

## Hunter 32

Chapter 32: A very weird encounter

The scaled man's words momentarily dumbfounded Jake. No, if he was to be believed, the Malefic Viper's words.

Unsure what to say, Jake just stared back at the man. After what felt like an eternity, the scaled man's face turned to one of confusion as he observed Jake closely with apparent puzzlement.

"I told you to fuck off," he said as he scratched the back of his head. "You must know who I am, right? So do as I say and leave me alone."

"Well, yeah, I heard you. But I thought the Malefic Viper was a snake turned dragon?" Jake asked, a bit confused by the entire situation.

"Oh, that?" The man laughed as an explosion of green mist burst out of him, with Jake standing completely unaffected.

The scaled man was still there, but behind him was a giant projection nearly identical to the dragon he had seen on the mural. "See? It is me. Can you leave now?"

"Yeah, I see it," Jake answered, still utterly lost as to what the hell was happening. Why had the system brought him to meet the namesake of his profession? "Gotta be honest, I have no clue why I am here or how to leave again. "

Dispelling the projection, the Malefic Viper continued to look confused back at him. "Seriously, you're a member of the order, right?"

"No, I don't think so, at least?" Jake answered truthfully. Would he be considered a member of the order, considering that everything he knew came from what seemed like an old sanctuary? He hadn't formally signed up for anything. Also, wasn't it a cult?

"Then how in the hell did you acquire my legacy? And why did it bring- wait."

As if suddenly enlightened, the Malefic Viper chuckled a bit to himself.

"You are a newly integrated human to the system, right? In one of those tutorials," he asked, an amused smile on his face.

"Yeah, I got the profession through a challenge dungeon," Jake answered, confused as to the apparent mood-swing the other man was showing. What was so amusing about him more or less appropriating a legacy?

Laughing even louder, he put his hand on Jake's shoulder, though his hand didn't actually make any physical contact. It appeared that touching one another was stopped by the system somehow.

"You have no idea, kid. This brings back some memories. Oh man, I can't believe you actually got through all that bullshit," he said, trying to pat Jake's shoulder again in vain.

"I don't get it," Jake said, his confusion growing by the second. Had he unintentionally gotten himself involved with some unstable ancient being?

"No, I assume you wouldn't. It would be damn weird if ya did. But it is funny, so I'm gonna tell you."

"Okay?" He actually kind of wanted to just leave now...

"Back in my younger days, I was very much into all of these events made by the system. You know what Records are?"

"Partly."

"Eh, just look up Akashic Records or something. Pretty much all pre-system cultures had some myth related to it. Just know that having sufficient Records is quite crucial for everyone. Mortals and gods alike. Which brings me to the next part.

"Newly integrated universes aren't just for the newly integrated races themselves. Many beings throughout the multiverse can obtain countless benefits from it. Most notably, a huge amount of Records can be earned. One such way of earning more Records is by investing in the tutorials and getting rewards from the system. It's essentially just glorified gambling making such investments," The scaled man began, as Jake was finally starting to understand why he was so happy.

"Well, you being here means that I very likely already earned back that investment. Geez, you must have done well for you to come here."

“Yeah, I...” Jake wanted to explain what had happened in the dungeon, but the Malefic Viper raised his hand to interrupt.

“Don’t bother. I quite frankly don’t give a fuck. Besides, the system tends not to like oversharing. It’s a bit overprotective when it comes to new universes after some gods accidentally ruined a lesser universe back in the 5th era,” he said as he plopped down on the ground sitting with his legs crossed. “Totally wasn’t me, by the way.”

Jake was about to ask some questions but was once more interrupted.

“No, I am not going to answer anything. Again, the system wouldn't like that either. Shit, you being alive should be proof enough. Never heard of anything below S-rank able to survive in this part of my realm,” as the Viper finished those words, with a movement Jake couldn’t even see, an explosion sounded out, throwing up dust and broken stone everywhere.

With a whisk of the Malefic Viper's hand, the dust dispersed, and Jake found himself standing on a small floating platform of stone, utterly untouched by even a single speck of dust. Around him, nothing remained as far as his eyes could see. Everything had simply been disintegrated into nothingness.

“See? Overprotective. Could collapse the entire damn realm on you without leaving a scratch. Ya can’t even kill yourself if you wanted to right now.”

With another wave of his hand, the whole place was restored back to exactly how it was before he shattered it, leaving it as if nothing had ever happened.

“Back to the story. You see, long ago, I made a certain challenge dungeon during a time where we gods had quite a bit more free rein on designing them. I am both incredibly proud and a bit embarrassed about how I made it, but at the time, it was super amusing,” the Viper said with a cheeky smile.

“Honestly, I more or less made it as a joke. The requirements were bullshit made up on the spot to make the challenger feel special, going like: “oh my god, I barely fit these, this must be destiny!”. And then, just after entering the first room, I would have them get impaled by a poisoned spike.”

“That does sound very familiar,” Jake nodded. He had found the design of the first part of the dungeon a bit suspect. Though he was embarrassed to admit, he didn’t really catch onto how suspicious the requirements were. Thinking back, it was a bit weird.

“It was a bit funny, right? The only sad part is that you don’t actually die in a challenge dungeon. At least not normally. Quite proud of myself for gaming the system on the last part of the challenge where ya have to cure yourself. Took quite a few workarounds to make that work and have the lethality stick,” he laughed, clearly proud.

“So, challenge dungeons aren’t normally lethal, but you somehow found a way to make it so, and now you’re bragging to the person who is suffering the consequences?” Jake asked pointedly.

“Yep.”

“Well, aren’t you a massive dick,” Jake said but couldn’t help snickering a bit himself.

“Guilty as charged. How was the part forcing you to feed me stuff not to die while on a timer? Forced to study my history, only to be rewarded with a mural of me being awesome?”

“Very narcissistic.”

“I take that as a compliment,” the Viper said with a huge smile. “You are surprisingly un-angry.”

“Wouldn’t it be a bit boring if you couldn’t even die from the challenge?” Jake asked. “Makes it all a bit more exciting.”

The scaled man looked at him a bit to discern if Jake was serious. He was. “That’s some fucked up logic right there. I like it!”

“Anyway, why am I here?” Jake finally asked. Funnily enough, he didn’t really feel like leaving anymore. As weird as it may sound, he found talking to the snake-god in front of him relatively easy. It was... relaxing. Maybe because he hadn’t spoken to anyone for a few days or because his conversation partner wasn’t human. Or maybe they just vibed.

“Now, that’s an excellent question,” he answered, nodding his head slowly. After several moments where the Malefic Viper looked like he was deep in thought, he finally turned to Jake, looking him straight in the eyes. “No idea. Well, some idea, but it’s more fun if you figure it out yourself.”

Jake was once more floored by the flippant attitude of the Malefic Viper. How the hell did the revered and worshipped dragon he had seen challenge the heavens themselves and ascend, turn into... this.

“Can you at least tell me where exactly we are?” Jake answered, hoping to get at least something tangible out of the eccentric snake turned dragon.

“Oh, that’s an easy one; we’re in my realm!” he shouted loudly as he spread out his hands in a comical way. Noticing Jake still staring at him, confused, he elaborated. “That means it is kind of my world. I made it. Don’t worry about it; it is a god-thing. So, what do you think? My realm is pretty darn awesome, right?”

Looking around at the flat, desolate surroundings in all directions, he wasn’t particularly amazed.

“It sure is something,” he answered, dodging to answer. “You mentioned something about being a god?”

Jake had run into the mention of gods in some of the books he had read, but nothing concrete. It would make sense for the Malefic Viper to be considered a god, having a cult and all. He just wasn’t sure exactly what it meant by ‘god’.

“Totally am. Just keep doing stuff, gain levels, evolutions, all that jazz, and you’ll get there eventually. It’s hard work, but it’s worth it just for the immortality alone,” the Viper said, as he kept a jovial smile on his lips.

Jake just nodded along, pondering what the hell was wrong with the so-called god in front of him.

“My turn to ask something!” The Malefic snake said as he continued, “how come you’re so casual despite how fucked up this entire situation is?”

Momentarily taken aback, Jake did wonder how he was so calm. His willpower stat had most certainly increased a lot. But more importantly, he hadn’t felt anything negative from his instincts since he came here, not a single shred of danger at any point, not even at the Viper’s show of power.

“I guess my willpower stat has grown a lot,” Jake answered truthfully.

“Yeah, that isn’t how willpower works, mate. You don’t suddenly become a bastion of calmness from a stat,” the Viper explained, as he turned uncharacteristically serious. “Stats may change some parts of you, but your mind remains untouched. You become able to think faster, process everything far more efficiently, and remember every single detail, but changes to who you are fundamentally will never happen. It has never happened. Many beings of unimaginable power, having a willpower stat at an incredible height, have fallen to the plagues of the mind.”

Jake turned solemn at the Malefic Viper's words as he detected a faint trace of sadness in his words.

“Willpower will allow you to endure the endlessness of immortality, it will help you resist attacks on your mind, and it can help you keep calm in situations of great danger. However, for those to be possible, you have to possess the ability to do those things to begin with. Some never learn to endure... and time doesn’t heal all wounds.”

The Viper’s look was very downtrodden at this moment as he stared out into the vast desolate wasteland that was his realm. Turning back to Jake, he continued once more.



“The path to power is a long and lonesome one, but you will meet many along the way. Friends, comrades, subordinates, and superiors, an endless web of karmic threads will be left in your wake. But the march of time is ruthless, the need for constant progress endless. Those friends will be left behind; your comrades abandoned as they fail to keep up, your subordinates lost, superiors surpassed. Families... taken from you.”

The last few words were barely audible. Jake wasn't quite sure what exactly to say or do.

“Sorry, I'm rambling again. Haven't spoken a word to anyone for a very, very long time,” the Viper apologized.

Jake looked back at him for a few seconds, unsure of what to say or do. If he should even do anything. As the silence continued, however, he collected his thoughts and spoke honestly.

“You sound like you've gone through some shit. I am not going to stand here and pretend to understand what someone like you struggles with, but I am pretty sure doing nothing isn't the solution,” Jake said.

“And what makes you think I haven't tried to do everything already?” he asked back, a formless aura spreading out from him.

Jake felt like he suddenly stood before an incarnation of death and destruction. Yet he didn't back down. He pushed back, his bloodline fully awoken, refusing to be inferior. The aura failed to affect him as he stood unmoving.

“Just sounds like a challenge you haven't been able to beat yet. And if it isn't that kind of issue...” Jake said, as he continued, his voice a bit softer. “Then, sometimes, moving on can be the best.”

The Malefic Viper looked back at Jake, clearly a bit surprised at how he still stood unaffected.

“When you lose everything, what is there to do but try to regain it?” he asked pointedly.

“If what you’ve done so far hasn’t worked, then shift up your strategy or the rules of the games, but... sometimes victory is found by just walking away.” Jake began as he sighed. “I didn’t know them... but I have never met anyone who doesn’t want their loved ones to be happy, even after their own end. Maybe your victory is found not through fixing what you can’t, but by creating something new. It doesn’t have to be better... just good enough.”

Jake didn’t exactly know where his words came from. In some ways, he tried to channel his inner Jacob, and in others borrowing from something his father had once told him. When he got injured and had to give up going pro with his archery, he was broken... but those words had helped him find a new goal.

The Viper just stared back at Jake for what felt like an eternity. He finally chuckled a bit as he smiled - his first genuine smile for a long time.

“Look at you going full-on philosopher on my ass,” he said as his chuckle turned to a laugh. “Oh man, this shit is absurd. A mortal comforting a god, what has the world come to.”

Thinking about it, Jake had to agree. He was a bit embarrassed to admit that he had kind of forgot the scaled man in front of him was a god for a second. In his defense, he didn’t exactly act like one.

What followed was a sight rarely seen. A mortal and a god were sitting on the ground, just chatting. The Viper was throwing out advice on minor things, with Jake just telling random anecdotes from his own world. Perhaps even Jake, with his ordinarily introverted personality, had missed talking to anyone during his isolation. The Viper having missed conversations was even more evident.

Jake had no idea how long they talked, but he thoroughly enjoyed their time together. He heard stories about the multiverse, about how the Viper had met a fellow god and fallen in love. It was never spoken, but Jake knew that it was she he had talked about earlier, as he always had a glint of sadness in his eyes whenever he mentioned her.

Just two lonely people, caring neither for status nor power.

It was no secret that Jake came away with the most knowledge. The Viper knew far more than Jake on pretty much every subject. Yet he held back on giving direct advice on anything related to the system. He did provide a bit of general knowledge, but nothing major. According to the Viper, there was more value in Jake discovering those secrets by himself.

After a few hours, the Malefic Viper finally got up, as he motioned for Jake to do the same.

“It seems like it is your time to return soon,” the Malefic Viper said, as Jake got on his feet.

“We still haven’t found out why I came here,” Jake added. They had managed to somehow not talk about that.

“Oh yeah, that. When I made the dungeon back in the day, I didn’t have anyone else around with permission to approve the better evolutions, so the responsibility naturally fell to me. One could call it a happy little accident that you came here,” the Viper laughed.

“Ah! Now I remember! The description did say something about being chosen,” Jake said as he finally got it. “Does that mean I passed the job interview?”

“You got lucky young man,” The Viper joked back before turning a bit more serious once again. “I won’t give you anything concrete, but I can give you a tip. Focus on the mana. You can feel it all around you. Feel it more. The earlier you do so, the better. It will help you in more ways than you can imagine.”

Extending his hand towards him, the Viper motioned for a handshake.

Without hesitating, Jake took his hand, knowing physical contact couldn’t be made. Yet to his surprise, his hand met with scaly textures. Before he could question anything, he felt a warm flow encompass his body as he shook the hand.

“Something for your journey. A small string of karma if you may,” the Malefic Viper said as he let go of Jake's hand.

Feeling his vision blur and spin once more, Jake knew that his time here was over. The last thing he saw was the green eyes staring back at him as he heard the Viper speak one last time.

“And thank you once more, Jake. Cya later!”

With those words, he disappeared, and the Malefic Viper was alone once more.

The scaled man didn't take off back to the decrepit old cave. He couldn't even remember the last time he spoke with anyone. Met anyone, to be honest.

Looking at his hand, he still felt the aura of his little visitor. Compared to him, it was so small, so insignificant. And yet it felt strong. Limited, but powerful still. Deep within the Records, he felt a power that even gave him pause.

"What a powerful bloodline..." he whispered to himself. It wasn't just powerful; it was intimidating. Even the Record's mere remnants carried the charms of something that refused to back away from his probing gaze. It was primal, like a wild beast, one refusing to surrender to even him.

Many might see this foolhardiness as a weakness, but the Viper felt only strength. One would never achieve true power from avoiding danger. It may lead to a short life, but without said determination, one would never reach the pinnacle either.

Smiling, he thought that he might just have made a good investment. It didn't come cheap, as he still felt a faint trace of weakness, unlike anything he had felt in countless eons. Despite so, he felt no regret. More than just an investment in a powerful initiate, he may have made something even more valuable.

The smile quickly disappeared, however, as he thought back to their conversation. The calmness and straightforwardness of a mortal had truly impressed him. But the fact that he was so genuinely straightforward also meant that the words carried more weight. Being spoken to directly was not something he had ever been used to.

Taking a step, he appeared in a valley. This valley, compared to everything else surrounding it, was not desolate but brimming with life everywhere. Small animals ran in the shrubbery, birds chirped, and a calm wind blew throughout.

In the center of this valley, two obelisks stood. One of them had countless runes with unimaginable power, covering every speck of its surface, each rune holding more information than a mortal mind could comprehend in a lifetime.

The other obelisk only had a single rune even though they were the same size. This solitary rune did not exude any power but was only a single word:

Hope

The Malefic Viper stood there for a while before moving forward and putting a hand on each of them.

“Perhaps I have wallowed enough. You always told me to smile and never doubt myself,” he spoke while gently caressing the runes on the filled obelisk while only having his palm rest on the lone rune on the other.

“Perhaps it’s time for the Malefic Viper to make his return.”