions presents itself."

From there... the entire discussion kind of spiraled, as Jake came to learn that most factions honestly didn't care about what event was chosen, while those that did care were just very vocal about it. What they did care about were gains they could get from others for their vote.

After an hour of open discussion, people began spreading out with negotiations becoming face to face and behind closed doors. The first thing Jake did was to go over to Jacob and confirm that the Holy Church indeed did intend to vote for the Treasure Hunt. One can only confirm so much with mouthed words and questioning gazes.

"Yeah, we discussed it and agreed on the Treasure Hunt being the best. There are several reasons for this, but the primary one is that we feel it fits our strengths the most," Jacob explained.

"We are in agreement then," Jake smiled. "How do you feel the chances are to lock it down?"

"Quite good. With our and Haven's votes and a few of the allies we have already made agreements with, we are close. If we manage to secure the votes of the Noboru clan, I believe it is pretty much secured."

"Better get moving then," Jake said as he and Jacob together went towards the Noboru clan. Miranda had already gone over to one of the other top 10 factions who seemed indecisive. Neil hadn't hesitated to go straight to the other space mages present to keep discussing their teleportation circle network. In retrospect, it had been an excellent move to bring him. Miranda deserved a pat on the back for that one.

When the City Lord of the Noboru clan saw Jake and Jacob approach, he quickly finished up with the one he was currently talking to and engaged them – completely ignoring the undead woman who stood to the side, already waiting her turn. Jake had to admit, her level of patience and tolerance was impeccable as he didn't even see her react at the blatant disrespect.

She did do something, though. She motioned backward towards Casper to have him come over. Jake saw his old friend wince a bit, but once he saw Jacob and Jake also there, he relented and made his way over.

"Those two may as well come along," Jake said, nodding towards Casper and the undead woman. "Would make negotiations a bit easier just to have everyone present, don't you agree?"

"Alright..."

The Noboru City Lord clearly disapproved but allowed them all to go up to the platform nevertheless. However, he did throw out one comment just as he obscured them from outside view. Heard only by the four of them and the Sword Saint who sat with his eyes closed inside already.

"I didn't think the Holy Church usually associates with the undead?"

His words didn't seem that bad on the surface, but the meaning behind them was clear: he wanted Jacob to denounce them, take his side, and make them leave again. Jacob was ready, however.

"I cannot choose the associates of my friends. If the Progenitor wishes them present, then neither the Holy Church nor I have any right to tell him to make them leave. That we happen to interact through him is simply unavoidable," Jacob spoke.

Jake nearly wanted to choke as he heard that explanation. "Oh no, I am not here with the undead heathen! I am here with my friend who happens to be with an undead heathen, and if I happen to be friendly with the undead heathen, it is just to play nice with my friend!". To Jake, it was total BS, but Jake could empathize with Jacob's position. He couldn't openly say that Casper was his friend due to the Holy Church and their stance on the undead... it honestly sucked.

"Who cares? We're all just Earthlings and mortals; why care that someone has another eye color and a bit better death-affinity?" Jake asked, shaking his head. Sure, it was oversimplified, but he really didn't give a shit. Heck, his best friend was a snake, and his two other good friends were birds. Oh, and his kind-of-niece was the cutest baby hawk. Well, soon-to-be teenage hawk.

"Ah, I meant no offense..." the City Lord said, looking a bit embarrassed. Clearly not by his actions, but Jake's reaction. He was *that* kind of guy.

On the other hand, the undead woman made a huge smile as she went over and bowed deeply towards Jake as she extended her hand for a handshake, being a bit too obvious as he looked straight down her cleavage.

"I am Priscilla, and it is an honor to finally meet the Progenitor and Viper's Chosen face to face," she said, her eyes looking deeply into Jake's. No matter how ignorant Jake was at times, even he could pick up the apparent signals and her shameless flirting. Sadly for her, Jake wasn't interested.

He grabbed her hand and shook it. "Jake Thayne, nice to meet you too. I heard a lot about you from Casper."

Indeed he had. Casper had spent a lot of his recounting of becoming undead and the rest of his time in the tutorial talking about her. About how insufferable she was and how she had tried to "honeytrap" him all the damn time, even when he already had a girlfriend. She had even flirted just as they went to the World Congress...

"Only good things, I hope," she answered, her smile only growing.

"Sure."

That made her smile fade a bit.

As for why he used his name so openly, despite hiding himself with a mask throughout the entire World Congress... it was because he saw no reason to hide it. In fact, he preferred if people knew who he was.

It was already known that Caleb was his brother, of course, and by extension, it would be easy to figure out who his parents were. With his brother around to defend them, he didn't fear that they would suffer any harm; he actually believed that the knowledge of not only pissing off the Court of Shadows but him too would serve more as a deterrent.

And as sad as it was to admit, Jake didn't really have any other people he was close to other than his family and colleagues before the system. He had more friends and comrades now than before. Miranda, Hawkie, Mystie, Sylphie, Villy, etc. All were new friends he had made after the system. He also still had Casper and Jacob, who he considered friends.

All of these had in common that everyone already knew he was close to them and/or could take care of themselves.

However, most importantly... he didn't really have any cool nickname. Sure, some called him the Hunter or just Hunter, but he didn't really want to be called that all the time, as a hunter wasn't as unique as an Augur, Judge, Sword Saint, or other cool names like that. Yes, Jake was a tiny bit jealous.

Well, he was sure he would get a cool one in the future, and he did kind of have Progenitor, but introducing himself as the Progenitor would just be weird. It would be like introducing himself as a Prodigious Arcanist or another of his titles. Also, what if he got a better title in the future? Would he have to switch it up then? Way too much work. Jake Thayne worked just fine.

Anyway, back at the negotiations that Jake had just made damn awkward, but luckily Jacob was there to pick up the slack. Casper just snickered at Jake's response as Priscilla looked scornfully back at her undead comrade... yet still containing a bit of her coy demeanor. *Yep, she is an S-tier gold digger. Or influence digger? Blessed by a Primordial digger?*

"Both Jake and Haven as well as the Holy Church are interested in the Treasure Hunt event, and we naturally hope for your support in this endeavor," Jacob said, leaving the other side open to voice their requirements.

"I am sure we can figure something out," the City Lord of Saya said. "I believe the Holy Church has much to offer, information being one such thing."

"I am listening," Jacob replied as they slowly began talking. There was plenty of time, so Jake did some negotiating of his own.

Jake walked over, took a seat on one of the chairs, and looked at the Sword Saint, who had now opened his eyes and regarded him.

"What do *you want*?" Jake asked curtly.

"What makes you think I want anything in particular?" the Sword Saint asked in return, raising his eyebrows.

"Because people like us always have something we want, and you look just as bored being here as I do."

Jake had observed the old man enough to see his impatience. They were both here for similar reasons too. Jake came to reconnect with his family and friends and support Miranda, while the Sword Saint came here to support his clan.

The old man smiled and chuckled a bit. "What are you offering?"

"I'm an alchemist," Jake answered, summoning three bottles of the health, mana, and stamina variety.

Jake knew from Miranda he couldn't actually hand them over in here. He had tried and have Casper give him some small thing from his own spatial locket, and Jake found himself unable to deposit it. Chances are, the system wouldn't allow anyone to trade any material goods during the World Congress. A bit sad, honestly, as Jake would have loved to give his pals and family some good potions.

The Sword Saint looked at them as his eyes sharpened. He picked one up and observed it a bit more closely and even opened one of them to take a whiff.

"Certainly better than any made by our resident alchemists or pharmacists. However, while I am certainly interested, I am unsure what the point is offering such things to me personally... I am not the one you have to convince; it is the City Lord," he said, referring to Jacob and the City Lord, who looked wholly absorbed in his discussion with Jacob.

"Are you saying that if you say to vote for something, he won't listen?" Jake asked. From how the City Lord had constantly looked at the Sword Saint for approval, Jake was quite clear he didn't have it wrong.

"Even so, my personal wants and those of Saya are two separate entities," he answered, shaking his head.

"How so? Your success and power mean more power to your faction. Your death or stagnation is a loss or could possibly lead to the collapse of your entire clan," Jake said, becoming clear that they had a bit of a fundamental disagreement about how things were supposed to work.

"You look at it far too simply... to lay everything on this old man is not the way. The Noboru clan is not strong because I am strong. We are strong together. I am merely our sword, nothing less, nothing more," he answered, making his view on things quite clear.

"While I admire that mindset... will a dulled sword be enough for you to stand on top when you refuse to invest in bettering yourself?" Jake asked, looking the Sword Saint straight in the eye.

"I guess time shall tell," he answered, shaking his head.

"Either way... that is another reason I say go for the Treasure Hunt. Dungeons or the Town Defense one will not allow us humans to spar... the tournaments will be structured and annoying, and who is to say the format will even allow those who wish to battle to meet? No, the Treasure Hunt is the only open event where we can all meet. At that time, let's see who wins..." Jake challengingly said as he looked into the eyes of the Saint.

"Me, or the Noboru clan."

With those words, Jake just exited the barrier, getting a weird look from both Jacob and the City Lord, who looked at him leave with puzzlement on their face. Jake hadn't gotten to negotiate for anything but just left... but he felt like the Noboru clan would vote for the Treasure Hunt.

The big smile on the old man's face - shaking his head at the audacity of Jake - being the source of his confidence. No matter how much he talked about doing everything for the clan... he wanted to know who was strongest just as much as Jake.

Chapter 225: World Congress: Master Negotiator

Okay, Jake did fuck up one thing during – or after, really – the discussion with Sword Saint. Jake liked walking off after getting the last word in, as he felt like it was the easiest way to come out on top of a discussion and because it allowed him not to need any more arguments.

This resulted in Jake leaving behind two undead with no one really talking to them, as Jacob and the City Lord were already doing their own thing.

It wasn't like he could walk back in either. Both because the barrier blocked him, but more importantly because that would be totally uncool. Luckily, Casper didn't want to be in there either as he also walked out... Priscilla following a few moments later, looking quite conflicted, wondering if she should have stayed or not. In the end, she seemed to have decided to rather go with the city that didn't either openly hate the undead or were bigoted towards them.

When Jake saw them following... well, he decided that he might as well also get them on board. With them, the Treasure Hunt would be damn near ensured. He would also go by Caleb and do as any good big brother and use their familial relation to convince him to go with Treasure Hunt by bringing up old memories, like how Jake always allowed Caleb to use the good controller.

Anyway, the undead faction wanted the Town Defense event because it would allow them to form better relations with other factions of Earth. Jake felt like as long as he could alleviate their fear of humanity suddenly banding together to wipe out the evil undead, they would be more open to voting for the Treasure Hunt.

Jake felt pretty sure about his assessment, but it was always good to confirm as he went up to Casper and asked.

"You guys want the Town Defense mainly to make humanity less assholeish towards the undead, right?" he asked as straightforwardly as he could.

"Yep," Casper answered with a shrug. "Can't see most of the others do anything good for our image. Could you imagine if we actually did well in the tournament and got a good reward? The "righteous crusade to wipe out the unclean" would be just around the corner if that happened. It would have nothing to do with just wanting to take our stuff, not at all."

"People like justifying their own shitty behavior, nothing new there," Jake said, shaking his head in his disappointment of the human race.

On a side note, all of this was said outside any of the platforms, allowing anyone interested to listen in.

Priscilla – despite Jake's cold reception to her earlier – still caught on as she nodded in agreement, her eyes practically shining at the opportunity.

"Indeed, we just want to form good relations with everyone and make valuable allies for the future. We carry no animosity towards anyone; we simply are what we are. Most of us didn't choose to become Risen. I died a few hours before the integration myself, and I was one of the people brought back to life by the system as a Risen along with thousands of

others. Everyone who died less than 24 hours before the system integration, in fact,” she said, giving a small speech, continuing.

”We Risen are barely different than anyone else... we have classes, professions, families, and friends just like everyone else. Casper here is a rare exception as someone who *chose* to become a Risen, and the Progenitor knew him beforehand. Has he truly changed?”

Her last words were naturally directed towards Jake.

It was clear she wanted validation, even if a bit of it was bullshit. Casper didn’t as much choose to become a Risen as he got blackmailed into it with his dead girlfriend’s soul. He also was a bit different than before, though that was primarily due to the constant dark energy that he kept bottled up – no doubt related to his curse magic. Personally-wise, he was pretty much the same, except for those suppressed emotions.

”Yeah, he is still the same downer he always has been,” Jake answered, throwing a cheeky smile towards Casper. ”Probably still sucks at poker too.”

”Fuck you; I’m still convinced you cheated,” Casper answered back with an accusatory smile.

”I deny all such accusation.”

Wait, did I cheat? Considering I always had a muted version of the bloodline even before the system, it is entirely possible. I did like betting based on intuition more than anything. I should have gone to casinos... also, sorry, not sorry, Casper.

Priscilla just stood smiling as the two talked, elation clear on her face as Jake did all the PR work for them. If being a bit nice to them could help his friend in the long run, he was all for it.

"Should we go discuss a bit more closely behind closed doors?" Priscilla asked.

"Sure," Jake agreed and followed them towards the undead faction's platform. Actually, it was only now he noticed the name of the city. Jake would have personally thrown money on it, either being called Necropolis or The Graveyard or something else cool – or stupid, depends on who you ask – like that.

Instead, he was met with the boring vanilla name Deepshire. Nothing related to death at all except maybe the deep part – something Jake would later learn actually just referred to how they were geographically placed low and how they had many mines and underground networks.

Before he stepped on the platform, he noticed his brother off to the side, leaving another platform, and Jake took the chance as he yelled. "Hey Cal, we are having a small meeting; wanna join?"

He was a good big brother like that, always trying to involve his little brother when he did fun stuff. Jake totally didn't have any ulterior motives... not at all.

Caleb looked his way, threw a quick look at the two people with him, and nodded as he went towards Jake. "Shouldn't be an issue."

He went over, and together they all stepped up on the platform the four of them. From what Jake knew, it was the first time his brother met Priscilla face-to-face, and he was already looking forward to how his brother would react to her "friendly" behavior.

So when she went to greet him after they all stepped on the platform, he had to hide his childish giddiness a bit.

"Greeting Judge, It is an honor to meet you," she said, as she did a curtsy towards him respectfully. "I apologize for not seeking you out earlier, but I am glad we finally got a chance to speak."

"Likewise, the Court and the Risen tend to do well by each other in the multiverse; let's not make Earth any different," Caleb said, as he also greeted her.

Jake stood back, disappointed as hell. He had expected Priscilla to act like she did with him and Casper and make a bit of a fool of herself when Caleb shot back with "I'm married" or something like that, and Jake could laugh at the awkwardness of it all.

Yet Priscilla acted perfectly decent, not even trying to do the slightest. She just seemed like a competent leader and not a gold digger trying to get into the pants of anyone with strong backing. Was it because his brother wasn't blessed by a Primordial? No, Umbra was also pretty awesome in her own right, according to Villy... so maybe... just maybe...

She actually was competent. Yeah, she had to know that Caleb was taken, so she didn't even try any of her shit... *damn, I was looking forward to it.*

It was sad that Jake would have to actually do political stuff instead of messing with Cal.

"Cal, you'll vote with your big bro for the Treasure Hunt, right?" he asked, with a big smile.

"No, of course not; we are going with the tournament," Caleb answered back, returning the smile with an even bigger one.

"What happened to my obedient little brother, who always did as his awesome older brother asked him?" Jake said, acting hurt.

"He became the leader of a shadow assassin organization," Caleb answered curtly. "My question is why you wouldn't like a 1 vs. 1 tournament. Not confident you'll win?"

"It's not that; I just wouldn't enjoy slogging through 10 days of battles against weaker foes for a handful of good fights... I can find plenty of good fights outside of events. The Treasure Hunt, on the other hand, will likely offer unique and cool challenges to get the treasures... and you can do the fun stuff from day one. No need to wait for some stupid tournament brackets or things like that," Jake answered, really trying to convince his brother.

"Also, who says shadow assassins aren't good at hunting treasures? You can sneak around and steal stuff from others or quickly swipe things and run away! I am sure you would all love it too!"

"But shadow assassins are even better at assassinating people," Caleb countered.

Reasonable... however...

"You can also assassinate people during the Treasure Hunt. It will actually be way easier then as they will be distracted. You can snipe them from long distance unnoticed, emerge from a shadow right as they least expect it or after they just get done fighting a tough foe for a treasure. Then you can both beat them *and* get the loot. Win-win for everyone but the poor sap who gets robbed and possibly killed." Jake once more reiterated how great the Treasure Hunt was for everyone involved.

"While that does sound convincing, people also tend to group up when it is possible, and it tends to be harder to assassinate people surrounded by allies."

"Not if you bring even more assassins. Group assassinations. Sounds like a great teambuilding exercise, doesn't it?" Jake kept trying.

"Not as great as the afterparty for when we do great in the tournament," Caleb didn't relent.

"Boring," Jake shook his head before turning to Priscilla and Casper. "You guys support the Treasure Hunt, right? No one likes Town Defense anyway."

"I am not certain what we will choose," Priscilla answered noncommittally. "It depends on what is best for the Risen as a whole... not just a few of our experts."

"If you don't, I am going out there right now yelling loudly about how we need a crusade," Jake announced - his mask hiding his emotions a bit too well as Priscilla didn't pick up on the sarcasm as she panicked.

"Wait! I don't think that's necessary, what if w-"

"He's fucking with you," Casper chimed in with a big grin. "But if you do go for it, can I come with you and toss out some curse magic to really solidify the image that we are evil life-hating monsters?"

"It would be my pleasure," Jake chuckled. "But in all seriousness, the Holy Church and Haven will both vote for Treasure Hunt, and we are collecting more votes as it is. Pretty sure Jacob will get the Noboru clan vote locked down, and Miranda is working on another of the first ten cities. With you guys, the Treasure Hunt will be pretty much assured."

"So you're telling us to be on the right side of history?" Caleb asked.

"That, and also... Cal... would mom and dad really want to see their children fight?" Jake asked, going full-throttle on the emotional manipulation. "The tournament might force us to battle. What would mom say?"

"Don't worry, I swear I will surrender if that ever happens, so that won't be a problem; I doubt I can win anyway," Caleb said, not taking Jake seriously at all. "But it does sound like we're screwed. The group we just came from seemed pretty damn disingenuous when they said they would strongly consider the tournament. It might be an idea to voice that we will vote for the Treasure Hunt just to be one of the "cool guys," I guess."

"Treasure Hunt voters are the cool guys," Jake fully agreed, once more regarding the undead. "The Risen are cool, right?"

"Our body temperatures are indeed lower than you humans," Casper confirmed.

"So, you're on board?"

"I don't really care either way, so sure. On one condition, you're gonna come visit and help me with some stuff. Work-related stuff. Oh, and bring some alchemy stuff along; you must have some cool stuff. I want all the stuff," Casper answered. "That sounds fine, right, Priscilla?"

"I'll also promise to walk out of here smiling and looking happy like I just had a swell of a time," Jake added on, looking at the slightly troubled Priscilla. "The Risen are gonna look like the nicest people around."

"You're wearing a mask; no one can see you smile," Caleb commented, not at all supporting his big brother as a good little brother should.

"Irrelevant," Jake shook his head. "But sure, I'll come by, but it will be after the Treasure Hunt. I am sure we're all going to be busy in the next few months grinding out levels. I guess I'll go on an adventure after the event, so stopping by and seeing the evil stronghold of the undead faction makes sense."

"Alright, we'll support the Treasure Hunt vote," Priscilla finally relented. "I hope that you will also support us if we run into difficulties in the future."

"Of course. As long as you guys don't do anything weird, that is. No mass-undeadification-rituals, we clear?"

"Alright, we'll pause the construction when we get back," Casper smiled. "Thanks, mate."

Casper knew that Jake only agreed to help them because of him, which was true. Jake didn't care much about the undead faction – he didn't care much about factions at all, period – instead, he cared about people. Casper was a friend, and of course, he would help his friend. He had fucked up in the tutorial... he wasn't going to repeat that.

"You're also on board?" Jake asked Caleb, trying to get his brother to confirm the vote for the Treasure Hunt.

"Alright, but I expect a damn nice stack of presents when you come to visit. Oh, and it's fine to wait till after the event," Caleb also relented.

"Of course, I planned on bringing good stuff anyway. Also, while we're here, I can even toss in that I promise not to beat any of you up during the Treasure Hunt. I won't even rob you!" Jake happily said.

"So you would beat me up if I didn't agree?" Caleb asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Of course, you've gotten a bit too cheeky lately. So be happy; you won out big time," Jake joked as he gave him a pat on the back.

"Lucky me."

They sat down and kept talking. Priscilla was a bit hesitant in the beginning but soon joined in. While Jake's first impression of her wasn't that good, she seemed like an okay lass once you got to know her.

Miranda sighed as she returned to Haven's platform. She had spent the last nearly three hours trying to get votes for the Treasure Hunt, but honestly, it wasn't easy. Many of them wanted unreasonable compensation or promises, some of them even requiring a system-enforced defensive pact just for a damn vote.

She wasn't even sure if she had secured a single vote... at least no one willing to sign an agreement. Heck, the majority didn't even let her know what they wanted to vote for.

Soon, Neil and Lillian joined her on the platform before she finally saw Jake walk from the platform right next to them – the one belonging to the city Saya. The Augur exited soon after, and from the looks of it, things had gone well.

Jake entered the barrier and smiled.

”Oh, hey everyone. How did things go? I managed to get Caleb and his city as well as the undead on board, and Jacob, with a solid assist from me, also landed the Noboru clan vote, so we should be good,” Jake casually said

... Making Miranda truly feel like she had just wasted the last three hours of her life.

Chapter 226: World Congress: Final Talks

The vote for the System Event came and went, all the different factions once more back on their respective platforms. There were a few last-moment speeches, but everyone knew that people had already decided by now what they wanted or made other commitments.

In the end, the vote for the System Event quietly came to an end, as Jake just hoped that things would indeed go as he planned. *Treasure Hunt let’s gooo!*

The vote for System Event has concluded!

With 63% of the total votes, the chosen System Event is the Treasure Hunt.

The Event will begin in 3 months (90 days), and all eligible participants will be invited at that time.

Jake read it over and did a mini-cheer inside. 63% of the total votes was damn nice. Some people had just been stubborn, and he was also fairly confident that some had just abstained. In retrospect, they likely didn't need one or two of the factions they made deals with, but hey, better safe than sorry.

All in all: Treasure Hunt get!

With the final vote of the World Congress done, the last message popped up.

The final vote has concluded. The First World Congress will end in: 1:29:59

One and a half hours to go around and talk to people. Jake felt like it was a bit much, but Neil was already gone by the time Jake had time to consider what he wanted to do. As he hadn't really thought about there being much time remaining after the vote, he had already said his farewells to Caleb, Casper, and Jacob, making it super awkward if he waltzed back now to keep chatting.

Just as Jake considered what to do, someone approached him. She was from one of the lower-ranked cities, and Jake hadn't seen her around at all, really.

She was pretty small with long black hair. Her level was only 51, which made Jake wonder why she was even here. It was entirely possible she was the lowest-leveled person present.

"Excuse me, you are Jake, right?" she asked him. "My name is Kim Eunseo; I would like to ask if you have time to talk a bit privately?"

Jake frowned a bit beneath the mask. The woman looked to be in her mid-thirties and wore an outfit that was not at all fit for adventuring. It looked far closer to business-casual, actually. More importantly, though... she knew his name.

While he hadn't kept it a secret during the World Congress, it hadn't been publicized either. She didn't strike him as some Priscilla-type gold digger either, so Jake was honestly a bit confused about what she wanted.

"Do we know each other?" he asked. He couldn't remember her, but maybe they had met? They might have met pre-system, and he just couldn't remember.

"No, this is our first meeting. I would explain more, but I think it's better to do it in a more private setting. It's related to a mutual acquaintance of ours," the woman calling herself Kim Eunseo said.

"Fine," Jake answered. Hmm, maybe she was related to some god the Viper knew? Maybe even a member of the Order of the Malefic Viper? Or was it related to a mortal friend? It would have to be one not present here, wouldn't it?

No one was on Haven's platform as everyone had already left, Miranda and Lillian busy trying to do some more political stuff he didn't care about, and Neil busy with his space stuff.

They got on the platform, and Jake invited her to take a seat.

"So, who is this mutual acquaintance of ours?

"From what I know, there aren't any positive relations between you, but I would like to ask you some questions related to him anyway and what transpired between you two anyway," Kim Eunseo said. "He has not been able or willing to do so himself."

"Who?" Jake asked... but deep down, he felt a bit of anger churn up as a name sprung to mind.

"William."

Carmen leaned back as she tossed the small orb she normally used for dodge-training up and down as she just waited for it all to end. She had tried to go out and help with things, but honestly, she felt like she had just embarrassed herself. But she *had* tried. She really had. She had gone with Sven or the City Lord she had appointed and tried to play nice, but

she just felt sick to her stomach while doing it. The fake smiles, the empty promises... everything just sucked.

She hated being there and thoroughly regretted coming. She felt so out of place it was like going to one of her old family gatherings. It was even similar in that she was just brought along to show off. In case, because she had reached D-grade and not because she was the daughter of her father, so that was at least marginally better. Anyone else could have made a quick alliance with Sven as that was truly all she had done, so she didn't really have any reason to be there.

Sven looked like a meathead, but he wasn't stupid at all. Carmen had never considered herself a moron, but she sure as hell wasn't smart. She had sucked in school, and the only thing she had ever been good at was boxing. Meanwhile, she felt like so many of the other people present weren't just strong fighters but were even damn smart in their own right.

Spending the last few years in prison had stunted her quite a bit, and she felt like she would never truly fit in with all these "elites". This was the last World Congress she had any intentions of participating in...

The only bright spot was that things had turned out fine as she liked the idea of a Treasure Hunt, and ores and metals were quite useful for her profession. It did also help that most didn't dare approach her as she didn't look particularly interested in talking with anyone, and her D-grade strength also served as a natural deterrent.

In comparison, the tutorial had been so easy. Even after Carmen returned to Earth, it was easy. She could just spend all her time fighting and doing something she actually felt good at and not be the incompetent piece of shit she currently felt like.

As she sat there, a person approached. Carmen really didn't want to talk to anyone, but she nearly felt forced not to turn them away when she saw who it was. She didn't want to fuck things up more than she already had by turning away the City Lord of Haven.

Why the fuck didn't I turn on the barrier, she bemoaned as the woman walked up and stood right below the platform.

"Would it be alright if I joined you?" the City Lord asked. Carmen was pretty sure she was called Miranda, and she looked to be around 30, if even that. Older than herself, that's for sure, but with the system, things get a bit hard to tell.

"Alright," Carmen answered, a bit unsure of what the hell she was supposed to say.

Miranda walked up and took a seat beside Carmen. A few seconds passed before Miranda asked: "Can you make it a bit more private?"

"Alright..." Carmen answered, feeling dumb for not having done it already.

The moment the barrier hummed into effect and the platform was hidden from outside view, Miranda let out a huge sigh as she slumped back in the chair.

"I am fucking exhausted," she blurted out. "Days like these are what lead to an early retirement due to stress, I tell you."

Carmen was taken aback, not sure how to respond to the woman. I was like she flipped like a coin. Her welcoming and friendly demeanor were utterly gone as she now just looked... normal.

"Yeah, today sucks," Carmen agreed. She could handle normal.

"I wouldn't say suck as much as being a bit tedious and annoyingly hard work. Everyone wants something if they feel like every term isn't 100% to their advantage, and even then, most of the time, they only think they're superior because they're idiots," Miranda complained.

"What makes you any different?" Carmen asked, feeling a bit more comfortable. Her own hate and annoyance of fake morons overtaking her self-doubt.

"Oh, nothing really. I am sure I am equally exhausting to deal with. It's our job to try and take a mile when given an inch. That's why I was appointed City Lord. Well, that, and because the one who claimed the Pylon seriously didn't want to do the job, I just like telling myself it was due to how competent I was and not because I got lucky," she answered honestly.

Carmen looked at the woman a bit, unsure what she wanted. Why had she come here? She battled a bit internally but decided just to ask... she appeared to have been honest so far.

"Why did you want to talk to me?" Carmen asked, honestly not sure if she should expect a genuine answer or not.

Carmen wasn't stupid enough to think it was because the woman was just nice and friendly. She had seen her negotiate. Miranda always wanted something; she always did things because she thought it would benefit her or her city... because that was her job. And while Carmen respected that, she didn't have to respect the underhanded ways people went about things.

"Because you're the highest-ranked member of a faction related to a Primordial on Earth," Miranda answered with a small shrug. "A lot of people seem to think you work for Sven due to the difference in nobility rank and such, but I happen to have a more reliable source of information than most."

"So you *do want* something from me," Carmen shot back, a bit disappointed. She should have known... that damn blessing would only cause issues in the long run. She had only said yes to it for the stats and the skill, not because she actually wanted to go around playing priest, or worse, politician.

"Sure, I want to form a good relationship, so if we ever have a disagreement, it doesn't instantly result in a fight to the death. I don't see someone so highly regarded by Gudrun as being weak in any way, and based on the Progenitor's assessment, you are one of the strongest here by a good margin," Miranda explained.

"Sounds like you want an awfully lot of nothing," Carmen answered, sharpening her gaze.

How the hell did she know who had blessed her? Was she also blessed by some god? Well, it made sense; Gudrun had said that many of the powerful people on Earth would be blessed and had even warned her about the Progenitor being blessed by some giant snake god.

Was this Miranda also blessed by that snake?

"I didn't come wanting anything today; I just hope to lay the foundation for the future," Miranda smiled. "I like to at least introduce myself to the important people of Earth."

Carmen scoffed. Right...

"Should stop wasting your time then and go talk to Sven," she shook her head.

"Don't underestimate yourself... how much do you know about Gudrun and Valhal in general?" Miranda asked.

It was a bit... embarrassing, but Carmen honestly didn't know much. She had only ever met Gudrun, and she had seemed nice enough. Gudrun felt very motherly and kept making comments that Carmen was just like her husband in many ways, and she had taught Carmen some stuff, but not much related to Valhal itself. Just some general stuff. Much of that Carmen had found out herself, but to be fair, the information had been scarce.

"Not as much as you, it seems," Carmen once again scoffed, but inwardly she did want to know. She hated how everyone seemed to know more than her about everything. Sven was far more knowledgeable regarding everything Valhal-related, and Carmen was too damn proud and embarrassed to admit that in front of him

"Valhal is a weird place, mainly created due to the admiration many felt towards the Primordial Valdemar. Eventually, it turned into a powerful organization with a vast number of experts, both among mortals and gods alike... but things never really got started before *she* came," Miranda began.

"There was no rhyme or reason behind blessings given, no attempt to bring together those who technically belonged to Valhal, and nothing but a loose code of honor uniting them. Valdemar had no desire to fix any of this because, quite frankly, he never cared for any of it. He had his brothers in arms and rarely thought of anyone not in his immediate surroundings.

"Gudrun was one of those comrades in arms he got during the second era, a powerful god in her own right, but also one with ambition and guile. She also managed to do something no other warrior done before: she conquered the heart of Valdemar. They became bonded, and now she is effectively his wife and has been ever since... and in actuality, she is the true leader of Valhal. On paper and in spirit, it was still, and always will be Valdemar simply due to his utterly insane amount of power, but what he had in brawns, Gudrun had in brains.

"And if there is one thing I am 100% confident Gudrun is good at, it's recognizing talent. So don't put yourself down... if there is anyone great warriors of the multiverse wish to be recognized by, it's her."

Carmen looked a bit oddly at Miranda, not sure what to say. Gudrun hadn't talked much about herself... not at all... and if Carmen reminded her of her husband...

"So when she said I am like her husband, she called me simple-minded..." Carmen said, self-deprecatingly.

"Valdemar isn't known for being simple-minded. He is known for his strength. He didn't need anything but his axe to sit where he is today, and what he couldn't do himself, he had the foresight to find qualified people to handle for him. His innate charisma and drive were enough to attract them. He is a genius, no way about it. Knowing that Gudrun compared you to him... It only makes me happier I came to meet you today," Miranda answered smilingly.

Once more, Carmen was unsure what to say. Miranda didn't look like she had anything more to add either, but she just sat there in silence with her. She looked like she actually enjoyed the quiet break away from all the discussions... Carmen could relate to that.

Like that, the minutes just ticked by until the timer finally was about to expire. Miranda got up and stretched, cracking her neck and even doing a small yawn.

"Gotta head back now. Nice meeting you."

"Same," Carmen answered without even thinking.

Miranda just smiled in return as she left.

She seems nice enough, Carmen thought as she saw her walk out.

Miranda made her way back towards Haven's platform as there were only a few minutes left, and she wanted to check in with everyone just before it all ended. While walking over, she saw a woman exit the barrier, making her frown.

A frown that only deepened when she actually made her way inside and saw that it had just been her and Jake. She hadn't seen Jake around at all... did that mean he had just spent nearly one and a half hours with that woman? Moreover... he had a weird look on his face.

He was both frowning and looking puzzled, as if deep in thought. Miranda couldn't help but ask:

"Who was that?"

"A psychiatrist," Jake answered, shaking his head. "One whose patient I've already killed once during the tutorial, and among other things, she asked me not to kill on sight on our next meeting."

"Sounds like there is a story there I haven't heard," Miranda said, smiling. He had talked a lot about fights in the tutorial, sure. He had mentioned how some psycho had killed most of the survivors and then... wait. Was it him?

"Will you do as she asked?" she asked.

"Maybe... if what she said is true... maybe. She wanted to learn about him more than anything... what had happened between us," Jake said, looking a bit conflicted before turning to her, still looking puzzled. "Apparently, I gave him some kind of PTSD?"

Shortly after that, Lillian returned and barely had time to throw them both a nod before the final message of the World Congress came. Neil never came back but stayed discussing teleportation with other space mages till the very last second.

The First World Congress has concluded. The Second World Congress will commence in 1 year (365 days)

Chapter 227: Shopping Spree

The World Congress had only lasted about 10 hours total but had without a doubt been a defining moment for the enlightened races of Earth. Most of the powerhouses of the planet met, and alliances, truces, trade agreements, defensive pacts, or just generally friendly relations were established between many factions.

To distinguish a "winner," if one may, would be difficult. While Jake and Haven had gotten all the voting results, they wanted and managed to secure both Herbs and the Treasure Hunt event, that didn't mean they had somehow won out over everyone else. They were far from the only ones, as it wasn't like the Treasure Hunt was unpopular, and Ores and Metals was the first option voted in, along with the foodstuff one.

The only way to truly say there had been a winner was if a World Leader was selected, but such an option was far off. Perhaps it would happen in a year, or perhaps later than that. Many theorized ways the system would one day enforce that one had to be selected, but that day hadn't arrived yet.

In the end, it can be said that all of humanity won out. No wars or conflicts were started, as the World Congress had in general been a pleasant event that only led to a stronger bond between the enlightened races, and everyone came out on top – even the undead who had feared for the worst.

Jake, Lillian, Miranda, and Neil appeared back at the good old lodge inside Jake's valley. They had only been gone for 10 hours, but all of them – besides Neil, who actually seemed quite energetic – were exhausted.

It took a lot out of you to always be on your toes, and even if Jake hadn't been under as much pressure as Lillian and Miranda when it came to discussions, he was still tired. Jake tended to find social interactions, even those he enjoyed, exhausting in the long run. But the most exhausting thing had been the talk with that Kim Eunseo woman – or Kimmie as she told him just to call her.

She had told him quite a bit about what she and William had been up to, and while Jake had let her talk and he listened, he honestly didn't care very much about that metal mage anymore. Jake didn't truly know him as he had only spent a few moments with the guy. He only knew the metal mage more as an idea or a concept than a person.

To Jake, he was a representation of Jake's own failures during the tutorial, nothing less and nothing more. He had been a living reminder that Jake had fucked up and not even tried to help people he honestly did care about – no matter how much he sucked at showing it. In that sense, Jake wouldn't say he hated William; he hated what he represented. The only real feeling he felt towards him was apathy.

This ultimately leads to the question: would Jake kill him the next time they met? He couldn't answer that. He did feel a strange mix of puzzlement, doubt, and even humor in how William had apparently been traumatized by Jake smashing him into the ground. But if he would kill him... time will tell.

If Jake were honest, he would prefer just never to meet the guy again. The psychiatrist talked about him how he was "improving" and to start moving towards forgiveness if that was at all possible, but Jake really didn't feel like he had anything to forgive him for. If anyone truly had a bone to pick with William, it wasn't Jake either... it was Casper, and even more so than that, his girlfriend. William had either been the direct or indirect cause of her death. Jake wasn't sure which, and he hadn't been insensitive enough to ask for details.

And one thing was for sure... if Casper decided that little shit needed to be squashed, Jake sure as hell wouldn't interfere.

"So... what's the plan now?" Jake asked, shaking his head to get some of those annoying thoughts out of his head.

What was important now was preparing for the Treasure Hunt and nothing else.

Both Miranda and Lillian, who stood there like they were in a daze, just looked at him weirdly as Miranda asked. "Check out the System Store?"

"Oh, shit," Jake exclaimed as he swiftly opened it, and instantly a store opened up before him:

Limited System store

Categories:

Ore & Metal

Herbs

Jake didn't need to go any further than that as he opened up the Herbs category and instantly felt a bit... disappointed. He had *a lot* of Credits just burning in his metaphysical pocket. *A lot*.

Credits available: 133.972.000

Jake had even spent a good 700.000 on things. Mainly all the weapons he had destroyed, his order of the mushroom-killing poison devices, and a lot of other minor matters he wanted to be done. He was also fully aware that he had overpaid for pretty much everything, at least he thought so. He had given Miranda 500.000 to buy weapons with, and she did mention he still has some money with the city...

Anyway, all of this is to say that Jake was loaded, and he knew he was loaded and wanted to instantly buy out all the best stuff. Yet the best he could find was a scarce few uncommon rarity herbs, and the rest were common or inferior-rarity.

Well, it wasn't all bad, and Jake instantly jumped in and checked what the store had in stock. Before that, though, he just quickly skimmed some rules:

The System Store only accepts Credits.

The System Store restocks every 3 days.

Items put up for sale must have a list price and can be bought by anyone with access to the store.

Items bought will appear in your immediate surroundings (if you have spatial storage, it will appear within there).

Items sold directly to the System Store are appraised, and you will be paid immediately based on their estimated worth (determined dynamically, with the current development of Earth taken into account). These items will not become available to others with access to the store.

There were a few other notes, but these were the important ones. Especially the restocking was a relief to Jake due to what he planned on doing next.

Without any hesitation, Jake went into the store and bought 50% of the common-rarity Red Lavender, Blue Lavender, and Green Lavender. Each Lavender only had a cost of 250 Credits, with the inferior-rarity version costing 25. Jake left the inferior-rarity versions alone, as quite frankly, he didn't need it. However, he did see that the inferior-rarity Lavender was disappearing rapidly, likely being bought up by all the different cities, no doubt.

Luckily for them, the system had clearly taken this into account, and there was a near-infinite supply of inferior-rarity Lavender. As for the common-rarity stuff, not so much.

Once he bought it – nearly 1000 plants of each version, making him spend nearly a million Credits right away – he felt it instantly appear within his spatial storage, neatly packed in bundles. 10/10 delivery service. He also quickly bought some Evergreen grass to go with the Lavender, immediately now having enough materials for several thousands of potion batches.

Jake didn't hesitate as he dove in and began buying up some more stuff, such as all the Bluebright Mushrooms, which was about 70 total only, and more than half of the uncommon-rarity toxins available. That was more than a million Credits down the drain again. He didn't really sweat it, though, because he quickly tried to do something else fun.

He took out a potion and willed the system to offer to purchase it.

Would you like to sell [Health Potion (Common)] for 6412 Credits?

Well, ain't that a deal? Jake smiled. It was one of his newest potions, and it was quite potent for sure... but damn, that was some good value. One has to remember that every

brewing didn't result in a single potion but a batch of potions, and at this point, Jake could easily have several potions in every batch.

This meant that Jake could effectively amplify the value of the ingredients by turning them into a potion by about a hundredfold. The only limitation was his own time and boredom. Of course, he had a strong feeling the price would decrease the more he sold - a feeling he tested out.

He had 5 potions from the same batch, restoring the same amount of health each. He sold the first one and saw it disappear from his hand. He quickly did the same two more times and noticed the price reduce slightly, increasing by a bit more every time he sold a potion.

Would you like to sell [Health Potion (Common)] for 6331 Credits?

The last one he would get around 80 less for.

Finally, he took one of the potions and put it up for sale so other cities could buy it. He decided to start high and put it at 15.000 Credits, more than double what the system offered. He didn't actually think anyone would buy it right away, bu-

Your [Health Potion (Common)] has been sold.

Okay, people really like potions, Jake thought, shaking his head in mild disbelief. Fifteen thousand Credits was a *lot* to normal people... but then again, a potion restoring nearly your entire health pool is close to a second life. Jake sure as hell wouldn't be able to be

where he was today without chugging down what he now realized was millions of Credits worth of potions.

“Would it be fine if I just offloaded a shitload of potions?” Jake asked Miranda, who also stood in a trance going through the store.

“Sure,” she answered, as Jake saw a weird nugget of metal appear beside her. “It’s your Credits.” Another weird piece of metal appeared, and what looked like an old root soon after, before another small ore popped into existence.

Jake took that approval and rolled with it and put up all the potions he had made as he prepared for the fight against the Prima as well as most of his old common-rarity ones. He had already given out the inferior-rarity ones, so he now put up 99% of the potions he had left.

Which only left one issue... bottles... Jake was nearly out of-

Just as the thoughts appeared, so did the bottles. Hundreds, no, thousands of small potion and poison bottles appeared on the ground just beside Lillian, who stood there with her neutral expression.

“I made a deal to have a supply of bottles sold right after returning at a reduced price, and I was waiting to snipe the postings,” she explained, a small smile creeping onto her lips. “You did mention how you needed bottles, and I assume that need is now bigger than ever.”

“Lillian, you are a goddamn hero!” Jake said, giving her a huge thumbs up.

She looked a bit embarrassed, making Jake happy he hadn’t jumped to his first choice, which was to give her a big bear hug. Jake was feeling damn good, practically shoveling in crafting material, and he even got a bunch of uncommon ingredients for some poison he had researched.

On a side note, most often, you didn’t actually need a specific kind of herb for a recipe; you just needed something that fit the criteria. The Lavender archetypes, as an example, was just one kind of herb that innately stored energy especially suited to the resource potions, and they were incredibly easy to grow and numerous; hence they tended to be the go-to. They were such good herbs because they truly only did that one thing.

So, Jake had needed some more strong poison with powerful necrotic energy to begin making some uncommon-rarity poison in earnest. The super-fungicide had used up far more valuable ingredients than it should have, and it wasn’t something he could mass-produce, far from it.

Apropos the mushroom, Jake also picked up some herbs he hoped to combine with the Lifevines. Maybe even the Lifecore he still had absorbed with Palate of the Malefic Viper that was actually the source behind knowing what he needed. At least he had a solid general sense of what could be good to combo it with.

Finally, Jake tried to look for something he could mix with the weird time-bananas from his time tree. Because one had to remember that Jake now had a time tree. Well, not a tree, but Jake called it a tree anyway.

However, it turns out that finding compatible herbs for time bananas isn't that easy. Who would have thought? Apparently, time bananas that permanently increased agility weren't that common... in fact, one could even call them rare... rarity.

Bad jokes aside, Jake spent the next hour or so shopping. All the potions he put up for sale were sold within the first fifteen minutes, making Jake realize he had likely undercharged significantly. But wouldn't it be kind of an asshole move to overcharge people for what is essentially emergency care? Yeah, overcharging people for stuff like that is some solid asshole behavior.

All of them actually just stood there, likely looking absolutely moronic from an outsider's point of view. The only thing really happening was items appearing on the ground around Miranda and Lillian once in a while. For Neil and Jake, it just appeared in their spatial storages.

Jake even ended up picking up a few things from the foodstuff store. It was mostly things he just wanted to experiment with as they contained types of energies he thought beneficial during a brew. It could totally end up being a dead-end, but who knows.

"So, any interesting news?" Jake heard a voice echo in his head. He smiled as he felt that the connection was completely back. Well, it had been ever since he left the Congress, but Villy was nice enough to give him some time to look at menus.

"I'll tell ya in a bit when the others leave, deal? I wanna ask you some stuff too," Jake answered back. He could have spoken the words out loud, but that would just be weird as he was surrounded by other people.

“Lillian, we should head back to the office and call a meeting with the council to discuss these new developments,” Miranda finally said.

“I’ll tag along; I need to get back with my party. We got some work to do in the next 3 months to make sure we’re all ready for the Treasure Hunt and won’t embarrass Haven,” Neil answered.

“Right, that will certainly be one of the points of discussion. Identify how many citizens we have able to reach D-grade in time and support them to do so,” Miranda said before turning to Jake. “You wanna come along?”

She looked like she already knew the answer and only asked to be polite. And, well, she did know the answer.

“Nah. I got some stuff to handle,” Jake said dismissively.

He had just spent 10 hours in a congress surrounded by hundreds of people. No fucking way he was going to *another meeting*. Besides, he had to wait for the hawks to get back. They tended to spend a lot of time hunting these days, with even Sylphie tagging along.

“Alright, take care. I’ll come by and inform you later,” Miranda answered with a nod, quickly adding. “Tomorrow, that is.”

Giving an affirming nod, he saw them all walk out of the valley, leaving Jake back in the valley. Alone with himself, his thoughts, and an impatient god he had put on hold.

Chapter 228: A Question of Morality

Jake sat on the steps leading up to his lodge, looking at the weird banana time tree as he spoke with Villy.

His theory that gods truly had no idea what happened inside the World Congress turned out to be entirely accurate. The system just simply didn't allow them to peek or communicate with their blessed ones in any way during the Congress, and the only way for them to find out afterward was to be told. That, or use some serious mental magic on the person, but gods couldn't do that currently due to the other set of system-limitation on the entire 93rd universe.

"A Treasure Hunt... a bit unoriginal but not bad. It's honestly hard to say what would be best due to the lack of information. There is no way of knowing what kinds of treasures will appear, so it could end up just being piles of junk. I doubt it, but it could happen. Personally, I would have gone for dungeons due to the two Challenge Dungeons and tend to be safe bets. On a side note, if you ever find one, do it. They are all done alone and often come with some sweet rewards, and you could likely have done both within the allotted

time,” Villy chimed in, genuinely interested in all of the system stuff going around related to the integration.

”True,” Jake spoke, seeing no reason not to speak out loud. It was just easier than sending it mentally. ”But a Treasure Hunt can also be great, and it also feels more... new. Exciting. It will also allow me to finally butt heads with some of the other humans of Earth.”

”As I said, it isn’t a bad choice, and honestly, it would be impossible to determine what the best one would be. I am actually prone to trust your gut over anything else right now, including my own empty guesses,” the Viper answered back.

”Huh? Why?” Jake asked, a bit confused.

”The system restricted everything about these events. That includes all skills or other types of divination, intuition skills, soothsaying, all of that stuff didn’t do jack shit to give hints. But your bloodline isn’t bound by any such rules.”

”I reckon if the system blocks even gods, it would also block me. Sure, it’s strong as fuck, but-”

"No buts. It isn't a question of strength either, but one of rules and absolutes. A bloodline operates on a different spectrum than skills or regular magic. It ignores all rules and acts as it is meant to act in all circumstances. You have a spherical perception ability of sorts, right?" Villy asked. Jake quickly confirmed with a nod.

"Well, that's an absolute. Aka, it doesn't give a flying fuck about anything. A god could use their strongest stealth skill, and you would be able to see them like nothing was obscuring you. Of course, it isn't perfect, and there are always ways to still mess you up. In the end, the bloodline still relies on you, so don't get complacent, but do realize exactly how powerful a tool it is."

Jake sat a bit in contemplation. It was true he could see through those barriers during the World Congress, though he *had* tried to avoid doing so not to be a peeking tom. He also did remember how he could see "outside" the dungeons he was in, basically just seeing large black voids beyond the walls. Villy had also mentioned something similar before. He was pretty sure it was something about how only two things operated outside the system.

"I get it... so my gut feeling originating from my bloodline is better than nothing... this is related to when you talked about bloodlines operating outside the system, right? You mentioned two things do that... what is the second thing?" Jake asked.

“Something you’ll learn about in the future. It isn’t anything relevant to you yet, and you’ll know the moment you encounter it. Just know that the difference between these two things is that while a bloodline is something bound to your being and comes from your Origin... the other thing is claimed. Surrendered to you by the system. What they do have in common is that neither is inherently about strength or power.”

“Alright,” Jake answered. He was fine with figuring stuff out himself. Now, as for what Jake himself wanted to talk about...

“So... Villy... I need some advice. I told you about the news related to that metal caster William who fucked up my tutorial, and I am just wondering... what would you suggest?”

“Hm, depends on what you want to do. If you want to kill the guy, go ahead, but if you want to leave him be, I doubt he will cause you much trouble. As I told you before, Eversmile likely doesn’t give a fuck either way,” Villy answered. But... that wasn’t really what Jake wanted to know.

“No... I mean... *should* I kill him the next time we meet? Would that be the right thing to do? Morally, that is. The dude has done some seriously fucked

up stuff, but... honestly... it isn't that bad in the grand scheme of things, is it? Sure, he is bad, but compared to that Donald fellow or some of the other fucked up people I have heard about, he doesn't seem as *evil*. Also, it feels a bit weird for me to act like some arbiter of justice," Jake said, shaking his head.

"I am not the best to ask about moral advice from, as most would classify me as evil. And I wouldn't disagree either. Honestly, if you look at how many humans he has killed, you have done far worse than him since returning to Earth. He hasn't even killed in the double digits while you have. You have also slain even more intelligent beasts than him. In the eyes of humanity, he might be evil, but in the eyes of the multiverse, no one cares," Villy answered.

"Not to get into a too in-depth moral discussion, but doesn't it also have something to do with intent and cause?" Jake asked.

"Sure, one can say it does. So let me ask you, why did you go and hunt down all those shit-flinging monkeys right after you evolved to D-grade?"

"Well, to test myself, get some levels, explore the forest, etc. I wanted a bit more progress before the World Congress, and I was curious what was out there," Jake answered.

“And the reason why William did as he did during the tutorial was that he thought that was the best thing to do for himself. He thought it would give him a higher final reward if he were the only survivor, so he tried to make that happen,” Villy said. Jake had heard it all before from both Villy and his two buddies during the World Congress, so it wasn’t anything new, and he knew where the Viper was going with it, but he disagreed.

“But the difference is that he took pleasure and enjoyment in doing what he did. He enjoyed killing people and causing all that mayhem,” Jake shot back.

“Because you hated every second of hunting down monkeys, didn’t you? You both enjoy it, albeit for different reasons. William had, and likely still has, a fragile ego and psyche; he was stunted developmentally in every way and acted like a stupid teenager with too much power, so he began believing himself the chosen one, not knowing he was actually facing a Chosen. To him, there was no greater feeling than having power over others when he himself had felt so powerless his entire life. Eversmile was continually cultivating this mindset till the day you punted him into the ground. My actions back then should make it clear I hold no love for the little fuck, but that had nothing to do with me believing he is the bad guy or something, just that I thought you would enjoy putting him down.”

“So, you’re doing the whole ‘you aren’t so different’-speech?” Jake shook his head. “Also, you make him sound like the victim here.”

“Oh no, not at all; the dude deserved getting his head smashed in. Also, I like you way better. I am just saying that trying to judge William by some grand moral doctrine is bullshit, as everyone is evil in the eyes of someone else. I personally don’t like him because he is weak-minded and so easily manipulated. I don’t like him because he messed with you, and I don’t like him because I like fucking with Eversmile. I don’t like him selfishly. So what I am saying is... if you want to kill him, do it because you want to, not because you feel obligated to. In the end, we’re all monsters leaving mountains of corpses in our wake, so trying to judge who has the least bad corpse-mountain is just moronic in my opinion.”

“I know you’re partly playing devil’s advocate and stuff, but you do have a point... I guess we all suck now. Mystie, Hawkie, and Sylphie are as much people to me as any human... you’re technically a snake. So I guess by monkey-law, I am now a wanted war criminal?” Jake asked, a bit jokingly.

In all honesty, Jake just felt a bit... off about his entire mindset regarding things like revenge and bearing grudges. When he looked deep inside himself, he didn’t have anyone he really hated. Even those who betrayed him in the past just all seemed so meaningless now. Unless they posed an active threat, he didn’t see any need to hunt them down or do anything.

Yet, he was still not sure if he wanted to kill William. A part of him did, just to “finish the job,” and another part of him thought: “is he even worth thinking about?”

That isn't to say Jake wouldn't kill people he judged deserved it. If people like Donald waltzed in, Jake would happily put him down again. But that was solely because Jake selfishly hated them, not because he was trying to be some hero. Meanwhile, William was just... sad.

I'll just leave the judgment entirely up to Casper. Jacob clearly doesn't care about it and even seems to think what he did was "fine" as it was just him following his path or whatever, but Casper has every right to finish the job. As for the question if Jake would help Casper track down and kill William? Of course he would; that's what friends are for.

"If the monkey empire had a court, you would surely be put on trial," Villy answered Jake's bad joke that he made primarily to lighten the mood, Villy instantly catching on with his godlike ability to read social cues.

"Anyway, thanks as always for the talk Villy. You can always ping me if there is something," Jake answered with a smile.

“Sure thing. Work hard, and win that Treasure Hunt. I don’t care if it isn’t winnable, win it anyway,

” Villy said with a chuckle as Jake felt the presence of the snake god fade away, and he was once more alone in the valley.

He took a deep breath and stood as he stretched a bit. He had 90 days or three months till the Treasure Hunt, and he would spend all that time preparing. During these three months, he had a number of goals.

Firstly, he wanted to make a supply of uncommon-rarity poison. He knew it wasn’t easy and that it would take a while to craft it reliably, but he felt confident.

Secondly, he wanted also to make an uncommon-rarity beneficial consumable. He wasn’t sure if it would be a potion, as quite frankly, it would be impossible for him to make mana, health, or stamina potions of uncommon-rarity any time soon.

Due to the way rarity worked for the resource potions, the only way to increase the rarity was to increase the potency. There was only depth and no width to expand upon. The fungicide was uncommon due to the sheer complexity of how it worked, not necessarily how effective it was. Which is to say, if Jake wanted to make an uncommon-rarity potion, it would have to do more than just restore a resource. An uncommon-rarity health potion would restore several times his health pool anyway, so it would be kind of useless.

One way to do this was to make a rejuvenation potion that restored all three resources, though even that would likely not be possible. He could also try his hand at making regeneration potions that boosted passive regeneration for a time, or something like that. However, another option was to just make something entirely else... like flasks.

Flasks were something Jake had kind of neglected, but that didn't mean they weren't great. Flasks could give temporary bonuses, such as stat bonuses, heightened concentration, or even some more exotic effects like making a good portion of your mana into a certain affinity for a time or something like that. They were temporary boosting items and functioned a lot like his Limit Break, and like Limit Break, they would lead to a period of weakness or other side effects when they expired.

As for Elixirs... he would put that off for now. Three months just wasn't enough time to do everything.

Third, Jake wanted to check out the dungeon, maybe even clear it. He did want to spend most of this period on his profession due to the system store, but that didn't mean he would entirely neglect his class. Jake also seriously doubted he could make himself sit still for that long. At the very least, he wanted his level 120 skill selection.

Fourth, and perhaps the most important of them all, he wanted to cuddle the cute bird currently making a beeline for him.

"REEE!" Sylphie screeched as she descended towards him excitedly. It hadn't been that long, but she was always excited, and Jake had absolutely no complaints about that.

"Had a good hunt?" he asked, Sylphie happily landing on his shoulder as she rubbed her head against the side of his head. He raised his hand and scratched her, taking that as a yes.

Sylphie was really beginning to look a lot more like a real adult hawk, but she was still a bit small, and all her feathers weren't out yet.

[Syplhian Eyas – lvl 41]

She was growing up fast, and her level was already beginning to get quite impressive. She was leveling a lot faster these days, and when Jake saw her parents also enter the valley, he saw she wasn't the only one.

[Stormsong Hawk – lvl 109]

[Mystsong Hawk – lvl 116]

The two of them had grown many levels since he evolved too. He remembered them being 102 and 111 respectively when he evolved his class, and he was pretty sure he was at least partly responsible for their leveling frenzy. He had kind of owned them both in their little fight.

As for Sylphie, she seemed to be going through a growth spurt too. Maybe it was because she was now actively practicing more and even hunting, and based on Jake's assessment, she could easily beat beasts quite a few levels above herself. Her wind magic was both weird and powerful, easily shredding most anything it touched.

After rubbing the bird a bit more, he finally got to work as he summoned his cauldron. He had a lot of stuff to do, but his first task would be to get grooving – which meant to mass-produce potions and sell them for ridiculous prices.

Hence with great vigor, he began yet another alchemy grind.

Chapter im61: Intermission 6 - William (1/3)

Intermission 6 - William (1/3)

Kim Eunseo. Commonly just called Kim or Kimmie by her friends. To him, however, she was Ms. Kim.

In his life, William had only ever suffered defeat before three people. Himself, due to his own ignorance, Ms. Kim, who was the only psychologist to ever truly figure him out, and... *that* time.

Anyway, this was why she was the first one he wanted to find upon his return to Earth. A return that went as one expected.

His new 'master' sent him off from whatever void he had been trapped in for the last few months. Yes, months, because the fucker had bent time or some shit. He had been forced to practice every hour of every day, only relaxing whenever he fell asleep from exhaustion.

At first, he wanted to kill the old man, but he began to see his gains in time. When he was offered a new weapon and help with his other pieces of equipment, he began to *really* see his gains.

The final thing he got before leaving was directions when he asked. Directions to find his target. And his 'master' obliged, smiling creepily like always.

When he returned, all was as expected. He found himself within the now ruined mental hospital he had been taken to enter the tutorial from - at the entrance-area, surrounded by other patients and personel.

If it were the old him, he would have slaughtered the lot of them... he held a lot of hate for a good number of them, and he even saw that shitty nurse who forced him to take his medication. Sadly... he had been told to consider if the killing was worth it, and honestly... they were all too weak. They wouldn't even give any experience or tutorial points anymore, so it was all a bit pointless.

Oh, but he still took out his new weapon.

Less than a minute later, he walked out of the hospital, juggling the severed head of some weird-looking monster that had been trying to sneak up on them.

“Damn does it feel good to be back,” he said to the bloody head in his hand.

“Now, where were you again,” he said as he closed his eyes. A mental image of the city appeared in his mind, including the location of his target. His goal was in a house in the suburbs leading into the city.

Manipulating the breastplate he had gotten from his first friend Herrmann he lifted himself off the ground as he took flight. He ignored distractions on the way, as he didn’t want to risk his target slipping away or falling prey to any unfortunate incident.

Luckily, she lived close to the hospital. In quite a nice neighborhood well above the middle class. Big houses, big lawns, and driveways that once, without a doubt, had big cars in them. Now they were all vacant and many of the homes broken messes.

The house he was interested in, number 76, was rather whole, actually. Sure, the windows were all broken, and the entire first floor was gone, but besides that, it looked fine.

He couldn’t help smiling as he heard noises within. But soon, he frowned as he detected several loud ones.

Walking in, he made his way towards the noise in the basement. He could hear them very clearly now.

“I know you have one; just give it to us already, you stupid bitch,” one voice said.

“I already told you it is gone! Like the cars... please just leave us be!” a familiar female voice pleaded.

“Don’t fucking lie, I *know* you have it,” the first voice said again. William didn’t even need to get closer: he could easily feel it already. Why had his master made these morons come here? His touch upon them was so obvious...

“Then give us something else,” a second male voice said. William was now just standing right above him, peering down into the floorboards.

“I don’t have anything! Please, there is no reason for this, we-“

“This is a waste of time,” a third voice said. “Just stop the damn foreplay and fuck her already so we can move on.”

“Fine,” the second man said. “Always in such a rush.”

“What are you-“

“Shut the fuck up. Ya know I always had a thing for you, so if you play along real nice, I promise to let you and the kid go. *After we’ve* had some fun,” William heard the man chuckle. He was still standing unmoving right above them.

“I... please, don-“ the woman cried.

“I told you to shut up! One more word and the kid’s first!”

“Hurry up, but do that sick shit somewhere else. We need to leave so-“

“Got room for one more?” the three men heard a voice above them say. Footsteps now clearly audible as someone walked down the stairs.

William saw the situation was quite as he had foreseen.

In the corner was a small woman in her early 30’s. Her shirt was partly ripped by a large burly man standing over her. In William’s opinion, he had always rated her objectively good-looking. Large eyes, long black hair, and a good bone structure.

What he didn’t expect, however, was the smaller version of her lying unconscious on the ground. She didn’t look any older than five or six. For some reason, the sight of her

coupled with the words of the men earlier made him a bit mad, but he quickly suppressed it and spoke with a huge smile.

“Wow, Ms. Kim, I didn’t know you had a daughter,” William commented as he looked the men in the eye, all of them sizing him up. Kim, on the other hand, looked at him with a look of terror. He wasn’t sure if it was directed at him or her current situation.

“Who the fu-“

“Now, now gentlemen,” William said, putting his hands up in front of his chest. “Is this the way to treat a lady?”

“What do you want?” the third man said. The only one not currently standing over someone threateningly. He wore a clearly upgraded medium warrior set, and looking at this level; he was likely the leader here.

[Human – lvl 29]

None of the others were even above 25. While William, on the other hand...

Status

Name: William Hanson

Race: [Human (E) – lvl 48]

Class: [Metal Savant – lvl 66]

Profession: [Disciple of Eversmile – lvl 31]

He didn't feel the slightest threat. The men mere background to his beautiful reunion.

“Allow me to introduce myself. William Hanson, 19 years old, no work experience except my very successful career being a psychotic mass murderer. I am a fast learner, though!” William snickered. “So, can I join in on the fun?”

He briefly saw the look of terror on Ms. Kim's face deepen, but soon it turned more somber. He couldn't help but smile internally. He hadn't gone wrong indeed.

“Listen here, you litt-“

Before he could finish the sentence, his head was severed from his body.

The leader and the man closer to the child both changed their attitude really quickly because of that. Weird how that works.

“What? He was rude, was he not?” William casually said as the two men exchanged a quick glance before charging towards him. Neither of them made it two steps before both their bodies were eviscerated into dozens of pieces. Falling to the floor in bloody messes.

At this point, Ms. Kim had a bit of that terror returning.

William walked up to her as she sat there unmoving. Her shirt was slightly ripped, and the marks on her face were clearly indicating that she had been hit. Her level was no higher than 17. She was a lamb in this new world. Worse was the little girl, who boasted a level of only 10. He didn't even know how she got any levels, though.

Honestly, she looked... unsightly. Her demeanor was very different from the authoritative woman he remembered from their session. Yet William didn't feel the slightest inclination of killing her. He needed her, and clearly, she needed him.

“I take it you remember me, Ms. Kim?” William asked, already knowing the answer.

“William... or you prefer Mr. Hanson?”

“William is fine, miss,” he said, giving her the same fake smile he used in every one of their session. “You are my psychologist or therapist or whatever they called it. And I require your professional guidance once more.”

She looked at him, her terror now mainly replaced by confusion. Until he saw her gaze land on her smaller version not long away. Without even hesitating, she got up and ran to the little girl, cradling her.

“Relax, she’s alive,” William muttered, but she didn’t stop hugging her. “Okay then...”

Sitting down on the stairs, he began playing a bit with his new weapon, cuts appearing randomly on the ground and walls here and there.

After what felt like ages, she finally began talking.

“What are you going to do to me?”

He kept playing around as he chuckled. “You misunderstand. This is about what *you* can do for me.”

“This is my daughter Seo-Yun,” she said. “She will be six in only a few days. Her father died shortly after she was born. Moving from overseas, I don’t have any other relatives on this side of the world. So it has just been the two of us since then.

“We went to that tutorial together. It was pretty safe, so we didn’t do much fighting. She didn’t do any at all, of course. We... without you, I fear what would have happened. To both of us. Thank you, William.”

William just smiled and didn’t interrupt her. He enjoyed this new sensation. He actually felt a bit of interest in her situation. From a standpoint that didn’t revolve around benefits or objectivity. A foolish subjective interest in another human being.

So he tried something else he had never truly tried before.

“Sorry to hear. Sounds like it sucked, but glad to see you two made it.”

He showed actual sympathy. Not a lot, but just a sliver. But for once, it wasn’t just empty words or platitudes, but genuine. He was happy she had made it, as while she had been a hard-ass, she had also always been one of the better people in that shitty hospital. And she didn’t disappoint him as her eyes opened wide.

“William... you...” she said, stunned.

“Let’s get out of here. The blood is beginning to stink, and we don’t want little Seo to start crying when she wakes up, now do we?” he said, getting up from the stairs.

Kim only nodded as she got up and followed after him, holding her child. William couldn't help but look. For reasons he still couldn't explain, he liked the look of the scene. He didn't understand why at all, something Ms. Kim was sure to help him with.

Getting outside, he stretched in an exaggerated motion as he looked back at the woman. "Much better out here, isn't it?"

"William... what happened to you?" she asked, still holding her child.

"Oh, this and that. I killed a bunch of people, made a friend, killed a bunch more people, and got my head smashed in and killed by some monster in human skin. You know, the usual tutorial stuff," he answered, still smiling, but his face did crack a bit at the last part.

"One step at a time, William. But what is this about making a friend?"

"Wow, between killing people and getting killed myself, you think making a friend is the big takeaway?"

"Isn't it? It is an event important enough to be put beside your own killing and you supposedly getting killed. Which must indicate it meant a lot to you," she answered.

William smiled as he was beginning to see his good old 'friend' once more in her.

“Enough about me for now. So, a daughter, eh? Never mentioned that,” William said, changing the subject.

“Our talks weren’t about me; they were about you. Besides, would you have cared for that information before? Or would it just have been ammo to try and get under my skin and throw me off?”

“Wow. Harsh. But totally true,” William said, chuckling a bit.

Silence overtook the two for a bit as he just observed her looking down on her daughter, wiping some grime off her cheek. He found it eerie how they looked so incredibly similar. The kid was like a mini-Ms. Kim.

“So what is it you really want?” she finally said, breaking the silence.

“I am sure you have noticed by now, but I experienced quite the enlightenment on certain subjects during our time apart. Certain changes, if you will. I want you to do what you did before. Help me understand these things by having our ‘talks’,” he explained.

“William, what are these changes? In your own words.”

“Hm... do you know how evolution works through the system?” he asked, and seeing her shake her head, he explained.

“You see, I wanted to try and understand emotion better subconsciously, it seems. Comprehend them somehow. I had some encounters that gnawed at me, made me reconsider certain things. Evolution through the system is exactly as described. It allows one to get closer to the perfection that is divinity. But perfection is subjective, so one of the things it does is change the one evolving according to their own deep wishes. Mine appeared to be to comprehend these emotions better, so... here I am.”

“That is... so you are... better?” she asked, very much doubting her own words.

“Oh no, far from it. Don’t get me wrong; I don’t believe there was ever anything to fix - just ways to improve myself. I don’t *need* emotions, but I recognize the value in many of them. Empathy, as an example, is quite a dual-edged sword. On the one hand, it can help you better read people, but on the other hand, it can make you less efficient in killing. I want to learn to control it,” he said.

“You know that isn’t how emotions work. You cannot pick and choose, like a cable package. They are all connected,” Ms. Kim sighed.

“First of all, outdated metaphor. Secondly, I would agree if it was anyone else. But you see, I am indeed quite a bit different. Unique if you may. My new ‘master’ as he calls himself helped me understand certain things about myself,” he smiled, thinking back to the creepy old man. Not even realizing how he had inadvertently began picking up a habit of also smiling a bit too much.

“You will have to explain everything to me in great detail, or I won’t be able to help. But... I am not sure how you want to do this... thing. The world is different.”

“This is my proposition. I will help and protect you, and at the same time, you will help me. A partnership, if you will. It’s a pure win-win, so what do you say?” William said, extending his arm for a handshake.

Kim just looked at her child in her hand and asked. “What about Seo-Yun?”

Waving his hand dismissively, she was at first worried until he said. “I get it; you’re a package deal. So, not a partnership, but the three musketeers instead? Something like that. On that note, how is she still out cold?”

“I... I put her to sleep with a skill of mine. It revolves around hypnosis, and I had to make her calm as we tried to hide,” she said, a bit ashamed.

“Neat. Anyway, what do you say?”

“I don’t feel like I have much of a choice in the matter,” she sighed. “Okay, William, but we must set some ground rules.”

“Eh, like what?”

“Firstly, you must promise to protect my daughter and me, of course. Secondly, you are never allowed to use intimidation or force me to do anything against my own volition or

resort to violence due to our talks. Third, you must always answer me honestly. Lastly... you are not allowed to kill any people in front of Seo-Yun.”

“I kind of expected a rule against killing altogether,” he said, honestly a bit surprised.

“We both know that isn’t realistic.”

“Because of me or the current state of the world?” he asked. “Also, what is up with the second rule?”

“Both. And the purpose of the second rule is to make sure this is a partnership. I cannot do my job if I am to be in fear of anything I say. I will without a doubt need to push you and risk angering you...”

“Fine. But I will add a bit to the rules, first of all, confidentiality about anything I don’t give you express permission to say or that you believe can benefit me by sharing. And to make the third rule two-way. You also have to be honest with me at all times. Of course, I will also keep everything confidential,” he said, nodding.

“Naturally, I won’t share anything,” Kim said. “I also agree to your terms.”

“Great,” William said as he took out a small object the size of a coin from his pocket. “From this deal, our new karma shall be born.”

The coin flew up into the air as it exploded several golden letters in mid-air, describing the terms they had just made, exactly as they were made.

“Now, let us shake on it, and the bond be created,” he said, motioning for her to shake his hand. “Oh, and the kid too.”

That day they shook hands, and a very unusual trio was born.

Chapter im62: Intermission 6 - William (2/3)

A few weeks later, a trio of a small girl, a young man, and a woman walked through the streets of the now broken city. The girl ran around far faster than a typical child normally could, showing that her physique would clearly be considered supernatural by pre-system standards.

The teenager was smiling cheekily as he chatted with the woman. That is until the girl ran up to him, holding a small object in her hand, that with a second look, was clearly a broken dagger handle.

“Look, look! I found this! Do magic!” she said, proudly presenting the weapon to her mom and the teenager.

“Woah, nice find. Now watch this,” the young man said as the dagger began floating and spinning in the air.

As with every other time he did it, the small girl began giggling as she tried to grab hold of the dagger again - her mother stepping in before she could get a chance.

“Seo, you know you aren’t allowed to play with sharp things,” Kim said, having noticed a few of the sharp edges on the handle.

“But mooom!” she cried.

“Ms. Kim is right; only big kids like me are allowed to play with them. Like me,” William said as he floated the dagger into his hand, and with a swift motion, made it disappear into himself. “Tada!”

The girl giggled as William returned the smile. It didn’t take long before Seo rushed off again to explore the small city they had just entered.

It was a bit over two weeks since they had returned to Earth and began their partnership. William had thoroughly enjoyed their time, though they did have a few awkward conversations about certain emotions. A particular one he vividly remembered from just two days ago.

“Are you sure I am not a damn... you know?”

“William, thinking a child is cute does not make you attracted to them. It just means that your natural empathy exists. It is a biological trait developed for you to want to defend a child and care for them. Also, you just experienced a phenomenon called ‘cute aggression’ earlier. It is very normal to want to squeeze cute things; I have it too,” she said comfortingly.

“And you are 100% sure? A psychopath is one thing, but a goddamn child predator? Yeah, rather just cut off those emotions permanently again if that’s the case,” he said, shivering a bit at the thought.

“Is it not more interesting *why* you find the thought so abhorrent?”

“What?” he asked, confused.

“What logical reason do you have to find just the thought of it so terrible? Where does your disgust stem from?”

“It’s... thinking of someone doing twisted shit to someone like mini-you just seems fucked up. As for why... hm... it just is? Like she’s a little kid and all,” he answered, still thinking.

“Once more, why, though? You have no remorse or hesitation when killing people, and your brother was even younger. What makes doing ‘that’ with a child more disgusting

than murdering that child outright?” she said provocatively. William was clearly seeing that she was uncomfortable even asking the question.

“I... it just fucking isn’t cool, alright? Killing is different. You know, like when you go hunting. There is no reason to extend the animals suffering more than necessary. Killing is quick, and then it is done. It is an act that has utility. While...*that*

... is just fucked up,” he said, seriously wanting to change the subject. But she didn’t let him.

“But what if they take pleasure from it? Like you take pleasure in extending the suffering of your targets? Do you not like to play around with your victims before you end their lives? What makes what you do different?” she challenged once more.

“Okay, I get it... no killing kids. Sheesh,” he sighed, as he couldn’t help but look at Seo running around happily in front of them. *Yeah, not like kids have proper levels and give any experience anyway... no reason to.*

“I know this isn’t easy to talk about; I am not particularly fond of it either. But it is important for you to understand why you do things and what kind of emotions push you to do these things. Even before your change, you found playing with your prey fun, from what you told me. It is clear that it stems from your innate desire for power, but why doesn’t this desire extend to all aspects of your life?” she said.

“Who says it doesn’t?” William answered half-jokingly.

“Why didn’t you force me to help you but instead offered to create what you yourself identify as a partnership? Why agree to take Seo with and protect her too? You didn’t

need to, but you did so anyway. You can't tell me there were purely utilitarian reasons behind it."

"True... I knew I wanted you to help me due to our prior interactions, and when I saw Seo, I didn't really feel like I had much of a choice but to take the both of you. As for why I wanted a partnership... well, I doubt you could do your job without also having a measure of power in the relationship, and because... well, I respect you, I guess," he answered, feeling a bit embarrassed. *Damn that honesty rule.*

"I see," she said, no longer talking for a while. "Thank you."

He couldn't help but look at her as she smiled at him. Her hair had long been washed and was now the long silky hair he remembered. Her clothes were no longer torn, but a robe he had 'acquired' from someone he made sure didn't need it anymore.

It was a good memory, despite only being two days old, despite the rather harrowing conversation before, that is.

One may wonder how exactly their relationship could truly be considered a partnership as William currently appeared to hold all the power. Still, the reason was exactly due to their contract - a karmic contract to be more accurate.

Karmic contracts were an interesting thing. William had been given a token from Eversmile to make it as he hadn't learned how to properly do it himself yet. The contract was the kind that couldn't be broken easily without both party's consent. And if one did break it... well, it wouldn't end well.

A good case would be getting a bad karmic curse. A bad case would be instant death. He still wasn't quite sure how it worked, but it didn't really matter much. Because even if he broke the contract, he didn't give a damn.

Because as William had said: he was unique. Enough so for even the system to recognize it.

[Bloodline of the Bondless One (Ancient)] – Grants resistance to passively creating karmic bonds. Increases ability to comprehend bonds and manipulate them.

A bloodline. The reason his master had been so willing to make him a student. As to what exactly it did... well, the first part about passive karmic bonds was apparently the overpowered part, while he mainly noticed the second one during his practice after he had awakened it.

William didn't know that he had apparently always had it, but it was only awakened when Eversmile blessed him. He even got the skill as part of the blessing-title-thing. His master had warned him not to mention his bloodline and that most information out there in the multiverse was fake, spread on purpose by those with powerful bloodlines like him. He totally got that; he would have done the same thing.

Anyway, back to karma. What he did learn about karma was that karmic bonds between two people are a two-way street. Normally when a bond is created, there is a connection going from person A to person B and from B back to A. But what happens if one of those is missing?

Well, according to his master, that would be nearly impossible without an incredibly powerful skill, coupled with great insight into the concept of karma. If the bond goes from A to B, there will always automatically be a bond back the other way.

This is also the reason why a single party cannot simply sever karma. You may cut off your own part, but the karmic bond will always exist if the other party doesn't also sever all karma. And even if it is severed, to truly 100% sever it is once again nearly impossible.

Which is where his bloodline comes in. If he is person B in the other example, then while person A establishes a karmic bond with him, he won't just automatically return that bond or have a weaker bond. Which effectively means that he could more easily sever his own karmic connections.

Now, what does this help with? First of all, he could sever any contract such as the karmic contract simply by working on not actively forming his part. To make it even better, the other party was still bound by the agreement like if he was too. Well, unless the person had just a sliver of insight into karma... it only worked with weaker people, but it was still nice.

Eversmile had told him that his bloodline meant so much more than simply that, but honestly, that part was good enough for him already. It meant he wasn't shackled down by some otherworldly law, or worse, his own promises.

Which isn't to say he had any plans on breaking his deal with Ms. Kim. He just didn't like the thought of being unable to break it.

"So, where to now?" he asked her.

As said, it was a partnership. And since William didn't have any particular target or location in mind, he just let her direct them. Because while he didn't have any family or friends he gave a damn about, she did.

"They lived in the inner city, just through here. Though I must admit it is a bit hard to recognize a lot of the area due to the destruction," she sighed.

"Want some help? If they're close, I should be able to locate them," he asked, offering his karmic expertise.

"Really? How?"

"An ability of mine. Quite effective at finding people you have a connection with. It was the same skill I used to find you," he answered, not intending to share any real details.

"It would certainly be useful. What do you need me to do?" Ms. Kim asked.

"Just take my hands, and I am gonna give it a go," he said, offering up his hands. "It is my first doing it, though, so not sure if it will actually work."

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained.” She grabbed his hands without hesitation, and William couldn’t help but notice how soft her hands were. Shaking his head, he closed his eyes and began reading the threads of karma.

In his mind’s eye, he saw thousands upon thousands of threads extend out from Kim. Most of them so ethereal that he wasn’t even a hundred percent sure they were actually there. The threads didn’t actually go anywhere but simply hung in the air.

All except for five. One of them was directly connected to William himself. Its strength and intensity were relatively strong, but it was nothing compared to the thread right beside it. A powerful, almost golden, thread extended to the child playing behind them. The most powerful karmic connection he had seen since he started practicing this whole karma thing.

But neither of those was what he looked for. Instead, it was the three threads extending towards the inner city she pointed to before. One of them was significantly stronger than the two others. Likely only one friend or family member, and two she wasn’t quite as close to.

Opening his eyes, he smiled. “Let’s go.”

“You found them?” she asked, not quite believing him. He had just taken her hands and closed his eyes for ten seconds before letting go again.

“Three people you have some kind of connection with right this way, milady,” he said, making an exaggerated motion towards where she pointed before.

“Do you know who?” she asked quite a bit of expectation in her voice.

“No clue.”

“Let us hurry then!”

“Alright.” He turned towards the girl as he yelled, “Seo, time to go! It’s flying time!”

With an excited scream, she bolted back towards him.

At the same time, he took out a large disc of metal from his armor that he quickly enlarged to make it long enough for all of them to stand on. The disc also had small appendages to hold feet in place, making it safe-ish.

“I still can’t believe you convinced me to fly on that thing. Much less Seo,” Kim said as she stepped on the giant disc.

“Come on, you secretly like it, don’t ya?” he teased, getting only a small smile in return. No denial, though.

Seo, of course, absolutely loved flying on the disc.

The two of them laughed as they took flight and whooshed through the air towards where he had tracked the karmic threads. The speed of the disc was limited more by the child on board than William's own capacity for speed. However, he had to admit that keeping it afloat was quite expensive mana-wise.

As they got closer, William quickly saw far more people than just the three they were looking for. An entire camp had been built in what was once a park, with several makeshift tents and other structures scattered about.

Turning to Ms. Kim. "I think Seo needs to sleep."

She nodded as she picked up the oblivious child. Putting her mouth to her ear, she spoke in a weird ethereal voice. "Sleepytime."

With those words, the small girl fell over in her mother's arms, already asleep. It was the standard procedure they had agreed upon when meeting other humans. The situation was unpredictable by default, after all.

Their intrusion did cause quite the commotion also. Several people spotted them flying towards the camp, and he could hear several yells as they tried to muster a response to a possible attack.

At the behest of Ms. Kim, he landed outside of their camp, several watchful gazes drilling into them. And like last time they met other humans, he let her take the lead once more also. On a side note, he had learned that being a group carrying around a sleeping kid didn't exactly add to their intimidation factor.

"I am sorry for the scare; my companion and I are here looking for a close friend of mine," Kim said, practically yelling at the six men who stood cautiously watching them at the edge of the camp.

"Who?" one of them yelled back.

"Her name is Mary; she is my friend. But would it not be easier for us just to enter and look around ourselves? We have it on good authority she is here," Kim tried to argue, hoping to reunite with her friend as soon as possible.

The men turned to each other and muttered in hushed voices. Scowling back towards her and William several times before finally turning back to them.

"Fine, you and the girl can come in, but the guy is staying out here," the man said.

"Why can't he enter with us? We truly mean no harm and-"

"He gives me the creeps, and we can't see his level. That reason enough?" one of the other men said.

“But- “

“I don’t give a shit what you say; he ain’t comin’ in,” the same guy said, cutting her off.
“And if you keep up this bullshit, you can fuck right off too.”

Ms. Kim was momentarily unsure what to say as William stepped forward.

“Now now, that is no way to speak to a lady, is it?” he said, a big smile on his face.
“Besides, why are we even arguing? Are you boys not under a serious misconception here? What makes you think I give a flying fuck if you allow me to enter or not?”

Chapter im63: Intermission 6 - William (3/3)

Conflict resolution is by many professionals considered an art that few will ever master. From smaller group projects to large enterprises, in the end, everything is made up of humans that have to interact for the cogs to turn. And when that happens, some friction is inevitable.

And that is in a school or corporate setting. In most cases, the worst-case scenario is just a lost job or a reprimand from upper management. However, In this new world, where a conflict would often spiral into a full-on fight to the death, conflict resolution only became even more important of an art to master.

William had never quite been one to care much about conflict resolution. Not because he didn't know how to handle it. He knew exactly how to handle it in the new world. Have a conflict with another human? Just kill the conflict in the most literal sense possible.

For a guard to be taunting someone he clearly couldn't read the power of was also highly questionable behavior.

At least all of this was Kim's fast analysis of the situation that was quickly devolving into something that could only end in bloodshed. And not William's blood.

When William said his somewhat threatening words, the six men reacted as one would expect. Three of them drew swords, one a bow and two more clearly prepared some kind of magic skill.

"Please, there is no reason to fight!" Kim practically yelled, trying to diffuse the situation.

"Won't really be a fight either way," William snickered. "It is their choice to walk towards death."

"William, we agreed to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. We have nothing to gain from fighting them."

“Oi, stop fucking ignoring me, or I’ll blow your head o-“

Before he could finish his sentence, he croaked. Something none of the men had seen was wrapped around his neck, cutting off air. In a panic, he tried to get it off him but failed as his companion yelled at the newcomers.

“What did you do! Release him right now, or I’ll-“

“You’ll let us in? Great!” William smiled as the suffocating man was released. “See, negotiations are so easy!”

The men looked at him in fright, but William didn’t bother giving them a chance to respond. “Now, before I regret my very merciful decision, get the fuck out of my way. If I wanted you dead, you would be dead, so stop wasting our time.”

Which turned out to work perfectly well as the men just stood by as William walked into the camp. Kim with Seo in her arms, just following silently along. While she disapproved of his methods, she had to confess that it worked and that sometimes power was the only thing enabling one to truly have it their way.

The camp itself was rather basic, and the populace less than energetic. Most just sat listlessly staring into thin air, while those slightly more motivated did basic tasks or practiced what was likely their profession.

None of them seemed to pay William and Kim any mind. The only thing that caught a bit of attention was the sleeping Seo, as children were relatively rare. A sad testament to the fate of the youngest generation.

Also, one of the men who had stood guard was now trailing along with them. Keeping a good ten or so meters away. It was the first guy to speak and the one who seemed the most diplomatic.

“Man, this place sucks,” William said, not caring how loud he was. “Who is this friend of yours anyway?”

“A friend from university. We shared quite a few classes and kept in contact afterward. She is also Seo’s godmother,” she answered.

“Oh, another shrink?” William asked, with quite a bit of distaste in his voice. While he liked Ms. Kim, he didn’t have the same love for the professional field of psychology as a whole, and she was perfectly aware of this. His trauma with other medical professionals was one of the most common subjects in their talks.

“No, a normal doctor. Has her own practice. Or, well, she had her own practice before the system. I just hope you are right and that she survived.”

“Well, better than a shrink, I guess. So, does she know about me?” William asked.

“Of course not. You were my patient William; confidentiality is the most basic of principles. And as I promised you, that confidentiality still stands,” she explained.

“Fair enough.” For some reason, though, he looked a bit annoyed at that.

After walking on a bit more, William got enough of their stalker as he turned back to the guy following them. “Yo, since you’re following us anyway, at least tell us where this Mary woman is.”

“O... okay. Mary is in the big white tent over there,” he answered, pointing to what was indeed a big white tent.

“Thanks, mate,” William said as he returned to ignoring the man.

Kim had, of course, also heard the man and sped up her pace as she made a beeline for the white tent. It was a lot like those party tents and was one of the largest tents in the entire camp.

Getting closer, she began to smell something that had become all-too-familiar after the initiation. Blood. The reason for this quickly became clear as they headed inside.

The tent could only be described as a makeshift hospital. Several mats were lain out on the floor, with gravely injured people on all of them. So many that some were forced to just lay on the bare ground. Their wounds mainly being large gashes, clearly caused by claws or fangs.

At one of the men who was missing both an arm and a leg, a woman was desperately sweating as she had her hands on his chest. It didn't take a genius to see that she was currently channeling some kind of healing skill.

She barely managed to stop the bleeding before she fell over, barely being caught by another woman who stood by her side helping.

"You need to rest and get your mana back; you can't do more as you are right now," the woman supporting the healer said.

"I know... but there is no one else," she sighed as she stood up, still wobbly on her feet.

It was at this point they turned around to see the three new arrivals in the tent. It was also the time that Kim saw the healer as both their eyes opened wide.

"Mary!"

"Kimmie!"

The two women sounded like schoolgirls seeing their girlfriend after a long summer break. Mary, still a bit unsteady on her feet, hurried over as she hugged Kim, squashing poor Seo in between them.

“What are you doing here!? Is something wrong with little Seo?” Mary said as she looked alarmed down on the sleeping girl as she let go of her old friend.

“No, she is fine. I just put her to sleep with a skill,” Kim answered as she looked her friend over. “We came here to find you and see how you were doing. What happened here?”

“The situation is bad. There is a pack of powerful monsters that have their eyes on the camp. They never come directly, but they attack any team sent out. This here,” she said, motioning to all the wounded people around her, “this is the result of trying to fight them off. And this is only the survivors.”

“Interesting,” William said, interrupting their little reunion. “What level are these monsters?”

His question grabbed her attention as she now noticed him for the first time. “Oh, I am so sorry I didn’t see you. Are you with Kimmie?”

“Yes, this is William,” Kim answered before he had had a chance to do so. “He is someone from work that I teamed up with after we both returned to earth.”

“Ah, good to meet you, William. I didn’t know she had such a handsome young colleague,” Mary said teasingly.

This time William answered before Kim could. “Yeah, because she didn’t. For some reason, they never offered me a job.”

“Huh? Who are you then?” she said, confused.

“Just a good friend of hers. But we did meet at her work, that is true.”

“A patient then?” she said, nodding as if she was sure to be right. “Taking care of your mental health even before the system was indeed important, and even more so now. Good to see that the younger generation is catching on.”

“Oh, I wasn’t a patient by choice,” he waved his hand dismissively. “I am still pretty sure nothing was ever really ‘wrong’ with me per se. Not sure about now, though.”

“What do- “

“Shouldn’t we talk about these monsters you mentioned?” Kim interrupted.

William looked at her and quickly got the hint not to overshare here and now. *Fine*, he thought as he agreed.

“True, so what are these things?”

Mary looked between the two, a bit confused as she spoke. “They are bipedal cat-like creatures. They hunt mainly during the night, so we tried to attack them during the day... you see the result. We are at our wits end here, and the leadership is unsure how to proceed. They often don’t kill on purpose but only injure... they seem to like playing with their prey.”

“Again, what’s their level?” he asked, not really caring much for the details. If they were just a bunch of level 50 monsters, they wouldn’t be worth jack.

“At least above 60.”

William turned to see a new man had entered the tent. The highest level individual he had seen so far since returning to earth, sitting at level 39. Still below William by quite some, but respectable, nevertheless.

“You fought them?” the young metal caster asked, now beginning to feel a bit excited.

“Yes, I led the squad. There are five of them, all at a level I can’t identify. I can’t see your level either, but I have a feeling you are above mine. Am I correct?” the man answered, adding on a question of his own.

Naturally, William had a skill to hide his own level. That was one-o-one of karmic magic.

“I can neither confirm nor deny that accusation!” William answered cheerfully. “But I can confirm that I would very much like to go kill these little kitty-cats.”

“Wait, Milas, is that you?” Kim suddenly butted in as she recognized the man.

“Yes, I am sorry I didn’t introduce myself earlier. My wife and I arrived here with Mary,” he said.

“Wait, you two know each other?” William jumped in once more.

“They are my neighbors, and Kimmie also met them at a party of mine a few months back,” Mary came in explaining.

“Ah, that explains the two other thin threads of Karma,” William nodded, only confusing the others. “Anyway, point me in the direction of the cats, then you guys can catch up while I go and do some pest control.”

Milas looked quite unsure of what to do, but Kim gave him an affirming nod. “Fine, they are normally in the block two or so kilometers north of here, up past the old hospital. They usually keep watch, so chances are they attack you before you even spot them.”

“Sounds easy enough, be right back,” he said as he got up.

“I must warn you; they are swift and strong. We barely survived an- “

“But you did survive. If they can’t even kill a bunch of weaklings like you, I doubt they are worth much,” he dismissed the man’s concern. “So just sit tight.”

“William. Never be overconfident,” Ms. Kim said sternly, adding in a bit softer of a voice. “And be careful.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He walked out of the tent with quite a big smile on his lips. *Guess I have to watch out, or she’ll reprimand me*, he thought to himself, making his smile only more genuine.

After he left, the four also followed as Milas had brought another healer to replace Mary. They went to another tent not far away, where Anton began making some coffee from some beans they found while the two women talked.

Seo had also been woken up and was now playing around with the only two others kids in the entire camp.

“So, who is he really?” Mary asked as she kept on pushing to know more about William. “Also, isn’t he a little young for you?”

“It isn’t like that, Mary...” she said with an exasperated sigh. “As he said, he is an old patient of mine. We made an agreement where I help him out, and he helps protect Seo and me.”

“Oh... ‘helping out’ eh?” she said, nudging her old friend with an elbow. “What kind of ‘help’ are we talking about?”

“The psychological kind Mary.”

“Okay then, keep your secrets,” she said, laughing. “But you must say he is quite the looker.”

“He is nineteen. He is also my patient,” Kim sighed.

“Are you sure he will be fine? Exactly how strong is he?” Milas asked, placing two cups of coffees on the table.

“In terms of fighting, he is more powerful than any I have encountered so far. We have yet to meet any monster he couldn’t kill nearly instantaneously,” Kim explained as she took a sip of the coffee, stats making the fear of burns redundant.

“Exactly how did he get so strong?” Milas continued asking.

“A lot of fighting naturally,” she answered promptly. It wasn’t her place to share.

“Human or beast?” Milas kept asking, with a serious look in his eyes.

Mary looked a bit shocked as she regarded him, while Kim also looked up at him rather abruptly.

“Why would you ask that?”

“I have also done a lot of fighting, Ms. Kim. And when I stand in front of that young man... I feel like I am moments away from death. Like he is prepared to kill me and anyone else in the room at a moment’s notice,” he said, feeling a slight shiver run up his spine. He still remembered the look the young man had given him earlier in the tent.

Sighing, Kim knew it wouldn’t make sense to hide it. “Both.”

“Kimmie... is he forcing you to...?” Mary asked, feeling horrible for her earlier jokes.

“No, nothing like that. We are in a partnership of sorts. William needs me, and I need him, so please don’t be worried. I have done nothing and will do nothing that is against my own will,” she said, trying to reassure her friend.

They kept talking for a few minutes until Milas suddenly frowned as they heard some commotion outside the tent. They all rushed out to see William having already returned. Not a scratch on his body.

However, what was truly frightening was the bloody bag and the six heads of cat-like monsters on the ground.

“Sorry for the wait Ms. Kim,” he said with a big smile. “The kitties were a bit tougher than expected; one of them was even at level 77!”

The entire camp was in an uproar. They were afraid of such power - all except for one.

“William! What the hell do you think you are doing!” Kim yelled as she stomped forward. “There are kids here, so clean up that macabre mess right this instant!”

Time passed as they decided to stick with the group. Eventually, they encountered a bubble as they traveled from their original camp, and within that bubble, a D-grade resided along with many other powerful monsters.

William killed them all, except for the D-grade. He actually felt a bit nervous facing it, as it was far stronger than anything ever before. In the end, he only killed it after he was forced to do so after it said ten were already claimed, and even then, it was a good while later. After the Pylon was claimed, Milas was made City Lord and William the official owner, but...

“You aren’t going?” Ms. Kim asked, confused.

“Nah, I don’t see any reason to,” he answered, shaking his head.

“Why not?” she pressed.

“It’s just a waste of time,” he insisted.

Over the last months, William had made a lot of progress. He had slain only a few humans throughout this time, only hunting beasts and overall acting like a decent person... a lot of it due to him following her advice and trying to resolve issues with other humans not using violence.

She had learned all about his tutorial. What he had done. It was unforgivable... but her job was not to pass judgment but make him understand why he did as he did and figure out a way to move forward. Yet there was one point he never addressed... how it ended.

He just said that he went to train with his master. He said he “died and went there,” but he deflected when she asked for details, often just using humor or shrugging it off, but she still saw him begin sweating a bit and look uncomfortable whenever she made him think of it. She was confused for a long time, until one day where he finally had to sleep... and she heard it.

William woke up screaming in a cold sweat, his entire body shivering. In his sleep, he had talked about yellow eyes and a monster... she also came to notice that he often looked an extra time after everyone wearing an archer's cloak. One time he yelped back when someone used some skill with dark-mana, and he categorically avoided anyone whose level he couldn't see.

Kim could get him to talk about anyone but the yellow-eyed monster, and now she was clear he would be in the congress. Which meant she would just have to go herself... and hopefully try to understand exactly what had happened.

Chapter 229: A Healthy Diet

Lavender, Evergreen Grass, a lot of mana and a bit of love, and you have a perfectly healthy potion. It seemed simple on paper, but there was a bit of work going into it. The mana-control aspect of the crafting process was something that could always be improved, and the more you trained, the better your potions would inadvertently get. While there was a cap caused by the ingredients and your own stats, it wasn't one Jake could ever feasibly reach.

He did improve a whole lot, though. His potions got better and better, and he honestly took quite a while to get proper pricing down but ended up just settling on 20.000 for each potion. While he certainly could charge more, he didn't feel the need to. He didn't craft them to make money, to begin with, but to level his profession and get as comfortable with his new D-grade mana control prowess as he could before he would begin crafting some more interesting things.

Like some uncommon-rarity poison.

Well, his pricing scheme was like that for the first week until he talked about it with Miranda.

“Why don’t you have someone else sell it for you? Merchants or others with compatible professions apparently get great experience selling items through the store to other cities and have even better methods to price goods with their skills. That way, they can gain levels, and you can gain Credits without thinking about putting them up for sale yourself,” she said, sounding quite reasonable.

“Do you have anyone in mind?” he had asked.

This was when he learned that apparently, being a City Lord’s assistant also included selling stuff as a part of the job, at least the system agreed it did. Lillian came by later that day, and from the first week and moving forward, she handled all the commercial stuff for him. She just came by once a day or so and took all the potions he had already made while giving him any stuff he asked her to buy or look out for.

Jake still bought most of the items he wanted himself, as quite frankly, he only knew he wanted it when he saw it. Every item above common-rarity was more or less an impulse buy because he thought: “hey, I guess I can use this for something.”

It had now been two weeks total since the World Congress ended, and Jake was spending most of his time every day experimenting on making an uncommon-rarity poison, but he did still spend a few hours pumping out potions.

The experience was great when he mass-produced things, and he had gained two levels during this period. While that doesn’t seem like a lot, one had to remember that leveling

only got harder and harder as time went on. Willy had told him that sometimes going years between levels at higher grades was just to be expected.

****' DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 103 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****' DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 109 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

****' DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 104 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

As for what kind of poison he was trying to make an uncommon variant of? He had decided to start with the old trusty one: Necrotic Poison.

Necrotic Poison did have some drawbacks, but against any living being, it was just great. Against elementals, it was quite bad, but it even functioned okay-ish versus plant-based foes. It also happened to be the poison Jake had the most experience with.

Finally, he decided to go for this poison because of a certain herb. Or, more accurately, mushroom. An old friend of his, but in a new and improved form.

[Aged Bluebright Mushroom (Uncommon)] - A poisonous blue mushroom that emits blue light. The Aged Blue Mushroom has grown to a point where simply being touched by its light can bring you harm, and the juices found within are more toxic than ever.

Jake had discovered that the System Store was indeed a bit dynamic and adaptable. He had bought all the normal common-rarity Bluebright Mushrooms that he could and found that the store stocked a few more every time, with it even giving out a few uncommon-rarity ones every time now.

For the first many mushrooms, he did as any reasonable person would do and ate them. All competent doctors would agree that death-shrooms would be a part of a healthy diet.

They tasted a lot like the regular Bluebright Mushrooms but had a bit stronger flavor, and the juices within them sizzled in his mouth when he ate. He was perfectly aware that without *Palate of the Malefic Viper*, half his mouth would have rotted away, but with it, nothing really happened. Yay for a legendary skill granting poison resistance.

The first few mushrooms always gave the best insights, and it was far more valuable than just trying to experiment with them blindly. Jake did run into the issue of needing to get more, and he knew he would need these mushrooms in the long run, even after the System Store disappeared. Problem is... Jake had never actually done any proper gardening in his life, and he also really didn't feel like starting now. It would require a lot of time to make a proper mushroom garden. This was an issue he brought up with Lillian during one of her visits to get his potions, and she just shrugged and said.

"Why not just find someone to do it for you? Maybe train someone to do it properly. That should also get them a great profession or a great upgrade."

Jake had considered it, but that would also take time... there was also the issue that he couldn't just take anyone random. They had to know the basics and be strong enough not to be killed by the mushrooms. He considered it for a while and decided to just postpone it for now. He would also need someplace to properly grow the Bluebright Mushrooms.

One could think that it would be smart to do the mushroom-growing down in the cave by the dungeon due to the mana it leaked, but the issue was that the dungeon portal leaked life-affinity mana, while the mushrooms primarily had death-affinity or perhaps rot-affinity mana. Chances are the mushrooms would get worse if put down there, or possibly mutate if Jake got lucky and gave it enough time.

No, the cavern was far more suitable to grow other kinds of herbs and plants in. There were many different types of mushrooms too, and ones used in hemotoxins or many other types of toxins would still grow just fine down there.

Luckily he wasn't in that much of a rush as he could save all the herbs he wanted to plant later in his spatial storage.

Anywho, Jake spent a damn long time grinding alchemy, eating mushrooms, making bank, and having the occasional playtime with Sylphie or meeting with Miranda and/or Lillian. All in all, it was quite relaxing, and his goal was to get his first uncommon-rarity poison done within the first month. After that...

Dungeon time.

Miranda took a deep breath as the mana hummed to life. A green sheen overtook the entire area as the light danced and weaved in seemingly random patterns. But there was a method to the madness as she began chanting words in a language she truly didn't understand. It wasn't a question of her translation skill not working either; it was that the words she spoke truly didn't exist, or perhaps weren't real words, to begin with.

They did hold power, though.

A green top-down view appeared, and she saw her targets. It was an old enemy most in the city would recognize as an Oakwood Tiger – the kind of beast that had nearly killed her, Hank, Louise, and Mark before Jake saved them.

She saw nearly a hundred of them grouped together around a large peculiar tree - likely a natural treasure of sorts. Out of all the tigers, one of them was special. It had a small mark on it that it could neither detect with its mana sense nor see with its eyes. It was a green sigil depicting a circular mark, looking a lot like a green lagoon. It was the Verdant Mark.

Miranda didn't have a typical combat class but was a witch. While they could fight with regular magic, flinging fire and ice like any other caster, their specialty lay in mysticism and ritual magic. Such as the ritual she was currently doing.

Around her was a magic circle over 5 meters in diameter, her standing in the center. Candles burned around the perimeter, and several items were placed in key spots of the formation. Among these items were the heart of an Oakwood Tiger she had killed days prior, leaves from the forest, bark from many different kinds of trees, and several catalysts she had bought using her Credits from the Ore & Metal category, as well as some things from the Foodstuff and Herbs categories.

Using the Verdant Mark, she weaved her spell, and through it, she would bring them death.

Concentrating, she evoked even more mana, and the items placed around the circle began burning with green fire as the spell activated.

“Verdant Feast Of the Lagoon’s Insatiable Depths.”

The Oakwood Tiger rubbed its barkskin up against the bark of the magical tree. It was a natural treasure that served as a natural gathering point for all the Oakwood Tigers in the area. It was their domain, and no other beast had been able to go near for months without being torn apart.

Some beasts had tried, but most didn’t. Many types of natural treasures – this one included - functioned better for some beasts than others. This tree was highly beneficial to the tigers but wouldn’t help many other types of monsters or enlightened races.

None of them knew that today would be their doom and that this haven they had named their home would be their grave.

At first, it was subtle. A few of the tigers noticed a shift in the air as a green wind seemed to sweep through, with even less noticing the green grass below them growing an even deeper green.

By the time they knew anything was wrong, it was already too late.

Suddenly a green hand sprang up from the ground and grabbed hold of the leg of one of the tigers. It struggled, but another arm came up, followed by a dozen more as they began dragging it down. Down to the depths of the lagoon.

All of the grass beneath their feet melted together as it began resembling a still lake. Every single tiger was assaulted at once by the greedy hands that sought to bring them down, and no matter how they cut or tore at the hands, a new one would just come to replace whatever they broke.

The ground then stopped simply looking like water as it actually turned swampy, and the hands began succeeding in dragging the tigers down. The first to be grabbed was also the first to be fully submerged as it failed to keep itself afloat and was pulled under.

Once it was entirely under... the tiger saw them - human-like creatures with maws for mouths closing in on it. They were all half-corporeal but physical enough to bite and tear into the tiger as it struggled. As a monster growing up in a forest, it had never fought in water nor was built to do so. Needless to say, it was heavily outmatched and outnumbered.

Its other comrades also joined it below as they too suffered the same fate. They did all struggle, and they managed to “kill” many of the creatures trying to devour them, but there were just too many. They did notice that these creatures didn’t respawn and no new ones appeared... so if they could somehow defeat them all...

The struggle ended up lasting for nearly half an hour before the depths below became calm, with only the occasional munching sound was heard.

Above, surrounding the natural treasure, the grass turned back to its old color as the aura from the ritual faded. Not a single trace of what had happened or a single body left over. All had been devoured at the Feast.

Miranda collapsed to the ground, sweat pouring down her face as she breathed heavily. A bit of blood even flowed out her mouth as she had taken a bit of damage towards the end from pushing herself too far. Yet, she had a light smile on her lips as she had succeeded in her most significant and powerful ritual yet.

The ritual circle around her had already died down, and all the catalysts burned away by the green fire. It had been an expensive one, and it had taken quite a bit of work to set it all up and make all the preparations, but it had been worth it.

****You have slain [Oakwood Tiger – lvl 89] – Experience earned****

****You have slain [Oakwood Tiger – lvl 80] – Experience earned****

...

****You have slain [Oakwood Tiger – lvl 92] – Experience earned****

****’ DING!’ Class: [Neophyte Verdant Witch] has reached level 91 - Stat points allocated, +3 free points****

****' DING!' Class: [Neophyte Verdant Witch] has reached level 92 - Stat points allocated, +3 free points****

It was some damn good experience to get two entire levels from a single ritual, and she chuckled through the pain as she began cleaning up the magic circle around her. She kept some of it as it could be re-used and was more or less an all-purpose ritual circle for Verdant magic. It had taken nearly all of her personal credits to get that one built...

Miranda also didn't get any race levels because, well, she was already capped at 99. Had been for a week now due to the immense amount of profession-experience she got from managing the city. She had even gained two levels from the World Congress.

She had decided to go for the Perfect Evolution due to the advice from the Sisters, and she didn't dare go against it. Jake also agreed she should do it, as, in his words: "everything counts."

Also, her class wasn't that bad to level, and one of the best parts was that she could do it from the comforts of her home. The ritual she had just performed was done from the cellar of the mayor's office/City Lord residence of Haven, more than 100 kilometers away from where she had just killed a massive group of Oakwood Tigers.

That was the beauty of being a witch and rituals... it was all a bit more metaphysical, and distance didn't always matter as much. She did have to mark a target in person, but once that was done, all she had to do was wait and then use the Verdant Mark as a casting point for the ritual.

There were some downsides, though. Such as the fact that Miranda honestly found her own spells scary, at least at first. Now, she had begun to be okay with them. Verdant

Ritual Magic was its entirely own school of magic, recognized by the system itself. There even was a Verdant-affinity. One Miranda didn't at all understand and knew she wasn't supposed to understand any time soon.

It was an affinity much like the holy-affinity, which was bound to the Holy Mother or the blight-affinity by the Blightfather.

Or, of course, the malefic-affinity of the Malefic Viper.

Shaking her head, she finished cleaning up the basement, went to a small room with a staircase and a sink where she quickly cleaned herself up before she headed upstairs again, passing through a myriad of wards on the way. Sadly, those only gave experience if someone actually interacted with them.

Miranda walked into her office, where Phillip was already waiting. The man himself had also gained quite a few levels over the last few weeks as he was one of the people identified as able to reach D-grade by the time for the Treasure Hunt to begin.

"Any news?" she asked.

"Well..." Phillip said, scratching his head. "Arnold keeps insisting he wants to talk with the owner. Apparently, only he can do what the madman wants. Should we ask Jake if he is fine with meeting him?"

"I'll bring it up next meeting. Anything else?"

“There has been a single more application to the temple, and a few people unsatisfied with not being able to buy all they want from the system store, but besides that, everything is going fine. Oh yeah, one last thing. Neil expects to reach D-grade within the month, and I, for one, am looking forward to seeing what a D-grade space mage can do,” Phillip answered, looking a bit expectant.

Chapter 230: This Contains Alchemy

Sylphie had once more been a bit mad when Jake had sent her away to spend some time with her parents, but today was one of those days where having a bird sitting around just wasn't feasible. The reason for this was simple... today would be the day he would craft his first uncommon-rarity Necrotic Poison. He could feel it. At least that's what he kept telling himself as he felt the same the day before.

Another two weeks had passed, and it had now been nearly a month since the World Congress ended, aka two months away from the Treasure Hunt. He had gotten another profession-level in the bag, bringing it to 105, and with it, a race level had also naturally come. Yet his stats had grown quite a bit more than one would expect. The reason for this was simple.

Jake had begun a new diet called: "SHIT, I GOTTA HURRY UP AND EAT THAT FUCKING BANANA BEFORE IT DISAPPEARS! DAMN YOU, TIME TREE THAT ISN'T ACTUALLY A TREE!"

It was a very healthy diet, naturally consisting of magical time bananas.

[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.

Jake constantly kept watch of the tree with his sphere, and whenever he saw a ripe banana appear, he stopped whatever he was doing to rush in and pick it off the tree. He had discovered the bananas could disappear and no longer be recognized as items in as little as a minute, while at other times, they remained on the tree for hours on end.

He suddenly understood far better why the Prima never left the temple. It didn't want to miss out on bananas.

He had also tried not heeding the warning and taking the banana away and out of the time-distortion area surrounding the tree. That hadn't gone well as it instantly began rotting and turned to dust in his hand within seconds. Jake still had no idea how to anchor the banana either besides eating it, but he did have one way of finding out.

Swallowing one. No, not eating it, but swallow a banana with Palate of the Malefic Viper. Sadly, he could only have one item stored at a time, and currently, he still had the Lifecore within there. He could switch it up but didn't really feel the need to. Eating the bananas normally was fine, too, as they were super tasty.

Also, while he made it sound like he ate a lot, he had only actually eaten 13 more during this month, giving him an extra 39 agility. He knew there was a cap of stats and all that, but he had decided that since agility was one of his best stats, it was fine. Besides... it allowed him to do something he really wanted: throw every single free point into perception again. Perception for the win.

Overall, his status had experienced quite the growth, especially in agility and the stats his class gave. Not to talk badly of the 10 race levels. That in itself

was more than 100 to all stats due to his titles. Of course, Perception was still the one that had grown most – as it should be.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (D) – lvl 110]

Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter – lvl 115]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 105]

Health Points (HP): 20070/20070

Mana Points (MP): 25941/26975

Stamina: 14571/16880

Stats

Strength: 1439

Agility: 2376

Endurance: 1688

Vitality: 2007

Toughness: 1392

Wisdom: 2158

Intelligence: 1709

Perception: 3902

Willpower: 1722

Free points: 0

As for skills, not much had changed besides a few upgrades here and there, such as Enhanced Splitting Arrow and Descending Dark Arcane Fang. Quite a mouthful that last one.

Anyway, bananas were tasty, perception is the best stat, and he had grown quite a bit since reaching D-grade. He had made way more progress in the first week on his monkey hunt than during this month, but that was just the disparity between professions and classes. Jake liked both, and that's what's important. Plus, right now, he wanted to make a cool new poison.

With his cauldron between his legs, he began his preparations. The first and most important ingredient he needed was, of course, the mushrooms themselves.

[Aged Bluebright Mushroom (Uncommon)] - A poisonous blue mushroom that emits blue light. The Aged Blue Mushroom has grown to a point where simply being touched by its light can bring you harm, and the juices found within are more toxic than ever.

Damn toxic, pretty tasty, and he had even discovered that he slowly got a bit of knowledge from Palate just by basking in their blue light. It was only a bit, though, and he quickly got “capped” on knowledge from doing that. Pretty much all he learned was that it emitted a kind of light that directly attacked the vital energies of anything it touched.

Secondly was the moss. One always needs to have moss as a side dish to their mushrooms. It was the butter to the bread or the rum to the coke. Of course, with a stronger mushroom, one needs more potent moss.

This is where another of the must-buys of the system store came in. Another item that Jake just bought everything of whenever possible.

[Black Moss (Uncommon)] - A rare variant of the Green moss found in places with absolutely no sunlight and a high level of death-affinity mana. This moss is extremely dangerous and will erode any vitality-based substance it comes into contact with.

The moss was black, as the name suggested. It was an almost unnaturally dark color, and he even felt a bit of dark-mana mixed into the overpowering death-affinity energy. Jake had naturally munched down quite a bit of this moss, too, having some good old moss-soup, bringing him back to his tutorial days.

With that and quite a few failed crafting attempts under his belt, he was beginning to get quite confident.

The final ingredient was, as always, his blood. It replaced most of the water and was quite frankly instrumental to him making as much progress as he did. It just made everything far easier, and the synergy with all of his Malefic Viper skills just amplified it even more. Sense of the Malefic Viper allowed him to way better get a feel for the concoction as his blood was already part of it, as an example.

With all of that in mind, he began.

Firstly, he cut his own wrist to add blood to the mixture – don't do this at home. He also added a bit of Purified Water to not have his blood be too overpowering in the concoction. With both hands on the cauldron, he slowly mixed the two until he was satisfied.

Next up was the moss.

Jake slowly took out a good handful of it, chopped it apart in mid-air with a few mana strings, and let all the small fragments enter the mix. The reaction was immediate as the two energies clashed, and he once more had to step in and be the guiding hand to make the two play nice.

Toxic fumes entered the air from the cauldron, and Jake was happy he was doing this outside and in a relatively open area. He did see that he was still a bit too close to a few trees as he saw some leaves turn black and wither, but what can ya do? He really needed to set up a proper lab.

After fully integrating the moss energy, he noticed that the entire concoction was still a bit too weak, so he used Touch of the Malefic Viper and infused a

bit more necrotic energy into it, just slightly topping it up. The moss-fragments absorbed the energy, and it gave them a second wind of sorts, allowing them to squeeze out just a bit more until they fully disintegrated.

Nodding in satisfaction, he took out one of the mushrooms. Its blue light seemed all-encompassing, and the entire area he was sitting in had already been cleared of grass by one of its brethren earlier.

With the common-rarity mushrooms, he squeezed them for their juices first, but with this uncommon version, he just placed it straight into the mix. The reason for this was simple: it would allow him to not only squeeze out the juices but also absorb all the light energy first.

The “flesh” of the mushroom had been bathed in its own light and contained a lot of its energy. Jake wanted to get that out before he fully ripped the mushroom apart and began directly integrating its potent juices. Also, it allowed the concoction to more easily assimilate the mushroom if he first let it get used to the death-light.

He assumed that when he got more used to the crafting process, this part was one he could speed up significantly, but currently, that would only be a shortcut to having the entire concoction explode in his face. That had happened a few times already.

So he took it slow and let the mushroom exude its own energy for a bit before he willed it to speed up just a little bit. He couldn't just sit there forever, or the concoction would be ruined too, so he was forced to.

Deploying some more advanced techniques, he shielded parts of the concoction with his mana, even using a bit of his own arcane-affinity to make the protective constructs stable to not interfere with the other energies of the concoction. That was the good thing about his own stable version of arcane mana: it didn't give a fuck about other types of energies.

This technique allowed him to avoid a cascading effect when some of the energies didn't play nice but allowed him to isolate the issues and deal with them. Once more, this made the entire crafting process a lot harder and prolonged, but you gotta do what you gotta do to make it work.

He sat like that for a good five minutes before the passive light was nearly entirely absorbed. He couldn't delay any longer as he began extracting the toxic liquids from within the mushroom as he braced himself.

A lot could be said about the blue mushrooms – most of it bad. One thing was certain, though, that's that they were toxic as hell. The liquids instantly sought to overpower the rest of the concoction with their potency as the death-affinity energy spread throughout the mix.

Now, one may call it a bit counterproductive, but the death-affinity energy tried to kill the death-affinity energy from the Black Moss. Death-affinity liked to make things dead, even other dead things, it appears, so Jake had to play mediator and make sure the two didn't just stupidly try to cancel each other out but instead mixed as they were supposed to.

With a guiding hand, he concentrated fully to keep the equilibrium stable as the energies slowly mixed and the synergistic effects began showing. Instead of killing each other, the two energies of death mixed, like they had agreed to team up and tag-team the next thing they met. This was exactly the state Jake had hoped for as he made a final push.

****You have successfully crafted [Potent Necrotic Poison (Uncommon)] – A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned****

Jake had a massive smile on his face as he opened the lid of the cauldron and took a good whiff of his concoction. It smelled absolutely terrible, and he

got a bad taste in his mouth from doing so, and from the looks of it, the trees around him and the ground below didn't like it either.

Nearly 15 meters around him was just dead grass, and quite a few trees also had signs of rot on them, with the closest two trees now nearly completely withered.

Okay, I really fucking need a proper alchemy lab.

If he kept doing as he did now, his entire valley would just be a dead wasteland by the time he was done. With Sense of the Malefic Viper, he could feel that the area had yet to be even close to permanently affected, but he risked that happening if he kept doing as he did. Aka, the ground becoming like someone had polluted it with a chemical spill or something.

Besides possibly ruining his home with toxic pollution, everything was great, and he had even gained two levels from the successful craft.

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 106 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 107 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 111 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

Jake guessed he was already close to a level, and that's why he got two. It had been quite a while since his last profession-level, after all. Anyway, more free points in perception.

Finally, he was down to the meat of things... the poison itself. And honestly, it hadn't changed much description-wise.

[Potent Necrotic Poison (Uncommon)] – An extremely toxic poison with necrotic properties, infecting and killing off biological material in the affected area. Wounds caused by necrotic poison are extremely difficult to heal. The poison takes effect upon any contact with any biological material. The poison emits necrotic light that affects the area around where it is applied, making necrotic energy seep into the enemy even further.

It did mention things that clearly came from the mushroom, such as the whole necrotic light thing. Funny fact, this was the first time Jake learned the official term for the death-affinity light.

Jake quickly scooped up the poison, only getting two bottles worth, which was to be expected. For reference, he usually got around 10 when making common-rarity necrotic poison per batch now.

With it in the bag, Jake decided it was best to wait for Miranda to arrive. He had a few things to talk to her about, renovating the basement and turning it into an alchemist lab being the primary one. Also... he had eaten so many damn mushrooms and too much moss these days, and he would really appreciate a proper meal.