

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 261: Introspection & Self-Control

When Jake had asked if the hawk called Sylphie could join them, Miranda had naturally just agreed. Why would she not? It looked cute, and it could sit and listen in when they talked. However... she hadn't expected it to also eat with them. Alright, even if it would eat with them, then it would just get some meat or something and sit off to the side. That would make sense to her. The current situation didn't.

Jake cut off a slice of meat and ate it, having nice table manners. Miranda did the same, as she used her cutlery. The hawk too.

A third plate was at the table, and in front of it, a hawk sat on its butt. The cutlery was glowing green as it imitated her and Jake, cutting off small slices of meat and bringing them to its open beak. The hawk even made chewing movements, despite Miranda being absolutely certain birds didn't need to chew food.

Well, by now, Miranda should really just call the hawk 'she'... Jake talked to her like a person, and the hawk did act remarkably human. Miranda just had difficulty wrapping her mind around an animal being as smart as a person.

Besides the presence of the small hawk acting weird, everything was relatively normal. They talked about quite a few things, one of which was classes.

“I still find the concept of witchcraft interesting. I wonder how it allows you to attack through marking a target... I see possibilities there,” Jake had muttered in between bites after Miranda had explained some more details about her current class.

She still hadn't evolved her class yet at level 100, so she wanted some advice. Jake's advice ended up boiling down to “pick what you like the most, just go with your gut,” which wasn't the most useful.

Sylphie had just made a screech, which Jake had interpreted as her agreeing. How the hell he got that from a screech, she didn't know. Miranda was 50-50 on him just fucking with her, but the hawk didn't protest either, and clearly, she understood their speech to some extent. At least Sylphie could pass the salt when asked...

“With the Fort expanding, it won't be long before we reach six digits,” Miranda said proudly, talking about citizens. “After the Pylon's influence encompassed the Fort, the vast majority of the people there automatically became recognized as citizens.”

“I've been wondering, what are the benefits of more citizens? Does it make you level faster?” Jake asked.

“Only partly. It appears to be based on how much work I do as a City Lord. In the end, I only have that much time and energy to work, and as we expand, help becomes required. From what I know, Sanctdomo has an entire government structure set up by now, with the Augur only working as the leader of a cabinet of leaders. It's a far more efficient system and recognized as a correct path, but that doesn't make it more correct than being a city lord leading a smaller city more intimately,” Miranda explained, adding. “The levels of the citizens only appear to have an impact on growth.”

She left out one thing, though... she also got levels by engaging with Jake. A part of the reason she wanted these meetings with him was that she nearly always got a level during them. Clearly, the system believed her interactions with Jake to be a crucial path of her role as City Lord. Based on her new profession, that had only become more important.

“Interesting... I guess it makes sense. It’s like leveling through killing. Singular, powerful citizens under your employ will be viewed as equally valuable to dozens of weaker individuals, I reckon,” Jake commented, nodding as if deep in thought.

“I’m not quite sure it’s that simple. It depends on how much work I have to do. It’s about what issues I resolve or prevent. Or when I make good diplomatic decisions or create valuable relations with someone important. Even appointing employees who do a good job rewards me. Me dealing with a level 40 troublemaker will reward me more than a D-grade who just sticks to himself and doesn’t bother anyone,” Miranda explained. Leaving out that according to the system, Jake was likely the largest potential source of trouble for Haven. Or perhaps just the most important element to handle.

“That sounds complicated... I’ll just stick to putting arrows in things,” Jake joked, making Miranda giggle a bit. Jake did seem a bit different today. More confident. A bit awkward as usual to begin with, but the dungeon and time away seemed to have done him good.

“You do that; then I’ll handle all those issues you can’t just fix with an arrow,” she answered with a smile.

“There is no issue that cannot be solved with oil, duct tape, and arrows,” Jake stated as if it was a matter of fact.

Miranda's smile only deepened as she shook her head. As much as she hated to admit it... Jake honestly could fix most issues with an arrow or at least the threat of an arrow. And those he couldn't... it was her responsibility to try and make sure those issues never even reached him.

"I'll drink to that," Miranda agreed as she lifted her glass. Jake mirrored her movement, lifting his too.

"Cheers!" both Jake and Miranda said.

"Reee!" Sylphie joined in as she also lifted her glass. Naturally not with wine in. Jake had made it very clear Sylphie was still too young to drink alcohol... no matter how nonsensical that statement was. She was a magical creature that in no way could get drunk from regular alcohol. Also, what did her age have to do with being able to drink as a goddamn bird? Birds were never meant to drink to begin with, as far as she knew. It was one of those things that she had just given up asking about. She had learned her lesson long ago, and yet Jake kept surprising her with his incomprehensible logic of-

'DING!' Profession: [Mistress of Haven] has reached level 101 - Stat points allocated, +59 free points*

Miranda got the notification and stopped her train of thought, and she just took a large gulp of her wine. *Yeah, this is normal.*

Like that, the dinner between two humans and a hawk continued.

To Jake, this evening was a great display of him keeping it cool and casual. At least it was to begin with. After half an hour or so, he kind of just got in the groove of things, and everything returned to how it usually was.

While they sat there, he had a lot of time to reflect. The concept of him being afraid of the opposite sex was honestly ludicrous the more he thought about it. But he understood why he had been.

For nearly his entire life, Jake hadn't been a very emotional person. He never wore his emotions on his sleeves but preferred to keep them bottled up and be alone. Granted, he wasn't the best at hiding them either, which led to many awkward situations.

He had never pursued anyone himself. Yet, he never had any resistance either when he was pursued. He had his first girlfriend back when he was a teenager, and that only lasted for a few months as Jake was "boring." Which was probably very accurate. He was boring... and he was bored.

Honestly, before the tutorial began, he couldn't remember the last time he truly had fun. Sure, he had enjoyable times, but if he was genuine with himself, then the last half a year or so were the best in living memory. Of course, there had been hard times and difficulties, but all in all, everything had finally become... interesting.

The Minotaur Mindchief had wandered through his memories. Jake had wandered with it and experienced the mundanity that had been his life. Everything was black and white. Monotone. There was no color, nothing that truly interested him or made him happy. He now realized the reason for that had been simple... it was his own doing.

His bloodline had always been with him. It had awakened on the first day of the tutorial... but that wasn't the first time it had become fully active. His mom and dad had told him he was such a wild child. He was quiet as a baby, but when he became a toddler, he always had to push the limits. Climb trees, get in fights, and all that.

It was him pushing himself. Challenging himself. All of that was fine and dandy... until Caleb was born. Caleb was afraid of Jake. As his brother, Jake had a natural sense of competition with his little brother, and without being aware, he had utterly tried to suppress Caleb with his presence back then. It was childish and stupid, and all it led to was Caleb always crying. Always afraid.

Yet Jake also wanted to protect his brother - because while there was a rivalry, there was also a sense of family. So, in the end, Jake had begun subconsciously suppressing his bloodline. Suppressing his emotions and his real self. Perhaps his supernatural intuition had also made him aware even back then: this was not the world for the Primal Hunter. The bloodline was more trouble than good.

Until the tutorial, that is. When it awakened again.

This related back to his inability to interact with women he found attractive. Because it could lead to emotions. Emotions would lead to interest. Interest would lead to disappointment. Disappointment would lead to failure. And finally, failure could lead to anger.

Jake had never broken up with anyone. Every time they broke up with him. Even Madeline had agreed that the honeymoon phase was amazing until Jake began getting boring. Most relationships had been duds from the start. Lasting only a few months tops. Only Madeline from university had lasted over a year, and she was the first person Jake took a genuine interest in even after the first few months.

But... being emotional was still not something he could really do. It had led to her disappointment in the end. He didn't know how to act. Jake had to admit that most relationships were just ones of convenience. Whenever a woman or girl came onto him, he had no real reasons not to engage. So the first time he was with one he actually cared about, and she betrayed him, he did what he had to do to protect himself.

This was why he had been actively avoiding potentially similar situations since back in university. It was just easier. If he didn't let anyone in, they couldn't hurt him. It was a simple solution, and Jake truthfully never had any need for romantic companionship.

Now that his bloodline was fully awakened, everything wasn't gray and dull anymore. He also noted how his attraction to Caroline faded nearly instantly. She just wasn't interesting anymore. In the end, he only ever found her attractive... but that was that.

It was just lust. A purely instinctual thing that Jake had learned to control a lot better than most, he reckoned. Even with a suppressed bloodline, he had still had above average instincts. But just because he was attracted to someone didn't mean it would lead to something. He had gone through puberty with improved instincts without any incidents. That should be proof enough.

A part of him was fully aware that if Jake stopped controlling himself, he would turn into someone he didn't want to be. Some people didn't restrain or control themselves in this new world, and that led to fucked up individuals. It led to people like Donald. Jake would rather put a dagger through his own throat than end up like that fucker just because he couldn't keep his dick in his pants.

He was strong now. If he had walked in on Andy and Madeline as he was now, he would likely have broken Andy's nose and told Madeline to fuck off without breaking down. He

wouldn't wallow in self-pity for years and drown himself in work. It had been the best choice back then—both for himself, Madeline, and Andy.

Because Jake did feel something when he walked in on them back then. Rage. Before the system, that was likely the time his bloodline was closest to reawakening. He wanted to get revenge back then when he saw them in that bed. The reason he just walked out was to control himself. Because if he had stayed... well, he would have killed both of them. No two ways about it. His only response back then was to avoid the situation. To hide and keep all his emotions bottled up. It was pathetic and cowardly, but that was how he had learned to handle life.

But it was all different now. Jake had grown a lot. At least, he thought so himself. Maybe the increased stats made memories more vivid and sped up brain functions and all that, but reflecting on himself as a person had become a lot 'easier,' if that made sense.

And right now, he was growing further as he managed to act completely normal with a woman he found attractive. If it had been Caroline back then, he couldn't do it. He would be awkward and be unable to think straight.

All of this isn't to say Jake liked Miranda. Well, he liked her, but he didn't *like* her. He was attracted to her, sure, but that wasn't the same. He had been attracted to Caroline too, and she turned out to be a shit-tier person. A guy finding a woman attractive was pretty damn normal, to begin with, and with evolutions making everyone into supermodels... yeah. If he couldn't act normal around women he found attractive; he soon wouldn't be able to be around anyone of the opposite sex.

He liked Miranda as a person and a colleague. Jake truthfully wasn't interested in a relationship. Not right now. He was still D-grade, and he had a long way ahead of him. A relationship would chain him down and create another weakness for him. He saw no reason to invite that into his life. Besides, he liked the dynamic he and Miranda had going on.

She was the brains of the operation, and he was the brawn. They were partners. Even if, for all intents and purposes, Jake was in the superior position. He held all the power. But he could handle it.

Jake was confident that he was a person who wouldn't find himself corrupted by power... because he had always been powerful. He had always suppressed himself. There were no two ways about it; Jake had been born superior to other humans. He had been forced to bury that superior aspect of himself to fit in and survive. Now, he just didn't need to do that as much anymore. But that didn't mean he didn't have the practice. But he could see others fall. Be corrupted by sudden power. For many more Donalds to be out there.

They would be wise not to visit Haven.

The man saw the city in the distance. It was an old medieval-looking building surrounded by houses. The man smiled as he had found his destination. He turned to his followers as he spoke:

“Looks like we've found Haven.”

He looked at one of the women with him as he gave her a pat on the head. “Good girl.”

She nodded and smiled. None of the three others with the man said anything either. They knew not to speak. For such was one of their rules.

The man took out his notebook, and a pen appeared in his hand. He turned to one of the pages and in it made a star. He heard the muffled groan of the woman who was in charge of scouting as she got her star. She had done well; it was only fair to reward her efforts.

“Now show your appreciation,” he said as he moved the cloth from her shoulder, revealing the star seared into her flesh and admiring his mark.

“Thank you, Sultan,” she said with a bowed head and a meek voice.

“You’re welcome,” Sultan said his smile widening. “Now, let us go forth. To Haven.”

The five moved towards what they thought was Haven.

Their mode of transportation was a nearly ten-meter long ship that levitated a few meters above the ground. One lined with gold and jewels.

Inside the ship, plenty of goods - on top of it, a man and four women.

All five of them D-grade.

Chapter 262: Sultan

”Based on current estimates, Haven should enter the Treasure Hunt with eight to ten D-grades. Neil and his party make five, then, of course, you, Phillip, and myself. I have no idea if Arnold will participate, and Phillip can’t get a straight answer from him either. I guess even he doesn’t know,” Miranda said, giving Jake an overview of how many they planned on bringing to the Treasure Hunt.

There were a few other potential prospects, hence the eight to ten, but it was rocky at best. If they could bring the hawks, it would be great, but sadly the system didn’t allow them to. Thinking about it, if beasts could enter, humanity would just be screwed. Jake was certain beasts existed within the forest that he couldn’t handle. And even if he could, he doubted there were more than a dozen on Earth who stood a chance. Something like the Prima could roll over most of Earth’s “elites.”

“Arnold isn’t simple at all. I reckon all those drones aren’t for show, and he has quite a few tricks up his sleeves. The dude is a damn solid craftsman, and he isn’t afraid of taking risks. He even made my new gloves for the most part and is working on my sword,” Jake explained.

“Yeah, he’s most certainly... wait a second,” Miranda said as she put up a finger. Her frown grew for every passing second until she looked back at Jake.

“The Fort just had visitors. A group of five D-grades. Lillian sent a message, and they may need assistance,” she explained. “There aren’t any issues yet, and while Neil and Arnold are there, Phillip is not feeling too safe about it. They haven’t engaged yet, and they are stopped in some vehicle outside of the city. Phillip is approaching.”

Jake frowned. He had just come from the Fort, and now they were visited by a bunch of D-grades. "Well, let's go," he said as he got up. Sylphie also got up with them, and Jake saw no reason against allowing her to come along. Besides, he doubted he could stop her from just following them in secret.

Outside the Fort, a levitating ship sat docked as a man on the deck was drinking tea. The four women also stood tentatively off to the side as they waited. Finally, a person came to the ship not long after and was invited up.

It was Phillip, and to be perfectly honest, he hated his job at that moment. He was sweating a bit at the auras of five goddamn D-grades. It was worse than when he went to visit Arnold and just damn stressful to deal with them as he didn't know their purpose. For all he knew, they could be there to kill him and claim the city. At least he had already gotten the message that Lord Thayne and Miranda were on their way. So all he needed to do was buy time and hopefully not piss off whoever was on the ship.

Getting up on the ship, he truly saw how lavish it was. The entire ship was wooden with jeweled decorations. In the middle sat the man Phillip assumed to be the owner of the ship. He was a man who appeared to be in his late thirties to late forties and in what looked like a nice gray tuxedo from before the system. The man looked at Phillip as he got up on the deck and opened his arms in welcome.

"Come, join me at the table. Oh, and do tell me, this is Haven, is it not?"

His tone was friendly and welcoming. He turned to one of the women to the side: "If you would, dear."

She moved over and prepared a cup of tea as Phillip took a seat. He knew he was utterly outmatched, so it was better to just play nice. It was a bit weird to have a D-grade pour tea for him, though.

“Thank you,” the man said as he nodded to her again. She took a step back, giving them some space. Yet, she was still close enough to move in if anything happened. Phillip had a hard time getting a read on the situation. It was very clear that the man was in charge, though.

“I guess this is technically Haven,” Phillip answered. “I’m Phillip, the man who tends to take care of this part of the settlement. May I know your name and your purpose for coming?”

The man looked at Phillip, and he felt a shiver run down his back.

“I go by Sultan. I am a merchant, and I have come here not to speak with you but the leader of Haven,” the man named Sultan answered.

“So you’re here just t-“

“Phillip, please,” Sultan answered, holding up his hand. “Drink your tea and wait with me. The important details are for Mr. Thayne and me to discuss. He is coming here, no doubt? I sense your impatience. There is no need; I do not come to cause trouble.”

Phillip opened his mouth but decided not to say anything. Instead, he just sat back and tried to relax. To be polite, he even took a sip of tea.

He hated to admit that it was exquisite.

Floating ship. Now that was fancy.

Jake got a brief briefing from Miranda about what was going on and headed off first by himself. Miranda and Sylphie would follow, but they were quite a bit slower than him. For the record, Sylphie was faster than Miranda but was still slow compared to someone like Jake or Hawkie. Over long distances, Jake would leave even Hawkie in the dust due to One Step Mile.

When he got close, he once more took to the air to see where his goal was. It didn't take long as there was already beginning to be a lot of intrigue around the area. Jake even saw a few drones checking it out. The ship wasn't exactly small either, so spotting it wasn't difficult.

He began flying over, and halfway he was noticed. A woman on the deck looked in his direction and made the man who was sipping tea with Phillip aware they had a visitor. A dozen seconds later, Jake landed.

"Welcome," the man said with a bow as he stood up. "You must be the Lord of Haven. Lord Thayne, correct?"

“Sure. Who’re you, and who are they?” Jake answered back as he walked towards the man, also motioning towards the man’s companions. He felt the four women tense up, but the man threw them all a glance, making them back down. Jake also took this chance to Identify all of them as he waited for the man to respond.

[Human - lvl 113]

“I am Sultan, a proud merchant, and these are my bodyguards of sorts. It’s a long story,” Sultan said with a smile as he waved it off.

Jake was a bit surprised at his level. 113 was not simple. Not at all. It likely meant that both his class and profession were up there. The four women, on the other hand, were a bit easier to get a grasp on.

[Human - lvl 101]

[Human - lvl 101]

[Human - lvl 100]

[Human - lvl 102]

All of them had only barely reached D-grade. Jake also got a distinct feeling none of them had achieved the Perfect Evolution. Meanwhile, he was absolutely certain Sultan had.

“A merchant, eh? So you’re here to peddle your stuff? Quite the unnecessary entrance for that,” Jake pointed out, shaking his head.

“Ah, quite the contrary. Now, all know that Sultan is here. Do you not see the crowd gather? The fascination of the masses? Alas, I am not here for them, but you,” Sultan stated, walked closer to Jake.

“Why?” Jake just asked, looking down at the man who met his gaze. They stared into each other’s eyes before Sultan looked away as he spoke.

“Truly, I have not gone wrong... I come to offer my services to you. I seek trade as much as I seek valuable relations. And who is more valuable than you,” he said, turning back to Jake. “A Primordial’s Chosen. Progenitor. Possibly the strongest man on Earth. For someone like me, who seeks out all of that which has value, tell me, what is more valuable than you?”

Jake stared at the man. He frowned before saying: “Phillip. Get out of here.”

Phillip looked confused at everything that was happening but didn’t have to be asked twice to leave. He had just been sitting there awkwardly from the beginning, and now he happily jumped down from the ship with a brief nod.

Sultan, without any prompt, waved his hand as a disc of metal appeared in his hand. He poured some mana in, and a bubble appeared around the entire ship, isolating Jake, Sultan, and the four women inside. Jake felt that it was a one-way barrier. As in, he could leave, but nobody could enter - a basic privacy barrier.

“So I’m right,” Sultan said, a huge smile on his lips.

That is when Jake realized. The man didn’t actually know about Jake. At least he didn’t know it was truly him. But the reaction to his question confirmed it to Sultan, making Jake frown. He wanted to ask how he knew, but Sultan answered without being asked.

“Like many others, I have been granted divine patronage. The gods chat, you know? They are aware that the Malefic Viper has returned, and there are even rumors he has a Chosen. One who is a Progenitor and from the newly integrated universe. One who is even on a planet with an Augur blessed by the Holy Mother. This naturally makes many wonder if some conflict could potentially arise from that. It just took putting two and two together from there,” Sultan explained casually.

“Good for you,” Jake said. He didn’t really care that he knew. It wasn’t some grand secret that he was blessed or a Progenitor. It really shouldn’t be that hard to put things together. There was one thing bothering him, though.

“I didn’t see you at the World Congress.”

“Because I didn’t attend. I was preoccupied at the time. Besides, I prefer to stay unbound. Ah, but that doesn’t mean I am not open to a partnership. I have many things to offer you, and I am sure you have plenty to offer me too,” Sultan said as he went over to the table and sat down, adding: “Please. Join me for tea.”

The man waved at one of the women, and she went into the small cabin of the ship. To prepare a new pot of tea, Jake reckoned. He saw no reason not to join him as his dinner had been interrupted anyway.

“You call yourself a merchant. What wares do you sell?” Jake asked as he sat down.

“Whatever valuables I come across. Herbs, ores, weapons, armor, whatever I believe I can make a substantial profit on, I will peddle. Please, you are more than welcome to browse later on. I am sure there are things that may interest you,” Sultan answered.

“I guess I’ll see,” Jake said, before just asking a question many likely wouldn’t answer: “How did you reach your current level so fast? D-grades aren’t that common yet, and you waltz in here with a party of five.”

“A lack of rest and a willingness to do what I deem necessary. I got a good start as I went through the usual cycle. Lucky challenge dungeon in the tutorial got me a powerful class while my own old-world experience proved useful when it came to my profession,” Sultan explained patiently.

As he finished, the door to the cabin opened again, and a woman walked out with a tray. It had two teapots on it and two new cups. Jake instantly felt something was off with the teapots. He felt the herbs within, but in one of them, he also felt something else. Poison. Jake frowned, but before he could say anything, Sultan addressed it.

“Please do not think me a moron. To attempt to poison the Chosen of the Malefic Viper sounds like the stupidest and most pointless thing one can do. I had my dear bodyguard here add some poison to it as I know those of your particular brand of alchemy tend to enjoy that. You are an alchemist, right? I saw the potions on the System Store and determined they had to be from an alchemist way ahead of the curve,” Sultan said with a small laugh.

That... was honestly reasonable. Palate wasn't some grand secret but likely the most famous skill related to the Malefic Viper.

The woman poured from the poisoned pot into Jake's glass and took the other teapot to pour into the other new cup. But Sultan stopped her.

“No, dear, just use my current cup. That one is for you,” he said with a kind smile, referring to the second clean cup.

For a moment, Jake thought it was just a nice gesture to have her join them, but he saw her face pale a little, even if her facial expression barely changed. After she was done pouring Sultan's tea, he motioned for her to pour for herself too – from the poisoned pot.

With slight hesitation, but no complaints, she did it. Jake wondered what it was about... did she have some immunity skill too? He was under the impressions skills like Palate were rare...

“Now, let us drink,” Sultan said as he raised his cup. Jake did the same and took a sip. Damn. The tea was seriously delicious, and the poison within was also interesting. It was undetectable to anyone but someone like him with a skill specifically to sense it, and it was damn potent. About as potent as his best common-rarity poisons even. It did come

with the requirement of the target having to consume it without resisting for the effect of the poison to take hold and activate. This type, compared to his poisons, was far more suited for... assassination. *Wait.*

The woman who had consumed her entire cup of tea in one gulp began sweating and shaking. Jake looked over to see her collapse to one knee as she began coughing out blood and dark veins appeared on her face. Tears of blood began dripping out of her eyes as she heaved for breath and appeared to be in immense pain.

What the fuck is going on? Jake very reasonably asked himself.

“Don’t worry, it won’t kill her, just hurt her a little,” Sultan explained nonchalantly, looking over at Jake. “I would prefer to talk about the upcoming Treasure Hunt and about me possibly working with someone to access your System Store, but I reckon you have questions?”

“What’s up with that?” Jake asked, referring to the woman. He was seriously considering if he should hand her a healing potion... but... she had willingly consumed the poison?

“As I said, a long story. But I shall give a bit of background,” Sultan said with a bit of resignation as he began his lengthy explanation. “She went by Gabi and was a talented young alchemist and healer. A nature healer, even. She was powerful for her level and excelled in all areas; thus, her level skyrocketed. Gabi went to Sanctdomo after the tutorials, and there she signed up at their party-finding offices and found comrades. She did great and kept progressing, yet she had a peculiar issue. Her parties kept dying. Odd coincidence, was it not? So thought others. She was found to slowly poison her party members and then kill them when they got too weak. Her class and profession ended up both revolving around this. She thought herself clever but did not know she was already under suspicion. In the end, she was found out and put in prison in Sanctdomo. But... Gabi was too valuable. Sanctdomo does not like killing those who have potential; she was only punished because she caused more harm than good. She was made to simply work as an

alchemist in perpetuity to create potions. That is when I came along and offered a deal. I needed another bodyguard, and they needed rid of her. So, they sold her as a prisoner of war of sorts. And now... now she serves me and is bound to my will till the day she deserves freedom again.”

Jake sat there taking it in, not entirely sure if the man was spewing bullshit or telling the truth. There was one part of it he was rather sure about, though.

“So, she’s a slave?” Jake asked curtly.

“Not the word I would use, but effectively, yes. That is her punishment for her crimes. It was either death or servitude, and she wanted to live. I also believe she has more worth alive than dead,” Sultan answered.

“And the three others?”

“All have similar stories, some worse than others. They are the scum of this new world who deserve no mercy,” Sultan stated, his demeanor still unchanged.

“And they all just happen to be women?” Jake asked, pointing out the obvious.

“Well, yes. Ah, but don’t misunderstand, *that* is not a fetish of mine. I prefer a willing participant. I am a merchant; I could just pay for a professional in any of the larger cities if that is what I was after. No, I keep them around solely for my own sense of vanity and

childish fantasies while naturally also needing powerful bodyguards,” Sultan said without a trace of shame.

“The torture?”

“Ah, that one is easy. I am also a narcissistic sadist who enjoys inflicting suffering upon those I believe deserve it, and I find it incredibly entertaining and ironic to torture them in similar ways to their crimes,” the merchant answered with a big laugh before turning serious. “There is no reason to pity those undeserving of mercy.”

The woman named Gabi was still cramped over on the floor, moaning in pain and coughing out blood throughout this entire conversation - the other three women just looking down at the deck.

Chapter 263: "I don't like you." - Jake Thayne, Year 1, 93rd Era.

Sultan was relaxed and confident as he studied the masked Chosen of the Malefic Viper. A powerful man worth working with. He had done his research before coming and believed he had an understanding of the man.

As a Chosen, he would naturally be a reflection of his Patron, so with the limited information on the Progenitor himself, he instead studied his god and the Order his god was in charge of. He studied customs and the ethos of the Order. Their logos and their - albeit lack of - foundational pathos. Instead, there seemed to be a focus on each being in charge of their own destinies, with morals judged based on how powerful a person is. To do harm upon those weaker than yourself was no sin but a right. For Sultan to find a

worthy partner and one compatible with him in this new world would be difficult, but he believed the Chosen would be his best shot.

Going into it with honesty would no doubt be the best strategy. Lies would eventually be picked apart, and half-truths would only serve to offend the Viper's Chosen. The Viper was known as a straightforward kind of god, and his Order also valued not beating around the bush.

Sultan was a bit surprised at the questioning of slavery. To his knowledge, that was commonplace in the Order. For the Chosen not to have a few slaves or at least slave-like servants would be ludicrous. Thus he would put all his cards on the table and negotiate from there. If nothing else, he was sure the Chosen would prioritize benefits over a slight disagreement.

Though that should not even be a concern. As far as Sultan knew, the Order of the Malefic Viper had quite the number of sadists within, and would their Chosen not be the worst of them all? Nevertheless, Sultan reckoned he enjoyed the show.

Because Sultan knew he did.

Jake looked down at the woman and back at Sultan. At the moment, he was 50-50 in his head if he should believe the guy. There was some evidence to his claims, though.

The kind of poison Jake had consumed wasn't easy to make. Far from it. It would take a lot of practice to learn and a lot of time. Of course, it was entirely possible Sultan had made her learn to concoct it for other means, which is why he placed it as a 50-50 kind of thing. Also, his lie would be easily disproved just by checking in with Sanctdomo. Someone who was either close to D-grade or D-grade had to have left some records.

So, let's say the story was true. Fuck Gabi. Jake would have killed her, but he also understood that imprisonment or even slavery was preferable to that for some people. Not to Jake, though.

Ultimately, Jake chose to assume the man had been honest, not because he thought him particularly trustworthy, but because it was the easiest thing to do for now. He had nothing to lose from doing so, and he would always take another more lethal approach if the man proved to be a liar.

But... there was one thing.

Jake looked straight at Sultan, meeting his eyes as he spoke: "I don't like you."

If the man wanted an honest conversation... Jake would be honest.

"And I don't mean that I dislike you a little. I mean that I am contemplating if I should just kill you or continue listening to what may or may not be bullshit. But I'll humor you for now. Let me make it clear; I don't like slavery. I know, shocking. So what reason will you give me for not ending you right here and now? What purpose do you see in keeping slaves? Why not just kill them and be done with it? Are you so weak you need to force a bunch of slaves to protect you?"

Sultan looked at Jake, clearly a bit shocked at his response. It was the first time he showed bewilderment, as if Jake's reaction wasn't at all what he had expected. Jake was genuinely curious what the man's arguments would be.

“That... was not at all the expected response. I appear to have made some serious miscalculations,” Sultan said, taking out a potion bottle and handing it to the woman. She instantly grasped it and drank, and shortly after, she calmed down and began breathing steadily. She backed off and gave Jake a weird look as she joined the other three women.

“For some reason, I was under the impression you would enjoy that. Is my information on the Order of the Malefic Viper and the Primordial himself that inaccurate?” he asked. It wasn’t a rhetorical question either.

“I’m not a part of the Order, at least not officially, and I am not the Malefic Viper. I have no idea why the fuck you would attribute their beliefs to me. I’m me; they are them,” Jake answered back curtly. Well, he knew why Sultan would do it, it made sense, but he also enjoyed making fun of the ego-tripping dude.

“Puzzling,” Sultan admitted as he unbuttoned the top button of his tuxedo. He was sweating a little, and the women were also tense with Jake staring down at their owner.

“I do not explicitly need them, but I do not see the value in them being dead either. To kill them would turn their value to nil besides a few experience points. It removes the values their futures could provide too. Even if we ignore their combat prowess, simply having them be crafters would be preferable, would it not? I am not saying it’s a perfect solution to keep them as slaves, but I would argue it’s the preferred option to simply slaying them outright. Even if they may deserve it,” Sultan argued.

Jake had to hand it to him; most would back down. But Sultan clearly hadn’t reached his level through backing down and being weak. He chose to meet Jake head-on.

“Right, and the torture is, of course, another just action that has to be a part of any good punishment, right? I am sure it has nothing to do with you being a royal bastard,” Jake asked sarcastically.

“I understand your judgment. We as humans tend to judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their behavior. My words or justifications hold little meaning to you, so I won’t even bother trying to convince you I am in the right. Think me a maniacal monster who enjoys torturing others, a hero of justice, or whatever you want in between. Just know that I hold no ill intentions towards you nor any of your comrades, and I am very selective in who I put under my control,” Sultan answered.

“Lots of flowery words for someone dictating the lives of others just because he’s some sadistic fuck. I guess you don’t have a good reason though, you just like controlling others. Is that the only way you can get a true sense of power?” Jake sneered.

“Ah, there we disagree. I did give them a choice. One that you seem unwilling to offer. It’s interesting, is it not? What is better, giving someone the choice of death or slavery? Or you just killing them outright, offering them no alternative?” he laughed. “Besides, it’s a choice that remains. I do not restrict them from harming me; it is just that harming me will begin the process of their deaths. It will start a timer. If they manage to kill me within the period, they will all live. If they fail, they die. Exciting, wouldn’t you agree? It helps keep me on my toes. Sadly, all four of them are too darn cowardly to take a stab at me. Who knows, they might have a shot if they attack all at once?”

Jake frowned, becoming more unsure if the man was telling the truth. But... something was telling him the guy was. Sure, he was a sadistic bastard, but at least he had been honest about it. This didn’t make Jake dislike him any less; it just made him continue the conversation. He did have one burning question, though.

“You talked about releasing them... can you even do that? As far as I know, the moment someone is enslaved, they essentially become Soulbound to a person, and their owner’s death would mean the deaths of the slaves,” Jake asked. This part he was actually curious about.

He saw the women off to the side shuffle a bit. They likely had never heard this conversation before and were afraid Sultan had lied to them at some point about the potential to release them. If he had... well, Jake knew who was about to die.

“The method you speak of is the most potent way of binding others to you. Potent, but also limited, as you just said. It’s a perfect one-way bond that has many benefits but also restrictions. One of those is the inability to release others for good. That is not my method. Instead, I use the far more regular method of using a medium. I use this,” Sultan said as he took out a notebook from his breast pocket as he explained.

“This notebook contains the contracts and is an item Soulbound to me. If I die, the item will cease to exist, and thus they will be released. Alternatively, I can choose to nullify the contract, which will also result in the person being freed.”

Jake leaned over and picked up the notebook without any prompt. Sultan didn’t even react, while the women did a bit as they moved closer. Perhaps looking for a chance to do something. Jake knew that he would have tried to kill Sultan long ago if he were in their shoes. Well, he would never be in their shoes, because in the end, a slave contract always had to be entered voluntarily. He would never have entered it, to begin with.

He opened the notebook and saw all the pages were blank. He ripped one out to see if he could, and it went smoothly. Next, Jake just threw a glance at Sultan before he burned it with Alchemical Flame. Was it fake? No... it just wasn’t a “true” item.

Sultan fished out another identical notebook and placed it on the table. Without any prompt, he turned a single page, and a contract was revealed.

“Please, this is the contract they are under,” Sultan said, leaning back to give Jake space.

Skimming it, Jake quickly saw it corroborated a lot of what Sultan had claimed. The contracts specified they weren’t allowed to willfully kill anyone without his permission, that they had to defend him from harm and stay close to him unless they had permission to leave, and finally, that they could protect themselves as long as it didn’t conflict with any of the previous two rules. There were no terms for release or anything else - not even a rule saying they had to follow all his commands.

“So, wheres the rest of it?” Jake asked after looking it over.

“That’s it. The only things not specified are the rules associated with it simply by it being a contract of this nature. Such as my ability to kill them at any point. Of course, such a death is not instant. I reckon it would take around ten minutes, and as long as they kill me within the period, they would be fine. Ah, also if they get above me in level. That would mean I lose the ability to control them. I am sure there are other ways too. The multiverse has endless possibilities after all, does it not?” Sultan explained with a casual smile. He was still sweating, but he didn’t seem that stressed out anymore.

“So why don’t they speak?”

“I told them not to. Nothing stops them besides their fear of retaliation. They can ignore all my commands too. That has yet to happen, by the way,” Sultan said, his smile growing.

“Now we’re back to the torture. Let’s say everything you do is logical and makes sense – it isn’t, but let’s say it is – where the fuck does the torture come in? Do you think it can reform them? Make them see the errors of their ways? Would that ever work?” Jake curtly said as he turned to the women and pointed to one of them. “You, answer that. No, don’t look at him. I’m the one who asked.”

The woman he pointed at was the one with a bow. It was the reason he picked her. When he asked, she threw a glance at Sultan, but Jake quickly redirected her back to him.

She hesitated to say anything until she finally spat out: “He’s lying! None of us have done anything wrong! We’re innocent, and he’s forcing us to work for him! He makes us do horrible things... tortures us... please! I beg you! Help us!”

Well, that was unhelpful, Jake thought as he heard her pleas. The three women looked slightly shocked as she yelled and had been surprisingly slow to nod in agreement, almost too enthusiastically. He would say it was a 60-40. 60 on her lying about being innocent, 40 on her actually being completely a victim. Either way, it didn’t matter much for Jake; he primarily wanted to confirm if they could speak and think for themselves. Clearly, her outburst was not something Sultan liked or had expected. In fact, he frowned, and the sweat on the back of his neck indicated he had gotten quite nervous again.

“Needless to say, she is lying. Please, simply check in with Sanctdomo. I implore you to simply trust me for now until you confirm it. I am willing to talk this through, and if you wish, I could even put their release as an item on the negotiation table. Just think about it,” Sultan said, continuing.

“But let’s continue the argument further. I release them. Then what? You kill them? Hope they’ve reformed? Tell them to leave and cause havoc elsewhere? Waste strenuous

amounts of resources to try and keep them imprisoned? I hope you see there are no good solutions here. I merely chose the solution that benefits me the most. Is it ultimately based on my own selfishness? Yes. D-grades don't grow on trees quite yet. These four hold far too much value to simply kill for some idealistic belief. In my view, their states are based on the choices they made. Based on a choice I made. I chose to make them slaves, and they chose slavery over capital punishment. It was all choices, the same as you can choose to kill me now and release them. I doubt I would win, and you would be able to kill all five of us if you so wished. That would be my miscalculation and my mistake. It would be unfortunate to lose my life like this, but I would only be able to blame myself," Sultan said as he sighed.

Jake just sat back as he thought about it. Would he be right in killing all of them? Probably not. Maybe? But to be fair... he honestly didn't care much either way. If he was perfectly genuine with himself, he didn't care much about releasing slaves anyway. In his eyes, they were already weak failures, innocent or not. Because one thing was certain, no matter what... they had chosen slavery over death. That in itself made him dislike them.

So what would he get out of killing them? Pretty much nothing besides being able to steal some of their shit. Even then, Jake knew most merchants had a spatial storage as a skill. Which meant robbing him wasn't really an option. He would get a boat and what they wore. Probably useful... but not by much. Meanwhile, a D-grade merchant could offer a lot...

In the end, Jake did the only reasonable thing.

He raised his hand and fired a blast of arcane mana through the barrier surrounding them. It opened a hole to the outside world that tried to close itself but was unable to due to the destructive mana. Sultan and the women all looked ready to pick up their weapons in an interesting display as if they wanted to fight together. The cowards truly preferred remaining slaves to Sultan over death.

Either way, the purpose for opening the hole was simple.

In flew a green figure that landed on his shoulder with a small annoyed screech. Following Sylpie walked Miranda, Neil, and Silas.

When in doubt... make others figure it out.

“Mister Sultan,” Miranda said as she entered. “Your reputation precedes you.”

Chapter 264: Executive Decision

Miranda had been working at high speeds as she made her way towards the Fort and while waiting outside. Lillian fed her information as she traveled with the hawk, and she and Lillian managed to put two and two together after Phillip came back and told them the merchant’s name was Sultan. He was one of the people they had become aware of already, as he had made quite the name for himself in some of the surrounding cities.

A ruthless man with a massive ego, but one incredibly good at his job. He had bought and sold things in Sanctdomo and two of the other cities the Holy Church controlled and many other settlements. Some Pylon cities, some not. The ship he traveled on was quite speedy, explaining how he could get around so much.

No one could really do much to him either. Sultan himself was powerful, and he had two slaves already near D-grade the last time he went to Sanctdomo. In Sanctdomo, he had ‘acquired two more who were swiftly approaching D-grade. A woman who had poisoned

her former party members and was apprehended after one of the victims ended up being a close friend of a council member. Miranda guessed that is when the leadership of Sanctdomo decided she was too much trouble.

The second woman was even worse. She was a pathfinder – an evolution of archer – specializing in some odd magic she had acquired from the tutorial store. She imprinted magical sigils on people and objects and used them to track things. It was an ability a lot like what Miranda herself could do with the Verdant Mark, except this woman could see through the eyes of the people she marked.

And what did she do with this? Well, she scouted. She was a premier scout of Sanctdomo for a while and used her sigils liberally. No one questioned them as they seemed so harmless. They spread to many people, and soon she had hundreds of them. Finally, she became so good at the skill she got a substantial upgrade to it ... which is when she began becoming an issue.

Her mark allowed her to always see. Now even without the consent or the other knowing. She became addicted to the knowledge and the feeling of control. She lived the lives of others, and especially one man she became infatuated with. She had been in a party with him, and they had gotten along great. All was well until they returned... and she learned he had a wife and kids.

That day she killed his family so he could be with her instead. But when she tried to get with him, he wasn't the same anymore. He wasn't his same bubbly self... so she got bored and switched.

Nine more families within the span of a month. Six wives, three girlfriends, fifteen children. She had a type, and that type was the man who already had everything. When she began stalking her tenth victim, she was captured. After her capture, they did some digging and found out she had been locked up before the system as a serial stalker that

had turned violent at times. The system had only made her worse as now she could truly express herself.

As fucked up as it was, the month she had spent stalking men had given her more levels than anything before. As a pathfinder, she gained massive amounts of experience from constantly avoiding detection and suspicion and stalking the men without them even knowing. She often also went without looking through their eyes – she liked to watch them sleep. Of course, the carefully prepared killings themselves gave quite the experience boost too.

These two women were monsters, yet Sanctdomo wanted to use them. So they had them imprisoned to continue serving the greater good through the use of their professions, but when they approached D-grade, Sanctdomo had an issue. They had no way to keep them trapped after the evolution. No D-grade with the skill-set required to enslave them either.

That is when Sultan came along and offered to take them off their hands. The current warden at the time, who was in charge of keeping them from committing more crimes, agreed with permission from his higher-ups after Sultan paid a hefty sum.

This was all the research Miranda had time to do before Jake ‘invited’ them in. It was about time too. The majority of the time had been spent juggling the influx of information from Lillian and an annoyed bird that wanted to break through the barrier right there and then.

“Mister Sultan, your reputation precedes you,” she said with a smile as she entered. The man was an egomaniac, so stroking that ego would be wise. Miranda also noted that Jake hadn’t killed him yet, but clearly, the ‘negotiations’ weren’t exactly going well either. The sweat on Sultan’s brow was visible, and the four slave women were tense.

If Jake were the scary bad cop, she would be the good cop. She had chosen to read Jake not killing the merchant outright as a sign he at least wanted to extract some benefits. Did she doubt for even a second that Jake could kill the five D-grades? No, not at all.

“Ah, Ms. Wells,” Sultan said, seeming almost relieved at her entrance. She assumed it was because he was. He also threw a glance at Neil and Silas. Neil had been brought along because... well, he was there with Silas when Miranda asked to have him brought around. His lie-detecting skills would be useful. There wasn't any fear of them resisting the skill either, as that would just make the judgment even easier if they chose to do that.

While Miranda did have some trust in the information from Sanctdomo, she still chose to confirm it. A large part of her hoped that the women turned out to just be innocent and blasphemers of the Holy Church or something else silly like that. She doubted it, but at the same time, would verify.

“Silas and Neil, please take those four into the cabin and check their stories. Ladies, be aware that all it will do is make our decision here easy if you try anything. Mister Sultan, as the formal leader of Haven, I shall represent Lord Thayne as the liaison of Haven and try to reach a beneficial conclusion to this whole endeavor. But be aware that you have already broken the law as slavery is illegal in Haven, so I expect a proper response and recompense,” Miranda said as she summoned a chair from her spatial storage and sat down. On second thought... she would just be the second bad cop.

Sultan looked a bit taken aback but chose to apologize right away as he waved off the four girls. “That must be my mistake; I was not aware it was outlawed and was not informed upon my arrival either.”

The four girls followed Silas and Neil away. At least the man was reasonable enough not to argue. Jake staring at him the entire time sure didn't help his situation either. Miranda smiled as she responded to the veiled question.

“Naturally, you weren’t aware. The law was just established a few minutes ago. We haven’t needed it yet, and have chosen to have the law work retroactively,” Miranda stated, not leaving much room for any counter-arguments. “Now, please state your full purpose for coming here. With proper cause, we may be able to reach an agreement and a solution that does not result in receiving the capital punishment the law dictates.”

Sultan had made another major miscalculation. Miranda didn’t like the guy at all either, and Jake had granted her the power to do whatever she wanted as the city lord, which included randomly creating laws. As long as he agreed with them, there wouldn’t be an issue, and from her quick assessment, he seemed to be a-okay with outlawed slavery. Considering his hour-long rant on how fucked it was to enslave beasts during one of their dinners, she had assumed as much.

Miranda joined Jake in staring down Sultan as a new drop of sweat appeared on the man’s forehead.

Jake gave Miranda a mental thumbs-up. He should have just waited for her from the start to have her deal with all this shit. It all seemed so damn complicated when it really shouldn’t be. Killing all five of them would be the simple solution, but would it be the best one? He wasn’t only making decisions for himself but Haven as a whole.

Now at least I’ll have the law on my side. Also, I should really ask Miranda about what the laws of Haven are, Jake thought.

If he had met Sultan out in the open while traveling or something, Jake would probably just have ignored him or killed him if he became an issue. If Jake got confirmation that even one of the women was innocent, or even if Sultan had lied a little about their circumstances, Jake would kill him. If Miranda ended up concluding killing Sultan would

be the best cause of action, Jake would kill him. Right now, he honestly didn't care either way until he was certain about things.

Let's say the women were as bad as Sultan claimed. Well, then they truly didn't deserve his pity. If he just went around killing anyone who did stuff he disagreed with, he would be busy killing people who ever thought putting canned cheese on anything was acceptable.

Didn't mean he didn't have lines people shouldn't cross. The torture part was just not okay, no matter how you spin it. That Jake would make sure that the four were taken away, freed or Sultan made to stop that shit was a given from the very start. Also, dependent on what the women really had done... it wasn't certain if he would respect their choice of slavery.

"I came to Haven for primarily four reasons. Firstly, to find a home base to operate out of. I am aware you are among the leaders in building a spatial network, and Haven will no doubt become a well-known city throughout the planet due to Lord Thayne's presence. Secondly, I will naturally join the Treasure Hunt, and I feel like I need an affiliation with a faction to do well there. I have made many enemies on my path already; I need some backing too. Thirdly, the benefits offered from a Pylon, including the System Store, are just too valuable to give up as a merchant. Fourth, I wish to simply do my work as a merchant here. Even if I am made to leave, I still hope to at least trade first. I do not doubt that Haven has many valuables to trade, just as I have many valuables to offer. To summarize, I want to work for and with Haven," Sultan answered, holding nothing back.

Jake didn't doubt for a second Sultan knew he was in some deep shit, pretty much surrounded by enemies on all sides. To be honest, Jake was surprised he wasn't just looking for an exit strategy. Did he still want to stay after just being threatened with capital punishment?

If he just left, that would also be a solution. Jake didn't care enough to hunt them down, and Sultan didn't strike him as the vengeful sort. He was a coward. There was no way he would risk his life for something as petty as revenge. The most he could do was attempt some economic damage, but Jake reckoned he was too cowardly to do even that.

"This is a horrible way to try and join a settlement," Miranda said, shaking her head.

"I very much realize that now. My antics don't fit in as well here as I had come to believe through my research. You have my genuine apology for that. As I offered prior, the four women can be given to you as a form of apology. However, I am curious... how has Haven managed to deal with criminals so far? As far as I know, dealing with prisoners has caused many issues and debates in most other settlements. Conventional prisons aren't exactly feasible anymore. Even Sanctdomo isn't able to contain someone at D-grade yet," Sultan answered.

"We don't have many of those issues. Currently, we only give out smaller punishments, and those that would result in incarceration result in exile or simply capital punishment. So perhaps we've been lucky that we haven't had that much crime. Worst were two cases of rape, and that one was an easy and swift death sentence as the guy tried to run," Miranda explained, waving it off. "Besides, how is that any of your business?"

Oh yeah, I remember that one. Some guy who got sniped when he tried to flee, Jake thought, having no sympathy. Of course, by old-world standards having capital punishments for most "serious" crimes would be excessive, but in this new world, it was just quick and efficient.

"I guess it isn't for me to snoop... I was simply curious if-"

“Ree!”

Sultan was interrupted at Sylphie screeching when she got annoyed; Jake stopped rubbing her feathers. He looked over at Jake, and Jake just stared back at him as he slowly scratched the bird that was now nuzzling up to his hand again. Neither spoke, and Jake fucking dared him to.

“A beautiful hawk... I am sorry if I disturbed it, an-“

Jake threw him a glance when he said ‘it’ giving the guy one more chance.

“If I disturbed... h-” Sultan watched Jake’s eyes closely “-er. Please, take this as an apology.”

Sultan summoned a small round marble-looking thing, and Jake used Identify on it right away. He also checked it for poison and anything else. What he had summoned was something Jake had encountered before when he researched making food for Sylphie.

[Beast Pellet (Common)] – A beast pellet made by a talented cook using monster materials and herbs to create an artificial natural treasure. Consuming this will have no effects on an enlightened species but is highly beneficial to monsters.

As for Sylphie’s reaction? She looked over at the pellet for a bit and jumped down on the table, knocking over every single teacup and the two teapots - on purpose as far as Jake could tell. Sultan still didn’t dare react even when the tea dripped down on his pants.

Sylphie went over and picked up the pellet incredibly slowly. She put it in her beak and ate it, making it crunch as she did so. Then she just wobbled off the table and leaped back to sit on Jake's shoulder. Never regarding Sultan a single time throughout it all.

But... Jake could tell she liked the pellet. He had to admit; Sultan was smart. He had identified and tried to bring one of the most influential people in Haven to his side through bribery. And it worked because now Jake couldn't kill him before figuring out where he got the pellet or if he had more.

It was at this time Neil and Silas walked out of the ship's cabin, both of them frowning.

"So?" Miranda asked, looking at Silas, but just looking at him, it was obvious.

"Fuck the lot of them," Silas said, disgust visible on his face. "Sometimes, I really hate these shitty skills. I don't... I need some air..."

Silas didn't stay but walked off the ship. Neil looked concerned after his friend as he sighed. Jake was also a bit surprised as Silas always seemed like a meek guy.

"Neil?" Miranda asked. Sultan just sat back with his eyes closed.

"Two of them were as you said... but the other two... they're worse," Neil said, shaking his head before he continued hesitantly. "They were partners... and..."

“They tortured and killed 582 people, including 172 children, all in an attempt to upgrade an item through a curse-ritual that harvested resentment and pain. It took them a month where they kept them all alive and in constant agony. It only ended when the last person killed herself after her child’s soul broke,” Sultan said, shaking his head. “While I wouldn’t argue I am a good person, even I have standards. They were the first I ever took control of after they tried to ambush me on my travels, and I will understand it if you question me for keeping them around.”

Jake looked up and over at Miranda and then back at Neil, who gave him affirming nod as he muttered: “And they seemed damn proud of themselves too...”

He threw a final glance after Silas, who was already far gone, but Jake could still see him shaking slightly. Jake decided there and then to make an executive decision as he put Sylphie down on the table. She read his mood and allowed him. Miranda looked over at him, and she understood as she made a subtle nod. He got up and got a few confused glances when he walked into the cabin where the four women were.

A loud noise.

Two people were sent flying out through the side of the cabin and into the plains – a figure chasing them.

An explosion.

Yells and curses.

And then... silence.

A single person returned not even two minutes after departing and jumped back on the ship.

**You have slain [Human - lvl 101 / Crudelis Hexer - lvl 109 / Experienced Silk Seamstress- lvl 89]*

**You have slain [Human - lvl 101 / Crudelis Hexer - lvl 107 / Recognized Jeweller of Zeil'Juia - lvl 91]*

Jake walked over to the chair and sat down as he cleaned his hands on his cloak. Sylphie just jumped back on his shoulder as if nothing had happened. Everyone looked at him.

“Continue.”

Chapter 265: Concessions Today, Profits in the Future

The situation was just a tiny bit tenser after Jake took out the trash. He considering if they should slap on a charge for contaminating Haven with toxic waste but held himself

back. During the brief intermission, the two women had exited the cabin. They now actually stood behind Sultan as if seeking protection from him, both looking terrified.

Miranda cleared her voice, bringing the attention back to her even if Sultan still threw glances at Jake. He didn't seem mad or offended at all but borderline elated.

"Needless to say, we reserve any right to dish out punishment as we see fit. If it is decided by the leadership of Haven – especially Lord Thayne – to deliver the aforementioned punishment, then that is something you will have to accept," Miranda said.

"Naturally," Sultan agreed, his smile now back. He seemed less stressed than before despite just losing two of his "bodyguards." Not much bodyguarding going on, honestly, as those two had been weak. He guessed they were the kinds of casters who needed ample preparation to show their full power, and Jake hadn't given them that. Not at all.

As to why he had killed them? Because they had crossed a line. Where exactly that line was, he couldn't say. They just had, so he acted. Jake was inherently an impulsive person, so when that overwhelming feeling of bloodlust came up, he felt it hard to hold himself back. He still had the self-control to throw Miranda a glance and get a nod of approval from her. After that whole Abby and Donald business, Jake didn't always trust his own sense of anger when it came to other humans.

As for the two last slaves? He didn't care. One of them was that Gabi woman, and he didn't know any details of the other, not even her name. Considering there wasn't any visceral reaction to her, Jake assumed she couldn't be as bad. Miranda could decide what to do with her. They were fucked up, sure, but they didn't incite any feeling of anger, only disgust. He did have some clue as to why that was and also why he disliked Sultan so much.

What Jake truly despised was unnecessarily causing harm to others in a disproportional way. He was fully aware sometimes you had to kill weaker individuals when it came to fighting, but going out of your way to torture or kill someone weaker was just wrong.

This was why Jake didn't just kill any random beast he came across, even while he still got experience from them. Killing a foe many levels below himself just for an insignificant amount of experience just didn't sit right with him. As an example, if the Minotaur Mindchief had only tried to kill powerful D-grade humans, he would say fair game. The problem was that it tortured and killed those significantly weaker than itself, like a fucking coward.

Sultan was a lesser version of that. He was a sadist who enjoyed torturing, not because he got anything out of it, but just because he was a bastard. Actually, if Sultan just had those four slaves without the whole torture part, he could maybe even see them get along. Sure, he was an ass, but who wasn't a bit of an asshole these days?

It was not like Jake would even pretend he and Miranda were the good guys right now. They were essentially blackmailing and forcing Sultan to give in to all their demands. Shit, they had yet actually to offer anything in return besides his potential survival.

Yet, for some reason, Sultan seemed fine with all that. It was honestly perplexing in every way. Things were going terribly for him, weren't they?

He hadn't been wrong. Sultan had begun questioning his decision to come to Haven before, but seeing the Chosen act, all that doubt was dispelled like the morning fog.

Lord Thayne was domineering, assertive, and acted like he didn't care about anyone else's opinion. He was perfect. His bloodlust and power were enough to send shivers down his

spine and make his heart pound. This was what a true powerhouse of the multiverse should be like.

Sultan had met the Augur during his last visit. He had even been asked to join the Holy Church or just become an affiliate partner, but he had refused. The church was controlling, and so was the city. In the end, you had to work for the collective, and while they supported the standouts a lot, Sultan didn't like the way they did things. It was a hive of covert corruption and politics. Without the Augur, the shitshow that was the political arena of Sanctdomo would already have fallen apart. Being a part of that city would mean being forced into politics if he wanted any proper benefits.

But Haven? In Haven, there were no politics. Not truly. It was a dictatorship with Lord Thayne at the top, Miranda Wells acting as the voice of his will. This was far more to his liking. He had hoped to endear himself to the Chosen personally, but even if that had failed, he had time. Even if he couldn't make Lord Thayne like him, he could at least make the Chosen view him as useful.

This was why he couldn't help but be happy. What was giving up a few slaves? A silly hobby? The profits and power he could accumulate from working with Lord Thayne would outweigh all of that a thousandfold. Sultan wasn't just looking at this in the short term either.

The Holy Church already had hundreds of talented merchants. With a population in the city in excess of 50 million, that only made sense, and that number was increasing with sometimes hundreds of thousands a day.

Sultan himself would say he was better than every single one of Sanctdomo's merchants, but he knew he would never get the best things. Because he wasn't loyal, and he would never be loyal to anyone but himself.

There was no way he would be a primary partner of Sanctdomo. Meanwhile, Haven didn't have any merchants associated with the city quite yet. At least Sultan hadn't heard of any, so no one worth his notice had appeared. It was a massive opening and exactly what he had been hoping for. Getting in on the ground floor would be good now. And in the future? It would be massively beneficial.

For who was the Chosen a Chosen of? The Malefic Viper, a Primordial, with his Order of the Malefic Viper. To get direct access through the Chosen to the Order, one of the most prominent alchemy-related organizations in the multiverse, would be invaluable. Sure, they were known as ruthless, but who would dare touch him if he came working for the Chosen?

Sultan knew that without strength, there was no way to succeed in the multiverse. The best merchant needed the strongest backing. The richest man would be the strongest, and the most influential would be the one capable of killing anyone who disagrees with him.

He had seen firsthand what happens to those not strong enough. Sultan had lost everything once already, and he refused to be a victim in this world anymore.

Sultan knew that all of this was, in the end, a gamble. A gamble Sultan believed only required him to put some of his wealth and the potential of being forced to leave on the table. At least to begin with. It had now changed to him already having lost two D-grade slaves, and he was sure he would lose the two others too. One way or another. Even his life was on the line, and he didn't have a single complaint about it. It was exciting.

Miranda Wells was a truly ruthless and talented woman. Lord Thayne was a monster in human skin. Even the green hawk was something else. A natural D-grade only still viewed as a juvenile of its race at D-grade? It was bound to become powerful. Sultan was certain

Haven also hid other secrets – not that he was even close to comprehending the three before him fully. Neil, the space mage he had figured out already. He wasn't difficult to dig up information on along with his party.

Sultan had spent only a few hours in Haven, and he was only becoming more and more determined to join them. Sure, Sanctdomo was large. It had hundreds of D-grades already. It had the Augur and many other powerful individuals.

Yet... if Haven and Sanctdomo clashed... he couldn't see Sanctdomo and all their powerhouses coming out unscathed. No... he wasn't sure he could see them coming out alive.

Before, he had wanted to join. Now, he *needed* to.

Cost what it may. If Sultan died because of his greed, then so be it. Sultan had chosen the life he led now, and he accepted death as a potential risk in pursuit of his goals. He was a man who went for what he wanted and either got it or died trying.

Sultan would take the losses and make concessions today for profits in the future. And while the Chosen didn't like him, he sure as hell liked the Chosen. Hopefully, they could foster a relationship in due time; if not, he would have to focus his attention on the other influential figures of Haven – primarily those who held sway over the Chosen, naturally.

As for his sadistic hobby? Well, he would figure that out... hopefully, they would allow him to keep one of the slaves. Prostitutes always overcharged him for that kind of thing, after all.

The following half an hour or so honestly went too easy. Jake was confused why Sultan just went along with borderline anything and made concession after concession. He did have some points he refused to concede on, but nothing Jake disagreed with.

Neil threw in that they should make him sign a contract binding him to Haven, but Sultan refused adamantly, refusing to be bound by a contract to the city. To Jake, that only made sense. Why would anyone clearly talented bind themselves to another faction? Jake himself sure as hell never would.

Sultan argued he refused to sign anything limiting his own freedom. Ironic, considering he kept slaves. Miranda tried to insist on this point but fast discovered it was an absolute dealbreaker. Ultimately it didn't matter to Jake if the guy was loyal. Having to write a contract to have someone be loyal and work for you seemed kind of unnecessary in nearly all cases. As Jake had no plans of sharing stuff like his Bloodline, there was no reason for him to sign a magical non-disclosure agreement either.

When they got to the slaves and what to do with them, it became more complicated.

Miranda turned to the two, and straight-up asked: "So, if you get to choose, then what do you want; slavery or capital punishment?"

It was an obvious answer, but they just wanted confirmation. Both wanted to remain slaves. By now, Jake had become aware one of them liked to kill entire families because she was fucked in the head and had dearly hoped Miranda would just throw him a "please just kill her"-glance.

“Then the next question is if you would prefer to work under the authority of Haven or Sultan?”

That was where it got surprising. The one called Gaby didn't hesitate to want to get the fuck away from Sultan as she began pleading about being reformed. Honestly, it was bad. Like, even Jake could say with 90% certainty she was just desperately trying to be freed. Didn't work.

But... the other... the serial-killer and stalker woman wanted to remain with Sultan... in fact, she stood oddly close to him as if afraid they would take her away. Could Jake try to analyze her movements and intent? Sure, but that would be a massive waste of brainpower. While it had more or less been decided he wouldn't kill her, that didn't mean he would have to deal with her. Hunting kids was just bad sport – be it to kill or enslave them. Adding on to that, had Sultan walked in with a child slave, he would be dead already.

Ultimately, Miranda reached an agreement with Sultan with Jake's approval.

Sultan would join Haven on a trial basis and be allowed to operate out of the city. For official matters such as the Treasure Hunt and other such events, he would be recognized as a member of Haven too. He would also be granted access to the System Store.

In return, Sultan would pay an increased tax rate over everyone else for the next 10 years or until he had paid a total of 100 million Credits. Additionally, he would be forbidden from enslaving anyone and would be subject to an interview with Silas present every month or so, dependent on when it would fit in everyone's schedules to check if he had been up to any misdeeds. He was also banned from torture, though he managed to argue in an exception if both parties consented. Miranda didn't ask the man further about his fetishes but moved on.

On the trading front of things – what this entire thing was meant to be about - Haven would have the right to buy any product of Rare-rarity or above from Sultan before anyone else and with a maximum of a 50% mark-up. This would essentially result in him selling at purchase price due to taxes.

There were many other stipulations and rules, and Jake only stayed in case things went south. Miranda and Sultan debated vigorously, and eventually, Lillian came by, and they began drawing up a contract using one of Miranda's skills. It was a balancing act of what to include in the contract and what not to. Some things like the interview or inability to take slaves didn't enter the contract, so it ended up being solely trade-related.

Jake thought that was probably for the best. Sultan had been way too dead-set on getting to join Haven that he didn't think they needed any loyalty clauses. Those were borderline impossible, to begin with, as the contracts had to be rather factual and to the point. This also meant that all of those good-faith clauses were out of the question.

Again, though, it wasn't needed. As long as Haven turned out to be a beneficial partnership for Sultan, he wouldn't leave. And if he left... well, who actually cares? Jake sure didn't. He also didn't fear Sultan would try some shit or cause issues in Haven. Maybe he would try to suck up to Miranda and get into the council-thing she had going on, but that was only to be expected of any sleazy businessman.

In the end, the entire debacle ended up taking several hours until finally, a document was signed by Miranda and Sultan. Sultan also wanted Jake to sign, but he declined. Signing it would mean he would have to read it in detail, and that didn't sound interesting at all. Sylphie also wouldn't like it, as it would mean he couldn't dedicate both hands to stroking her feathers as she sat on his lap.

Once everything was signed and done, they all sat back.

“Let me provide you a belated welcome to Haven, Sultan,” Miranda finally said with a smile. “I truly hope we have laid the foundation for a fruitful future today, despite the less than fortunate first impression.”

“Likewise, I look forward to working with you, Ms. Wells, Lord Thayne,” Sultan said, earning a look from Sylphie. “And the young mistress, of course,” he quickly added on.

Jake was pretty sure Sylphie didn’t really understand what he had said; she was just mad at not being included.

“Now, on to more important things than slavery or the morality of capital punishment or all that stuff,” Jake said to lighten the mood before saying something he had wanted to say for a long time:

“Show me your wares.”

Chapter 266: Sultan Has Wares, If You Have Coin

Jake didn’t know what to expect. He expected Sultan to have some good stuff considering his status as a D-grade merchant who had been around the place, but exactly how good he wasn’t sure. This was the first real merchant he had ever encountered, after all. For the

record, Jake hadn't looted anything off the two D-grade women. Their equipment wasn't actual gear, playing into his suspicion they were truly just there for show. Sultan no doubt kept all their stuff himself at usual times.

Smiling, Sultan answered his trade request: "My last visit to Sanctdomo wasn't only to sell my wares but also to seek out their experts. Knowing Haven would be my next stop, I made a number of commissions for things I specifically hoped would interest you. I do apologize if it is presumptuous of me to believe you do not already have better, but please take a look. As you are an alchemist, please let us start with a cauldron."

He waved his hand as a cauldron appeared. "This cauldron was created by a talented smith and alchemist working together to bring out its..."

Jake used Identify on it.

[Mithril Cauldron of Peerless Conductivity (Rare)] - A cauldron created by a talented smith with the-

"No thanks, I got better. Next," Jake said, not bothering with the rest of the description, besides just quickly checking the enchantments and seeing it was just a highly inferior version of his Altmar Cauldron of Supreme Simplicity. Neither the items nor Sultan's background information on it made it worth getting.

Meanwhile, Lillian and Miranda were also there, with Lillian noting down all the items as she also Identified them. Possibly to look into if they wanted to buy any of the stuff Jake passed on.

Sultan didn't seem offended but smiled as he moved on. "Perhaps something for your archery then?"

The man summoned a bow and laid it on the table. It was made of some wood that looked almost to be red. It had some dark lines running through it like it had been burned, giving it an interesting look. The string was entirely black and was made of some material Jake didn't recognize, and at each end of the bow's body was a small red gemstone. It was a lot like his current bow in design overall, if a bit larger. It was nothing that would matter, and Jake found himself quite adaptable anyway.

"This bow is made by the strongest archer and bowyer of Sanctdomo. A woman named Maria, if you have heard of her. As far as I know, she was a part of the World Congress too, so you may have seen her. This one cost me a pretty penny for the materials alone, and I believe it came out splendidly."

Jake listened to the explanation before he Identified the bow.

[Embered Bow of Scorching Plains (Epic)] - A bow made from an unknown type of wood that has been soaked in potent fire-affinity mana for a long period of time without being burned and then infused with a dozen of other valuable materials. All brought to life by an incredibly talented bowyer. The bow's structure is resilient yet flexible, the string near-unbreakable for anyone below C-grade. The two gemstones passively absorb and transform mana into that of the fire-affinity, making all arrows fired by this bow be embued with fire mana and the concept of embers. The two gemstones can be emptied out of energy to release a large burst of fire-affinity mana in the form of a giant arrow that explodes on impact, scorching the plains below. Enchantments: Ember Arrows. Scorching Plains.

Requirements. Lvl 105+ in any humanoid Race

See now we're cooking! Jake thought. Shit, the bow was super fire-themed, so maybe he *could* actually cook just using the bow. He wasn't going to try, but it was a fun possibility. According to Sultan, he had gone all out with his bow, and Jake could see that. Those two gems alone had to be epic-rarity each, and he had no idea how many more items he put into it.

The one who had made it was also talented. This wasn't like Arnold's gloves with so much untapped potential. That Maria who made this bow knew what she was doing, and she had done a splendid job.

"For the record, the craftswoman was aware it was commissioned as a gift for you," Sultan said, adding on with a small chuckle. "I practically got the work-hours for free, and I am sure she also wanted to impress. She told me to put in a good word."

Jake nodded as he said. "This is some good stuff. And you said it's a gift?"

"Most certainly. Take it as a gift to cement our future working relationship."

Sultan's smile grew even more as Jake took the bow off the table and into his inventory. He gave Sultan a nod of approval. Jake had to admit, the bribery was working as he now found Sultan slightly more agreeable.

He was also very impressed that a bowyer was able to craft epic-rarity items of this quality already. Maria was her name? Maybe someone worth seeking out in the future. She was in Sanctdomo, so it wasn't an overly long trip.

Jake was already feeling pretty damn satisfied, but Sultan wasn't done.

"Now, the next item is a sword..."

Jake didn't need the sword, and it wasn't even better than the Nanoblade anyway. And that was before the current improvements Arnold was making to it. Lillian noted it down in case someone else could use it.

"These pants I got from a leatherworker and tailor pair in Skyggen, and..."

Jake's pants were better. They were noted down again. Neil commented on Eleanor maybe wanting them.

"I noticed you always wear a cloak, so this-"

Didn't need that one either. Miranda bought it as her cloak sucked, so at least that one was useful.

”Certainly a new mask could be-”

Just no. Lillian wanted it, though. Not really to hide her face, but due to its effect of allowing some kind of far-sight.

”How about a necklace...”

Jake liked having a spatial storage.

”Gloves...”

Way worse than his new ones.

Jake saw that Sultan was getting a bit nervous at this point due to the repeated rejection. Jake had taken the bow, but for everything else, he had passed, completely uninterested. The man had started with some of his best stuff, and many of the following items were 'only' uncommon-rarity.

Not to be misunderstood, it was some great things. It was just limited how good stuff Sultan could get – or anyone could, really – as Earth was still in its infancy as a planet of the multiverse. That there were people able to craft epic-rarity items was already incredibly impressive.

Sultan didn't give up, though. He seemed to want to go through the entire set of gear pieces available, and eventually, he summoned something that did interest Jake a lot. It was a deep brown chestpiece of leather that looked very well made, if a bit simple. Jake Identified it and was pleasantly surprised.

[Leather Chestguard of the Juvenile Bristleback (Uncommon)] – A chestplate made from the tough leather of a young Bristleback. Created by a talented leatherworker, the workmanship is simple but effective. Has been infused with a Beastcore, making this chestpiece even more durable and enhances the wearer's resilience. Enchantments: +200 Toughness, +75 Endurance, +50 Vitality.

Requirements: Lvl 100+ in any humanoid race

The merchant didn't think this gear piece had much hope from the looks of it, but he explained its properties anyway with enthusiasm:

"I must say this one was a gamble. A hunting team came in having slain a young Bristleback that had just reached D-grade. It was a large pig-like monster, and the leatherworker worked tirelessly to make something useful. Luckily they had the core too. The final project came out quite nicely, but it did take an entire bus-sized body," Sultan explained.

It was a massive upgrade. Jake mentally compared it to his old chest, and the difference was clear.

[Armor of the Nest Watcher (Rare)] – A chestpiece made from the cured leather of an unknown creature. Provides strong protection against both physical and energy attacks. The very lifeforce of the Nest Watcher runs through this armor, blessing the

wielder with great vitality and toughness. Enchantments: Self-Repair. +75 Vitality, +50 Toughness.

Requirements: Lvl 55+ in any humanoid race.

Sure, it was a downgrade in rarity, but the level requirement was just that much higher, making it so much better.

"I'll take it; how much?" Jake said.

Sultan looked surprised but pleased. "Ah, normally I would charge 45.000 for a piece like this, but you can have it for 38.000, and I shouldn't take a loss."

"35.000 it is," Jake agreed.

"I do agree 37.000 is fair," Sultan countered.

"36.000."

"36.500."

"Alright, deal, Jake finally relented. He tried to put the chestpiece in his inventory but found himself unable to. This was when he noticed a faint bond of mana connecting Sultan and the armor, almost as if it was bound to him. He frowned and paid, and the moment he did, the weird bond disappeared, and he put it in his inventory.

"First time dealing with a merchant, I assume," Sultan chuckled. "It's just a simple skill to bind something during a deal. Simply protection against thieving, so people don't just swipe all your wares the moment they see them."

That... actually made a lot of sense. Jake totally got why that was a thing, and it was one of those practical skills that just had to exist. It was probably something every merchant or trading-related profession got with the profession.

As for why he haggled? Well, because that's just what you do. Sure, he had over 137 million Credits by now – actually having more now than right after the tutorial due to having sold so many potions. But that didn't mean he would waste them. Besides, maybe Sultan had other good stuff? Didn't wanna splurge for no reason.

"Now, how bout some new boots? I noticed yours look a little worn and is it not ample time for an upgrade?" Sultan said with renewed vigor after having just sold Jake the chestpiece.

"No," Jake curtly declined.

"Well, it can't be a winner every time. I am ashamed to say I don't have much else I believe would interest you in the equipment department besides one more item. Granted, this is assuming you are not looking for spears, halberds, heavy swords, crossbows, firearms, or pretty much most other weapon types. I assumed you are a one-handed weapon and bow kind of fighter," Sultan answered. The sum-up of how many different weapons he had was clearly more for Miranda and the others than Jake.

"True. So, the last item?"

"Ah, this one I have been saving. The best for last. You always gotta start out and end strong, do you not? This one is an item I am quite proud of having acquired. Originally it was bought at the Tutorial Store, but it was never used. I do not know the original intended use, but what I do know is that it isn't an item I have come across before. So please, have a look."

Sultan summoned a small token. It looked a lot like the tutorial upgrade tokens... because it was a lot like them, but at the same time very different.

[Token of Akashic Awakening (Epic)] – Infuse into a piece of equipment to attempt to awaken or amplify the Records within, upgrading the item to a maximum of Epic-rarity. If the item is already Epic-rarity, it will try to amplify existing effects through awakened Records. Overall effects may be unpredictable. WARNING: Touching directly upon the Records of an item may make others related to the associated Records aware.

Requirements: User must be below lvl 130.

"From rumors I have gathered, it is said that the Sword Saint used a similar – if far more powerful – item to awaken an old family heirloom to turn it into maybe the most potent

weapon on the planet. This one can do something similar, but I would recommend using it on a piece of equipment already recognized as an item if you choose to buy it. My appraisal skills at least made me believe that would be for the best," Sultan explained as Jake picked up the token and inspected it inside and out.

"How much?" Jake asked. He already had plenty of ideas on what to use it on, but he would still want the item even if he didn't. The item was just too interesting, and he could see too many uses. Shit, he could use it to upgrade his boots or necklace, couldn't he?

"Ten million Credits," Sultan said without batting an eye.

"Quite the price increase, don't you think?" Jake asked with a frown.

"True, but this item honestly cannot be evaluated through normal means. It does something perhaps only a few extremely rare natural treasures can do if it's even possible for something found in the natural world. My Patron has told me that this item wouldn't sell for millions but billions if not more outside our universe just because some powerhouse may want to research it. I am not trying to pull a fast one on you. This is simply the lowest I can go on an item like this... I am already reluctant to sell it as is, but I am a merchant at heart, and using such a valuable item myself would feel like a waste," Sultan explained with a sigh.

Jake kept frowning as he looked at it. Could he afford it? Well, yeah... but ten million wasn't nothing. It was nearly a tenth of his total wealth on what would just be another epic-rarity item... was it really worth it, unless he planned on just researching the item?

"*Buy it and use it on the boots,*" Villy suddenly came in from the left-field and said.

Well, that was an easy way to settle it. “Fine, I’ll take it,” Jake said, not even haggling. From Villy’s tone of voice, it was a good item. He assumed his godly pal knew more than he did, especially considering how he told him to use it on boots he had earned from Villy’s dungeon. Likely the Viper knew the origin of those boots. Or maybe it was a gag. An expensive gag. He wouldn’t put it past him.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” Sultan said with a smile as they traded the item. Jake suddenly felt like the man in front of him had gotten a bit stronger, and his smile even grew wider. Jake noted his race-level had just increased by one too. *Damn merchants and their completely legitimate leveling methods*, Jake cursed internally.

The next hour or so was spent going through all the other knick-knacks Sultan had. And he had a lot. Miranda bought some, Neil some, Lillian noted down everything, and even nudged Miranda to buy some stuff for the city.

As for Jake? Jake bought three types of Rare-rarity herbs, two of which increased agility and one that increased perception by 3 upon consumption. Sultan had exactly ten of each and said he had bought them specifically because he knew of Jake’s profession and class-archetype. He wasn’t wrong, and Jake appreciated it.

What Jake appreciated even more was the one epic-rarity natural treasure he brought Jake.

[Eye of the Libertas Eagle (Epic)] – An eye left behind by a slain Libertas Eagle, leaving all its Records within. The Libertas Eagle is especially known for its eyesight, which is said to allow the beast to spot its prey from nearly any distance. Looking into this eye is like staring into a far horizon. +25 Perception upon consumption.

It even had the best stat on it. Would Jake consume it? No, that would be gross. It was an eye. So he just had to avoid directly eating it. With these items, coupled with the time bananas and some other stuff, he knew his next objective.

Before the Treasure Hunt, he would craft some damn Elixirs.

Chapter 267: Five Lights in the Darkness

Jake made his way back to Haven with only a few stops on the way. Arnold was still trying to improve the Nanoblade, and Hank was still busy, so Jake didn't need to meet anyone but just checked in from a distance.

He left behind Miranda, Lillian, and Neil with Sultan to figure out some final things. Nothing major, just where he could set up shop, and for him to sell some stuff to those three too. Jake wasn't afraid of him causing trouble even if Sultan was the strongest person at the Fort now. After all of what he went through to get in the good graces of Jake, that would just be moronic.

The only one who followed him was Sylphie. She was also a happy little hawk as Jake had bought a dozen of those Beast Pellets as the final thing before he left. Sylphie wanted them all right away but had only gotten one. So Jake shouldn't spoil her too much. A little was okay, though.

Once he got back, the first thing he did was switch out his two chest pieces. He gained 150 toughness and 75 endurance from that but lost 25 vitality. It did suck to lose a bit in a stat, but what can you do?

Looking at his stats, he saw that he could get a bit more than 1000 additional stats from gear overall. A whole lot better than before the dungeon. He was certain that when his boots were upgraded and coupled with another upgrade or two, he would be damn settled for the Treasure Hunt.

Speaking of the boots and the upgrade token... while Villy had told him to buy it and use it on the boots, the god hadn't said when. Jake had already guessed that Villy knew the origins of the boots, and was of course, related to its Records. He wondered who would become aware when he messed with them. He would find out eventually... but not now.

Because the Token had a level cap of 130, while Jake was 118 in his race. Basic deduction told him the Token would upgrade an item to be close to his own level... so why not wait till he was closer to 130? He had around one and a half months before the Treasure Hunt, so he would just have to do the upgrade before then.

He did take a look at his boots, though.

[Boots of the Wandering Alchemist (Rare)] - Boots once offered to an alchemist before setting out on a journey to experience the world outside. Despite being made of simple leather, the Records of the alchemist has left a deep mark on this item, allowing it to transcend many ranks. Enchantments: +20 Endurance, +15 Agility. Reduces stamina expenditure from all movement-related skills by a small amount. Increases sensitivity towards earthbound plants.

Requirements: Lvl 25+ in any humanoid race.

They were old, worn, and looked to be falling apart. But Jake loved the damn boots. It was his first Rare-rarity piece of equipment, so of course, he would. They were also just too damn comfy. He looked forward to upgrading them and finding out who the alchemist in the item was.

But, for now... it was alchemy time.

Considering his cave wasn't done and making poisons would just lead to an ecological disaster, he would stick to potion and elixirs for now. He had gained so many materials, and he still had the System Store to splurge from. Speaking of the System Store, Lillian would come by later to drop off a whole load of items. During Jake's dungeon run, she had bought at least a few uncommon-rarity goods a day and sometimes even a rare one.

Having employees was tight.

The first type of elixir he would craft would be to enhance Vitality. He would use the Lifevines and eventually the Core that he still had absorbed with Palate.

[Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza Lifecore (Epic)] - The Lifecore of an Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza. Contains a massive amount of life-affinity mana and vital energy. Can be used in a myriad of alchemical creations. +25 Vitality upon consumption.

He had the Lifecore absorbed for nearly two months now, and he had learned plenty from it. The description with Identify had even expanded slightly, now also specifying how many stats it would give. He had learned far from everything, though. That would take years. But he had learned enough... at least enough to rather learn about the perception-enhancing eye.

Jake opened his mouth and spat out the Lifecore, quickly tossing it in his inventory. Afterward, he took out the eagle eye and absorbed that, storing it in his metaphysical magical time stomach. With all of that in order, he moved on.

With Sylphie allowed to sit on his head as he wasn't doing poisons, he sat down and got to work with making a few potions to warm up. After that, he would begin wasting ingredients like a madman, tossing away money to progress just a tiny bit faster.

That's right; it was time for another prolonged alchemy session.

Time kept moving as Jake sat on his ass doing alchemy while playing with a cute bird.

With the Treasure Hunt coming closer day by day, all the factions worked to realize their full potential in time. A push for as many D-grades as possible to enter and maximize their gains. Parties progressed together, honed their teamwork, and improved as a group.

While individuals would often dominate a fight, a party that mutually amplified each other could fight above the sum of their parts. Before, they had trained to counter beasts and the less intelligent lifeforms around, but now they worked to counter humans.

No doubt the Treasure Hunt would lead to plenty of human on human conflict. Most predicted there would also be more environmental challenges, but humans would likely still be the primary threat. As a Treasure Hunt, naturally, there would be treasures to steal from others.

All the strongest factions had these powerful parties. Haven even had Neil and his group. And while that one was powerful... it wasn't even close to the top.

The party moved through the cave system as they struck down foe after foe. This was their first D-grade dungeon ever, and just in time with around a month before the Treasure Hunt would begin. At the front was a defensive warrior with a large shield bathed in light, and behind him was a young man with long blonde hair and a sword shining with lunar light.

The backline was made up of a female archer in all red clothing and a bow that seemed to glow with embers, a male caster with two floating mirrors above his shoulders, and a woman in a long pristine white robe with many trinkets hanging from it.

The warrior in the front was Bertram and the leader of the group. They entered a new cavern, and the darkness from the golem in front of them encompassed their bodies and tried to suppress their magic.

“Lucian, attack from the left; I’ll take the front. Noor, defensive barrier. Maria and Joshua begin your preparations, Joshua release first, Maria follow-up,” Bertram’s voice echoed in the head of them all through a telepathic connection.

They all followed his commands as the swordsman Lucian turned into a beam of light and flew to the left of the nearly 30-meter tall shadow golem. It was the third mini-boss of

this type they had encountered, and this one was 130 while the last one had been 120, the one before that 110. They chose to apply the same tactic this time, hoping their more honed movements would give them an advantage from the start.

Noor, the priestess, summoned her staff and slammed it into the ground as a bubble of light exploded out from her, pushing back the darkness. She was already beginning a second spell to put up light barriers to block the expected incoming attack.

Maria drew her bow as she began charging a skill similar to Powershot as her body became cloaked in flames. Joshua angled his two mirrors and began channeling a beam of light that started to bounce between the two mirrors, constantly amplifying itself.

Bertram was the first to make contact as he blocked the giant fist descending towards him. His entire body was protected with D-grade plate armor, with an extra layer of magical light armor on top of it. The fist hit his shield, and the man, more than 20 levels below the golem, took the blow like nothing as he stood firm.

A giant blade of light came in from the side and cut into the golem's arm, leaving a deep gash in the dark metal. Several quick flashes of light followed it up as more cuts appeared on the arm. The golem tried to raise its arm, but Bertram stepped forth and sent out two chains of light from his shield that held it down.

The golem attacked with its other arm as it tried to get free, but this one was blocked by a barrier of light that exploded just as it hit it, sending what looked like shards of glass flying into its body. Then, before it had time to make another move, the attack from the light mage arrived.

He moved the mirrors closer to each other until they nearly touched, and then he angled them towards the golem. An intense beam flew forth and began burning into the chest of the golem, illuminating its entire body and making it roar in pain as its shadow magic was temporarily suppressed.

More flashes of blade light cut into its exposed form, and Bertram also took this time to rip the chains from his shield and slammed them into the ground like spikes, anchoring the arm entirely, freeing up his own ability to attack.

“Maria, now,” he said to the primary damage dealer of the group.

An inferno exploded from behind them. The flames did not hurt the light mage or the priestess at all, but the golem would not be as lucky. She released her string and sent out an explosion of flames roaring towards the golem.

The golem, still weakened by the beam of light, was hit hard and was sent flying back a bit until the chain became taut, making it fall forward. A large wound was on its chest as the flames kept burning, and Maria breathed heavily as she took a knee to recover.

Noor raised her staff and cast a recovery spell on Maria, making her wounded arms and upper body rapidly heal. Joshua was also already preparing his next spell as the golem entered its second phase.

Many cracks opened up all over its body as a wave of darkness was emitted. It encompassed the entire room, and only the small area around Noor was spared from being completely darkened. Bertram and Lucian both quickly retreated into the bubble and prepared as they had experienced the same with the last golem.

A golem, that wasn't actually a golem, but an elemental.

Dark energy exited the massive form and took the shape of a far smaller and thinner figure. Finally, the remnant dark energy took the shape of smaller shadow creatures, all still in D-grade. The party struck them all down with coordination and engaged the elemental itself.

The priestess suppressed it, the mage burned away at its appendages, while Bertram kept it locked down. Maria bombarded it with burning arrows while Lucian practically teleported around it, leaving cut after cut on its shadowy body.

Everyone in the party was between 107 and 113. Maria was the strongest at 113, Lucian at 112, the priestess at 110, the light mage 109, and Bertram the lowest at 107. He was chosen as the leader due to his role as Guardian of the Augur, which gave him many advantages. Everybody in the group supported this decision and was loyal members of the Holy Church. Everyone except for Maria.

"Alright, finish it," Bertram said, as he and the swordsman both used their strongest skills to make the elemental unable to fight back for a time.

The light mage held out both his hands as he conjured a wand of light. Noor, the priestess, waved her staff and sent a beam of holy energy into the man, making the wand glow even more. Then, he pointed the wand at the elemental and fired out a giant Holy Bolt.

It exploded on impact, enveloping the elemental in holy energy as it let out an unnatural roar of pain. But this would not be the end of its suffering.

At the back of the group, a figure leaped up as wings of fire spread out behind her. She drew her bow and charged the shot for a second as the wings moved from her back and onto the bow, transforming into an arrow.

“Galeshot of Gwyndyr,” she spoke as she released one of the signature moves of her Patron god.

A fiery wind flew out from her and towards the elemental. A split second later, she released the arrow as it sprouted wings in mid-air, carried forward by the scorching winds.

It impacted the already-weakened elemental and exploded in a giant inferno of deep red flames.

Maria fell to the ground and collapsed down on both knees as she coughed out blood. She got a heal thrown her way and was quickly up again as the group finished off the elemental that was already on its last legs. Or, well, shadow tendrils.

Not long after, the group got their notification. The fight had been completely one-sided.

****You have slain [Guardian of Nocturna - lvl 130] - Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

“Good job, everyone,” Bertram said as the darkness in the cavern faded. It was still dark due to the dark-affinity mana dominating the air, but it was far better. The group settled down as they rested, Noor’s staff embedded in the ground to create a holy bubble for them to sit within.

That a group of light, holy, and fire magic users found themselves within a dungeon of solely dark-affinity enemies was no coincidence. The Augur had led them there as it was a dungeon their group was extremely suited to handle. As a result, they practically countered everything the dungeon could throw at them.

One may question why a group with four members of the Holy Church had a party member that was not a part of their faction. The reason was simple: she was strong. Besides, they trusted her. Maria was not a member because she was already a part of Gwyndyr’s faction. A faction of mercenaries.

The Augur had hired her only weeks after the tutorial. Their meeting had been no coincidence, and no one knew what he had offered her or what the terms were. Well, Bertram knew, but he wasn’t telling. All they knew was that so far, she had been a core member of Sanctdomo from day one.

Not that any of them complained. They were just happy to have her on their side. She was, after all, the strongest archer of Sanctdomo and likely the strongest overall fighter of the city.

Some even began to think she was the strongest archer on Earth, period. Believing she had a shot against the mysterious Lord Thayne of Haven.

Bertram didn't agree with that at all... he knew exactly how much of a monster Jake was.

A monster that was currently training harder than anyone.

“You can't catch me!”

Jake ran through the forest yelling with a small pellet floating behind him suspended in a mana string.

A green bird was chasing after him, trying to eat the pellet.

The human laughed while Sylphie screeched in indignation every time he moved the pellet away from her beak.

Truly, these were actions only worthy of the strongest.

Chapter 268: Stupid Monkeys & Their Many Uses

Poisons? Now, Poisons were easy mode. That's where Jake quickly found his footing and created some cool stuff right away. It felt natural to him, and he had so many skills to make it easier. Sure, there were many things he couldn't make, but he was pretty confident in his abilities.

Potions? Still kind of easy. Especially mana potions. Heck, all the three fundamentals potions weren't that complicated, and Jake had that shit down to a science by now. At least he felt like he did, as his improvements were only marginal, and it would take him a long time to begin seeing tangible improvements.

Transmutations? Jake found a way to be a dirty little cheater with those. He had no idea how to do a proper transmutation. He just pulled a fast one with his arcane-affinity and made that affinity eat up enchantments on stuff to make the items more suitable for himself while making them useless for everyone else.

Besides that, he had done some other more minor things. He had made a Beastorb, made weird concoctions to corrode a moon, turning a moon shard into a small nuclear bomb of corruption and light. Also known as small things that are fun for the entire family.

Which all led to his next objective. Elixirs, the staple of D-grade alchemists. It was one of the reasons D-grade alchemists were far more sought after, besides, of course, the better potions. Few professions could take natural stat-increasing treasures and improve or change them, but alchemists could. Well, cooks and some other professions could too, but alchemists tended to be the go-to profession for it.

It had been around two weeks since Sultan joined Haven, and Jake hadn't heard much from the man beside him sending the stalker-slave woman with a delivery of herbs he had acquired from another merchant. Jake hadn't even requested it, but he was happy to take the goods.

The woman had seemed oddly content with her situation, and Jake really didn't want to question it. He had no idea what Miranda had done with that Gabi lady and didn't care about her either way. Right now, he wanted to focus solely on making elixirs.

Elixirs were quite a bit different from anything he had created before. Potions and poisons were far more - how could one put it - temporary in nature. They were once and done kinds of things. Their energy only had to do their work for a brief period before fizzling out. Of course, there were poisons and likely also potions with more long-lasting effects, but nothing to the level of an elixir.

Elixirs had a strong feeling of permanence. A permanent effect on the Records of a person. A permanent increase in stats. For many other goods, Jake could infuse far more of himself into his creations, and it would be fine, but for elixirs, he needed a sense of separation. He needed to allow the ingredients to truly shine, with himself only being a facilitator of the process.

While that didn't sound that hard or complicated, it sure as hell was. Because not only could Jake not come in and be a dominating force in the process, the ingredients also had to be nice to each other and mesh. With many poisons, he could pretty much force them together with his will, but that wouldn't work here.

Jake did have some advantages going into it, though. He had the eagle eye absorbed with Palate and was slowly learning about that, and a benefit of eating some of the bananas had been that he had gained a bit of understanding from those too.

Ultimately, this resulted in Jake making some damn solid progress. Jake burning through materials like he had no cares in the world also meant he didn't have to waste much time considering things. He could just impulsively give it a go, and if it failed... tough luck. He

could just try again. Also, snacking on ingredients was always a good time, even if some of the stuff tasted a bit weird.

Two weeks wasn't a long time, but it wasn't short either. In the beginning, Jake struggled over if he should start with agility or vitality-enhancing elixirs but eventually decided on agility. Ultimately, he didn't really wanna consume those for vitality but would happily chug down agility elixirs. After that, he would make ones for perception.

So even with difficulty, this meant that after two weeks of experimenting, three profession, and two race-levels, he was confident in his first success. While it was difficult and a new challenge, Jake wasn't an inexperienced alchemist anymore.

And, as much as he hated to admit it, his arcane-affinity kinda did come to be of assistance again. At least it helped him more easily tune into the permanence part of the creations by considering the stability inherent to his affinity. It wasn't anything significant, just a nice nudge.

As for what ingredients he used? Well, to begin with, he stuck to those he had plenty of. In the last two days, he had moved on to also implementing those he had a bit fewer of. Tri-Lighttail Monkey Beastcores. Not that Jake lacked those... he had gone on a bit of a monkey-genocide after all, and even if he hadn't taken corpses, he had gathered every single core.

Along with many other common-rarity and a few uncommon-rarity ingredients, he splurged a bit to increase his chance of success.

The crafting process itself went relatively easily. Jake used the core as the center as he slowly melted it using his flames within the cauldron. Next, he added a few berries that

were too weak to increase agility by themselves but still contained the energy. After that, a bit of grass, a small piece of bark, and many leaves also went in. All of it was melted and pushed into the residue from the core.

Jake didn't tell the core what to do, as the core residue was aligned towards agility already and the parts of the core not aligned towards agility were quickly realigned by the ingredients. Jake had only failed three crafts using this method before, and the last time had been close. This time it wasn't close – it was a success.

****You have successfully crafted [Celerita Elixir (Common)] – A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned****

****' DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 112 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

Jake inspected the brew and nodded at the result. He barely noticed the level-up notifications and hadn't bothered with them for these last two weeks. He probably should have, considering some of the implications they had.

[Celerita Elixir (Common)] – An elixir created from a mix of common ingredients, along with a few uncommon ones and a D-grade Beastcore of a Tri-Lighttail Monkey. Allows any who drink this elixir to receive some of the innate power of the materials, enhancing one's Agility. +3 Agility upon consumption

Requirements: D-rank or higher.

He saw that this first batch only had enough for two elixirs. While that seemed terrible, then it was the worth of two bananas. Not that his elixirs were as good as the bananas. There was one significant distinction – the requirement.

Anyone could eat a banana, while you had to be D-grade to get any use of the elixir. Jake knew a lot of the difficulty around elixirs was to allow those weaker, especially those below D-grade, to be able to benefit from them. Jake still had a ways to go before he could successfully craft those. Not that he was working towards it.

No, Jake would instead push directly for uncommon-rarity elixirs and finally a rare version before the Treasure Hunt.

He would use the eye and a few other items he hoped Sultan could procure in time for the rare version. Then, hopefully, he could also make a rare vitality elixir with the Lifecore and the Lifevines from the blue fungus. But to do that, he would have to keep grinding.

As for what else was going on during this time? Well, Jake had been relegated to his porch as the construction underground had really taken off. Jake had also learned that the reason Hank had delayed construction wasn't that he had better things to do; it was because he had been close to his own profession-evolution.

He had gained a new profession called General Foreman of Haven. Apparently, the profession was quite awesome and gave nearly as many stats as Miranda's, which placed it well in the upper-echelon of professions overall. The man wasn't close to D-grade, though, having neglected his class entirely ever since he came to Haven. He had said he was done fighting, and while Jake didn't understand it, he still chose to respect the man's decision.

Anyway, after he evolved, Hank came back, and Jake's underground complex was making swift progress. Naturally, the alchemist who would own it had also been down to give some input. Jake himself didn't interfere anymore after that but just sat up at the pond with his cauldron, only spying through his sphere once in a while.

Being up there also allowed him to count whenever a new banana spawned on the tree, and Mystie's automatic banana retrieval system captured one. Jake counted eleven right now. That's right; he had managed to convince Sylphie not to eat them on sight, primarily through bribery and coaxing.

As for where the bird was these days? He really didn't know. He hoped she was having fun, though, as she got closer and closer to becoming a fully-fledged D-grade hawk. The cute little bugger was probably out playing in the forest.

They grow up so fast...

The world was inherently unfair. The races struggled as they did everything they could to survive, but some had it harder than others. For example, if the leaders of a certain species fell, they would have to struggle to survive and rebuild, hoping a powerful alpha would not come by and claim their territory. This was rare but could happen if the one who came to slay their leader consumed or took away the natural treasure they had originally gathered around.

This particular race's leader had fallen, but their nest and hope for the next generation had been left untouched. A single of their Matriarchs survived to rebuild with the hidden young, as she had been far below ground with them as the predator came through and annihilated all in his path. They fast grew, and before long, D-grades entered the forest to try and reclaim their territory.

No other beast had claimed it as their Natural Treasure was gone. This didn't mean that the territory was useless, though. On the contrary, there was an air of ancientness and the concept of time was more prominent there, making it an excellent place for these monkeys to live.

At least... it should be.

The Tri-Lighttail Monkey jumped through the trees as it fled from its predator. It had been out with a group of its lesser brethren and had moved too far from the nest. It should have known better, but it hadn't detected the foe till it was too late. Or, more accurately, it hadn't recognized it was a foe until it was too late. For the predator had not been subtle.

A tornado had gone through, tearing into the trees. It wasn't a powerful one, almost as if the summoner didn't seek to do any damage with it but simply have it up for aesthetic effects. It couldn't be to hide itself. Surely not. That would be ridiculous.

But as ridiculous as it was, that tornado had turned into a frightening foe. A blast had slain one of the weaker monkeys nearly instantly; a blade of wind cut into another. The Tri-Lighttail had tried to fight back, but it found that its weight magic did not have the effect it should. Nothing it could do worked.

What was ridiculous was that the one hunting it wasn't a D-grade. It wasn't meant to be the predator... yet it was. It was too fast, too strong, and its talons, wings, and magic cut into the Tri-Lighttail time and time again as it tried to fight back while fleeing back towards its home and the Matriarch. But deep down... it knew it wouldn't make it.

Despite its small green form, the hawk was an utter monster.

Stupid monkey was mega bad at playing tag and super weak even if it was like mom and dad. Sylphie had managed to sneak up on it super stealthily and attacked with a mighty BAW! and a WHOOSH! and took down the two bad guys with the bigger bad guy.

The big bad tried to do that stuff that made it harder to fly, but Sylphie used Green Shield to make it stop. Green shield was nice. The stupid monkey then tried to throw stuff and hit Sylphie with its behind-ropes, but Sylphie was too fast and too smart for that!

Mom and dad had told her that hunting the big baddies was dangerous, but she had followed them when hunting before, and they weren't that tough. She could totally handle them! At least this one she could... some of them were still scary.

Sylphie wasn't stupid. She asked the wind every time before she went for the baddie, and only when the wind said it was okay, she attacked. The wind was everpresent and nearly always answered. It wasn't like a speaky-thing like Uncle did, but more a whisper-thing like the... well, like the wind.

She kept flying after the monkey for a bit, wooshing it as it ran away with her super winds. It sometimes turned around to throw stuff, and the next time it did so, Sylphie used a super move – she cut the branch it was about to land on.

BUT!

It didn't fall like it was supposed to! It kept flying forward like it didn't care, which was super-duper unfair. Why did Sylphie fall down when she didn't try to fly, and the monkey didn't? It was probably cheating. It was like how Uncle cheated during tag all the time. Making himself take super long steps and making her snacks not move as they should. Super unfair!

Well, Sylphie always won in the end, because Sylphie never gave up! And she wouldn't give up now either, but show just how awesome she was. She made herself mega-faster and flew forward as her talons began glowing green.

While Uncle was a bit weak, only really good at running away and playing with his smelly pot, he also tended to be very tough when hit. Mom and dad also said he was. She thought she couldn't damage him, and he said it was fine, so she wasn't bad, and it wasn't her fault when she accidentally... Sylphie still felt bad about it. Uncle got hurt because her glowy-green talon-strike was too strong. She learned to only use that on the bad guys, like the stupid monkey throwing smelly stuff.

Uncle also didn't like monkeys throwing smelly stuff. Which was weird because uncle liked playing with a smelly pot, but maybe they were different? Different kinds of smelly? Sylphie figured it out. She was so smart.

One thing she had learned was that she had to get strong and defend Uncle so he could keep playing with her and his smelly pot. Sylphie liked Uncle; he was one of her three favorite people in the whole world. So in order to realize her goal, she had to beat up the bad monkey.

She flew close, and the monkey tried to get away, but she made it unable to with her winds. It flailed and tried to hit with its tails but was blocked by the Green Shield. In the end, it had nothing more to use as the talons closed around its head.

As she struck, the talons become larger, and two of her glowing green claws dug into its eye-sockets as it tried to struggle. It failed to get her off as Sylphie dug into its brains and poured more power into her grip. Finally, she hit a tree, making her talons dig in deeper. She kept flying around with the struggling monkey for a bit longer, smashing it into tree after tree until it stopped moving, and she got the good-job-ding.

“Ree!” Sylphie screeched out in joy as she turned around to fly back home.

Hunting bad guys was super tiring, and Uncle had snacks at home. Oh, but she remembered to bring the not-so-tasty-anymore small core-thing from the monkey. Uncle liked those, and Sylphie got happier when Uncle was happy because she was one of the good guys.

Chapter 269: Singular Focus

Jake sat with a book in one hand, skimming through it as he stroked Sylphie’s feathers with the other. She lay napping on his lap, seemingly very content with the situation. She had been working hard as always based on how she managed to bring back the core of a D-grade monkey. He felt an odd sense of pride that she managed to solo kill D-grades while still not a fully-fledged D-grade herself.

She was getting there, though.

[Sylphian Eyas - lvl 91]

Considering how she only spent a bit of time every day hunting, it was impressive how she still got more than a level every two days. Hawkie had leveled far slower than she had. Of course, Sylphie could just sleep and reach level 100, but her hunting sped it up by quite a bit. Visually she seemed to have settled on her 'final form,' so to say.

A bit smaller than Hawkie, a good deal smaller than Mystie, and overall just a cute, cuddly green feathery ball of death. Others perhaps looked at her as something other than the adorable little thing she was, but Jake didn't care about those people. He was just proud of how strong she was.

Was she as strong as Jake had been at her level? No. Not even close. He had killed D-grades a lot earlier, and the monkey she had hunted down had only been around level 100 to 105 as far as he could tell from the core. That didn't make her weak, though, far from it. On the contrary, she was a damn strong beast for her level, and he was sure she would only grow stronger as time went on.

From what Jake had seen of her fighting, she had extremely high-level skills and abilities but struggled with prolonged battles and keeping up the pressure. She consumed insane amounts of mana with practically all her skills, even if they were a bit overpowered. Especially that green bubble she summoned to protect herself was impressive and was in part the inspiration to Jake's Arcane Barrier.

Ultimately though, it didn't matter. Jake didn't need her to be strong; he just wanted her to be happy. He understood that happiness and power were often tied together in this new world, and Sylphie did seem to have an innate desire to grow more powerful. Jake would happily help foster that if it made her happy, and if not... he would protect her. She was

already like family to him, which made him think about his 'real' family. He hadn't gone and seen them yet, even if he really should have. But... some parts of him were afraid.

Caleb had adjusted well, but how about his mother and father? Caleb said they were well, which had put his mind at ease, but he still worried. He especially worried about how they would receive him. Jake felt like he wasn't the same person now that he was before the system. Far from it. He feared they wouldn't recognize or would reject him. Shit, he had killed more humans than most of the famous serial killers from before the system.

It was likely a senseless worry as their other son, the leader of a shadow-assassin-cult, was accepted. So they had to be adapted to the new world at least a bit.

Jake wasn't worried about Maja or his newborn nephew as much. He actually knew most medical issues from birth and all that were practically non-existent post-system. His only worries there were if the two of them were safe, and if Jake knew one thing about his brother, it was that he would keep his family safe above everything else.

Also... if they were ever truly in trouble, Jake fully expected Villy to give him a heads-up. If not, the two of them would have issues. Villy also fully knew this and told Jake not to worry but focus on himself. Well, himself and the bird. Even Villy seemed to have taken a liking to Sylphie and called her 'interesting,' which was Villy-code for someone he liked.

The small hawk on his lap roused from her slumber and shook her feathers a bit as she looked up at Jake with her big eyes. Jake smiled back and rubbed her head, and scratched her beneath her neck. She nuzzled up to his hand and looked to be enjoying it very much.

"You hungry?" he asked, getting a happy screech in reply as she flapped her wings in excitement.

Jake took out a pellet and offered it up to her. She gulped it down and nuzzled up to his chest.

“By the way, Sylphie, remember to not go too deep into the territory of those monkeys, and if you see one of the thin and long ones of them, get away from it. Those are pretty fast, and it may get dangerous, okay?” Jake warned her as he knew the hawk would dive into the forest again soon.

She looked up at him with doubt, not entirely believing Jake’s advice.

“Trust me on this, okay? Even your mom and dad can’t handle those without working together, so they may be a bit much for you for now, alright? I am not sure I could have taken them easily, if at all, before reaching D-grade myself,” he patiently explained.

Sylphie looked up at him, still skeptical, but seemed to accept what he said. Jake nodded as he gave her another pat, and she got up, ready for another day of adventures. He saw her off with a smile as he dove into his work again.

It was the day he had made his first common-rarity elixir, and for the rest of the day, he wanted to practice that. He hadn’t consumed any of them yet but was waiting. It wasn’t like Agility really helped with his alchemy, after all.

He had more than 600 stats to fill with eating or drinking stuff, and he had already decided to have most of that be Agility and Perception. Perception would be the best due

to the whole percentage amplifiers, but Agility was a close second because it was great for combat.

Besides, it wasn't like he couldn't get more titles or maybe skills to also enhance Agility down the line.

Anyway, for now, Jake dove into spamming out batches of Agility elixirs like there was no tomorrow. Then, when he felt well-practiced, he would begin working on the uncommon-rarity version. It was a great plan, and he was sticking to it, and he was completely sure he hadn't missed anything important.

Vilastromoz considered if he should remind him. Should he? Nah, Jake remembered. He did, right? Sometimes the Primordial hated that no effective mind-reading abilities existed—another hard rule of the system, and the sanctity of the Truesoul and all that. You could skim and even enter and read the memories sometimes with special skills, but that was more like watching a movie of the past.

Actually, it was something pretty close to what the Viper really wanted Jake to remember.

Path of the Heretic Chosen wasn't a normal skill. Not at all. In fact, he had never encountered an identical one before. Well, skills to experience the past were, as said, not that special, but the way this one did was just something else. It pulled out Records directly; it allowed Jake to see the entire situation not just from the point of view of Vilastromoz either but also from other important actors and their interpretations of what happened.

Even more so was that Vilastromoz had no control over it. He knew that the Holy Church and many other factions liked to have these kinds of "experiences" for their members, but

it was always a well-curated thing. It would show a pre-determined moment, and it would be one highly regulated and "edited" so-to-say. But Path of the Heretic Chosen? The god featured had not a smidge of control. So it was as equally frustrating as it was interesting.

Nearly half as frustrating as how Jake had not even recognized he had reached level 110 in his profession and had unlocked another use of the skill. Maybe he couldn't use it yet? Had the Viper missed him trying? Well, he couldn't read his mind, so maybe? Maybe not?

Well, his head was in other places, primarily alchemy, so it wasn't all bad. Jake still found time to relax with the Sylphian Eyas that was soon approaching level 100. Jake clearly cared for the bird, and Vilastromoz had to admit he could see the appeal. It was a powerful beast for its level, and Jake hadn't even begun to realize how much he had affected it. Being born growing up and in his presence had some... peculiar effects. It wasn't instinctively wary of him for one thing. So yes, the hawk was interesting too for sure, but not as interesting as Path of the Heretic Chosen.

Could Jake really have completely forgotten the skill because he was so damn focused on making some shit-tier elixirs and playing with an admittedly cute bird? Did he seriously prioritize that over a potential legendary skill and the ability to dive through time and space and experience Records of the first era and the rise of a Primordial?

No, that can't be it.

That was exactly it.

Jake had completely forgotten the skill as he was too engrossed in improving his elixirs, and the only breaks he gave himself was when Sylphie was back, and even those were

spent reading books on elixirs meanwhile. The books were from the dungeon still, and he had to admit they weren't that useful anymore, but they had to do for now.

Should he have remembered Path of the Heretic Chosen? Probably, but his singular focus on elixirs wasn't bad either. Not at all. He had entered a near trance-like state, only focusing on his alchemy, cutting everything else out.

Days passed by as Jake grinded like never before. He churned out elixir after elixir and had a constant stream of ingredients coming in from Lillian, who monitored the System Store - both system offerings and from other people who sold through the store - as well as Sultan, who was also on the lookout.

Ten elixirs became twenty, twenty became forty, and forty became eighty. Soon, Jake had well over a hundred elixirs, all giving +3 Agility for anyone above D-grade. That is when Jake also switched to something else, primarily to introduce some diversity.

It took Jake less than thirty hours from when he switched to the first success.

****You have successfully crafted [Vitae Elixir (Common)] - A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned****

[Vitae Elixir (Common)] - An elixir created from a mix of common ingredients, along with a few uncommon ones and a D-grade Monstercore of a Deepdweller Warrior. Allows any who drink this elixir to receive some of the innate power of the materials, enhancing one's Vitality. +3 Vitality upon consumption

Requirements: D-rank or higher.

These ones Jake had no intentions of consuming himself at all. No, they were all for the System Store. Unfortunately, he couldn't make as many due to the use of Deepdweller Warrior cores, which he had significantly fewer of, but he would have to make do for now. Well, all in all, it wasn't an issue as he had even more Deepdweller cores than monkey cores. He only used a Warrior's for now due to how much more potent it was. When he got more skilled, he could switch to the regular ones. As for the Fungalmancer ones or the ones from the mini-bosses? He saved those for the uncommon and rare elixirs.

How much money he made, Jake didn't know and didn't care about. Jake just handed off the elixirs to Lillian by placing them outside his lodge and had her sell them. Later, he learned that Sultan bought a lot of them – apparently, elixirs of all kinds were a massive rarity on Earth. Shit, any item that increased stats was a rarity.

26 days till the Treasure Hunt, Jake had another major success as he crafted an item he had been hoped to make for a long time.

****You have successfully crafted [Sensus Elixir (Common)] – A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned****

[Sensus Elixir (Common)] – An elixir created from a mix of common ingredients, along with a few uncommon ones and a D-grade Beastcore of a Sunshade Eagle. Allows any who drink this elixir to receive some of the innate power of the materials, enhancing one's Perception. +3 Perception upon consumption

Requirements: D-rank or higher.

The core had not come from any merchant or his own hunt but delivered along with a dozen or so other cores of the same beast by Mystie and Hawkie. They managed to communicate that a canyon deeper within the forest was heavily populated with these eagles, and the two hawks primarily hunted those these days. Jake had a strong feeling neither Mystie nor Hawkie liked eagles very much.

Wait, didn't eagles hunt hawks? I guess it makes sense then, poetic revenge or something.

Anyway, they came by, took Sylphie with them, and returned within a few days with more cores before leaving again for a longer trip. He was limited in these cores, but for now, Jake would just make all he could. Oh, and these elixirs? They went straight to his belly.

You have assimilated a powerful energy of Perception.

+3 Perception

...

You have assimilated a powerful energy of Perception.

+3 Perception

24 days till the Treasure Hunt and Jake ran out of cores to use for his perception elixirs. He ended up drinking 23 of them, meaning a total increase of 69 Perception.

Nice.

But that he was out of materials didn't mean he stopped. It just meant he began pushing for the uncommon-rarity version of the agility-enhancing elixirs. This proved to be a quite different experience than other times he tried to push himself to upgrade a rarity. He dove in with an absolute singular focus and didn't hesitate to waste even rare-rarity materials – bananas included.

Jake went in with low expectations but soon discovered something... the method was the same. All it took was more energy and better ingredients. Thinking about it, it actually made a lot of sense.

Why would one not just consume a lot of common-rarity elixirs and just cap out that way? Jake had consumed over twenty without losing any effect. So perhaps that was why the system didn't see any reason to make higher rarities of elixirs that much harder. It wasn't like potions or poisons where every rarity was a significant qualitative increase.

Elixirs were mainly just more quantity... and while it took some more control, focus, and finesse, it wasn't that bad.

19 days till the Treasure Hunt, he did it.

****You have successfully crafted [Celerita Elixir (Uncommon)] – A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned****

[Celerita Elixir (Uncommon)] – An elixir created from a mix of uncommon and rare ingredients as well as the D-grade Beastcore of a Tri-Lighttail Dervish. Allows any who drink this elixir to receive some of the innate power of the materials, enhancing one's Agility. +10 Agility upon consumption

Requirements: D-rank or higher.

Jake batched up the two elixirs as he also checked another notification. Another expected one with borderline little-to-no impact.

****Skill Upgraded*: [Craft Elixir (Common --> Uncommon)] – Potions for emergencies, flasks in preparation for the toughest of foes, and elixirs to build the foundation of power. Allows the alchemist to craft elixirs of uncommon-rarity and below. Elixirs are able to grant those who consume it a permanent increase to stats. Must have suitable materials and equipment in order to create potions. Adds a small increase to the effectiveness of created elixirs based on wisdom.***

With another two elixirs in bottles, Jake didn't hesitate to fire up another batch as he also began working on the other uncommon-rarity elixir – the one for Vitality. He got Vitality done and was saving the Perception one for when he got more cores.

14 days till the Treasure Hunt, Jake had been working as a goddamn uncommon-rarity elixir factory, and someone couldn't wait any longer.

"Jake, for fuck's sake, check your notifications and check your goddamn Path of the Heretic Chosen skill!" Villy suddenly yelled at Jake after he finished another batch.

"Wait, what?" Jake asked, confused as he looked around. Oh... right... levels.

Jake had to admit the last two weeks plus had kinda blended together, and he barely remembered anything besides alchemy. Even all his meetings with Miranda had been postponed, and he hadn't really talked to anyone besides when someone came by with goods, that that had barely been an acknowledgment of their presence. Sylphie, Hawkie, and Mystie hadn't been back yet either, but he had a feeling they were fine.

He recognized that he had been a bit too focused and checked his notifications...

Oh.

****' DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 113 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

...

****' DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 119 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 124 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

****' DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 120 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

It turned out that Jake going into a bit of a trance had worked out well for him. In his defense, he had only just gotten that last level thirty minutes ago.

Anyhow, Jake should do this more often.

He wanted to go check out his new profession-skill available, but he had a feeling Villy *really wanted* him to check that Path of the Heretic Chosen first.

Chapter 270: Presence

Jake opened up his system menu and went through all the stuff.

He had saved up a stupid amount of Free Points. 220 of them, to be exact. He should have probably just tossed them where they belonged, to begin with, but hey, better late than ever. As to where they belonged?

All to perception!

Heck, if Jake were to do another of those weird Legacy trips from his Path of the Heretic-Chosen, it would be silly not to have as much perception as possible to experience it fully. At least that's what he kept telling himself to justify his questionable decision just to keep throwing everything in perception. He just liked to do it, and his other stats had always been growing nicely, so it wasn't that bad.

"Jake..." Villy's voice sounded out before Jake got side-tracked again.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You know what, for you alone, I will check out my Path of the Heretic Chosen *before* I pick my level 120 skill. Don't say I never do anything for you!" Jake joked as he shook his head and opened the menu thing. It wasn't really a menu; Jake more just poked the skill and saw if it did anything.

He knew it wasn't a sure thing that he could use the skill and potentially get an upgrade but that he needed to reach some threshold he didn't know about. He assumed he had reached the threshold for Palate nearly solely due to the Trial of Myriad Poisons, but he wasn't sure about any of the other skills.

So he had to be honest; he was actually a bit surprised when the skill responded, and he knew he could activate it. A prompt came up before him.

Do you wish to experience the Legacy of the Malefic Viper? Uses remaining: 2

Jake stared at it for a while as he wondered what skill it could be about. A part of him hoped Sense, but he seriously doubted it, but it was only a faint vain hope. Jake could also use more perception.

“Yep, it works. Two uses too. I guess I’ll give it a go?” Jake said, semi-asking Villy.

“Go for it and tell me what you saw afterward,” the god answered.

Jake nodded as he accepted the prompt as his vision went dark.

The council had convened, and they were ready to pass down judgment. They had attempted to scare off the beast several times, but it always returned. Where it had come from, they were unaware; it had simply one day entered the imperial oligarchy and begun ravaging it.

Yet, it was not like the other beasts. Monsters born in the infinity of space often were simply beasts or unintelligent creatures that only sought to kill and consume. They were often weak for their level, and a single council member could take it down easily.

But... a council member had already fallen to this menace, forcing their hands. Sure, it had been the weakest council member, but it was still significant. It was a rarity they were forced to meet like this to begin with, especially in person.

Every single one of them were early B-grade powerhouses, and each had conquered their respective worlds long ago and founded factions with no rivals besides each other. In the end, an equilibrium had been made, and now the war between their factions was simply a game to nurture new worthwhile fighters. It was also a valuable source of experience for them as respective leaders.

“All agree, we spring the trap at Neonwell once the beast arrives?” the council member asked.

He was the most desperate as the beast was now in his empire. The last empire it had been in, the council member from there had been slain before the beast moved on to find new challenges and to claim all their national treasures. So, naturally, he feared he would be the next to fall without assistance.

“In agreement,” one of the strongest council members said. However, even if none were strong enough to easily slay the others, that didn’t mean they were truly equal. The bribery to make this council member agree first had not been cheap...

“Fine,” another agreed with a nod.

Two more nodded, and the last four also agreed after some hesitation seeing as they didn’t want to be the only ones not participating – once the beast was dead, that would reflect badly on them. The last time a council member had risen to B-grade and joined, he

had gotten cocky, and... well, he hadn't stayed a council member for long. Or alive, for that matter.

"We estimate the beast will reach there within the next two years, so let us prepare our defenses."

Jake's vision shifted, and he saw a new planet. One entirely blue and glowing with energy, tens if not hundreds of times larger than even the Sun-sized Earth. It also looked almost crystalline and very otherworldly. He saw all nine council members descend on the planet, and from there, his vision sped up. He saw the planet spin at high speeds as he followed it through space until finally, the fateful day arrived.

A figure approached from far out in space. Wings beat as a shadow seemed to follow the creature, and a miasma marked its path, and death was in its wake. It was a dark green dragon with spikes lining its body and two deep green eyes that observed the planet in the distance.

Jake recognized it as the form he had seen ascend from the planet on the mural back in the Challenge Dungeon. *So, the Malefic Viper turned into a dragon at B-grade and left his home planet...* Jake realized as he kept observing.

He hadn't entered that state of extreme observation yet, so he knew this wasn't the time yet. But he still kept careful watch and took it all in. At worst, it would be an interesting insight into B-grades, and at best, he could learn something from their battle besides what the skill intended.

The Malefic Viper stopped as he observed the planet. He waited a bit and eventually landed on a large asteroid floating through space – the only one large enough for the

several hundred meters long beast. The Viper looked towards the planet once more. Did he know? Perhaps... perhaps not. Either way, he would use a true and tested opener.

Opening his maw, the dragon breathed in. Jake felt the mana in the atmosphere be vacuumed in from far and wide, as well as the draconic body humming with energy. A green glow appeared around the mouth as a tiny ball of energy appeared... and then he breathed.

For a second, the world changed color. It flashed green as the Dragon Breath was released. Instinctively, Jake knew... this attack was a concept in itself. The Dragon breath, the signature move of all dragons. He had always thought dragons to be majestic and kinda cool creatures that he totally wanted to hunt down.... but seeing one in action was different.

The breath took the form of a beam of green energy that headed straight for the planet, and Jake could already imagine the effect it would have. It would be like a giant meteor smashing down, scorching much of the surface with pure destruction.

At least it would have if it hit.

Five spots down on the planet began glowing, and a barrier appeared in front of the beam, tens of thousands of kilometers into space. The council members who summoned it seemed to be aware it wouldn't be enough, and soon five more identical ones were layered along with it - each barrier thousands of kilometers in diameter. It was a planetary defense of sorts.

The beam hit the first barrier as a mighty explosion sounded out, and it looked as if space itself collapsed on the impact point. Everything became warped, but the very next moment, Jake could see what was happening again as space had repaired itself.

The first barrier was broken, and the second had already cracked. A second later, it gave out as the breath hit the third. That one only took a few seconds before it slowly eroded away, making it clear the breath held corrosive properties.

Barrier after barrier fell as the Malefic Viper kept using his Dragon's Breath. When it hit the second-to-last, a figure appeared behind the last one. He placed his hand on it, and the entire thing lit up with what looked like a magic circle inscribed upon it.

Just as the second-to-last barrier broke, he poured in energy, and the entire barrier got fired forward with incredible momentum towards the Viper. The breath simply wouldn't have time to erode it in time, and the huge dragon was forced to dodge as the asteroid it had been sitting on was turned to cosmic dust.

Jake felt the impatience of the Viper as he flew forward down towards the planet.

His vision shifted once more, and Jake saw the eight other council members hidden in a weird spatial bubble of sorts behind one of the moons of the planet. All of them were hidden not just in the spatial bubble but also under several arrays. They had been in there for over half a year, just waiting for this day.

Once the dragon got closer to the planet, another set of barriers activated. However, this one was not meant to keep the beast out – it was to keep it in.

At the same time, a third set activated closer to the surface of the planet, effectively making a closed circle of space around the planet. Only ten beings trapped within – the Viper and nine council members.

While Jake couldn't even use Identify on anything, he had a feeling they were all roughly the same level. At least none of the council members looked worried, as Jake assumed they could see the level of the Viper. Unfortunately for them, they were under an assumption... one Jake perfectly understood. One he would have made many times without his instincts telling him otherwise.

These nine council members were absolute geniuses of their worlds. They were the strongest. They had great classes, great professions and had always fought above their own level. A beast of an equal level was just another easy prey to them. Sure, they had met variants and stuff, but out in the real world, they weren't a dime a dozen.

So they went forth with absolute confidence and trapped the dragon within the barrier for a nine versus one battle. But they weren't aware. Jake felt it, though. The Malefic Viper wasn't the one trapped in there with them.

They were trapped in there with him.

All nine moved to attack. Jake saw attacks he couldn't fully understand. Flames that melted colors, winds of space mana that tore up the fabric of reality, and many more types of magic – all of them more useless than the next against the scales of the dragon, as they seemed almost to drink up the magic.

The attackers were taken aback by the lack of effectiveness. Yet hope was not lost. One of their members teleported to be right above the head of the beast and swung down with his hammer, hoping to-

It was blocked as the dragon raised his claws, making it evident it was not only tough versus magic. But surely, the Viper's offensive capabilities besides the signature Dragon's Breath would be-

Mana manifested in mid-air as the Malefic Viper counterattacked with green explosions. Meanwhile, a miasma of poison seeped out from the dragon wings and overtook the area. His claws swung and forced the one with the hammer to retreat with a scratch on his arm.

The exchange was brief, but it had shocked the nine of them. But... that seemed to be enough. A seed was planted. One of doubt. One where death or severe injury was a possibility. Jake knew this because the time had come.

He intimately felt everything, not just what the Viper experienced but also the nine. He knew the Viper had gone all-out from the start, even boosting himself right from the get-go to appear as strong as possible. This was planned.

Jake felt fear.

Anticipation.

Doubt.

Greed.

Anger.

Hesitation

Bloodlust.

But more than anything... he felt pride.

A pride that manifested as an aura – a presence - blanketed the area, the nine council members within as the entire atmosphere seemed to shift.

“Pathetic creatures,” the Viper’s voice echoed through space. “How dare such weaklings think themselves conquerers. Kings. Emperors. You are nothing but prey to fuel my path. Be honored, for that is truly the greatest purpose your lives could have. Take joy as I devour you one by one. Do not fear for all which you have built, for it shall follow you. Embrace desolation, for it is the only end that awaits you and everything you have created. Embrace Death. Embrace your fate. **Embrace despair.**”

Every word made space vibrate; every syllable tore into the souls of the nine council members. Tore into their wills and their minds. All of it through the presence that affected the entire area. *Mana in the presence?* Jake rhetorically asked himself as he felt it.

Presences weren't anything new. Everyone had one; it just came with getting stronger. It could become more prominent in some scenarios, such as when Jake felt a strong sense of bloodlust, then his presence would reflect it. In general, strong emotions would be reflected in your presence to some extent.

However, this was different. This was not that passive presence. This one felt alive. It was filled with the will and pride of the Malefic Viper, as it didn't simply communicate an emotion but tore into the nine council member's minds. Even more than that, it contained mana, something a presence normally never would, and to be fair, Jake wasn't even aware it could.

The battle had barely begun, and it was far from over. Jake estimated the battle would be around equal and hard-fought by both sides, though he did admit he believed the Viper would win... but the nine could at least get away, the majority anyway.

Yet, all of them stood stunned for a moment. Immobilized by the presence of the Viper. Jake felt what they felt... a sense of fear, despair, and hopelessness. Like no matter what they did against the Viper, nothing would work. It was like how Jake felt against the King of the Forest back then... which actually made him think the Unique Lifeform had a similar skill.

It was a spell they would break out of soon enough... but-

The Malefic Viper snapped forward as his neck seemed to extend, and a long fang penetrated straight through the chest of one of the council members as he bit into him, leaving a barrel-sized hole due to the size difference. At the same time, the Viper fired out eight of the long spikes on his body – one for each council member.

Magic also began manifesting around the dragon. It was even more powerful and collected far faster than before as the presence affected not only the other living beings within, but even the Viper himself and the area as a whole. The magic attacks all coalesced and headed for the eight council members together with the spikes.

All attacks hit at once.

All of them were thrown out of their stupor simultaneously.

All of them were now badly poisoned.

In a single moment, the tides had turned. An equal battle became a one-sided one as that sliver of doubt remained. The poison only added to the helplessness.

What transpired after that wasn't a fight but a slaughter. Six council members died, and three ended up fleeing, but Jake was certain they, too, would be hunted down in time.

For the Pride of the Malefic Viper would not allow any of his prey to escape. He had pronounced their deaths, and he would carry out the sentence.

This time was a lot different than the last time he used Path of the Heretic-Chosen. Jake had experienced a far longer span of time and even more emotions than ever before from not only the Viper but also the council members.

Jake had felt it all, and he understood it. He actually questioned why he had never done what the Viper did already. Well, he realized he couldn't have, as it wasn't that easy... unless you experienced doing it first-hand. As long as you got the basic concept, it was simplicity itself.

Perhaps pride was just something Jake had plenty of. Perhaps he was specifically suited to imposing his will upon the world.

It wasn't because the time-rewind aspect of the skill didn't work this time or wasn't there. It just wasn't needed.

Because Jake got it the first time around.

[Pride of the Malefic Viper (Ancient --> Legendary)]

Jake felt his consciousness slowly return to the real world as he saw the dragon head down towards the crystalline planet below. He felt the Viper. He knew the intent. So he was certain.

The planet would turn into just another desolate wasteland.

Just like all those the Malefic Viper had come across before.